

Standing Down a Joint Task Force

By SCOTT M. HINES



U.S.-Honduran color guard at ceremonies for Ahuas Tara, III.

U.S. Air Force (Lemuel Castillas)

Often established in a crisis, joint task forces (JTFs) are generally designed to respond to a specific set of circumstances. What happens to JTFs when the crises which originally demanded their formation disappears or is resolved? Emphasis is placed on standing up JTFs; but how does the Department of Defense determine when it is time to *stand one down*? Are there criteria used to make this decision, or is it a matter of judgment? In addition, this decision can be clouded by competing bureaucratic interests which seek to justify a continuation of the presence long after it is needed. The following case of Joint Task Force-Bravo, Honduras, illustrates this tendency.

U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) maintains a small American military presence in Honduras at a facility known as Soto

Cano Air Base. Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B), directly subordinate to SOUTHCOM, consists of approximately 800 members of the Army and Air Force and U.S. Government civilian personnel. JTF-B has operational control over all forces deployed to Honduras, coordinates regional logistics, supervises engineering projects, maintains a search-and-rescue and medivac helicopter capability, and assists Honduras in counterdrug actions.¹ Since the United States has no base leasing agreement, its military presence is dependent on the express permission of the government of Honduras.

SOUTHCOM has had a presence at Soto Cano for over a decade. The original reasons for establishing JTF-B faded with the Cold War, but a lack of policy guidance from Washington has resulted in an American extended presence. Although SOUTHCOM continues to justify JTF-B as a critical hub for U.S. military training in Central America, most of the missions in question could be accomplished

without the task force, saving DOD approximately \$22 million annually.²

Background History

The U.S. Armed Forces and Honduran military have conducted bilateral training exercises since 1965. By the early 1980s, however, the frequency and size of exercises began to increase in response to the situation in Nicaragua and El Salvador. In Spring 1982, Honduras approached the United States and began negotiations granting access to Honduran naval and air facilities.

Congress appropriated \$13 million in 1983 to upgrade Palmerola Air Base (later renamed Jose Enrique Soto Cano Air Base by Honduras) in Comayagua. Construction was completed by June 1983, extending the runway to 8,500 feet. That same month the United States established the Regional Military Training Center, a facility operated by Special Forces to train friendly countries in basic counterinsurgency tactics. SOUTHCOM

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also created JTF-11, later known as JTF-Alpha, to coordinate show-of-force training deployments on the Nicaraguan border. With congressional approval for a "temporary but indefinite presence," JTF-Alpha was re-named JTF-Bravo in 1984.³

Throughout the 1980s the U.S. presence at Soto Cano served as a valuable staging area for intelligence gathering missions against both the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the FMLN insurgents in El Salvador. Also, JTF-B continued to coordinate large- and small-scale exercises in Honduras. Most of all, however, the presence was meant to demonstrate America's commitment to the region and to send a message to the Sandinistas and their Cuban/Soviet supporters. By 1987, the budget for JTF-B had swollen to \$25 million and the organization had grown to over 1,000 personnel, all assigned on temporary duty (TDY) ranging from four weeks to six months.⁴

A Shift in Mission

With peace being negotiated in El Salvador and the election of President Violetta Chamorro in Nicaragua, the original purpose of JTF-B evaporated. Accordingly, elements of the executive branch began to question the continued need for a military presence in Honduras. An interagency Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) examined the issue in late 1990 but reached no agreement on the fate of the task force. This generated JCS interest in the question, resulting in a flurry of taskers to SOUTHCOM requesting information on JTF-B. Feeling pressure to justify its presence, SOUTHCOM began to consider new missions for JTF-B, fundamentally to alter its nature.

SOUTHCOM decided to make JTF-B the premier counterdrug operations support unit for the region. This seemed a logical choice because of the high volume of narco-trafficking through Central America and the Caribbean. In addition, after seven years of coordinating exercises in Honduras, JTF-B was proficient in hosting units deploying from the

United States. By 1990, however, these operations changed from predominantly combat-related exercises to more engineering and humanitarian oriented deployments. During the Bush administration, "peacetime engagement" was the byword for military operations in the region, and the frequency and scope of deployments increased dramatically. Honduras became a favorite location to train, not only because of the local government's permissiveness but also because the services of JTF-B reduced costs for deploying units. By 1993 JTF-B was no longer the nucleus for anticommunist activities in Central America; instead it evolved into a regional logistics hub—coordinating training and assisting Honduras in its fight against drug trafficking.

However, modifications to JTF-B missions have not convinced everyone that the presence is still needed. The issue of JTF-B has become an enormous interagency battle, drawing fire from various sources. The General Accounting Office released a report stating that JTF-B has outlived its usefulness. The Department of State continues to argue that the presence serves no real purpose except as a military convenience. Honduran President Roberto Reina has appointed a commission to reevaluate the original protocols negotiated with the United States and examine the "usefulness" of the current arrangement. JCS continues to see the need for the task force but has not provided adequate policy guidance for SOUTHCOM. As a result, the command organized a committee with the task of justifying U.S. presence in Honduras. Thus, instead of an objective evaluation of the need for JTF-B, the issue of a continued presence in Honduras erupted into an interagency debate. In the middle is SOUTHCOM, a command whose future is itself in question, desperately trying to hold onto its assets in Honduras.

Time to Stand Down?

Most of the reasons SOUTHCOM furnishes for maintaining JTF-B are superficial. Added to this, many missions currently assigned to

the task force could be accomplished by other means. For example, SOUTHCOM points out that JTF-B contributes millions of dollars annually to the local economy of Comayagua and that the departure of American troops would cripple the fragile economy. In addition, JTF-B employs approximately 700 local Hondurans, many of whom were previously unemployed. It is true that the contribution of JTF-B to the economy is significant, but on closer analysis one finds that the tremendous influx of Chinese investments to the Comayagua Valley have begun to dwarf any contribution made by a continued U.S. military presence.

With regard to missions performed by JTF-B, many are obsolete or can be accomplished without a \$22 million dollar effort. The hope that counterdrug support operations would become the primary mission of the task force has proven ineffectual. In 1993 JTF-B participated in only fifteen missions and did not significantly support the U.S. Customs Service and Drug Enforcement Administration in the region. Also, the Clinton administration's emphasis on interdiction instead of eradication has shifted the focus from Central American trafficking to Andean producer-nations. Country teams, specifically military groups, can achieve missions such as logistical coordination in each Central American country as they have in other regions that do not have JTFs to provide such support. Large-scale intelligence collection from Soto Cano is also irrelevant now that democracies firmly in place in both Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The strongest argument for maintaining JTF-B is in support of engineering exercises and humanitarian aid in the region. There is little doubt that the American military has contributed to this impoverished region, gaining worthwhile training experience in the process. But it is doubtful that this training will be discontinued if JTF-B is stood down. This assumption is primarily based on the fact that large-scale training occurs elsewhere in Latin America

where JTFs are nonexistent. For example, the National Guard has conducted very large exercises in Ecuador without support and coordination from a standing JTF. Some critics argue that JTF-B, by providing logistical and transportation support, denies deploying units of valuable aspects of overseas training. By having units deploy to a bare bones environment, training may be more realistic than with an established JTF nearby. It is true, however, that without JTF-B the cost to National Guard and Reserve units training in the region will increase marginally as the units will have to support themselves during deployment.

SOUTHCOM has eyed the base in Honduras as a potential site to reposition assets as the command draws down in preparation for its departure from Panama in 1999. However, based on several SOUTHCOM studies, "keeping the option open in Honduras" is infeasible. First and foremost, Soto Cano is a small airstrip, hardly able to accommodate more than a few additional helicopters from Panama. Second, given political trends, it is doubtful the Honduran government would permit a sizable increase in the U.S. presence. Finally, maintaining a forward military presence there provides little strategic advantage over simply positioning assets in Florida. It is interesting to note that JTF-B played no role in Operation Just Cause in 1989; thus it would most likely not be used in a future large-scale contingency in Latin America.

JTF-B does not significantly contribute to U.S. national security. It assists deploying units to Honduras and Central America. It coordinates regional logistics and provides some support to counterdrug operations. But without a vital mission for JTF-B like that of the 1980s, it is hard to justify spending \$22 million that could be used elsewhere. It is equally difficult to excuse the tremendous disruption caused when members are pulled from active units to fill lengthy TDY

assignments at Soto Cano. Moreover, other means are available to achieve JTF-B missions. Why maintain a JTF, normally used in crises, when the United States can achieve the same ends without the cost of stationing of troops abroad?

More importantly, the mission drift by JTF-B is a dangerous precedent. What is the message when a JTF is stood up in a crisis, then continued until political pressure terminates it? If DOD wants to exercise a degree of autonomy in choosing when to stand up JTFs, it must act responsibly by standing them down. To avoid the bureaucratic inertia arising in the case of JTF-B, standing down JTFs should be just as methodical a process as standing them up. **JFO**

NOTES

¹ U.S. Southern Command, "Joint Task Force-Bravo Fact Sheet," Quarry Heights, Panama, August 20, 1993.

² The current annual budget for JTF-B is approximately \$16.5 million. In addition, the services pay approximately \$5.5 million in TDY reimbursements for JTF-B members.

³ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee for Military Construction, Hearings on "Central American, Persian Gulf, and Pacific Construction Programs," March 26, 1987.

⁴ U.S. General Accounting Office, "Honduras: U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Air Base," Briefing Report to the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Military Construction, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate (Washington: Government Printing Office, March 1989), p. 18.

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