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U.S. Military in Paraguay Prepares to "Spread Democracy"

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Written by Benjamin Dangl
Thursday, 15 September 2005



Estigarribia Military Base in Paraguay, © Clarin

Controversy is raging in Paraguay, where the U.S. military is conducting secretive operations. 500 U.S. troops arrived in the country on July 1st with planes, weapons and ammunition. Eyewitness reports prove that an airbase exists in Mariscal Estigarribia, Paraguay, which is 200 kilometers from the border with Bolivia and may be utilized by the U.S. military. Officials in Paraguay claim the military operations are routine humanitarian efforts and deny that any plans are underway for a U.S. base. Yet human rights groups in the area are deeply worried. White House officials are using rhetoric about terrorist threats in the tri-border region (where Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina meet) in order to build their case for military operations, in many ways reminiscent to the build up to the invasion of Iraq. (1)

The tri-border area is home to the Guarani Aquifer, one of the world's largest reserves of water. Near the Estigarribia airbase are Bolivia's natural gas reserves, the second largest in Latin America. Political analysts believe U.S. operations in Paraguay are part of a preventative war to control these natural resources and suppress social uprisings in Bolivia.

Argentine Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel commented on the situation in Paraguay, "Once the United States arrives, it takes it a long time to leave. And that really frightens me." (2)

The Estigarribia airbase was constructed in the 1980s for U.S. technicians hired by the Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner, and is capable of

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housing 16,000 troops. A journalist writing for the Argentine newspaper *Clarín*, recently visited the base and reported it to be in perfect condition, capable of handling large military planes. It's oversized for the Paraguayan air force, which only has a handful of small aircraft. The base has an enormous radar system, huge hangars and an air traffic control tower. The airstrip itself is larger than the one at the international airport in Asunción, the Paraguayan capital. Near the base is a military camp which has recently grown in size. (3)

"Estigarribia is ideal because it is operable throughout the year...I am sure that the U.S. presence will increase," said Paraguayan defense analyst Horacio Galeano Perrone. (4)

Denials and Immunity

"The national government has not reached any agreement with the United States for the establishment of a U.S. military base" in Paraguay, states a communiqué signed by Paraguayan Foreign Minister Leila Rachid. The U.S. Embassy in Paraguay has also released statements officially denying plans to set up a military base in the country. (5)

The Pentagon used this same language when describing its actions in Manta, Ecuador, now the home of an \$80 million U.S. military base. First they said the facility was an archaic "dirt strip" which would be used for weather monitoring and would not permanently house U.S. personnel. Days later, the Pentagon stated that Manta was to serve as a major military base tasked with a variety of security-related missions. (6)

Paraguayan political analyst and historian Milda Rivarola said that, "in practice, there has already been a (U.S.) base operating in Paraguay for over 50 years." The U.S. armed forces have had an ongoing presence in the country, she said. "In the past, they needed congressional authorization every six months, but now they have been granted permission to be here

for a year and a half." (7)

On May 26, 2005 the Paraguayan Senate granted the U.S. troops total immunity from national and International Criminal Court jurisdiction until December 2006. The legislation is automatically extendable. Since December 2004, the U.S. has been pressuring Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela and Paraguay into signing a deal which would grant immunity to U.S. military. The Bush administration threatened to deny the countries up to \$24.5 million in economic and military aid if they refused to sign the immunity deal. Paraguay was the only country to accept the offer. (8)

Coup Warning in Bolivia

The proximity of the Estigarribia base to Bolivian natural gas reserves, and the fact that the military operations coincide with a presidential election in Bolivia, has also been a cause for concern. The election is scheduled to take place on December 4 2005. Bolivian Workers' Union leader Jaime Solares, and Movement Toward Socialism (M.A.S.) Legislator Antonio Peredo, have warned of U.S. plans for a military coup to frustrate the elections. Solares said the U.S. Embassy backs rightwing ex-President Jorge Quiroga in his bid for office, and will go as far as necessary to prevent any other candidate's victory. (9)

The most recent national poll conducted showed leftwing M.A.S. congressman Evo Morales barely one point behind Quiroga in the race. Solares said there were calls in June 2005 for a military coup during the massive protests that toppled President Carlos Mesa. Recent U.S. military operations in neighboring Paraguay would facilitate such an intervention. (10)

The Bush administration played a key role in the 2002 coup against President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and the 2004 ousting of Haitian president Bertram Aristide.

The Tri-Border Terror Theory

In March, William Pope, the U.S. State Department's principal deputy coordinator of counterterrorism, said that 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed is believed to have visited the tri-border area for several weeks in 1995. Defense officials say that Hezbollah and Hamas, radical Islamic groups from the Middle East, "get a lot of funding" from this tri-border area, and that further unrest in the region could leave a political "black hole" that would erode other democratic efforts. (11)

Military analysts from Uruguay and Bolivia maintain that the threat of terrorism is often used by the U.S. as an excuse for military intervention and the monopolization of natural resources. In the case of Paraguay, the U.S. may be preparing to secure the Guarani water reserves and Bolivia's natural gas. (12)

In spite of frequent attempts to link terror networks to the tri-border area, there is little proof of the connection. However, this did not prevent the U.S. from "liberating" Iraq in 2003. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld argued during the debate over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, "Simply because you do not have evidence that something does exist does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist." (14)

Paraguayan and U.S. officials contend that much of the recent military collaborations are based on health and humanitarian work. (13) However, State Department reports do not mention any funding for health works in Paraguay. They do mention that funding for the Counterterrorism Fellowship Program (CTFP) in the country doubled for 2005. The report explained, "Bilateral relations between the U.S. and Paraguay are strong, with Paraguay providing excellent cooperation in the fight against terrorism...CTFP provided funds for Paraguayans to attend courses on the dynamics of international terrorism, and the importance and application of intelligence in combating terrorism." (14)

Col. Hugo Mendoza of the Paraguayan army said he's thankful the U.S. military is helping Paraguay meet security threats through the joint exercises. "We're learning new things and working with new equipment and the latest technology which we would not be able to afford otherwise." (15)

Journalist and human rights activist Alfredo Boccia Paz, said, "These missions are always disguised as humanitarian aid...What Paraguay does not and cannot control is the total number of agents that enter the country." (16)

Meanwhile, neighboring countries have not warmly received the news of the military activity. The Chilean Communist Party demanded that Paraguayan President Nicanor Duarte "reconsider and cancel" recent military deals with the US as they are "extremely serious for Latin America." (17)

In Paraguay, human rights and activist organizations have mobilized against the military activity. When Donald Rumsfeld visited the country in August, protesters greeted his entourage with chants such as, "Rumsfeld, you fascist, you are the terrorist!" as a military band welcomed him by playing the "Star Spangled Banner". (18)

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