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Guatemala: Defense Minister Says U.S. Troop Maneuvers Do Not Violate Constitution

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Dec. 21, Guatemalan Defense Minister Hector Alejandro Gramajo rejected the notion that military maneuvers in Guatemala by US soldiers violate the country's constitution, as alleged by several Guatemalan congresspersons. According to government officials, a contingent of some 40 US soldiers carried out parachuting and survival practices between Nov. 28 and Dec. 12 in the department of Peten. Peten borders on Mexico and Belize. The presence of the US soldiers was kept secret until the Anthropological Institute Workers Union denounced the maneuvers which allegedly caused damage to archaeological sites in Yaxhua, located a few kilometers from the pre-Colombian city of Tikal. The denunciation led the Foreign Relations Commission of the Guatemalan Congress to request "clarifications" of the US troop maneuvers in the region from the Defense and Foreign Ministers toward determining whether they were in violation of the constitution. For Gen. Gramajo, the presence of a small US special unit in Peten did not merit a previous authorization from the Congress. According to Guatemalan army spokesperson Col. Luis Rodriguez, "if they had been a battalion or a military installation, then we would have solicited the appropriate authorization." Rodriguez said that the maneuvers constituted a "simple interchange" between US troops and units of Guatemala's elite "kaibiles." Meanwhile, the US Embassy in Guatemala City released a communique denying that the soldiers had caused damage to the archaeological site. The contingent from Fort Bragg, said the communique, had carried out maneuvers in various parts of the world without causing damage in any country. The congressional commission decided, however, that the action in Peten merited a series of investigations to determine whether the presence of the US troops affected Guatemala's "active neutrality." Juan Morales Navarrete, president of the congressional Commission on Central American Integration, said, "We condemn the interference of foreign troops in Guatemala for its effect on the active neutrality, and the government should be concerned about and demonstrate that our neutrality is genuine...The constitution demands that the Congress approve not only the passage of any foreign army or establishment of temporary bases in our country, but also that it be approved by two-thirds of the Congress." [Basic data from Excelsior (Mexico), 12/22/88]

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