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Paraguayan Congress, Media Weigh in on ‘Mercenary’ Mystery

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News that a paramilitary agent, apparently from Italy, secretly entered Paraguay under contract by the government, helped train a joint military and police task force, and even participated in operations against a group of alleged guerrillas, killing four, caught the public and media outlets by surprise and prompted Congress to demand an official explanation from President Horacio Cartes.

The information first surfaced in mid November, when Capt. Amílcar Vera, a commander with the Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta (FTC) operating in northeastern Paraguay, told a correspondent from the Associated Press that a former soldier from the US with experience in the Middle East had trained Paraguayan agents who, days before, had killed members of a previously unknown organization of supposed guerrillas called the Agrupación Campesina Armada (ACA). “The American, known as Instructor Zero, was training our agents, specifically the youngest ones, the rookies, to participate in operations,” Vera revealed, adding, “I can’t say what his real name is, nor how his contract came about, because that information is kept at the highest levels.”

The only other thing the AP’s Pedro Servín was able to glean from Capt. Vera was that Instructor Zero worked for an international outfit called Team Zero. With those scant details, the Senate approached President Cartes a week later, on Nov. 26, demanding a public report on the “engagement of a foreign ex-agent, associate of a private military instruction company, to train members of the Army elite to fight the guerrillas.”

An investigation led by Sen. Desirée Masi of the opposition Partido Democrático Progresista (PDP) determined that Instructor Zero was actually a former Italian reservist named Yeco Belucci. In calling on the government to clarify the matter, a motion that was later approved by the Senate as a whole, Masi revealed that “the mercenary” had been contracted by “a European country” at one point but “released for psychological reasons.” She also drew attention to a video he posted on social media in which he describes Paraguayan soldiers as “my boys.”

In the video, which was shown in the Congress building, Belucci is seen in a sunny and wooded place, his arms covered in tattoos, dressed in a T-shirt with the US flag stamped on the front, and wearing a pair of night-vision goggles, even though it is the middle of the day. “That’s it, brothers,” he says. “Zero casualties. Zero collateral. Four targets down. This is what we call a job well done. I’m proud of my boys.” The Italian-based company that published the video on its website is called Spartan 360º Tactical Defence, not Team Zero, as Capt. Vera—perhaps confusing it with Zero Team, a popular Japanese video game from the 1990s—called it.

Mixed messages

The revelations have put the Cartes administration on the defensive. The president ignored the Senate’s demand for explanatory reports and, via one of his spokespeople, claimed he was unaware Instructor Zero had been hired, had no idea how the man entered the country, and didn’t know how much the services cost or who paid for them.
Defense Minister Diógenes Martínez backed the president’s claims, but shortly afterwards, the newspaper ABC Color published statements by the country’s top military commander, Gen. Luis Gonzaga Garcete, indicating it had been the former head of the FTC, Gen. Luis María Ramírez Ríos “who handled Zero’s arrival” and that “Cartes gave the OK.” Ramírez Ríos, the Asunción daily added, “had praised the work of Zero and even talked about how he had served in Afghanistan, although there isn’t a single record that actually occurred.”

Media outlets took to ridiculing the whole affair as something that might have been concocted by Cuba’s Alejo Carpentier, Paraguay’s Augusto Roa Bastos, Colombia’s Gabriel García Márquez or one of the many other writers involved in Latin America’s magical realism literary movement. Still, the fact remains that four youths from the alleged ACA did die, and that Instructor Zero really was in Paraguay, even though agreements Paraguay signed before and since Zero’s visit should have made unnecessary the hiring of the “mercenary,” as Sen. Masi—and the media since then—called him.

Paraguayan police and military already receive periodic training from US and Colombian instructors. Over the course of the past year, military and police contingents tasked with fighting the ACA and the Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP), a guerrilla group whose existence is also questionable, traveled to the US and Colombia or welcomed, on Paraguayan soil, instructors from those countries. In each case, training courses lasted three months.

On top of that, the Paraguayan government, basically at the same time Instructor Zero was presumed to have been in the country’s jungly northeast, took measures to strengthen its military ties with Great Britain, Israel, and South Korea. British instructors who came to Paraguay in March 2015 to train military personnel in intelligence-gathering techniques are scheduled to return in the coming weeks. There is a possibility, as well, that Paraguay could sign a cooperation agreement with Great Britain regarding logistics and technology sharing. Paraguay will work with Israel to improve intelligence-gathering and interrogation techniques. And with South Korea, it signed a cooperation agreement on Jan. 12 that centers around military education and training. Additionally, Paraguay is looking to upgrade its military arsenal with defense systems, armaments, planes, and radars.

Drugs and weapons

Even if the ACA and the EPP are “more of an illusion” than a real guerrilla threat, as former Interior Minister Rafael Filizzola once said, the government does have a valid argument for keeping Paraguay’s military instruction agreements in place, namely that it also needs help in tackling drug trafficking. Past administrations, including the constitutional government of President Fernando Lugo (2008-2012) and the de facto government of Federico Franco (2012-2013), who succeeded Lugo following a parliamentary coup (NotiSur, July 13, 2012), also stressed Paraguay’s drug-trafficking problems.

Paraguay may be better known as a haven for smuggling and money laundering—two illegal activities President Cartes himself has been linked to (NotiSur, Sept. 11, 2015)—but it is also home to significant drug-trade operations. UN agency reports cite it as a major hub for the cultivation and transport of marijuana, and as a corridor country for cocaine coming from the world’s top three producers, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, in that order. Paraguay’s Secretaría Nacional Antidrogas (SENAD) estimates that criminal groups produce some 48,000 tons of marijuana annually on between 5,000 and 8,000 hectares of land. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has
said that about 40 tons of cocaine cross the country every year, mostly for shipment to the US and Europe.

Besides trying to optimize its military and police with periodic visits to the Tolemaida Air Base, in western Colombia, and twice yearly joint combined exchange training sessions with the United States Army Special Forces in North Carolina, Paraguayan authorities have also been working, since 2014, to increase the overall size of its combat forces. There are approximately 13,500 soldiers in the Paraguayan military. The Defense Ministry, hoping to add 1,000 more by the end of 2015, launched a campaign to encourage youth enlistment. The government missed the target. Its plan to reward people for betraying members of the EPP also fell flat.

What the government is en route to accomplishing is a general overhaul of military equipment—in all areas, from weapons to vehicles. The upgrade involves the Army, Navy and Air Force (not the Police) and is expected to cost approximately US$600 million, according to Diálogo, an online military magazine based in Florida. Among other things, Paraguay plans to buy fighter jets, helicopters, armored and amphibious vehicles, artillery boats, and new radar equipment.

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