

# *On Watch*



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Military Law Task Force of  
the National Lawyers Guild

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*By Harold Jordan and Amy Holmes*

From March 5 to 9 of 2007, more than 400 activists gathered in Ecuador for the first International Conference for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases. Activists came from 40 countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa. They brought many decades of grassroots experience from a wide variety of movements: women's rights, indigenous sovereignty, peace, faith-based, human rights, youth, labor, and environmental justice. The main conference, held in Quito, was followed by a Women's Caravan to the Pacific Coastal town of Manta, home of a US military base.

The conference focused on the proliferation of foreign military bases and other infrastructure used for wars of aggression, highlighting the special role of the US, NATO, and the European Union.

### **Ecuador: A Fitting Setting For the Conference**

Ecuador was the perfect setting for such a gathering, as its new government has taken a stance against the renewal of the US military base at Manta beyond 2009. The international gathering celebrated this commitment to end the US military presence. Indeed, the involvement in the conference of key governmental officials – the Mayor of Quito, himself a retired general; the governor of the province of Manabi; and the deputy minister of defense - was an affirmation of the significance of the Manta base decision.

Ecuador is in many ways a microcosm of Latin American geography: it contains the high volcanic peaks of the Andes, the rain forest of the Amazon, the stunning coastline of the Pacific Ocean, and the undisturbed natural habitat of the Galapagos Islands, where Charles Darwin developed his theory of evolution. However, Ecuador's geography has determined its destiny in more ways than one. Located directly to the south of Colombia, Ecuador also falls within the purview of the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).

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### Legitimacy of U.S. Base at Manta Questioned

In 1999, the US made an agreement to lease the Eloy Alfaro Air Base in Manta for a period of ten years, but this agreement was never taken to the Ecuadorian parliament for approval. For this reason, the legitimacy of the base has been questioned by many Ecuadorian citizens from its very inception.

After 9/11, SOUTHCOM began expanding its operations as part of the war on terror to include drug interdiction in Colombia and the targeting of alleged terrorist groups. Although the agreement with Ecuador was that the Forward Operating Location (FOL) would be used only for the surveillance of drug-related activities, many have become concerned that it is also used as a base for counterinsurgency operations in Colombia. At the time, the US government promised that it would simply refurbish an old air field for daytime anti-narcotics surveillance and that no US personnel would be permanently housed at the facility. By 2004, base operations had expanded to include regular visits by US naval war and Coast Guard ships and the stationing of 475 US military personnel.

### Base Operations Violate Ecuadorian Sovereignty, Security, Environment

Ecuadorians are beginning to associate a number of problems, either directly or indirectly, with the base in Manta:

- The US Coast Guard has become involved in patrolling the waters off the coast of Ecuador - violating Ecuador's sovereign right to patrol its own territorial waters - although the FOL permits only the aerial detection of drug-trafficking.
- The US Coast Guard has sunk Ecuadorian fishing vessels on the grounds that they were involved in drug trafficking. In many cases, no drugs were found on the boats and no compensation was paid to the fishermen.
- Herbicidal aerial spraying – harmful to both humans and the environment – has increased along the Colombian-Ecuadorian border.

- The number of Colombian refugees who flee both from the Colombian paramilitaries and from the destruction of their homelands through aerial spraying has also increased.
- Incursions into Ecuadorian ground and airspace by Colombian military units in search of guerillas, resulting in the 'accidental' death of Ecuadorian citizens have led to the fear that this small Andean country is being dragged into the war on drugs, the war on terror, and Colombia's ongoing guerilla warfare.<sup>1</sup>
- Human rights groups have charged that US airplanes based at Manta have been involved in activities ranging from immigration interdiction to a failed coup attempt against President Chavez of Venezuela. Moreover, the US Defense Department has been pressuring Ecuador to allow the Manta base to be used for anti-terror operations.
- The US military has hired DynCorp, a company that is heavily involved in US activities in Colombia, to run base operations. The company is also involved in US military activities in Iraq, where it provides border security advisors. In the words of Gustavo Larrea, of the Quito-based Latin American Association for Human Rights, "Here we have a company of mercenaries that has been accused of human rights abuses across the globe operating an illegal American base on Ecuadorian territory."<sup>2</sup>

### Base Issue Enters the National Elections

The continued presence of the Manta base became an issue in the Presidential elections last November. National newspapers ran articles featuring the position of each Presidential candidate on the Air Base in Manta. Although some observers have pointed to the leftward turn in Latin America as contributing to the heated political atmosphere in the southern hemisphere, in fact candidates from across the political spectrum announced their intention to terminate the agreement with the United States.



Rafael Correa stood out from the rest of the candidates with his particular position on the basing issue. During his campaign he told the *New York Times*: “Of course we are willing to negotiate with the United States about extending the lease for the base in Manta. If they let us build an Ecuadorian base in Miami, if it is no problem, we’ll extend their lease.” Correa was elected and, as of the time of writing, he has so far stuck by his anti-base position. According to recent polls, some 65% of Ecuadorians, and 45% of Manta residents, oppose the renewal of the Manta base agreement.

### **Ecuadorian Defense Ministry: Base Closure a Must for National Sovereignty**

At the opening session, Deputy Minister of Defense Miguel Carvajal Aguirre emphasized that there could be no “national security” for Ecuador without development and that closing the base would be a requirement for national sovereignty. He affirmed that the Ecuadorian military would play a role in addressing the development needs of the country, where 54% of the people live in poverty, including 90% of the Indian population, and where there is a substantial rate of illiteracy.

The government’s decision about the Manta base has occurred in the context of broader reform efforts aimed at combating corruption in the legislature, as well as efforts to bring about economic reform. On April 15, some 82% of Ecuadorian voters approved President Correa’s proposal to create a special assembly to rewrite the Constitution. Correa’s election is part of a wave of new leadership in Latin America that is trying to operate more independently of US control. Political and military developments in Ecuador have the potential for influence beyond national borders.

### **Number of U.S. Bases Abroad Unknown – May Top 1,000**

The conference provided activists with an opportunity to explore recent developments in military policy and to formulate strategies to counter such policies.

Of greatest concern was the massive presence of US military bases in foreign countries, as well as emerging strategies for US and Allied global control. Even the simplest of facts about US bases – how many installations there are and what their roles are -- is not known with

certainty. The official Pentagon count is that there were 737 US bases outside the US in 2005. Chalmers Johnson estimates that “an honest count of the actual size of our military empire would top 1,000 different bases overseas, but no one – possibly not even the Pentagon – knows the exact number for sure.”<sup>3</sup>

Conference presenters explored the negative impacts of these US military operations in several areas, among them the environment (the world’s largest polluter and consumer of oil), human rights, violence against women, and the loss of sovereignty (the shielding of US personnel from domestic laws).

Another development of concern to anti-base activists is the expansion of NATO to Eastern Europe, the increased military spending within the European Union, and the stationing of European forces throughout Europe, Africa, and Southwest Asia, as reflected in the new “European Security Strategy.”

Hans Lammerant of Belgium, speaking about the impact of military bases on human rights, expressed the concern that the European public wrongly sees military bases as simply a local problem. In fact, “NATO is the tool which drags European states into US military policy.”

### **Base-Battling Campaigns Span the Globe**

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the conference was the exchange among activists of organizing campaigns and strategies. Among the struggles highlighted were:

- In the Philippines, a campaign against the granting of extraterritorial privileges to the US military (granting immunity to the military, etc.);
- In Japan, campaigns against the building of a massive new base in Henoko (Okinawa), the construction of a massive US base in Iwakuni, slated to become the largest staging point in the Far East, and citizen opposition to US Marine exercises at the base of Mt. Fuji;
- In Australia, a nationwide campaign against the US-Australian military alliance and the presence of almost 40 US bases in the country;



- In South Korea, a grassroots campaign against the land seizures that have occurred as part of the expansion of the massive US military base in Pyeongtaek;
- In Germany, the citizen campaign against allowing the German military to use the former Soviet bombing range at Bombodrom for an aerial range;
- In the United States, work opposing the continued militarization of Hawaii and the related violations of Native sovereignty, and the long campaign in Vieques, Puerto Rico to end Navy and Marine bombardment and to address the resulting safety and environmental issues; and
- A very promising campaign being led by the School of the Americas Watch to convince the new wave of Latin American political leaders to stop sending military officers to the former School of the Americas, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

### **Conferees Form International Activist Network**

Conference participants decided to form an ongoing international activist network. Plans were developed to create an ongoing international network with communication mechanisms, additional regional and international gatherings, and possible coordinated actions. Participants were keenly aware of the need to structure a network that allows national movements to formulate issues in ways that speak to their own political and social conditions. For example, anti-base activists from Europe (especially Germany) felt that it would be critical for our movements to distinguish themselves from radical right-wing groups who oppose a “foreign” presence, but who support the militarism of their own government.

This year promises to be busy for anti-base organizers. On February 17, more than 100,000 people demonstrated in the Italian town of Vicenza against a proposed major expansion of the US military base (Camp Ederle). In May, European organizers held an International Conference on Demilitarization in Prague, Czech Republic. The theme of the conference was “No to the US missile defense shield/No to US and NATO Military

bases in Europe.” The conference is an outgrowth of efforts to block the US from installing a missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. In June, German activists will hold a mass protest in central Germany at the upcoming G8 summit, highlighting the link between globalization and military might.

### **Women Caravan by Bus to Manta, Then March on the U.S. Base**

On March 8, International Women’s Day, an eight bus caravan left the main conference site in Quito for the coastal city of Manta. Fifteen hours later, after traveling from the high altitudes of Quito down through windy Andean mountain passes, the caravan finally arrived in Manta, having descending more than 12,000 feet.

Along the way the caravan made stops in Santo Domingo, Porto Viejo, and Montecristi, where public celebrations of International Women’s Day were being held, often involving both dancing and speech-making.

The following day in Manta there was a public meeting where a representative of each country delegation spoke to the filled auditorium. Many of the people who addressed the audience had already spoken in Quito; however, the idea of the mini-conference was to bring the message of the larger conference to the people living in or near the air base. Although one might have expected the people of Manta to be more skeptical of the moving caravan spectacle and its anti-base slogans, since they might be in some way dependent on the base for economic reasons, this was not the case. On the contrary, we were greeted with enthusiasm not only by the locals, but also by the Governor of Manabi.

Since anti-base activists in many countries must fight an uphill struggle against not only the U.S. presence in their countries, but also against their own government’s collusion, Ecuador is now in a unique position to build on the synergy created by the support of both the social movements and the government.

After the public meeting in Manta, the conference participants set off on a five-mile march from the city center to the air base. The march was led by Corazon Valdez Fabros, one of the fearless leaders of the anti-base movement in the Philippines during the last decade of the Cold War that led to the ousting of the U.S. from



Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base in the early 1990s. The symbolism of this historical figure leading the march, who now acts as the Secretary General of the Nuclear Free Philippines Coalition, was inspiring for everyone who hoped that the movement in Ecuador would be equally successful: “Manta si – base no!”

## RESOURCES

### **Closing Bases, Supporting Communities**

Fellowship Magazine, Winter 2007, \$6, available from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Box 271, Nyack, NY 10960.

**Base De Manta: Ojos Y Oído Del Plan Colombia**, March 2007, Colición No Bases Ecuador, Av. Patria 640 y Amazonas, Of. 1203, Quito, Ecuador, [nobases@yahoo.com](mailto:nobases@yahoo.com).

### **Outposts of Empire: The Case Against Foreign Military Bases**

Transnational Institute, March 2007, [www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org).

## CONTACTS

### **International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases**

[www.no-bases.net](http://www.no-bases.net) [nobases@yahoo.com](mailto:nobases@yahoo.com)

### **Upcoming actions against the G8 summit**

[www.g8andwar.de](http://www.g8andwar.de) [g8undkrieg@so36.net](mailto:g8undkrieg@so36.net)

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Edwards, “The US Forward Operating Location in Manta: the Ecuadorian Perspective” WOLA memo, March 30, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Michael Flynn, “What’s the Deal at Manta,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January-February 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, Metropolitan Books, 2007, pg. 140. For example, the Pentagon’s inventory does not include substantial US deployments and operations in bases in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, Uzbekistan, Turkey, and many outposts in Britain.

## MILITARY LAW SEMINARS

Would you like to arrange a seminar on military law and counseling or conscientious objection in your area? The MLTF can provide speakers and resources for day-long or half-day seminars on these issues: an overview of military law, with emphasis on discharges, handling AWOL cases, and dissent, or habeas corpus petitions in conscientious objection cases. Both sessions can be geared for law students and counselors as well as attorneys. For more information, contact Marti Hiken at 415-566-3732.

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