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President Enrique Peña Nieto Pledges Mexican Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations

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In an address to the UN General Assembly in New York during the last week of September, President Enrique Peña Nieto committed to provide Mexican soldiers to the UN Peacekeeping Forces. Peña Nieto’s announcement does not represent any change in policy, as the Mexican president is already allowed to send personnel from the Navy, Army, or Air Force to peacekeeping missions with approval from the Senate.

For most of its history, Mexico shied away from participating in any UN operations, partly because of limitations in the Mexican Constitution that prohibited such engagement. In 2004, former President Vicente Fox’s administration, via Foreign Relations Secretary Ernesto Derbez, proposed that Mexico contribute troops to the UN (SourceMex, May 19, 2004).

In 2005, the Senate approved an amendment allowing the Mexican president to commit troops to international combat and noncombat missions. Any troops committed to peacekeeping operations would require a vote from the Senate, but the executive was given the power to send military units for humanitarian missions without Senate approval (SourceMex, March 2, 2005).

The Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) said Mexico made three exceptions before the amendment was approved in 2005, sending observers to a UN operation in the Balkans in 1947-1950 and a conflict in the region of Kashmir along the India-Pakistan border in 1949. In 1992, Mexico sent a contingent of police officers to a UN peacekeeping operation in Honduras and El Salvador.

Even with the president’s powers, Mexico had not provided military and civilian personnel to UN operations since the amendment was approved in 2005. Some observers noted that Mexican troops were already busy with other duties at home during the last administration. "The war against drug traffickers during the presidency of Felipe Calderón prevented us from reincorporating our country to this service offered by the UN," columnist Yuriria Sierra wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior.

"Of course, this is a very important participation for our country, giving us a sense of solidarity and the opportunity to react in certain situations," added Sierra, who noted that the disaster-assistance training received by Mexican troops could be invaluable in the UN’s relief operations.

Following the president’s announcement at the UN, the SRE also touted the benefits for Mexico of participating in UN operations. The SRE said Mexico would initially have limited participation in any peacekeeping operations but would be open to a wide range of activities. "Military or civilian personnel could become involved in areas where engineers, doctors, nurses, political observers, election advisers, or specialists in human rights are needed," the SRE said in a communiqué.

"The participation of our country in the UN peacekeeping operations is one of our country's expressions of global responsibility," said the SRE. "Our country is already the second-largest contributor in Latin America to the UN’s peacekeeping budget."
Peña Nieto’s pledge to the UN means that Mexico would join more than a dozen countries from Latin America and the Caribbean to contribute to UN peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. Other participating countries from the region include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Jamaica, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Colombia, and Honduras. The two latter countries participate on a limited basis, with Colombia committing personnel to UN operations in Haiti and Honduras providing support in Western Sahara. Brazil and Argentina are providing the largest number of personnel to UN operations.

"Almost all countries contribute personnel to Haiti and Brazil has dominated the mission from its inception," Sabrina Karim wrote in the Americas Quarterly blog in 2012. "The large presence in Haiti makes sense. Scholars argue that countries contribute troops to areas where they have the most vested interest."

Mixed reaction in Senate

As expected, Peña Nieto’s announcement received strong support in the Senate from members of his governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and from the center-right opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). However, PRI and PAN senators qualified their support for the decision. The center-left parties, led by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), described the decision as a mistake.

"The administration has to be very careful when deciding to send Mexican troops," said Sen. Jorge Luis Preciado, floor leader for the PAN in the upper chamber. "First, we have to determine whether we need the soldiers at home. We must put out any domestic fires before committing troops to overseas missions."

Preciado also reminded Peña Nieto that the Mexican Constitution obligates the Senate to ratify any decision to send Mexican soldiers to UN peacekeeping missions.

PRI senators were equally cautious, suggesting that the president must use prudence even when sending Mexican military or civilian personnel to UN humanitarian missions. "We must carefully weigh our participation in these missions and determine whether the affected country has even asked the UN to send personnel," said PRI Sen. Ismael Hernández.

The PRD offered an opposite stance, suggesting that the decision to commit troops to UN peacekeeping forces was a mistake. Sen. Alejandro Encinas, floor leader for the PRD in the upper house, said the decision runs counter to Mexico’s long tradition of allowing countries the right of self-determination.

"We have already seen the problems caused by the participation of the military in matters of public safety," said Encinas, pointing to the policies of ex-President Calderón to use the Army and Marines to combat drug traffickers. Massive violations resulted from this policy, Encinas noted.

Other observers agreed with Encinas’ premise. "The presidential announcement that Mexican troops will participate in international peacekeeping operations ends the traditional international isolation of the Mexican military," Jorge Carrasco Araizaga wrote in a piece published by Agencia de Noticias Proceso (apro). "In the end, this is a measure that contradicts the actual behavior of Mexican soldiers and marines in our very own country."