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Costa Rica: Teddy Bears and Military Medical Personnel not Enough to Shield U.S. Warship on Humanitarian Mission from Criticism

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They came on a humanitarian mission to one of Costa Rica’s socially more depressed areas, say government, diplomatic, and military officials. The mission was a façade to try and cover up the US’s effort to drag Costa Rica into its military agenda, said political and civil-society leaders opposed to foreign military presence in a country that abolished its army more than six decades ago.

The USS Iwo Jima docked on Aug. 20 in the Costa Rican eastern Caribbean port city of Limón, some 150 km east of San José, this Central American nation’s capital, for what its promoters described as a 10-day humanitarian mission consisting of medical checkups and surgical and other treatments for some 1,000 people.

The port is the capital of the eastern Costa Rican province of Limón, which stretches between the borders with Nicaragua, on the north, and Panama, on the south. Of the country’s seven provinces, it is one that shows some of this nation’s most critical socioeconomic figures.

The ship and its crew were greeted with an extremely warm welcome by local and national authorities. "Today, you make us feel extremely important," said Limón’s Mayor Eduardo Barbosa, at times addressing his military guests in English.

In his emotional statement, Barbosa added that the operation, Continuing Promise 2010, brought Limón "the huge hope that we shall be different once you have left our lands."

In a speech she read in Spanish, US Ambassador to Costa Rica Anne Andrew said, "Continuing Promise 2010 is testimony to the United States’ constant commitment to Costa Rica."

"It is a joint effort that seeks cooperation from different government agencies, multinational companies, nongovernmental organizations, and public- and private-sector representatives," Andrew said. "It focuses on bringing quality medical care and assistance in engineering to regional communities with humanitarian needs. The arrival of mission Continuing Promise in Costa Rica is another example of the many ways Costa Rica and the United States work together for the benefit of our citizens."

Commander Tom Negus, the ship’s top officer, said, "Continuing Promise is an equal-partner mission that serves as a tangible demonstration of our commitment to our neighbors."

"What we really bring is a message, a message of commitment and partnership—that commitment and partnership is strong, sustained, meaningful, and based on mutual respect," said Negus, and he immediately went on to say that "our feelings of commitment and partnership are so strong that we use no words, instead, we use our actions."

Comisionado Nacional Antidrogas Mauricio Boraschi said during the welcoming ceremony that the mission came to Limón "to give the province support in social areas and, above all, in health."
"What we do" in this mission also "has a positive impact on security issues in this province," added Boraschi referring to Limon’s high violence and crime rates. "We precisely continue working together, both the United States government and Costa Rican authorities, on being able to strengthen actions not only against drug trafficking—which is a quite delicate and important topic—but also in areas such as health, education, and coexistence."

The Costa Rican government "clearly understands this topic deserves much attention, and the social issue in Limón is very important," and it also "very clearly understands that missions that have come to the country—this as well as missions within the framework of the joint-patrol treaty—have been granted the due authorization for the ships’ stay," underlined the commissioner.

Boraschi, often referred to as Costa Rica’s "drug czar," thus referred to the joint-patrol agreement the US and Costa Rica signed in October 1999.

During the press conference that followed, authorities representing both countries took questions that dwelt more on the mission’s military component and provided answers emphasizing that benefits from the mission far outweigh the damages warned against by those opposing it.

"I think that the much larger investment that the United States is making here is with the medical services they will be providing to over 1,000 people, the dental services they will provide to hundreds of people, the 1,000 teddy bears that they are bringing," said Andrew. "And most importantly, the friendships that will be built between the ship’s personnel and both the communities and the experts in the communities here in Limón."

Asked about the crew’s status while in this country, she said, "The boat and the personnel on the boat are here in Costa Rica under a diplomatic note."

On this, the ship’s commander said that the mission came "at the invitation of the Costa Rican government and in consultation with the State Department and the US Southern Commands (SOUTHCOM) in Miami, Florida," and he added, "We have marines who will be working with the Public Force [Fuerza Pública, Costa Rica’s police]."

Complaints about helicopter flights over capital

But opposition legislators and civil-society organizations are not taking official explanations at face value, a position that grew stronger when several US military, twin-engine helicopters from the USS Iwo Jima flew over parts of Costa Rica’s Central Valley. The flights were seen over San José and its eastern sector of Zapote, including the Casa Presidencial, as well as the central city of Cartago, some 23 km southeast of the capital.

The arrival of the USS Iwo Jima is "totally inconvenient, it’s part of a process of militarization of Costa Rica, which we reject, which is contrary to this people’s traditions and to the principles of our Constitution, which abolished the Army and which doesn’t admit the presence of military forces to carry out any activity the Costa Rican state should do," leftist Frente Amplio (FA) Deputy José María Villata told NotiCen.

"And this so-called humanitarian aid or this visit disguised as humanitarian aid is part of this process of gradually taking possession, taking on more presence—the [US] military forces—throughout the Caribbean Basin, and in this case in Costa Rica," Villata went on to point out.
"The helicopter event has angered much of the Costa Rican population, it has caught the people’s attention," said Villata—the FA’s only congressman in the 57-strong Asamblea Legislativa (AL)—the country’s unicameral legislature.

"This was not within the permit the Asamblea approved", warned Villalta, and he explained that the AL, "with our negative vote...approved a permit for the docking, coming on shore, and staying at the port for the North American Navy’s crew for this mission of humanitarian aid in Limón, in the Caribbean zone. So, the permit does not include in any way helicopters flying over other parts of the national territory. We are asking the Ministerio de Gobernación, Policía y Seguridad Público (MSP) to explain" these flights.

Center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) Deputy Néstor Oviedo told NotiCen that the request for the vessel to dock was passed on the understanding "that they were actions to be carried out in the province of Limón, just as it was said to us."

The request "stated it was coming for humanitarian action, that it was a hospital ship, in Limón," and "under no circumstance was it said that they were gong to provide a service or were going out to other places," Oviedo stressed.

Presidency Minister Marco Vargas told the weekly government press conference on Aug. 24—one day after the most recent of the flights was spotted flying over San José and the Casa Presidencial, that the US Embassy said the choppers were being used "for natural-disaster practice."

"Basically, what they point out is that they’re for natural disasters and airlifting Marines who are giving these talks and these instructions and this training," added Vargas. "Remember that part of the project [the mission] is also to prepare for natural disasters," said the minister after stating that he was the receiving information on "what the embassy has referred to on this issue."

Minutes before, Vargas had said he had seen two helicopters flying over San José and that his only comment was that "in a concrete way, there is a permit granted by the Asamblea Legislativa for this landing or this ship’s docking."

Costa Rican union leader Albino Vargas told NotiCen that, "if it is a humanitarian operation, we don’t completely believe so, no matter how many teddy bears they hand out."

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