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Ecuador says U.S. must leave Manta air base

It's American military's only South American outpost for anti-drug flights

Associated Press updated 10:11 p.m. ET July 29, 2008

QUITO, Ecuador - The U.S. military must stop using its only outpost in South America for anti-drug flights when Washington's 10-year lease on the base in Ecuador expires in 2009, the Foreign Ministry said Tuesday.

Leftist President Rafael Correa has repeatedly said that Ecuador would not renew the agreement to use the Manta air base, but Tuesday's Foreign Ministry statement said the South American nation has now formally notified the U.S. Embassy of the decision.

Some 300 U.S. soldiers are stationed at the Pacific base and flights from Manta are responsible for about 60 percent of U.S. drug interdiction in the eastern Pacific.

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The statement said that surveillance flights will end in August 2009 "and the withdrawal of foreign personnel from the Ecuadorean Air Force base in Manta will end in November of that year."

The United States and Ecuador signed the 10-year agreement in Nov. 12, 1999.

U.S. military officials have said that Washington is not planning to set up an alternative to the base in either neighboring Colombia or Peru. The U.S. government has previously said it will respect Ecuador's decision.

A draft constitution backed by Correa that was recently approved by a special assembly, abolishes any foreign military bases on Ecuadorean soil. The draft charter must still be approved by voters in a referendum.

Ecuador produces very little cocaine, but is often used as a transit country for drugs sent from Colombia and Peru to the United States.

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