



NUEVAS LEYES
REGULAN PROCESO
Migratorio



DE TRAVESÍA POR EL
Potomac



EXPLOSIVAS
DECLARACIONES
DEL "DIABLO"
Etcheverry



LAS MEJORES
Pael
DEL A

IMAGEN

DE WASHINGTON

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Edición Inaugural

The Americas—A Ticking Terrorist Time Bomb

(Translated from “Imagen de Washington”

Las Americas, Una Bomba de Tiempo)

by

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The Americas--North, Central, and South--are part of a twelve thousand mile tapestry that stretches from the Arctic to the Antarctic. Despite significant differences, the threads that link this remarkable and diverse collection of countries include economics and politics. Yet, there is another connection that has been little noticed. That is, there is a growing presence of terrorists from the Middle East in Central and South America. And, even though it is invisible to the general public, this infiltration represents the most explosive threat the hemisphere has ever faced.

-The Seeds of Terror Have Been Sown in the Americas-

The operations of Osama Bin Laden’s al Qaida terrorist network, Egypt’s Jamaa Islamiyya, Hamas, and Hezbollah have reached the Americas and found a toehold in places like la Triple Frontera, the triple border region where Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina meet. Approximately 650,000 people, including 25,000 Arabs of Palestinian and Lebanese descent, live in the region, which has long been known as a smuggling zone and haven for criminals. By the time the 9-11 attacks occurred, the Argentines already had been investigating the region for terrorist activities. Yet, when it shared its data with other intelligence services, its reports were dismissed until the U.S. terrorist attacks in 2001. These investigations were the direct result of Islamic Jihad terrorist strikes against the Jewish community in Buenos Aires, most notably the bombing of the Israeli embassy in 1992, killing 29, and the Jewish Cultural Center in 1994, which killed 84 and injured over 300. The primary suspect in the Center bombing was Imad Mugniyah, a leading member of Hezbollah, who later fled to Iran.

There are several notorious cauldrons of Middle Eastern terrorism in the tri-border area, including Ciudad del Este in Paraguay, Puerto Igauazu in Argentina, and Foz do Iguacu in Brazil. The economy of the tri-border area is focused on smuggling, counterfeiting, and the laundering of Colombian cocaine money and revenues associated with Afghan opium sales, which are often used to buy weapons. As far back as 1995, a former State Department counterterrorism official, Philip Wilcox, testified before the International Relations Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives that there were significant Hezbollah activities in the region. He further asserted that Hezbollah also has terrorist cells in Colombia and Venezuela that engage in fund-raising and recruitment. According to Wilcox, these groups get guidance and logistics support from Iranian intelligence officers assigned to Iranian embassies in the region.

Intelligence officials have also identified other al Qaida infiltrations within Latin America. For example, according to a senior Pentagon official who spoke on the condition of anonymity, in the 1998-1999 timeframe, the Jamaa Islamiyya sent Mohamed Abed Abdel Aal, a leader with suspected bin Laden connections to Colombia, to

negotiate an arms deal with Colombian rebels. He was captured by local police and extradited to Ecuador where he mysteriously disappeared.

Colombia itself has several home-grown terrorist organizations. These include the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). In addition, radical Arab groups have been found in Maicao Colombia. In 2001, even three members of the Irish Republican Army, who were allegedly explosive experts with plans to help the FARC conduct an urban terror campaign, were arrested in Colombia. There have also been allegations of similar support by the terrorist group Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA).

The signs of a global terrorists presence in the Americas are sometimes subtle, but nonetheless, unmistakable. For example, shortly after the 9-11 attacks, 35 Iraqis were arrested in Tijuana, Mexico for improper documents while trying to cross into the U.S. And, ironically months before 9-11, in April 2001, the U.S. temporarily closed its embassies in Uruguay, Paraguay, and Ecuador after the CIA warned of possible terrorist attacks by al Qaida.

More recently, in 2004, Pentagon officials confirmed that human smuggling rings in Latin America are attempting to sneak al Qaida agents into the U.S. Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the U.S. State Department gave congressional testimony that Hezbollah and al Qaida were becoming firmly entrenched in the Americas when Mark F. Wong, the Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, told the House of Representatives' International Relations Committee about the threat posed by both groups in Latin America.

Perhaps the most overt and troubling terrorist link can be seen in Venezuela. There, maverick President Hugo Chavez has created an environment that one military intelligence analyst, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, called a "hotbed of terrorist activity." He added, "The media has reported rumors that al Qaida is setting up bases in Venezuela. It's more than a rumor." One report stated that bin Laden's network has established a training camp on Venezuela's Margarita Island, a tourist destination that has a Muslim community comprised mostly of Arabs.

This does not surprise most observers since Chavez seems to have a tendency for radical behavior and questionable friends. The list is extensive. For instance, he can be seen in news videos hugging Libya's Moammar Gaddafi. He was the first foreign leader to visit Baghdad after the first Gulf War and meet with Saddam Hussein. He considers Fidel Castro to be his mentor. He regularly gives sanctuary to Colombia's rebels. There is even sworn testimony given by a former high level Venezuelan official stating that he personally delivered a million dollars to al Qaida and Taliban forces in Afghanistan on behalf of Chavez.

Ironically, infiltrating and attacking a country other than the U.S. may very well hurt North America more than a direct assault like 9-11. Such an attack would likely result in a devastating domino affect that could topple a number of economies throughout the Americas.

-Oil and Money, the Twin Towers of the Americas-

What makes the Americas so vulnerable and attractive to terrorists are the very interdependencies that unite the region. From the U.S., Uruguay, and Ecuador to

Colombia, Canada, and Chile, the futures of all the countries of the Americas are integral to each other. And, intelligence experts are increasingly concerned that the key sectors of petroleum and finance are the most vulnerable elements. Some have even compared oil and banking to the former twin towers. They predict that these targets have the potential to make the 9-11 terrorist attacks that occurred in New York City and on the Pentagon look like fire crackers in comparison. Perhaps not in the total number of people killed, but in the potentially devastating impact they could have on the economy of the Americas. They point out that with the heavy U.S. dependence on oil from Mexico and Venezuela and the billions in trade and loans among the countries, a single terrorist act in South America could create an energy crisis unprecedented in nature or cause banks to fail in North America and regional economies to crumble to the South.

That's because in recent years Venezuela has ranked consistently as one of the top four sources of U.S. oil suppliers, along with Mexico, Canada, and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. now depends Mexican and Venezuelan oil for roughly 25 percent of its petroleum needs. And, those countries in turn depend upon that revenue to ensure the stability of their own economies. In Venezuela's, for instance, the petroleum industry accounts for more than three-quarters of the country's total export revenues, about half of total government revenues, and about one-third of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Venezuela also has the Western Hemisphere's largest proven conventional oil reserves, holding reserves of about 78 billion barrels. The country produces over 3 million barrels a day, ranking it among the top ten crude oil producers in the world. In addition, they supply major Caribbean refineries with significant quantities of crude oil, the two largest being the Hovensa refinery on St. Croix, which includes partial ownership by the state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. (PdVSA) and the Isla Refinery on Curacao. About one-third of Venezuela's refined products exports are sold to the U.S. In addition, PdVSA operates several key pipelines needed to get oil out of fields like Maracaibo, Falcon, Apure, Oriental, and the Zuata region of the Orinco belt for transport to the port of Jose on Venezuela's northern coast. This includes two parallel 130-mile pipelines. In April 2003, Colombia and Venezuela agrees to build a pipeline enabling Colombia to export natural gas from the Guajira basin to the Maracaibo region of Venezuela that would carry between 150 and 200 million cubic feet per day beginning in 2005.

To the north, Mexico, the second largest oil supplier to the U.S. has petroleum production facilities that also have a dramatic impact on both their state revenues and the operation of industry and transportation in the U.S and elsewhere in the Americas. For instance, Antonio M. Amor Refinery in Salamanca in the state of Guanajuato, owned by Pemex Refinacion , a subsidy of Petroleos Mexicanos, Mexico's national oil company, produces high-octane gasoline and diesel and aviation fuel.

It is not hard to imagine the crippling economic impact if a commercial or charter plane were crashed into one of these Venezuelan or Mexican production or refinery facilities, causing their destruction or severe damage. A truck bomb could cause the same damage or cut off a vital pipeline. A significant reduction in oil production or refined petroleum products could send an unprecedented shock wave with far-reaching implications through the entire economy of the Americas, including transportation, manufacturing, and financial sectors.

Inflicting heavy damage on oil production in Venezuela, for example, would impact not only the U.S., but Brazil as well. With over a half trillion dollar a year economy and 175 million people, Brazil is the continent's lynchpin. A terrorist attack that affected Brazil would in turn cause a domino effect that would threaten the economies throughout Latin America, as well as financial institutions in North America.

This vulnerability has increased over the past decade as Latin countries struggled to balance financial and credit needs with their ability to expand their economies and infrastructures. In 1994, for example, the 23 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean owed approximately \$557 billion dollars in foreign debt. By 2004, that number had increased approximately \$800 billion. It is estimated that the Latin American foreign debt represents approximately 36 percent of the GDP of the region, according to statistics from international financial institutions and the commercial banking sector.

These billions of dollars in debt are carried by international organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and large U.S. banks and financial institutions from Europe and Asia. For good reason many investors, bankers, and traders fear that any disruption of the economy of those countries would force a default on the debt and spark a devastating devaluation of the currencies. In effect it would trigger a global financial fiasco that would spread like wildfire through the Americas from the Rio Grande River to the Tierra del Fuego and from Canada deep into the heart of the U.S.

Some countries are already struggling to maintain a manageable balance between required funding and repayment. Brazil, for instance, the world's 9th largest economy, was faced with financial needs of about \$54 billion in 2002. And, Honduras spends 60 percent of its GDP to pay its overwhelming debt. It is perhaps Argentina, though, that best represents the danger to the international credit and business community. The country is the world's 29th largest economy and Latin America's third largest after Mexico and Brazil. Given that Argentina's loans represent more than 15 percent of the IMF's total portfolio, nonpayment of loans would have a serious impact on the international financial structure. In addition, the country owes approximately \$90 billion in bonds to an array of private creditors, the majority from the U.S., Europe, and Japan. Bank failures either at home or in North America would dry up loan and investment money.

Prior to September 11, 2001, it would have been unthinkable that crashing a hijacked commercial airplane or exploding a bomb at a single target could send a tidal wave of instability throughout the economic structure of an entire global region. This is no longer true. There is no doubt that the seeds of terrorism have been planted in the region. What remains to be seen, though, is if they are allowed to grow. Ironically, if they are, it will be the very dependencies that unite the Americas that present the most attractive target for the terrorists to rip it apart. What happens in any one country will send strong shock waves to every corner of the Western Hemisphere because in the end, all the people of the Americas are Americans.

About the author: The writer has spent over 30 years providing consultant and business services to the U.S. Department of Defense. In addition, he served eight years as a

Capitol Hill Congressional correspondent and columnist for military affairs for Downey Communications. He also lived in South America where he worked as a photojournalist and has written over 300 stories on defense, economic issues, and the cultures of the people and countries of the Americas.