

Central America, the forgotten frontier

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NEW YORK U.S. foreign policy after 9/11 has dramatically shifted its focus toward the Middle East, leaving Central and South America in the cold. Within the past several months, there have been several alarming developments in Central America that suggest the opening of a new front in the struggle against global terrorism. And while the Bush administration has not paid sufficient attention to these issues, recent events offer some hope of an important shift. On his way to the Defense Ministerial Conference in Quito, Ecuador, last week, Donald Rumsfeld held talks with the presidents of Nicaragua, Panama and El Salvador to promote regional cooperation to combat all "the enemies of civil order in the world."

Central America is plagued by ineffective border security, weak infrastructure, half-hearted efforts at regional cooperation, widespread poverty and rising crime rates. For many years, the porous borders of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and Honduras have turned the region into a major transit zone of narcotics and human trafficking between South America and the United States. And now, Al Qaeda may be recognizing opportunities there.

During the summer, Adnan Shukrijumah, a Saudi Qaeda operative also known as the "next Mohammed Atta" and listed as one of the FBI's most wanted terrorists, was spotted in an Internet cafe in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Honduran Security Minister Oscar Alvarez fears Shukrijumah has been involved in plots to disrupt shipping lanes by using explosives to damage the Panama Canal.

In another troubling Mideast connection, Ashref Ahmed Abdallah, an Egyptian national, was arrested by U.S. authorities at Miami International Airport in July for smuggling illegal aliens from the Middle East into the United States. Central America is a staging ground for his operation.

And if international terrorism succeeds in gaining influence in drug circles, its rewards could be staggering. Shortly before 9/11, the U.S. Coast Guard intercepted a Belize fishing vessel carrying 26,400 pounds of cocaine, worth \$600 million.

A sure way to fight the threat of terror from this direction is to address the region's more conventional crime, since both thrive under the same conditions. Foreign criminals of all stripes can easily extend their illegal operations because the region's local law enforcement is ineffective, and at times, corrupt and susceptible to bribery. National governments are ill equipped to manage the enforcement workload.

Prominent Central Americans suggest that the creation of an integrated economic zone would help resolve the drug and crime problems. With free trade, governments are forced to improve border and port security to safeguard commerce. Civil society and multinational corporations would be more likely to collaborate as pressure groups on security reform.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement, signed this May, could be a catalyst for change. Central Americans see the pact as an opportunity to accelerate economic and political reform and to forge a stronger relationship with the United States. But in order to fully reap the benefits of free trade, Cafta members should formulate a coherent policy on port and border security; after all, this is where import and export begins.

Largely because of deficiencies that are typically nourished by impoverished societies, local law enforcement in Central America is an unreliable force to guard the region's borders. The creation of a regional integrated border patrol supported by all government agencies and economic partners of Cafta is an investment that would benefit Central America and the United States in the long run.

Without further attention in this arena by the United States and its Latin American neighbors, Adnan

Shukrijumah and his colleagues will gain unfettered use of this region. In only a matter of time, Central America can be the conduit for more terrorist activities in the North. A divided Central America, with ineffective border controls looms like a potential Afghanistan, a short flight or a day's drive from America's own porous frontier. Let us hope that Rumsfeld's trip signals a new focus on America's southern flank.

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