

The root of the Andes crisis: Hugo Chavez

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The first weekend of March saw three South American countries come to the brink of war. The worst has been averted: After a two-day emergency meeting, the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States agreed on a resolution approved by all 34 members of the hemispheric forum. But despite the presidential handshakes at yesterday's Rio Group summit in Santo Domingo, the crisis is far from over.

It began when the Colombian army bombed a guerrilla camp about two kilometres inside Ecuador, a targeted attack that killed Raul Reyes, a senior commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Colombian troops crossed the border, retrieved the body, computers and other equipment, and left.

The OAS resolution, while acknowledging that Colombia had violated Ecuador's territorial integrity, did not condemn Bogota's actions. Despite backing the resolution, two countries - Venezuela and Nicaragua - voiced their opposition; both have ideological affinities with the guerrillas, but their reactions have deeper roots. The crisis has exposed Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's ties with them, and how effective oil diplomacy has been in swaying Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega back to his most radical stands. (Following Venezuela and Ecuador, Nicaragua severed diplomatic ties with Colombia on Thursday.)

The conciliatory balance achieved at the OAS is precarious, given Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa's renewed radicalization, instigated by Mr. Chavez and now backed by Mr. Ortega. Thus far, the centre-left governments of Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and, surprisingly, Bolivia, have prevented the scale from tipping. Before looking at the cross-border raid and demanding condemnations from the international community, the first question should be: Why do Colombia's neighbours - willingly or not - provide a haven for the guerrillas?

In the case of Ecuador, it is yet to be clarified whether its armed forces lack the capacity to protect their territory, or whether its government is complicit in guerrilla activity. In the case of Venezuela, there are no doubts: Mr. Chavez's support for the FARC is unequivocal, and partly explains his disproportionate reaction to Colombia's incursion into Ecuador.

Mr. Chavez warned his Colombian counterpart, Alvaro Uribe, that if he tried a similar action in Venezuela, it would be considered *casus belli*. The next day, on his regular Sunday broadcast, he ordered his defence minister to send 10 tank battalions to the border with Colombia, and his foreign minister to shut down the Venezuelan embassy in Bogota.

Mr. Chavez's belligerence, however, has more to do with his domestic political problems than with the Colombia-Ecuador dispute. His support has fallen considerably since losing a referendum in December to change the country's constitution. Despite record oil prices, Venezuela is facing food shortages, as imposed controls are taking their toll on the economy. And this year's inflation is

forecast at 25 per cent. Creating an external conflict could help Mr. Chavez galvanize internal support, distract attention, create a state of emergency and disqualify opposition voices as traitors.

Colombia says it has uncovered evidence of Mr. Chavez's involvement with the Colombian guerrillas on Mr. Reyes's computer. Documents and letters showcase the guerrillas' tight links with the Venezuelan regime, including strategizing discussions, payments for as much as \$300-million (U.S.), code references to airplanes and "kilos," and direct contact and negotiations between Ivan Marquez, one of the seven members of the FARC's high command, and Venezuela's interior minister.

These are serious accusations, and the Colombian government, with the evidence in its hands, has announced its intention of presenting the case to the International Criminal Court. Yet, as in many other cases, the other side, the one meddling in the internal affairs of a bordering state, is formulating the war threats. Venezuela had no business in the bilateral incident between Colombia and Ecuador. Mr. Chavez's reaction gives credence to the rumours of the FARC's top commander, Manuel Marulanda, being in a camp within Venezuela. Mr. Marulanda, who is in his 70s, is said to be ill with prostate cancer.

It is also clear that borders should be respected - by everyone. So Colombia should apologize to Ecuador, as it has done. But Ecuador should also defend the integrity of its territory against the guerrillas' incursions. One could argue that if Israel were right to bomb Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, then Colombia was right to act in self-defence in Ecuador.

The international community should not lose sight that the democratic government of Colombia is dealing with a terrorist organization financed through kidnappings for ransom, extortion and drug-trafficking. The FARC commander killed last Saturday was personally responsible for well-documented criminal acts.

When Mr. Chavez, in his broadcast, called for a minute of silence in Mr. Reyes's honour and spoke of him as a "good revolutionary," it was a blatant provocation. Mr. Uribe, Colombia's President, has not sent more troops to the borders, and is not likely to respond to Mr. Chavez's provocations. The OAS resolution and the diplomatic efforts at the Rio Group summit seem to have temporarily defused the crisis between Colombia and Ecuador. But, with Mr. Chavez's moves threatening to widen the conflict, the region's long-term stability and peace continue to be at stake.

Mr. Chavez's threats should be taken seriously, more so now when they come from a position of increased domestic weakness. The former paratrooper, whose only military action was his failed coup attempt in 1992, wants his war - it befits his self-aggrandized image of a Latin America liberator. Ecuador's Mr. Correa and Nicaragua's Mr. Ortega are following his lead.