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Rice Signs Accord Letting U.S. Military Use 4 Bases in Romania

Dec. 6 (Bloomberg) -- Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signed an agreement with Romania today that lets U.S. troops use four training bases in the formerly communist-run country, the first such facilities near eastern Europe's Black Sea Coast.

The accord Rice signed with Romanian Foreign Minister Mihai-Razvan Ungureanu in Bucharest allows as many as 1,500 U.S. troops as well as Romanian and other allied forces to use a main base and airfield near the Black Sea port city of Constanta plus three other facilities in the area, according to a U.S. statement.

``With Romania we have a particularly close relationship as well as a military relationship that's playing out in Iraq and Afghanistan," Rice told journalists in Bucharest after meeting with Romanian President Traian Basescu. The agreement ``geographically makes sense," she added.

Romania, a former Warsaw Pact member that toppled its communist government in 1989, became the second-largest country in eastern Europe after Poland to join NATO in 2004. Romania has sent more than 800 troops to Iraq and almost 1,000 to

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Afghanistan, fostering a strategic alliance with the U.S. in a region once dominated by the former Soviet Union.

Neither Rice nor Basescu said how much money the U.S. and Romania will spend to prepare the bases before they can be used by U.S. troops. Romania, one of the poorest nations in eastern Europe, has to keep government spending and deficits in check to qualify for European Union membership as early as 2007.

Base Locations

No timing for when the bases will be ready was disclosed, although Stars and Stripes, the U.S. military magazine, cited a Pentagon spokesman today saying they could host U.S. troops by mid-2007.

Basescu said U.S. troops will use a training base in Babadag, close to the River Danube delta, as well as the nearby training ranges in Cincu and Smardan. Training will be possible for all types of operations ``including air and naval," Basescu said.

The U.S. State Department's statement released in Bucharest today said the presence of the U.S. troops ``will be relatively small and rotational." It said the U.S. will use Mihail Kogalniceanu, near Constanta, as its main base for a deployable task force headquarters of about 100 persons.

Both Rice and Basescu rejected European concerns over reports that the Central Intelligence Agency has set up a secret prison and interrogation network at bases in eastern European countries including Romania in 2004.

``We can't tolerate such speculations about Romania endlessly and we believe such statements are completely out of line," Basescu said. ``Whoever has such suspicions about Romania is free to come over and check any site they desire."

The Polish and Romanian governments last month denied reports by newspapers including the Washington Post and the Financial Times that the CIA has operated covert interrogation centers in the two countries. The newspapers cited U.S.-based nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch.

Rice left Romania Tuesday night for another stop in Ukraine's capital Kiev. Nadia Comaneci, Romania's most-acclaimed gymnast ever, who scored the world's first ``perfect 10" in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, was among officials who welcomed Rice upon her arrival in Bucharest today.

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