

# Paraguay: Controversy Over Troop Deployment

Thursday 6 May 2010, by [RUIZ DIAZ Natalia](#) (Date first published: 4 May 2010).

**(IPS) - Military troops and extra police are being deployed in northern Paraguay after a state of emergency was declared to crack down on an armed rebel group that calls itself the Paraguayan People's Army (EPP).**

As part of Operation Py'a Guapy — “tranquility” in the Guaraní indigenous language — 3,300 Paraguayan army, navy and air force troops along with 300 national police officers have been sent to the northern provinces of Concepción, San Pedro, Amambay, Presidente Hayes and Alto Paraguay. On Sunday, Apr. 25, President Fernando Lugo signed into law a bill declaring a state of emergency in the conflict zone, which encompasses five of the country's 17 provinces.

According to government security agencies, these are the provinces where the EPP is active. Its roughly 100 members operate in remote, inaccessible forested areas, with the support of high technology equipment, where there is little or no police protection.

The emergency measures have been condemned by civil society organisations and met with reticence by the political opposition, but Lugo insists that they are needed to restore peace and security to the area of the country affected.

While the police and troops deployed have yet to undertake a major offensive into the mountainous forest areas, they have stepped up their presence in the towns of Arroyito, Belén, Paso Barreto and Puentesíño, in the province of Concepción, where the latest attacks attributed to the EPP took place.

Lugo called for the emergency measures after a police officer and three civilians were killed in an EPP attack in Arroyito, when they discovered a rebel camp while investigating cattle theft.

Under the state of emergency, suspected EPP members can be arrested without warrants. The measures adopted also include a ban on public gatherings and protests and tighter controls on the circulation of vehicles on highways and local roads in the provinces affected.

The EPP leapt into the public spotlight when it claimed responsibility for the September 2004 kidnapping of Cecilia Cubas, daughter of former president Raúl Cubas (1998-1999). Cecilia died in captivity and her body was recovered in February 2005.

At the time, Paraguay was governed by Nicanor Duarte (2003-2008) of the Colorado Party, which dominated Paraguayan politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now heads up the right-wing opposition that holds a majority of seats in Congress.

Since 2006, the government has attributed a number of crimes committed in the northern region of the country to the EPP. Several EPP members are currently in prison on kidnapping charges.

Minister of the Interior Rafael Filizzola announced that the troops and police deployed have been

fully equipped with all of the necessary weapons and ammunition.

Under Operation Py'a Guapy, army troops will patrol the forested areas that form a triangle between the provinces of Amambay, Concepción and San Pedro, while navy patrol boats will monitor the Paraguay, Aquidabán and Ypané Rivers and their tributaries, with the support of an additional 50 members of the navy.

For its part, the air force will conduct aerial reconnaissance and will be in charge of the transportation of troops and logistical support.

The entire operation is to be coordinated by General Bartolomé Pineda, the commander-in-chief of the army, while information will be handled by the Joint Operations Command.

While Operation Py'a Guapy got underway, controversy began heating up in the political arena after Vice President Federico Franco declared that the real objective of the state of emergency was not the elimination of the EPP.

Since taking office in August 2008, the left-leaning Lugo has frequently clashed with Franco, his second in command.

Lugo, a former Catholic bishop, denied Franco's allegations and said that the military and police deployment proved the vice president's claims to be false.

The president, whose work with the dispossessed earned him the nickname "bishop of the poor", was elected at the head of the Patriotic Alliance for Change, a coalition of opposition parties and social movements. Franco, his running-mate, belongs to the centre-right Authentic Radical Liberal Party, which was the largest opposition party at the time.

Established for a period of 30 days, the state of emergency affects 800,000 of Paraguay's 6.2 million people, and can be called off earlier if its objectives are not met.

Under the Paraguayan Constitution, a state of emergency can be declared in the event of an international armed conflict or a serious internal upheaval that poses an imminent threat to the Constitution or the functioning of state institutions.

In a press release, the Paraguayan Human Rights Coordinating Group (CODEHUPY) highlighted the fact that at this point in time, Paraguay is neither involved in an international armed conflict nor facing a situation that could endanger the state institutions of the five provinces in question.

The current situation, according to the press release, is a matter of "criminals acting outside the law who should be apprehended, charged and sentenced under the regular legal system."

CODEHUPY believes that "to claim that an armed group of approximately ten individuals is producing an internal upheaval and justifies a state of emergency is to acknowledge the incapacity of the country's security agencies."

A similar view was expressed by the trade union federation Central Nacional de Trabajadores, which stated that it will remain vigilant in the event of any violation of the public freedoms established by the constitution.

The declaration of the state of emergency in the five northern provinces coincided with an attack by armed gunmen on Senator Robert Acevedo, of the Authentic Radical Liberal Party, in the capital of the province of Amambay.

Acevedo's driver and bodyguard were killed in the attack, which has been attributed to organised crime organisations involved in drug trafficking operations around Paraguay's northern border with Brazil.

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