

Bulgaria OKs 3 bases for U.S. troops

By Nicholas Kralev
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Bulgaria has agreed to open three military bases to permanent use by 2,500 U.S. troops who would be available for combat in the Middle East and other nearby regions. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will seal the deal when she visits the country this week.

Miss Rice, who leaves on a trip to the Balkans today, is expected to sign a broad defense-cooperation agreement with the new NATO ally that would authorize the stationing of foreign forces on its soil for the first time in its 1,325-year history, U.S. and Bulgarian officials said.

The final draft of the agreement, which was seen by The Washington Times, allows the United States to deploy troops from the bases for missions in third countries without the specific permission of the Bulgarian authorities, a sensitive matter for many Bulgarians.

"One of the key issues anywhere is our ability to use our soldiers where we need them," said a senior U.S. official. "Otherwise, we would be tying ourselves [down]. The old model [during the Cold War] was that we had forces in Europe because we thought we'd fight in Europe."

The possibility that U.S. troops would use a country with a large Muslim minority as a base for an attack on a Muslim nation, such as Iran or Syria, has provoked vocal opposition in Bulgaria. A nationalist party represented in the parliament plans to stage massive protests against the agreement during Miss Rice's visit.

Another difficult issue during the negotiations involved jurisdiction over any crimes committed by U.S. military personnel in Bulgaria. It was resolved in a convoluted 10-line sentence, which the senior U.S. official said is standard for such documents.

"The Bulgarians waive the right to primary jurisdiction, but, in cases of particular importance, they recall the waiver and reassert their jurisdiction," the official explained in much simpler language. He noted that most crimes committed by U.S. forces abroad "are fairly minor."

A senior Bulgarian official said Sofia was satisfied with the arrangement and that the two countries would work together on a case-by-case basis in the event of any serious crimes.

Officials of both countries said the United States will not pay rent for its use of the Bezmer and Graf Ignatievo air bases and the Novo Selo army training range and storage facility. But, according to the agreement, it will cover "operational and maintenance expenses."

"If we decide we need commercial property, we'll pay," the senior U.S. official said.

The senior Bulgarian official said that any new facilities built by the Americans will remain Bulgarian property during and after the Americans' presence in the country.

The Bulgarians are hoping the agreement will generate employment in the country, but may be disappointed.