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## **Panama Briefs: FARC Incursions, Education, Mining Projects, U.S. Bases**

by LADB Staff

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### *Police sent to contain Colombian incursions in Darien*

Members of the Colombian right-wing paramilitary force *Comite de Autodefensa Campesina*, who attacked remote villages in the border province of Darien in April (see *EcoCentral*, 05/01/97), entered the towns of Yape and El Real in June looking for Colombian guerrillas belonging to the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)*.

In one report, Romulo Emiliani, bishop of Darien, said that 40 heavily armed paramilitary troops took over the town of Yape, decapitated a man whom they accused of working with the FARC, and then raped the man's three daughters. Interior Minister Raul Montenegro at first downplayed reports of these incursions, saying that all was calm in the area. But on July 7, the government announced that it was sending 1,000 police to the border, in an operation labelled *Peace and Sovereignty*, to reinforce the 300 already there.

However, National Police spokesman Jose Zamora said the police contingent did not intend to engage the Colombians. "Panama does not have the personnel to guard the border," he said. The reinforcements are going there because of "bandits and thieves" who infest the area. Panamanian policy at the moment is to accept the reality of both guerrilla and anti-guerrilla presence and to oppose assistance to the guerrillas by Panamanians.

At the same time, Panama has tried to avoid recognizing the Colombian presence as a violation of national sovereignty even though there is ample confirmation that the Colombian guerrillas are well-entrenched in at least seven fronts in Darien. According to a source in that province, FARC has a delegate in every village along the border "and the Panamanian police know it."

While some reports suggest that the *Autodefensa Campesina* is also well-established in Darien, official policy says that sovereignty is not at issue because they have not sought a confrontation with the border police and have, according to Montenegro, already left Panama. Meanwhile, Panamanian authorities are seeking cooperation with Colombia to exchange intelligence information and to coordinate efforts to dislodge the *Autodefensa Campesina*. President Ernesto Perez Balladares said he planned to meet with Colombian President Ernesto Samper in August to discuss deployment of regular Colombian troops along the Colombian side of the border.

### *Educational reform laws*

Teachers have been marching and picketing since January against administration proposals to modernize and decentralize public elementary and secondary education. Along with other public employees, teachers unions have fought a law, passed by the Legislative Assembly in February,

that will eliminate the special pensions for such public workers as teachers, nurses, and postal workers. The government argues that the pension benefits are too generous and that the pension fund is running a deficit that must be closed by doubling the employees' contributions from 2% to 4% of their salary. After 1999, the current system will be replaced with an enforced savings system (Sistema de Ahorros y Capitalizacion, SIACAP) covering all public employees and administered by workers cooperatives. In June, the Assembly began debating an administration education-reform bill that would eliminate the current centralized Personnel Board, turning authority for such matters as hiring and promotion of teachers over to 13 local councils.

In addition, the new law would require teachers to have a university, rather than a normal-school degree; lengthen the school year by 40 days; and reduce paid vacation time from three months to one month per year. The administration has been talking tough to the teachers ever since the modernization laws were introduced. In April, Education Minister Pablo Thalassinos warned against a strike, noting that there are 16,000 unemployed teachers who could take their places in the classrooms. But teachers unions ignored the warning and on June 17 initiated a 48-hour strike that stretched into two weeks. Talks initiated by Thalassinos on June 22 yielded nothing. The minister then sacked 112 teachers, most of them union and protest leaders. Finally, on July 1, teachers unions suspended the strike after reaching an agreement with the government under which the fired teachers would be reinstated. Both sides also agreed to turn the dispute over to a commission made up of government officials, teachers, and parents.

### *Organizations mobilize for and against mining projects*

On June 17, 20 campesino, Indian, human rights, and other organizations formed a National Front Against Mines (Frente Nacional Contra las Minas). The front's immediate goal was to shut down an open-pit gold mine near the towns of Macaracas and Tonosi in Los Santos province. The mining concession is held by the Minería Cerro Quema, a subsidiary of the Canadian consortium Campbell Resources of Toronto. Local residents complained that the mine's operations contaminated rivers and soil as sediment left from the cyanide separation process washed downstream.

A report by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry confirmed the residents complaints and said the Cerro Quema company had not built the sediment traps as stipulated in the contract with the government. In response to the protest, Minister of Commerce and Industry Raul Arango ordered operations suspended at Cerro Quema for four months beginning June 24. During the shutdown, a commission will review the mine's environmental-compliance record. Cerro Quema general manager Vernon Smith promised to take steps to curtail contamination and to hire 170 local residents.

Meanwhile, according to a report in the newspaper *El Siglo*, groups of armed men are operating in the mountains of Veraguas, Chiriqui, Bocas del Toro, and Darien provinces in opposition to other foreign-operated mines. These "armed environmentalists," according to the newspaper report, are essentially guerrillas challenging not simply illegal environmental practices of the mining companies but their presence in Panama. By contrast, some 200 Cerro Quema mine workers protested the four-month closing. At a rally in front of the town hall in Los Santos, the workers claimed that those who oppose the mine do so because they are angry at not having been hired to work there, and in some cases because they had not been able to sell their land to the company.

## *Panama raises concerns about chemical weapons on U.S. Bases*

The Foreign Ministry registered concern that the US military may have carried out highly dangerous weapons tests on Panamanian soil and left weapons materials in sites that have not been identified in official US reports. On July 1, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a California-based organization, said that, according to documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, the US military carried out a series of secret weapons tests near Fort Clayton on the Pacific side of the Panama Canal. Although initially denied by the US Embassy in Panama, the report was later confirmed by public-relations officer Byron Conover of the Southern Command.

The tests were made in the 1960s and early 1990s and involved projectiles charged with depleted uranium U-238. Other tests used Dioxin and Agent Orange. Conover said the tests were only to see how depleted uranium and the chemical-charged projectiles reacted in the tropics and that none was actually fired. According to the FOR report, the projectiles were buried near the canal and information about them was suppressed by the Department of Defense. Mention of these tests was omitted from official reports on schedules for bases to be turned over to Panama.

The Foreign Ministry issued a statement noting that Panama has never given permission for the use of such weapons on its territory and that the tests violated a 1997 US law prohibiting tests of nuclear and chemical weapons outside the US. The executive director of the environmental organization Asociacion Nacional para la Conservacion de la Naturaleza (ANCON), Juan Carlos Navarro, accused the US government of withholding accurate information on the extent of base contamination. He called for a thorough audit of contamination in all areas historically used by the US in Panama and urged that it be carried out by international experts.

Since the passage of the Carter-Torrijos Treaties in 1977, the position of the Panamanian government has been that the US must clean up radioactive and other contaminants on military bases before they revert to Panama. [Sources: Inforpress Centroamericana (Guatemala), 02/06/97, 02/13/97, 05/16/97; Inter Press Service, 06/23/97; La Prensa, 06/26/97; El Siglo (Panama), 02/14/97, 02/25/97, 04/30/97, 06/26/97; Agence France-Press, Central America Update, 07/01/97; 06/30/97-07/04/97; Reuter, 07/01/97, 07/07/97; El Panama America, 01/15/97, 05/12/97, 06/12/97, 06/13/97, 06/23/97, 06/25/97, 06/26/97, 06/28/97, 07/01/97, 07/02/97, 07/03/97, 07/05/97, 07/08/97, 07/09/97, 07/10/97]

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