

CHDS, Panama's Government and Justice Ministry cosponsor conference on security and defense in MesoAmerica

On July 29-31, the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies co-sponsored, together with the Panamanian Ministry of Government and Justice, a conference on "Critical security and defense challenges in MesoAmerica: Regional, governmental and private perspectives."

The event offered several critical insights into the problems being faced by Central America, Panama and Mexico. It focused on the importance of inter-agency and regional coordination in security and defense; regional cooperation for better inter-operability among the Central American countries, particularly with U.S. forces in the region, the critical need for institution building, and the balance between short-term needs (political necessities) and long-term goals (strategic vision).

"This conference has done two important things to help confront the challenges we all face in this Hemisphere," said Dr. Richard D. Downie, Center director. "Those are: to effectively pose the nature of the threats that we face and, more importantly, to point to the opportunities for strengthening ourselves to face them."

Although not the focus of the conference, there continue to be broad concerns in the region over the relationship between the civilian authorities and the military. Unlike the 1990s, with its emphasis on reducing military budgets, today the region's armed forces are under pressure to increase their missions and resources, which has led to a debate about whether these trends strictly reflect security needs, or are part of a military effort to increase their role and presence in the political sphere.

The keynote speaker, Latin American historian Dr. Frederick M. Nunn, urged the group to consider the political context in which decisions were made, pointing out that priority attention should be given to the issue of the political control of the armed forces and the challenges that stem from it.

A key insight was that Latin American "presidentialism" has favored a weakening of democratic institutions and practices in favor of reliance on the armed forces, calling into question whether democracy will in the last analysis be defended by a vertical, essentially non-democratic institution. Another was that civilian police and the military roles and jurisdictions are often superimposed on one another, leading to confusion and concern about the "militarization" of law enforcement.

There was also a broad consensus on the continued need to identify the principal challenges to defense and security in the region. The lack of effective civilian law enforcement institutions, and a dearth of resources, has contributed greatly to this problem. The role of criminal behavior--gangs, narcotics trafficking, etc.--was a

prominent theme, but it was suggested that its characteristics and reach were not clear and that, for example, although youth gangs were a central focus in the discussions, they in and of themselves may not represent a threat to democracy.

There was also significant skepticism expressed about the value and reach of the Mérida Initiative, a three-year, \$1.5 billion anti-drug assistance package for Mexico and Central America. Although the initiative was viewed as an important step in collaboration between the U.S. and its southern neighbors—offering more concrete assistance in a single year than in the previous 12—there was also concern that it might contribute to the militarization of the fight against regional crime, with serious fallout in the area of human rights. There was also concern expressed that Mérida focused on new national and international security paradigms currently only shared by a select few, and that it would have the effect of striking blows against principles of regional integration that are a cornerstone of the Inter-American system.

Great concern expressed over the lack of State control over private security agencies, as well. In some countries in the region, military and law enforcement officials operate their own private security companies on the side. In El Salvador, the lack of effective statutes and procedures mean that in effective private agencies have great leeway in conducting their affairs. In Guatemala, private security agents are nearly triple the number of police and military.