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Issue Brief

Suriname's Armed Forces – Capability Compromised

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S*ummary*

Suriname's security challenges mainly arise from the growing menace of narco-trafficking and piracy. However, any assessment of its army shows how lack of maintenance and outright neglect has repeatedly compromised its capabilities.

Suriname is the only Dutch-speaking country in the South American continent. With a population of about 566,000 and a land mass of 156,000 sq.km, Suriname is sparsely populated except for its coastal areas. A largely uninhabited hinterland contains pockets of Amerindians (3.8 per cent of the population) and Maroons (21.7 per cent), descendants of escaped slaves, while the more densely populated region is home to a heterogeneous mix of Indonesians (13.7 per cent) called Javanese, Africans (15.7 per cent) called Creoles, and Indians (27.4 per cent) called Hindustanis.¹

In contrast to the very violent ethnic strife that plagued its English-speaking neighbour Guyana, Suriname has managed to keep ethnic tensions largely under control despite periodic political upheaval. Unlike at the time of independence in 1975, when there were distinct political parties for each of the different racial groups, political parties now are not strictly divided along ethnic lines anymore. Both ruling and opposition alliances are multi-racial and multi-religious in nature. While no actual data exists on the ethnic composition of either the military or the police (the latter in 1973 was 32.8 per cent Hindustani and 65 per cent Creole), anecdotal evidence from observers of the country suggest that the military and police are dominated by Creoles and Maroons, with 20-25 per cent Hindustani component.²

In 1980, a group of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) overthrew the elected government despite intense resistance from a badly outgunned police force, which was only subdued when the navy shelled them into submission. This led to the establishment of a *de facto* military dictatorship (though there was a nominal civilian president) in the country for the next seven years, headed by Sergeant-Major (self-promoted to Lt. Colonel) Desi Delano Bouterse. In December 1982, following a counter-coup attempt earlier in March, 16 prominent Surinamese soldiers, lawyers, academics, businessmen and trade-unionists were murdered allegedly at the behest of Bouterse and his henchmen. As one of the victims was also a Dutch national, all assistance programmes were suspended by the Dutch Government. The trial of the perpetrators of this crime has since been a subject of much controversy in Suriname.

During the military dictatorship, Suriname had also flirted with a Cuban style-socialism, which resulted in the country being treated as a pariah by the United States (US) too. Meanwhile, between 1986 and 1991, a bloody civil war broke out in the country due to rebellion by a group of Maroons led by former Bouterse bodyguard Ronnie Brunswijk. The 1986 Moiwana massacre in which 39 Maroons were killed stands testimony to the brutality unleashed by the military dictatorship at the time. The armed forces were an instrument of national repression then. The size of the army had grown to about 3,000 men and their position in the civil war was further bolstered by the induction of armoured vehicles and aircraft. It is

¹ [Suriname Census Statistics 2012](#), *Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek in Suriname* (General Bureau of Statistics in Suriname).

² In 1994, the author undertook some research into this aspect of Suriname's armed forces. No data was forthcoming but the author spoke with academics who studied Suriname and then proceeded to examine photographic evidence of armed forces and police parades and exercises.

noteworthy that though the size of the police force was reduced to about 1200 personnel during this period, their reputation and prestige among the civilian population was much higher than that of the army.³

A slow transition to democracy began in 1987, with full multi-party democracy finally restored in 1991. Support from Brazil and Venezuela enabled the civilian government to neutralise the political power of the military in 1993 with the removal of the last of the officers from the era of military dictatorship. Though Bouterse is now the president of Suriname, being democratically elected in 2010 and again in 2015, he has the dubious distinction of being prosecuted and convicted *in absentia* for drug smuggling (as was Ronnie Brunswijk) by the Dutch authorities. He was sentenced in July 2000 to 11 years in prison for trafficking 474kg of cocaine. A Europol warrant for his arrest is still out and his appeal for a review has been rejected.⁴

Furthermore, thanks to the continuing efforts of Chandrikapersad Santokhi, earlier in his capacity as commissioner of police and thereafter minister of justice and police, and later as the leader of the opposition, Bouterse was finally prosecuted and put on trial for his involvement in the December 1982 murders – leading to Bouterse dubbing Santokhi as the ‘sheriff’.⁵ This led to Bouterse Government extending amnesty in 2012 to all those who were accused of involvement in the 1982 murders including President Bouterse himself. The amnesty is being challenged in Suriname’s courts and the legal arguments and machinations surrounding the trial continue to be debated to this day, with no sign of closure for the families of the victims.

Bouterse’s son Dino Delano Bouterse, who had previously been arrested in 2003 and sentenced to eight years of imprisonment in 2005 for narcotics and weapons trafficking and also for vehicle theft, was arrested and extradited by the US Drug Enforcement Agency from Panama in 2013. He was prosecuted in the US and was sentenced to a 16-year jail term in March 2015. He was not only accused of drug smuggling but also for trying to help Hezbollah establish a base in Suriname, all the more ironic since Dino was holding a senior position in the country’s counter-terrorism unit.⁶

Hezbollah’s activities in Latin America seem to be aimed at establishing bases there to launch attacks on American targets as well as to benefit from the lucrative cocaine trans-shipment trade en route to Europe and Africa.⁷ Dino was reportedly paid US\$ two million as a down payment and trial documents suggest that he saw

³ During the dictatorship period, the Surinamese police personnel, even with guns drawn, were known to reassure civilians – “No frede! Wij zijn van het Volk” – “Don’t be afraid. We are of the people”

⁴ [“Dutch Supreme Court rejects bid for review of Desi Bouterse drug sentence”](#), *Stabroek News*, January 14, 2015.

⁵ Stieven Ramdharie, [“Moet Bouterse bang zijn voor Chan de Sheriff?”](#), *de Volkskrant*, May 21, 2015.

⁶ [“Suriname President's Son Pleads Guilty to Abetting Hezbollah”](#), *Haaretz*, August 30, 2014 and Jonathan Stempel, [“Suriname President's Son Gets 16 Years in U.S. Prison for Aiding Hezbollah”](#), *Haaretz*, March 10, 2015.

⁷ Guy Taylor [“Hezbollah moving ‘tons of cocaine’ in Latin America, Europe to finance terror operations”](#), *The Washington Times*, June 08, 2016.

Hezbollah as a potential parallel military force in the event his father is forced out of office.⁸

Amidst all of this, the Surinamese armed forces went through periods of trials and tribulations and mostly neglect. Currently comprising some 2,200 personnel, it is divided into army, navy and air force. However, years of turmoil and neglect have left a potentially effective military (for its size) seriously deficient in capability. While some tentative steps towards recapitalisation of the military are in progress, it is unclear whether these will be brought to fruition.⁹ In May 2013, while announcing the purchase of 75 armoured and luxury vehicles for the security forces, Melvin Linscheer, Director of the Bureau for National Security, had stated:

“When this government was sworn in, we encountered an outdated, ragtag fleet of vehicles for the departments charged with security services...There was nothing; no boats, no aircraft, not even cars that work properly. And meanwhile, more than 150 known criminals are walking around free. So we purchased these cars and we’ll also be purchasing helicopters soon...There will be complaints against them, but you simply can’t put a price tag on guaranteeing safety. When the responsibility is yours, you have to make decisions”¹⁰

However, rhetoric has not been matched with budgetary allocations. Suriname currently spends about 0.6 to 0.7 per cent of its GDP on defence.¹¹ At a time when its commodity dependent economy is experiencing negative growth rate of two per cent per annum, funding will inevitably be in short supply.¹² While defence expenditure may have been high during the period of military dictatorship (reliable figures being unavailable), but that has not been the case 2008 onward. Bouterse has since shown no inclination to increase defence spending.

The Dutch assistance has gone to the Suriname police rather than the national army, and the American assistance has been largely in the form of intelligence cooperation with some minor support in the form of small arms and vehicles. In neither case has the assistance been very high. The US security assistance amounted to \$422,236 in 2012, 97.3 per cent of which was for general military assistance and remaining three per cent for narcotics control programmes.¹³ What is of interest is the US effort to train the officer corps of the national army on military’s role in a civilian democracy. It might be suggested that the legacy of the 1980 Bouterse coup still looms large in the consciousness of Suriname’s partners.

⁸ Haaretz, n. 6.

⁹ Marvin Hockstam, [“Suriname Defense Ministry Boosts Spending, Cooperation with Pentagon”](#), *Dialogo*, May 20, 2013.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ [“Suriname Military Expenditures - Percent of GDP”](#), *IndexMundi*, As of May 16, 2008.

¹² [“Suriname facing economic crisis – report”](#), *Stabroek News*, September 24, 2016.

¹³ [“U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants to Suriname”](#), *InsideGov* (accessed January 22, 2017)

The Armed Forces

The *Nationaal Leger* (NL) or the National Army consists of all the three formations and all use army ranks. The naval unit (or Marine) of the NL, which was reconstituted as the Coast Guard, now reports to the ministry of internal affairs though it remains under military control. It should be noted that most formations are led by Lt. Colonels, with the current commander of the NL, Adolf Jardim, holding the rank of a Colonel. This rank is also held by the Director-General of the Coast Guard.

Army

The Suriname Army comprise of the following units:

- A [Light Infantry Battalion](#) (33ste Bataljon der Infanterie);
- A [Special Forces](#) Corps;
- A Support Arm (Staf verzorgings Bataljon); and
- A [Military Police](#) Corps (also responsible for immigration).

For a small force, Suriname's army appears well-equipped with a small armoured force of EE-11 Urutu APCs and EE-9 Cascavel Armoured Cars – the latter armed with 90mm guns. However, serviceability of the said vehicles was very low until Brazil stepped in to refurbish six of the Urutus and two Cascavels.¹⁴ This process has now been completed but it is unclear if these eight vehicles are the only ones serviceable, as Suriname had displayed at least three road-worthy Cascavels as recently as 2015.¹⁵

In addition, Suriname has a small artillery detachment comprising three vintage QF 25pdr artillery pieces, though it is not entirely certain whether the guns are functional.¹⁶ These assets are augmented by nine DAF YP-408 APCs, dating back to the 1970s, and a number of 14.5mm and quad-12.7mm anti-aircraft guns. A detachment of M40 106mm recoilless guns that was once in service has not been seen for some years now.

Coast Guard

In contrast to the army, the Suriname Coast Guard – formerly the navy/ marine – has experienced a serious depletion in its capability. Starting with three 32m patrol craft, the Coast Guard has suffered from prolonged neglect. All three patrol craft are now out of service. Their replacements, a force of five Rodman Type 55 and

¹⁴ [“Cerimônia de entrega de viaturas blindadas EE-11 URUTU no Suriname”](#), *Exército Brasileiro*, December 08, 2015 (accessed January 22, 2017)

¹⁵ Author's observation during a military parade held on November 25, 2015.

¹⁶ Ibid. Also during the second parade in 2016.

three Rodman Type 101 patrol boats, were far less capable. In fact, they too rapidly fell into disrepair and reduced to rusting hulks by 2011.¹⁷

After spurt in piracy, blamed on neighbouring Guyana, Suriname rebuilt its Coast Guard between 2012 and 2013 with the induction of three French OCEA patrol boats. The serviceability of these vessels is not entirely clear, with some observers suggesting that maintenance is a chronic problem largely due to the fact that these vessels themselves are not particularly robust – OCEA is best known for manufacturing pleasure craft. Despite then Vice President Robert Ameerali saying that the country could be proud of its Coast Guard, the response of Colonel Jerry Slijngaard, who heads government's Coast Guard Committee, was rather pessimistic. He was of the view that these vessels are barely sufficient to patrol Suriname's territorial waters and combat maritime crime activities like piracy.¹⁸ In fact, since 2013, no new vessels have been acquired nor have any older ones been returned to service.

Air Force

The state of the Surinamese Air Force is similar to that of the Coast Guard. Suriname once operated a capable force of five BN-2 Islanders, three PC-7 armed trainers, four helicopters and three Cessna liaison aircraft. The civil war took a heavy toll with natural attrition reducing the fleet next to nothing. To bolster its transport and maritime surveillance capabilities, two CASA 212-400 aircraft were purchased in 1999, one fitted with a capable sensor array. Once again neglect took its toll and by 2012 the Venezuelan experts had deemed these aircraft beyond recovery. They were subsequently sold to the US-based Fayard Enterprises. The Cessna 172 too has been offered for sale, though BN-2 and Cessna T303 may still be operating.¹⁹

Suriname's only operational aircraft seem to be the three Chetak helicopters India delivered in 2015.²⁰ While the project suffered from multiple administrative and financial problems, these aircraft continue to operate as the nation's only military aircraft. They are supported by a single Eurocopter Bk-177B-2, operated on behalf of the Suriname Police Corps. In a belated recognition of the need for a fixed-wing component, a single de Havilland Canada DHC-6 Twin Otter is reportedly on order.

¹⁷ Author's observation.

¹⁸ Ray Chickrie, "[Suriname gets modern coast guard to tackle Guyanese pirates](#)", *Caribbean News Now*, September 07, 2013 (accessed January 22, 2017).

¹⁹ The entire registry of all aircraft in Suriname – including military – is available at <http://landewers.net/PZ.TXT> (accessed January 22, 2017)

²⁰ "[India Gives 3 Chetak Helicopters to Suriname](#)", *Defence-Aerospace.com*, March 16, 2015 (accessed January 22, 2017).

Conclusion

Suriname is not faced with any conventional military threat except for a minor border dispute with Guyana. In August 2016, Colonel Jardim, Commander of the National Army, had very clearly stated that the country faces no existential external or internal threat. Its security challenges mainly arise from the growing menace of narco-trafficking and piracy, besides the internal law and order challenges common to the Latin America-Caribbean region. These are all linked to the transnational organised crime, which the government and the military of the country have identified as the country's major threat.²¹

Suriname, like many other countries of the region, is a party to the Inter-American Convention against Corruption and Migrant Smuggling and the Inter-American Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters. Furthermore, the country has bilateral maritime counter-narcotics enforcement agreements with the US, the Netherlands, Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia. This cooperation has proved invaluable as within the first nine months of 2015, Surinamese authorities had arrested 139 alleged drug traffickers and seized 626.6 kilograms of cocaine, 33.8 liters of liquid cocaine, 841.7 kg of marijuana, four grams of heroin, 4.3 grams of hashish and 2,878 MDMA tablets.²²

It appears that the Surinamese Police has been the biggest recipient of training and assistance from the US and the Netherlands. The Caribbean Basin Security Initiative has yielded significant benefits to the police in terms of training, equipment and technical assistance.²³ In comparison, the army has been left to its own devices and any assessment of the armed forces show how lack of maintenance and outright neglect has repeatedly compromised its capabilities.

While the national army has to an extent managed to restore a veneer of its former capability, it remains critically deficient in terms of air transport and maritime surveillance aircraft. Its small force of OCEA patrol craft is insufficient to provide adequate coastal surveillance. With such compromised capability, it is an open question whether Suriname's armed forces will prove equal to the task of combating transnational organised crime.

²¹ Marcos Ommati, "[Suriname Sees Transnational Criminal Networks as Biggest Security Challenge](#)", *Dialogo*, August 29, 2016 and [Suriname](#), 2016 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), *Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs*, U.S. Department of State (accessed January 22, 2017).

²² Ibid.

²³ *Dialogo*, n. 21.

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