

## **A Question of High Caliber: Venezuela and the Manufacture of 7.62x39mm Ammunition**

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As is of public knowledge, in May of last year the Department of Defense of Venezuela signed a contract with the Russian company Rosoboronexport to purchase 100,000 AK-103 assault weapons. 52,000 rifles out of the 100,000 have already been delivered. The contract also included the purchase of machinery and technology to manufacture ammunition for new rifles (1) in Venezuela.

According to the plan created in the 90's by the Armament Control of the National Armed Forces of Venezuela (Darfa), the goal of this purchase is to substitute around 60,000 rifles FAL caliber 7.62x51mm bought in Belgium in the 50's & 60's and those assembled by the state-owned Venezuelan Military Industries Company (Cavim) in the 1970's (2).

In line with the strategic guidelines of Darfa, 50 per cent of the old FAL weapons were would be kept for the armed forces reserves and 50 per cent would be stockpiled for spare parts (3).

A surprising event, however, is that while the Darfa doctrine of a few years ago recommended the purchase of arms caliber 5.56x45mm, Hugo Chavez's Office decided, instead, to purchase the AK-103 assault weapons which are a more modern version of the AK-47 caliber 7.62x39mm (4).

The purchase of this new rifle has raised concern in the government of United States of America and in Colombia, due to the possible diversion of part of the AK-103 supply and surplus FAL weapons to armed groups of the Colombian conflict (5) .

The diversion of small arms from the armed forces and security sector is a reality in Latin America. Furthermore, in the last 10 years the police and military of Colombia have apprehended military type weapons and ammunition with identification marks that belong to the armed forces and security forces of bordering countries, or, as having been manufactured in bordering countries (6).

These weapons can be traced back to the source of diversion because each weapon is marked with a serial number and brand symbols (such as manufacturing company's name, symbol, country of origin etc.). This would enable sanctioning of those responsible for the diversions and the interruption of illegal practices. Intervention will obviously depend on the cooperation among the governments of Colombia and bordering countries.

According to analysts, an even more worrisome topic is the possible diversion of new 7.62x39mm ammunition which shall be bought by Venezuela and will also be manufactured by Cavim (7) .

Unlike small arms, ammunition cartridges are not marked with serial numbers which would allow for easy tracing to the first buyer or consignee. On the other hand, the Farc already face a shortage of ammunition supplies for their AK-47s, the weapons used by their combatants (8). 7.62x39mm ammunition is scarce in Latin America.

On the other hand, the paramilitary forces, which are opposed to the Farc control the Gulf of Uraba, which is the main maritime access route for AK-47 arms trade that originates in the (ever shrinking) surplus weapons generated by the end of the armed conflicts in Central America. On the other hand, neither the armed forces of Colombia (which uses ammunition caliber 5.56x45mm) nor the majority of the armed forces of the region, currently use 7.62x39mm ammunition as a standard (9).

The exception to the rule is Venezuela, as Cavim will start mass production of this type of cartridge. The diversion of ammunition from Venezuela to the armed conflict in Colombia constitutes a possible threat, if we consider the precedent diversion of small arms and ammunition in the region and the economic resources available to the Farc and other Colombian armed groups as a result of their involvement in cocaine production and trafficking.

This dilemma, however, does have a possible solution: to prevent and block the diversion of weapons and ammunition. As explained in previous issues of En La Mira, Colombia and Brazil (two neighbors of Venezuela and important manufacturers of ammunition), have adopted measures to mark batch numbers of ammunition cartridges manufactured for the armed forces and security forces.

The objective of marking cartridges is to identify and suppress diversion patterns. The identification markings made by the company Indumil (Industria Militar) in Colombia and CBC (Companhia Brasileira de Cartuchos), in Brazil, are numeric or alphanumeric, permanent, remain intact after use and are easy to identify and to read. The batch numbers are unique and specific for each purchase order. The marked batches are sold only to the client who made the purchase order, generally a military unit or, in Brazil's case, also police forces.

In this manner the consignee of the munition can be traced and identified following the batch number on record and the manufacturer's sale inventory (10).

The identification and marking of batch numbers does not in itself solve the problem of diversion of ammunition. Nonetheless, this type of marking makes it possible to trace ammunition and eventually identify and sanction the group responsible for diversion. It is, therefore, a powerful investigative tool for law enforcement nationally and internationally.

The adoption of this type of marking system by Cavim will not only contribute to improve the control of the ammunition manufactured for the Venezuelan armed forces of Venezuela, but will also be interpreted by border countries as a gesture of good will of Venezuela for a better prevention and reduction of the traffic in firearms in Latin America.

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