

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

The battle over the 'diferendo'

Will Venezuela and Colombia step back from the brink, before a new "Central America" explodes in South America?

A Colombian ship patrolling coastal waters off the Colombian Guajira Peninsula was approached by several Venezuelan warships Aug. 9 and ordered to withdraw under threat of attack. The corvette *Caldas* refused to budge, claiming it was well within Colombia's 12-mile territorial waters limit. The standoff lasted over a week, while Venezuelan xenophobes gave public vent to their outrage at the "invasion" and Venezuelan President Jaime Lusinchi fired off a formal letter of protest to his Colombian counterpart, denouncing the "provocation."

The Venezuelan military was put on alert, and heavy artillery and F-16 fighter-bombers moved to the frontier. Venezuelan Army Minister Italo del Valle conducted a 72-hour "efficiency" tour of all border posts, and various Venezuelan national guard post commanders were reportedly urging Venezuelans living in Colombia to return home at once. *El Mundo* in Caracas reported "intense movement of patrols" on both sides of the border.

On Aug. 17, the Colombian Navy withdrew the *Caldas*, and sent three rocket-carrying corvettes to the disputed area to "carry out sovereignty maneuvers," according to the Bogota daily *El Tiempo*. Colombian naval sources denied that the *Caldas* had abandoned Venezuelan territory, "because it never left Colombian waters."

Media in both countries are hyping tensions. *El Siglo* in Colombia lied that the two Presidents had brawled over the telephone, later denied by both

sides. Venezuela's *El Universal* wrote that if Colombia did not yield this time, Venezuela could take "more drastic action, including in the military, social, or trade areas." The border between Venezuela's Paez state and the Colombian department of Vichada has been closed, and other common border regions "virtually closed," according to sources.

Both Presidents have gone into closed-door sessions with their cabinets, their military commanders, diplomatic advisers, ex-Presidents, heads of political parties—you name it. Each has emerged claiming the full solidarity of their people in a "just cause."

The oil-rich maritime territory in dispute is the so-called *diferendo*, a bone of contention between the two Andean neighbors since at least 1939. There have been similar incidents in the past, triggering hostile exchanges which eventually died away. Nearly every administration, Venezuelan and Colombian, has been able to claim at least one negotiated "agreement." And so the dispute dragged on.

What makes this time different? First, there is the narco-terrorist factor. Colombia is a nation being hit by Soviet-run irregular armies which combine drug traffickers and terrorist bands from at least four nations. It is therefore highly vulnerable to destabilization. The constant incursions of the narco-terrorists across the border into Venezuela, and the extension of drug-trafficking routes into that country, have posed the need for a joint war to combat narco-terrorism.

Blocking such a unified strategy is easily accomplished, by bringing the heated *diferendo* issue to life.

Second, there is the economic factor. While both countries are suffering from declining export revenues and soaring debt service costs, Venezuela has suddenly found itself without the funds to meet operating needs and debt service charges. Its desperate calls for fresh credit have been met by counter-demands from international bank creditors for agreement to a refinancing scheme bearing conditions impossible to meet. Faced with a difficult election period, President Lusinchi could stand a diversion. Only this one could get out of hand, very quickly.

In a speech Aug. 19, Lusinchi denounced the Colombian government's defense of the *Caldas* affair as "a biased and slanderous interpretation," and charged that "nothing can justify the invasion of maritime territory over which our country . . . has irrefutable rights." He ominously warned Colombians living inside Venezuela to "cooperate." He also rejected as "unviable" a Colombian government proposal to form a mixed "permanent conciliation commission" to appeal to the international court at The Hague for a solution to the conflict.

An Aug. 17 editorial in the Bogota daily *El Espectador* had the most rational comment to offer about the conflict, which it labeled "anachronistic": "The possibilities for joint economic development, in parallel action and dedicated to defense of continental democracy, are immense. . . . We also feel that it would be criminal to give ourselves over to an arms race . . . that the merchants of death will try to instigate, knowing well that it is the best way to fill their pockets. [And] we must not forget those who, for political reasons, could be interested in