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LADB Staff

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Russia Closes Surveillance Facility in Cuba

by LADB Staff

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has decided to close the Russian military electronic-surveillance center (Centro de Inteligencia) at Lourdes, near Havana, which has been running since the 1960s. The decision infuriated the government of President Fidel Castro and further eroded already unsteady relations between the two countries. Analysts say the move signals Russian interest in closer relations with the US, which has objected to the presence of the center in Cuba.

The center is a Cold War relic installed in 1964, two years after the Cuban missile crisis. Russia currently pays Cuba US\$200 million a year mostly in spare parts and other goods to rent the center. It spends an additional US\$100 million or so on the 1,500 Russian military personnel and their families who live near the center. Putin said the closing did not mean a change in bilateral relations. And, in late October, a group of Russian parliamentarians arrived in Cuba for a three-day visit to smooth relations.

Before leaving, the delegation's leader said the meetings with Cuban counterparts indicated that bilateral relations "have good prospects." He said there were practical economic matters where cooperation would be possible such as in oil refining.

Officially, the US government has objected to the presence of the center so close to the southern US and claimed that it is used to spy on US communications and military operations. The Russians say the center serves to check on US compliance with nuclear test-ban treaties and to monitor US missile tests. But in practical terms, the Lourdes center was not much of an issue except for anti-Castro hard-liners in Miami and in Congress.

In 1998, Rep. Sam Gejdenson (D-CT) said US officials viewed the center as useful because the Russians could verify that the US was in compliance with arms-control agreements. The Defense Department downplayed the center as a source of friction because of a tacit understanding with the Russians that neither side would call attention to each other's electronic listening posts (see EcoCentral, 1998-04-16). Hard-liners in the Cuban exile community have insisted that the center posed a threat to national security, and there was some sentiment in Congress to force its closing.

A congressional committee voted last year to restrict aid to Russia until it dismantled the Lourdes center. Russian authorities said the measure was excessive since a similar US post in Norway was more sophisticated than the one at Lourdes (see CubaSource, 2000-06-09). The Russian newspaper Izvestia reported Aug. 13 that the government was about to shut down the center and that Russian personnel and equipment were already being withdrawn. The newspaper quoted military sources who said the withdrawal was being done hurriedly and that the center would be closed by the end of the year.

Two months later, President Putin confirmed that the center would be closed as would a Russian installation at the naval station at Cam Ranh, Vietnam. He made the announcement Oct. 17 during a meeting with his Defense Ministry. The focus of the meeting was Putin's proposal for a strategic overhaul of the Russian military, which included closing the two facilities. On Oct. 23, Russian Ambassador in Havana Andrei Dimitriev confirmed the closing. He told reporters that the decision had been made and there was no more to say about it.

Commander Anatoly Kvashnin, chief of the general staff of the Russian armed forces, said the decision was made "after lengthy negotiations with our Cuban partners." He said the move resulted from changes in the world political situation. He added that the savings in rent and maintenance costs would buy 20 reconnaissance satellites and 100 radar installations that could do the intelligence gathering better than the Lourdes center.

President George W. Bush praised Putin's decision, saying that it was another indication that the Cold War was over. "President Putin understands that Russia and America are no longer adversaries," said Bush.

Cuba denounces decision

Following the ambassador's confirmation of the closing, the Cuban government objected strongly, arguing in an official note that the center was important to Cuban security because, since Sept. 11, "the US government's stance is more aggressive and belligerent than ever." Under the circumstances, the closure would amount to a concession to the US, said the note. An editorial in the official government newspaper Granma asked, "How is it possible that scarcely months after the Russian president's visit to Cuba, in the midst of a grave crisis that constitutes a risk to world peace, and especially to Cuba, subjected to more than 40 years of blockade, aggressions, and terrorism, [Russia] adopts the precipitous decision to eliminate the center?"

The government note challenged the Russian explanation for the move and disputed Kvashnin's claim that closing the center followed negotiations with Cuba. The note said the arrangement for use of the center could not be canceled because Cuba had not agreed to it and that Russia would have to negotiate a new agreement on the future of the center. The note acknowledged that the two countries were in negotiations but that they were inconclusive. "Not a word of its closure was said" when Castro and Putin visited the center in December 2000, said the note. "On the contrary, there was talk of further developing and modernizing it." However, the future of the center was not at all clear after last December, and the decision to close it may not have been a complete surprise in Havana.

During the December visit, Putin seemed to signal the changes to come when he said that the old relationship with Cuba was finished and that Russia had decided that "we will build a relationship between our countries based upon the warm feelings and high-level relations that already exist." In talks, described as difficult, Putin made no important concessions on the outstanding issues of trade, investment, and renegotiation of Cuba's debt to the old Soviet Union. During the tour of Lourdes, the two leaders agreed that the center would remain in service. However, Russian sources said it was technologically obsolete and no longer of strategic importance (see CubaSource, 2001-01-12).

Havana is now saying the only disagreement was over how much Russia should pay in rent. Russia wanted Cuba to hand over 25% of its rent income as compensation for the intelligence information it received from the center. Havana countered with an offer to pay 12.5%. According to the official note, Russia had been demanding rent reductions for several years, had fallen behind in rent payments, and had abruptly ended bargaining over the rent. In an argument based on equity and fairness, the government note said that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba allowed the center to remain open and charged nothing for it until Russia canceled various economic arrangements with Cuba in 1992.

In exchange for permission to modernize and expand the Lourdes facility, Russia began paying rent US\$90 million in 1992 and US\$160 million from 1993 to 1995. The US\$200 million payment began only in 1996. "This sum is not at all extraordinary when one considers that it is barely 3% of the damage caused to our country's economy by the disintegration of the socialist bloc and the USSR and the unilateral annulment of all agreements," said the Cuban note. It went on to say that Russia's haste to close the center was because Putin wanted to make the announcements about the Cuban and Vietnamese bases when he and Bush met at the Asia-Pacific Cooperation Forum in Shanghai on Oct. 21. "The one regarding Cam Ranh, although unimportant in reality, is highly symbolic; the one concerning Cuba would be a special gift," said the note.

Later in October, Havana announced that Russia should pay US\$1.23 billion as compensation for the loss of trade and investment in ongoing projects after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In reporting on the demand, Granma took the same frank tone as the Oct. 17 official note, underscoring the magnitude of the ideological antagonism between the two former allies. Since 1991, said Granma, "there has been no collaboration between Russia and Cuba, and no one remembered whether we existed." With the nearly total withdrawal of Russian cooperation, said a Granma editorial, Cuba was left with large unfinished projects: the half-built nuclear-power plant at Juragua, a nickel-processing plant in Holguin province, and abandoned investment plans for Cuba's oil industry. Yet Russia continued to demand payment of Cuba's debts to the former Soviet Union at a time "when there were no markets, food, fuel, raw materials, or vital resources." The economic chaos that followed Cuba's "special period" resulted from the "hurricane of pillage and robbery" that occurred in Russia.

Reasons for closing in dispute

The Russian Press Digest speculated that Putin decided to close the center after his December 2000 visit to Cuba when he and Castro could not agree on how to finance it, and alternately, that Putin and Bush agreed on the closing during their meeting in Slovenia last summer. The announcement of the closing came just days after the first US attacks on Afghanistan and Putin's announcement of support for the US war on terrorism. Analysts have suggested that the closing is part of a general restructuring of US-Russia post-Cold War relations and see it as a prelude to further agreements on such matters as Bush's missile defense shield.

US and Kremlin defense specialists told CNN that the financial benefit to Russia from the closing would not be significant. Instead, they said, it was part of Putin's policy of forging closer relations with the West despite misgivings by elements in the military and among former Soviet hard-liners.

In exchange for the Lourdes closing, Putin expects the US to close its spy center in Norway and support a debt-reduction agreement and Russian membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), analysts say. US government spokespersons said little or nothing about the center's supposed menace to national security but instead emphasized the symbolism of ending a vestige of the Cold War.

Following a dinner meeting between Secretary of State Colin Powell and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov in preparation for the Shanghai meeting, a senior US official said Russia might be viewing the recent cooperation on international terrorism as a chance to improve relations in other areas. Powell said in a speech at the conference that "there is a new strategic opportunity." Cuba appears not to figure in the emerging strategic opportunity.

The Miami Herald speculated that China might replace Russia as Cuba's ally in intelligence gathering. China has reportedly already built a center for electronic eavesdropping in Havana province.

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