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Panama, U.S. Reach Preliminary Accord On Military Bases

by LADB Staff

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The US ambassador to Panama, William Hughes, announced on Feb. 26 that he and then foreign minister Gabriel Lewis had reached a "general and preliminary" understanding under which the US would keep four of its ten military bases rent free after the US pullout in the year 2000 as required under the 1977 Torrijos-Carter treaty. However, Lewis's successor, Ricardo Arias, refused to recognize any such understanding. While there seems little doubt that some sort of agreement in principal is in place, there are conflicting reports about whether the military bases will remain open or whether the agreement is only on the use of Howard Air Force Base as a multinational antinarcotics center (Centro Multilateral Contra el Narcotrafico, CMN).

Jorge Ritter, Panama's representative in talks with US representative John D. Negroponte, confirmed the existence of a preliminary agreement, but he said it had only to do with the antinarcotics center. President faces hurdles in negotiating with US Although public opinion polls always show that a great majority of Panamanians want the US to keep a military force in Panama because of the boost it gives to the economy, nationalistic feelings and continuous wrangling over the issue among the political parties have slowed negotiations for more than two years. In 1995, for example, local newspapers reported that President Ernesto Perez Balladares had held secret talks with US officials on the extension of base rights.

Under heavy criticism for compromising Panamanian sovereignty, the president retreated from any appearance of having actively sought a new accord with the US. Only if the US asks first, would he agree to negotiate on an extension, he said (see NotiSur, 02/24/95). Informal talks continued thereafter, but the Perez Balladares administration has consistently balked at signing any deal because the US insisted on getting the use of bases rent free. One obstacle to negotiations was the appointment of Negroponte, who is regarded unfavorably in nationalistic circles because of his record as ambassador to Honduras during the 1980s, when the US secured military bases there to support the contra war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Another political consideration that may have prevented frank and timely negotiations is the precarious hold the government has on the voters' allegiance. Despite the popular support for an extension of base rights, the referendum on the issue that the government promised could give voters the chance to register general disapproval of Perez Balladares. An editorial in the magazine Panama Virtual said that a referendum on the bases could turn out to be a "vote to punish the government for the unpopularity it has been generating with its economic measures."

Perez Balladares briefly rejects all US military

Talks went on discretely, however, through 1996, but were thrown off track in October when Perez Balladares exploded a diplomatic bombshell, telling Foreign Minister Arias that "there won't be a single American base, a single American soldier, in this country in the year 2000." Sources said Arias was taken by surprise. "Arias's jaw just dropped open," said one diplomat.

Later, the president seemed only to postpone any bilateral agreement on bases until what he hopes will be his second term in office, by saying that Panama will start the next century "without the presence of foreign military bases." These remarks surprised officials in Washington, and Negroponte immediately cancelled scheduled talks in Panama.

Panama proposes antinarcotics center

Despite the president's statements, the Foreign Ministry continued to say that the door was not shut on negotiations. As the concept of base rights was argued out along nationalistic lines, Perez Balladares introduced the idea of a nonmilitary base that would serve as an international center for antinarcotics operations. Critics say the plan is a cover to allow the US to keep a large military force in the country. But administration officials deny this and note that with several other countries involved, concerns about US influence in Panama would be lessened, while preserving the economic benefits.

To insure Panamanian "neutrality" and independence from the US, the administration plans to sign a collective accord on the CMN with all nations involved. The Foreign Ministry reported in December 1996 that talks on the proposal were progressing in Washington, but public statements by US officials suggested that the US had not let go of the idea of maintaining a strong military presence in Panama. US Secretary of Defense William Cohen said in February that a "residual" military force would be necessary for the CMN to operate. The head of the US Southern Command, Gen. Wesley Clark, told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he foresaw the need for a US military force of between 4,000 and 5,000 troops to protect life and property, to maintain the neutrality of the canal, and to carry out humanitarian as well as antinarcotics operations.

In January, Clark caused another stir when the local press reported that he had told the governor of Puerto Rico that talks were underway on extending rights to several military bases. Clark reportedly said it was not clear that all US forces would leave Panama at the end of 1999. The newspaper El Panama America reported that the US Defense Department plans to transfer 70 aircraft to Panama for use in the proposed CMN. These statements gave the impression that much more than an antinarcotics center was under consideration. Ambassador Hughes disavowed Clark's remarks and said there were no negotiations underway to keep the US military in Panama after 1999.

Arias said that, in any case, no matter what sort of an accord is reached, the final decision on the CMN will be made through a popular referendum and that the question of military bases was "virtually dead." Besides the referendum, both countries will have to make arrangements with the other countries that are expected to cooperate in the antinarcotics center. Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, and Bolivia have expressed interest in participating. [Sources: Miami Herald, 11/19/96; Spanish News Service EFE, 12/03/96, 01/28/97; Associated Press, 02/21/97 02/27/97; El Panama America, 11/18/96, 01/28/97, 02/27/97; Panama Virtual, 02/97; El Siglo (Panama), 02/28/97]

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