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LADB Staff

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Arms Trafficking Raises New Concern in Panama About Plan Colombia

by LADB Staff

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President Mireya Moscoso has said Panama would not take part in the US-backed Plan Colombia. A series of clandestine arms shipments headed for Colombian guerrillas indicates, however, that Panama may already be affected by its neighbor's internal conflict. Plan Colombia is Colombian President Andres Pastrana's initiative, backed by US aid, that aims to crush the narcotics industry. But Panama and other nations bordering Colombia assume the offensive will be aimed at the Colombian guerrillas as well, forcing the armed conflict into their countries (see NotiSur, 2000-07-14, 2000-09-08).

In August, Foreign Minister Miguel Aleman said Panama would cooperate with Plan Colombia. But in mid-September, Pablo Quintero, director of the Consejo de Seguridad del Estado, said Panama would not participate in the plan. He said he hoped the war in Colombia would not become internationalized, but that Panamanians near the border with Colombia have been displaced for several years by incursions of guerrillas and paramilitaries from Colombia.

Despite the Moscoso administration's policy of distancing itself from Plan Colombia, the government has gradually beefed up its police presence in the Darien border area. And with the discovery of vigorous arms traffic through Panama, Moscoso announced additional measures to reduce the arms transfers.

In recent months, police have seized several arms shipments destined for the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). In September, the flow seemed to increase as Panamanian authorities discovered three big arms caches. One was found in Chame near Panama City and another in Salamanca in the province of Colon, which police said was the largest arms cache found since 1980. The third was uncovered in a Panama City residence.

The caches included assault rifles, grenade launchers, mortars, land mines, ammunition, and high explosives. In the third cache, police say they found various military manuals, including one on how to mount terrorist attacks in urban centers, of the kind used in the US Army's School of the Americas. Police said the arms were shipped from Nicaragua to Costa Rica in containers and then transferred to Panama in trucks carrying potatoes and onions.

After the first shipment was discovered, former director of the Panamanian police Ebrahim Asvat said the arms shipments raised a national security alert. "We have only detected one shipment," said Asvat, "but how many slipped by?" Some Panamanian officials are saying the arms transfers show that the FARC is stockpiling weapons in preparation for an expected Colombian military offensive supported by the US under Plan Colombia, and that the internationalization of the conflict is already underway.

Some weapons may have come from ex-contras In Nicaragua, armed forces chief Gen. Javier Carrion and police officials said they think the arms were bought by Panamanians from ex-contras in Nicaragua and resold to the FARC at a markup of as much as 2000%. Costa Rican officials said they planned increased patrols on the Pan-American highway and had asked for help from the US Coast Guard. Joint drug interdiction patrols have been underway in Costa Rican waters since March under a Costa Rican-US agreement (see NotiCen, 1999-09-02, 2000-05-04).

The origin of all the weapons is not known, but it is assumed that Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador are flooded with illegal military arms left over from the conflicts of the 1980s. Since the end of those conflicts, additional weapons have entered the stream with cuts in Central American armed forces. A report in The Miami Herald said Central American military officers sold excess arms to Colombian combatants for cash or cocaine. Even Costa Rica, which has no army and was not at war in the 1980s, was involved in arms trafficking and many of the weapons wound up in the hands of Costa Rican officials.

In a 1981 investigation, the Legislative Assembly found that government officials had diverted tons of arms from secret Cuban shipments to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and to Costa Rican security forces. Some 2,000 weapons were missing from Costa Rican inventories in a 1981 audit and it is likely they ended up in the illegal arms trade. So far, 16 Colombians and Panamanians have been arrested in connection with the arms shipments. Panama's Customs director Mercedes Villalaz is investigating customs inspectors on the border with Costa Rica in Chiriqui province.

At least one shipment passed overland from Golfito, Costa Rica, in trucks and went through customs inspections at the Panamanian border checkpoints. Three customs inspectors are suspected of having allowed the trucks to pass through. Panamanian police director Carlos Bares said in early October that he would call a meeting of Central American public-security officials to consider additional steps to stop the arms flow toward Colombia. [Sources: Associated Press, La Prensa (Panama), 09/09/00; The Miami Herald, 09/15/00; The Tico Times (Costa Rica), 09/22/00; El Panama America, 09/09/00, 09/14/00, 09/23/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 09/20/00, 09/23/00, 10/02/00]

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