

Top general urges Brazil to develop nuclear weapons

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Brazil should develop the technological capacity to manufacture nuclear weapons, one of the country's top generals declared in a television interview last week.

The remark was delivered in the context of a turn by the Workers Party government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva towards a dramatic increase in military spending in an effort to build back up the country's armed forces, which have been severely discredited since the end of the military dictatorship more than two decades ago.

"If the government agrees, we need to have the ability in the future to develop a nuclear weapon," said Gen. Jose Benedito de Barros Moreira, one of Brazil's few four-star generals and a former head of the country's War College. Barros Moreira, who is presently a senior official in Brazil's Ministry of Defense, in charge of formulating the country's military strategy, compared the weapon to a "lock" needed to safeguard Brazil's resources.

The startling comment came in a roundtable discussion on the program *Expressao Nacional* broadcast Tuesday night by TV Camara, the network run by Brazil's congress. The general appeared together with two congressional deputies, Jose Genoino of the Workers Party and Raul Jungmann of the Popular Socialist Party, as well as Antonio Jorge Ramalho da Rocha, of the National University of Brazil's Institute of International Relations.

"We should be technologically prepared to produce a nuclear device," said the general. He added, "No country can feel safe if it doesn't develop technology that enables it to defend itself when necessary."

Barros Moreira said that Brazil's resources made it a "target" for foreign aggression. "The world lacks water, energy food and minerals," he said. "Brazil is rich in all of these. For this reason we must put a strong lock on our door."

Significantly, the two legislators both found themselves largely in agreement with the general. Genoino, an anti-government guerrilla under the military dictatorship, rose to the presidency of the Workers Party (PT), and became one of the central figures in a political bribe and kickback scandal that led the country's attorney general to declare him a leader of a criminal organization.

He spoke in terms of Brazil's need to have armed forces to "match its economic and political projection in the world" and to support "the projection of power in the world and region."

Jungmann, an ex-member of the Stalinist Brazilian Communist Party who has faced his own charges of embezzlement of public funds while he served as agrarian reform minister under the

government of President Fernando Cardoso, talked about Brazil becoming a "*global player*"—using the English phrase—and the need to attend to the "viability of our armed forces."

Both legislators lamented the financial neglect of the armed forces, with Genoino railing indignantly against the "poverty wages" paid to generals and admirals.

Neither they, nor anyone else on the program, bothered to mention that the reduction of appropriations for the Brazilian military was bound up with the overwhelming popular repudiation of an institution responsible for the murder, torture and imprisonment of tens of thousands Brazilian workers, peasants, students and political oppositionists, including some whom the two deputies presumably once regarded as their comrades.

The subject of the television round table discussion was the move by the Lula government to fulfill the Defense Ministry's request for a 50 percent hike in arms spending for the coming year, raising military appropriations from their current level of \$3.5 billion to well over \$5 billion. It is widely anticipated that the government will revive plans that were shelved in 2002 to purchase new fighter jets and to develop a nuclear submarine.

While the Defense Ministry and the Lula government have officially denied any connection, the discussion of the proposed military buildup in Brazil's right-wing media has focused on a supposed challenge posed by the multi-million-dollar arms purchases made by the Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chavez from Russia, including 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles and fighter planes.

Two days after the general's televised remarks, Brazil's Defense Minister Nelson Jobim spoke at a military conference in Rio de Janeiro in support of building a nuclear submarine, claiming that such a weapons system was needed to defend recently discovered off-shore oil reserves.

"When you have a large natural source of wealth discovered in the Atlantic, it's obvious you need the means to protect it," Jobim said.

The Brazilian military had sought the development of a nuclear submarine during the period of the dictatorship, which ruled the country from 1964 to 1985. During the period in which he had emerged as a national figure for his leading role in a series of massive metalworkers strikes in defiance of military rule, Lula had denounced the proposed submarine program as a diversion of resources that were needed to meet the country's vast social needs.

Now, as president, he has emerged as a champion of realizing

the Brazilian military's old dream. Last July, Lula announced the appropriation of \$540 million to fund the navy's nuclear enrichment program, the first installment of what is expected to be more than \$1.2 billion for the building of a nuclear submarine.

"Brazil could rank among those few nations in the world with a command of uranium enrichment technology, and I think we will be more highly valued as a nation—as the power we wish to be," he said at the time.

In his speech last Thursday, Defense Minister Jobim insisted that Brazil's uranium enrichment program would be used solely for the submarine program and dismissed the idea that it would be utilized for the production of a nuclear weapon. "That's total nonsense," he said, while making no reference to the proposal made by General Barros Moreira expressing the exact opposite viewpoint.

The more perceptive voices in the Brazilian media, however, treated the general's opinions as anything but "nonsense." *Folha de Sao Paulo* political columnist Janio de Freitas, for example, wrote that in his remarks Barros Moreira "went much further, in objectivity and clarity, than Jobim. He went, strictly speaking, to the very end: he spoke of the necessity of Brazil mastering the entire cycle of nuclear energy, which includes, more than the submarine, nuclear explosive devices."

"How far attending to this alleged necessity has already proceeded is almost a mystery, as is normal for military projects," continued Freitas, who noted that the Brazilian navy had long ago assembled qualified personnel and equipment to begin nuclear enrichment.

The columnist noted that the Lula government has enjoyed the complicity of the Bush administration in concealing the extent and nature of its nuclear program. Washington, he reports, "managed to get the International Atomic Energy Agency to pretend to be satisfied with verbal explanations, after being blocked when it tried to inspect the characteristics, and thereby deduce the possible aims, of the Brazilian installations for uranium enrichment."

He noted that the US attitude toward nuclear developments in Brazil is precisely the opposite of that taken toward similar developments in Iran, where the government has submitted to extensive inspections.

There is no doubt that Washington has tilted strongly towards Brasilia, promoting the Lula government as a counterweight to the influence exerted by the left-nationalism of Venezuela's Chavez on the continent. Lula has encouraged this alignment, both with the deployment of the Brazilian military as "peacekeepers" in Haiti—freeing up US Marines for the occupation of Iraq—and in the recent ethanol treaty with Bush.

In conclusion, Freitas wrote: "The motive for the change being introduced in Brazil is obscure, but it is already known that the dimensions of its effects, internal and external, can only be great and grave."

Brazil is not building up its military—and potentially pursuing nuclear weapons—because of some perceived threat from Venezuela. If anything, the political demonization of Chavez and Venezuela's recent arms deals have merely been employed by the Brazilian military and its backers as a useful pretext for promoting rearmament.

Nor, obviously, is there any groundswell of popular support for

increased military spending, much less a nuclear arms program. The one political figure most identified with supporting a Brazilian bomb—the recently deceased right-wing nationalist deputy and former presidential candidate Enéas Carneiro of the Party for the Reconstruction of the National Order (PRONA)—was turned into an object of public ridicule over the proposal.

Nonetheless, there are profound objective forces underlying the drive by Brazil's ruling circles to pursue renewed military power, including nuclear weapons. The international arena is characterized by the increasingly sharp and open conflicts between the rival capitalist nation states over the control of resources and markets. This process has found its most acute expression in the eruption of American militarism, as Washington seeks to exploit its military superiority to offset its relative economic decline, launching two wars of aggression for control of energy-rich regions in the course of the last seven years.

General Moreira Barros's warnings about Brazil becoming a "target" for potential wars over increasingly scarce sources of energy, water and food reflects the emerging reality of a build-up towards a new period of worldwide conflagration. At the same time, the Brazilian ruling elite has its own increasing regional and global profit interests, and is prepared to utilize military force to further them.

While, no doubt, the Workers Party government will promote militarism and a revived nuclear program with the politics of nationalism, these developments pose an ominous threat to the Brazilian working class. As a result, it will confront growing attacks on its living standards, the increasing power of a military that relinquished its dictatorial grip over the country little more than two decades ago and the prospect of being dragged into a catastrophic world war.



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