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### **Introduction**

For both Costa Rica and to a greater degree Panama, the struggle against illicit small arms is a particularly unique challenge. A civil war rages in Colombia with well-financed guerrillas making excursions into Panama to buy weapons, many times in exchange for cocaine. Their demand for weapons helps to keep a steady flow of arms through the Panama/Costa Rica border. The business is lucrative with automatic weapons purchased in Central America selling for five-times as much in Colombia. Though the stream of weapons has South America as its principle destination, predictably many weapons fall into civilian hands on the streets of Panama and Costa Rica.

To combat the proliferation of small arms within Panama, two major steps were announced in the last year. In April of 1999, the mayor of Panama City announced the extension of a weapons buyback program through the year 2004. The program began in February of 1997 and will now exchange food vouchers for weapons. So far the program has been successful in collecting over 1,700 weapons including handguns, AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, grenade launchers, submachine guns, shotguns, and surface-to-air rockets.

The Panamanian government also announced that it would adhere to an Inter-American Convention Against the Fabrication and Illicit trafficking in Firearms, Munitions, and Explosives, which promotes cooperation and exchange of information related to combating the fabrication and trafficking of illegal firearms, ammunition, explosives and other related materials. All states signing the convention agree to take legislative or other measures to classify fabrication and trafficking in illegal arms as a criminal activity. The legislature approved a 30-article bill in May of 1999 that outlined comprehensive legislative methods for controlling all aspects of trafficking in illegal arms and explosives.

### **The Canal Zone and the Departure of the U.S.**

Panama continues to feel the negative effects of the United States' military presence. Despite cleanup efforts by the U.S., unexploded ordinance, grenades, and various military weapons remain in the Canal Zone. Several serious injuries have occurred to field workers, hunters and children who have come across explosives and shells in areas that were supposed to have been decontaminated by the U.S. on its departure.

The Rio Hato region, a former training site for U.S. and Panamanian military officers was the site of several injuries caused by unexploded ordinance. In July of 1999 an unexploded grenade in a field in this area injured a peasant farmer. Also in July 1999, the explosion of a grenade injured reforestation workers. Former Panamanian President Ernesto Pérez Balladares said that he holds the U.S. responsible for any accidents that occur from the detonation of unexploded ordinance.

According to the Department of Health, 17 communities have experienced deaths or injuries as the result of unexploded ordinance. These types of injuries may continue to occur as the Canal Zone is transformed from a military installation to civilian uses. The 20-mile by 50-mile Canal Zone area is being developed into a center for trade, manufacturing and ecotourism.

### **The Colombian Conflict**

With the departure of U.S. Troops from the Canal Zone, Panama faces another problem--increased arms and narcotics trafficking. Colombian and Peruvian guerrillas view southern Panama as an arms bazaar. In Darien province close to the Colombian border, a remote jungle zone, explosives and weapons from Soviet-made AK-47s assault rifles to RPG-7 grenade launchers to C-4, explosives are bought or traded for cocaine. It is reported that arms transfers occur every day at various ports in the region close the border with Colombia.

Many of the weapons are remnants of Nicaragua's civil war. In March, Panamanian security forces broke up a smuggling ring that was transporting AK-47s from Nicaragua across the Costa Rican border to Darien province.

While Darien province garners much attention for its proximity to Colombia, Chiriquí province on the Costa Rican border is also a hotbed of activity. Residents there say they fear for their safety and that it is common to see Colombian guerrillas dealing in military-grade weapons and equipment at all times of the day and night. The 200 mile-long Costa Rican border is patrolled by only 50 men, versus 2,000 on the Colombian border. In March of this year, a Panamanian congressman suggested moving the headquarters of a nearby police division closer to the border to increase security in the area. The Costa Rican border is lightly guarded and both the Governor of Chiriquí province and the director of the National Police do not see the situation as critical but rather as a historically difficult to secure area. The numerous jungle routes facilitate entry into Panama.

Despite the sentiments of the governor of Chiriquí and the director of the National Police, many other Panamanian officials say the solution to stopping the flow of guns into South American and drugs into Panama is to tighten security at the Costa Rican border. The two countries are cooperating on border control and security. There has been discussion of building a 125-foot "no man's land" on each side of the border to facilitate aerial surveillance of border crossings.

### **National Inventory Small Arms**

According to *Jane's Infantry Weapons 1999-2000* Panama maintains the following small arms and light weapons in national stocks:

- 9 mm FN 35 pistols
- 9 mm Uzi sub-machine guns
- 5.56 mm M16A1 rifles
- 5.56 mm Type 65 rifles
- 0.30 Grand M1 rifles
- 5.56 mm M16A1/HB machine guns
- 7.62 mm FN MAG machine guns
- 0.30 Browning M1919A4 machine guns
- 0.50 Browning M2HB machine guns
- 40 mm M203 grenade launchers
- 60 mm M19 mortars
- 81 mm M29 mortars

According the Federation of American Scientists' Arms sales monitoring project Panama received \$4 million worth of M-16 rifles, M-60, M-50 machine guns, and 120 and 80 millimeter mortars from the U.S. from 1994 to the present.

### **Costa Rica**

Although Costa Rica felt to a much lesser degree the effect of the trafficking of high caliber weapons although many of the armed robberies that occurred in 1999 were committed using AK-47 assault rifles. Costa Rica is a transit point in the route of guns bound for Colombia. The route follows: El Salvador - Nicaragua - Costa Rica - Rio Sereno - La Palma - Bahia Cupica.

At the UN Prepcom for the 2001 convention on small arms in February of this year, a government spokesperson stated that Costa Rica continued to refrain from investing in weaponry and that it believed in the promotion of peace and security. Costa Rica called for an investment policy that stressed the reduction of military expenditures and promoted disarmament and demilitarization. She said that the upcoming 2001 conference on illegal trafficking in small arms should be the arena for drawing up legally binding rules to govern the trade in small arms. She also stated that Costa Rica advocated an embargo of arms exports to countries that violated human rights or participated in such activity.

In late 1998, responding to increasing public outcry over random violence, the Judicial Investigation Organization together with the Ministry of Security and Justice began an initiative to study reasons for increases in crime and methods to combat violence. Additionally, the congress began a project to study the efficacy of outlawing the possession of firearms and analyze social and economic implications of the increase in violent crime. Despite the public fear, there was only a small increase in firearms related homicides from 87 in 1995 to 95 in 1996. Firearms related injuries decreased from 419 in 1996 to 284 in 1997.

### **National Inventory of Small Arms**

According to *Jane's Infantry Weapons 1999-2000* Costa Rica maintains the following small arms and light weapons in national stocks:

- .045 M1911A1 pistols
- 9 mm Beretta 38/49 sub-machine guns
- 5.556mm Galil rifles
- 5.56 mm M16A1 rifles
- 5.56 mm Type 68 rifles
- 7.62 mm M14 rifles
- 7.62 mm FN FAL rifles
- 7.62 mm M60 machine guns
- 00.30 BAR M1918 machine guns
- 00.30 Browning M1919A4 machine guns
- 40 mm M79 grenade launcher