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## Dominican Troops in Iraq

by LADB Staff

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Dominican Republic troops could be held in Iraq against their will, or that of their government, if President Hipolito Mejia decides to bring them home after six months while the US wants them to stay a full year. The soldiers could also be found to be in Iraq illegally under Dominican law, if it turns out that the deployment was unconstitutional (see NotiCen, 2003-07-10).

The opposition party Fuerza Nacional Progresista (FNP) sent out a press release on Dec. 12 charging that "the Dominican troops are in Iraq in flagrant violation of the Constitution of the Republic." FNP spokesman and Deputy Pelegrin Castillo authored the communique. Castillo also criticized Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega for thanking the administration for the troops, given the questionable constitutionality of the deployment.

Noriega was in the Dominican Republic for two days last week, met with Mejia, and spoke before the Congress, where he thanked the government, calling the contribution of soldiers a demonstration of "friendship, sacrifice, and courage that will not be forgotten." Castillo found it "irritating" that the US "proclaims so much its interest for the preservation of the state of law and ignores this gross abuse of the Constitution and of institutionalism." Castillo's statements came after Armed Forces Minister Jose Miguel Soto said on Dec. 4 that his troops might "possibly" return home ahead of schedule. Soon after, Mejia said that the troops would stay in Iraq until February 2004, "because we have an agreement of six months and must comply."

The Dominican Republic has 302 soldiers in Iraq. They were attacked at their base in Diwaniya on Dec. 4, the day of Soto's statement, by a mortar barrage. No Dominicans were hurt, but three Iraqis were injured. Said Soto, "In this situation, it is better to have the troops at home. The period ends in the month of February and that is when the troops will return, but possibly the withdrawal will commence before that."

### *Not so fast*

There is, however, some disagreement as to exactly how long a tour Mejia signed his troops up for. Noriega told reporters, "We expect the Dominican soldiers to remain in Iraq for a year. That was the commitment we reached with President Mejia." But Soto's recollection was, "All that was decided was that the soldiers stationed there would return in February. President Mejia has not indicated if he will send more troops as replacements and if they will stay until August." Before the Noriega visit, the government had said that the contingent would only stay for six months, but Noriega insisted that Mejia had told US officials they would stay "a full year, and we expect them to stay."

Noriega is not without persuasive clout. His main purpose in coming to the Dominican Republic was to discuss the country's economic crisis. The Dominican peso has lost more than half its value against the dollar in the last year. The disagreement regarding the troops squeezes Mejia between

his need to make a deal with the US to ease the financial crisis and his need to mollify the electorate. Mejia is running for re-election, his popularity has declined in recent polls, and the people don't like having their soldiers in Iraq. There have been no public protests demanding their return, but recent editorials have criticized Mejia for getting involved in the US's war. There have, however, been protests about the state of the economy.

A dozen or more people have died since September in angry protests against rising prices, the plummeting currency, International Monetary Fund (IMF) negotiations, austerity measures, and power outages. The Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo of the Dominican Republic approved on Dec. 16 a budget for next year of US\$3.2 billion, topping this year's budget by US\$998 million. Electricity rates will be increased, as will other user fees, including traveler's exit fees. The budget now goes to the Congress for passage. Technical Minister Carlos Despradel said that the budget corresponds with accords so far agreed to with the IMF.

The Dominican Republic went to the IMF for a bailout after a massive US\$2.2 billion fraud was revealed earlier this year (see NotiCen, 2003-05-29) at the Banco Intercontinental (Baninter). The economy still has not recovered. With elections coming up in May of 2004, the economic crisis has generated internal conflicts within the governing Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD). Opposition within the party to the candidacy of Mejia for re-election is huge. Public opinion is widespread that Mejia has acted against the principles of the party and that he will drive it into the ground if allowed another term.

Noriega stepped into this situation in *deus ex-machina* fashion, offering the president US backing in sorting things out. "There is willingness on the part of the government of the United States and the international community to support the efforts of President Mejia to overcome the crisis and put the fiscal situation in order," the envoy told reporters. Noriega also told Dominican deputies and senators in his address to the Congress, "Dominican finances are in deep disorder, but the productive capacity of the nation is fundamentally healthy." Noriega later said that Washington wants "to help the Dominican people to overcome the crisis," but that concrete measures are required on the part of the executive and the Congress."

The diplomat praised the way Mejia and his government responded to the crisis, saying that the president "has done some very important things for this country and now is trying in a very serious way to overcome the economic and fiscal crisis."

In contrast, on Dec. 11, the population overwhelmingly supported a general strike against official economic policy. Seven people were killed in the violence. Conflict within the governing party has intensified.

### *A tale of two primaries*

Three PRD presidential aspirants told the press that they would not concur with the results of Dec. 21 primaries because of what they termed "grave irregularities." The three are Vice President Milagros Ortiz, PRD secretary Rafael Subervi, and party ex-president Emmanuel Esquea. They also charged that Mejia supporters had illegally used state resources for their organization Proyecto

Presidencial Hipolito (PPH). A final charge alluded to "the alteration and expansion of the rolls of the PRD through the planned inscription of a large number of members of other parties."

Before formally withdrawing, the three had sent Mejia a letter, in which they "urgently" asked that he not run again. "We are not going to permit a distortion of the Dominican democratic process, said Vice President Ortiz. Although they will abstain from the Dec. 21 primaries, the three said they intend to remain "active and militant in the search for solutions for the republic and for the PRD.

On the other side of the divide, PPH coordinator Eligio Jaquez denied that the organization had used state money. Jaquez, who is also Mejia's Minister of Agriculture, maintained that his boss had every right to seek re-election. Another faction within the PRD is also seeking the presidency.

On Dec. 7, this group held a primary and chose party president Hatuey De Camps as its presidential candidate. Mejia said it was up to the Junta Central Electoral (JCE) to determine who would be the party's official entry and which primary was the real one. The JCE has not yet spoken.

Mejia enters his primary with the apparent full weight of the US government behind him, if not with that of his own party or his people. Meanwhile, his recollection of just how long his troops were to stay in Iraq remains cloudy.

-- End --