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U.N. Secretary-General Urges Mexico to Contribute Peacekeeping Troops

by LADB Staff

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In a request that created strong controversy in Mexico, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked the Mexican Senate and President Vicente Fox's administration to consider contributing peacekeeping troops to international missions. Annan made the request during a visit to Mexico City in early September to meet with Mexican government officials and intellectuals and to take part in a seminar on democracy in Latin America.

Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez set off a similar debate in May of this year when he brought up the same issue (see SourceMex, 2004-05-19). Mexico willing to contribute noncombat personnel Derbez has since ruled out the involvement of Mexican military personnel in peacekeeping forces but said he would support the use of Mexican medical personnel, observers, and police officers in other peacekeeping operations. He said the Fox administration has conveyed this possibility to Annan. "[President Fox] has clearly stated that we would like to participate in humanitarian efforts," Derbez said during a radio interview.

"Our conversations with the secretary-general are related to how we can provide support services." The foreign relations secretary said a police deployment is not the equivalent of sending troops. "Our country would be providing security, not participating in combat," said Derbez.

Derbez said, for example, that the Fox government would be willing to send police to train law officers in Haiti if the Haitian government presented such a request. Derbez' statements did not lay to rest the controversy regarding possible participation by the Mexican military in international peacekeeping operations.

During a brief statement to the Senate, Annan noted that several countries in Central and South America have allocated troops to international peacekeeping operations. The UN has deployed 50,000 troops for 17 peacekeeping operations worldwide. Annan told Mexican senators and the Fox administration that 30,000 more soldiers would be needed for peacekeeping missions in other areas.

Sen. Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho said Annan's address to the upper house was short and did not leave room for dialogue between legislators and the secretary-general. "We were not able to communicate to him that we have actually discussed this issue in the Senate and that there are diverging positions among the various parties," said Sauri, a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Sauri said she doubted that the Senate would back any use of Mexican troops in peacekeeping forces, but she said the upper house is very willing to go along with the proposals set forth by Derbez to send personnel to assist in nonmilitary activities.

Human rights groups oppose any deployment of troops

Annan's proposal also attracted debate outside presidential and congressional circles. The semi-independent Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) issued a statement opposing the proposal. "Mexico does not have any reason to contribute troops to international peacekeeping missions," said CNDH president Jose Luis Soberanes Fernandez. "Such a move would violate our tradition of nonintervention in the affairs of other countries."

The CNDH leader said the main purpose of the Mexican military is to ensure the national security of Mexico. "By sending them to other countries, we would be violating the purpose for which the military was created." The CNDH position received support from a handful of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). For example, the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Francisco de Vitoria said the government should protect the basic tenets of Mexican foreign policy, which include support for the principle of self-determination and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Center director Miguel Concha Palo raised concern that Mexican troops could be placed in a position where they could abuse the rights of others, as has been the case with US soldiers in the prisoner abuses in Iraq. "This [situation] would be dangerous and embarrassing for Mexico," said Concha.

Some members of the Mexican military, however, see some benefit to allocating troops to peacekeeping forces. Retired Army Gen. Luis Garfias Magana said Mexican soldiers would benefit from the experience of serving under an international command. "This would allow them to strengthen their military training," Garfias told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. Garfias said Annan's proposal for including of Mexican troops in peacekeeping forces merits further discussion. "This is a matter that should be addressed not only by legislators but by members of the military," he said. (Sources: La Cronica de Hoy, Spanish news service EFE, 09/09/04; El Universal, La Jornada, The Herald-Mexico City, 09/10/04)

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