US Increasing Troop Numbers in Paraguay

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US efforts to increase its military presence in northwestern Paraguay have raised concerns in neighboring countries and in sectors of the Paraguayan Congress. Paraguay's promises to give US troops immunity from prosecution for war crimes has drawn protests from social and legislative groups. President Nicanor Duarte has repeatedly denied that the US will be allowed to set up a permanent base like the ones it maintains in Guantanamo, Cuba, and Manta, Ecuador, yet expansions at the Mariscal Estigarribia military facility, 280 km from the border with Bolivia, has raised doubts about Duarte's denials.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld woos President Duarte

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made a mid-August tour of Paraguay and Peru, seeking to expand the number of US troops allowed into Paraguay's Chaco region in the northwest. This summer, Paraguay's Congress granted permission for a contingent of US armed forces to remain in the country for 18 months at a time. The joint military exercises authorized by Congress on June 1 cleared the way for the arrival of about 150 US troops in Paraguay.

In May, Congress granted immunity from prosecution to the US soldiers participating in the 13 operations approved so far, two of which are already underway. Through an agreement between the governments of Paraguay and the US on joint military exercises and through bilateral exchanges, Asuncion relinquished the right to subject the visiting troops to the jurisdiction of the local judicial system, international courts, or any other court outside the US. At the start of the Duarte administration, in August 2003, a request by Washington for immunity from prosecution for US troops had been denied. Prior refusals by a number of Latin American countries to offer immunity to US troops led to cutoffs in US aid to those countries (see NotiSur, 2002-09-13, 2003-07-11).

In December 2003, the US cancelled US$330 million dollars in economic aid to some 10 countries, including Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela, because they refused to sign bilateral agreements that would ensure US troops and other citizen's immunity from prosecution by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Since 2002, 46 US military operations have been conducted in Paraguay, including visits, special exercises, and humanitarian missions, especially in the northern departments of San Pedro and Concepcion, the eastern department of Alto Parana whose capital is Ciudad del Este, in the triborder region and the western department of Boqueron. The triborder region is of special concern for countries around the region as a center for smuggling and other criminal activity.

The US claims that support for Islamic terrorist groups is funneled through the area. One of the latest joint exercises was a humanitarian mission in the department of Concepcion, where landless campesinos have been mobilizing in favor of agrarian reform (see NotiSur, 2004-10-01, 2005-02-04.)
Rumsfeld's visit was his third in 10 months, a belated effort by the Bush administration to find support where it has steadily been losing influence. The main claim Rumsfeld makes is that "democracy" is under threat from leftist groups and leaders in the region.

"There certainly is evidence that both Cuba and Venezuela have been involved in the situation in Bolivia in unhelpful ways," Rumsfeld told reporters as he flew to Paraguay from Washington. Rumsfeld declined to elaborate but senior defense officials traveling with him said a major purpose of the secretary's visit to Paraguay was to consult on Cuban and Venezuelan activities in the region.

Rumsfeld and the Bush administration have made repeated allegations about Cuban and Venezuelan "destabilization" efforts, yet have declined to produce evidence or money trails for public consumption.

How Presidents Hugo Chavez or Fidel Castro managed to stage the multimonth, nationwide grassroots protests in Bolivia that toppled President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005) is something the US government has yet to explain (see NotiSur, 2005-01-28, 2005-05-27, 2005-06-17).

During the meeting with Rumsfeld, Paraguayan officials sought greater access to US markets, particularly for beef and other products. The Paraguayan press bitterly reported that the coterie of US reporters accompanying Rumsfeld had free access to the secretary, while Paraguayan reporters were prevented from questioning him during his visit to their country.

Social groups disrupted Rumsfeld's visits to national cemeteries in both Paraguay and Peru. Whistles, shouts, and boos were audible as the top US military official laid wreaths at the graves of dead soldiers. More than 100 protestors faced off against a line of police in Asuncion, shouting phrases including "Murderer!" "Rumsfeld, you have bloody hands!" and "You are the terrorist!"

**US military presence causes concern for MERCOSUR countries**

Some observers have said that the arrival of another 500 US troops in Paraguay on July 1 and the expansion of the Mariscal Estigarribia military base indicate plans to establish a permanent base. They point out that the Mariscal Estigarribia base has been equipped in recent years to permit the landing of large aircraft and to house thousands of troops. Lawmaker Maria Jose da Conceicao of the governing leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) in Brazil expressed surprise that Paraguay authorized the presence of US troops and said that the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), of which Brazil and Paraguay are both members, must take a stand on the matter.

"MERCOSUR is much more than a mere trade pact, and Paraguay should have previously informed its partners in the bloc of its decision," said da Conceicao, a member of the commission on foreign relations and defense in the lower house of the Brazilian Congress. "It is apparent that the US wants to impose the creation of a base in Paraguay where large planes capable of flying to Venezuela over Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia could land." Da Conceicao said Brazilian Defense Minister Jose Alencar and Foreign Minister Celso Amorim should be summoned to a public hearing in
Congress to clarify Brazil's position regarding the decisions that its neighbor and MERCOSUR partner are taking.

Federico Storani, the deputy chairman of the foreign relations commission in Argentina's lower house, said that each MERCOSUR member has the sovereign right to reach its own decisions and that the regional bloc only takes a stance or intervenes if the constitutional order is at risk in one of the member countries.

Nevertheless, Storani, who represents the opposition Union Civico Radical (UCR), said he was opposed to the entrance of foreign troops who enjoy immunity from prosecution. "I don't like that at all, for Argentina or for any MERCOSUR country," he said, adding that it would be even more serious if the US troops scheduled to take part in 13 different joint military exercises in Paraguay between now and Dec. 31, 2006, were a precursor of a permanent military presence. Yet President Duarte has repeatedly denied that he will allow a permanent base to be set up.

"There is no proposal to install a US military base in Paraguay, and, if it did exist, we would reject it overwhelmingly because that would represent a mutilation of our autonomy and political and economic independence," said Duarte in a late August interview.

But Paraguayan political analyst and historian Milda Rivarola said that, "in practice, there has already been a [US] base operating in Paraguay for over 50 years." While the actual physical infrastructure of a military base does not exist, the US armed forces have had a continued, ongoing presence in the country, she said. "In the past, they needed congressional authorization every six months, but now they have been granted permission to be here for a year and a half," she said.

Paraguayan Senate demands explanation

In the Senate, Duarte's meeting with Rumsfeld came under harsh criticism. Vice President Luis Castiglione was called before the Senate to give an official report on the content of the executive branch's dealings with Rumsfeld. The absence of any official report following the meeting between Duarte, Castiglione, and Rumsfeld created suspicion and anger in opposition sectors of the Congress. Sen. Ana Maria Mendoza of the Patria Querida (PQ) was among the congressional voices demanding Duarte and his officials explain what went on in the "closed and secret" meetings with the US defense secretary. "What have they come looking for?" asked Mendoza. "If it's for the terrorist threat, we have a right to know, and, if that is a pretext, what is Paraguay going to commit to?"

Senators presented Castiglione with a set of questions to answer: 1 What are the true objectives of the Rumsfeld visit? 2 What benefits will Paraguay receive, if any? 3 What did Paraguay commit to? There was also a question regarding tariff reductions for Paraguayan goods into Florida.