



National Defense University

Institute for National Strategic Studies

COLLEAGUES FOR THE AMERICAS SEMINAR SERIES
 "Security Policy Challenges in Central America"

July 25, 2003

Featured Guest: **Mr. Daniel W. Fisk**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central American and Cuban Affairs, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

On July 25, INSS hosted the sixth 2003 "Colleagues for the Americas" seminar. The seminar, titled "Security Policy Challenges in Central America," focused on the sub-region's approach to security reform, its progress to date, and the challenges that still need to be addressed. The following report summarizes Mr. Fisk's key points.

The nations of Central America have the unique opportunity to transform their security forces to deal effectively with the urgent challenge of domestic criminality and promote regional cooperation to confront the serious problem of transnational crime.



Mr. Jay Cope, INSS Senior Research Fellow, listens as Mr. Fisk summarizes his key points.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Central American approach to national defense and security has changed to reflect the advent of democracy and the sub-region's shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics. The result is most evident in the downsizing of the armed forces. El Salvador shrank from 60,000 to 12,500, for example. (Guatemala went from 50,000 to 30,000; Honduras from 26,000 to 6,700; and Nicaragua from 130,000 to 15,000.) Closely related to the reduction in force is a growing consensus that each state stands to gain from increasing collaboration. The Presidents of Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama signed a landmark Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America in 1995. Since then, a Central American Integration System -known as "SICA"- has promoted communication and cooperation between national militaries and law enforcement agencies. There also have been initiatives to foster confidence and build security such as efforts to establish a reasonable balance of forces among countries. The United States strongly supports Central American leaders in their commitment to security cooperation and desire to develop a sub-regional security framework.

While these positive steps are commendable, much more remains to be done to transform security institutions for today's demanding threats, such as domestic crime and violence, terrorism, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and other forms of organized crime. From a U.S. perspective, the fundamental issue of

Central American security reform is not about military disarmament; rather, it is the need to rationalize and reconfigure existing resources to confront domestic and transnational security challenges. The roles and missions of the armed forces and police should be redefined. Instead of investing resources on traditional formations, governments should develop lighter, mobile units trained for the new environment and able to work with neighboring and allied forces to secure the sub-region from stateless enemies and international criminal networks



Ms. Janie Hulse, INSS Research Directorate asks a question on the topic of deportation.

Effective security reform requires knowledgeable civilian leaders. Unfortunately, there are few experts on defense and security matters on the isthmus. While civil-military relations have shown considerable improvement over the last decade and efforts have been made to encourage greater civilian involvement, the shortage of confident leadership explains the limited scope of Central American security reform and the military's continued institutional autonomy and legal impunity. Civil-military interaction has improved, but mistrust still exists.

The failure of Central American governments to protect the well being of their citizens has produced a proliferation and growth of private security companies. In Guatemala, for example, contract guards out-number police officers. While these organizations fulfill a fundamental need, there is the danger of these firms becoming enforcement agencies and involved in other forms of extra-judicial activity. If exploited in this way, private security will become a growing law and order problem.

Elected leaders are making crime a policy priority, but citizens have little trust in national police and justice institutions, which are seen as corrupt, ineffective and unmanageable. Security reform must address these issues. What national structures are needed to protect citizens? Would an isthmus-wide Italian Carabinieri-style military-police force be beneficial? Civil society wants tangible results. Any security reform must include the police and judicial systems.

Another Central American issue is its role as a source of illegal arms - the place for "one-stop shopping for weapons." The sub-region is the repository of excess small arms. Ineffective controls and endemic corruption have facilitated weapons purchases by illegal armed groups, drug traffickers, and other criminal organizations. Illustrating the gravity of the situation, one Central American country is known as the WalMart of arms.

A related matter is the national security need for out-moded weapon systems of little use today in combating transnational criminal organizations. Two instances of this situation are man-portable air defense systems from the 1980s - MANPADs (also known as surface-to-air-missiles or SAMs) - and old jet fighter aircraft.

Central American nations face demanding security challenges that are compounded by scarce resources. Financially, the countries are in no condition to upgrade obsolete equipment or increase salaries for security

personnel. To further complicate the human resource issue, these nations are suffering from an exodus of middle class citizens to the United States. These immigrants drain the talent pool on the isthmus for important sectors - including the law enforcement and justice sectors. There is little opposition because citizens working in the United States send home money. There are 2 million Salvadorians residing in the U.S., for example, who remitted over \$2 billion in 2002.

In sum, Central American nations need to transform their security forces to deal effectively with the urgent challenge of domestic criminality and promote regional cooperation to confront the serious problem of transnational crime. While negotiations for a Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) pave the way for sub-regional economic integration and access to U.S. markets, there has been less movement toward security cooperation. The national leader who makes the bold move to restructure and refocus his defense and security institutions will define the norm for the entire isthmus. This is a tremendous opportunity that the United States hopes one leader will seize.



Dr. Anthony Gray, consultant on Latin American affairs (left) expands on a discussion point with Mr. Fisk and Mr. Gerardo Monroy, SICOFAA (right).

The INSS Colleagues for the Americas Seminar Series is a program of monthly meetings that commenced in 1994 to further research on hemispheric security and defense issues and to contribute to the professional education of United States and foreign practitioners.

The next meeting in the INSS Colleagues for the America Seminar Series will be September 3, 2003. For more information, please contact Minas Khodagolian, NDU-INSS, (202) 685-3849, email: khodagolian@ndu.edu. For more information about this report or the "Colleagues for the Americas" program, please contact Mr. John Cope, tel.: 202-685-2373, e-mail: copej@ndu.edu.

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