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CRISIS IN SOUTH AMERICA

Showdown with Colombia all about ideology

Leftist governments of Venezuela, Ecuador using rebel bombing incident to lash neighbour over its close ties to hated Uncle Sam

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BOGOTA -- Colombian troops launch a military assault inside Ecuadorean territory. Venezuela and Ecuador send troops and tanks to their borders with Colombia. Ambassadors are expelled. There is talk of dirty bombs in rebel hands and genocide charges in the International Criminal Court. The Organization of American States goes into an emergency session. Is war inevitable?

Probably not.

More likely is that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez wants to focus his people's attention somewhere other than the food shortages at home, and for Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, who has allowed Colombian rebels to take refuge on his territory, taking offence may seem like the best defence.

One of the region's worst political showdowns in years began under the cover of night on Saturday, when Colombia's military bombed a

rebel encampment in Ecuador, killing Raul Reyes, a senior official of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and 17 other guerrillas.

The outcry from all over South America, including diplomatic heavyweight Brazil, was immediate and negative, and the controversy has so far refused to die.

At the heart of the storm is the fact that Colombia's actions have fuelled Latin America's ideological divisions. The region is dominated by leftist governments, and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe is a conservative who has received about \$5-billion in U.S. aid since 2000 to fight drugs and leftist rebels.

So what was originally seen as a major victory for Colombia against the FARC has become the stick that Ecuador and Venezuela are using to beat Mr. Uribe over Colombia's relationship with the hated Uncle Sam.

Mr. Chavez characterizes Mr. Uribe as a pawn of the White House and has raised suspicions that the United States is using Colombia as a proxy in Latin America. (There were reports that U.S. intelligence was used to pinpoint the rebel camps in Ecuador.) The standoff is doing none of the three participants any good. Borders between Colombia and Ecuador and Venezuela are currently closed and millions of dollars worth of trade are frozen. In 2007, Colombia-Venezuela trade was worth \$1.8-billion (U.S.), and that between Colombia and Ecuador worth \$492-million.

The Colombian military has released evidence, allegedly acquired from FARC computers seized at their encampment, that the rebels were seeking ingredients for a dirty bomb, The New York Times reported. It has also said the laptops showed Mr. Chavez had provided \$300-million in aid to the FARC, which prompted a threat to take him to court on genocide charges. Colombia also produced documents stating that top Ecuadorean officials have condoned the presence of FARC camps along their border.

Ecuador categorically denied any connection with the FARC, and Mr. Chavez has reacted to Colombia's actions with characteristic vitriol.

Then, in an unexpected move that many Colombians feel was calculated to discredit their military, Ecuador claimed it was on the verge of negotiating the release of 12 hostages, including the seriously ill former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, when Colombia attacked. According to Mr. Correa, the death of the FARC's Mr. Reyes has critically derailed the release process.

Relations between Ecuador and the FARC guerrillas is nothing new, according to Jorge Restrepo, director of the Colombian non-profit Resource Centre for Conflict Analysis.

"It is not Ecuador's conflict, and for them it is much easier to accommodate the FARC than to fight them openly. ... The problem is that the mutual convenience [between Ecuador and the FARC] seems to be arranged at a very high level."

Daniel Bonilla, professor of political science at Los Andes University in Bogota, expressed concern that Ecuador may have ulterior motives in allowing the FARC to move across their borders. "Ecuador may have an arrangement to advance this [Venezuelan socialist] movement that implies support for the FARC. That's very problematic for Colombia and for the region."

Catherine LeGrand, professor of Latin American history at McGill University, suggested that Mr. Chavez's tactics might be employed to "focus Venezuelans on external issues, because there are internal problems with food provision," she wrote via e-mail.

"Also, Chavez wants peace talks about humanitarian exchange of prisoners between the FARC and the Colombian government [to continue] ... and he sees Uribe as seeking a military solution."

Mr. Reyes had been the main negotiator between the FARC and the international community, a channel of communication that Mr. Restrepo said "takes a long time to build."

The possibility of future peace talks is highly uncertain in the wake of Mr. Reyes's death, as is the future of the FARC's leadership. One thing that is certain is that the FARC's existence will continue to be used as a wedge by both Colombia and its leftist neighbours to

deepen the ideological divide that has existed for years.

Nearly every Latin American leader has expressed deep concern about maintaining trade relations and stability in the region in the wake of the recent crisis. The Organization of American States met in Washington yesterday in an attempt to resolve the dispute.