



CRS Report for Congress

Latin America: Terrorism Issues

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Summary

U.S. attention to terrorism in Latin America intensified in the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, with an increase in bilateral and regional cooperation. In its April 2007 Country Reports on Terrorism, the State Department highlighted threats in Colombia, Peru, and the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. There were no known operational cells of Islamic terrorists in the hemisphere, but pockets of ideological supporters in the region lent financial, logistical, and moral support to terrorist groups in the Middle East. Cuba has remained on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1982, which triggers a number of economic sanctions. In May 2007, for the second year in a row, the Department of State, pursuant to Arms Export Control Act, included Venezuela on the annual list of countries not cooperating on antiterrorism efforts. Congress fully funded the Administration's FY2008 request for \$8.1 million in Anti-Terrorism Assistance for Western Hemisphere countries in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY2008 (P.L. 110-161). In the first session of the 110th Congress, the House approved H.Con.Res. 188, which condemned the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association in Buenos Aires, and H.Res. 435, which expressed concern over the emerging national security implications of Iran's efforts to expand its influence in Latin America, and emphasized the importance of eliminating Hezbollah's financial network in the tri-border area. The Senate also approved S.Con.Res. 53, which condemned the hostage-taking of three U.S. citizens for over four years by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, while a similar resolution, H.Con.Res. 260, was introduced in the House.

Terrorism in Latin America: U.S. Concerns

Over the years, the United States has been concerned about threats to Latin American and Caribbean nations from various terrorist or insurgent groups that have attempted to influence or overthrow elected governments. Although Latin America has not been the focal point in the war on terrorism, countries in the region have struggled with domestic terrorism for decades and international terrorist groups have at times used the region as a battleground to advance their causes. The State Department's annual *Country Reports on Terrorism* highlights U.S. concerns about terrorist threats around the world, including

in Latin America. The April 2007 report states that terrorism in the region was primarily perpetrated by terrorist organizations in Colombia and by the remnants of radical leftist Andean groups, but maintained that the threat of a major terrorist attack remained low for most countries in the hemisphere. According to the report, “there were no known operational cells of Islamic terrorists” in the region, but it maintained that “pockets of ideological supporters and facilitators in South America and the Caribbean lent financial, logistical, and moral support to terrorist groups in the Middle East.” The report also stated that regional governments “took modest steps to improve their counterterrorism (CT) capabilities and tighten border security” but that progress was limited by “corruption, weak government institutions, ineffective or lack of interagency cooperation, weak or non-existent legislation, and reluctance to allocate sufficient resources.” The report lauded counterterrorism efforts in Panama, Mexico, and El Salvador, and noted that Caribbean and Central American countries took steps to improve their border controls and to secure key infrastructure. It also noted that most hemispheric nations had solid cooperation with the United States on terrorism issues, especially at the operational level, with excellent intelligence, law enforcement, and legal assistance relations.

Colombia. Colombia has three terrorist groups that have been designated by the Secretary of State as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs): the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the leftist National Liberation Army (ELN), and the rightist paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), which is in the process of demobilizing. According to the terrorism report, these groups have been weakened as a result of aggressive actions by the military and policy but nevertheless continued to murder, kidnap, and terrorize Colombians from all walks of life. Despite the government’s military campaign against it, the FARC continued terrorist and narco-trafficking activities, which included several bombings against urban military targets, the targeting of rural outposts, infrastructure, and political adversaries, and continued kidnappings throughout the country. It has continued to hold three U.S. hostages since February 2003. The ELN and the Colombian government have held talks in Cuba, but no agreements have been reached. More than 32,000 AUC members have demobilized, and the AUC has ceased to function as a formal organization, but AUC renegades continued to engage in criminal activities, according to the terrorism report. Both the FARC and the ELN often crossed into Ecuadorian and Venezuelan territory for rest and resupply, and splinter groups of the FARC and the AUC operated in various parts of Venezuela and were involved in drug trafficking. The terrorism report lauded Ecuador’s efforts to maintain control of its border, but with regard to Venezuela, the report maintained that the government did not systematically police its border with Colombia. Moreover, according to the report, “it remained unclear to what extent the Venezuelan government provided material support to Colombian terrorists.”

On December 19, 2007, the Senate approved S.Con.Res. 53 (Nelson, Bill) condemning the holding of three U.S. citizens by the FARC and calling for their immediate and unconditional release. A similar resolution, H.Con.Res. 260 (Diaz-Balart, Mario), was introduced in the House on November 15, 2007.

Peru. The brutal Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso or SL) insurgency, which the Department of State has designated as an FTO, was significantly weakened in the 1990s with the capture of its leader Abimael Guzman, who, after a new trial in 2006, was sentenced to life in prison. According to the State Department terrorism report, SL has hundreds of armed combatants, and the group is now involved in drug trafficking. The

SL killed eight civilians and five counternarcotics police in 2006 and reportedly intimidated voters in parts of Peru during elections last year. The Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), which was decimated after a 1996 hostage action at the residence of the Japanese Ambassador in Lima, could be trying to reconstitute an organizational structure. The group also reportedly is attempting to rebuild support in the universities where it had considerable influence in the 1980s.

Tri-Border Area. In recent years, U.S. concerns have increased over activities of the radical Lebanon-based Islamic group Hezbollah (Party of God) and the Sunni Muslim Palestinian group Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) in the tri-border area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, which has a large Muslim population. The TBA has long been used for arms and drug trafficking, contraband smuggling, document and currency fraud, money laundering, and the manufacture and movement of pirated goods. The terrorism report maintains that the United States remains concerned that Hezbollah and Hamas are raising funds among the sizable Muslim communities in the region but stated that there was no corroborated information that these or other Islamic extremist groups had an operational presence in the area.

Allegations have linked Hezbollah to two bombings in Argentina: the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires that killed 30 people and the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) in Buenos Aires that killed 85 people. In November 2006, an Argentine judge issued arrest warrants in the AMIA case for nine individuals: a Lebanese citizen who is a member of Hezbollah, Imad Mughniyah, and eight Iranian government officials, including former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Interpol subsequently posted a Red Notice for Mughniyah, and in November 2007, its General Assembly voted to approve notices for five of the Iranians wanted by Argentina (not including Rafsanjani). The action had been held up since March 2007, when Iran appealed the decision by Interpol's Executive Committee to issue the notices.

Congress has continued express concern about progress in Argentina's investigation of the 1994 AMIA bombing. H.Con.Res. 188 (Ros-Lehtinen), approved by the House by voice vote on July 30, 2007, applauded the Argentine government for increasing the pace of the AMIA investigation, and called upon the General Assembly of Interpol to issue red notices for five Iranians implicated in the AMIA bombing. Another resolution, H.Res. 435 (Klein), approved November 5, 2007 by voice vote, expressed concern over the emerging national security implications of Iran's efforts to expand its influence in Latin America, and emphasized the importance of eliminating Hezbollah's financial network in the tri-border area of South America.

Cuba. Since 1982, the Department of State, pursuant to Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act of 1979, has included Cuba among its list of states sponsoring terrorism (the other states currently on the list are Iran, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria). The Communist government led by Fidel Castro had a history of supporting revolutionary movements and governments in Latin America and Africa, but in 1992, Castro said that his country's support for insurgents abroad was a thing of the past. Most analysts accept that Cuba's policy generally did change, largely because the breakup of the Soviet Union resulted in the loss of billions in subsidies.

The State Department's terrorism report maintains that Cuba has "continued to publicly oppose the U.S.-led Coalition prosecuting the War on Terror." It also noted that

Cuba maintains close relationships with other state sponsors of terrorism, such as Iran, and has provided safe haven for members of several FTOs. The report maintained that Cuba provides safe haven to various Basque ETA members from Spain and to members of two Colombian insurgent groups, the FARC and the ELN. Colombia has publicly acknowledged that it wants Cuba mediation with the ELN. Since December 2005, the Colombian government and the ELN have held six rounds of exploratory talks in Havana. The terrorism report also maintained that Cuba permits U.S. fugitives from justice to live legally in Cuba, with many accused of hijacking or committing violent actions in the United States. The report noted that Cuba has stated that it will no longer provide safe haven to new fugitives who may enter the country and cited Cuba's return of a U.S. fugitive who had sequestered his son and flew a stolen plane to Cuba in September 2006. The report did not mention Cuba's return in late April 2007 of another U.S. fugitive, Joseph Adjmi, who was convicted of mail fraud in the 1960s. The State Department report also cited Cuba's demand that the United States surrender Luis Posada Carriles and three Cuban Americans that it accused of plotting to kill Castro and bombing a Cuban airliner in 1976. (Also see CRS Report RL33819, *Cuba: Issues for the 110th Congress*, by Mark P. Sullivan.)

Cuba's retention on the terrorism list has been questioned by some observers. In general, those who support keeping Cuba on the list argue that there is ample evidence that the country's supports terrorism. They point to the government's history of supporting terrorist acts and armed insurgencies in Latin America and Africa. They point to the government's continued hosting of members of foreign terrorist organizations and U.S. fugitives from justice. Critics of retaining Cuba on the terrorism list maintain that it is a holdover of the Cold War. They argue that domestic political considerations keep Cuba on the terrorism list and maintain that Cuba's presence on the list diverts U.S. attention from struggles against serious terrorist threats. (For further information, see CRS Report RL32251, *Cuba and the State Sponsors of Terrorism List*, by Mark P. Sullivan.)

Venezuela. The terrorism report cited the Secretary of State's May 2006 determination that Venezuela was not "cooperating fully with United States antiterrorism efforts" pursuant to Section 40A of the Arms Export Control Act. Subsequently, the United States imposed an arms embargo on Venezuela on August 17, 2006, which ended all commercial arms sales and re-transfers to Venezuela. (Other countries on the Section 40A list include Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria, not to be confused with the "state sponsors of terrorism" list under Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act of 1979.) According to the terrorism report, President Hugo Chávez continued "public criticism of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, deepened Venezuelan relationships with Iran and Cuba, and was unwilling to prevent Venezuelan territory from being used as a safe haven by the FARC and ELN." As noted above, however, the State Department maintained that it remained unclear to what extent the Venezuelan government provided material support to Colombian terrorists. In addition, according to the terrorism report, Venezuelan citizenship, identity, and travel documents remained easy to obtain, making the country a potentially attractive way-station for terrorists. (Also see CRS Report RL32488, *Venezuela: Political Conditions and U.S. Policy*, by Mark P. Sullivan.)

Caribbean. In early June 2007, the Department of Justice announced that four individuals – two Guyanese nationals, one Trinidadian national, and one U.S. citizen of Guyanese origin – were being charged with conspiring to blow up fuel tanks and a fuel

pipeline at JFK International Airport in New York. U.S. officials lauded cooperation from both Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago as instrumental in deterring the plot. Some analysts contend that plot focuses attention to the potential security threat posed by Muslim extremists in the Caribbean, while others maintain that there is little evidence to indicate that Muslims in the region are attracted to radical Islamist ideologies.

U.S. Policy

As in other parts of the world, the United States has assisted Latin American and Caribbean nations over the years in their struggle against terrorist or insurgent groups indigenous to the region. For example, in the 1980s, the United States supported the government of El Salvador with significant economic and military assistance in its struggle against a leftist guerrilla insurgency. In recent years, the United States has employed various policy tools to combat terrorism in the Latin America and Caribbean region, including sanctions, anti-terrorism assistance and training, law enforcement cooperation, and multilateral cooperation through the OAS. Moreover, given the nexus between terrorism and drug trafficking, one can argue that assistance aimed at combating drug trafficking organizations in the region has also been a means of combating terrorism by cutting off a source of revenue for terrorist organizations. The same argument can be made regarding efforts to combat money laundering in the region.

Although terrorism was not the main focus of U.S. policy toward the region in recent years, attention increased in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Anti-terrorism assistance has increased along with bilateral and regional cooperation against terrorism. Congress approved the Bush Administration's request in 2002 to expand the scope of U.S. assistance to Colombia beyond a counternarcotics focus to also include counter-terrorism assistance to the government in its military efforts against drug-financed leftist guerrillas and rightist paramilitaries. Border security with Mexico also became a prominent issue in bilateral relations, with attention focused on the potential transit of terrorists through Mexico to the United States. As noted above, the United States has imposed sanctions on three groups in Colombia (ELN, FARC, and AUC) and one group in Peru (SL) designated by the Department of State as FTOs. Official designation of such groups as FTOs triggers a number of sanctions, including visa restrictions and the blocking of any funds of these groups in U.S. financial institutions. The designation also has the effect of increasing public awareness about these terrorist organizations and the concerns that the United States has about them.

Through the Department of State (Diplomatic Security Office, Office of Antiterrorism Assistance), the United States provides Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) training and equipment to Latin American countries to help improve their capabilities in such areas as airport security management, hostage negotiations, bomb detection and deactivation, and countering terrorism financing. Such training was expanded to Argentina in the aftermath of the two bombings in 1992 and 1994. Assistance was also stepped up in 1997 to Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay in light of increased U.S. concern over illicit activities in the tri-border area of those countries. ATA funding is generally provided through the annual foreign operations appropriations measure under the Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR) account. For FY2006, \$8.9 in ATA was provided for the Western Hemisphere, while the FY2007 Western Hemisphere request was for \$11.9 million. In the Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY2008 (P.L. 110-161), Congress fully funded the Administration's FY2008

request for \$8.1 million in ATA for Western Hemisphere countries, and also funded a \$1.4 million request in Terrorist Interdiction Program assistance for the region.

The United States also works closely with the governments of the tri-border region — Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay — through the “3+1 regional cooperation mechanism,” which serves as a forum for counterterrorism cooperation and prevention among all four countries.

Increased Regional Cooperation Since 9/11. Latin American nations strongly condemned the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and took action through the OAS and the Rio Treaty to strengthen hemispheric cooperation against terrorism. The OAS, which happened to be meeting in Peru at the time, swiftly condemned the attacks, reiterated the need to strengthen hemispheric cooperation to combat terrorism, and expressed full solidarity with the United States. At a special session on September 19, 2001, OAS members invoked the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, also known as the Rio Treaty, which obligates signatories to the treaty to come to one another’s defense in case of outside attack. Another resolution approved on September 21, 2001, called on Rio Treaty signatories to “use all legally available measures to pursue, capture, extradite, and punish those individuals” involved in the attacks and to “render additional assistance and support to the United States, as appropriate, to address the September 11 attacks, and also to prevent future terrorist acts.”

In the aftermath of 9/11, OAS members reinvigorated efforts of the Inter-American Committee on Terrorism (CICTE) to combat and eliminate terrorism in the hemisphere. The CICTE has cooperated on border security mechanisms, controls to prevent terrorist funding, and law enforcement and counterterrorism intelligence and information. At a January 2003 CICTE meeting, OAS members issued the Declaration of San Salvador, which condemned terrorism and pledged to strengthen hemispheric cooperation through a variety of border, customs, and financial control measures. At the February 2005 CICTE session held in Trinidad and Tobago, OAS members reaffirmed their commitment to deepen cooperation against terrorism and addressed threats to aviation, seaport, and cyber security. CICTE held its seventh annual regular session in Panama from February 28 to March 2, 2007, which focused on the protection of critical infrastructure in the region.

OAS members signed the Inter-American Convention Against Terrorism in June 2002. The Convention, among other measures, improves regional cooperation against terrorism, commits parties to sign and ratify U.N. anti-terrorism instruments and take actions against the financing of terrorism, and denies safe haven to suspected terrorists. President Bush submitted the Convention to the Senate on November 12, 2002, for its advice and consent, and the treaty was referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Treaty Doc. 107-18). In the 109th Congress, the committee formally reported the treaty on July 28, 2005 (Senate Exec. Rept. 109-3), and on October 7, 2005, the Senate agreed to the resolution of advice and consent. The United States deposited its instruments of ratification for the Convention on November 15, 2005.