

Venezuela creates military unit on Colombia border amid fighting

CARACAS (Reuters) – Venezuela has created a special military unit for an area on its border with Colombia that has been the center of clashes between troops and illegal armed groups since last month, the defense minister said on Monday.

Thousands of civilians have been displaced by combat with fighters that the government of President Nicolas Maduro calls “terrorists.”

General Vladimir Padrino said a temporary unit called an Integrated Operational Defense Zone, or ZODI, would operate in several municipalities of Apure state, where the clashes have taken place.

“We are not going to allow any type of force, be it conventional, irregular, criminal, drug trafficker, etcetera, to come to Venezuelan territory to commit crimes,” Padrino said in a televised statement.

Venezuela’s military maintains a standing ZODI unit for each of its 23 states and the capital, Caracas.

Padrino said eight soldiers had been killed in the fighting, while 34 soldiers had been wounded, nine members of the armed groups had been killed and 33 people were being prosecuted by the military justice system.

Colombia’s Foreign Ministry on Monday urged respect for the rights of the civilian population living in Apure and the neighboring Colombian state of Arauca.

“Armed conflict in the border area of Arauca and Apure is seriously affecting the lives of the civilian population and has forced families to abandon their homes and belongings,” the ministry tweeted.

Opposition critics say the fighters include dissident FARC guerrillas who reject a 2016 peace deal with the Colombian government.

Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano told newspaper El Tiempo over the weekend that Maduro’s government had become entangled in fights between different groups of the former FARC guerrillas and was in drug trafficking

cahoots with some.

Meetings had been held between the Venezuelan armed forces and dissident allies to coordinate an offensive against other ex-FARC members, he said.

“The objective of the operations there is not the protection of the border, it’s the protection of the drug trafficking business,” Molano told the newspaper.

Venezuela denies any links to Colombian guerrillas or drug trafficking groups.

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