



Latin America: Terrorism Issues

Mark P. Sullivan
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

March 11, 2009

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RS21049

Summary

Since the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, U.S. attention to terrorism in Latin America has intensified, with an increase in bilateral and regional cooperation. In its April 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism, the State Department highlighted threats in Colombia and the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Cuba has remained on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1982, which triggers a number of economic sanctions.

U.S. officials have expressed concerns over the past several years about Venezuela's lack of cooperation on antiterrorism efforts, its relations with Cuba and Iran, and President Hugo Chávez's sympathetic statements for Colombian terrorist groups. In May 2008, for the third 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.

In the 110th Congress, the House approved H.Con.Res. 188 and H.Con.Res. 385, both condemning the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association in Buenos Aires, and H.Res. 435, expressing concern over the emerging national security implications of Iran's efforts to expand its influence in Latin America, and emphasizing the importance of eliminating Hezbollah's financial network in the tri-border area. The Senate approved S.Con.Res. 53, condemning the hostage-taking of three U.S. citizens for over four years by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

To date in the 111th Congress, one legislative initiative has been introduced, H.R. 375 (Ros-Lehtinen), with the goal of bolstering capacity and cooperation of Western Hemisphere countries to counter current and emerging threats, promoting Western Hemisphere cooperation to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, and securing universal adherence to agreements regarding nuclear proliferation.

For additional information, see CRS Report R40193, *Cuba: Issues for the 111th Congress*, and CRS Report RL32488, *Venezuela: Political Conditions and U.S. Policy*.

Contents

Terrorism in Latin America: U.S. Concerns	1
Colombia	1
Venezuela	2
Peru	2
Tri-Border Area	3
Cuba	3
U.S. Policy.....	4
Increased Regional Cooperation Since 9/11.....	5

Contacts

Author Contact Information	6
----------------------------------	---

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 2008 report states that terrorism in the region was primarily perpetrated by terrorist organizations in Colombia and by the remnants of radical leftist Andean groups. 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." Overall, however, the report maintained that the threat of a transnational terrorist attack remained low for most countries in the hemisphere.

The report also stated that regional governments "took modest steps to improve their counterterrorism 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 Argentina, Panama, Paraguay, 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 remaining elements of the rightist paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). With more than 32,000 members demobilized, the AUC remained inactive as a formal organization, but some AUC renegades continued to engage in criminal activities, mostly drug trafficking, according to the terrorism report. The ELN, which had dwindling memberships and reduced offensive capability, has participated in peace talks with the Colombian government, but no agreements have been reached.

The FARC has been weakened by the government's military campaign against it, including the killings of several FARC commanders in 2007 and the group's second in command, Raúl Reyes, during a Colombian government raid on a FARC camp in Ecuador on March 1, 2008. Moreover, in May 2008, the FARC admitted that its long-time leader, Manuel Marulanda, had died of a heart attack in March. Nevertheless, the group has continued terrorist, kidnapping for profit, and narco-trafficking activities, including murders of elected officials and attacks against military and civilian targets in urban and rural areas. According to the State Department terrorism report, both the FARC and the ELN often crossed into Venezuelan territory for rest and resupply, and the FARC regularly used Ecuadorian territory for rest, recuperation, resupply, and training. On December 19, 2007, the Senate approved S.Con.Res. 53 (Nelson, Bill) condemning the holding of

three U.S. citizens by the FARC since February 2003— Thomas Howes, Keith Stansell, and Marc Gonsalves — and calling for their immediate and unconditional release. (Also see CRS Report RL32250, *Colombia: Issues for Congress*)

Venezuela

The State Department’s terrorism report stated that “it remained unclear to what extent the Venezuelan government provided support to Colombian terrorist organizations,” but information on captured computer files from Colombia’s March 2008 raid of a FARC camp in Ecuador raised questions about alleged support of the FARC by the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chávez. Since May 2006, the Secretary of State has made an annual determination that Venezuela was not “cooperating fully with United States antiterrorism efforts” pursuant to Section 40A of the Arms Export Control Act (AECA). As a result, the United States imposed an arms embargo on Venezuela, which ended all U.S. 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 Chávez continued public criticism of U.S. counterterrorism efforts and deepened Venezuelan relationships with Iran and Cuba, and his ideological sympathy for the FARC and ELN, along with high levels of corruption among Venezuelan officials, limited Venezuelan cooperation with Colombia in combating terrorism. In addition, according to the report, Venezuelan citizenship, identity, and travel documents remained easy to obtain, making the country a potentially attractive way-station for terrorists.

U.S. officials and Members of Congress also have expressed concerns about Venezuela’s growing relations with Iran, especially because of Iran’s links with Hezbollah. On June 18, 2008, the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control announced that it was freezing the U.S. assets of two Venezuelans for providing financial and other support to Hezbollah. In the 110th Congress, the House approved H.Res. 435 (Klein) in November 2007, which expressed concern about Iran’s efforts to expand its influence in Latin America, and noted Venezuela’s increasing cooperation with Iran.

Also in the 110th Congress, two resolutions were introduced related to Venezuela and terrorism, but no legislative was action on the measures. H.Res. 1049 (Mack), introduced March 13, 2008, would have called on the Administration to designate Venezuela as a state sponsor of terrorism. H.Res. 965 (Issa), introduced February 7, 2008, would have called upon the Chávez government to implement measures to deny the use of Venezuelan territory and weapons from being used by terrorist organizations and to resume full cooperation with the United States on counterterrorism measures.

For additional information on Venezuela and terrorism concerns, see CRS Report RL32488, *Venezuela: Political Conditions and U.S. Policy*.

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 several hundred armed combatants, and the group is now involved in drug trafficking. The SL killed 20 civilians, 11 police officers, and one military

member in 2007, and conducted 80 terrorist acts in remote coca-growing areas this year. According to the terrorism report, the FARC continued to use remote areas along the Colombian-Peruvian border for rest and to make arms purchases.

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. A 2009 RAND study examines how Hezbollah has benefitted from film piracy proceeds in the tri-border.¹ The State Department terrorism report maintains that the United States remains concerned that Hezbollah and Hamas sympathizers 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: an internationally wanted Hezbollah militant from Lebanon, 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). In February 2008, Imad Mughniyah was killed by a car bomb in Damascus, Syria.

Congress has continued to express concern about progress in the investigation of the 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 bombing. H.Con.Res. 385 (Ros-Lehtinen), approved by the House by voice vote on July 15, 2008, condemned the AMIA bombing, and urged Western Hemisphere governments to take actions to curb activities that supported Hezbollah and other Islamist terrorist organizations. 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 (EAA) of 1979, has included Cuba among its list of states sponsoring terrorism (the other states currently on the list are Iran, Sudan, and Syria). Communist Cuba had a history of supporting revolutionary movements and governments in Latin America and Africa, but in 1992, then Cuban leader Fidel Castro said that his country's support for insurgents abroad was a thing of the past.

¹ Gregory F. Treverton et al, *Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism*, RAND, 2009.

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 "remained opposed to U.S. counterterrorism policy, and actively and publicly condemned many associated U.S. policies and actions." It also noted that Cuba maintains close relationships with other state sponsors of terrorism, such as Iran and Syria, and has provided safe haven for members of several FTOs – the FARC, ELN, and Basque ETA from Spain. Colombia has publicly acknowledged that it wants Cuba mediation with the ELN. 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, although it noted that Cuba stated in 2006 that it will no longer provide safe haven to new fugitives who may enter the country. In April 2007, Cuba returned U.S. fugitive Joseph Adjmi, who was convicted of mail fraud in the 1960s. Several fugitives wanted in Florida for Medicare fraud reportedly fled to Cuba in 2008. In a notorious case, three brothers (Carlos, Luis, and José Benitez) who reportedly submitted \$119 million in false medical claims have been imprisoned since September 2008 on immigration violations, although they have not been returned to the United States.² Cuba has called for the United States to surrender Luis Posada Carriles and three Cuban Americans that it accused of plotting to kill Castro and bombing a Cuban airliner in 1976.

Cuba's retention on the terrorism list has been questioned by some observers. In general, those who support keeping Cuba on the list 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 while North Korea and Libya have been removed, and maintain that Cuba's presence on the list diverts U.S. attention from struggles against serious terrorist threats.

For additional information on Cuba, see CRS Report R40193, *Cuba: Issues for the 111th Congress*. For background, see CRS Report RL32251, *Cuba and the State Sponsors of Terrorism List*.

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.

² Jay Weaver, "Fugitives make off with Medicare millions," *Miami Herald*, January 1, 2009.

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 counterterrorism 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. 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. As noted above, the United States has included Cuba on its list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1982, pursuant to section 6(j) of the EAA, and both Cuba and Venezuela are currently on the annual Section 40A AECA list of countries that are not cooperating fully with U.S. antiterrorism efforts, lists that trigger a number of sanctions.

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. In recent years, ATA for Western Hemisphere countries amounted to \$8.9 million in FY2006, \$7.3 million in FY2007, and an estimated \$8 million in FY2008. For FY2009, the Administration requested \$9.3 million in ATA for Latin America, with \$2.8 million for Colombia and \$3 million for Mexico, and the balance for other countries. Also under the NADR funding account, the United States began providing Terrorist Interdiction Program assistance for several Latin American countries in FY2008. An estimated \$1.3 million is being provided to Panama, Brazil, and Nicaragua in FY2008, while the Administration requested \$1.2 million for Latin America for FY2009.

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

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 effort of the of the Inter-American Committee on Terrorism (CICTE) to combat 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 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-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.

Author Contact Information

Mark P. Sullivan
Specialist in Latin American Affairs
msullivan@crs.loc.gov, 7-7689