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## **Argentine President Cristina Fernandez Stands Up to U.S.**

*by LADB Staff*

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On April 17, the Argentine government surprised the diplomatic world and even more so the Argentine public by announcing that it had sent a peremptory directive for the US Military Group, a technical-cooperation mission providing services in Argentina, to vacate the offices it has occupied for a half century in the Ministerio de Defensa central office. After a brief but cordial conversation between Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and US President Barack Obama during the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago in mid-April, such a unilateral decision seemed unimaginable.

Nevertheless, most surprised were political, business, and social leaders and ordinary citizens, who learned for the first time, through this seemingly purely administrative act, that since the 1960s some 50 foreign military personnel shared tasks, infrastructure, and offices, under the same roof and within Argentine military units, with local Army and Navy experts who managed sensitive national-security issues.

Since the June 28 legislative elections could cost the president the legislative majorities that have until now allowed her to govern without many unwelcome surprises, some thought the measure was a big splash for purely political motives. US military mission terminated Argentina has a long-standing anti-US sentiment deep-rooted and not tied to ideology and it was thought that the decision was aimed at capitalizing on that sentiment for electoral purposes. But that view was mistaken.

Although it is true that Argentines have become used to their government's grandiose gestures, within days it became clear that expelling the US military mission was actually a new chapter in a pent-up continental dispute in which Argentina has put itself out front in condemning US military and economic policies. "It is only logical that, in a central ministry such as this, where all defense decisions are made, we should not be working with agents from other countries in the office next to us, especially those from a hegemonic and interventionist power such as the US. It is a basic tenet of national sovereignty," a spokesperson for Defense Minister Nilda Garre told Argentine daily Pagina 12.

In the official presentation 50 years ago announcing the arrival of the US military, the public was told that the mission "uses, in accordance with its requests, facilities offered by the national government but reports directly to the diplomatic authorities of its country." A confidential document from Argentine Ministerio de Defensa files shows that the US Military Group was responsible for providing technical and strategic support for the decisions that led President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) to abandon significant advances in three national arms-development projects: the Condor missile, a submarine already under construction, and an armored vehicle known as the Tanque Argentino Mediano (TAM).

Among the hundreds of national print, radio, and TV outlets, only Pagina 12 ran the story. International news agencies transmitted the information and let the world know that Argentina had just broken certain ties that subordinated it strategically to policies designed by the Pentagon, such as Menem's three decisions within what his foreign relations minister Guido di Tella called Argentina's "carnal relations" with the US. Outside Argentina, however, the news had ample repercussions.

The head of the US Military Group in Argentina is Col. Edwin Passmore, an officer with rich experience who has held similar posts in Caracas and also served in Afghanistan and as a Pentagon intelligence advisor in Kuwait during the first US invasion of Iraq. Since 2003, when former President Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007), husband of President Fernandez, took office, military relations with the US have been limited.

Under the Kirchner and Fernandez administrations, officers have no longer been sent for training at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC), formerly known as the School of the Americas (SOA), which the Pentagon renamed after it became evident that graduates were involved in undermining Latin American democracies and installing dictatorships that carried out the most abhorrent human rights violations. (Roy Bourgeois, a Catholic Maryknoll priest who leads the struggle to close the school, called the name change "throwing perfume on a toxic dump.")

### *Argentina skips joint maneuvers*

It was also the Fernandez administration that reacted most strongly when, in 2008, the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) announced that, after a half-century of inactivity, it was reactivating the Fourth Fleet. Because of that, for the first time, Argentina did not participate in last April's Operacion Unitas Gold, which was full of symbolism since 2009 was the 50th anniversary of the naval exercises carried out every year since 1959.

Garre's aides say the Ministerio de Defensa is reviewing its existing cooperation agreements and military-exchange programs with various countries but primarily the US. To do so, the government has proposed an as-yet-unfinished work agenda to US Ambassador in Buenos Aires Earl Anthony Wayne. "Some joint projects that are at an advanced stage are in limbo because of US insistence on erasing the boundaries between defense and national security," a philosophy with which Argentina does not agree, wrote Pagina 12 without specifying which joint projects it referred to. It is assumed that Garre and US Defense Secretary Robert Gates (appointed by former US President George W. Bush and kept on by President Obama) discussed the issue when they met during the September 2008 Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas (CDMA) in Canada.

Nevertheless, a Sept. 4, 2008, communique on the Ministerio de Defensa Web site said the central issue covered in the bilateral meeting was Argentina's complaint about the reactivation of the Fourth Fleet, the determinant factor in the decision of Argentina, as well as Uruguay, to not participate in Operacion Unitas Gold and to only send an observer mission to those exercises. Nevertheless, the Web sites of both SOUTHCOM and Global Security reported the two countries' full participation in the joint exercises in April and May at Mayport Naval Station on the northern Florida coast.

## *President bans GM soy from military lands*

In a different setting, this confrontational attitude toward US government policies had a second manifestation, also from the Argentine Ministerio de Defensa, with an official order prohibiting "soy cultivation on lands belonging to the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, as well as on lands adjacent to military areas." The amount of affected land is not known, but the armed forces are among the largest landholders in the country.

The decision is aimed directly at multinational Monsanto, which holds the patent on genetically modified (GM) soy seed and Roundup Ready herbicide. The principal active ingredient in this herbicide is glyphosate, which government and private studies indicate is harmful to humans. In an April 12 resolution, Minister Garre said, "The rationale for this measure is that planting transgenic soy depends on a package associated with herbicides whose effects are not neutral for the environment or people's health."

The resolution is not ingenuous. This is the first time that a government agency has admitted that glyphosate could be harmful to human health. When Argentine legislators were debating passage of a patent law benefiting Monsanto, the multinational had an ardent defender and active lobbyist in the US Embassy.

Meanwhile, since March 2008, the government has faced a merciless offensive from agriculture sectors tied to soy cultivation, which have not hesitated in advocating the interruption of the institutional life of the country by calling for the president's resignation (see NotiSur, 2008-04-11, 2008-08-01, 2009-03-27). The political opposition has capitalized on that offensive and is calling on supporters to inflict a "humiliating defeat" on the president in the June 28 legislative elections.

On May 11, rightist Mauricio Macri, head of the Buenos Aires city government and a possible presidential candidate in 2011, said on TV, "The Cristina cycle is already over," and the time has come "to begin to agree on a civilized transition." What Macri proposes and the principal leaders of corporate agriculture, the political opposition, and the major media outlets applaud is nothing less than the rupture of institutional order.

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