

Mixed Response to Rumsfeld Security Pitch to Hemisphere's Defense Ministers

US preoccupations with terrorism and the conflict in Colombia were some of the topics of debate at the VI Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas in Quito, Ecuador on November 16-19. The meeting, which focused on ways to strengthen hemispheric security, included a special emphasis on Haiti and the Brazilian-led force of United Nations peacekeepers there.

The conference's final declaration featured a joint pledge for increased cooperation among the 34 participating countries to combat drug trafficking, terrorism and other threats to hemispheric security. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stressed the need for such cooperation in his opening remarks.

"The new threats of the twenty-first century recognize no borders," Rumsfeld cautioned. "Terrorists, drug traffickers, hostage takers and criminal gangs form an anti-social combination that increasingly seeks to destabilize civil societies."

Rumsfeld cited alleged fundraising by Hamas and Hezbollah in South America and cautioned that routes used to smuggle contraband and illegal migrants across the US border could be exploited by terrorists as well.

Despite broad agreement on the dangers of drug trafficking and other forms of transnational crime, however, some officials objected to the United States' emphasis on terrorism in defining security concerns.

Brazil's vice president, José Alencar—who recently assumed the post of defense minister after a scandal in which the army appeared to downplay abuses during Brazil's decades of military rule—emphasized the role of social problems such as poverty and inequality in fomenting insecurity and condemned the United States' unilateral decision to go to war in Iraq.

"Some favor the use of force to combat the so-called new threats represented by terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Others, like us, defend cooperation in combating the structural threats reflected in extreme poverty, hunger and increased inequality," Alencar commented.

Rumsfeld also met resistance to his recommendation that Latin American countries increase cooperation between military and police forces, a touchy issue in a region with a recent past of military dictatorships.

"Each country, of course, has to figure out for themselves...what the relationships are to be between the police and their military," Rumsfeld said. Terrorist groups can "take advantage of the seams" between different kinds of security forces, between countries and in ungoverned and border areas, he warned.

Alencar noted that Brazil's constitution limits the military's role in domestic affairs. His Argentine counterpart, José Pampurro, also ruled out involving military forces in police activities. The proposal received the most support from Colombia's defense minister, Jorge Uribe, who placed it in the framework of his country's civil conflict.

"The problem of the violence in Colombia is not a Colombian problem, it is a human problem," Uribe told his colleagues. "I think that one day we will get to the point where we need a multinational force, and we're not talking about a force composed of soldiers from different countries. We're talking about coordinating military and police efforts....All of you have an obligation to help Colombia," he added.

Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador and Chile roundly rejected this suggestion as well as a US-Colombian initiative to create an official list of terrorist groups in the Americas that could lead to joint action by the Organization of American States (OAS).

"It's a Colombian problem that has to be resolved within Colombia," Argentina's Pampurro declared. "We want to give all the support we can to that country's

government so that it can resolve it, but we do not believe that direct military participation by our countries would be appropriate.”

In contrast, the conference participants hailed inter-American cooperation in the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti, where Brazil leads a 4,000-member force that includes nine Latin American countries. The US agreed to share surveillance information with UN peacekeepers there.

Before arriving in Ecuador for the defense ministers’ conference, Rumsfeld visited Panama and several Central American countries. He toured the Panama Canal zone, where he praised the security operations in force since the area was transferred back to Panamanian sovereignty. In El Salvador, he awarded Bronze Stars to six Salvadoran soldiers who fought with their country’s contingent in Iraq. And in Nicaragua, he secured a pledge from President Enrique Bolaños to destroy that country’s remaining Cold War stock of shoulder-fired missiles, a commitment that was immediately caught up in political controversy (see earlier article on this subject in this section).

Sources: El Comercio (Ecuador) www.elcomercio.com

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