



## U.S. Military Bases in Latin America and the Caribbean

By John Lindsay-Poland

The explosion of U.S. military interest and funding for Plan Colombia, occurring in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from military bases in Panama in December 1999, has given rise to a proliferation of new U.S. bases and military access agreements in the region. The growth of these new, smaller bases constitutes a decentralization of the U.S. military presence in the region and has been Washington's response to a reluctance by regional leaders to host large U.S. military bases or complexes.

What the U.S. Southern Command (SouthCom) calls the "theater architecture" is a complex web of U.S. military facilities and functions in the region. This interlocking structure has been in transition. U.S. military facilities represent tangible commitments to underlying policy priorities, such as ensuring access to strategic

resources, especially oil, and to a supply-side drug war that holds foreigners responsible for U.S. citizens' addiction to illegal drugs.

"Puerto Rico has replaced Panama for forward basing headquarters in the region," SouthCom General Peter Pace told Congress in March 2001. Puerto Rico serves as regional headquarters for the Army, Navy, and Special Forces, while SouthCom headquarters itself is located in Miami.

But unlike U.S. bases in Panama, the function of Navy training in Vieques has as

much to do with U.S. military missions in Iraq and Europe as it does with operations in Latin America, since battle groups deploy directly from Puerto Rico to the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, where they conduct regular bombing runs. Until 1997, when facilities in Puerto Rico were incorporated into SouthCom, the Vieques bases were part of the Atlantic Command.

Besides the land bombing range on Vieques, the Navy also operates an "outer range" of nearly 200,000 square miles, an underwater tracking range for submarines, and an electronic warfare range in waters near the island. The ranges are used both by the Navy and by military contractors to test sophisticated ship and weapons systems.

The Pentagon is also investing in its own new infrastructure in Latin America, with four new military bases in Manta, Ecuador; Aruba; Curaçao; and Comalapa, El Salvador, all

known as forward operating locations, or FOLs. Washington signed ten-year agreements with Ecuador, the Netherlands (for Aruba and Curaçao), and El Salvador, and Congress appropriated \$116 million in FY2001 for renovation of the air facilities in Ecuador, Aruba, and Curaçao. SouthCom also operates some 17 radar sites, mostly in Peru and Colombia, each typically staffed by about 35 personnel.

The FOLs and radar facilities monitor the skies and waters of the region and are key to increased surveillance operations in Washington's Andean drug war. As part of the growing U.S. military contribution to Plan Colombia and to President Bush's Andean Counternarcotics Initiative, they constitute a cordon around Colombia. Beginning in October 2001, AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control Systems) aircraft are operating from the air base in the Ecuadorian port city of Manta. Approved by the short-lived government of President Jamil Nahud in November 1999, the base in Manta will host up to 475 U.S. personnel.

In addition, there are two older U.S. bases in the region: one in Soto Cano, Honduras, a joint command base that since 1984 has provided support for training and helicopter sorties, and a second in Guantánamo, Cuba, a base that since 1903 has served as an R&R site for sailors and Marines, a refueling base for Coast Guard ships, and, in recent years, a temporary camp for Haitian refugees. There is no termination date for the U.S. lease on the Guantánamo base.

The Pentagon is moving to outsource much of the operation and maintenance of military bases to private contractors. The Air Force is contracting out the operation of the Manta base, and even "host nation riders" who accompany military flights over Colombia are to be recruited and employed by a private U.S. military contractor, according to the implementation plan for the base.

In Panama, all U.S. military forces departed, and bases were closed by treaty at the end of 1999. But the Pentagon retains access for military flights into and out of Panama, including a contract to transport cargo and passengers between Honduras, Panama, and dirt strips in Colombia on a daily basis.

Bases belonging to Latin American militaries but built or used by U.S. soldiers are not considered U.S. bases, though they often serve similar purposes. The Joint Peruvian Riverine Training Center in Iquitos, Peru, has largely replaced the former riverine training base in Panama. In addition, up to 800 U.S. military and contract personnel operating at any time in Colombia are housed at nominally Colombian bases.

### Key Points

- The Pentagon has a new infrastructure in Latin America, with four new military bases.
- Base closures in Panama gave way to a new array of facilities that surround Colombia.
- Base operations and maintenance increasingly are being outsourced to private contractors.
- The military's new "hub" is in Puerto Rico, though the future of Navy training in Vieques is uncertain.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

---

The soldiers and contract personnel that the U.S. military deploys to bases in Latin America and the Caribbean far outnumber personnel of U.S. civilian agencies in the region. The presence of so many U.S. personnel on military missions sends a message that the U.S. prefers force over diplomacy to settle the region's problems, including conflicts with the United States. In addition to their role in facilitating military operations, U.S. bases are a symbol of Washington's history of gun-boat intervention and of its use of local armies to control Latin populations and resources.

Most U.S. bases in the Caribbean were explicitly acquired through conquests in the 1898 Spanish-American-Cuban War. The permanent infrastructure at the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo is a continuing source of antagonism with Cuba.

Besides evoking the past, U.S. bases are contracted into a future beyond any imagined or articulated military mission. Plan Colombia was originally envisioned as a two-year "push" into guerrilla-occupied southern territories, with vague plans for subsequent years. In contrast, the ten-year leases in Ecuador, Curaçao, and Aruba, purportedly created to monitor drug traffic, are brief compared with the perpetuity claimed for the naval base in Guantánamo. This permanent infrastructure generates inequitable relations and invites intervention in a crisis, instead of negotiation.

The bases have no mechanism for transparency or monitoring by civil society in the host countries, and are thus subject to other missions. A State Department official said in 1999 that "the new counternarcotics bases located in Ecuador, Aruba, and Curaçao will be strategic points for closely following the steps of the [Colombian] guerrillas." And consistent with SouthCom's identification of illegal immigration as a central security threat, aircraft from the Manta base were used to find and detain a fishing boat suspected of ferrying illegal immigrants to the United States.

The dramatically increased U.S. military involvement in Colombia and the spillover of refugees and conflict in the border region have generated alarm among broad sectors of Ecuadorian society—including the military—over the potentially destabilizing role of the Manta base. One officer calls the base "the eyes and ears of Plan Colombia," and other opponents point out that Ecuador's Congress never considered or approved the agreement, as the Constitution requires for treaties and military alliances. Ecuadorans also object to provisions exempting U.S. on-duty military personnel from Ecuadorian criminal jurisdiction.

The outsourcing of air transport, base construction, and maintenance and the host nation rider program, like that of other military activities overseas, diminish the information available—and thus the accountability—for U.S.-sponsored actions outside U.S. borders. Not until an enterprising reporter discovered an Internet-posted request for proposals did Panamanian civil society become aware that the Pentagon had been using airstrips in Panama for "transportation services" into and out of Colombia—even after U.S. troops left. The

contract had been held since 1997 by Evergreen Helicopters, a company that also played a clandestine role in the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama.

The FOL in Comalapa, El Salvador, operated by the Navy, has no limit on the number of U.S. personnel who have access to any ports, air space, and unspecified government installations that the U.S. deems pertinent. The opposition FMLN party argues that the agreement affects Salvadoran sovereignty and thus should have required ratification by more than a simple majority of the legislature.

In Vieques, military bases have an additional meaning and a political function, serving to reinforce what the United Nations Decolonization Committee and many others have called Puerto Rico's colonial status. On an island where the FBI has compiled 1.8 million documents based on surveillance of political organizations, the presence of large U.S. military bases plays an important role in conditioning islanders' choices about Puerto Rico's status—ranging from statehood to commonwealth to full independence. It is difficult to imagine a truly free choice by Puerto Ricans as long as thousands of U.S. troops operate there. That is one reason why it is so important to heed the result of the July 29, 2001, Vieques plebiscite, in which 68% of voters called for an immediate end to the bombings, a cleanup of the lands, and the transfer of these lands to local authorities.

The Navy's bombing in Vieques is increasingly challenged both in U.S. federal court, with six environmental and civil rights lawsuits and nearly 2,000 administrative tort claims, and by more than a thousand cases of civil disobedience. Navy personnel have abused arrestees and have even bombed areas visibly occupied by protesters.

Many military bases in Latin America—like those in the U.S. and elsewhere—leave a devastating environmental legacy. In Vieques, studies have found high rates of cadmium, lead, mercury, uranium, and other contaminants present in the soil, food chain, and human bodies of island residents. Vieques residents have elevated rates of disease, including a 26.9% higher incidence of cancer than other Puerto Ricans. In Panama, the U.S. military left behind more than 100,000 pieces of unexploded ordnance on firing ranges in the fast-growing canal area, despite a Canal Treaty provision for removing such dangers.

Overseas bases present special problems for environmental cleanup, because sovereignty is always at issue. Once the Pentagon is gone, the U.S. abandons both jurisdiction and responsibility for the contamination its military has caused.

---

## Key Problems

- Bases represent a commitment of resources in the region, displacing assistance for civil society and social programs.
  - U.S. military installations are characterized by a lack of transparency and accountability.
  - Bases in Puerto Rico distort islanders' choices about political status, while training in Vieques represents an extreme of undemocratic policy.
  - Military bases overseas often leave behind ecological damage, with no provisions for environmental cleanup.
-

# Toward a New Foreign Policy

To live up to its democratic ideals, the U.S. should adopt a new doctrine of military policy in Latin America and the Caribbean. Such a doctrine would value ties with civilians more than ties with the military. It would dedicate more resources to addressing the economic causes of conflict, rather than to building installations designed for the use of force. It would also commit the U.S. to transparency about the purposes, activities, and effects of existing U.S. military bases in the region.

## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should adopt a doctrine of hemispheric relations that redirects resources from military installations toward social programs.
- Short of such a foundational shift, base agreements should require specific missions, fixed periods, discussion by civil society, U.S. responsibility for environmental cleanup, and approval by U.S. and host nation legislatures.
- Democratic principles call for ending the bombing in Vieques.

U.S. military facilities represent tangible commitments to underlying policies that are outmoded—as in the case of Cuba—or perniciously expansionist. The SouthCom briefing, which guides the Army's military presence in the region, highlights U.S. concern with access to strategic resources, especially oil, as well as other issues with social and political roots such as immigration and narcotics. A different doctrine would redirect resources invested in military bases to civilian agencies whose charter is to address such social and political

problems, including nongovernmental organizations, local and regional agencies of the region's governments, and agencies of the United Nations. This would entail important changes for the Andean Counternarcotics Initiative, consistent with proposals to redirect military and police assistance to alternative agriculture and other development programs in the Andes and to drug treatment and health programs in the United States.

Short of such a reexamination of the policy foundations for military bases in the region, the U.S. should review existing agreements for overseas bases using democratic criteria. Bases should not be maintained or established without broad consultation and agreement of the civil societies and legislatures in which these bases are located. Without such consultation and agreement, the bases are a usurpation of democratic control within the host society. Objectionable provisions, such as broad U.S. military access to the host nation's ports and air space, diplomatic immunity for U.S. military personnel, and prohibitions on access or inspections by local authorities, should be deleted. Bases should be established only for fixed periods of time with clearly defined missions, and these mission mandates should require renewal by both U.S. and host congresses.

The U.S. should also not attempt to establish military access or carry out controversial military missions through private means, such as the outsourcing of military operations. A good first step would be to enact Rep. Jan Schakowsky's bill to ban private contractors in the Andes from military missions. In Panama, the U.S. should honor the substance of the Neutrality Treaty, which forbids stationing U.S. soldiers and bases in Panama, by refraining from using local airstrips for military sorties by either military or contract aircraft.

In Puerto Rico, the U.S. should heed the clearly expressed wishes of people in Vieques and the Commonwealth government to stop bombing. A study by the Center for Naval Analysis demonstrated that the Navy can and does use other facilities for the training conducted in Vieques, and a naval commander recognized that training in Vieques has little to do with preventing terrorist attacks. More fundamentally, if the U.S. used diplomacy instead of bombing in conflicts with Iraq, Yugoslavia, and other nations, it would not need to practice firing bombs in Vieques.

To ensure transparency and accountability to host countries, base agreements should be amended to give the public health and environmental officials of host nations and representatives of communities affected by U.S. bases the authority to inspect these facilities on short notice.

To address environmental problems generated at U.S. military bases in Latin America as well as in other regions, the U.S. should recognize its responsibility and Congress should establish an Overseas Defense Environmental Restoration Account. The account should provide for cleanup of both existing and former U.S. bases overseas to at least the same standards established for domestic military bases, with adequate study of contaminated lands and waters.

In Vieques, following a termination of bombing, a cleanup will be necessary for the protection of public health. Congress should appropriate funds for a complete cleanup. Similarly, policymakers ought to heed the repeated appeals by Panama to remove the explosives and chemical weapons left in firing ranges in the canal area and San Jose Island, respectively. Such measures of environmental responsibility would demonstrate environmental leadership that is sorely needed.

*John Lindsay-Poland <forlatam@igc.org> is coordinator of the Fellowship of Reconciliation Task Force on Latin America & the Caribbean.*

*Foreign Policy in Focus* is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from foundations and churches. *In Focus* internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments. ISSN 1524-1939

### Editors

Tom Barry (IRC)  
Martha Honey (IPS)  
**Issue Editor**  
Jo-Marie Burt

### Communications Directors

Tim McGivern (IRC)  
Erik Leaver (IPS)  
**Project Administrator**  
Nancy Stockdale (IRC)

### Orders and subscription information:

**Mail:** PO Box 4506  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506  
**Voice:** (505) 842-8288  
**Fax:** (505) 246-1601  
**Email:** infocus@irc-online.org

### Editorial inquiries and information:

**IRC Editor**  
**Voice:** (505) 388-0208  
**Fax:** (505) 388-0619  
**Email:** tom@irc-online.org

**IPS Editor**  
**Voice:** (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232  
**Fax:** (202) 387-7915  
**Email:** ipsps@igc.org

**Website:** <http://www.fpif.org/>

# Background Statistics

| <i>Major U.S. Bases in Latin America and the Caribbean</i> | <i>Number of Military Personnel Stationed or Maximum Allowed</i> |
|--|--|
| Guantánamo Bay, Cuba                                       | 774  |
| Soto Cano, Honduras  | 500  |
| Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico                               | 3,000  |
| Manta, Ecuador   | 475  |
| Aruba  | 300  |
| Curaçao  | 300  |
| Comalapa, El Salvador                                      | About 15 / but no limit  |
| Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico                                 | 2,635  |

## Sources for More Information

### Organizations

#### Acción Andina

Bolivia  
Voice: (591) 425-2401  
Email: andina@albatros.cnb.net

#### Caribbean Project for Justice and Peace

Box 13241  
Rio Piedras, PR 00908  
Voice: (787) 722-1640  
Email: wandac@coqui.net

#### Center for International Policy

1755 Massachusetts Ave. NW, #312  
Washington, DC 20036  
Voice: (202) 232-3317  
Fax: (202) 232-3440  
Email: cip@ciponline.org  
Website: <http://www.ciponline.org/>

#### Fellowship of Reconciliation

2017 Mission St., #305  
San Francisco, CA 94110  
Voice: (415) 495-6334  
Fax: (415) 495-5628  
Email: forlatam@igc.org  
Website: <http://www.forusa.org/>

### Publications

Fellowship of Reconciliation, "Puerto Rico Update," newsletters and reports offering news and analysis on U.S. bases in Panama and Puerto Rico. Available at <http://www.forusa.org/TFLACframe.html>  
Gen. Peter Pace, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Southern Command, "Posture Statement of U.S. Southern Command," Statement before Senate Armed Services Committee, March 27, 2001. Available at <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/032701.htm>

### Websites

#### Drugs & Democracy

<http://www.tni.org/drugs/>  
A news list focused on drugs and militarization in Latin America that frequently includes information on U.S. military presence.

#### U.S. Navy

<http://www.navyvieques.navy.mil/>  
Navy's website dedicated to its version of its role in Vieques.

#### U.S. Southern Command

<http://www.southcom.mil/home/>

#### Vieques Libre

<http://www.viequeslibre.org/>  
News and information on Vieques from an anti-Navy, often nationalist perspective.

### Subscribe:

Subscribe for a year for \$60 (50 issues). Individual copies of *In Focus* are \$2.50, postpaid; bulk orders of *In Focus* are \$12.00 for 10 copies of the same issue, postpaid; orders for delivery outside the U.S. are double the listed prices. (Subscriptions do not include back issues. Contact the IRC for a list of available back issues.) Make checks payable to the Interhemispheric Resource Center. We also accept VISA and MasterCard.

To subscribe to *Foreign Policy In Focus*, or to order back issues, contact the IRC:

PO Box 4506 ♦ Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506 ♦ Phone: (505) 842-8288 ♦ Fax: (505) 246-1601

Name

Email Address

Street Address

City, State, Zip Code

VISA/MasterCard Number

Expiration Date

Signature