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US-sponsored Police Academy Proposed in Costa Rica

by LADB Staff

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In June, Costa Rican President Abel Pacheco made his first trip to the US in an attempt to drive forward support for negotiating a free-trade agreement between the US and Central America. He returned home with a proposal to locate an International Law Enforcement Academy in Costa Rica. According to Pacheco the country's half-century-old decision to have no army is not under threat. The International Academy, as proposed by US President George W. Bush, will train recruits to counter domestic violence, protect the environment and fight against drug trafficking and terrorism.

After a June 13 visit to the White House, where Pacheco met with Bush, the Costa Rican leader demonstrated enthusiasm for the proposal, which would be realized with joint financing from the US and Costa Rica, and with their experience and knowledge of security matters. Pacheco claimed that the topic interests him "because it would be a 100% civil police force and a police that would be concerned with modern world problems."

Although located in Costa Rica, the school would have a hemispheric reach. It will have similar objectives to the International Law Enforcement Academies in Hungary, Thailand, Botswana and the US state of New Mexico, which were established to help fight Washington's drugs war, but with a special emphasis on the environment. The academy would at first receive students from Central America and the Caribbean, but its supporters hope it will eventually be converted into a police institute for the whole of Latin America. Although Pacheco said the proposal has his backing, he made it clear that the initiative would be put before the Legislative Assembly, which will have the power to accept or reject it.

There are indications that the plan to construct the school has a history longer than Pacheco's US trip, perhaps as far back as the Miguel Angel Rodriguez administration (1998-2002). Costa Rican Security Minister Rogelio Ramos, who held the same post in the Rodriguez cabinet, apparently discussed the issue with US Ambassador to Costa Rica John Danilovich in the weeks before Pacheco visited Washington. It is also believed that the US first intended to locate the school in Panama, original home to the infamous School of the Americas, now located in Fort Benning, Ga. The decision to switch locations was made for "political reasons" and for the democratic stability of Costa Rica.

Armed forces in the region receive environmental training

The people of Costa Rica, a country known for its ecological vision, will be "very interested a police force that is able to protect nature and other life forms on the planet as well as human beings," said Pacheco. However, the relation between defense and the environment is already established in Central America. Last June, the Tropical Agriculture Research and Higher Education Center

(CATIE) hosted a function attended by 40 representatives from Central American countries and the US to celebrate the opening of the "Central American Program of Environmental Defense in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor".

CATIE is a post-graduate research and teaching center concerned with agriculture, conservation management and the sustainable use of natural resources. Included among the institutions present at the event were the US Southern Command, the Center for Strategic Leadership at the US Army War College, military and police academies from five Central American countries, the Central American Commission of Environment and Development, and the Meso American Bio Corridor Project among others.

According to a press release issued by CATIE, the initiative aims to improve and strengthen the ability of members of the armed forces in agricultural, forestry and environmental issues. Through a training scheme that will reach the next generation of military experts, CATIE hopes the project will eventually impact the work of 170,000 members of the armed forces and police in the region. CATIE is responsible for coordinating and executing the program in at least eight military and two police academies in Central America, along with the environmental ministries of the region.

"In Central America the armed forces already have a legal mandate to involve themselves in environmental matters, via the Framework Treaty of Democratic Security and in the Sustainable Development Alliance," said Costa Rican Environment and Energy Minister Carlos Manuel Rodriguez. "This program puts into practice the new roles assigned to the military by the law."

Edgar Gutierrez, Director of the Development Observatory based in Costa Rica, expressed dismay at the re-militarization of the region. "In Central America the US military acts as a friend of the environment while in the Andes it acts as a friend of anti-drug entities. Is the military a true friend, or does it have other hidden agendas?"

Environmental experts also regard US interest in training police in environmental matters with suspicion, given the US administration's apparent disinterest in global environmental issues as evidenced by President Bush's refusal to attend the crucial Earth Summit in Johannesburg this month and his rapid withdrawal from the Kyoto Treaty.

Some analysts suggest that with the Puebla-Panama Plan (PPP) mega development project moving forward the US government is looking for a method of control that can prevent conflicts such as the Zapatista movement in Chiapas and the war in Colombia from expanding and threatening the establishment of a Free Trade Area of the Americas.

"PPP and the free trade area of the Americas have a military component markets and free commerce can function without state regulation, said Jose Merino, ex Costa Rican deputy. "But only with the protection of political and military force". Merino is coordinator of the political action forum "Another Costa Rica is possible; another world is possible." The shift towards military assistance draws Washington policy away from working with civilian leaders.

"Latin American military leaders' analyses and recommendations often carry disproportionate weight, because of their superior access to US policy makers," said Adam Isacson of the Center for International Policy in a recent report. By focusing on large military solutions to civil problems the US is stunting the growth of civil society and encouraging the security forces to overstep their primary roles, he wrote.

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