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## Region Reconsiders Troops In Iraq After Spanish Election

by LADB Staff

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Signaling the prospect of further diminution of the coalition of the willing, Honduras will follow Spain's lead in withdrawing its troops from Iraq.

Honduran Defense Minister Federico Breve, who made the announcement, said the decision "coincides with the decision of the prime minister-elect of the Spanish government."

Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, who will become prime minister as a result of the parliamentary victory of his Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol (PSOE) over the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) of Jose Maria Aznar, had said earlier of the Iraq war, "The participation of our country was an error. I believe that, in itself, the war in Iraq was also a political mistake. You can't bomb a country 'just in case.'" Zapatero added, "The war and the occupation have been a disaster." Honduras just last month sent a contingent of 370 soldiers to Iraq, replacing a force of equal size sent last August.

The announcement said that the Hondurans would leave Iraq at the end of June, but they had been committed for one year. Two days prior to the announced withdrawal, government spokesmen had told reporters that Honduran troops were in Iraq to stay, but this was in the context of a mini-panic in which the director of population and migratory policy Ramon Romero said on television that "the entire area of Central America is on alert" and had been warned by the US that the region was in danger of being infiltrated by Arabs who could be dangerous.

### *US promotes racial profiling*

Romero said the US Embassy had requested his agency to keep a watch on citizens of Arab and Chinese origin as they could have links to networks of extremists. President Ricardo Maduro said then that "all democracies are more vulnerable," that "we will continue supporting the fight against terrorism," and that his troops would continue on in Iraq. Honduras joined El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic in lending their names and citizens to the war in response to a hard sell from the recently defeated Aznar in mid-2003 (see NotiCen, 2003-07-17).

Maduro's decision to send the troops won very narrow legislative support, just enough to put the soldiers on the planes. The lack of enthusiasm, both legislative and popular, may be behind the current rethinking. The change of plans came as US President George W. Bush was urging wavering coalition members to stay in Iraq. The US administration downplayed polls indicating that the coalition was unraveling worldwide. International military presence in Iraq is small compared to the 110,000 troops the US has sent, but the Bush regime reportedly needs what legitimacy it can get from being able to say that about 35 nations are represented among the total of 15,000 soldiers from countries other than Britain.

Nicaragua has already withdrawn, citing lack of finances to continue a presence in Iraq. Nicaragua sent troops under even less secure circumstances, where the opposition Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) opposed the deployment (see NotiCen, 2003-07-10). The troops went with the understanding that their way would be paid in full and that they would be kept out of harm's way. That latter understanding was universal for the region; there was to be no fighting and no injuries to any army of the isthmus or of the Dominican Republic.

### *New generation, old commitment*

A sidebar to Nicaragua's refusal to stay on in Iraq is that in the US, Miami resident Camilo Mejia, a US soldier, refused to return to Iraq saying he is a conscientious objector. He has turned himself in to authorities after some months in hiding. Camilo is the son of Carlos Mejia Godoy, famed Nicaraguan singer and songwriter whose revolutionary poetry and music served as inspiration to Sandinista fighters during the revolution and the contra war. In its celebration of the revolution, Mejia Godoy's *Ay Nicaragua Nicaraguita* could, and did, reduce this entire nation of poets to tears.

On giving himself up, Camilo said, "At the front, we know that that war is just a pretext for oil." And his father said, "I hope they treat him as they would the great patriots of that country. Like Jefferson and Lincoln would treat a soldier of peace, because he is my son, a soldier of peace."

### *Guatemala also questions support*

Another loss for Bush was, apparently, Guatemala. President Oscar Berger, during a trip to Spain on March 6, said during a joint news conference with Aznar that his army would soon join the others in Iraq. Berger said that "an agreement was recently signed" with the US Embassy in Guatemala to that effect. Aznar, in a statement that presaged the kind of misinformation that would soon end his party's reign, said reassuringly, "Today in Iraq life is normalizing and things are improving." Negative reaction from diverse quarters in Guatemala was quick in coming.

Procurador de los Derechos Humanos Sergio Morales said, recalling the country's recent bloody past, "The doctrine and practice of human rights rejects violence in whatever form. In that sense, we believe that the extreme manifestation of violence is war, for which there is no room within the framework of human rights."

A more pecuniary Mariano Rayo, Partido Unionista opposition deputy, said, "It's a laudable gesture of international solidarity, but I'm reminded that the present government says that we have a financial and economic crisis." Equally decisive in what was about to occur was the statement of army spokesperson Edith Vargas, who said, "There are legal aspects that must be taken into account. Given the difficulties we have, the priority must be the nation." There was no further test of wills.

The next day, upon his return to Guatemala, citing lack of funds, Berger said, "We're going to stay out of it; Guatemalan troops are not going to Iraq." Bush's luck is holding in El Salvador. With the curtain about to descend on the current government, but with the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) expected to continue its mandate, Minister of Defense Antonio Martinez

Varela said, "There are no immediate plans [for the return of troops]. We have not received instruction from the government that contradicts their presence" in Iraq. However, he said that the army's commitment extends only until August.

Conversely, this could change radically according to an analysis that was sown with the Spanish election and has shown signs of flowering. Former Salvadoran foreign minister and international relations secretary of the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) Francisco Aguirre Sacasa noted that the PSOE victory weakens Bush, and that means that "the Democratic Party, with its candidate John Kerry, could win the elections, in part, because of the disagreement of the North American electorate with an interminable and apparently unwinnable war, not only in Iraq, but in the Middle East." The implication is that the Salvadoran electorate might want to reconsider its preferences, since Kerry would not look as favorably upon the right-wing ARENA as does the Bush administration.

This analysis found a second in Nicaragua, where FSLN leader Tomas Borge observed, "There are some leaders who are going to say this is the second coming of Christ, and with this [victory of Zapatero], leftist governments will sprout all over Latin America." But if Cuba's Fidel Castro had his way, Spain would leave and take all the Latin American troops with it. In the message Castro sent to Zapatero congratulating him on his victory, the Cuban leader requested the "immediate" return home of all "Latin American youth." He implored the incoming Spanish leader to "prevent the death of Salvadoran, Honduran, Dominican, and Nicaraguan" soldiers. He wrote, "The peoples of Latin America have the right to expect, at least, the immediate return of these young people. They have no duty to wait until June 30."

Castro reasoned that Spain bears the responsibility for "the death that could occur to any of these youths," and, now that the Spanish people have repudiated the principal architect of the Latino presence in Iraq, the whole operation under Spanish command, the Ultra Plus Brigade, should end.

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