

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Just what Latin America needed -- a new arms race

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When key U.S. and Latin American policy makers met at The Miami Herald's Americas Conference last week, some of them raised eyebrows by raising an old issue they said is coming back -- a regional arms race.

"Latin America has begun a new arms race," Costa Rican President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias told the conference's opening night.

"It is shameful that governments of some of the poorest nations continue to hoard tanks, jeeps and guns to supposedly protect a population languishing in poverty and ignorance."

Arias' statement went against the conventional wisdom in recent years that Latin America is one of the world's regions with the lowest military spending, especially since the return of democracy to most of its countries in the 1980s.

According to the United Nations' World Economic Indicators, Latin America and the Caribbean spent only 1.3 percent of its gross domestic product in military expenditures in 2004, the last year accounted for. By comparison, the Middle East and North Africa spent 3.7 percent of its GDP, South Asia 2.5 percent, Europe and Central Asia 2.3 percent, and Sub-Saharan Africa 1.9 percent, the figures show.

BIG ARMS DEALS

But Arias, referring to the latest headlines about massive arms purchases in Venezuela, Chile, Colombia and other countries, said there has been a sharp increase in military expenditures over the past two years.

He added that the region urgently needs to agree on a cap on military spending.

"In 2004, Latin American nations spent a total of \$24 billion on weapons and troops, an amount that represents an 8 percent increase in real terms over 10 years ago," Arias said, quoting figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. "And that amount has grown alarmingly in the last year."

Indeed, press reports say Chile has recently purchased 10 F-16 combat planes with air-to-air missiles from the United States, another 18 second-hand F-16s from the Netherlands, two submarines from Spain and France and more than 100 German-made Leopard II armored vehicles, among other weapons.

Venezuela has purchased military aircraft from Brazil, combat helicopters and troop transport planes from Russia and Spain, and at least 100 AK-103s and AK-104s from Russia.

The Bush administration has said it has complained to Russia about these purchases, arguing that many of these rifles -- or the ones they are replacing -- may end up in the hands of violent leftist groups in Colombia or other countries in the region.

Peru has reportedly purchased Russian-made MiG-29 combat planes and French-made Mirage 2000 aircraft. Colombia has bought armored vehicles and transport planes, while Brazil has bought U.S.-made Black Hawk helicopters and South African missiles.

Who is to blame, I asked Arias in an interview.

He blamed the Clinton administration, which in 1997 lifted a 20-year-old ban on U.S. sales of sophisticated weapons to Latin America that had been put in place by former President Jimmy Carter at the time when military dictatorships dominated the region. Then, Latin America was spending about 6 percent of its GDP in weapons and troops.

What should be done, I asked Arias.

His answer: We should get our priorities right and begin to put education ahead of militarization.

He proposed that wealthy countries change the criteria by which they give economic aid to the developing world.

EDUCATION CRISIS

"In Latin America, one out of three children does not attend secondary school," Arias said. "This is not only offensive to our values: It is a testament to the lack of economic vision. We must understand that the educational catastrophe of today is the economic catastrophe of tomorrow."

"I propose that we start the 'Costa Rica Consensus,'" he added, noting that his country abolished the army in 1948 and could thus well serve as a leader on this issue.

"We should create mechanisms to forgive debt and give international aid to developing nations that invest more in education, health and housing and less in soldiers and weapons."

My opinion: I agree. Latin America's growing military spending is not only a recipe for continued poverty, it may also pave the way to stronger militaries that sooner or later -- especially amid the region's growing street crime crisis -- may be tempted to take power. It's a dangerous trend on both counts.