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## The US Military Descends on Paraguay

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While hitchhiking across Paraguay a few years ago, I met welcoming farmers who let me camp in their backyards. I eventually arrived in Ciudad del Este, known for its black markets and loose borders. Now the city and farmers I met are caught in the crossfire of the US military's "war on terror."

On May 26, 2005, the Paraguayan Senate [allowed](#) US troops to train their Paraguayan counterparts until December 2006, when the Paraguayan Senate can vote to extend the troops' stay. The United States had threatened to cut off millions in aid to the country if Paraguay did not grant the troops entry. In July 2005 hundreds of US soldiers arrived with planes, weapons and ammunition. Washington's funding for counterterrorism efforts in Paraguay soon doubled, and protests against the military presence hit the streets.

Some activists, military analysts and politicians in the region believe the operations could be part of a plan to overthrow the left-leaning government of Evo Morales in neighboring Bolivia and take control of the area's vast gas and water reserves. Human rights reports from Paraguay suggest the US military presence is, at the very least, heightening tensions in the country.

### Soy and Landless Farmers

Paraguay is the fourth-largest producer of [soy](#) in the world. As this industry has expanded, an estimated 90,000 poor families have been forced off their land. Campesinos have organized protests, road blockades and land occupations against displacement and have faced subsequent repression from military and paramilitary forces. According to [Grupo de Reflexion Rural](#) (GRR), an Argentina-based organization that documents violence against farmers, on June 24, 2005, in Tekojoja, Paraguay, hired policemen and soy producers kicked 270 people off their land, burned down fifty-four homes, arrested 130 people and killed two.

The most recent case of this violence is the [death](#) of Serapio Villasboa Cabrera, a member of the Paraguayan Campesino Movement, whose body was found full of knife wounds May 8. Cabrera was the brother of Petrona Villasboa, who was spearheading an investigation into the death of her son, who died from exposure to toxic chemicals used by transgenic soy producers. According to [Servicio, Paz y Justicia](#) (Serpaj), an international human rights group that has a chapter in Paraguay, one method used to force farmers off their land is to spray toxic pesticides around communities until sickness forces residents to leave.

GRR said Cabrera was killed by paramilitaries connected to large landowners and soy producers, who are expanding their holdings. The paramilitaries pursue farm leaders who are organizing against the occupation of their land. Investigations by Serpaj demonstrate that the worst cases of repression against farmers have taken place in areas with the highest concentration of US troops. Serpaj reported that in the department of San Pedro, where five US military exercises took place, there have been eighteen farmer deaths from repression, in an area with many farmer organizations. In the department of Concepción there have been eleven deaths and three US military exercises. Near the Triple Border, where Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina meet, there were twelve deaths and three exercises.

"The US military is advising the Paraguayan police and military about how to deal with these farmer groups.... They are teaching theory as well as technical skills to Paraguayan police and military. These new forms of combat have been used internally," Orlando Castillo of Serpaj told me over the phone. "The US troops talk with

the farmers and get to know their leaders and which groups, organizations, are working there, then establish the plans and actions to control the farmer movement and advise the Paraguayan military and police on how to proceed.... The numbers from our study show what this US presence is doing. US troops form part of a security plan to repress the social movement in Paraguay. A lot of repression has happened in the name of security and against 'terrorism.' "

Tomas Palau, a Paraguayan sociologist at [BASE-IS](#), a Paraguayan social research institute, and the editor of a recent book on the militarization of Latin America, said, "The US conducts training and classes for the Paraguayan troops. These classes are led by North Americans, who answer to Southern Command, the branch of the US military for South America."

Like Castillo, Palau said there is an association between the US military presence and the increased violence against campesinos. "They are teaching counterinsurgency classes, preparing the Paraguayan troops to fight internal enemies," he told me. He said it's common knowledge that the US troops and the Paraguayan troops are conducting operations together. "All the Paraguayan press is talking about this."

The US Embassy in Asunción rejects all claims that the US military is linked to the increased repression against campesino and protest groups, either through exercises or instruction. In an e-mail response to the charges, Bruce Kleiner of the Embassy's Office of Public Affairs writes that "the U.S. military is not monitoring protest groups in Paraguay" and that "the U.S. military personnel and Paraguayan armed forces have trained together during medical readiness training exercises (MEDRETES) to provide humanitarian service to some of Paraguay's most disadvantaged citizens." However, the deputy speaker of the Paraguayan parliament, Alejandro Velazquez Ugarte, said that of the thirteen exercises going on in the country, only two are of a civilian nature.

According to BASE-IS, Paraguayan officials have recently used the threat of terrorism to justify their aggression against campesino leaders. One group, the Campesino Organization of the North, has been accused of receiving instructions from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), that country's largest leftist guerrilla movement. The FARC has also been accused of colluding in the kidnapping and murder of the daughter of former Paraguayan President Raúl Cubas Grau last year. A June 23 report from the Chinese news service Xinhua said that Colombia's defense minister, Camilo Ospina, spoke with Paraguay's attorney general, Ruben Candia, about the presence of the FARC in Paraguay. Ospina said the FARC was consulting organized crime groups and "giving criminals advice on explosives" in Paraguay.

Regarding the FARC connection in Paraguay, [Paul Wolf](#), an international attorney in Washington who has studied the group closely and written about it, said, "Since the Colombian government hasn't shown any evidence or given any names, this can't be considered as anything but war propaganda." Linking Paraguayan campesino groups to the FARC is nothing new, particularly since the death of Cubas's daughter. However, in an interview with the Paraguayan newspaper *La Nación*, the bishop of Concepción, Zacarias Ortiz Rolon, said, "As far as the official interest in making believe that there is a guerrilla group and that it is fed by the Colombian FARC, that seems a bit suspicious to me."

The Association of Farmers of Alto Paraná (ASAGRAPA), a campesino group near the Triple Border, reported that a local politician offered one of the organization's leaders a sum of money equivalent to a monthly salary, in return for which the ASAGRAPA member was told to announce that other leaders in the organization were building a terrorist group and receiving training from the FARC. BASE-IS reports suggest that this type of bribery and disinformation is part of an effort to guarantee the "national security of the US" and "justify, continue and expand the North American military presence."

"All of these activities coincide with the presence of the US troops," Palau explained about the violence against farmers. "The CIA and FBI are also working here. It's likely they are generating these plans for fabricating lies about guerrilla and terrorist activities. They need to find terrorists to use as an excuse for militarization." Last October the Cuban media outlet Prensa Latina reported that FBI director Robert Mueller arrived in Paraguay to "check on preparations for the installation of a permanent FBI office in Asunción...to cooperate with security organizations to fight international crime, drug traffic and kidnapping."

Journalist Hugo Olázar of the Argentine paper *Clarín* reported last September that US troops were operating from an air base in Mariscal Estigarribia, Paraguay. He visited the base last year and said it had an air-traffic control tower, a military encampment and was capable of handling large aircraft. Though the United States denies it is operating at the base, it used the same rhetoric when first discussing its actions in Manta, Ecuador, which is currently home to an \$80 million US military base. The base there was first described in 1999 as an archaic "dirt strip" used only for weather monitoring. Days later, the Pentagon said it would be utilized for

security-related missions.

Other indications that the US military might be settling into Paraguay come from the right-wing Paraguayan government. Current President Nicanor Duarte Frutos is a member of the Colorado party, which has ruled the country for more than fifty years. It was this party that established the thirty-five-year dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner. Soon after his election in 2003, Duarte became the first Paraguayan president to be received at the White House. Last August Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld flew to Paraguay. Shortly afterward, Dick Cheney met with Paraguay's vice president.

Last year, 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."

### **Counterfeit Rolling Papers and Viagra**

Washington has justified its military presence in Paraguay by stating that the Triple Border area at Ciudad del Este is a base for Islamist terrorist funding. In a June 3, 2006, Associated Press report, Western intelligence officials, speaking anonymously, claimed that if Iran is cornered by the United States, it could direct the international network of the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah to assist in terrorist attacks. The Justice Department has indicted nineteen people this year for sending the profits from the sale of counterfeit rolling papers and Viagra to Hezbollah. "Extensive operations have been uncovered in South America," the AP article states, "where Hezbollah is well connected to the drug trade, particularly in the region where Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay meet."

Other claims about terrorist networks said to be operating in the Triple Border region include a poster of [Iguaçu Falls](#), a tourist destination near Ciudad del Este, discovered by US troops on the wall of an Al Qaeda operative's home in Kabul, Afghanistan, shortly after 9/11. Aside from this, however, the US Southern Command and the State Department report that no "credible information" exists confirming that "Islamic terrorist cells are planning attacks in Latin America."

Luiz Moniz Bandeira, who holds a chair in history at the University of Brasília and writes about US-Brazilian relations, was quoted in the *Washington Times* as saying, "I wouldn't dismiss the hypothesis that US agents plant stories in the media about Arab terrorists in the Triple Frontier to provoke terrorism and justify their military presence."

Throughout the cold war, the US government used the threat of communism as an excuse for its military adventures in Latin America. Now, as leaders such as Bolivia's Evo Morales and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez move further outside the sphere of Washington's interests, the United States is using another "ism" as an alibi for its military presence. As Greg Grandin pointed out in his article "[The Wide War](#)," first posted on TomDispatch.com, the Pentagon now has more resources and money directed to Latin America than the Departments of State, Agriculture, Commerce and Treasury combined. Before 9/11 the annual US military aid to the region was around \$400 million. It's now nearly \$1 billion. Much of this goes to training troops.

Making wild allegations about Paraguayan farmers being terrorists is one way to justify the increased spending and military presence in the region. "The US government is lying about the terrorist funding in the Triple Border, just like they did about the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq," said an exasperated Castillo of Serpaj. Indeed, the street markets I walked through in Ciudad del Este, and the farmers I met along the way, seemed to pose as much of a threat to US security as a pirated Tom Petty CD or a bottle of counterfeit whiskey.