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October 16, 1985

TRIP REPORT: LATIN AMERICA

Countries Visited: Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador

Dates: 5-12 October 1985

Regional Conclusions:

1. The regional differences in terrorism are apparent in Latin America. Unlike Europe, where small leftist/anarchist groups engage in isolated terrorist acts, or the Middle East where religious, political, and/or state-sponsored groups conduct terrorism, in Latin America terrorism is sustained and inextricably intertwined with insurgency (and often also with the narcotics trade), and is far more aptly described as low-intensity warfare.
2. Violence, crime, and terrorist acts have a long history and are a way of life in much of the Latin American region, which also has a reputation for political instability coupled with reverence for machismo.

Country Conclusions:

1. Colombia: Narco-terrorism exists here. Some insurgent groups (e.g., M-19 & FARC) obtain protection money from drug dealers for protecting drug fields and production plants. Kidnapping is a way of life, a favorite tactic of insurgent groups and plain criminals alike. Women and children are not exempt as terrorist targets. Embassy Bogota has probably one of the most elaborate and formal antiterrorism procedures of any Embassy in the world. All dependent children have been excluded from the country for almost a year. All Embassy personnel live in the upper floors of apartments rather than more vulnerable houses. (Rich Colombians have also migrated to apartments, driving up apartment rents and causing a shortage.) All Embassy personnel commute to the Embassy in armored vans (with armed bodyguards in chase vehicles) at computer-determined times and varied routes. The much touted, expensive aqueous foam system in the Chancery, however, did not work because of continuing maintenance problems. Most of the country and much of the city are off limits. Morale is high despite the circumstances.
2. Panama: A "terrorism free-zone" by tacit agreement of all parties in Latin America. Panama has become an R&R center for all sorts of terrorist, insurgent, and narcotics groups, who are free to come and go in the country provided they don't engage in terrorist acts while in Panama or make their links to terrorism or insurgency elsewhere too direct or blatant. Vulnerability is very high, but the threat is low. At least 135 international banks thrive in Panama, which allows the laundering of all sorts of illegal money, whether terrorist, insurgent, or common criminal. Because of the vulnerability of the Panama Canal, the U.S. apparently believes that this arrangement is more advantageous to the U.S. than disadvantageous.

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Tasking: Request NIO/Terrorism & Narcotics to commission an IIM (NIE . . .?) on the question of the cost/benefits to the U.S. in terms of the support to terrorism/narcotics resulting from Panama's laissez faire policies. (Explore duty-free port activity, international banking transactions, personnel transists, arms & narcotics transfers, National Guard corruption, etc.)

Of interest during the SOUTHCOM briefings was a detailed presentation on the Area Specialist Teams (ASTs), who are Special Forces personnel who conduct "low profile" (i.e. civilian clothes and long hair, but official passport & military ID card if challenged) security surveys of Embassies and other key US facilities overseas, specifically for planning use by US CT forces in a contingency (i.e. how to react to a repeat performance of the Tehran Embassy seizure...). When asked how they related to ISA, the AST leader replied that the CTJTF didn't want ISA in the Latin American region!

3. Costa Rica: The model of democracy in the region. No current terrorism problems. But, with small, ill-equipped, poorly-trained security forces, the country remains extremely vulnerable to future terrorism.

4. El Salvador: A country deeply involved in guerrilla war since 1979. Government forces have gotten the upper hand over the past year and are currently forcing the guerrillas to reduce the size of their groups and revert to urban terrorism (instead of attempting to defeat government forces in the countryside). Unfortunately, a paradoxical side-effect of this progress in the war is that any and all North Americans are being specifically targeted by the smaller, less controlled, less ably-led terrorist groups. Terrorism in San Salvador against North Americans will probably increase. The U.S. Ambassador is wrestling with the terribly difficult decision of whether to order the evacuation of American dependents. Up to this point, the political objective of supporting the Duarte government--appearance of "normalcy" and of government control--plus the very strong desires of at least a significant number of people, has outweighed the assessment of danger to Americans. U.S. dependents in San Salvador remain there voluntarily, accepting patriotically the increased personal risks of terrorism.

Recommendations:

1. That the background section of the Task Force report include a brief discussion of the regional differences in terrorism, in an effort to convey the complexity of terrorism.

2. That the background section of the Task Force report include the judgment that Americans abroad, particularly diplomats, military personnel, and dependents, will be at increased risk. A decision to implement withdrawal must attempt to assess the political costs of such a move, and balance them against numerous other factors, primarily involving the safety of those involved. Serious consideration must also be given to the numbers of people required at overseas posts. We should not expose, nor need we protect, any more than are really necessary.

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