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Salvadorans Remain in Iraq

by LADB Staff

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Honduras has become the first Latin American country to follow Spain out of Iraq, but will be the second Central American country to leave. Nicaragua was first; it repatriated its troops on March 1.

But State Department spokesman and Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher did not know that when he told reporters that both El Salvador and Nicaragua "are staying put." Boucher's error goes directly to, and undermines, an issue brought up in President George W. Bush's April 13 press conference.

Answering a reporter's suggestion that the small number of troops in his coalition "is proof [to opponents] that your coalition is window dressing," Bush responded, "I don't think people ought to demean the contributions of our friends into Iraq. People are sacrificing their lives in Iraq, from different countries. We ought to honor that, and we ought to welcome that. I'm proud of the coalition that is there. This is a these are people that have the gut leaders have made the decision to put people in harm's way for the good of the world. And we appreciate that sacrifice in America. We appreciate that commitment." It is now evident that the US State Department doesn't know who is there making those sacrifices.

The remaining countries from the region are El Salvador and the Dominican Republic. The Spanish press reported that those countries were likely to withdraw as well. With 115 Nicaraguans gone, regional troops forming part of the Spanish-led Plus Ultra Brigade now number about 900 (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18). As one of his first acts as Spain's prime minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero announced the withdrawal of his 1,400 troops just one day after his April 17 inauguration. Honduran President Ricardo Maduro followed suit two days later.

The US reportedly expected Zapatero to give the US several weeks to achieve a UN resolution under whose auspices Spain might have stayed, but with little hope of that happening, Zapatero decided to pull back immediately because of the deteriorating security situation. Bush took Zapatero to task for the abruptness of the withdrawal that the Spaniard had been promising for a year, and Boucher followed up saying, "Honduras was affected by the decision of Spain." Boucher was partially correct about that.

Honduran Foreign Minister Leonidas Rosa Bautistas said that President Maduro "has ordered an urgent evaluation of the situation in Iraq. The government and armed forces are making the evaluation with the maximum security and in the shortest time possible." Scant hours later, Maduro announced on the broadcast media throughout the country, "I have decided to return the Honduran troops from Iraq. I have instructed Minister of Defense Federico Breve to execute this decision in the shortest time possible, and in conditions of security for our troops." Maduro had reportedly spoken to Zapatero by phone shortly before this.

This was not, however, a snap decision, said Maduro. "My government has been analyzing closely the evolution of the situation in Iraq, and less than a month ago I announced, for reasons of national convenience, my decision not to ask the Congress for a new authorization to extend their stay," he said. The congressional authorization under which the Hondurans remain in Iraq expires in June.

Salvadoran opposition grows El Salvador may be where the other shoe drops. Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador Gregorio Rosa Chavez said in a news conference that the majority of the population "does not want us to continue in that adventure of Iraq." He said the new government, which will take office June 1, would have to make a decision, and "I hope that it is taken with wisdom and taking public opinion into consideration." He said he hoped the death on April 4 in Iraq of 19-year-old Salvadoran soldier Natividad Mendez Ramos "leads to sensible conclusions." Another dozen Salvadorans were injured in the attack that killed Mendez Ramos.

Leveling his heaviest guns at Salvadoran foreign policy, the prelate invoked Pope Juan Paul II, whom he quoted, "Every war is unjust and immoral, and is not the way to resolve problems in today's world." The UN, said the bishop, must "reorganize itself and have greater autonomy" to decide about the situation in Iraq, which, "although they don't want to admit it, is Vietnamizing. That means it was badly conceived, badly calculated, and badly decided."

Addressing incoming president Tony Saca, Rosa Chavez said the Iraq war is "based on lies. There are now tons of ingredients, clearer than at the beginning, that the new president will have to take into account to make this decision."

In February, El Salvador sent 380 soldiers to replace 360 who had been in Iraq for six months. They are scheduled to leave Iraq in August when the government's commitment to the coalition expires. The governing party, Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), said it would keep troops in Iraq for the full period of its commitment. But the Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) insisted on their return.

El Salvador's human rights ombud Beatrice de Carrillo spoke up on April 21, after the other withdrawals had been announced. "The removal of these other troops has caused the guerrilla forces to change their tactics tremendously and exposes us to greater risks," she said. President-elect Saca comes to power June 1. If he remains true to his campaign promise not to withdraw troops, he will clearly be doing so at the cost of popular sentiment. His powerful opposition, the FMLN, had already vowed to resist his administration to the last barricade, even before the Iraq war became a weapon in their hands (see NotiCen, 2004-03-25).

Dominican Republic leaving, too

The remaining Latin American arrow in the coalition quiver, the Dominican Republic, is set to fly home in June. Secretary of the Armed Forces Lt. Gen. Jose Miguel Soto Jimenez carefully emphasized to the press that President Hipolito Mejia has every intention of repatriating his troops without replacing them. Soto's emphasis was necessary in light of previous recent statements that the Dominican Republic forces' departure from Iraq did not depend on Spain's pullout (see NotiCen, 2003-12-18).

Mejia is in an uphill battle for re-election, and there is stiff opposition to his having sent troops to Iraq. The opposition Fuerza de la Revolucion has scheduled a mass protest for April 28, and party coordinator Narciso Isa Conde said the object is to put Mejia on notice that "he can't go around the world trampling and attacking the national sovereignty of other peoples and nations." The protest will mark the 39th anniversary of the 1965 Revolucion Constitucionalista, when insurgent Dominicans battled US Marines, and at least 3,000 died in an attempt to re-establish the government of President Juan Bosch (1963) after a US-backed, anti-communism fueled, military coup toppled him.

Zapatero has pledged to accord Latin America new importance, and he has said that the region will become "a preferential center of attention" of Spain's foreign policy. He said he wants to "contribute to the self-image of its peoples, consolidate democracy in all its countries, and establish the real bases for the actualization, modernization, of our community of nations."

Also on his agenda is a "Pacto de Estado on immigration" with Latin America. This is as important for some nations of the Americas as are the complexities of immigration with the US. Spain, once a net exporter of population, now has about 1.64 million foreigners of whom a million are "irregular." Some 600,000 are Latin American, according to official data. There is widespread opinion, say humanitarian organizations, that official estimates are low. Spain is also a member of the Banco Centroamericano de Integracion Economica (BCIE) and has pledged US\$200 million in capital to the region, of which US\$50 million has so far been deposited. The rest will be provided as demand capital.

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