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## US Military Takes Aim at Environment

by LADB Staff

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Once revered as the "work of God" and feared for the awesome power to wreak disasters of biblical proportions, man's original dance partner Mother Nature was identified this week by US military leaders and foreign-policy experts as the newest "threat to regional security." While it may seem odd to classify the environment along with drug trafficking and rogue nations as a post-Cold War bogeyman, participants in this week's regional security summit in San Jose claimed nature poses a serious threat to economic sustainability, regional stability, and emerging democracies throughout the Americas.

"Environmental problems in the hemisphere undermine democracy and prosperity more than any other type of security threat," said Robin Rosenberg, Deputy Director of the North-South Center, a US foreign-policy think tank. "The military has a legitimate concern that environmental problems, [if left unchecked], will result in avoidable security issues, such as border conflicts, insurrections, and economic deterioration." In a historic round of regional security talks hailed as "the first conference to put the words 'security' and 'environment' in the same sentence," environmental and defense leaders from 14 countries met this week with representatives from civil society to study ways to improve hemispheric military partnerships and strengthen environmental security measures.

Curtis Bowling, assistant deputy undersecretary of defense, said environmental security implies a "military peace mission to protect people from environmental threats." In addition to the traditional military task of providing emergency relief following natural disasters, he argued, armed forces must also focus on reducing environmental circumstances that lead to conflict by promoting sustainable environmental laws that protect forestry and fisheries, regulate pollutants, and manage natural resources.

"In the same vein that drug-related violence represents a threat to regional security, so too do environmental concerns and conflicts on environmental issues," Major Gen.

Gary Speer, Deputy Commander in Chief of the US Southern Command, told The Tico Times Monday. "Militaries must be prepared not only to respond to natural disasters, but also to prevent environmental issues from becoming a source of conflict." Asked to elaborate on how armies can prevent conflicts on environmental issues, Gen. Speer replied, "That is why we are here this week, to see what we can do and to get different ideas from different countries." Although armies, in particular that of the US, have often been criticized for being protagonists in environmental destruction, Gen. Speer insisted that "the US military, both in the US proper and overseas, follows

the same environmental standards as US businesses and industry." "We hope to instill the same degree of responsibility with our partner militaries around the hemisphere," he added.

However, not everyone is convinced that the men and women in uniform represent a greener, environmentally friendlier army. "[Speer's comment] misses the point," John Lindsay-Poland, director of the Latin American program for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, told *The Tico Times*. "Most US industries are not firing live explosives into the environment."

US military left environmental hazards in Panama Lindsay-Poland, author of a forthcoming book about the US legacy in Panama, said the US has still not complied with the Chemical Weapons Convention, which obliges it to remove and destroy all chemical-weapons containers left behind at old military bases. Because of not cleaning up its deadly mess, he added, leftover explosives from US ranges have killed 21 Panamanians since Uncle Sam pulled out of the country in December 1999. "At a time when the US is going to war with Iraq over claims that Saddam [Hussein] is not sharing information about chemical weapons," Lindsay-Poland said, "it is hypocritical, illegal, and dangerous for the US to do the same in Panama."

Another sticking point that critics claim destroys the US military's credibility as a protector of the environment is the massive fumigation campaign in Colombia as part of the controversial US\$7.5 billion Plan Colombia (see *NotiSur*, 2001-03-02). "Indiscriminate fumigation is not only destroying the subsistence food crops in some of our communities, it is also poisoning the soil of primary rain forests, killing animals and traditional plants that we use for medicinal purposes," reads a document provided by the Traditional Authorities of the Awa People, who were in San Jose last October for the Colombian peace talks. "But the greatest injury is when our water supplies are poisoned, resulting in the deaths of our fish and affecting the health of our people."

Max Manwaring, a consultant for the US Army War College, this week admitted to *The Tico Times* that the fumigation campaign has had international consequences, polluting rivers in Colombia and Brazil's Amazon Basin. "People have a right to get upset about this," he said. A third apparent inconsistency that has critics scratching their heads is how the lean, "green" US military machine can call for environmental security while its commander in chief, President George W. Bush, has pulled an about-face on the Kyoto Protocol and openly plans to drill for oil in an Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge.

Addressing charges of US government hypocrisy, summit participant Alan Hecht of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) stressed that it was too soon to judge the Bush administration on environmental policy. "I withhold judgment, and I hope other people will too until the policies are given time to evolve," he said. Despite controversy regarding the US's moral authority to spearhead a regional military-environmental campaign, Manwaring said the proposal to involve the armed forces in environmental security is not the same as seeking a military solution to a social problem, as is the case with the much-criticized war on drugs. "The environment is too big of an issue not to use all state and regional resources available," Manwaring stressed.

"The problem is that a lot of people see this effort in the metaphor of the drug war or fight against communism," Rosenberg told *The Tico Times*. "But the US is not just looking for a new enemy."

"In reality," he added, "this effort is a recognition that civil society has not been able to address environmental threats, which are not just threats against quality of life, but threats that represent national-security risks." "The drug war has not been very positive, and the Southern Command is extremely aware that this effort could be perceived as another militarization of a social problem," Rosenberg continued. "However, this issue does not follow the same logic. The Southern Command is not looking for another controversial war."

While everyone from the military and the US State Department to foreign-policy experts seems to agree that environmental issues need to be at the forefront of future US policy, critics wonder whether the military, which President Bush claimed is "trained to fight and win wars," is the organization best fit to carry out the mission.

Rosenberg said that, despite their dark history, the fear of militaries in Central America is a thing of the past. People now view armed forces as competent bureaucracies capable of getting things done where civil organizations fall short, he said. "The military brings to the table a trained, disciplined force with transportation," said Gen. Speer. "We have permanent leadership to execute planned, coordinated, and supervised missions in response to natural disasters."

While the general stressed that the military's role in environmental security would be to act as a "support to civil authority," the US Army War College's Manwaring warned of the danger of Latin American militaries starting to believe they can solve their countries' problems better than civil society or the government. "This is a concern," he stressed. "It has been known to happen before." The three-day security conference concluded Wednesday, and Gen. Speer said it achieved its primary goal of creating the opportunity to open dialogue and build trust between "those in uniform and those in civilian clothing." Priority issues and needs were identified, as well as some solutions, such as oil-spill response education and training, disaster-response training, pollution prevention, and elaboration of a Regional Action Plan in environmental security.

However, Elizabeth Odio, Costa Rica's minister of environment and second vice president, said much work remains to be done. "In the past, irreversible damage has been done to the environment by people who wanted to make a better world through war," Odio charged in closing statements of the conference. "And today, we continue to talk about economic development without taking the environment into consideration." Odio cited Costa Rica's recently signed free-trade agreement with Canada, which lacks an environmental protection clause. She did, however, acknowledge the importance of this week's conference, saying it represented military and civil groups "working together for the world at peace that we all want."

Asked by The Tico Times what environmental security means to Costa Rica, which abolished its army 52 years ago, Odio said that current environmental protection efforts by the Ministry of Security and the joint US-Costa Rican drug patrols are two examples of areas that can do more to protect nature. Joint maritime drug patrols will start to police illegal fishing and poaching off the Cocos Island, she said, and the Ministry of Security will expand its efforts to help deal with the problem of environmental contamination. "The Ministry of Security has already been of great help in defending turtles and the forest," she added. "Without this help, environmental destruction here would be much greater."

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