

Project Censored has just released its list of the 25 top censored stories for this year. Upside *Down World* Editor, Benjamin Dangl won an award for his coverage of US Military Operations in Paraguay.

To see the entire list, [click here](#)

## **#25 US Military in Paraguay Threatens Region**

### **Sources:**

**Upside Down World, October 5, 2005**

**Title: "Fears mount as US opens new military installation in Paraguay"**

**Author: Benjamin Dangl**

**Foreign Policy in Focus, November 21, 2005**

**Title: "Dark Armies, Secret Bases, and Rummy, Oh My!"**  
**By Conn Hallinan**

**International Relations Center, December 14, 2005**

**Title: US Military Moves in Paraguay Rattle Regional Relations"**  
**Sam Logan and Matthew Flynn**

Faculty Evaluator: Patricia Kim-Ragal

Student Researchers: Nick Ramirez and Deyango Harris

Five hundred U.S. troops arrived in Paraguay with planes, weapons, and ammunition in July 2005, shortly after the Paraguayan Senate granted U.S.

troops immunity from national and International Criminal Court (ICC) jurisdiction. Neighboring countries and human rights organizations are concerned that the massive air base at Mariscal Estigarribia, Paraguay is potential real estate for the U.S. military.

While U.S. and Paraguayan officials vehemently deny ambitions to establish a U.S. military base at Mariscal Estigarribia, the ICC immunity agreement and U.S. counterterrorism training exercises have increased suspicions that the U.S. is building a stronghold in a region that is strategic to resource and military interests.

The Mariscal Estigarribia air base is within 124 miles of Bolivia and Argentina, and 200 miles from Brazil, near the Triple Frontier where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet. Bolivia's natural gas reserves are the second largest in South America, while the Triple Frontier region is home to the Guarani Aquifer, one of the world's largest fresh water sources. (See Story #20.)

Not surprisingly, U.S. rhetoric is building about terrorist threats in the triborder region. Dangl reports claims by Defense officials that Hezbollah and Hamas, radical Islamic groups from the Middle East, receive significant funding from the Triple Frontier, and that growing unrest in this region could leave a political "black hole" that would erode other democratic efforts. Dangl notes that in spite of frequent attempts to link terror networks to the triborder area, there is little evidence of a connection.

The base's proximity to Bolivia may cause even more concern. Bolivia has a long history of popular protest against U.S. exploitation of its vast natural gas reserves. But the resulting election of leftist President Evo Morales, who on May 1, 2006 signed a decree nationalizing all of Bolivia's gas reserves, has certainly intensified hostilities with the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Paraguay in August of 2005, he told reporters that, "there certainly is evidence that both Cuba and Venezuela have been involved in the situation in Bolivia in unhelpful ways."

Military analysts from Uruguay and Bolivia maintain that the threat of terrorism is often used by the U.S. as an excuse for military intervention and the monopolization of natural resources.

A journalist writing for the Argentinian newspaper, Clarin, visited the base at Mariscal Estigarribia and reported it to be in perfect condition. Capable of handling large military planes, it is oversized for the Paraguayan air force, which only has a handful of small aircraft. The base is capable of housing 16,000 troops, has an enormous radar system, huge hangars, and an air traffic control tower. The airstrip itself is larger than the one at the international airport in Asuncion, Paraguay's capital. Near the base is a military camp that has recently grown in size.

Hallinan notes that Paraguay's neighbors are very skeptical of the situation, as there is a disturbing resemblance between U.S. denials about Mariscal Estigarribia and the disclaimers made by the Pentagon about Eloy Alfaro airbase in Manta, Ecuador. The U.S. claimed the Manta base was a "dirt strip" used for weather surveillance. When local journalists revealed its size, however, the U.S. admitted the base harbored thousands of mercenaries and hundreds of U.S. troops, and Washington had signed a ten-year basing agreement with Ecuador. (See Chapter 2, Story #17, for similarities between the Manta air base in Ecuador, and the current situation unfolding in Paraguay.)

As Paraguay breaks ranks with her neighbors by allowing the U.S. to carry out military operations in the heart of South America, Logan and Flynn report that nongovernmental organizations in Paraguay are protesting the new U.S.

military presence in their country, warning that recent moves could be laying the foundation for increasing U.S. presence and influence over the entire region. Perhaps the strongest words come from the director of the Paraguayan human rights organization Peace and Justice Service, Orlando Castillo, who claims that the U.S. aspires to turn Paraguay into a "second Panama for its troops, and it is not far from achieving its objective to control the Southern Cone and extend the Colombian War."

#### Note

1. "Bolivian Gas War," <http://www.Wikipedia.org>, May 2006.

#### UPDATE BY BENJAMIN DANGL

The election of Evo Morales in Bolivia in December of 2005 brought more attention to the U.S. military presence in neighboring Paraguay. Since his election, Morales has nationalized the country's gas reserves and strengthened ties with Cuba and Venezuela to build a more sustainable economy. Such policies have not been warmly received in Washington. Responding to this progressive trend, on May 22, 2006 George Bush said he was "concerned about the erosion of democracy" in Venezuela and Bolivia.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, himself a victim of a U.S.-backed coup, said Bush's comments mean, "He's already given the green light to start conspiring against the democratic government of Bolivia." U.S. troops stationed in Paraguay may be poised for such an intervention. However, human rights reports suggest the U.S. military presence has already resulted in bloodshed.

Paraguay is the fourth largest producer of soy in the world. As this industry expands, poor farmers are being forced off their lands. These farmers have organized protests, road blockades and land occupations against this

displacement and have faced subsequent repression from military, police, and paramilitary forces.

Investigations by Servicio Paz y Justicia (Serpaj), a human rights group in Paraguay, report that the worst cases of repression against farmers took place in areas with the highest concentration of U.S. troops. This violence resulted in the deaths of forty-one farmers in three separate areas.

"The U.S. military is advising the Paraguayan police and military about how to deal with these farmer groups," Orlando Castillo of Serpaj told me over the phone. He explained that U.S. troops monitor farmers to find information about union organizations and leaders, then tell Paraguayan officials how to proceed. "The numbers from our study show what this U.S. presence is doing," Castillo said.

The U.S. government maintains the military exercises in Paraguay are humanitarian efforts. However, the deputy speaker of the Paraguayan parliament, Alejandro Velazquez Ugarte, said that of the thirteen exercises going on in the country, only two are of a civilian nature.

This presence is an example of the U.S. government's "counter-insurgency" effort in Latin America. Such meddling has a long, bloody history in the region. Currently, the justification is the threat of terrorism instead of communism. As Latin America shifts further away from Washington's interests, such militarization is only likely to increase.

Throughout these recent military operations, the U.S. corporate media, as well as Paraguayan media, have ignored the story. Soccer, not dead farmers or plans for a coup, has been the focus of most headlines.

For ongoing reports on the U.S. militarization of Paraguay and elsewhere visit [www.UpsideDownWorld.org](http://www.UpsideDownWorld.org) , a website on activism and politics in Latin America, and [www.TowardFreedom.com](http://www.TowardFreedom.com) .

Benjamin Dangl's book,

[The Price of Fire: Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia](#)

(forthcoming from AK Press, January 2007), includes further investigations into the U.S. military operations in Paraguay.

Ideas for action include organizing protests and writing letters to the U.S. embassy in Paraguay ( [www.asuncion.usembassy.gov](http://www.asuncion.usembassy.gov) ). For more

information on international solidarity, email Orlando Castillo at Serpaj in Paraguay:

[desmilitarizacion@serpajpy.org.py](mailto:desmilitarizacion@serpajpy.org.py)

#### UPDATE BY CONN HALLINAN

My article was written in late November 2005 during the run-up to the Bolivian elections. That campaign featured indigenous leader Evo Morales, a fierce critic of Washington's neoliberal, free trade policies that have impoverished tens of millions throughout Latin America. The Bush administration not only openly opposed Morales, it charged there was a growing "terrorism" problem in the region and began building up military forces in nearby Paraguay.

There have been a number of important developments since last fall. Morales won the election and nationalized Bolivia's petrochemical industry. In the past, such an action might have triggered a U.S.-sponsored coup, or at least a crippling economic embargo. Foreign oil and gas companies immediately tried to drive a wedge between Bolivia and other nations in the region by threatening to halt investments or pull out entirely. This included companies partially owned by Brazil and Argentina.

But Latin America is a very different place these days. Three days after the May 1, 2005 nationalization, Argentine President Nestor Kirchner, Brazilian President Lula De Silva, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and Morales

met in Puerto Iguazu and worked out an agreement to help Bolivia develop its resources while preserving regional harmony. As a result, it is now likely that foreign petrochemical companies will remain in Bolivia, although they will pay up to four times as much as they did under the old agreements. And if they leave, the Chinese and Russians are waiting in the wings.

The situation is still delicate. U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recently compared Chavez to Adolph Hitler and linked him to Cuba's Fidel Castro and Morales. Aid is flowing to militaries in Colombia and Paraguay, and the White House continues to use private proxies to intervene in the Colombian civil war. While there is a growing solidarity among nations in the southern cone, some of their economies are delicate.

Ecuador is presently wracked by demonstrations demanding the expulsion of foreign oil companies and an end to free trade talks with the U.S. This is an ongoing story. While the alternative media continues to cover these developments, the mainstream media has largely ignored them.

A note on reading the mainstream: the Financial Times recently highlighted a Latinobarometro poll indicating that most countries in South America were rejecting "democracy" as a form of government. But since free markets and neoliberalism were sold as "democracy"—economic policies that most South Americans have overwhelmingly rejected—did the poll measure an embrace of authoritarianism or a rejection of failed economic policies? Tread carefully.

To stay informed of developments in this area visit websites of School of the Americas Watch: <http://www.soaw.org/new/> and Global Exchange: <http://www.globalexchange.org/> or contact Conn Hallinan at [connm@ucsc.edu](mailto:connm@ucsc.edu)

## **Project Censored: US Military in Paraguay Threatens Region**

Written by Project Censored  
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