

6-12-2009

Many Questions Arise Following Audit of U.S. Military Base in Ecuador

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Many Questions Arise Following Audit of U.S. Military Base in Ecuador." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13786>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Many Questions Arise Following Audit of U.S. Military Base in Ecuador

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Ecuador

Published: 2009-06-12

In 1999, few Ecuadorans raised red flags about the installation of a US military base in Ecuadoran territory whose mission would be to control drug trafficking. In violation of the Constitution, the bilateral agreement regarding the Puesto de Operaciones de Avanzada (Forward Operating Location, FOL), as the military base was called to disguise its true purpose, was never approved by the Ecuadoran Congress. Only the Comision de Asuntos Internacionales, led by rightist Congressman Heinz Moeller, examined the agreement and approved turning over Base Aerea Eloy Alfara, in the costal city of Manta, to the US military, from which it would launch surveillance flights (see NotiSur, 1999-05-20).

Neoliberalism had been rigorously implemented in Ecuador, the dollar was adopted as the national currency, and the rightist parties had monopolized all seats of power and democratic institutions. The US took advantage of these circumstances to gain access to Manta.

Ten years later, the silence surrounding the agreement's approval has begun to be broken. Social organizations, youth collectives, associations of fishers, women, and private citizens have regained their voice to denounce the effects of the foreign military presence at the Manta base. They did so at a public hearing on May 21, in which the Comision Especializada de Asuntos Internacionales y Seguridad Publica (CEAISP) of the Asamblea Nacional (AN) listened and promised to act in response to the various complaints of human rights violations.

Where is the promised economic growth?

The installation of the US base was expected to bring economic growth, which is the argument the US Embassy in Ecuador still uses to justify its presence. Its Web page says, "The FOL injects over US \$6.5 million annually into the local economy of Manta. This investment includes important operating costs for the airport, such as over US\$2 million to operate the Manta FOL Fire Department and approximately US\$200,000 in airport maintenance costs. Miguel Moran, leader of the Movimiento Tohalli de Manta, says, however, that the US Embassy's assertions are lies, since US military personnel did not consume local products, and the little money that came in went to a small group of proprietors of high-class bars and other places frequented exclusively by US military personnel.

Along the same line, Manta fire chief Sofonias Rezavala told CEAISP, "The FOL's only support was a few used uniforms, and they did not provide the aid necessary to develop this institution. The only investment made was in the FOL fire station."

Rezavala also complained that they received little help battling one of the worst fires ever suffered by the city of Manta, which destroyed 10 houses in the colonial center of the city on June 21, 2005. "We Ecuadoran firefighters had to fight the fire alone," said Rezavala. "The radars will not bring my husband back"

The initial belief surrounding the base has changed; the FOL is now an unwanted tenant for Manta fishers, small business owners, and social organizations. The foreign presence is seen through a more regional perspective, where the US's implementation of neoliberalism and its control of resources are more important than the stated objective of fighting drugs. "If my children or grandchildren ask me what I did when a foreign military base was installed in my country, I want to tell them that, yes, I condemned what they did, and yes, I warned about what it meant for Ecuador and Latin America," said Marcos Martinez, CEAISP president.

Criticisms of the US presence include denunciations that CEAISP will have to verify, such as those related to the disappearance of the Jorge IV fishing boat on June 15, 2002, precisely at the time the US began its operations against Ecuadoran boats suspected of carrying migrants or transporting drugs. At the headquarters of the Asociacion de Pescadores Autonomos Artesanales de Manabi in a bamboo house on the outskirts of Manta, CEAISP members listened to the wives of the fishermen who disappeared on the Jorge IV.

Maria Urgiles, wife of one of the 18 disappeared fishers, could not believe that this time, after seven years of fruitless appeals for help from the authorities, seven lawmakers were listening to her. Maria asked why the radars, the satellites, and the cutting-edge technology at the disposal of the US at the Manta base were not put to immediate use to carry out search operations the day they were notified of the boat's disappearance. Maria says she wants to make an agreement with the US government. "Let them take the FOL, the radars, and the planes...and return my husband to me," she said, adding with resignation, "I know the radars will not bring back my husband."

In search of answers

The US Embassy's Web page says that the FOL's mission is limited to anti-drug trafficking and that its work consists of carrying out aerial missions to provide information for maritime interdiction operations by the US Coast Guard and its allies, but that it does not participate directly in the operations. However, Article 3 of the agreement between Ecuador and the US says, "Interdiction operations in Ecuadoran territory are the exclusive responsibility of the Republic of Ecuador."

CEAISP wants to know on what basis the US carried out maritime interdictions in Ecuadoran territorial waters, during which at least 14 boats were sunk, another six were damaged, and unjustified torture and repression against fishers and migrants took place. One such case was that of the fishing boat Ochossi, whose captain said, "In 2005, US military boarded us, a plane flew over us for eight hours. They cornered us in an inlet and made us hold weapons and be photographed with first and last name like drug traffickers. They gave us no food until the next day. They destroyed our launches, used objects to make perforations, and, when they found nothing, they left. When we asked who was going to pay for the damages, they gave us a paper and told us to go to the embassy. They left us adrift and went away."

One by one, CEAISP heard testimonies from captains of boats or their owners, who said they never received help from any Ecuadoran authority in demanding that the US pay for the damages it caused, and the US Embassy never even met with them to negotiate a settlement. What did they really do? CEAISP also visited FOL installations on May 22 and spoke with US representatives.

Despite their refusal to answer lawmakers' questions and their repeated insistence that all requested information had to be solicited through the Ecuadoran Foreign Ministry, some important information was gathered that provided the basis for a request for an comprehensive audit of US activities, which CEAISP will present to President Rafael Correa. Lawmakers found the FOL's claim of efficiency in the war on drugs surprising. The US Embassy has made repeated statements highlighting the success of the anti-drug operations and said they have captured more than 1,800 tons of cocaine.

Nevertheless, when lawmakers asked where the evidence was, where the people detained were, how many trials have been carried out as a result of these captures, and even more important, why these figures do not agree with those of the Consejo Nacional de Substancias Estupefacientes y Psicotropicas (CONSEP), FOL representatives replied that the amount of drugs corresponds to operations of the three FOL installations in Latin America and joint operations with 11 countries.

CEAISP vice president Pilar Nunez has calculated the effectiveness of the FOL's anti-drug efforts and says, "Even if the level of effectiveness is around 15 tons of cocaine captured each year in each participating country, the effect is nil, ridiculous even, if one considers the number of aerial missions, the personnel assigned, and the investment made. So, with this minimal effect on controlling drugs, it's worth asking, what did they do in these 10 years?"

The question will have to be answered by the Comision de Auditoria de la Base de Manta that the executive must name once CEAISP submits the report of its visit and the questions that have been raised. Meanwhile, the US will abandon Manta in July, four months before the agreement signed in 1999 expires, and which the present Ecuadoran government refused to renew (see NotiSur, 2007-01-26, 2008-08-08).

-- End --