



US, South American military leaders meet in Paraguay to discuss defense cooperation

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ASUNCIÓN, Paraguay (Aug. 19, 2015) -- Gen. John Kelly, commander of U.S. Southern Command, left, is greeted by Gen. José De Nardi, Chief of the Brazilian Armed Forces Joint Staff, after delivering remarks during the opening ceremony for the 2015 South American Defense Conference (SOUTHDEC) Aug. 19 in Asunción, Paraguay. (Photo by José Ruiz)

Military leaders from nine South American nations joined U.S. counterparts and Canadian observers in Asuncion Aug. 19-20 to explore opportunities for defense cooperation and mechanisms to counter threats to the region's security.

The gathering marked the first time Paraguay has hosted the South American Defense Conference (SOUTHDEC), an annual meeting of the region's top military commanders co-hosted by U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).

Gen. Luis Garcete, Commander of the Paraguayan Military Forces, greeted his country's guests during the opening of the fifth SOUTHDEC and thanked them for the "...consideration, understanding, reciprocity and camaraderie which characterize the armed forces' permanent relations."

[Gen. John Kelly](#), SOUTHCOM commander, commended the defense leaders for working together, noting the importance of their commitment to collaboration.

"When it comes to issues like climate change, maritime security, (and) humanitarian crises, borders don't matter; the only things that matter are our partnerships," he said. "In fact, partnerships can make all the difference, especially in times of crisis. That's when our efforts to build mutual understanding and trust really count."

Kelly led a U.S. delegation that included senior representatives from the Department of State and Department of Defense, including the National Defense University's [Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies](#).

Also in attendance, representing 27 member states from across the Americas, was [Brig. Gen. Jaime González](#), Vice Chairman of the Organization of American States' [Inter-American Defense Board](#), the oldest regional defense organization in the world.

The Threat of Transnational Organized Crime

The forum's opening discussions included an analysis of threats and challenges impacting the region, chief among them transnational organized crime. Regional militaries are routinely tasked to support law enforcement operations targeting transnational criminal organizations and their activities.

The subject was among the topics briefed by the Paraguayan Armed Forces following the opening ceremony, and they listed narcotics production and trafficking among 15 threats to their nation's security.

According to the [United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime](#) (UNODC), there are indications illicit trafficking routes are shifting and illegal drugs trafficked within them changing, as



ASUNCIÓN, Paraguay (Aug. 19, 2015) -- Gen. Juan Rodríguez, Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces, center, discusses "territorial sovereignty and defense against transnational threats" while participating in a panel with senior military leaders from Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay during the 2015 South American Defense Conference (SOUTHDEC) Aug. 19 in Asunción, Paraguay. Rodríguez was joined in the panel by Gen. Omar Salinas, Commander of the Multinational State of Bolivia, left, Rear Adm. Francisco Bolaños, Director of Logistics at the Peruvian Armed Forces Joint Staff, right, and Col. Osvaldo Almirón, Chief of Policy Strategies and Plans at the Paraguayan Armed Forces Joint Staff (not pictured). (Photo by José Ruiz)

users around the world switch consumption habits and transnational criminal organizations adapt to ever-evolving markets and pressure from law enforcement operations.

In its [2015 World Drug Report](#), UNODC noted cocaine consumption was on the decline in North America, as well as Western and Central Europe, while almost doubling in South America from 1.8 million users in 2010 to 3.3 million users in 2012. The trend is believed to be one of many indicators of how transnational criminal organizations seek to expand their unlawful operations as conditions around the globe change.

"Not only are criminal networks expanding, but they're also diversifying their activities," said John Maloney, a SOUTHCOM senior analyst for transnational organized crime issues. He cited the region's economic growth and resulting free trade areas as positives transnational criminal organizations tend to exploit.

Success Story: Sovereign Skies

As the leaders explored ways to counter the threat, they took time to hear one recent [success story](#) of regional cooperation ending illicit-trafficking flights once commonplace over the Caribbean Sea.

[Sovereign Skies](#) is a program developed in 2010 by the Dominican Republic in collaboration with the U.S., Brazil and Colombia to interdict illicit air traffic and regain air sovereignty after the Caribbean nation began experiencing a high volume of illegal flights.

U.S. Air Force Col. Mike Torrealday, an F-16 instructor pilot and Reserve Advisor at U.S. Forces Southern, was a lead

subject-matter expert who supported the development and implementation of the program.

He described how the Dominican Republic, with U.S. assistance, purchased Brazilian A-29 Super Tucano aircraft configured with aerial surveillance equipment, then turned to experienced instructors from Brazil and Colombia to train the pilots and instructor pilots needed to implement Sovereign Skies.

"Before we started this program, the Dominican Republic was receiving 120 to 130 illicit tracks per year," he said. "From 2011 to 2014, we eradicated all (illicit air) tracks; and they went from 130 per year to zero, so we had great success by developing it with regional participation."

He described Sovereign Skies as a model program that can be tailored to help other countries in the region confront similar challenges.

Human Rights

As they talked about how to best address transnational organized crime and other threats, the leaders also took time to discuss human rights, a topic of mutual importance to the 11 delegations in attendance.

Leanna Bresnahan, head of SOUTHCOM's Human Rights Office, spoke of the region's achievements in promoting human rights over the past several decades, recalling her office's work with 11 countries who participate in the SOUTHCOM-sponsored Human Rights Initiative. In March, Paraguay became the fifth South American nation to join the initiative since it began in 1997.

"As the initiative has matured, we have a group of nations with strong programs, and they are now assuming more prominent roles in order to share their expertise and lessons learned," said Bresnahan.

"The world's needs are enormous," she added. "Our beautiful hemisphere's defense and security forces are on their way to being recognized around the world as human rights defenders. Let's stay together on this path of great importance."

Military Support to Humanitarian, Disaster Relief Ops

On day two of SOUTHDEC, the event's focus transitioned to defense cooperation in support of civil-military operations.

The Brazilian delegation started the day's activities with a presentation about their experiences supporting domestic and international civil-military operations following natural disasters and other crises.

According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Latin America and the Caribbean are highly vulnerable to natural disasters, including floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, droughts and volcanic eruptions.

Prior to the start of SOUTHDEC, the [Cotopaxi volcano erupted](#), threatening the safety of 219,000 people and prompting preventive evacuations in surrounding communities about 50 miles south of Quito, Ecuador.

To respond to such threats, countries in the region routinely cooperate to strengthen their disaster response capabilities. Several will join more than a dozen countries taking part in Fuerzas Aliadas Humanitarias 2015, a SOUTHCOM-sponsored humanitarian assistance exercise Honduras will host from Aug. 26-Sept. 4, and involving a major disaster scenario requiring the collective capabilities of a multinational military contingent.

The leaders also touched on defense cooperation in support to [global peacekeeping and stabilization missions](#), an area of expertise the region has extensive experience in. More than half of Western Hemisphere nations supporting U.N.-sponsored peacekeeping nations around the world are from South America and more than 80 percent of peacekeepers representing the Americas hail from the southern continent.

The two-day event included bilateral meetings and closed with an executive session during which they worked to define areas of mutual interest for forthcoming engagements and next steps in the cooperative relationship between the region's armed forces.