

2003

TERROR REIGNS SUPREME AND THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE IS SEEMINGLY ENDLESS IN THE TRIPLE FRONTIER

Gregory Shapiro

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/journal_of_human_rights



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gregory (2003) "TERROR REIGNS SUPREME AND THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE IS SEEMINGLY ENDLESS IN THE TRIPLE FRONTIER," *NYLS Journal of Human Rights*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/journal_of_human_rights/vol19/iss3/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@NYLS. It has been accepted for inclusion in NYLS Journal of Human Rights by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@NYLS.

TERROR REIGNS SUPREME AND THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE IS SEEMINGLY ENDLESS IN THE TRIPLE FRONTIER

I. INTRODUCTION

Brazil as a nation has suffered the brunt of numerous criminal activities which can be seen throughout the countryside and in the faces of its people. Corruption, terrorism, poverty, and drug trafficking dominate the area and perpetuate ongoing violence. With the development of Itaipu Binacional, one of the world's largest hydroelectric power plants, a reservoir was created which has served as a medium for transportation and a bridge between the cities that make up the "Triple Frontier". The area is the center of numerous illicit activities and links to terrorism, but opposition to such behavior exists and agreements have been enacted to strengthen the forces at work to eradicate problems in the area.

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITAIPU BINACIONAL-THE WORLD'S LARGEST HYDROELECTRIC POWER PLANT

Itaipu Binacional is a public enterprise, the development of which was a joint effort by Brazil and Paraguay. Completed in 1983 at a cost of \$10 billion, it is among the world's largest hydroelectric power plants.¹ Located on the Parana River, the plant's reservoir created by the damming serves as the territorial division between Brazil and Paraguay. The reservoir is also very close to the border of Argentina.² In 1995, based on a survey by the American Society of Civil Engineers, Itaipu was named one of the seven wonders of the modern world.³

The plant generates record-breaking figures of energy production on a yearly basis and is responsible for 89% of the electric energy consumed in Paraguay and 25% of the Brazilian market.⁴

¹ International Research Institute For Climate Prediction, *Itaipu Binacional*, available at <http://iri.columbia.edu/application/sector/water/BRAZIL/itaipu.html>.

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Agreement Strengthens Law Enforcement for Itaipu*, Oct. 28, 2002, available at http://www.undcp.org/brazil/itaipu_agreement.html.

³ *Itaipu Binacional*, *supra* note 1.

⁴ *Id.*

Today it serves as a major tourist attraction, and since its opening to the public in the 1970s, over 11 million visitors have gazed at its impressive stature.⁵ For all of the plant's beneficial aspects, this region and its surrounding cities also attract international criminal activity.⁶ According to the Brazilian Federal Police Department (DPF) in Foz do Iguacu, the city where the plant is located, the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and other commodities, smuggling, and money laundering are just some of the criminal activities that take place.⁷

III. THE CITIES THAT FORM THE "TRIPLE FRONTIER": A CENTER FOR ILLICIT ACTIVITY

The aforementioned criminal activities in Foz do Iguacu and around the plant are only part, however, of a larger network of criminal activities that dominate the surrounding landscape. The area between the cities of Foz do Iguacu, Brazil, Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, and Iguazu, Argentina, is commonly referred to as the "Triple Frontier".⁸ While this area attracts millions of tourists, it unfortunately also attracts those with intentions far less altruistic.

The "Triple Frontier" harbors and serves as a hub for numerous criminal activities and their perpetrators. Some of these activities include terrorism, the trafficking of people and goods, drugs, weapons, forgeries, money laundering, prostitution, and illegal gambling.⁹ The exorbitant rate of criminal activity is partly due to corruption, which is rampant among the senior ranks of local and federal government in the area.¹⁰ Such corruption, coupled with the ease of crossing borders of the neighboring countries, makes the area attractive for those looking to elude legal scrutiny.¹¹

It is thus not surprising that these cities were areas where the first settlements of immigrants from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq were established. It is also where the Palestinian terrorists

⁵ *Agreement Strengthens Law Enforcement for Itaipu.*, *supra* note 2.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Blanca Madani, *Hezbollah's Global Finance Network: The Triple Frontier*, MIDDLE EAST INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN (Vol. 4 No. 1), January 2002, available at <http://www.meib.org/issues/0201.htm>.

⁹ Security and Intelligence Advising, *International Terrorism: The Importance of the Tri-Border Area* (Feb. 2002), available at <http://www.siacorp.com/3border%20paper-abstract.pdf> [hereinafter *International Terrorism*].

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

organized and emerged about fifty years ago.¹² The presence of members of international terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Al Gamma Al Islamiya, Al Fatah, Muslim Egyptian Brothers, Al Qaida, and ETA have also been detected.¹³ The last twenty years have also seen an influx of immigrants from China, Taiwan, and Korea and with this influx, the presence of the international criminal organization called the Chinese Triads.¹⁴ Conflicts have currently arisen between the Arab terrorist groups and the Triads for the control of the criminal resources in the region.¹⁵

The Arab population in the region is believed to number around 20,000 or about one in every 30 residents.¹⁶ Most of the population resides in Ciudad del Este, whose inhabitants have dramatically increased since the construction of the hydroelectric dam in 1967. Hezbollah's presence in the zone was first brought to the attention of investigators when it was concluded that they were involved in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy and again in the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Community Center in Buenos Aires. The pro-Iranian Hezbollah cells implicated were headquartered in Ciudad del Este.¹⁷ Finally, in October 1998, a suspected member of Hezbollah was arrested in front of the US Embassy in Paraguay while analyzing the facility, possibly in advance of a terrorist attack.¹⁸

The situation in the area remains dismal due to certain "benefits" given by the countries that form the infamous "Triple Frontier".¹⁹ Brazil plays a focal position in terrorist planning because citizenship there is readily obtainable and law enforcement officials refuse to extradite their citizens.²⁰ Paraguay also serves a key role in terrorist activities by allowing for their financing under an umbrella of illegal businesses, established through the bribery of key officials.²¹ A recent investigation by the National Direction of Civil

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Madani, *supra* note 8.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Terrorist Networks Being Broken in South America*, June 13, 2002, available at http://www.informationwar.org/terrorist_network/in_s-america.htm.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

Aeronautics determined that approximately sixteen foreigners enter Paraguay illegally on a weekly basis through the airport at Ciudad del Este, paying around \$5,000, US currency, in advance. Unfortunately, many more are believed to enter by land.²² Finally, due to Argentina's lack of effective border control and high levels of corruption among their ranking officers, terrorists enter and exit the country with very few problems.²³

As a consequence of the presence of this significant terror element, the United States has been forced to rethink its relationship with many of this region's countries, especially after the September 11th attacks. A focus has been placed on the Latin American and South American countries whose security agencies are ill-equipped to deal with the problem. The Bush Administration, in fact, has asked the governments of Brazil and Paraguay to investigate the movements of Palestinian and other Arab nationals on their border and especially in the "Triple Frontier" area.²⁴

The United States government has also declared a zero tolerance policy regarding international financing of organizations listed as terrorist groups by the United States State Department.²⁵ While the exact number of illegal remittances from South America is not known, investigations place the number in the tens of millions of dollars.²⁶ Although security in the "Triple Frontier" has increased and tended to quell some of the widespread abuses in the area, terrorists are simply fleeing to other cities in Brazil. Without more cooperation and an increase in funding to secure these surrounding areas, this "hide and seek" cycle will remain endless.²⁷

With the end of the Cold War, a priority had been placed on trade expansion, which, unfortunately, has come at the expense of ensuring security.²⁸ Today, willingness to continue trade relations, and eventually expand these relations, is largely dependent on how much this region cooperates with Washington on security-related matters.²⁹ Colin Powell reiterated this point by emphasizing that future relations with the area will correlate with the level of respon-

²² Madani, *supra* note 8.

²³ *International Terrorism*, *supra* note 9.

²⁴ Madani, *supra* note 8.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

siveness of foreign governments to US requests for support and assistance.³⁰

Such a request for unbridled cooperation, however, presents a conflict of interest to these countries and their top officials. The Triple Frontier is the largest center of commerce in Brazil, and the Arab community there is frequently described by the press as a “pillar” of economic activity.³¹ Were this community to abandon the region, the impact on the economy could have devastating ramifications. Thus, officials are wary of taking actions that are too intrusive of these people thereby forcing them out of the region.

IV. THE CURRENT SITUATION IN BRAZIL

Clearly the ramifications from this region’s perpetrators and the lack of adequate security are not maintained in a bubble. Instead, they have disastrous effects on the entire region, none more evident than those effects in Brazil. In a telling article, Jennifer Rich of MSNBC chronicled the story of Marcus Perez, an aspiring photojournalist who met an untimely death in Sao Paulo.³² Rich told how it was hard to find anyone in Brazil who hadn’t been personally touched by violence, and highlighted this statement with supporting statistics. In the first nine months of 1999, for example, 9,530 homicides were reported among a state population of about 36 million, averaging 35 killings a day.³³ Every hour, 40 people in the state were robbed, 23 people were mugged and 23 cars were either hijacked or stolen.³⁴

Many of the problems in Brazil, she explained, stemmed from gross disparities in wealth—between those with money and those invariably without. The city’s unemployment rate—close to 20%—and a tremendous increase in gun ownership has created a lower class in Brazil brimming with frustration and violence.³⁵ In 1999, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso unveiled the country’s first comprehensive anti-violence package, which attempted to restruc-

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² Jennifer Rich, *Brazil’s Criminal Tidal Wave*, May 19, 2002, available at www.conjunturacriminal.com.br/artigos/kahn129.htm.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

ture the federal government's efforts to combat organized crime and drug and weapons trafficking.³⁶

The steady influx of drug trafficking into Brazil represents another major problem and accounts for an estimated 60% of homicide-related violence.³⁷ Drug abuse has drained the economy by lowering the national GDP by an estimated 8% a year due to reduced productivity and premature deaths.³⁸ The extensive drug use among the population correlates directly with Brazil's AIDS epidemic. According to the World Health Organization approximately 550,000 persons are infected by the HIV in Brazil³⁹ and approximately 40,000 incarcerated Brazilians are HIV-positive.⁴⁰ Since 1994, United Nations Drug and Crime Prevention projects have been initiated, aiming at educating Brazilians about the link between intravenous drug use and HIV/AIDS.⁴¹

V. THE AGREEMENT TO REGULATE THE ITAIPU'S RESERVOIR AND ITS GOALS

As a response to these largely unregulated atrocities, an agreement was reached between the United Nations Office of Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP), the DPF, and Itaipu Binacional on October 11, 2002. Its goal was to provide funds for the intensive policing of the Itaipu's reservoir starting in 2003. The design of the effort attempts to prevent and stem illegal immigration, the smuggling of guns and munitions, and the trafficking of narcotics and human beings. The agreement also extends to the prevention of the illegal transportation of chemical products used to refine illicit drugs and their chemical precursors.⁴²

According to Joaquim Mesquita, the police chief of DPF in Foz do Iguacu (one of the major cities surrounding the power plant), "there will be more security for Itaipu and a more effective fight

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, *Cause for Hope in Brazil: Educating the Most Vulnerable About Drug Abuse and HIV/AIDS* (June 2002), available at www.undcp.org/odccp/newsletter_2002-06-30_1_page005.html [hereinafter *Cause for Hope in Brazil*].

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, *Drugs and AIDS Prevention Project*, available at http://www.unodc.org/unodc/project_summary_adbra_99_e02.html (last visited May 15, 2003).

⁴⁰ *Cause for Hope in Brazil*, *supra* note 37.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Agreement Strengthens Law Enforcement for Itaipu*, *supra* note 2.

against crime within the reservoir's area and throughout the Parana River, as well."⁴³ Mesquita may very well have reason for hope because part of the agreement included the establishment of a special nucleus for aquatic operations (DPF NEPOM) in Foz do Iguacu.⁴⁴

The DPF NEPOM will coordinate police operations and attempt to repress environmental aggressions within the power plant area. They will guard and be responsible for the entire Parana River. The patrol will span from the Itaipu's dam to the Friendship Bridge, which spans the Parana River and unites Foz de Iguazu with Ciudad del Este on the border between Brazil and Paraguay.⁴⁵ Before any security was implemented, and until September 14, 2002, border controls were basically non-existent on Puente de la Amistad, the location of the Bridge of Friendship. All operations under the agreement will be performed inside Brazilian territory even though the operation borders both Brazil and Paraguay.⁴⁶

Funds from the project *Strengthening of Chemical Precursors Control*, which was developed by the ODCCP Brazil office in partnership with the DPF in 1998, will be used by Itaipu Binacional. These funds will be used to purchase three patrol motor boats, one inflatable boat, and communication equipment designed specifically for intelligence gathering. The DPF already has two aquatic vehicles, given to them by Itaipu Binacional, which will be used to support patrolling operations.⁴⁷

Brazil and its bordering nations, no doubt, face serious problems with consequences that are felt worldwide. But with the steps that are being taken, including the agreement signed on October 11 to regulate Itaipu Binacional's reservoir, as well as others already in place, hope remains that progress will be made. Now that the dire circumstances of Brazil and the surrounding region have become more visible, especially since the September 11th attacks on the United States, interested observers can institute a more concerted, well-planned effort. Hopefully the small steps that are being taken can play a role in the eventual eradication of crime and its sources in the area.

Gregory Shapiro

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ Madani, *supra* note 8.

⁴⁶ *Agreement Strengthens Law Enforcement for Itaipu*, *supra* note 2.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

