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Mexico Drawn Into Diplomatic Dispute Between Colombia And Ecuador Regarding Attack On FARC Camp

by LADB Staff
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Mexico became embroiled in the diplomatic fracas between Colombia and Ecuador that followed the Colombian military’s March 1 attack on a camp of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) inside Ecuador, after learning that four Mexican citizens were killed in the attack and another was injured. President Felipe Calderon’s administration, which has had close relations with the government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, asked for an investigation, but critics in Mexico said the Mexican president should have responded more vigorously.

At the same time, questions arose regarding the presence of the five Mexicans, all affiliated with the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), in the FARC camp in Ecuador. The Colombian military raid reportedly killed guerrilla leader Raul Reyes and other FARC members but severely strained relations between Colombia and Ecuador (NotiSur, March 07, 2008). A handful of Latin American leaders offered to mediate the conflict, including Calderon and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. The Mexican president played a role in easing tensions between the two countries at the summit of the Rio Group in the Dominican Republic in early March.

Attack kills four Mexicans, injures another

As the Mexican president was conducting his mediation efforts, news filtered out of Ecuador that several Mexicans were killed in the raid on the FARC camp. The government of Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa initially reported that as many as 10 Mexicans might have died in the attack. Subsequent investigations indicated that four students from UNAM Juan Gonzalez del Castillo, Veronica Natalia Velazaquez, Soren Aviles Angeles, and Fernando Franco who were visiting the camp, were killed. Another student, Lucia Morett, sustained injuries severe enough to require hospitalization.

The Calderon government criticized the Colombian raid and secured a promise from Colombian authorities to look into the possibility of compensating the families of the victims, but stopped short of lodging a vigorous condemnation. "Mexico's Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) is aware that we are willing to make indemnity payments once there is a judicial decision or we reach an administrative conciliation," said Colombia's Foreign Relations Secretary Fernando Araujo.

Calderon government criticized for timid response

Parents of the UNAM students labeled the Calderon administration's response too timid and demanded that the Mexican government take a tougher line with the Uribe government. "We consider it an obligation of the Mexican state to promote the respect for life, as is spelled out in
the Mexican Constitution," said a letter by the parents of the UNAM students. "This should be the case no matter where the students are." Rita del Castillo, Gonzalez's mother, said the parents were planning to organize a march at the UNAM to honor the five students and press their demands to the Calderon government. Among other things, said Ana Maria Ramirez Maldonado, Velazquez's mother, the parents are urging the Calderon government to demand that those responsible for the massacre be punished. But others were skeptical that any action would be taken. "Calderon's government has always responded to the interests of people like [President] Uribe," said Marcelo Franco, Fernando's father. "Furthermore, this is another sign of its subservience to the interests of the US." Jose Luis Soberanes, president of the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), strongly criticized Colombia but did not mention the Mexican government in a statement released in early April. "We cannot tolerate a situation where people are deprived of their lives," said Soberanes, who acknowledged making contacts with the human rights ombudsman in Ecuador, who has given Morett and relatives of the victims support.

Mexican legislators also condemned the Calderon government for failing to lodge a more vigorous protest. The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) demanded that Calderon send a diplomatic note to the government in Bogota condemning the attack. "The government should at the very least send a diplomatic note protesting what we consider a crime against humanity," said PRD Sen. Ricardo Monreal. In a resolution approved in late March, the Senate demanded that the Uribe government make reparations to the families of the Mexican victims. "The Senate has to show solidarity with the Mexicans who died and with their families," said Sen. Ramon Galindo, a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Senators also urged the Calderon administration to expedite the investigation of the circumstances surrounding the presence of the UNAM students at the FARC camp.

The incident raised some questions about the true purpose of the visit by the UNAM students to the guerrilla camp in Ecuador. Questions arise about student ties to FARC Colombian authorities raised the possibility that the UNAM students may have been among a group of Mexican and Chilean nationals who were being trained by the FARC in guerrilla tactics. "We have had conversations with Mexico's Foreign Relations Secretariat to determine with absolute clarity why those students were present at this camp," said Araujo. In an interview with Ecuadoran media, Morett emphatically denied that she and her colleagues had traveled to Ecuador for any sort of training. She said the purpose of their visit was to conduct studies related to their work at the university and to engage in "tourist activities." This prompted a skeptical response from Colombian officials. "Tourism in a camp of terrorists?" asked Colombian Vice President Juan Manuel Santos. "Who is going to believe this tale?" UNAM officials came to the defense of the students. Ambrosio Velasco, director of UNAM's school of philosophy and letters, said the trip to Ecuador was part of the Latin American studies research that the students were carrying out. "These students have a strong sense of social responsibility," said Velasco. "They were studying legitimate and legal solutions [to the problems of poverty]. Velasco emphasized that the UNAM school of philosophy and letters does not endorse or promote links to guerrilla groups. But some skeptics said UNAM had long been a site for students to form groups in support of the FARC. "In the university, there are halls where groups of students or even nonstudents get together to engage in activities of indoctrination and propaganda in favor of the Colombian guerrillas," said Pablo Hiriart, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior.
Some media reports had labeled Morett a "Mexican guerrilla" and "drug trafficker." But her friends and relatives disputed the allegation, saying she was an aspiring actress who was in Ecuador working on her bachelor's thesis on Latin American culture. Morett's father, Jorge Morett Sanchez, a professor at the Universidad Autonoma Chapingo in Mexico City, said his daughter was an idealistic young woman who had traveled to Ecuador to attend a leftist meeting. Government probes FARC ties to Mexican drug cartels The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), in conjunction with the Policia Nacional de Colombia (PNC), is also investigating allegations that the FARC has established operations in Mexico to facilitate its connections with the Sinaloa and Tijuana drug cartels.

The investigation centers on reports that the FARC has been working very closely with notorious drug traffickers Sandra Avila Beltran and Juan Diego Espinoza Ramirez, who have connections to the Sinaloa cartel. Avila Beltran, known as the Reina del Pacifico (Queen of the Pacific), had become a major player in the drug trade until her arrest in October 2007. Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora said authorities have uncovered "abundant evidence" of links between Colombian and Mexican drug organizations, but thus far there has been no indication that the FARC is involved. "We don't have any direct evidence of links between the FARC and Mexican drug cartels," he said on March 25.

In November, federal authorities arrested three Colombian citizens in Mexico City who allegedly had connections with Colombia's Valle del Norte cartel and were said to be dealing with Espinoza and Avila. Still, Colombian authorities insist that the FARC is directly involved in the drug trade in Mexico. "All the FARC's fronts are dedicated to drug cultivation and are using their connections with the Mexican cartels," said Alvaro Caro, director of Colombia's Policia Antinarcoticos. Caro said the FARC, in conjunction with the Mexican cartels, is responsible for 90% of the cocaine circulating in the US. Even with the lack of new evidence, Mexican authorities have in the past linked the FARC to the operations of the Sinaloa cartel (SourceMex, August 10, 2005).

The US State Department and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have also made these allegations. In a report published in 1999, the State Department said the FARC reached an agreement in the 1990s with the Arellano Felix family, which operates the Tijuana cartel, to coordinate drug- and arms-trafficking activities. Furthermore, said the report, the FARC maintained an official presence in Mexico City for a decade, through an office created to promote ties between Colombia and Mexico to promote "peace negotiations" in Colombia. Mexican authorities closed the office at the request of the Colombian government. Despite the office's closure, the FARC was able to expand its links to Mexican drug traffickers in recent years, Colombian officials contend.

Regardless of any connections to the drug trade, Mexican authorities are trying to determine whether the FARC has any presence in Mexico City. Investigations center on Mario Dagoberto Diaz Orgaz, said to be the director and chief financial officer of an organization called Nucleo Mexicano de Apoyo a las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). Diaz Orgaz, a Mexican citizen, is a researcher with the Centro de Ingenieria y Desarrollo Industrial del Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnologia (CONACYT). Diaz Orgaz reportedly went into hiding when the investigations began, but his attorneys have denied that he has any links to the FARC.