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Signs of Greater U.S. Military Involvement In Paraguay

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News that the US government removed Paraguay from its "blacklist" of places that violate international copyright and trademark norms triggered a debate in the South American country, where political opponents of President Horacio Cartes, alternative media outlets, and the Sindicato de Periodistas Paraguayos (SPP), a journalists union, claim that Washington adopted the measure "as a reward," according to the Web site E’a, "for continuing to comply with US military-security policy in the region."

The suspicions are fueled by Paraguay’s well-established reputation—dating back to the days of the Gen. Alfredo Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989)—as a major haven for contraband and counterfeiting name-brand clothing, alcoholic beverages, watches, perfume, cigarettes, and other products (NotiSur, Oct. 17, 2003).

The June 18 announcement by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) striking Paraguay from the blacklist was all the more surprising given that, just three weeks later, the Cámara de Comercio, Industrias y Agricultura de Panamá (CCIAP) reported that 75% of the cigarettes sold in the Central American country arrive as contraband and are produced by the Paraguayan company Tabacalera del Este, which has faced similar accusations in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Aruba, and Curaçao and is the flagship of a holding company owned by President Cartes (NotiSur, April 4, 2014).

The USTR decision was made public just hours after a meeting in Washington between Paraguayan Foreign Minister Eladio Loizaga and US Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Heather Higginbottom. In a joint statement, the two diplomats described their dialogue as "an opportunity for our two nations to discuss strong bilateral relations, regional and global cooperation, and a comprehensive partnership to strengthen democratic institutions, expand economic growth, and to develop new opportunities for Paraguayans and Americans." The partnership is based on "a long history of cooperation" and "encompasses an array of programs with the government, civil society, and the private sector to achieve sustainable, inclusive development for Paraguayans and Americans," the statement reads.

As part of the agreement, the US will invest US$6 million in a program to reduce child labor in Paraguay. The Paraguayan government "reaffirmed its commitment to support and expand peacekeeping operations," the document—in a clear allusion to military cooperation—explains.

"Operational platform"

The agreement coincided with the arrival in Paraguay, three weeks earlier, of 16 US military instructors tasked with leading combined training exercises. The instructors, who spent a month in the country, belong to a special-forces unit of the North Carolina National Guard. They were authorized, thanks to a resolution approved by Congress at the behest of President Cartes, to enter the country with all of the equipment and munitions needed for the training sessions. They also enjoyed diplomatic-immunity status during their stay.
The training mission, combined with the June 18 announcement, led E’a to suggest that "the real undercurrent of the Loizaga-Higginbottom accords is that we continue being an operational platform for US security policy regarding the trafficking of illicit drugs and psychotropic substances, transnational crime, money laundering, and terrorism—all based on the principle of shared responsibility."

The news site and the SPP used the agreement made in Washington—together with the unusual participation of the 16 US instructors in an official military parade—to recall another example of Pentagon involvement in Paraguay: the February 2014 inauguration, by the US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), of a Center for Emergency Operations in Santa Rosa de Aguaray in the troubled northeastern department of San Pedro.

The district of San Pedro occupies an area that, for the past several decades, has been the scene of a tough land dispute between small-scale growers, displaced people, and campesino organizations, which have mounted a formidable social and political challenge, and industrial-scale soy producers—mostly from Brazil (NotiSur, July 18, 2014)—whose operations are highly mechanized and offer little in the way of employment opportunities.

With the inauguration of the emergency-operations facility, the previously phantom-like USSOUTHCOM—which has long had an unsettling albeit unproven presence in the country—is now formally established in Paraguay, where the US Agency for International Development (USAID) is also highly active.

Parade polemic

On June 23, in the city of Copiatá, President Cartes and his entire Cabinet participated in a military parade celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Academia Militar Mariscal Francisco Solano López. On the occasion, the military school’s director thanked ally countries for allowing Paraguayan officials to receive training abroad. He cited the specific case of 80 Paraguayan soldiers who will remain until Aug. 14 in Colombia, where they are being taught counterinsurgency techniques.

What the director did not explain that day is why 16 US instructors, carrying eight large flags among them, had just marched in the academy’s centennial parade, a fact that only came to light because of a series of photos published by the Agencia de Información Paraguaya and reprinted by the daily Última Hora. The images also made their way through social media channels.

Government officials and media outlets have had no reservations, on the other hand, in talking about the US government’s promise to spend US$6 million fighting child labor in Paraguay. The announcement came, incidentally, just as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) was again sounding the alarm regarding the rising number of children and adolescents—in Paraguay and elsewhere across the globe—who have jobs that are too dangerous for their age or are being exploited in "criadazgo" situations, whereby impoverished children are placed in wealthier households as live-in domestic workers.

Indentured servants

Bernardo Puente, a coordinator with an International Labour Organization (ILO) initiative called the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), estimates that some 15 million children and adolescents around the world are enslaved in criadazgo situations. He challenges the
idea, furthermore, that these indentured servants, which go by different names in different countries—criaditos in Paraguay, ahijados in Peru, restavek in Haiti—are brought from the countryside to the cities out of concern for the children or to show solidarity with the families of origin.

"The people who bring them do so because they don’t want to pay a domestic worker," says Puente. "Nor do they have any interest in these children and adolescents going to school. They’re their slaves."

Official statistics suggest that 2.5% of Paraguayan children (approximately 50,000) between the ages of 5 and 17 are criaditos, young people whose parents, generally campesinos, hand them over to wealthier people in good faith and with the dual objective that, by doing so, they can ease household costs and give their children a chance of receiving an education (NotiSur, Aug. 2, 2013). Generally speaking, however, criaditos end up living in shameful conditions, are overburdened by their domestic duties, and are not sent to school.

Places that provide little in the way of social-mobility opportunities and have deep levels of inequality, as is the case in the department of San Pedro, provide fertile ground for the criadazgo scenarios. Paraguay is the only country in the Southern Cone that has failed to turn the commodities boom into improved conditions for the society as a whole (NotiSur, April 11, 2014). It is the world’s fourth-leading producer of soy, an increasingly valuable oilseed that has been in high demand in recent years. Paraguay has also boasted average annual economic growth numbers of roughly 5%. Inequality, however, has also grown. Today, the richest 20% of the population controls 53% of the wealth while the poorest 20% have just 4%.

Wary of USAID
Washington’s promise to assist in the fight against child labor has, for the most part, been well-received. Many people, nevertheless, are wary of involvement by USAID, which brings to mind the specter of foreign intervention, especially in Paraguay, where the agency has operated for a half century and is believed to operate actively on behalf of US policy goals.

Young people, in particular, see USAID as being directly involved in the overthrow, in June 2012, of the progressive President Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), who was ousted in a parliamentary coup (NotiSur, July 13, 2012). An investigation by Brazilian journalist Natalia Viana, drawing on information leaked by the organization WikiLeaks, identifies US citizen Michael Eschleman as the person who organized the coup together with right-wing Paraguayan lawmakers.

Eschleman came to the country in 1985 as a Peace Corps volunteer. At the time of the coup, according to his profile on the Linkedin professional network, he headed USAID’s Democracy and Threshold Programs. Viana’s research established that, in the years leading up to the coup, "There was a significant increase in US financial assistance to nongovernmental organizations and other civil entities in Paraguay”—from US$17.24 million in 2007 (the year before Lugo’s electoral triumph) to US$36.2 million in 2010 (the second year of his four-year term).

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