

CRS Report for Congress

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Latin America: Terrorism Issues

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Summary

In the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C., U.S. attention to terrorism in Latin America intensified, with an increase in bilateral and regional cooperation. Latin American nations strongly condemned the attacks, and took action through the Organization of American States (OAS) to strengthen hemispheric cooperation. In June 2002, OAS members signed an Inter-American Convention Against Terrorism. President Bush submitted the convention to the Senate in November 2002 for its advice and consent, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a public hearing on June 17, 2004. In its annual report on worldwide terrorism, the State Department highlights threats in Colombia, Peru, and the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. The State Department also has designated four terrorist groups (three in Colombia and one in Peru) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, and Cuba has been listed as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1982.

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. While 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 report, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, highlights U.S. concerns about terrorist threats around the world, including in Latin America. The most recent *Patterns* report, issued in April 2004, notes that the international terrorist threat in the Western Hemisphere remained low in 2003, compared to other regions of the world. The report describes terrorist activities in the region in 2003, most notably in Colombia, Peru, and the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. The report also examines activity by Cuba, which has been designated by the State Department as a state-sponsor of terrorism since 1982.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in September 2001, U.S. attention focused on potential links in the region to the Al Qaeda terrorist network, especially in the tri-border region. The *Patterns* report maintained that although there continued to be reports in

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2003 of an al-Qaeda presence in the tri-border region, “these reports remain uncorroborated by intelligence and law-enforcement officials.”

There were increased concerns in 2004 about Al Qaeda threats in Latin America. Honduras declared a terror alert on August 23, 2004, after receiving information that Al Qaeda reportedly was attempting to recruit Hondurans to attack U.S. and other embassies.¹ In June, Honduran officials said that a suspected terrorist cell leader, Adman G. El Shukrijumah had been spotted at an Internet café. In August, El Salvador received threats from an Islamic extremist group to carry out attacks in the country if it did not pull its troops out of Iraq. Some press reports have alleged that Al-Qaeda may be attempting to use a Salvadoran criminal gang, the Mara Salvatrucha, to infiltrate the U.S.-Mexico border, although Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge maintained on September 27, 2004, that there was no indication of such infiltration along the border.²

Colombia. Colombia remains of paramount concern to the United States because of the threat to democracy posed by three groups that have been designated by the Secretary of State as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs): two leftist guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), and a rightist paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The three groups target elected government officials and civilians with their attacks, with international human rights groups denouncing the massacres, assassinations, political kidnappings, forced displacements, and forced recruitment of minors by all three groups. While the *Patterns* report noted that Colombia suffered many large and small domestic terrorist attacks in 2003, it noted that the government’s security strategy provided substantial achievements by decreasing murders by 16% and kidnappings by 30%. The FARC and AUC have been heavily involved in drug trafficking, which has been the key to their growth over past decade. In February 2003, a U.S. civilian contractor and a Colombian national were murdered by the FARC after their plane crashed. The FARC is also holding hostage three U.S. contractors from that plane crash. (For more on Colombia, see CRS Report RL32250, *Colombia: Issues for Congress*.)

Peru. Peru is another country of concern. The Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso or SL) insurgency, which the Department of State has designated a FTO, was significantly weakened in the 1990s with the capture of its leader Abimael Guzman, but in 2001 and 2002 terrorist acts committed by the group increased from previous years. The group was allegedly responsible for a March 2002 car bomb across from the U.S. Embassy, in which ten Peruvians were killed, including security personnel protecting the embassy. Eight SL members remain in custody for the bombing. In 2003, however, the *Patterns* report noted that there was a 15% reduction in terrorist acts committed by the Shining Path.

Tri-Border Region. In recent years, U.S. concerns have increased over activities of the radical Lebanon-based Islamic group Hizballah (Party of God) and the Sunni Muslim Palestinian group Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) in the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, which has a large Muslim population. According to

¹ “Honduras: Terror Alert Issued After Al-Qaida Tip-Off,” *Latinnews-Daily*, August 24, 2004.

² “U.S. Officials Dispute Al Qaeda Role in Hemisphere,” *Homeland Security Monitor* (Intellibridge), September 30, 2004; Jerry Seper, “Al Qaeda Seeks Tie to Local Gangs,” *Washington Times*, September 28, 2004.

the *Patterns* report, the tri-border region “has long been characterized as a regional hub for Hizballah and Hamas fundraising activities, but it is also used for arms and drug trafficking, contraband smuggling, document and currency fraud, money laundering, and the manufacture and movement of pirated goods.” As noted above, the *Patterns* report maintained that reports of an al-Qaeda presence in the tri-border region remain uncorroborated.

Allegations have linked Hizballah 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 86 people. The *Patterns* report noted that investigations into the two bombings continued in 2003 and that the trial of suspects in the AMIA bombing was nearing an end. On September 2, 2004, however, five suspects (including four Argentine police officers) were acquitted as accessories in the AMIA bombing. The acquittal prompted protests by Argentina’s large Jewish community. (For additional information on Argentina, see CRS Report RS21113, *Argentina: Political Conditions and U.S. Relations.*)

Cuba. The Department of State includes Cuba among its list of six states sponsoring terrorism (the other six states are Iran, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria). Cuba was added to the list in 1982 for its complicity with the M-19 insurgent group in Colombia. 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.

According to the April 2004 *Patterns* report, although Cuba ratified all 12 international counterterrorism conventions in 2001, it has remained opposed to the U.S.-led global coalition against terrorism and “actively condemned many associated U.S. policies and actions throughout 2003.” The State Department report also noted that Cuba continued to host several members of FTOs as well as some U.S. fugitives from justice. The report maintained that Cuba provides safehaven to up to 20 Basque ETA terrorists from Spain and has provided “some degree of safehaven and support” to members of two Colombian insurgent groups, the FARC and the ELN. The report acknowledged, however, that Colombia acquiesced to having the two groups in Cuba; it also noted that Colombia has publicly said that it wants Cuba’s continued mediation with the ELN in Cuba. With regard to the ETA members, the report cited a Cuban declaration in May 2003 that maintained that the ETA presence in Cuba stemmed from a request from Spain and Panama and that the issue is a bilateral matter between Cuba and Spain.

In general, those who support keeping Cuba on the terrorism list argue that there is ample evidence that Cuba 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 RL3225, *Cuba and the State Sponsors of Terrorism List*, and CRS Report RL31740, *Cuba: Issues for the 108th Congress*.

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. In 2002, Congress approved the Bush Administration's request 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.

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 Foreign Terrorist Organization (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. For FY2001, \$4.7 million in ATA training was provided to Western Hemisphere countries. In FY2002, a total of \$27.5 million was provided for the region, with \$25 million for an anti-kidnapping program in Colombia (appropriated through an FY2002 supplemental appropriations measure, P.L. 107-206) and \$2.5 million for the regular Western Hemisphere program. For FY2003, the Administration's \$3.6 million in ATA assistance was provided for the region, with \$3.3 million of that for Colombia. For FY2004, an estimated \$2.6 million in ATA assistance was provided for the Western Hemisphere, while the Administration requested \$5.2 million for FY2005, including \$1 million for the tri-border region and \$3.9 million for Colombia.

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.

Money laundering in the region has been a major U.S. concern for some 20 years, largely because of its association with drug traffickers, but terrorist organizations may also be involved in money laundering as a means of hiding their financial assets. The United States works through the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a multilateral anti-money laundering body, to help develop and promote policies to combat money laundering worldwide. According to the Department of State’s March 2004 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, 13 nations in the region are jurisdictions of primary concern to the United States because of their vulnerability to money laundering. These are Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Brazil, Cayman Islands, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Increased Regional Cooperation Since 9/11. Latin American nations strongly condemned the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington 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 another resolution, the OAS called on the Inter-American Committee on Terrorism (CICTE) to identify urgent actions aimed at strengthening inter-American cooperation in order to combat and eliminate terrorism in the hemisphere. The CICTE was reinvigorated in the aftermath of 9/11, and has cooperated on border security mechanisms, controls to prevent funding of terrorist organizations, and law enforcement and counterterrorism intelligence and information. At a January 2003 CICTE meeting in El Salvador, 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 conference, the United States pledged \$1 million to the OAS to help the growth of CICTE “as a technical body devoted to increasing counterterrorism expertise in the Americas.”³

In June 2002, OAS members signed a newly completed Inter-American Convention Against Terrorism. Signing the treaty for the United States, Secretary of State Powell said that the OAS had “produced the first new international treaty since September 11 targeted

³ U.S. Department of State, International Information Programs, “U.S. Donates \$1 Million to Combat Terrorism in Western Hemisphere,” *Washington File*, January 22, 2003.

at improving our ability to combat terrorism.”⁴ The Convention, among other measures, would improve regional cooperation against terrorism, commit parties to sign and ratify U.N. anti-terrorism instruments and take actions against the financing of terrorism, and deny safe haven to suspected terrorists.

On October 27-28, 2003, the OAS held a Special Conference on Security in Mexico City that focused on identifying new threats, concerns, and challenges facing the hemisphere and agreed on a cooperative approach toward addressing them. Among the threats identified in the adopted Declaration on Security in the Americas were “terrorism, transnational organized crime, the global drug problem, corruption, asset laundering, illicit trafficking in weapons and the connections among these activities.”⁵

Congressional Action. President Bush submitted the Inter-American Convention Against Terrorism 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). The committee held a public hearing on the treaty on June 17, 2004.

The 108th Congress called for two reports from the Administration regarding terrorist activities in Latin America. The FY2005 Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 108-375), enacted into law October 28, 2004, required a report within 180 days from the Secretary of Defense on the activities of Al Qaeda and associated groups in Latin America and the Caribbean (Section 1047) and a report within 60 days from the Secretary of State regarding any relationships between foreign governments or organizations and terrorist groups in Colombia (Section 1021).

The 108th Congress also expressed concern regarding the continuing investigation into the July 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires. Both the House and the Senate approved similar resolutions — H.Con.Res. 469 (Ros-Lehtinen) and S.Con.Res. 126 (Coleman) — on July 22, 2004, that, among other provisions, urge Argentina to provide resources to investigate all areas of the AMIA case, encourage U.S. law enforcement support, and encourage the establishment of an OAS task force to assist in the investigation.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, International Information Programs, “Transcript: Powell Stresses Security at OAS General Assembly,” *Washington File*, June 3, 2002.

⁵ Organization of American States. Declaration on Security in the Americas. October 28, 2003.