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Special U.S. Military Task Force Prepares to Land in Honduras, Critics Say to Secure U.S. Interests

by George Rodriguez
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More US Marines are about to land in Honduras, a historical home for that military corps. In the latter part of the last century, US military presence in this Central American nation responded mainly to a Cold War scenario, with leftist guerrillas and national armies fighting head on in El Salvador and Guatemala, and the former guerrilla Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in power and at war with a US-backed irregular force in Nicaragua.

But now, with ideological armed conflicts over since the 1990s, and gang violence and organized crime, along with earthquakes and hurricanes, as the new threats to the region, the US is just as willing to support its allies in the area.

Besides bilateral agreements to fight off international and local criminal organizations established in the Central American isthmus—such as joint patrol agreements covering both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean—and different forms of US cooperation, a Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-South (SPMAGTF-South) is entering the regional stage.

A communiqué issued early last month by the US Embassy in Honduras said, "The United States of America is requesting the government of Honduras permission to carry out a joint exercise between a group of Marines and Honduran counterparts," as part of "our cooperation in issues of preparation for natural disasters as well as cooperation in the continuous fight against drug trafficking and organized crime."

US Embassy cites lofty goals for Marine presence
The embassy explained that "we have requested the Marines' presence in Honduras from June to November 2015, during the hurricane season, to back Honduras in case of an eventual hurricane or other important natural disaster," and to support community services in the easternmost Caribbean department of Gracias a Dios. It also pointed out in its April 6 text that, besides training Honduran troops, the Marines' task includes building schools in this country severely hit by poverty.

A week later, in an article titled "Marines set for new mission in troubled Central America," posted on its Web site, the Marine Corps Times, quoting US military sources, provided a more detailed explanation of the SPMAGTF-South’s mission, a force whose field of action reaches beyond Honduras and Central America, encompassing the rest of Latin America.

"About 250 Marines are preparing to form the US military's first rapid-response task force to be based in Central America, where they'll train with local forces battling drug cartels and stand ready to help in the event of hurricanes and other natural disasters," the paper reported. The task force troopers gathered last month "at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for a ... certification exercise prior to their June deployment to four Central American countries."

"Like the Marine Corps' other task forces designed to respond to contingencies occurring within designated combatant commands, SPMAGTF-South will be dispersed throughout US Southern
Command’s area of responsibility," the newspaper pointed out. The area covers Central America, the Caribbean, and South America.

The report said, "The deployment is expected to last six months, and a replacement unit won't deploy again until the following spring."

"They'll spend six months training alongside local militaries and will conduct humanitarian missions, if needed," it added.

The Times said the bulk of the task force—as well as four CH-53E Super Stallion heavy-lift helicopters—will be stationed in Honduras, while the rest will be distributed in teams deployed to Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador—the latter two countries bordering Honduras to the north and the east.

Task force commander Lt. Col. David Hudak told the publication, "It's the first time the region will see a land-based Marine rotation of this scale, and it's new for a lot of the Marines as well."

The article also said, "This new unit will build on an existing Marine mission to train alongside Central American militaries that are on the front lines of the drug war. With the ultimate destination for the goods being the US border, Central American militaries are deploying into the region's jungles, and along its coastlines and rivers to counter illicit trafficking of cocaine, weapons, money and even people."

Hudak said, "Small teams of Marines have been deployed to Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and El Salvador in recent years to train local forces to combat cartels and narcotics traffickers. SPMAGTF-South will include security cooperation teams that will continue that training mission."

But the task force’s official job description is put to question in Honduran opposition and human rights quarters, where the presence of the new US troops is regarded as protection for US interests and as part of what is described as the government’s militarization of the country.

**Honduran critics see less altruistic motives**

Former Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009) said that, since the bloody coup that toppled him June 28, 2009 (NotiCen, July 2, 2009), "everything’s been privatized, all that moves must be turned into business, and the state must become small, efficient, at the service of the ruling élite."

And, "since people complain, it’s necessary to militarize," Zelaya recently told NotiCen. Honduras "is a state economically handed over" to transnational companies, he added. "I believe this is like a laboratory, which, if successful from their point of view, they’re going to apply to other countries."

Zelaya also said that the militarization process is not altogether an initiative of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who has promoted creating several police forces with a distinct military orientation (NotiCen, Sept. 5, 2013).

"Juan Orlando only runs errands for the gringos [the US]," Zelaya said, smiling. "The problem is that capitalism is sinking … capitalism is in a state of shock, of crisis, it has destroyed the planet’s natural resources, there’s distress, there’s poverty, there’s more violence. So, how does it contain this? With wars, coups … and that’s what you militarize societies for. Militarism is like a weapon to impose a failed model."
Regarding stationing the task force at the Coronel Enrique Soto Cano Air Base, outside the central Honduran city of Palmerola, some 82 km northwest of the capital Tegucigalpa, Honduran human rights activist Bertha Oliva said, "The Palmerola military base installations were improved in 2012 by the Southern Command. More recently, the US government asked Honduras to allow the presence of new Marines."

Oliva told NotiCen that, despite the official discourse about facing off "narcoterrorism, in essence it’s about using Honduras to stop Chavismo without Chávez from El Salvador and Nicaragua." The activist referred to late four-time Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and the leftist governments of Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega—who, along with Zelaya, was one of Chávez’s allies in Central America.

"La base de Palmerola" has a history of US military presence in Honduran territory. During Cold War times, when Honduras was surrounded by internal armed conflict raging in several Central American nations—El Salvador (1980-1992), Guatemala (1960-1996), Nicaragua (1982-1990)—thousands of Marines were stationed at Palmerola.

Successive Honduran governments then feared an attack by the Ejército Popular Sandinista (EPS)—at the time, the region’s most powerful army—during the revolutionary government (1979-1990) of the leftist former guerrilla Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), now in power again.

The reason was the presence of combatants of the US-backed, anti-Sandinista Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN)—better known as la contrarrevolución or la contra—in El Aguacate Air Base, in the southern Honduran department of El Paraíso, from where they would cross over the nearby 922 km border into neighboring Nicaragua.

The local wars ended in the 1990s, through a regional peace agreement signed in 1987 (NotiCen, Aug. 19, 1987) in Guatemala, but violence still hits the region. The threat is not "communist guerrillas" anymore, but local gangs (maras) in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, making up the Triángulo Norte (Northern Triangle) region, and international organized crime—mainly drug-trafficking networks.

With some 80 to 90 homicides per 100,000 population, Honduras is labeled the most violent and dangerous country worldwide—besides nations hit by war—according to estimates by international and local organizations (NotiCen, Feb. 6, 2014), with El Salvador beginning to catch up.

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