

War of words escalating over Peru's spy accusations

BY JOHN ENDERS

Special to The Miami Herald

The arrest of a Peruvian Air Force noncommissioned officer accused of feeding military secrets to his Chilean handlers has pushed long-simmering relations between the two South American neighbors to a new low.

On Tuesday, the sparring between the countries' leaders intensified with Chile's President Michelle Bachelet calling her Peruvian counterpart's recent comments about the spying scandal "offensive and haughty."

Peruvian authorities revealed last week that they had detained Victor Ariza Mendoza after uncovering evidence of military espionage on his laptop and in e-mails and money transfers. Ariza, 45, had reportedly worked at the Peruvian Embassy in Santiago. Peru says it intends to try him for treason.

On Monday, Peru's President Alan Garcia denounced Chile for offending Peru's sovereignty and called the spying "repulsive." Garcia, however, said he did not believe that Bachelet was aware of the alleged spying.

Bachelet responded Tuesday, saying that Garcia's comments were not helpful.

"The expressions we heard yesterday, which I would call offensive and haughty, do not contribute to the integration and cooperation that neighbors should enjoy," she said.

The spying allegation could be attributed to an escalating arms race in the region, experts say.

"Spying does not come as a shock, but this unfortunate incident is not going to do much to allay the suspicions between Peru and Chile," said Michael Shifter, vice president for policy at the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, D.C., and a Peru expert. "Rising arms purchases in the region is a reflection of a number of problematic and tense situations in South America."

Over the past week, Peru has called home its ambassador to Santiago for consultations, and Garcia rushed home over the weekend from a Pacific summit in Singapore hours before he was to have breakfast with Bachelet.

Despite the denials in Santiago, a judge in Lima on Friday ratified charges against Ariza and an unidentified member of the air force for allegedly revealing national secrets, espionage and

money laundering, according to news reports.

The judge also issued an arrest warrant for two members of the Chilean military allegedly involved in the affair, according to the reports.

On Tuesday, Peru said six others, in addition to Ariza, may have been involved.

Though they have been peaceful neighbors for most of the past century, Peru and Chile have a long history of conflict and distrust. During military regimes in both countries in the 1970s, the rightist dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Santiago and the leftist regime of Gen. Juan Velasco in Lima, there was even talk of invasion.

But it was the bloody and tragic five-year War of the Pacific, which began in 1879, that put a permanent imprint on the relationship between the two countries. Chile, with a stronger economy and a better-trained and equipped military, defeated allies Peru and Bolivia, and Chilean forces occupied Lima.

Carlos Basombrio, a political analyst in Lima, doesn't doubt that Chile spied on Peru.

``This happens sometimes in relations between countries," he said.

But Basombrio said he doesn't believe the highest levels of the Chilean government authorized espionage. ``In Chile, the Armed Forces are very autonomous," he said. ``It's possible that they did this without the civilian authorities' knowledge."

Peruvians say they are especially concerned about recent arms purchases by Santiago. Chile reportedly wants to buy \$445 million in missiles and radar equipment from the United States. Last week, the Pentagon informed Congress that that figure might be as high as \$600 million.

Garcia, concerned about Chile's military strength and arms purchases announced recently by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Bolivia's Evo Morales, has called for a nonaggression pact in South America.

Peru is a founding member and Chile an associate member of the Union of South American Nations, the latest in many efforts to integrate the economies of South America and strongly promoted by Chávez. When Garcia took his nonaggression proposal to UNASUR, however, it received a lukewarm response.

Spying is not new in Peru. According to press reports, the last spy to be convicted here was Julio Vargas Garayar, another noncommissioned officer in the Peruvian Air Force who was convicted in 1978 of selling military secrets to Chile. He was executed by firing squad in 1979.

Peruvians also have a history of spying on others. Former President Alberto Fujimori's spy chief, Vladimoro Montesinos, became so powerful that he was later convicted on charges of drug trafficking, embezzlement, corruption and involvement in death squads during the

government's war against the Shining Path guerrillas in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Meanwhile, Ariza awaits trial. His arrest, some say, points to a growing suspicion among countries in the region.

“UNASUR, which is supposed to be able to deal with these situations and build mutual confidence, has its hands full,” said Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue. “The fact is that for all the talk about integration and regional harmony, mistrust among governments may be at a high point.”