

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1834
March 4, 2008

Hugo Chávez, the FARC, and Threats of War

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On March 1, Raúl Reyes, the *nom de guerre* of Luis Édgar Devia Silva, a senior leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), died as he had lived—violently—on the borderland between Colombia and Venezuela. A commander of the FARC's Southern Bloc, Reyes stood in line for a top leadership position in the narco-terrorist group. In the eyes of Colombian law, the 59-year-old, avuncular-looking Reyes was a natural-born killer with more than 121 legal cases opened against him, 57 of them for homicide and acts of terrorism, and 14 convictions.

At the time of his death, there was a \$5 million reward for information leading to Reyes' arrest and/or conviction, offered by the U.S. government. The Colombian Minister of Defense called Reyes' death a major setback for the terrorist guerrilla organization.

The engagement that killed Reyes and 16 other FARC insurgents occurred on the Ecuador side of the border and appears to have involved possible violations of Ecuadorian sovereignty. The reaction of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to a bilateral incident and his order to militarize the Colombia–Venezuela frontier threaten to escalate the incident into a full-blown regional crisis. This is an opportunity for the Organization of American States (OAS) and regional leaders to play a stronger role in crisis management and addressing threats to hemispheric security.

Sovereignty vs. Safe Havens. Many details about the operation remain sketchy and conflicting. It is unclear whether the Colombian military

located Reyes by tracking his satellite phone or by getting information from an informant. The Colombians say they were fired upon and returned fire in self-defense. Ecuadorians say Reyes and his troops were camped for the night on Ecuadorian territory and were not in a fighting posture.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Colombia launched a joint air–land operation against a FARC encampment that crossed into Ecuador. The distance of the incursion remains in dispute. While Colombian President Alvaro Uribe apparently briefed President Rafael Correa of Ecuador on the operation hours after the attack, Correa now claims he was misled and misinformed by his Colombian counterpart and has denounced Reyes' death as “the worst aggression suffered by Ecuador at the hands of Colombia.” The details of the operation will be disputed and investigated in the weeks ahead.

On March 2, the Colombian military reported that it had recovered “revealing” information from computers captured in Reyes' effects, including records of contacts with senior security officials in Ecuador who were reportedly interested in “formalizing a relationship with the FARC.” Authorities in Quito denied any links between the FARC and officials in Ecuador.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm1834.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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The situation surrounding Reyes' death demands further objective investigation. Furthermore, governments and citizens must recognize that terrorists and insurgents, be they narco-terrorists in the FARC, al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan, or Kurdish terrorists in Iraq, show no respect for frontiers and national sovereignty.

“A Good Revolutionary.” In his Sunday address to the nation on March 2, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez eulogized Reyes as “a good revolutionary” and called the Colombian operation “a cowardly assassination.”

By once more defending the FARC, Chávez showed his troublesome and increasingly strident interventionist streak in Colombia. The most recent crisis can be traced back to Chávez's August 2007 involvement as a “mediator” in a humanitarian effort to obtain the release of kidnap victims held by the FARC. The number of hostages held by the FARC is estimated to run into the hundreds and includes former presidential candidate and French-Colombian citizen Ingrid Betancourt and three American contractors.

In November 2007, following unauthorized direct contact between Chávez and the Colombian military, President Uribe told Chávez to stand down in his efforts, provoking a vehement reaction by Chávez. In early 2008, Chávez, with assistance from the Red Cross and others, succeeded in obtaining the release of two female political hostages. Another four political hostages were released on February 28.

On January 11, 2008, still riding high after the first release, Chávez applauded the FARC's release of hostages and urged Europeans and others to remove the FARC from the ranks of international terrorist organizations. The FARC, Chávez announced, was a genuine army, occupying territory and fighting for the Bolivarian cause. Although the FARC has been spurned by responsible leaders and the Colombian people, Chávez has attempted to grant new legitimacy to the discredited narco-terrorists.

Chávez's support for the FARC provoked an outpouring of public opposition to the FARC and its violent ways, culminating in massive street rallies in Colombia on February 4 that were echoed by smaller events around the world.

In early February, Wilber Varela, aka “Soap,” a leader of Colombia's violent North Valley cartel, was murdered on Venezuelan soil. The episode raised troubling questions about links between drug lords and Venezuelan authorities. Investigative journalists in Colombia have also raised questions regarding the secretive activities of General Hugo Armando Carvajal, Chávez's chief of military intelligence, citing anonymous witnesses who were present at repeated meetings between the general and FARC leaders.

On the Alert. In response to the Ecuador incident, Chávez issued maneuver orders on March 2: “Move 10 battalions to the Colombian frontier immediately, tank battalions, military aviation!” Chávez announced he was closing Venezuela's embassy in Bogota and said that he would strike Colombia if its military forces made a similar incursion into Venezuela.

This response illustrates Chávez's increasing bellicosity. Two weeks ago, following the filing of a massive suit against Venezuela's state-run oil company, PdVSA, Chávez threatened to cut off oil shipments to the U.S. if the suit harmed Venezuela, a statement he later modified to mean if attacked by the U.S.

At home, Chávez faces mounting inflation, food shortages caused by his anti-market economics, and soaring crime rates. The current crisis also gives Chávez a chance to call attention to the package of military hardware that includes Russian-made helicopters and 24 new Su-30MK2 multi-role fighters.

Conclusion. Venezuela's escalation of the border incident between Colombia and Ecuador is an unwelcome step toward the abyss. While war may not be imminent, Chávez's truculent and trigger-happy approach to the diplomatic crisis has set alarm bells ringing throughout the hemisphere.

The heightened risk of conflict between Venezuela and Colombia requires immediate action by the Hemisphere's regional body. The Organization of American States (OAS), now on the verge of celebrating its 60th anniversary, has an excellent opportunity to act. OAS Secretary General Miguel Insulza has a number of tools available to facilitate a calming of emotions and a more impartial approach to

crisis management. Yet he will face opposition from Chávez and his supporters, who will attempt to scapegoat the U.S. for the death of a convicted murderer and terrorists. Regrettably, the U.S. Congress has yet to confirm the U.S. ambassador to the OAS.

The crisis is also an opportunity for a regional leader like Brazil to adopt a more proactive stance on hemispheric security threats and to insert itself into a spiraling contest that pits Chávez and his bloc of allies against the elected and legitimate government of Colombia. While the threat of a war

between states may diminish in the days ahead, the triangular struggle between President Uribe of Colombia, the FARC, and its increasingly vocal supporters in Presidents Chávez and Correa will require ongoing efforts at crisis management in an increasingly dangerous part of the world.

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