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LADB Staff

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## Nicaragua and Panama Quarrel Arms Shipment

by LADB Staff

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The Colombian newspaper El Tiempo reported April 21 that a shipment of arms from Nicaragua ostensibly destined for the Panamanian National Police arrived in Colombia in a zone controlled by right-wing paramilitary forces. News of the shipment has caused an international furor, with officials of Nicaragua and Panama accusing each other of orchestrating an illegal arms sale.

The Guatemalan firm Grupo Internacional de Representantes (GIRSA), acting as broker, shipped the arms to Panama in October 2001, but they arrived in Colombia instead. Nicaraguan police say shipment was legal Nicaraguan police chief Edwin Cordero said he negotiated a deal with representatives of the Panamanian police in 1999. The deal was to trade 3,000 Nicaraguan AK-47 rifles and 5 million rounds of ammunition for Panamanian small arms, Uzi submachine guns, and bayonets.

Police spokespersons said the exchange was "a legal commercial operation" and GIRSA was a responsible company from which Nicaragua had previously arranged purchases of police equipment. The trade, they said, was approved in 1999 by then President Arnaldo Aleman (1997-2002), his interior minister Rene Herrera, treasury minister Esteban Duque Estrada, and the five-member comptroller's office (Contraloria General de la Republica, CGR).

The Panama daily La Prensa reported that, in September 2001, Shimon Yalin Yelinek, an Israeli living in Panama and representing the firm Digal S.A. de Panama, went to Nicaragua to supervise the arms transfer on behalf of the Panamanian police. He and Oris Zoller, an Israeli representing GIRSA, inspected the arms in a Nicaraguan police warehouse. Aleman, Duque Estrada, and a growing number of former Aleman associates are under investigation for corruption (see NotiCen, 2002-05-09).

Nicaraguan Interior Minister Arturo Harding confirmed Cordero's account of the arms deal and said his office was investigating how the shipment ended up in Colombia. Yelinek acknowledged that he inspected the arms in Nicaragua along with Zoller and that Zoller, a Zoller associate, and a Nicaraguan army officer identified as Col. Calderon tried to interest him in taking part in the arms deal. Yelinek said he refused because he thought it was illegal.

The Nicaraguan daily El Nuevo Diario tried unsuccessfully to communicate with army Col. Roberto Calderon Meza to see if he knew anything about the arms deal. Missing in the Nicaraguan version was any explanation of how the arms shipment got to Colombia. GIRSA says the shipment arrived in Panama as scheduled but that the shipping documents were somehow altered and the arms proceeded on to Colombia. Colombian officials said the shipment left the Nicaraguan port of El Rama on the Panamanian freighter Otterloo and arrived in the Colombian port of Turbo. Documents furnished by Nicaraguan authorities show the Otterloo left El Rama with the arms

shipment, but the ship's records indicate that it docked at Turbo and off-loaded only plastic balls it had taken on in the Mexican port of Veracruz.

Panamanian police chief Carlos Bares said he knew nothing about the arms exchange with Nicaragua despite Cordero's insistence that he had dealt with Panamanian officials in working out the exchange. Panamanian national-security officials also denied any deal had been made with the Israelis or with the Nicaraguan police, and they said all Panamanian arms purchases were made through a Hungarian firm.

Bares accused the Nicaraguan police of using false documents to disguise the shipment as a legitimate exchange. He said the arms exchange was a ruse to extract arms from the Nicaraguan police and sell them for personal profit in Colombia. Cordero disputed the Panamanian claims and called Bares a liar. He said the arms left Nicaragua in a Panamanian ship bound for the Panamanian port of Colon, and blamed the Panamanians for diverting the arms to Colombia.

Cordero contradicted Bares' claim that he knew nothing about the exchange deal, and he said that, while he and Bares were in Bolivia attending a conference, Bares informed him that the arms had not arrived in Panama.

Panama's Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Aleman accused the Nicaraguan police of corruption and of managing the transfer from beginning to end. "The arms were under the custody of the Nicaraguan police, they left from the warehouses of the Nicaraguan police, and they were shipped by the Nicaraguan police from Nicaraguan waters and taken to Colombia."

### *Presidents agree on commission to investigate*

While in San Jose for the inauguration of Costa Rican President Abel Pacheco May 8, Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos and Panama's President Mireya Moscoso agreed to set up a tripartite commission with Colombia to investigate the arms scandal. Bolanos announced that the commission would have support from Interpol and the Organization of American States (OAS). Gerardo Bravo, author of a study on the control of arms and arms trafficking in Nicaragua, said arms were exported in Central America like bags of rice and beans. He said there were few regulations governing the export and import of arms either in Nicaragua or Panama and little control of the internal flow of arms whether registered or illegal.

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