



A Recurrent Latin American Nightmare:

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This article represents the personal views of its author.

Widespread corruption, organized crime and weak states are conditions that facilitate and provoke the diversion of small arms and ammunition from military and police stockpiles to criminal organizations and illegal armed groups. The situation is particularly serious when these arms and ammunition feed armed conflicts. For instance, several academic works and policy papers provide examples of leaks of small arms from military and other state agencies to armed groups involved in the internal armed conflict in Colombia. These analyses suggest the diversion from Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Brazilian and Venezuelan official stockpiles to armed groups such as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN).¹

In the case of Venezuela this is particularly worrisome. The government recently purchased 100,000 AK-103 7.62 × 39mm caliber assault rifles from Russia to replace the aged FAL rifles purchased from Belgium in the late 1950s and manufactured in the 1970s

by CAVIM (*Compañía Anónima de Industrias Militares*), the state managed arms company.² The contract between CAVIM and the Russian company Rosobornexport also includes the purchase of ammunition and the transfer of machinery and technology to produce assault rifles and 7.62 × 39mm rounds.³

The AK-103 is a newer version of the AK-47, a favored weapon of the FARC, the strongest guerrilla group in Colombia.⁴ Analysts and policy makers argue over the possible Venezuelan threat. One group believes the quantity of assault rifles purchased is exaggerated and non-utilized rifles might be diverted to Colombia. Another group argues the real problem is the possible diversion of surplus old FAL rifles that will result from the incorporation of the new Russian weapons. A third possibility is the diversion of 7.62 × 39mm ammunition to FARC, who is having serious problems getting ammunition for its AK-47 rifles.

The first two arguments are not entirely justified and should not be the main source of concern. The real problem is the potential to fuel the Colombian conflict with the sudden availability of 7.62 × 39mm ammunition diverted from official Venezuelan stockpiles. There are practical solutions that, if implemented by CAVIM, would help prevent the diversion of ammunition to illicit markets.

U.S concerns: 100,000 assault rifles is an exaggerated and destabilizing amount.

The United States argues that the quantity of assault rifles purchased by the government of Venezuela is exaggeratedly high and may cause a regional destabilization.⁵ The 100,000 rifles, however, is not a new figure. According to the Plan of Strategic Consolidation of the Venezuela Armed Forces 1998–2007, formulated in the late 1990s by the Directorate of Armament of the Armed Forces (DARFA), Venezuela should replace its FAL rifles with 100,000 new rifles in a gradual process that would take up to 10 years.⁶

What is surprising is that DARFA recommended the purchase of a 5.56 × 45mm weapon that would become the “assault rifle for the 21st century of the Venezuelan armed forces.” DARFA had already tested several 5.56 × 45 mm candidates for the replacement of the FAL rifles like the Kalashnikov AKM-200 (Russia); Colt M-16A2 (United States); FN FNC (Belgium); Steyr AUG (Austria); FAMAS (France); SIG 550/551 (Switzerland); Vecktor (South Africa); Heckler und Koch G36E (Germany); and Galil (Israel). And since 2001, CAVIM had started producing 5.56 × 45mm ammunition to supply the new rifles.⁷

Then there was a sudden doctrine change in favor of a 7.62 × 39mm rifle. This could be interpreted as a political statement by President Chavez who “bought whatever weapon I want and where I want.”

The 100,000 assault rifles would not far exceed the needs of the Venezuelan military.

¹ Small Arms Survey, 2006, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.222; García-Peña, Daniel, War Peace and Light Weapons in Colombia: A Case Study, Geneva, Geneva Forum, 2006, p.83; Schroeder, Matt, *Small Arms, Terrorism and the OAS Firearms Convention*, Washington D.C., FAS, Occasional Paper N°1, pp. 22, 23 and 24.

² Small Arms Survey 2006, p.87

³ Ibid.p.87

⁴ Ibid, p. 220-227; Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, *Siguiendo el Conflicto: hechos y análisis de la semana.*, N° 6, 2005, p.2; Pézard, Stéphanie, Sustaining the Conflict: Ammunition for Attack, in Pézard, Stéphanie and Anders, Holger, *Targeting Ammunition: A Primer*, Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2006, p.144

⁵ See for example: Lumpkin, Jhon, Rumsfeld attacks Venezuela on AK-47s, The Globe and Mail, March 24, 2005, http://www.mre.gov.br/portugues/noticiario/internacional/selecao_detalhe.asp?ID_RESENHA=119581&Imprime=on and BBC News, US Concern over Venezuela Rifles, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4377481.stm>

⁶ “El fusil de asalto del siglo XXI”, La DARFA en la actualidad, <http://www.fav-club.com/articulos/darfa4.htm>; Centro de Estudios Unión para Nueva Mayoría, Balance Militar de América del Sur, País: Venezuela, adquisición de material bélico, 2005, p.2; Fundación Ideas para la Paz, *Siguiendo el Conflicto: hechos y análisis de la semana*, N° 6, 2005, p.2.

⁷ “El fusil de asalto del siglo XXI”, La DARFA en la actualidad; Fundación Ideas para la Paz, p.2.

Its armed services, including the militarized police — National Guard — which is considered a fourth armed force, is 91,000 troops strong without the first line of reserves (estimated at 8,000 troops).⁸ There would be few guns left to be diverted to the FARC.

The old FAL may get diverted to armed groups in Colombia

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Venezuela purchased 50,000 FAL 7.62 × 51mm assault rifles from FN Herstal (Belgium). Approximately 10,000 FAL rifles were assembled in the 1970s by CAVIM.⁹ These 60,000 rifles will become surplus after the purchase of the Kalashnikovs. According to DARFA, 50 percent of the surplus will be kept for the reserves with the rest to be used for spare parts.¹⁰ This surplus may in fact be diverted to insurgent groups in Colombia, particularly the FARC. As a matter of fact, military, law enforcement and intelligence sources in Colombia have reported the diversion of FAL rifles belonging to Venezuelan armed and security forces since the mid 1990s.¹¹

However, it would be a strategic mistake for the FARC to incorporate FAL 7.62 × 51mm caliber rifles into its stockpile.¹² There is a steady shift in the region from 7.62 × 51mm to 5.56 × 45mm caliber weapons. For example, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru use 5.56mm weapons. Brazil is also changing its caliber. Relying on FAL rifles would imply a shortage of ammunition in the near future. If, on the other hand, the FARC keeps the Kalashnikovs as its main assault weapon, an ammunition factory is located next door...in

Venezuela. This fact leads to the third considered risk of the recent arms deals between Venezuela and Russia: the diversion of ammunition.

New wine in old bottles: the risk of feeding FARC rifles with ammunition produced in Venezuela.

The FARC is experiencing problems procuring ammunition for its AK-47 rifles with the resolution to Central American conflicts and the end of the paramilitary's control of the Gulf of Urabá (the main sea corridor used for arms and ammunition trafficking). This caliber is scarce in South America since the militaries in the region do not use this kind of ammunition.¹³ The only exception is Venezuela which will soon begin massive production of the ammunition desperately needed by the FARC. There is a clear and present threat of corruption and the diversion of Venezuelan ammunition to the FARC and also to paramilitary groups.

Unlike weapons, small arms ammunition rounds are not marked with serial numbers. Though it is possible to determine the manufacturer and, sometimes, the year of production, it is virtually impossible to trace ammunition to its first purchaser or receiver.

This problem is not unsolvable. For example, Colombia and Brazil adopted measures to engrave lot numbers in the ammunition produced for the military and the security forces to facilitate investigations concerning the diversion of ammunition from state stockpiles. The alphanumeric characters

are durable, easily visible and readable, and remain intact even after the round is fired. Lot numbers on the ammunition are unique to the production run for the order and transferred only to the client who ordered the ammunition. Each lot number can be linked to a specific transfer and to the state who ordered the lot.¹⁴ This practice is further eased when, as in Venezuela, there is a single national producer and supplier for the armed forces.

Ammunition marking is not the panacea for the prevention of diversion and theft from official stockpiles. However, lot marking is a step forward to identify the specific source of diversion and end the vicious circles of impunity that favours corrupt practices or enable security breaches. Because it facilitates more accurate tracing, lot marking is a powerful tool in terms of international cooperation against illicit arms trafficking and also in terms of adequate control and administration of military and police stockpiles. The adoption of ammunition marking measures would certainly benefit Venezuela in terms of its international image and for the region as a whole in terms of security and stability. **FAS**

⁸ Centro de Estudios Unión para la Nueva Mayoría, *Balance militar de América del Sur / - 1ª. ed. - Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios Unión para la Nueva Mayoría, 2004*. pp. 112 and 324 and *The Military Balance 2005-2006* (for the reserves figure)

⁹ Altuve Febres, Fernán, *La Historia del FAL de la Fabrique Nationale, Seguridad al Día.com* and Klare, Michael and Anderson, David, *A Scourge of Guns: The Diffusion of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Latin America*, Washington D.C., Federation of American Scientists, 1996, pp.22 and 127 and República Argentina, Ministerio de Defensa, Registro Nacional de Armas, *Fabricas de Explosivos, Armas y Municiones en América Latina: una visión actual sobre los principales establecimientos estatales de producción para la Defensa*. <http://www.renar.gov.ar/cursos/expertos/notaa/fabricas.asp>

¹⁰ La Darfa en la Actualidad

¹¹ García-Peña, Daniel, op.cit., p.83; Schroeder, op. cit., pp. 22, 23 and 24

¹² Dreyfus, Pablo, "Small Arms: a lethal fashion", IANSA Newsletter, Latin America, 2003, <http://www.iser.org.br/publique/media/LETHAL%20FASHION.pdf>

¹³ Pézard, op.cit. p. 144 and Small Arms Survey 2006, pp. 220-227

¹⁴ Anders, Holger, "Refutando mitos sobre la imposibilidad de marcaje y rastreo de munición", *En la mira*, N° 0, 2006 http://www.comunidadessegura.org/?q=pt/taxonomy_menu/15/156; Aguirre, Catherine and Restrepo, Jorge, *Marcaje y Rastreo de Munición: Indumil en Colombia*, *En la Mira*, N°0, 2006, http://www.comunidadessegura.org/?q=pt/taxonomy_menu/15/156; Anders, Holger, "Following the Lethal Trail: Identifying Sources of Illicit Ammunition", in Holger and Pézard, op.cit. pp.207-228 and Dreyfus, Pablo, "Crime and Ammunition Procurement: the case of Brazil", in Holger and P