

Diplomacy would curb violence in Latin America

Insight on the News

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On Jan. 27, dynamite explosions decapitated six electrical towers, throwing Guatemala City into darkness. In the early hours of the following day, a blue car sped by the U.S. Embassy, firing shots at either the building or the peasant unionist demonstrators camped out in front. About the same time, a Guatemalan military patrol killed several guerrillas in San Marcos province near Mexico, and a journalist's and daughter were murdered to highlight some nebulous point. Such turmoil indicates a steadily increasing cycle of violence in this Latin American nation.

A resurgence of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (known by the Spanish acronym URNG) and extremist factions protesting a national referendum on corruption point to unresolved sociopolitical, economic and security concerns still fomenting after 33 years of conflict. In a country of 10 million people - where human rights groups say more than 100,000 people have been killed, 45,000 have disappeared and another 45,000 have fled - ordinary people are sensing that change is imminent. Ironically, foreign tourists scurry around this picturesque country virtually unmolested, unaware of the convergence of these foreboding

Among the problems of this Spanish-Mayan country are 40 percent unemployment and underemployment, internecine political warfare interlaced with ordinary drug corruption and the dynamics of a guerrilla war. The discovery last September of weapons and munitions in Managua, Nicaragua, intended for a battalion-size element of the URNG shows that these insurgents are determined to engage in a protracted fight to achieve recognition. While Guatemalan military intelligence sources indicate there are only 700 to 1,000 combatants nationwide (down from the 6,000 to 10,000 a decade ago), there has been a surge of attacks with medium-gauge weapons, such as rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

Now, overt guerrilla conflict across the Mexican border in Chiapas fuels the possibility of an interregional war without borders. Such a conflict could mushroom throughout Latin America, inflamed by the supranational theme of sociopolitical and economic discrimination against the Mayans, which parallels the condition of blacks during the post-Civil War era of the United States. The Mayans are free but unaccepted. In a sense, the conflict has become a civil rights struggle, similar in some aspects to that of the Incas of Peru who rallied around the Maoist Sendero Luminoso movement. These indigenous factions draw on catalytic events - such as the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or even the assassination of Mexican presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio - to amplify their grievances and illustrate the disparities foisted upon them.

Drug-related crime, which has risen as traditional moral values have eroded, exacerbates the conflict. Guatemala, because of its location, is the ideal shipping route for cocaine coming from Colombia. Furthermore, the expansion of opium cultivation south from Mexico promotes fast money and slick deals that counter the impact of good government and long-term business efforts.

To mute the effects of this mounting storm, the Organization of American States and the U.S. State Department must intercede diplomatically. This should happen before violence causes further polarization between negotiating factions. Addressing Latin American problems in purely economic terms while ignoring sociopolitical factors only worsens them, as trickle-down economic theory does not appear to work effectively in this region. Getting a jump on the trouble now might end this festering conflict and save thousands of lives in our hemisphere, rather than allow it to carry on into the 21st century.

According to the Monroe Doctrine, American involvement in this region should not be limited to neutralizing forces of destruction, such as intervention in illegal drug trade, immigration and warfare. It should include nurturing social development, such as democratic reform, economic justice and conflict adjudication. Helping our neighbors sort through problems at critical times will spare us a vast array of costly consequences.

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