

The Attaché's Dilemma

Albert Leftwich

Lieutenant Colonel Ferris has been the defense attaché (DAT) at American Embassy Bonito in the capital of the Caribbean island nation of Belessa for six months. In preparation for this assignment, Colonel Ferris learned about the principal duties of a defense attaché as codified in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961. These include

- Represent the secretary of defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the regional COCOM (Combatant Command) commander, and the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) with their counterparts;
- Serve as the primary in-country facilitator for U.S. national military strategy for promoting U.S. interests and regional stability;
- Observe and report military information; and
- Provide military advice to the U.S. chief of mission (e.g., the ambassador).

During his consultations and briefings in Washington, DC, and Miami, Colonel Ferris was given the following three priorities.

First, the State Department stressed the need to consolidate democratic institutions and respect for human rights in Belessa. Until three years ago, Belessa had been ruled for two decades by military governments that restored law and order, and defeated a Marxist-inspired insurgency but suppressed dissent through the limitations of civil liberties. Although the military governments were generally pro-United States, Washington criticized the generals for accusations of human rights abuses. The United States eventually brokered an agreement between the military and civilian groups to reinstitute

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democracy. Fernando de Noronya, a center-left lawyer, was elected president. Once in office, de Noronya has launched a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate and document—but not prosecute—military human rights abusers.

Secondly, representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the Joint Staff J5 (Strategic Plans) told Colonel Ferris to lobby the government to contribute troops to peacekeeping missions. The OSD and the J5 see this as a “win-win” for both the United States and Belessa. Peacekeeping, they argued, is an appropriate mission for the military in a democratizing state that faces negligible external threat. The United States will help professionalize Belessan forces, and the deployments will enhance Belessa’s international status while keeping the military out of politics. Colonel Ferris should approach the GoB (government of Belessa) to contribute one hundred troops for yearlong tours in the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai to replace U.S. forces.

Finally, the SOUTHCOM J2 (director of intelligence) was most concerned about illicit drug trafficking through the region around Belessa. She instructed Colonel Ferris to negotiate an agreement with the Belessan military for frequent use of their air base and coast guard base by U.S. counternarcotics patrols.

Upon arrival at American Embassy Bonito, Ambassador King, a political appointee, welcomed Colonel Ferris to the Embassy “Country Team.” He instructed Colonel Ferris to keep close watch on the military and to report any involvement by senior officers in criminal activity or plots to overthrow the government. But the ambassador stressed that the Country Team’s priority was to promote U.S.-Belessan economic and political partnership because, in the long run, that’s best for both countries.

During his first six months in Bonita, Colonel Ferris has made progress in most areas. He developed professional relationships with many key military officers that enabled him to report extensively on the state of military and civil-military matters. His most effective relationship has been with Colonel Mora, chief of foreign liaison on the Ministry of Defense staff. Colonel Mora speaks excellent English and has a sophisticated understanding about U.S. national security issues, having attended the U.S. Army Staff College and served as an attaché in the United States.

Concerning the legacy of the military governments in Belessa, Colonel Mora believes that “the past is past” and that he wants to help develop Belessa’s future. He is enthusiastic about the international

peacekeeping mission and the counternarcotics cooperation. The MFO mission would provide operational experience that could not be duplicated in Belessa, and Colonel Mora is concerned about a rise in drug-related criminal activity in Belessa since the return to democratic rule. The civil-military situation is "delicate," he said, because of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's investigation. Although President de Noronya claims that no one will be prosecuted, there is great uncertainty within the armed forces about what will happen once the sordid details are made public. "Mistakes were made, but that was so long ago . . .," he sighs with a shrug.

During the previous six months, the pace of negotiations has been frustratingly slow. The SOUTHCOM J2 has pressed Colonel Ferris to "make this basing thing happen so we can see what's going on in your sector." The OSD country director has called Colonel Ferris every week to see if he is close to "closing the MFO deal." Ambassador King has supported these initiatives in private but cautioned Colonel Ferris not to do anything that could "blow up" and upset the economic cooperation agreement that is close to being concluded.

Colonel Mora has served as interlocutor between Colonel Ferris and Minister of Defense (MoD) Loungo. He tells Ferris that he is pushing the MoD as quickly as is practical. The MoD is an ambitious but "difficult" career politician with no prior military expertise. MoD Loungo wants "successes" that he can use in future political campaigns, but is also cautious about overextending himself politically. Due to Colonel Mora's patient negotiations, the MoD has expressed interest in the MFO peacekeeping mission—if the United States provides additional training and equipment. He also has been open to the idea of allowing the use of military bases but wants to discuss the details with "the American general who is making this request." Colonel Mora suggests that the SOUTHCOM J2 visit to help make the case to MoD Loungo, to stroke the MoD's sense of importance. Colonel Ferris worked out the details with SOUTHCOM, and the visit date was set. OSD has asked the SOUTHCOM J2 to raise the MFO issue as well. Colonel Mora is certain that he will be able to mediate the meeting and obtain the MoD's approval to both the counternarcotics cooperation and the peacekeeping mission. Colonel Ferris agrees that Colonel Mora's liaison skills are indispensable.

Colonel Ferris lives in an eighth-floor condo overlooking the Caribbean. Returning home from the embassy one night, Ferris picks up the mail from the doorman. The doorman also hands him an envelope for a Belessan national news magazine, *Veja*, that was just

delivered. Once in his condo, Ferris finds that inside the envelope is a manila folder with a typed note—

This will be of interest to the good people of the United States of America—I trust you—please help us secure justice.

Inside the manila folder is a report of an interrogation session dated fifteen years ago. Colonel (then Lieutenant) Mora's name and signature is on the report as the interrogation section supervisor. Colonel Ferris was studying the document to determine its authenticity when his cell phone rang. It was Colonel Mora.

“Colonel Ferris, I know that you have just returned home and received an envelope. Please don't ask me how I know, but I know. I had to take precautions because I knew Santana would try something like this.” Colonel Mora's voice was tense. “Colonel, these documents are all falsified. They are a fabrication by powerful individuals who want to derail our counternarcotics cooperation. Word has leaked. Unfortunately, there are elements within the armed forces who are working for the drug traffickers and will do anything to prevent Americans from getting involved. You must believe me. You must trust me. Colonel, if you want this meeting to succeed next week, I need to get those documents from you. Please bring them to my office at the Ministry of Defense first thing tomorrow morning. Then we can discuss our strategy for the meeting next week.”

What should Colonel Ferris do?

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