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LADB Staff

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U.S. Expedites Transfer of Military Bases to Panama

by LADB Staff

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On March 10, President Ernesto Perez Balladares formally took possession of the US Rodman Naval Base near the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal. Panama will take physical control of the base April 30. The transfer marks the beginning of a new phase of rapid decommissioning and transfer of the principal remaining bases.

In a ceremony attended by Cabinet members, Adm. Paul Reason, commander of the US North Atlantic Fleet, and US military officers from Rodman, Perez Balladares said acquisition of the base opens new possibilities for investment. Panama plans to turn part of the base into a complex that will include an oil refinery, warehouse facilities for grains and lubricants, dockyards, and an anchorage for a tuna fleet.

Already, the Panamanian Maritime Service is using part of the base. In February, the US announced a schedule for transferring all remaining properties before the Dec. 31, 1999, deadline required by the 1997 Carter-Torrijos treaties. In March, the US handed over its facilities on Galeta Island. Following Rodman, Howard Air Force Base will close in May, Fort Sherman and two firing ranges will be transferred in June, and Fort Clayton in July. US Army spokesman Col. Byron Conover said the pace of the base transfers is speeding up. "We begin moving in earnest at the end of May," said Conover. "By June we'll be deactivating units, and by July all of the personnel's families will have left Panama."

At its peak, US troops strength in Panama was 60,000. The number is now down to 4,000. Panama-US negotiations to turn Howard into a multinational anti-narcotics center broke down last October, forcing the US to look elsewhere (see EcoCentral, 1998-10-01). When Howard closes, current counternarcotics intelligence operations there will presumably end. When Fort Clayton closes in July, the US Army South command headquarters will move to Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico. (Sources: Associated Press, 02/12/99; Reuters, 03/10/99; Notimex, Spanish News Service EFE, 03/11/99; El Panama America, 03/12/99).

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