Mercosur to investigate arms trafficking to Brazil (BRAZIL)

The countries of the Mercosur trade bloc agreed on Tuesday to create a joint commission to investigate the alleged trafficking of arms from Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay to Brazil, that country's vice president and defense minister, Jose Alencar, announced.

(13.02.2006)

The decision to investigate complaints aired in the Brazilian Congress about weapons trafficking was made during a meeting held in the Brazilian capital.

Taking part in the talks were Alencar and diplomats from Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, as well as Brazilian lawmakers and security officials.

"It was a very worthwhile meeting, with a good atmosphere, and it was decided to make a joint effort to inhibit the smuggling," Alencar told journalists.

Last year, the Brazilian Congress created a special commission to look into arms smuggling and it concluded that military officers from the three other Mercosur nations were implicated in the illegal practice.

Lawmaker Moroni Torgan, a member of the commission, said that the best evidence of smuggling would be to seize in Brazil weapons with the stamps of the neighboring nations' armies.

However, he added that "now it's necessary to find the perpetrators" of the crime, a matter that will be placed in the hands of the multilateral commission, which will work in coordination with the Brazilian Foreign Ministry.

According to Torgan, a former head of the Brazilian Federal Police, the bands of weapons traffickers have been using children and youths to bring the arms into Brazil. "There are children who have crossed the border carrying Argentine-made grenades," he said.

The lawmaker also said that "hundreds and hundreds" of weapons have entered Brazil illegally, but he was unable to provide an exact number.

Torgan added that "100 people (are killed) every day" by firearms in Brazil and that many of the weapons come from neighboring countries.

Members of the Brazilian legislative panel were told by the witnesses that heavy weapons, such as rocket launchers and landmines, were among the arms sold to criminals.

The weapons were diverted from arms factories in the neighboring countries, according to the witnesses, and sold to organized crime groups such as the Red Command and the First Capital Command.

The Red Command, one of Brazil's largest criminal organizations, controls the illegal drug trade in Rio de Janeiro state, especially in Rio's "favelas," or shantytowns. It has carried out attacks on buses, stores, hotels, schools and shopping centers with firearms and bombs in recent years.

The First Capital Command is considered Sao Paulo's largest criminal group and Brazil's most dangerous drug trafficking organization.


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