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## **Honduras To Provide US With Military Basing Facilities, Get Palmerola Back In Return**

by Mike Leffert

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A new military base that will be available to US forces is to be established in Honduras. The base is to be near the Nicaraguan border in Mosquitia, Gracias a Dios Province. General Romeo Vasquez, head of the Honduran Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the press that Honduran forces were already in the area, but "it's a zone where there is conflict and problems, therefore we need to have greater presence."

The July 15 announcement comes a month after President Manuel Zelaya visited US President George W. Bush in Washington. At the same time, the US agreed to help convert the Palmerola base that once supported the contra war against the Sandinistas to a commercial airport for CAFTA trade. Vasquez gave few details about the base, and Army spokesman Col. Leonardo Munoz told the media that it is "a long-term project, but it is being studied formally by both governments."

Reportage on the development gives the impression that President Zelaya initiated the idea of the base during his Washington trip in June, in order to control drug traffic through the remote zone. But, as early as May, Defense Secretary Aristides Mejia said, "The possibility exists of creating facilities in the zones of La Mosquitia and La Ceiba for United States operations; not necessarily a classic base with permanent installations, but just when needed. We intend, if President Zelaya approves, to expand joint operations."

A month later, on June 15, Vasquez contradicted Mejia, saying the plan was "to establish a permanent military base of ours in the zone." The area is swamp and jungle, accessible only by air, sea, and river. The expansion also would permit US use of Honduran maritime territory and infrastructure for warships capable of long periods at sea. Mejia said the US already has air base facilities in Gracias a Dios, with the Quinto Batallon in Mocoron and a naval station at their disposal nearby. Mejia said future plans call for a radar installation at La Mosquitia.

### *Cloudy chronology: whose idea was this?*

The Honduran defense secretary said that all this was pretty much in place before the Zelaya visit. "We were there when the budget was approved, and some things were included to start functioning next year, but there will be others that will be put off," he said. Analysts took this last statement to mean that these plans were more than just a "possibility." Mejia had been to Washington, at the request of the US, to discuss these plans, along with Vasquez, defense advisor Col. Fidel Velasquez, and Chief of the Comision de Defensa del Congreso Nacional Argentina Valle.

It was also reported that Zelaya, in his discussions with Bush, had requested that the Palmerola Air Base be converted into a commercial airport and that Bush had said the idea was "wholly

reasonable." But the earlier reporting in May quoted Argentina Valle saying that Honduras could get Palmerola in exchange for the installations on the coast. The chronology suggests some effort to make it appear that these developments originated with Zelaya, whereas the record indicates that they came out of earlier discussions between the US and Honduran security officials.

The reporting at the time of Zelaya's visit mentions free trade, democratic institutions, and corruption in Honduras, energy issues, immigration reform, debt relief, military accords (see NotiCen, 2006-05-18), and some other subjects, but not military bases. Discussions of converting the Palmerola Air Base have been going on for years.

It was built in the mid-1980s at a reported cost of US\$30 million for use by the US for supplying the contras during the US proxy war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. During the war, the US had more than 5,000 troops there, against the possibility of a US attack on Nicaragua. Currently some 500-to-600 US troops are stationed there. It functions as a Honduran air force base and as a flight-training center. The base is about 70 km north of Tegucigalpa, in Comayagua. This is an agricultural region, and the thinking of the Zelaya administration is that produce could be air freighted to the US under the provisions of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

Zelaya toured the base on June 1 with US Ambassador Charles Ford, Mejia, Vasquez, and Foreign Relations Minister Milton Jimenez. The president said that Honduran businesspeople had already petitioned for the change of use and that the petition "has already been presented to the US State Department, and they have expressed their total agreement." Plans to adapt the base include construction of a four-lane highway from Tegucigalpa to Comayagua, paid for, said Zelaya, with US donations. "The idea," he said, "is to make this highway an easy-access route to Comayagua and the airfield of Palmerola, which at the moment does not have the conditions for a commercial base, but little by little, the country will adapt to this concept."

The tradeoff seems mutually beneficial to the two countries. The US will get military facilities located strategically for its needs. The Mosquitia area is said to be a corridor for drugs moving south to north, and the coastal location is ideal for naval and air coverage consistent with US-perceived security requirements. The new base also fits the US desire for integration of regional militaries into a force to confront organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism.

Senior officials of the armed forces of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua met June 29 to discuss this kind of coordination. They have been working on this since their presidents agreed on a regional "rapid-response force to confront narcoterrorism and other emerging threats" at a Tegucigalpa summit in February 2005 (see NotiCen, 2005-02-17). The Palmerola tradeoff is exemplary of the linkage between regional security, CAFTA, and US strategic interests.

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