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The Coup and the U.S. Airbase in Honduras

Zelaya, Negroponte and the Controversy at Soto Cano

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The mainstream media has once again dropped the ball on a key aspect of the ongoing story in Honduras: the U.S. airbase at Soto Cano, also known as Palmerola. Prior to the recent military coup d'etat President Manuel Zelaya declared that he would turn the base into a civilian airport, a move opposed by the former U.S. ambassador. What's more Zelaya intended to carry out his project with Venezuelan financing.

For years prior to the coup the Honduran authorities had discussed the possibility of converting Palmerola into a civilian facility. Officials fretted that Toncontín, Tegucigalpa's international airport, was too small and incapable of handling large commercial aircraft. An aging facility dating to 1948, Toncontín has a short runway and primitive navigation equipment. The facility is surrounded by hills which makes it one of the world's more dangerous international airports.

Palmerola by contrast has the best runway in the country at 8,850 feet long and 165 feet wide. The airport was built more recently in the mid-1980s at a reported cost of \$30 million and was used by the United States for supplying the Contras during America's proxy war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua as well as conducting counter-insurgency operations in El Salvador. At the height of the Contra war the U.S. had more than 5,000

soldiers stationed at Palmerola. Known as the Contras' "unsinkable aircraft carrier," the base housed Green Berets as well as CIA operatives advising the Nicaraguan rebels.

More recently there have been some 500-to-600 U.S. troops on hand at the facility which serves as a Honduran air force base as well as a flight-training center. With the exit of U.S. bases from Panama in 1999, Palmerola became one of the few usable airfields available to the U.S. on Latin American soil. The base is located approximately 30 miles north of the capital Tegucigalpa.

In 2006 it looked as if Zelaya and the Bush administration were nearing a deal on Palmerola's future status. In June of that year Zelaya flew to Washington to meet President Bush and the Honduran requested that Palmerola be converted into a commercial airport. Reportedly Bush said the idea was "wholly reasonable" and Zelaya declared that a four-lane highway would be constructed from Tegucigalpa to Palmerola with U.S. funding.

In exchange for the White House's help on the Palmerola facility Zelaya offered the U.S. access to a new military installation to be located in the Mosquitia area along the Honduran coast near the Nicaraguan border. Mosquitia reportedly serves as a corridor for drugs moving south to north. The drug cartels pass through Mosquitia with their cargo en route from Colombia, Peru and Bolivia.

A remote area only accessible by air, sea, and river Mosquitia is full of swamp and jungle. The region is ideal for the U.S. since large numbers of troops may be housed in Mosquitia in relative obscurity. The coastal location was ideally suited for naval and air coverage consistent with the stated U.S. military strategy of confronting organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism. Romeo Vásquez, head of the Honduran Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked that the armed forces needed to exert a greater presence in Mosquitia because the area was full of "conflict and problems."

But what kind of access would the U.S. have to Mosquitia? Honduran Defense Secretary Aristides Mejía said that Mosquitia wouldn't necessarily be "a classic base with permanent installations, but just when needed. We intend, if President Zelaya approves, to expand joint operations [with the United States]." That statement however was apparently not to the liking of eventual coup leader and U.S. School of the Americas graduate Vásquez who had already traveled to Washington to discuss future plans for Mosquitia. Contradicting his own colleague, Vásquez said the idea was "to establish a permanent military base of ours in the zone" which would house aircraft and fuel supply systems. The United States, Vásquez added, would help to construct air strips on site.

Events on the ground meanwhile would soon force the Hondurans to take a more assertive approach towards air safety. In May, 2008 a terrible crash occurred at Toncontín airport when a TACA Airbus A320 slid off the runway on its second landing attempt. After mowing down trees and smashing through a metal fence, the airplane's fuselage was broken into three parts near the airstrip. Three people were killed in the crash and 65 were injured.

In the wake of the tragedy Honduran officials were forced at long last to block planes from landing at the notoriously dangerous Toncontín. All large jets, officials said, would be temporarily transferred to Palmerola. Touring the U.S. airbase himself Zelaya remarked that the authorities would create a new civilian facility at Palmerola within sixty days. Bush had already agreed to let Honduras construct a civilian airport at Palmerola, Zelaya said. “There are witnesses,” the President added.

But constructing a new airport had grown more politically complicated. Honduran-U.S. relations had deteriorated considerably since Zelaya’s 2006 meeting with Bush and Zelaya had started to cultivate ties to Venezuela while simultaneously criticizing the American-led war on drugs.

Bush’s own U.S. Ambassador Charles Ford said that while he would welcome the traffic at Palmerola past agreements should be honored. The base was used mostly for drug surveillance planes and Ford remarked that “The president can order the use of Palmerola when he wants, but certain accords and protocols must be followed.” “It is important to point out that Toncontín is certified by the International Civil Aviation Organization,” Ford added, hoping to allay long-time concerns about the airport’s safety. What’s more, the diplomat declared, there were some airlines that would not see Palmerola as an “attractive” landing destination. Ford would not elaborate or explain what his remarks were supposed to mean.

Throwing fuel on the fire Assistant Secretary of State John Negroponte, a former U.S. ambassador to Honduras, said that Honduras could not transform Palmerola into a civilian airport “from one day to the next.” In Tegucigalpa, Negroponte met with Zelaya to discuss Palmerola. Speaking later on Honduran radio the U.S. diplomat said that before Zelaya could embark on his plans for Palmerola the airport would have to receive international certification for new incoming flights. According to Spanish news agency EFE Negroponte also took advantage of his Tegucigalpa trip to sit down and meet with the President of the Honduran Parliament and future coup leader Roberto Micheletti [the news account however did not state what the two discussed].

Needless to say Negroponte’s visit to Honduras was widely repudiated by progressive and human rights activists who labeled Negroponte “an assassin” and accused him of being responsible for forced disappearances during the diplomat’s tenure as ambassador (1981-1985). Moreover, Ford and Negroponte’s condescending attitude irked organized labor, indigenous groups and peasants who demanded that Honduras reclaim its national sovereignty over Palmerola. “It’s necessary to recover Palmerola because it’s unacceptable that the best airstrip in Central America continues to be in the hands of the U.S. military,” said Carlos Reyes, leader of the Popular Bloc which included various politically progressive organizations. “The Cold War has ended and there are no pretexts to continue with the military presence in the region,” he added. The activist remarked that the government should not contemplate swapping Mosquitia for Palmerola either as this would be an affront to Honduran pride.

Over the next year Zelaya sought to convert Palmerola into a civilian airport but plans languished when the government was unable to attract international investors. Finally in 2009 Zelaya announced that the Honduran armed forces would undertake construction. To pay for the new project the President would rely on funding from ALBA [in English, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas] and Petrocaribe, two reciprocal trading agreements pushed by Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez. Predictably the Honduran right leapt on Zelaya for using Venezuelan funds. Amílcar Bulnes, President of the Honduran Business Association [known by its Spanish acronym COHEP] said that Petrocaribe funds should not be used for the airport but rather for other, unspecified needs.

A couple weeks after Zelaya announced that the armed forces would proceed with construction at Palmerola the military rebelled. Led by Romeo Vásquez, the army overthrew Zelaya and deported him out of the country. In the wake of the coup U.S. peace activists visited Palmerola and were surprised to find that the base was busy and helicopters were flying all around. When activists asked American officials if anything had changed in terms of the U.S.-Honduran relationship they were told “no, nothing.”

The Honduran elite and the hard right U.S. foreign policy establishment had many reasons to despise Manuel Zelaya as I’ve discussed in previous articles. The controversy over the Palmerola airbase however certainly gave them more ammunition.