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Statements Abroad Allege US Military Base in Costa Rica, Question Nation's Sovereignty, Comment on Elections

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On its foreign policy front, Costa Rica has recently been the subject of statements that have ruffled local diplomatic feathers and led this Central American nation to react, denying the allegations and demanding apologies.

Early last month, the Venezuela-based Latin American television network Nueva Televisora del Sur (TeleSUR) broadcast a report about an alleged bilateral agreement to build a US military base in Costa Rica's northwest—a region bordering Nicaragua. The report was broadcast on Feb. 2, the day presidential and congressional elections were held—the presidential vote to be finalized next month in a runoff.

"During the past years ... the [US] Southern Command has been training Middle American troops, through military exercises," said the network. "Let us see what military and political influence that country has had in Costa Rica," a nation it described as one of "a pacifist tradition, where the Army was abolished half a century ago."

"Nevertheless, it has been possible to establish an agreement to set up a military base in the city of Liberia," the report went on, referring to the city some 230 km northwest of the capital San José and some 80 km southeast of the northwestern border post of Peñas Blancas, next to Nicaragua. The agreement was "authorized by the government and the national parliament in 2010, under the pretext of the anti-drug struggle," said the report.

TeleSUR was referring to the US-Costa Rica joint-patrolling agreement, which dates back to October 1999 ([NotiCen, Sept. 2, 1999](#), and [July 29, 2010](#)), involving the US Navy and the US Coast Guard (USCG) as well as the Costa Rican Servicio Nacional de Guardacostas (SNG).

"The assistant commander of the Southern Command reported about the US\$15 million investment in a naval base that would be under construction in the town of Caldera," the report added, mentioning the western coastal town some 80 km west of San José, a Pacific port where Costa Rica's SNG has a base. It also referred to Paul Trivelli, a former US ambassador (2005-2008) to Nicaragua presently serving as foreign policy adviser at the Miami-based US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).

The command is responsible for contingency plans and operations in the Caribbean—except US commonwealths, possessions, territories—as well as Central and South America, also for US military resources in those regions, and for the defense of the Panama Canal and its surrounding area.

What mostly upset Costa Rican authorities was TeleSUR's statement, in the report, that the US "has, in Costa Rica, 46 warships, 200 helicopter gunships, six Harrier combat planes, one aircraft carrier, and 13,000 marines."

Costa Rica, US deny reports

Immediately after an initial report on the TeleSUR information by Costa Rica's Channel 7, Security Minister Mario Zamora told NotiCen that the contents of the TeleSUR report lacked veracity and that it contained data from the US requests for Navy and USCG vessels to dock at Costa Rican ports.

The joint patrolling agreement allows the US to send Costa Rica six-month authorization requests for dozens of such ships and their crews to arrive at Costa Rican ports, for reasons such as refueling or delivering boats and crews captured while transporting drugs—usually cocaine and marijuana.

The Asamblea Legislativa (AL)—Costa Rica's unicameral, 57-seat parliament—must vote each year on the requests for the Jan. 1-June 30 and July 1-Dec. 31 periods. The deputies have vote favorably—and with some delay—for the permits for the USCG vessels, but the Navy permits are usually not put to a vote, since they involve warships and most deputies oppose their presence, since Costa Rica abolished its Army in 1948. They point out the country should not allow foreign troops in its territory, as stated in the Constitution.

The description on its Web site says, "The US Coast Guard is one of the five armed forces of the United States and the only military organization within the Department of Homeland Security."

Zamora also explained that the US usually requests the docking permit for dozens of vessels—some requests have been for up to 40 ships or more—"although only one could actually arrive."

"Someone maliciously presents the data, stating that all the marines arrived at the same time, and are in the country, and, in this case, I only say that I have 5 million witnesses that it's not so, and that shows who's telling the truth," added the government official.

In statements to journalists, Mary Daschbach, the press and cultural officer at the US Embassy in Costa Rica, said, "The information presented in that video is not exact and not precise. ... There are no United States military troops or vessels stationed in Costa Rica, neither are there any future plans to have them. Occasionally, an airplane participating in operations against illegal trafficking of drugs or other goods refuels and takes off from the Liberia airport. But no airplane of the government of the United States is permanently stationed in Liberia."

"Upon request from the government of Costa Rica, the government of the United States trains, equips, and [provides] infrastructure to the Servicio de Guardacostas of Costa Rica and the Public Security Ministry, in order to support their efforts to improve the country's border security and the protection of Costa Ricans against the threat of international criminal organizations," Daschbach said.

The report in question led to an exchange of notes between Costa Rica's Minister of Information Carlos Roverssi and TeleSUR president Patricia Villegas. On Feb. 6, Villegas sent Roverssi a four-paragraph letter stating that "TeleSUR presents its apology to the Costa Rican people and its audience in general. It is convenient to clarify that it all has been a regretful mistake when the sources were checked in writing the story."

Five days later, Costa Rican Foreign Minister Enrique Castillo told NotiCen that the government accepted the apology, and "the case is closed."

New problem involving Bolivian president

But on Feb. 17, another case opened, this time regarding Bolivia's President Evo Morales and his views on Costa Rica's election scene as well as this country's sovereignty.

It was not a first. In 2010, a report by the Spanish news agency EFE dated in La Paz, Bolivia, and quoted in a Costa Rican Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (RREE) communiqué said that Morales—that landlocked South American nation's first indigenous president and an outspoken critic of the US and its foreign policy—said at an Aug. 30 official activity with the military that "Costa Rica has no armed forces, but its armed forces are those of the United States."

In a communiqué, the Costa Rican ministry then regretted the "unfortunate statements that ignore our pro-civilian tradition and reveal a lack of knowledge of Costa Rican history."

Four days after his first statement, also according to EFE, Morales said, during another official event, "I want to say that, if I was wrong, I apologize. I never tried to offend a country such as Costa Rica, which has no armed forces."

Diplomatic déjà vu occurred last month, when Morales spoke about Costa Rica's first election round and again mentioned this country's sovereignty vis-à-vis the US. Referring to the results of presidential elections held Feb. 2 in both El Salvador and Costa Rica, the Bolivian leader noted, five days later, that progressive political parties were the most voted in both processes.

Morales referred to the former Salvadoran guerrilla Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)—presently in power—whose candidate Salvador Sánchez obtained almost 49%, and to Costa Rica's opposition center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), whose candidate Luis Guillermo Solís rounded up a surprising 30.64%. Morales said that such results are "important steps" in the region, against what he described as US imperialism.

On the vote in El Salvador, Morales said that the top candidate is "a guerrilla who fought for his country," and, regarding Costa Rica, he said that, "for the first time, a leftist party is becoming outstanding. Costa Rica used to be a colony of the US. I even believe—I hope I'm not mistaken—[it is a country] without armed forces. The US eliminated the armed forces in Costa Rica."

Costa Rica calls statements "interference"

Costa Rica's first reaction came through a communiqué the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores issued on Feb. 17 deploring Morales' statements on this country. The following day, Castillo referred to the runoff, scheduled for April 6, and told journalists that "we've considered this was meddling in Costa Rica's internal affairs, even more serious as the election process is in progress, and expressions by a foreign president could influence the result."

The minister said that it was the Costa Rican government, established after a brief civil war, that, on Dec. 1, 1948, abolished the Army. "And regarding whether Costa Rica is or was a colony of the US, the communiqué clarifies that Costa Rica has never been a colony of the US and that, on the contrary, it waged a war to free Nicaragua from that condition."

Castillo referred to an episode during the 1854 civil war in Nicaragua between the Partido Legitimista (conservative) and the Partido Democrático (liberal) in which the democráticos sought

US pro-slavery filibuster William Walker, who became the country's president (1856-1857) and, in his last invasion of Central America, was executed in 1860 in Honduras.

"We very much regret that the president of Bolivia ignores Costa Rica's path, and we expect an apology," Castillo said. Ministry sources told NotiCen that, as of March 3, no such apology had been received from Bolivia.

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