

February 1995

# HONDURAS

## Continuing U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Base Is Not Critical





**National Security and  
International Affairs Division**

B-259044

February 8, 1995

The Honorable Herbert H. Bateman  
Chairman  
The Honorable Norman Sisisky  
Ranking Minority Member  
Subcommittee on Military Readiness  
Committee on National Security  
The Honorable John R. Kasich  
Member, Committee on National Security  
House of Representatives

Since 1983, the United States has maintained a semipermanent military presence at Honduras' Soto Cano Air Force Base.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. presence was established there to support U.S. military and political interests in Central America, which were threatened by communist expansion in the region. With the end of the Cold War and political changes that have occurred in the region, we examined the continuing need for a semipermanent U.S. military presence in Honduras. Specifically, we assessed whether this U.S. military presence is critical to current U.S. activities and objectives in the region. The cost to maintain the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano is projected to be about \$38 million in fiscal year 1994. In light of budget constraints and current efforts to increase the cost-effectiveness of the Department of Defense's (DOD) worldwide operations, we believe this report will be of interest to the Subcommittee.

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**Results in Brief**

The U.S. military presence at Soto Cano provides useful and convenient support to some U.S. government activities but is not critical to these activities or current U.S. policy objectives in the region—which are now oriented toward economic growth and democratic reform. U.S. military and embassy officials in the region agree that the military's contribution to the new objectives is incidental and not reason enough to maintain the presence. Moreover, the United States has underway a range of official programs to achieve economic and democracy objectives in Latin America, which are being carried out by several civilian agencies.

With the end of the Cold War and political changes that have occurred in the region, the major missions of U.S. personnel at Soto Cano are to

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<sup>1</sup>A combination of conditions have contributed to describing the U.S. military presence in Honduras as semipermanent. These include the early congressional concerns that facilities not be permanent-type construction, the short-term assignments at Soto Cano, and the use of semipermanent facilities for more than 10 years.

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support military training exercises, humanitarian and civic assistance exercises, and U.S. counterdrug activities. However, the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano is not essential to training exercises. Similar training is routinely conducted in other Central American countries without this type of semipermanent arrangement. The U.S. Army has recently acknowledged that training can be conducted in the region without a semipermanent logistics support base.

Soto Cano is located in the center of the drug transit area, and U.S. military personnel there assist the U.S. Customs Service, the U.S. Navy, and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in counterdrug operations. However, this support is minimal. Officials from the three agencies characterized the support they received as convenient, but not critical, and said they could continue their operations in the region without support from the U.S. military at Soto Cano.

The pending withdrawal of U. S. forces from Howard Air Force Base in Panama was also ascribed as a reason for the continuing U.S. presence at Soto Cano. Some U.S. government officials believe that the U.S. presence at Soto Cano provides the U.S. military with needed flexibility as it draws down assets in Panama and in the event of a future crisis in the region. However, the current arrangement with the Honduran government does not guarantee that the United States could have full access for future U.S. missions. A significant expansion of U.S. assets at Soto Cano and access for future military missions would likely be encumbered by a number of factors, including the absence of a base rights agreement, limited capacity, and political issues. DOD and State Department officials acknowledged it was unlikely the United States would become involved in a major military conflict in Latin America.

The original reasons for the establishment of U.S. presence at Soto Cano no longer exist. The elimination of this arrangement would have minimal impact on current U.S. missions and objectives in the region and would potentially result in budgetary savings. However, we did not attempt to establish firm estimates of cost savings that would result from discontinuing the U.S. presence because there were too many unknowns, including how current activities at Soto Cano would be dispersed to other DOD installations or whether they would be eliminated.

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## Background

In August 1983, DOD established a joint task force called Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B) of about 1,100 Army and Air Force personnel at Soto

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Cano (formerly, Palmerola Air Base), the Honduran military installation that houses the Honduran Air Force Academy. The presence was established to support various U.S. political and military objectives that demonstrated U.S. commitment to its allies against the increasing communist threat in the region. JTF-B and the other U.S. military units at Soto Cano were assigned missions to coordinate and support U.S. counterinsurgency and intelligence operations, and military training exercises in the region. When directed, JTF-B provides support for disaster relief, search and rescue, and contingency-type missions in Central America. JTF-B was established as a subordinate unit of the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), headquartered in Panama.

The United States funded construction projects and infrastructure upgrades at Soto Cano, such as a F-16 capable runway, semipermanent barracks, offices and recreational facilities, 22 miles of roads, and upgrades of the water, sewer, and electrical systems. The annual cost for the United States to maintain the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano has grown steadily from about \$24 million annually in the mid-1980s to a projected \$38 million for 1994. (See table 1 for a breakdown of the costs.) Since 1991, the average annual cost of new construction and upgrades has been about \$2.5 million. U.S. operations at Soto Cano are funded from the Army's and the Air Force's Operations and Maintenance accounts.

In addition to JTF-B, other U.S. military units are stationed at Soto Cano to support JTF-B's missions, such as an aviation battalion and a military police platoon. About two-thirds of the U.S. military personnel assigned to Soto Cano are on temporary duty, usually from 4 to 6 months. The remainder serve a 1-year tour.

In April 1994, authorized U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano was reduced to 780 (see app. I). At the time of our fieldwork, DOD officials told us that the level of personnel was scheduled to increase to about 900 in October 1994 due to the relocation of helicopter personnel and three helicopters stationed in Panama. DOD officials informed us that this move was being made to keep aircraft assets in the theater due to the drawdown of U.S. forces in Panama. However, during discussions on a draft of this report, DOD officials told us that the level is now scheduled to decrease to about 500 personnel in October 1995 due to the deactivation of a helicopter battalion, which will reduce the number of helicopters from 31 to 11. In addition, all U.S. aviation operations and support at Soto Cano will be consolidated with JTF-B facilities, and the current main air facility, Camp Pickett, will be closed.

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According to DOD documents, the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano contributes about \$14 million annually to the Honduran economy in the form of contracts and services to support the U.S. military presence. This includes the U.S. military personnel estimated spending on the Honduran local economy.

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## Military Presence at Soto Cano Not Essential to New Strategic Interests

With the resolution of military conflicts and greater political stability in Central America, the focus of U.S. interest in the region has shifted from political/military objectives to economic growth and democracy building. The U.S. government officials we met with said that the continuing U.S. military presence contributed to U.S. democracy objectives, but that the contribution was incidental to their presence to perform other missions.

Since 1990, Central America has experienced new political stability as the conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua have been resolved, and the overall threat of communist expansion has diminished. As a result, U.S.-directed counterinsurgency and intelligence activities have ended. The changed political condition from the time that JTF-B was established is reflected in the April 1994 congressional testimony of the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. The Assistant Secretary stated “the United States is no longer compelled to base foreign policy strategy on defending the United States and its neighbors from external aggression. Instead, foreign policy can now be focused on encouraging democracy and promoting economic growth.”

When questioned about the continuing need for a military presence in light of new U.S. goals and the relative stability in the region, military officials at Soto Cano and the Southern Command said that the military presence at Soto Cano contributes to U.S. efforts to promote democracy. According to these officials, the military personnel at Soto Cano serve as an example of a military force that is subordinate to civilian control, a main tenet of democracy. However, the officials stated that the influence exerted by the U.S. military at Soto Cano was incidental and difficult to quantify.

According to State Department officials, the principal U.S. programs to promote democratic initiatives and military professionalism are administered by other U.S. agencies such as the State Department, the Agency for International Development, the Department of Justice, and the Defense Security Assistance Agency. Further, the continuing U.S. military presence at Soto Cano appears inconsistent with the current goal of the U.S. Embassy in Honduras—which is to reduce the overall size and scope

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of U.S. activities in Honduras in recognition of declining U.S. funding and increased political stability in the region. Moreover, the United States is also encouraging the government of Honduras to implement military reforms, which include reducing its armed forces.

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## U.S. Military Presence Is Not Needed to Support Military Training Activities

Since the end of the Cold War, the primary missions of JTF-B are to support joint, combined and interagency operations, and provide logistical support for military training exercises, and to maintain and operate an all-weather, C-5 capable airfield. While the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano is useful and convenient, it is not essential to support military training activities in the region. U.S. military personnel are routinely deployed throughout Latin America for training missions without a dedicated, semipermanent U.S. logistics and support base like Soto Cano. According to DOD records, in 1993 over 60,000 U.S. active and reserve military personnel were deployed from the United States and other locations to conduct a variety of training and civic assistance activities throughout Latin America. About 5,500 of the 60,000 participated in training activities conducted in Honduras. In discussions on a draft of this report, DOD officials provided us with figures for fiscal year 1994 training. These figures show that JTF-B provided support to 10,665 personnel, which is 89 percent of the total deployed in Central America. However, the types and levels of support provided by JTF-B to the various training exercises were not available. According to DOD officials, the number of personnel trained in Central America is approximately 17 percent of all personnel deployed from the United States and other locations to Latin America.

Training activities conducted in Latin America included engineering exercises to drill wells, build roads, schools, and medical clinics; medical exercises to provide basic medical, dental, and veterinary care; and combined exercises with host nation forces, such as computer-simulated war exercises and counterterrorist training.

JTF-B and the other U.S. military units stationed at Soto Cano provide support to these types of training exercises conducted in Honduras. For example, in support of an engineering exercise conducted in Honduras in 1993, U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano

- performed liaison functions with Honduran military and local government officials,
- assisted U.S. reserve units in awarding contracts to procure services and supplies on the local economy, and

- transported and accompanied advance teams to identify suitable locations for base camps and inspected training sites during the exercise.

The U.S. military at Soto Cano also often provides limited support (such as supplies and communication support) to training exercises in Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador. For example, military personnel at Soto Cano provided and transported tents to a National Guard training site in Guatemala when the Guard's shipment of tents was delayed.

Currently, assets from Soto Cano are being used to support demining training under the operational control of the U.S. Military Group (USMILGP) in Honduras for Brazilian, Costa Rican, and Honduran troops. JTF-B also recently provided assistance to the USMILGP in El Salvador in the coordination of air operations for the Fuertes Caminos exercise.

Officials from the U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard said that the support they receive from U.S. military forces at Soto Cano makes training more convenient but that the training can be accomplished without a U.S. military presence. Since 1992, the Army National Guard and Army Reserve have increased their training deployments to other Central American countries, especially El Salvador and Guatemala. In these countries, intergovernmental coordination for logistical support is provided by U.S. military personnel attached to the Embassy; personnel deployed in advance of the training; post-exercise evaluation teams; and in some cases, the host nation military, according to U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard officials.

In a March 1994 memorandum on the review of the requirement for JTF-B, to the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA), the Army staff concluded that training activities in the region could continue without support from U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano. According to the memorandum training exercises in the region can be supported from bases located in the United States without the support of an "expensive, semi-permanent, logistics base." The memorandum states that the costs to support training exercises in Honduras exceed the benefits and the resources could be better used elsewhere to meet other Army operational requirements. Further, the Army Chief of Staff indicated to the Commander in Chief (CINC), USSOUTHCOM, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a message, that reducing or eliminating the Army's support requirement for JTF-B would represent an important savings to the Army. Furthermore, we reported in November 1993 and testified in April 1994 that some DOD humanitarian and civic action projects were not designed to contribute to

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foreign policy objectives, did not appear to enhance U.S. military training, and either lacked the support of the country or were not used.<sup>2</sup>

According to DOD officials, the CINC, USSOUTHCOM, considered the CSA's concerns about the need for JTF-B. The CINC's position is that JTF-B could be reduced, but that access to Soto Cano, with its C-5 capable airfield and a U.S. presence, is needed to accomplish USSOUTHCOM's mission, which includes conducting various military and humanitarian operations, training, and providing support for exercises in the Central American region.

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## U.S. Military Support at Soto Cano to Counterdrug Activities Is Minimal

U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano provide support to the U.S. Customs Service, the U.S. Navy, and the DEA counterdrug programs in the region. However, the level of support is minimal and involves only a small portion of the U.S. military personnel and equipment at Soto Cano. U.S. Customs, U.S. Navy, and DEA officials characterized the support they receive from the U.S. military at Soto Cano as useful and convenient, but not critical to their counterdrug programs.

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## Minimal Support to Customs Counterdrug Activities

Honduras is an ideal location for U.S. Customs to intercept and track suspect drug-trafficking aircraft. The U.S. Customs Service has two airplanes and eight personnel stationed at Soto Cano to intercept and track planes suspected of carrying drugs in the Central American region and over the eastern Pacific Ocean. Customs provides housing for its personnel at the base and its mechanics maintain their counterdrug planes, but receives utilities and other support services through the U.S. military and can use U.S. military facilities, such as the dining hall.

In addition, Customs purchases airplane fuel from U.S. military supplies and receives ground and air operations support, such as air traffic control and weather reports from U.S. military at Soto Cano. The U.S. military presence at the base provides Customs with a secure environment and operational capability 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. According to the U.S. Air Force commander at the base, about 130 personnel are involved in airfield operations. However, Customs counterdrug flights accounted for only a small percentage of the total flights handled by these personnel. For example, Customs' aircraft accounted for about 8 percent of total U.S. fixed-wing flights from Soto Cano between July 1993 and May 1994—an

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<sup>2</sup>Department of Defense: Changes Needed to the Humanitarian and Civic Assistance Program (GAO/NSIAD-94-57, Nov. 2, 1993) and Department of Defense: Weaknesses in Humanitarian and Civic Assistance Programs (GAO/T-NSIAD-94-158, Apr. 19, 1994).

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average of 16 times per month. During the 9-month period, April to December 1993, Interagency Counterdrug Assessment data shows that Customs' aircraft based at Soto Cano participated in intercepting/tracking 32 trafficking aircraft, which resulted in 13 cocaine seizures.

Customs officials said their counterdrug operations could continue at Soto Cano without assistance from the U.S. military if support were obtained from the Honduran military and/or contractors. Additionally, Customs officials told us that if they did not have access to Soto Cano, they could use aircraft based in Panama, Mexico, or other locations to monitor areas now covered by the aircraft at Soto Cano. However, the officials also said that this option would decrease the effectiveness of operations because Customs' aircraft would always be in a "catch-up" mode rather than an intercept mode. We note that Customs carries out similar activities in Mexico and other locations without a U.S. military presence. Notwithstanding the current Customs' arrangement with USSOUTHCOM<sup>3</sup> for use of the Soto Cano Base facilities, arrangements to provide for Customs use of civilian airport facilities for antidrug activities—without a U.S. military presence—may be possible as has been done in Mexico according to Customs officials. This would require the governments of the United States and Honduras to negotiate and establish appropriate arrangements.

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## Navy Uses Soto Cano Infrequently

The Navy uses Soto Cano in its counterdrug operations, which involve detecting and monitoring suspected drug planes. U.S. military flight records at Soto Cano showed that Navy counterdrug planes landed at Soto Cano on average 11 times a month from July 1993 through May 1994. Two Navy P-3 counterdrug planes based in Panama sometimes use Soto Cano for refueling or as a temporary base for their operations. The aircraft refuel at Soto Cano and receive ground and air operations support similar to the support provided to Customs. Navy personnel are sometimes housed at Soto Cano during 2- to 3-day stopovers.

Navy officials said that due to intercept geometry limitations, in order for the Navy P-3 aircraft to provide a constant air intercept capability, they must be staged at a Central American site. The optimum location for staging is north of Costa Rica but south of Mexico. Currently, Soto Cano is the only air base with U.S. aviation support that fits that description. These officials further added that due to excessive transit distance from other

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<sup>3</sup>The arrangement is based upon a memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Customs Service and USSOUTHCOM, dated September 14, 1990. The purpose of this memorandum is to facilitate and implement cooperation and coordination for the detection and monitoring of maritime and aerial transit of illegal drugs through the USSOUTHCOM's area of responsibility into the United States.

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P-3 bases, a Central American base is required to conduct maritime patrols in the southwestern Caribbean and eastern Pacific. When Howard Air Force Base closes, Soto Cano will be the only base in Central America that has U.S. aviation support. According to DOD officials, if the U.S. presence at Soto Cano is discontinued, P-3s could potentially continue to stage out of there or other bases in the region if the appropriate operating agreement can be made with the host nation. However, in considering options associated with the possible elimination of the U.S. presence at Soto Cano, the effectiveness of the Navy's P-3 interdiction efforts should be considered. Our prior work has raised serious questions about the cost-effectiveness of DOD's surveillance efforts in the drug war.<sup>4</sup>

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### DEA Receives Limited Support From U.S. Military at Soto Cano

A part of DEA's mission is to assist local law enforcement agencies with counterdrug investigations, intelligence, and other activities. The 4th Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment, at Soto Cano occasionally provides helicopter transport to DEA agents and Honduran law enforcement officers for counterdrug operations.<sup>5</sup> These missions have involved transporting agents to investigate drug seizures (post-seizure investigation), reconnaissance, drug eradication, and training for Honduran law enforcement officers.

At the time of our fieldwork, the helicopter battalion had 33 helicopters: 15 Blackhawk, 10 Huey, and 8 Chinook helicopters. From October 1992 through March 1994, the battalion provided transportation support to DEA about once a month, typically transporting two DEA and three Honduran agents. This accounts for only a small portion of the helicopter battalion's total flying hours. For example, during fiscal year 1993, DEA air transport totaled 91.3 flying hours, or only 1.2 percent of the helicopter battalion's total flying hours. The remaining 98.8 percent of the helicopter flying hours went for a variety of missions such as pilot proficiency training, humanitarian and civic action exercises, and general support for U.S. military groups and embassies in the region.

DEA officials characterized the helicopter battalion's flight support as convenient. They said that DEA operations in Honduras could be conducted with one Chinook and two Blackhawk helicopters. However, DEA officials noted they have other options to meet their needs for air transportation.

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<sup>4</sup>Drug Control: Heavy Investment in Military Surveillance Is Not Paying Off (GAO/NSIAD-93-220, Sept. 1, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>DEA is authorized to request DOD assistance for its counterdrug operations by section 1004 of the fiscal year 1991 National Defense Authorization Act, as amended (P.L. 101-510).

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These include chartering planes, which they have done in the past, or using U.S. helicopters based in Guatemala.

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## Soto Cano Not a Viable Option to Howard Air Base

U.S. military and diplomatic officials told us that another reason to maintain a U.S. presence at Soto Cano is the pending U.S. withdrawal from Panama by the end of 1999, that will result in the loss of Howard Air Force Base. These officials stated that it is important to retain access to an airfield in the region that is operated by U.S. military personnel. Without a U.S. military presence at Soto Cano or Panama, officials said the United States would no longer control or have immediate access to an airfield in Latin America for contingency purposes. They stated, however, that this is not reason enough to justify continuing the U.S. presence. They also acknowledged that it was unlikely that the United States would become involved in a major military conflict in Latin America.

Maintaining a U.S. military presence at Soto Cano does not guarantee continued access to the base because the United States has no base rights or status of forces agreements with the government of Honduras. According to some Honduran officials we met with, the Honduran constitution prohibits the permanent basing of foreign troops in Honduras, which would limit U.S. options with respect to future missions at Soto Cano. The 1954 Military Assistance Treaty between the United States and Honduras was the basis for military cooperation and assistance during the Cold War. Subsequent annexes and protocols to the 1954 agreement provided for the establishment of U.S. military presence at Soto Cano. U.S. and Honduran officials characterize the agreement allowing a U.S. military presence at Soto Cano as a “handshake” agreement, which either side could decide to break at any time.

In fact, the current U.S. presence has become a source of political controversy. Some Honduran government officials question the need for the U.S. military at Soto Cano and the adequacy of the arrangement for this presence. The Honduran President, the Chief of the Armed Forces, and leaders of the Honduran Congress have called for an examination of the terms and conditions of the U.S. presence because the reasons for its establishment no longer exist.

Finally, continuation of the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano will require recurring renovation and upgrade construction of some facilities

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and environmental issues will need to be addressed.<sup>6</sup> For example, the waste water treatment system is not adequate for the current U.S. presence.

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## Cost to Maintain U.S. Presence at Soto Cano Base

We did not attempt to establish firm estimates of cost savings that would result from discontinuing the U.S. presence at Soto Cano because there were too many unknowns. For example, we did not know how current activities at Soto Cano would be dispersed to other DOD installations and whether they would continue at the same level. Similarly, we did not have a firm basis for estimating the costs that Customs would incur with a different support arrangement for its mission. However, since about 83 percent of training exercises in the region take place without assistance from U.S. forces at Soto Cano, there are other DOD units and bases that provide similar support and they could take on the support role currently performed by JTF-B. Thus, we infer that DOD resources (i.e., human, financial, supplies and equipment, and contracts and fees) associated with base operations and maintenance could be eliminated and costs would either decline and/or shift to other agencies. Table 1 shows the direct costs associated with maintaining the U.S. military presence for fiscal year 1994.

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<sup>6</sup>JTF-B envisions providing proactive environmental leadership and began using environmental compliance assessment system inspections in April 1993 to establish a baseline program. They have begun to identify and prioritize requirements and funding sources. Additional full-time staffing is required for this program.

**Table 1: Costs to Operate and Maintain U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Base (Projected for Fiscal Year 1994)**

Dollars in thousands	
<b>Cost elements</b>	<b>FY 1994</b>
Contracts and fees <sup>a</sup>	\$9,510.9
Army Flying Hours Program <sup>b</sup>	7,900.0
Supplies and equipment <sup>c</sup>	6,075.6
Per diem and transport <sup>d</sup>	6,000.0
Travel and transportation <sup>e</sup>	1,012.2
Civilian salaries <sup>f</sup>	1,003.2
U.S. Air Force costs <sup>g</sup>	6,790.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$38,291.9</b>

<sup>a</sup>Base operations contract, telephone and electrical service costs, and design fees for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects.

<sup>b</sup>Fuel, repair and replacement parts, and travel expenses for the 4th Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment.

<sup>c</sup>Office, medical and maintenance supplies, repair parts, and data processing purchases.

<sup>d</sup>Transportation costs for initial deployment and return to home base for U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano, and per diem and separation allowance costs while stationed at the base.

<sup>e</sup>Costs to transport equipment to the base, and for U.S. military personnel stationed at Soto Cano to travel from the base to other locations on official duty.

<sup>f</sup>Salaries for 39 Honduran clerks at Soto Cano and for 45 staff-years of personnel in Panama providing administrative support to U.S. military at Soto Cano.

<sup>g</sup>Air Force shares the cost of all cost elements except Army Flying Hours Program. However, Air Force costs are shown in total because Air Force personnel were unable to separate its costs by the individual cost elements.

Source: GAO analysis of data provided by U.S. Army and Air Force.

## Recommendation

The reason that the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano was established no longer exists and this presence is not critical to current missions. In light of budget constraints and current efforts to increase the cost-effectiveness of DOD's worldwide operations, we question whether the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano is justified. Therefore, we recommend that

- the Secretary of Defense reduce U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano to the level necessary to support counterdrug activities, pending the development of other arrangements to support those counterdrug activities;
- the Commissioner of the U.S. Customs Service, the Administrator of DEA, the Secretaries of State and Defense, in conjunction with the Director of

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- the Office of National Drug Control Policy, develop a plan to conduct their operations without U.S. military units at Soto Cano; and
  - the Secretary of Defense withdraw the remaining U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano once the interagency plan is developed and implemented.

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## Agency Comments

In its comments on a draft of this report, DOD stated that they have already begun reducing U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano to the levels necessary for USSOUTHCOM to carry out JTF-B's restructured mission, which was formally approved on November 18, 1994, after the completion of our audit work. DOD plans to reduce the number of helicopters from 33 to 11 and personnel from the April 1994 level of 780 to 499 by October 1995. DOD said that if JTF-B were eliminated, it would cost units deploying to the region about \$8.2 million per year to provide the command and control and logistics support for most exercises in the Central American countries at the fiscal year 1993-94 level. No details were provided as to how the \$8.2-million estimate was established or its relevance to the total cost of the U.S. presence at Soto Cano. DOD stated that continued U.S. military operations at Soto Cano are important to ensure effective forward presence and to execute peacetime operations in the Central American region. They responded that any further restructuring of DOD activities at Soto Cano should await decisions that are pending on the relocation of USSOUTHCOM headquarters. DOD's response and comments are in appendix II.

The Department of State generally agreed with the information in the draft report but expressed concern about its timing and the political signal that might be perceived by the Latin American region if JTF-B were to be terminated. The U.S. Customs Service, DEA, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy generally agreed with the information contained in the draft report. Informal comments received from the agencies during discussions on a draft of this report have been included where appropriate.

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## Scope and Methodology

We interviewed officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department, the U.S. Customs Service, DEA, and the Army National Guard Readiness Bureau, all in the Washington, D.C., area. We also met with the Army Reserve Command Headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, and the U.S. Atlantic Command in Norfolk, Virginia. We obtained additional information related to the costs of maintaining the presence at the base from Air Force Air Combat

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Command Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and the Army Forces Command Headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia.

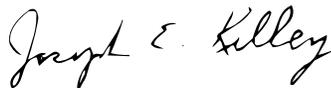
In Panama, we met with officials from the USSOUTHCOM, including U.S. Army South, and the U.S. Customs Service and DEA. In Honduras, we visited the U.S. military installation at Soto Cano and interviewed the Commander, JTF-B; the Commander, 4th Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment; and other military personnel assigned to the base. We also met with the U.S. Ambassador to Honduras and other embassy officials, including the Commander of the USMILGP, the Defense Attache, and the DEA Country Attache. Additionally, we interviewed former and present Honduran government and military officials regarding the U.S. military presence in Honduras. We did not assess the effectiveness of the programs that are supported by JTF-B and the other U.S. military units at the base.

We conducted our review between October 1993 and June 1994 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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We are sending copies of this report to the Secretaries of Defense, State, and Treasury; the Attorney General; the Commissioner of U.S. Customs; the Administrator of DEA; the Directors of the Office of National Drug Control Policy and the Office of Management and Budget; and interested congressional committees. Copies will also be made available to others upon request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-4128 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix III.



Joseph E. Kelley  
Director-in-Charge  
International Affairs Issues

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## Abbreviations

CINC	Commander in Chief
CSA	Chief of Staff of the Army
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DOD	Department of Defense
JTF-B	Joint Task Force-Bravo
USMILGP	U.S. Military Group
USSOUTHCOM	U.S. Southern Command

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# Authorized Level of U.S. Military Personnel at Soto Cano Base (as of April 1, 1994)

<b>Military unit</b>	<b>Authorized level</b>
<b>Joint Task Force Bravo</b>	
Command group and joint staff	153
Air Force forces	136
Medical element	79
Joint security force	51
Army forces	38
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>457</b>
<b>Other military units</b>	
4th Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment	263
Military police platoon	48
Armed Forces Radio and Television Service	3
Criminal investigation unit	1
Other small support units <sup>a</sup>	8
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>323</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>780</b>

<sup>a</sup>Includes five personnel in the power plant and three personnel in an equipment diagnostic and measurement unit.

# Comments From the Department of Defense



INTERNATIONAL  
SECURITY AFFAIRS

## ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

2400 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2400



09 DEC 1994

Mr. Henry L. Hinton, Jr.  
Assistant Comptroller General  
National Security and International  
Affairs Division  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Hinton:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the General Accounting Office (GAO) draft report, "HONDURAS: Continuing U.S. Presence at Soto Cano Base Is Not Critical," dated NOVEMBER 1, 1994 (GAO Code 711056), OSD Case 9808. The DoD partially concurs with the draft report.

The DoD agrees that the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano Air Base provides valuable and convenient support to U.S. Government interests and activities in the region. Continued U.S. military operations at Soto Cano are important to ensure an effective forward presence and to execute peacetime operations in the Central American region. By our continued presence there, the U.S. Government demonstrates its commitment to a neighboring region still struggling to consolidate recent democratic gains.

Soto Cano provides a forward operating base, with a unique all-weather, C-5 capable runway, that allows the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) operational flexibility to support joint, combined, and interagency operations and training throughout the region. The U.S. operation, termed Joint Task Force (JTF) Bravo, provides valuable support to ongoing deployments for training, security assistance, humanitarian and civic assistance, disaster relief, search and rescue, and counterdrug operations. The training that U.S. personnel receive at JTF Bravo is integral to the readiness of forces engaged in a wide range of military activities.

The JTF Bravo acts as the control and command headquarters for U.S. troops deployed to the region and also plays a valuable contingency role in the region. A recent example was the requirement to reconnoiter for migrant camps in Belize, which JTF Bravo accomplished in a week. Since February 1994, the JTF Bravo medical team has responded to 20 emergency or urgent helicopter evacuations of seriously injured U.S. personnel. The JTF Bravo logistical support to deployments in the region encompasses everything from food and tents to fuel and medical supplies. The GAO characterization of the "limited" support provided to training exercises does not recognize the extent



Appendix II  
Comments From the Department of Defense

of support that is provided. For example, due to U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations, all units deploying to the region draw all their tents, cots, and other canvas gear from Soto Cano. The report also does not reflect the JTF Bravo current operational, logistical and medical support to Special Operations Forces conducting demining training and assistance in Honduras.

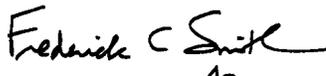
The draft report also does not consider ongoing reductions of the U.S. presence at Soto Cano that will close a portion of the base, reduce helicopter strength from 33 to 11, and reduce personnel from the April 1994 level of 780 to 499 by October 1, 1995. By comparison, there were 1,288 personnel at Soto Cano in August 1992. The reductions will result in significant cost savings. Even at that reduced level, the JTF Bravo will continue to be cost effective and provide a wide range of valuable military and interagency activities in the region.

It is important to recognize that the absence of JTF Bravo support to future operations and training would require additional support costs to units deploying to the region, including aviation, medical, intelligence, communications, and other logistics supplies and services. The SOUTHCOM estimates that it would cost approximately \$8.2 million per year for transportation of personnel and equipment to provide the command and control and logistics support for most exercises in the five countries now supported by JTF Bravo (Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Nicaragua) at the FY 1993-1994 level. Further, elimination of JTF Bravo would significantly restrain projected training deployments to the region.

In accordance with U.S. obligations under the Panama Canal treaties, the DoD is conducting a survey of possible sites for the relocation of the SOUTHCOM. Further restructuring of the DoD activities at Soto Cano should await the results of that study, which are anticipated in the Spring of 1995.

The detailed DoD comments on the GAO recommendations are provided in the Enclosure. The DoD appreciates the opportunity to comment on the GAO draft report.

Sincerely,

  
Joseph S. Nye, Jr. 

Enclosure

GAO DRAFT REPORT - DATED NOVEMBER 1, 1994  
(GAO CODE 711056) OSD CASE 9808

"HONDURAS: CONTINUING U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE  
AT SOTO CANO BASE IS NOT CRITICAL"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS ON  
THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

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RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense reduce U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano to the level necessary to support counterdrug activities, pending development of other arrangements to support those counterdrug activities. (p. 16/GAO Draft Report)

DOD RESPONSE: Partially concur. The DoD has already begun reducing U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano to that level necessary for the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) to carry out the restructured mission of Joint Task Force (JTF) Bravo.

The DoD does not agree, however, that U.S. personnel at Soto Cano should be reduced to that level necessary to support only counterdrug activities. In addition to the counterdrug mission, JTF Bravo provides valuable support to ongoing deployments for training, security assistance, humanitarian and civic assistance, disaster relief, and search and rescue. The training that U.S. personnel receive at JTF Bravo is also integral to the readiness of U.S. forces engaged in a wide range of military activities. Further, continued U.S. military operations at Soto Cano are important to ensure effective forward presence and to execute peacetime operations in the Central American region.

In accordance with U.S. obligations under the Panama Canal treaties, the DoD is currently conducting a study of possible sites for the relocation of the SOUTHCOM. Results of that study are expected in the Spring of 1995. Further changes to DoD activities at Soto Cano should not be made until results of the study are available.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommended that the Commissioner of U.S. Customs Service, the Administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the Secretaries of State and Defense, in conjunction with the Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, develop a plan to conduct their operations without U.S. military units at Soto Cano.

DOD RESPONSE: Nonconcur. As discussed in the DoD response to Recommendation 1, continued U.S. military presence at Soto Cano is

Now on p. 12.

important to carry out a variety of missions. Through JTF Bravo, U.S. military units at Soto Cano will continue to provide support to interagency counterdrug activities in the Central American region, in addition to its other missions.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense withdraw the remaining U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano once the interagency plan is developed and implemented.

DOD RESPONSE: Partially concur. As discussed in the DoD response to Recommendation 1, the DoD has already begun reducing personnel and equipment at Soto Cano in accordance with the restructuring of JTF Bravo's current mission. It is expected that the number of personnel at Soto Cano will decrease from the August 1992 level of 1,288 personnel, to 499 by October 1995. The DoD maintains, however, that a forward operating base is important to maintain a U.S. presence and execute peacetime engagement operations in the Central American region. Further restructuring of the DoD activities at Soto Cano should await decisions regarding the relocation of the SOUTHCOM, expected in the Spring of 1995.

# Major Contributors to This Report

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**National Security and  
International Affairs  
Division, Washington,  
D.C.**

Benjamin F. Nelson, Associate Director  
Andres C. Ramirez, Assistant Director

---

**Atlanta Regional  
Office**

Mario L. Artesiano, Regional Assignment Manager  
Nancy T. Toolan, Evaluator-in-Charge  
Daniel E. Ranta, Evaluator  
Sara L. Bingham, Reports Analyst

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