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Intelligence Report

Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis

1 October 1997

Colombia-Venezuela: Continuing Friction Along the Border [REDACTED]

A series of recent skirmishes between Venezuelan security forces and Colombian guerrillas operating on the Venezuelan side of the countries' 2,200 kilometer common border has rekindled longstanding tensions in the region and placed a significant strain on bilateral relations. Assaults by insurgents on Venezuelan soldiers and civilians have led to new assertions by Caracas that Bogota is not doing enough to secure the frontier. Colombian officials contend that reckless Venezuelan attempts to strike back at the guerrillas, coupled with evidence that corrupt Venezuelan military members are supporting the rebels, prove that Caracas bears some responsibility for border violence. [REDACTED]

Diplomatic clashes and nationalist indignation notwithstanding, [REDACTED] reports indicate the two governments have worked diligently to downplay border incidents and prevent them from causing serious damage to bilateral cooperation.

- *Nevertheless, some Venezuelans doubt Bogota's sincerity and have considered new alternatives for dealing with the problem.* Several political officials have suggested that the government open a direct dialogue with the guerrillas, others have proposed that Caracas mediate peace talks between Bogota and the insurgents, and military leaders have privately contemplated cross-border strikes against the rebels, according to clandestine and press reports. [REDACTED]

Meanwhile, the inability of either country to devote sufficient resources to effectively counter guerrilla activities along the border will undoubtedly undermine efforts to pacify the region, and disputes over incidents are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. [REDACTED]

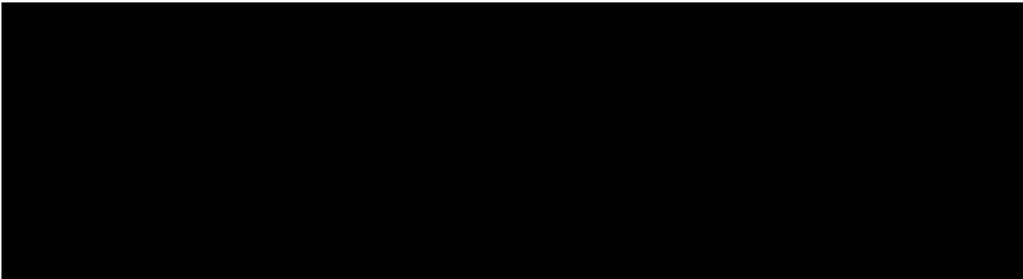
The insurgents will probably not threaten the few US facilities in the border area, but US personnel could become incidental victims of rebel violence. The recurring diplomatic squabbles between Colombia and Venezuela caused by guerrilla incursions may upset the climate of mutual cooperation that the United States is trying to foster in the region and hinder US-sponsored counterdrug and security programs.

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- *Caracas—and possibly Bogota—will almost certainly press Washington to become more involved in the border problem, especially with counternarcotics assistance that could also be used to combat the guerrillas. Venezuela is sure to raise the issue during President Clinton's visit in October.* [REDACTED]



Border Incidents Spark Nationalist Reaction

Members of Colombia's most powerful insurgent groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), have made several incursions into Venezuela since the beginning of the year, prompting Caracas to issue formal protests and renew pressure on Bogota to augment its security presence in the border region. Increasingly frustrated with Colombia's lack of responsiveness to the guerrillas' activities—including cross-border drug trafficking, kidnappings, military-style raids, and extortion of Venezuelan oil companies and ranchers—some Venezuelan officials have gone so far as to publicly accuse Bogota of allowing or even encouraging turbulence in the area. Early this year, both Venezuelan Frontier Affairs Minister Marquez and the head of the country's civilian Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services alleged that Colombia was deliberately trying to drive its domestic problems into Venezuela. The officials' statements reflect Venezuelan rhetoric more than fact because there is no reporting to corroborate a Colombian strategy to push the insurgents into its neighbor's territory. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Venezuelan Military Losing Patience as Casualties Persist. Border incidents have especially angered the Venezuelan Armed Forces, which has the primary responsibility for frontier security and whose personnel are often the victims of guerrilla attacks. According to [REDACTED] press reports, Colombian rebels have inflicted several losses on the military since the beginning of the year:

- Guerrillas attacked a Venezuelan border patrol in Apure State in February 1997, wounding three soldiers and causing a subsequent shooting incident that left one civilian dead and several others—mostly Colombians—injured.
- In April, insurgents killed two members of a Navy river patrol and fired upon a Venezuelan military helicopter.

- More recently, alleged ELN members seriously wounded another Venezuelan soldier in an ambush and suspected FARC rebels kidnapped a Venezuelan naval officer.¹

Convinced that the Colombian military is not doing enough to counter or prevent guerrilla activities in its own territory, the Venezuelan high command has repeatedly insisted that Bogota grant it permission to pursue the rebels across the border. [REDACTED]

Colombia Seeks To Shift Blame. Bogota has denied Caracas's claims that it bears full responsibility for frontier violence and has noted several incidents that highlight Venezuela's contribution to the problem:

- A Colombian military report made public in April 1997 stated that a Venezuelan Army officer had been caught selling rifles to guerrillas in 1995 and that US hand grenades shipped to Venezuela had been confiscated from the rebels that same year, along with dynamite originally purchased by the Venezuelan Army. The insurgents reportedly paid for the war material with money from their accounts in Venezuelan banks.
- [REDACTED] about 90 percent of the ammunition seized from guerrillas in the border area comes from Venezuelan security forces.

We cannot corroborate these charges. [REDACTED]

Bogota cited the arrest in February of a former Venezuelan National Guard lieutenant colonel who was serving as a FARC leader as further proof of its neighbor's involvement in the border violence. Officials have likewise pointed to accidental shootings of Colombian civilians by overzealous Venezuelan border guards—as occurred in February—and unauthorized incursions into Colombian territory by Venezuelan troops to support their assertion that Caracas shares some of the blame, according to press reports. [REDACTED]

¹ Intense pressure by Venezuelan military units searching for the kidnappers forced the rebels to release the naval officer on 24 August, according to press reports. [REDACTED]

A Long History of Border Troubles [REDACTED]

Tensions between Colombia and Venezuela over their common border date back to the early 1800s. Many of these disputes resulted from disagreements over the delineation of national boundaries, and most have been resolved by international arbitration and official demarcations of the border area. Differences over territorial sovereignty in and around the Gulf of Venezuela still arise from time to time—the countries almost went to war because of an incident in the area in 1987—but usually do not escalate beyond nationalist rhetoric. [REDACTED]

In recent years, however, a number of other issues related to the border—the return of stolen property, illegal migration, and environmental protection—have placed new strains on bilateral relations. For example, Venezuela's Environment Minister announced in late August that Caracas plans to demand more than \$60 million in compensation from Bogota for damage done to a key Venezuelan river basin by oil spills resulting from insurgent attacks on Colombian pipelines. Nevertheless, the guerrillas' cross-border activities have been the most heated topic in Caracas's diplomatic agenda with Bogota. [REDACTED]

Continuing Efforts To Reduce Tensions

Despite periodic diplomatic clashes, the governments of both countries have worked hard to prevent recent incidents from escalating into a direct threat to bilateral relations. Colombian President Samper and President Caldera have met several times over the past year to discuss frontier issues, and, although these meetings have failed to produce concrete solutions, they have at least kept the channels of communication open and tempers in check. [REDACTED]

Bogota Hoping to Avert Crisis. After the accidental shooting of Colombian civilians by Venezuelan border guards in February 1997, Colombian Foreign Minister Mejia confided [REDACTED] in Bogota that, although her government had been obligated to send an official protest to Caracas, it actually wanted to suppress the affair as soon as possible to restore normal relations. Caldera and Samper signed an agreement soon after the event to create a high-level, binational commission to investigate future border incidents, according to the press. [REDACTED]

In addition, Bogota has publicly and privately assured Caracas on various occasions that it would bolster its military presence along the border. Several such pledges eventually led to the activation in December 1996 of a new Colombian Army unit, the 18th Brigade, in Arauca Department, immediately across from the Venezuelan state

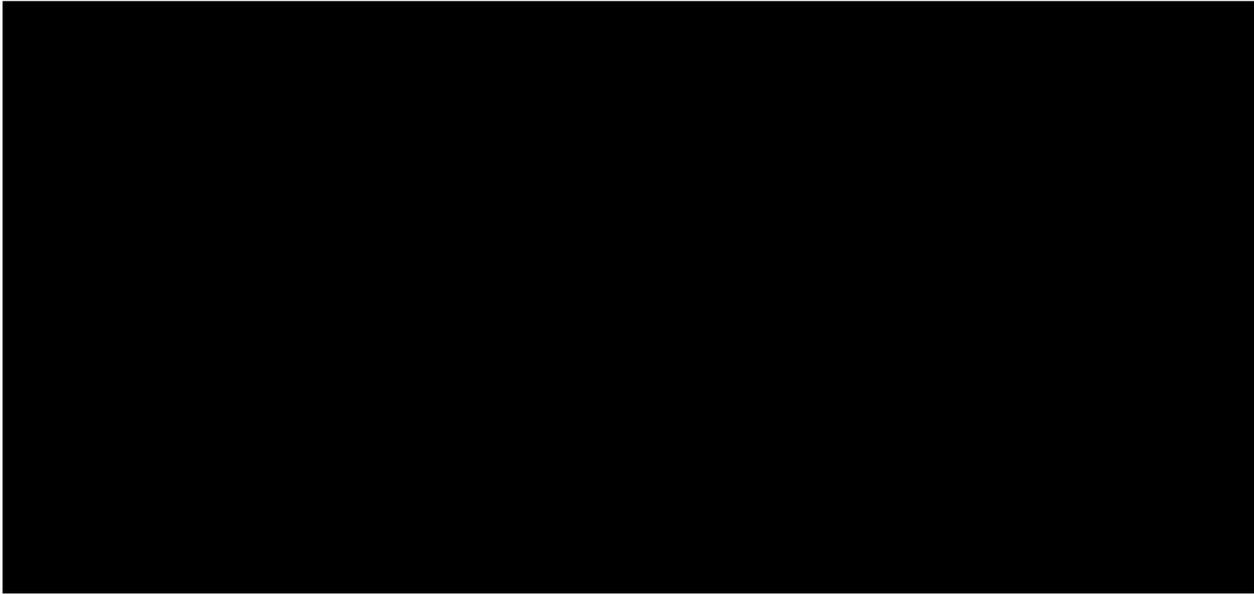
of Apure—where most of the violent frontier incidents occur. The following February, former Defense Minister Gonzalez promised that his border forces would match those of the Venezuelans within a few months, and Samper—during a border summit with Caldera in August—made a similar pledge to heighten security in the area, according to [REDACTED] press reports. [REDACTED]

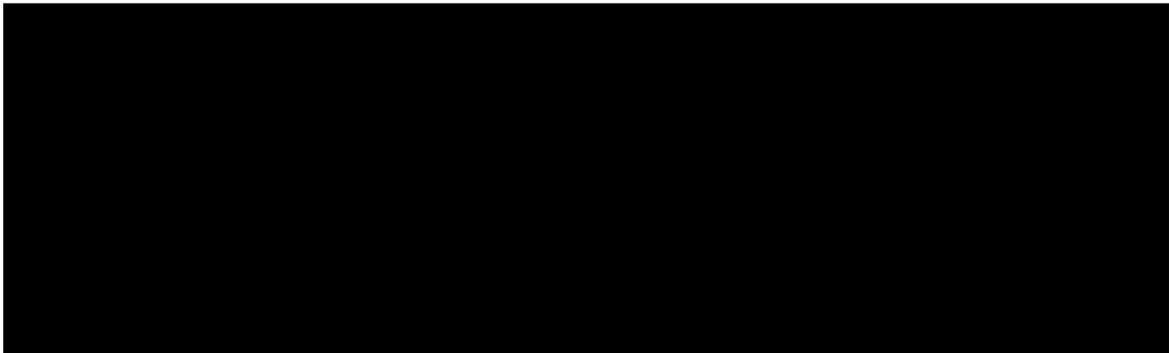
More urgent defense priorities in other parts of the country—the protection of major cities, economic facilities, and communications networks—have undoubtedly prevented Colombia from living up to its security commitments. Nevertheless, Bogota's repeated—if unrealistic—promises demonstrate its desire to placate Caracas. [REDACTED]

Caracas Proposing New Initiatives. Faced with Bogota's persistent refusals to approve Venezuelan requests to conduct cross-border "hot pursuits," Caracas has offered what it views as a less threatening option, describing the proposed strategy as "lukewarm pursuit." Under this concept, security forces from either country would be allowed to cross the other's frontier to search for and attack guerrillas, but the forces would be under the command of an officer from the entered national territory. Although Colombia supports coordinated military operations in the region, it remains adamantly opposed to any violations of its border and is unlikely to approve the Venezuelan proposal. [REDACTED]

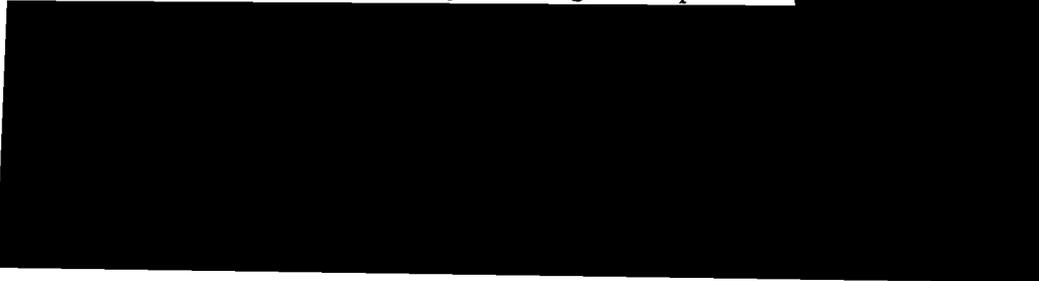
Venezuela has also offered to mediate peace talks between the Colombian government and the guerrillas, according to the press. Bogota had until recently declined these overtures outright, but, after his meeting with Caldera in August, Samper announced that Caracas's involvement in negotiations with the rebels was now a possibility. [REDACTED]

Venezuelan Military Remains Skeptical



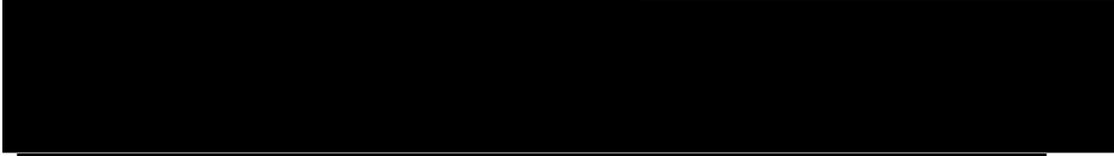


The Venezuelan military's dissatisfaction with its neighbor's inability to guarantee security in the region has driven it to take unilateral action. In April, the high command activated a second joint border command, Theater of Operations-2, in the northwestern frontier state of Tachira. [REDACTED] the Army also recently began to provide some border commanders with additional funding for collecting intelligence on guerrilla activities. Senior officers have even considered a more provocative method of dealing with the guerrilla problem. [REDACTED]



Venezuelan Military Pressing for More Social, Defense Spending

The Venezuelan military firmly believes that resolution of the border problem will require significant investment by the national government, according to [REDACTED] press reports. [REDACTED]



[REDACTED] Earlier this year, there was considerable political support for increasing the defense budget to enhance frontier security. Other, more pressing fiscal priorities have made it difficult for the government to follow through, however, and political backing appears to have diminished. [REDACTED]

The high command has echoed its resource needs to US military representatives whenever possible. [REDACTED] senior officers have emphasized the guerrillas' involvement in regional narcotics trafficking, probably hoping for counterdrug assistance that could also be used against the rebels. [REDACTED]

Limited Resources Will Make Progress Difficult

Venezuela's economic difficulties are undoubtedly hampering its efforts to develop and defend the frontier. The government has launched some meager attempts to counter insurgent influence by initiating development projects in the area, but has made little headway. Programs designed to establish agricultural communities in the region by providing land to peasants have been largely unsuccessful, with the recipients usually only holding on to the land long enough to sell it to Colombians at a profit. [REDACTED]

Meanwhile, continuing rebel violence in and around Colombia's major economic and population centers is undermining Bogota's efforts to dedicate more resources to the sparsely settled border region. According to [REDACTED] press reports, insurgents launched two nationwide offensives in 1996, causing millions of dollars of commercial damage and inflicting humiliating defeats on government forces. There have been several clashes between the military and rebels this year, as well as guerrilla terrorism and sabotage in Colombia's larger cities and along its main oil pipelines. Faced with these threats, it has been extremely difficult for Bogota to permanently deploy additional security forces along the frontier. [REDACTED]

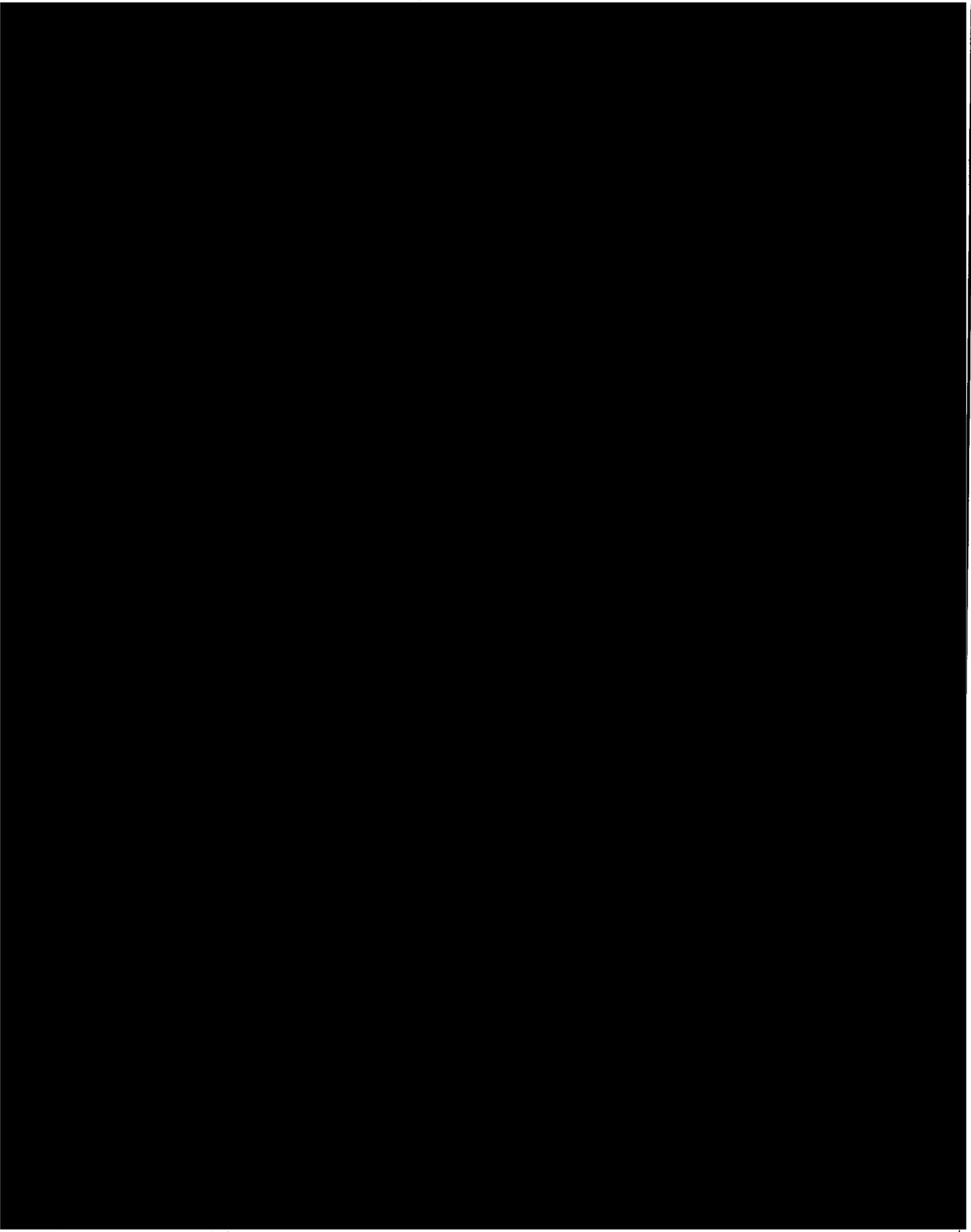
With relatively few resources available to effectively disrupt insurgent activities along either side of the porous 2,200 kilometer border, neither country is likely to see an end to the region's problems for several years—in the absence of a negotiated end to Colombia's insurgency. As long as these constraints remain in effect, the leftist rebels will have relatively free reign along the Colombian-Venezuelan border and remain an irritant to Caracas. Although neither country is apt to let the guerrillas

permanently damage bilateral relations, their continuing raids across the frontier will keep tensions simmering. [REDACTED]

Implications for US Interests

Guerrilla crime and terrorism along the border pose several problems for the United States. Although, the insurgents are unlikely to intentionally target the few US facilities in the region, US personnel could become incidental casualties of guerrilla attacks or be abducted by the rebels for ransom.³ The diplomatic spats between Colombia and Venezuela over border incidents may undermine Washington's efforts to promote regional cooperation and could hinder US-sponsored counterdrug programs and joint security initiatives in the area:

- An ill-timed guerrilla incursion, if coupled with a territorial flare-up in the Gulf of Venezuela or some other bilateral incident, could lead to a serious breakdown in cooperation and communication between Bogota and Caracas—as occurred in 1987—and force the US to assume a greater role in the border problem.
- Meanwhile, Venezuela, and possibly Colombia, will press Washington to become more involved in the border situation—ostensibly to interdict the narcotics flow—by providing military equipment and technical support that could be used against the insurgents. The issue is sure to be on Caracas's agenda during President Clinton's visit in October. [REDACTED]



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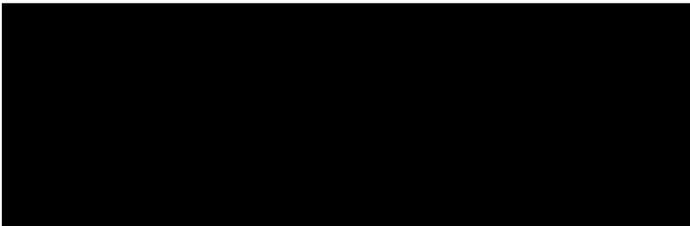
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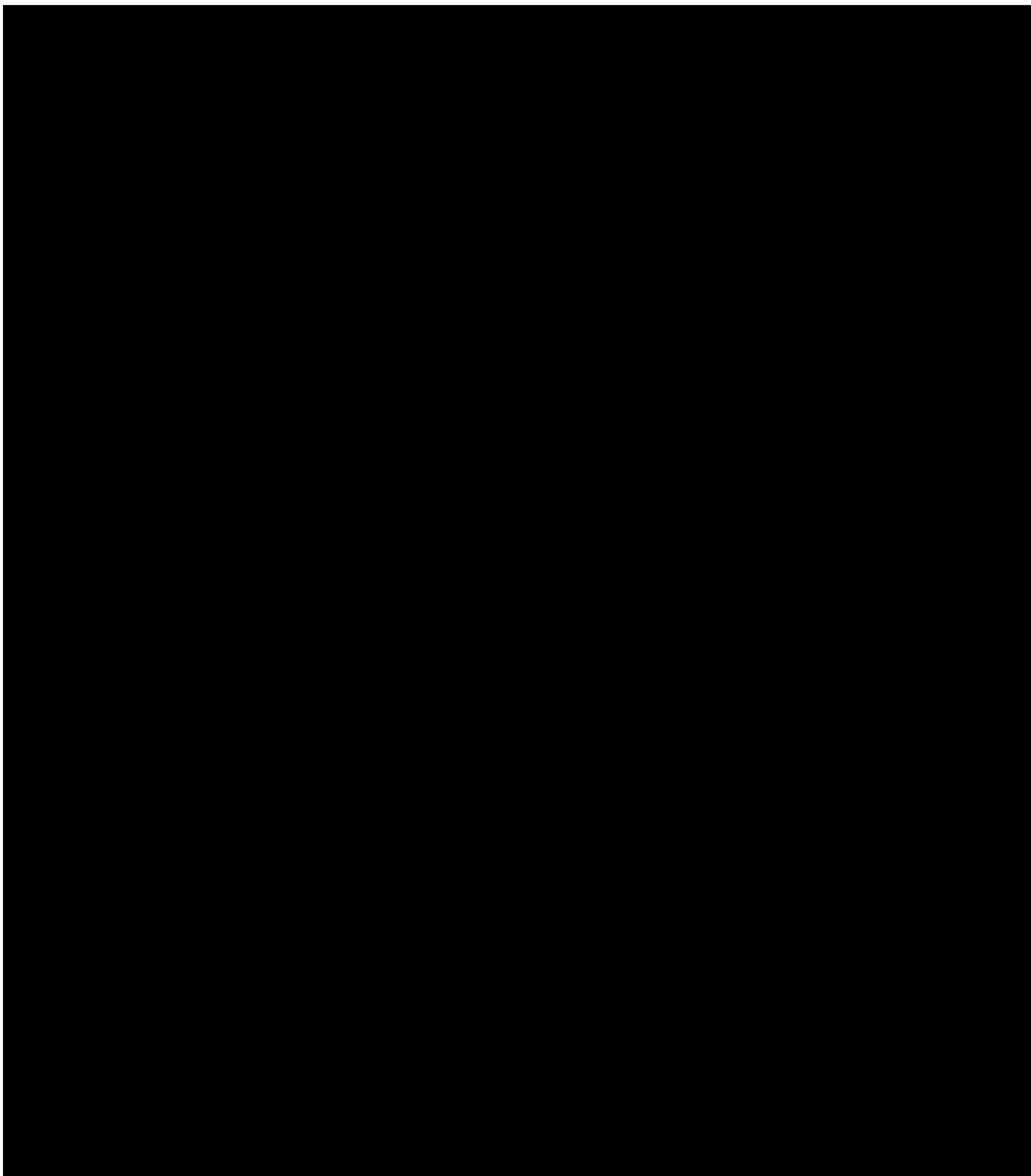
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