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by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2004-05-19

Mexico is struggling to define its role in the international community, as nationalistic tendencies come into conflict with the desire to become more engaged politically in global affairs. This conflict is especially strong on the question of whether Mexico should commit troops to UN peacekeeping missions.

Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez ignited a debate on the issue in mid-May with suggestions that Mexico should not only support the UN monetarily but also with personnel. "Are we not hypocrites by putting up money but not putting up troops?" Derbez said to reporters in Madrid. Derbez noted that Mexico ranks ninth in donations to the UN’s fund for financing peacekeeping operations. "One could say we are not participating, but [we are] to the degree that we are financing those who are [participating]," Derbez said. "There are no Mexican military forces, but there are military forces financed with Mexican money."

Congress criticizes plan, cites Constitutional constraints

Derbez's statements immediately drew criticism in the Mexican Congress and raised questions regarding whether President Vicente Fox's administration would break with Mexico's traditional position and contribute troops if a UN peacekeeping force were sent to Iraq. "Mexico is not inclined to be bellicose, and much less when our country opposes the occupation of Iraq," said Sen. Cesar Jauregui Robles of Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN).

Senators from other parties supported this position. "This is an unfortunate statement that has no legal or political substance," said Sen. Antonio Soto Sanchez of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "There is zero possibility that this proposal would gain support in the Senate or among the Mexican public."

Derbez later qualified his statements, saying that Mexico was not ready to commit any troops to Iraq or any other peacekeeping missions but was willing to provide training and preparation for law-enforcement personnel. PRI Sen. Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho said the point is moot because Article 76 of the Mexican Constitution expressly prohibits the use of the Mexican military for such purposes. "Our Constitution does not provide for any exceptions," said Sauri.

Sauri criticized Derbez for bringing up the wrong issues related to Mexico's participation in the UN. "There are other issues that need to be debated, such as the reform of the UN and the possibility of making Mexico a permanent member of the Security Council," said Sauri. Mexico was elected as a nonpermanent member of the Security Council during 2002 and 2003 (see SourceMex, 2001-10-10). The possibility of Mexican troops participating in UN peacekeeping operations was endorsed by Derbez's predecessor, former foreign relations secretary Jorge Castaneda. "If the governments of
Chile and Brazil can commit some of their troops to UN missions in Haiti, I don't see why Mexico cannot do the same," said Castaneda, who has launched an independent campaign for the Mexican presidency in 2006.

Derbez's statements were immediately dismissed, however, by President Fox, who was on a tour of European countries. "Our Constitution does not allow it," Fox told reporters in Switzerland. "And this administration has no intention of participating militarily in Iraq." The Mexican president is attempting to avoid situations where Mexico appears willing to cave in to the wishes of the US. At times, the Fox government has seemed to support US policies that would appear to violate Mexico's Constitution, such as allowing US agents to manage security measures at Mexican airports (see SourceMex, 2004-01-14).

The Fox government was steadfast, however, in its opposition to a US-led resolution to have the UN Security Council endorse the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (see SourceMex, 2003-02-26). In comments to reporters during his trip to Europe, Fox said he was concerned about the escalation of the conflict in Iraq and the inability of the US to bring peace to the war-torn country. He called for a greater UN presence in Iraq. "We would like to see a strong and active presence of the United Nations with enough capacity to solve this conflict," Fox said in Budapest.

Some Mexican officials have been called upon to play a small role in reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Jacqueline Peschard and Alonso Lujambio, two former commissioners of the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), are members of the team of electoral experts that will help set up elections in Iraq this year. "The recruitment of Mexican nationals to help with the UN's electoral efforts is a sign of the high regard for our country at the international level," the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) said in a prepared statement.

Mexicans allegedly recruited for construction work in Iraq

Another group of Mexicans may have been sent to Iraq without the knowledge of Mexican authorities. The Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC) said some US companies have been recruiting workers in Puebla state to work on reconstruction projects in Iraqi cities. The workers, who are lured with the promise of a six-month contract and payment in US dollars, have been recruited without the knowledge of local, state, and federal authorities.

CROC official Galdino Munoz Gonzalez said the workers who hail primarily from the municipalities of Tzicatlacoyan, Acajete, Nopalucan, and Tecamachalco have been told they could lose their jobs if they inform Mexican authorities about their employment. Furthermore, said Munoz, the employers are not taking any steps to ensure the safety of the workers and are not providing a means for them to communicate with their families in Puebla.

Mexican legislators say the recruitment is conducted with the knowledge of the US government. "How ironic that the US is encouraging hiring undocumented workers," said PRI Deputy Roberto Pedraza Martinez, a member of the population, borders, and immigration committee (Comision de Poblacion, Fronteras y Asuntos Migratorios) in the lower house. "But only because this involves activities in a region of high risk."
Pedraza said his committee would call on the SRE to conduct a full investigation. PRD Deputy Rafael Candelas Salinas raised concerns about the safety of the Mexican construction workers in Iraq. "There are hundreds of deaths daily," said Candelas. "Any person identified in any way with the US is in danger." (Sources: Agencia de noticias Proceso, 05/12/04, 05/13/04; El Sol de Mexico, 05/12/04; Associated Press, 05/13/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 05/12-14/04; Spanish news service EFE, 05/12/04, 05/17/04; Unomasuno, 05/17/04; La Jornada, 05/13/04, 05/18/04; El Universal, 05/18/04; Notimex, 05/17/04, 05/19/04)

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