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## *Tension spikes between Colombia and Venezuela*

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The relationship between the Venezuelan and Colombian governments took new confrontational steps this week. Colombian President Iván Duque made the first accusation after a sector of the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] announced a return to arms. Duque asserted that the group, which he called “a gang of narco-terrorists,” has “the shelter and support of [Venezuelan President] Nicolás Maduro’s dictatorship.”

The Venezuelan government responded with a communiqué rejecting the accusations. “It is bizarre that Iván Duque, with absolute audacity, intends to shift to third countries and third parties his sole responsibility for the planned dismantling of the peace process and for blocking compliance with the commitments assumed and signed onto by the State of Colombia.”

This is not the first time that the Colombian government has accused Venezuela of letting insurgent forces operate in its territory, particularly the National Liberation Army (ELN). In addition to this, it had been alleged that FARC leaders Iván Márquez and Jesús Santrich — present in the video that was released to announce the return to arms — were in the neighboring country [Venezuela].

Venezuela’s Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López denounced Iván Duque’s accusations as an attempt at warmongering: “The political problem facing Colombia cannot and must not lead to a military confrontation. We urge you not to seek excuses or pretexts with false positives to try to violate our territorial sovereignty, either by conventional forces or by irregular groups.”

In that context, on Aug. 31, Venezuelan Minister of Communication Jorge Rodríguez denounced the operation of three military training camps in Colombia where terrorist actions against the Venezuelan government and society are being prepared.

Rodríguez affirmed that one is located in the city of Maicao, 2.5 kilometers from the border, another in Rio Acha and the third in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. He explained that the first two are training for the use of explosives, and the third is for military training. Rodríguez charged that “they are training more than 200 people there to carry out paramilitary actions, terrorism, selective assassinations, and aggression on the border.”

“Iván Duque, what are you going to do?” the Minister of Communication declared when exhorting the president of Colombia to dismantle the training centers, which makes him an accomplice to these crimes, he said.

Rodríguez explained that the Venezuelan authorities were able to confirm the existence of the facilities after disrupting three actions involving explosives. The first two were to

occur on Aug. 17, when [terrorists] had planned to detonate explosives loaded with C4 in front of the headquarters of the Special Action Forces and a building in the 23 de Enero neighborhood, a Chavista stronghold. The third action had been scheduled for the end of August, with the detonation of an explosive in the Palace of Justice of Caracas, located in one of the busiest areas of the city center.

“All of this is part of a plan that would culminate in the next two weeks. They intended to perpetrate actions of greater and greater magnitude against the people of Venezuela and the president of the Republic,” Jorge Rodríguez charged.

The intersecting accusations marked a return to the highest level of tension since Feb. 23 when the Colombian government opened two international bridges to try to bring trucks and demonstrators by force into Venezuelan territory. The following night there was an attack by a group of 60 paramilitaries on a Bolivarian National Guard post a few kilometers from the international bridge.

This is not the first time that the Venezuelan government has accused Colombia of playing an active part in the attempts to overthrow Nicolás Maduro. In August 2018, Venezuela pointed out that the perpetrators of the president’s assassination attempt had entered a camp in Colombia, more precisely in Chinácota. From there they had also brought the drones that were carrying the bombs used to carry out the action.

The escalation occurs at a time of crisis for the Venezuelan opposition, which has lost its ability to mobilize and to raise the expectations of its supporters. Its initiatives have been reduced in recent weeks, as well as its national and international media impact.

The counterpart on the international scene could be seen in two major news items. The first one was similar to what Cuba, Iran, Syria and North Korea are facing. The second one was political, with recognition of the existence of direct dialogue between the U.S. and Venezuelan governments.

The latter occurred after Maduro decided to withdraw from talks with the opposition in Barbados, due to the latest unilateral actions of the United States. The confirmation of back-channels dialogue between the two governments showed that the resolution of the

conflict depends on an agreement with the U.S. government, the real decision-maker, financier and coordinator of the attempt to overthrow Maduro.

The possibility of such an agreement still appears to be far away in a deadlocked game. The U.S. claims that it will be unwilling to negotiate unless the Venezuelan president leaves office prior to an election. As for Maduro's government, one of their demands is the withdrawal of the blockade against the country.

How will the new escalation between Venezuela and Colombia play out in this context? The Venezuelan government has denounced the labyrinthine war plans being prepared from the neighboring country on several occasions. Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez announced that she will present evidence to the United Nations on “the protection and shelter provided by Iván Duque to terrorists and armed groups in Colombia which are authorized by him to attack our constitutional order.”