

GAO

Briefing Report to the Chairman,  
Subcommittee on Military Construction,  
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate

March 1989

# HONDURAS

## U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Air Base



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United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

National Security and  
International Affairs Division

B-213137

March 21, 1989

The Honorable Jim Sasser  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Military Construction  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In response to your request, we reviewed operations of the U.S. military base camp at Soto Cano (formerly Palmerola) Air Base, Honduras. Specifically, we obtained information on the base's missions, personnel, logistic support capabilities, facilities, and operation and construction costs associated with maintaining the military presence at Soto Cano.

## Results in Brief

U.S. military personnel have been stationed at Soto Cano Air Base since August 1983 when the headquarters for Joint Task Force 11 (subsequently renamed Joint Task Force-Bravo, or JTF-B) was established for what the Department of Defense stated would be a temporary mission. The primary purpose of JTF-B is to support the command, communication, intelligence, and logistics requirements for exercises and other military activities and to signal the resolve of the United States to support its allies against the Cuban/Nicaraguan threat.

Although the number of personnel assigned to JTF-B has remained relatively constant at about 1,100, the mission has expanded, logistic capabilities have improved, and facilities have been enhanced. Formerly an austere, highly dependent, forward-deployed force of the U.S. Southern Command, the structure of JTF-B is now similar to that of a unified command, although it does not exercise the broad regional responsibility, long-range planning function, and budget authority appropriate to a unified command. Some Department of Defense (DOD) personnel have characterized it as a "sub-unified" command. Even though subordinate to the Southern Command, JTF-B generally no longer needs the Command for resupply, except for rations and medical supplies and higher echelon maintenance, and has supported both operational missions and logistic and communication requirements of large-scale exercises in Honduras. Camp facilities are constructed of wood rather than more permanent materials. The Army has made quality-of-life improvements, such as construction of an air-conditioned mess hall, a swimming pool, and new

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clubs. Security upgrades are also underway. The overall cost of maintaining a military presence in Soto Cano is approximately \$25 million per year.

In a prior classified report, we concluded that DOD was establishing a presence in Honduras. Although the buildings are temporary and most personnel are assigned for less than 1 year rather than on permanent tours, the missions and recently improved capabilities of JTF-B suggest a more permanent presence than was evident in 1984. However, the assignment lengths and camp construction remain consistent with DOD's policy of a "temporary but indefinite" rather than permanent presence.

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## Agency Comments

In commenting on a draft of our report, DOD disagreed with our characterizations of the role of JTF-B and U.S. construction activities at Soto Cano. DOD commented that JTF-B should not be put on an equal footing with a unified command. We modified the report to clarify the role of JTF-B but also added that some DOD officials refer to it as a "sub-unified" command because of its range of responsibilities. Further, as requested by DOD, we have changed our characterization of the presence in Honduras from "continuing but indefinite" to "temporary but indefinite" to be consistent with DOD policy statements.

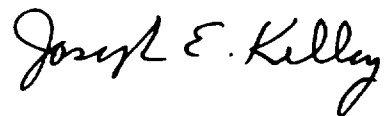
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Detailed information on these matters is contained in appendix I. DOD comments are included in appendix II.

Unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this briefing report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies of the report to interested congressional committees, the Departments of Defense and State, and other interested parties.

The major contributors to this briefing report are listed in appendix III.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph E. Kelley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Joseph E. Kelley  
Director, Security and International  
Relations Issues

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## Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
JTF-B	Joint Task Force-Bravo
SOUTHCOM	U.S. Southern Command



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# U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras

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In August 1983, the Department of Defense (DOD) established a base camp for Joint Task Force 11, subsequently renamed Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B), to perform what DOD stated was a temporary mission. Its purpose was to coordinate the command, communication, intelligence, and logistics support for planned exercises and other military activities and to signal U.S. resolve to support its allies against an increasing threat from Cuban/Nicaraguan forces. According to DOD, joint task forces are normally deployed to conduct a specific mission in a relatively small geographic area for a limited period of time. Formerly an austere, highly dependent, forward-deployed force of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), JTF-B has expanded its mission, improved logistic capabilities, enhanced its facilities, and now has functions similar to those of a unified command. However, it does not exercise the broad regional responsibility, long-range planning function, and budget authority appropriate to a unified command. Some DOD officials have characterized it as a "sub-unified" command.

JTF-B is located at Soto Cano Air Base, until recently named Palmerola Air Base, a Honduran military facility where the United States built an F-16 capable airfield with congressionally approved military construction funds. Soto Cano Air Base is in central Honduras, 50 miles northwest of the Honduran capital city of Tegucigalpa and 5 miles southeast of the city of Comayagua.

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## JTF-B Personnel and Mission

JTF-B performs functions similar to those of a permanent, unified command. The principal difference between JTF-B and a permanent command is that JTF-B personnel are deployed on short, temporary tours rather than on permanent tours.

Since 1984, JTF-B has maintained its staffing between 1,100 and 1,150. The primary units of JTF-B include Army and Air Force headquarters staff, military intelligence personnel, aviation support staff, security police, and medical personnel.

The JTF-B headquarters is organized like a unified command in that it has directorates to support daily operations, communications, and other activities. For example, the Operations Directorate plans the specific exercise activities and determines logistic and transportation support requirements. The Logistics Directorate arranges housing and delivery of fuel, water, food, and other necessities to exercising units. The Civic/Humanitarian Affairs Branch coordinates humanitarian assistance so that "every unit that trains in Honduras or is stationed at Soto Cano Air

Base contributes some type of humanitarian assistance to needy people in Honduras." JTF-B received \$1 million for this assistance in fiscal year 1988. The aviation, security, medical, and intelligence personnel conduct their respective missions of supplying transportation, security, and medical assistance for military personnel and conducting intelligence missions. Other units provide maintenance, communication, and radio/television support.

DOD officials recognize that when a joint task force is deployed for long periods, personnel should be permanently assigned rather than deployed on short-term, temporary duty. They also recognize that under certain circumstances it may not be politically feasible to establish a permanent presence—such may be the case in Soto Cano. A 1986 DOD report on low intensity conflict noted that when joint task forces are staffed on a temporary duty basis

"the lack of personnel continuity and, to a lesser extent, experience from top to bottom on the deployment of an extended JTF causes a significant gap in the ability to realistically plan and support the operation."

Although JTF-B officials did not point to specific problems resulting from temporary duty assignments, they acknowledged that permanent staff is needed to maintain expertise and continuity. Nevertheless, with the exception of the Task Force Commander, the Chief of Staff, and several other unit commanders who serve 1-year tours, U.S. military personnel at Soto Cano are on temporary duty assignments. Using temporary staff, however, is more consistent with the publicly stated temporary nature of the JTF-B mission.

In a prior classified report, we concluded that DOD was establishing a presence in Honduras. Although the buildings are temporary and most personnel are assigned for less than 1 year rather than on permanent tours, the missions and recently improved capabilities of JTF-B suggest a more permanent presence than was evident in 1984. However, the assignment lengths and camp construction remain consistent with DOD's policy of a "temporary but indefinite" rather than permanent presence.

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## Logistics Support Capabilities

Because the missions of a joint task force are traditionally temporary, limited time and effort are usually spent to develop comprehensive and long-term plans to support its operations. JTF-B, however, has developed from a task force with limited logistic and communication capabilities to



one equipped with an extensive logistics support base and forward base capability.

According to DOD, when the task force in Honduras was first established, its logistics support procedures were confusing, cumbersome, and time-consuming. For example, JTF-B almost totally depended on the U.S. Army's 193rd Infantry Brigade in Panama to requisition, obtain, and ship supplies to the task force. Since then, JTF-B capabilities have improved.

In 1986, DOD began to develop procedures so that requisitions could be sent directly from JTF-B to the U.S. supply system, thereby allowing JTF-B to function autonomously—no longer needing SOUTHCOM for resupply except for rations and medical supplies and higher echelon maintenance. The Logistics Directorate now believes it has the capability to arrange and control the movements of cargo and personnel in and out of Honduras and other Central American countries as directed; to order and monitor fuel; and to coordinate all troop movements, including feeding and housing within the theater. While the Task Force previously relied on deploying aviation units to supply their own aviation assets, Soto Cano now has 10 UH60 Blackhawk, 12 UH1, and 4 Chinook transport helicopters permanently assigned. The base's communication nets support U.S. military operations and exercises in other countries as well as units in Honduras.

JTF-B believes it has established logistic supply and service systems to sustain its forces and to serve as the control, communication, transportation, maintenance, and supply center for virtually all U.S. military activities in Honduras. For example, during the March 1988 deployment of troops from the 82nd Airborne Division and 7th Infantry Division (Light) to Honduras, JTF-B supplied fuel, water, fresh fruit, medical assistance, and housing for headquarters personnel and assisted in the redeployment. The JTF-B Commander believed that the deployment would not have been as successful without the logistical support of JTF-B.

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## Base Composition and Maintenance

JTF-B headquarters and supporting units are connected by about 10 miles of predominantly gravel roads and are located on about 300 acres of land surrounding the F-16 capable airfield, which the United States constructed from 1983 to 1985. The base camp consists of a variety of wooden structures to house and support personnel and missions. For

**Appendix I**  
**U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Air**  
**Base, Honduras**

example, there are 326 wood structures, called Central American Tropical Huts, that are used primarily to house JTF-B personnel; 92 wood office buildings; 9 wood guard houses; 3 wood clubs; and a swimming pool.

SOUTHCOM and JTF-B have sought to upgrade the base, particularly to improve the sanitation, security, and quality of life for personnel stationed there. For example, the base camp has a post exchange, which stocks food, sundries, basic appliances, and some clothing; a beauty parlor and barber shop; a recently constructed air-conditioned mess hall; and a movie theater. To improve security, JTF-B is purchasing a mobile sensor system, fencing, and night-vision devices.

Since 1984, U.S. contractors have provided JTF-B base operations and maintenance service. Global Associates has been the contractor since August 1986. The costs for services provided by Global Associates for fiscal year 1987 totaled \$4.5 million, or about \$373,000 per month. Major expenses were for base engineering projects, motor pool operations, materials, food, maintenance, and supplies. Other costs included items such as laundry and overtime pay. Table I.1 shows the fiscal year 1987 costs for selected services.

**Table I.1: Costs of Selected Base Services Provided by Global Associates**

Dollars in thousands	
Selected base services	Fiscal year 1987 costs
Facility engineer operations	\$999
Transportation (motor pool operations)	938
Materials	867
Food	523
Maintenance	351
Supplies	344

## Annual Operation and Construction Costs

Additional costs associated with maintaining a U.S. military presence in Honduras include annual operating expenses and construction costs. As shown in table I.2, expenses include supplies/equipment, the base maintenance service contract, temporary duty per diem for military personnel assigned to JTF-B, civilian salaries, and transportation. In fiscal year 1987, operational costs totaled about \$25 million. This amount does not include military salaries or expenses for intelligence missions that originate at Soto Cano Air Base.

**Appendix I**  
**U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Air**  
**Base, Honduras**

**Table I.2: Annual Cost of Continuing Military Presence in Honduras**

Cost element	Fiscal year	
	1986	1987
Supplies/equipment	\$10,807	\$15,559
Contracts <sup>a</sup>	9,145 <sup>b</sup>	6,933
Temporary duty per diem	2,869	1,992
Civilian salaries	773	636
Transportation	108	254
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$23,702</b>	<b>\$25,374</b>

<sup>a</sup>Includes contracts for base operations, vehicle rentals, printing, and claims and other contracts.

<sup>b</sup>Includes base operations contract with Harbert International and phase-in costs for new contract with Global Associates.

The funds used to construct and improve the base were derived from military construction funds and each service's operation and maintenance funds. According to SOUTHCOM, \$28.4 million was spent on construction at Soto Cano Air Base between fiscal years 1983 and 1988. Of this, \$20.8 million in military construction funds was primarily used to construct permanent facilities associated with the F-16 capable airfield and facilities to support intelligence units stationed at Soto Cano Air Base. However, the bulk of the camp—the wood structures and roads—was constructed with \$7.6 million of operation and maintenance funds and by units deployed to Honduras.

**Table I.3: Costs of Soto Cano Construction**

Fiscal year	Operation and maintenance funds	Military construction funds
1983	\$313	\$13,000 <sup>a</sup>
1984	181	0
1985	395	0
1986	1,597	0
1987	2,598	4,997 <sup>b</sup>
1988	2,483	1,823 <sup>c</sup>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$7,567</b>	<b>\$19,820</b>

<sup>a</sup>Airfield upgrade.

<sup>b</sup>Army/Air Force unspecified minor military construction project for "C Ramp," a staging area, and an exercise base camp. Intelligence units' military construction (\$4,300,000).

<sup>c</sup>Integrated physical security system (\$920,000) and UH-60 helicopter parking apron (\$903,000).

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## Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Our objective was to describe the missions, personnel, logistics support capabilities, facilities, and operation and construction costs associated with maintaining the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano Air Base. We have visited JTF-B periodically since 1983. In September 1987, we spent 4 days at the camp to obtain information on the amounts and type of construction taking place, the number and purpose of assigned personnel, and the Task Force's role and activities. During a March 1988 visit, we updated this information. At the camp, we interviewed the Task Force Commander and personnel, toured the facilities, and reviewed documents related to Task Force activities. We obtained financial data from SOUTHCOM and U.S. Army South located in Panama.

# Comments From the Department of Defense

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301-2400

In Reply Refer to:  
I-88/18173

6 JAN 1989

Mr. Frank C. Conahan  
Assistant Comptroller General  
National Security and International  
Affairs Division  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Conahan:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the General Accounting Office (GAO) draft report titled, "HONDURAS: U.S. Military Presence at Palmerola Air Base", dated November 18, 1988 (GAO Code 463754) OSD Case 7839-A. The DoD partially concurs with the report.

There are three misleading positions included in the report. First, the Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B) should not be put on an equal footing with a unified command. The JTF-B does not exercise the broad regional responsibility, long range planning function and budget authority appropriate to a unified command. Further, in the draft cover letter to Senator Sasser, the GAO states that the JTF-B no longer needs the U.S. Southern Command for resupply and that the JTF-B can provide for all the logistics and communication requirements of large-scale exercises in Honduras. Actually the JTF-B depends on U.S. Army South for resupply to include rations and medical supplies. Additionally, all higher echelon maintenance is performed in Panama. The JTF-B is subordinate to the U.S. Southern Command.

Second, the DoD did not "build" Palmerola (now known as Soto Cano) Air Base. The initial \$13 million investment of military construction funds for Soto Cano in FY1983 provided for improvements at a Honduran facility that was already under construction.

Third, the Department of Defense characterizes its military presence in Honduras as "temporary but indefinite." It is a continuing presence only in the sense that the U.S. length of stay there is indefinite.

Detailed DoD comments are provided in the enclosure. Thank you for this opportunity to review and to comment on the subject GAO draft report.

Sincerely,

RICHARD C. BROWN  
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense  
Inter-American Affairs

Enclosure

See comment 1.

See comment 2.

See comment 3.

Appendix II  
Comments From the Department of Defense

GAO DRAFT REPORT - DATED NOVEMBER 18, 1988  
(GAO CODE 463754) OSD CASE 7839-A

"HONDURAS: U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE AT PALMEROLA AIR BASE"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS

\* \* \* \* \*

FINDINGS

FINDING A: Establishment of the U.S. Military Presence at Palmerola Air Base, Honduras. The GAO reported that, in August 1983, the DoD established a base camp for Joint Task Force II (subsequently renamed Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B)), at Palmerola Air Base, Honduras. According to the GAO, the DoD stated the JTF-B would be a temporary mission, whose purpose was to coordinate the command, communication, intelligence and logistics support for planned exercises and other military activities, and to signal the U.S. resolve to support its allies against an increasing threat from Cuban/Nicaraguan forces. The GAO noted that the JTF-B is organized like a unified command in that it has directorates to support daily operations, communications and other activities. The GAO reported that, since 1983, the JTF-B mission has expanded and improvements have been made. The GAO referred to a prior report,

in which it concluded that the DoD was establishing a presence in Honduras. The GAO concluded that, although the JTF-B buildings are temporary and most personnel are assigned for less than one year (see Findings B and D), the missions and recent improved capabilities of the JTF-B (see Finding D) suggest a more permanent presence than was evident in 1984. The GAO also concluded, however, that the personnel assignment lengths and camp construction remain consistent with the DoD policy of a "continuing but indefinite," rather than permanent presence. (pp. 1-3, pp. 5-6/GAO Draft Report)

DoD RESPONSE: Partially concur. The DoD disagrees with the GAO comparison of the JTF-B to a unified command. The principal difference between the JTF-B and a unified command is the scope of assigned responsibility; i.e., the JTF-B exists to provide command and control, planning, logistical and administrative support to the U.S. forces in Honduras and to a limited extent, to provide logistical support to the U.S. Military Group in El

Now on pp. 1-2 and 6-7.

See comments 1 and 3.

Salvador and Guatemala. It does not exercise the broad regional responsibility, long range planning function and budget authority appropriate to a unified command. Since the establishment of the JTF-B in 1984, the mission has remained the same, -- i.e., to provide support for U.S. forces in Honduras and to support, on an as required basis, U.S. forces in El Salvador and Guatemala. Further, DoD policy vis-a-vis military presence in Honduras is more accurately described as "temporary but indefinite" rather than "continuing but indefinite."

FINDING B: Personnel Assigned to the JTF-B at Palmerola. The GAO report that the JTF-B performs functions similar to those of a permanent unified command, the principle difference being that JTF-B personnel are deployed on short, temporary tours. The GAO reported that, since 1984, the JTF-B has maintained its staffing between 1,100 and 1,150 personnel, slightly below the personnel ceiling of 1,205. The GAO observed DoD officials have recognized that, when a joint task force is deployed for long periods, personnel should be permanently assigned, rather than deployed on short, temporary duty. The GAO further observed, however, DoD officials also recognize that, under certain circumstances (such as at Palmerola) it may not be politically feasible to establish a permanent presence. The GAO cited a 1986 DoD report, which noted that when joint task forces are staffed on a temporary duty basis, the lack of personnel continuity and experience can cause a significant gap in the planning and support functions. The GAO reported that JTF-B officials did not identify specific problems resulting from the temporary duty assignments, but they did acknowledge that permanent staff are needed to maintain expertise and continuity. The GAO found, however, that with the exception of the Task Force Commander, the Chief of Staff, and several other commanders serving one year tours, U.S. military personnel at Palmerola are on temporary duty assignments. The GAO concluded that using temporary staff is more consistent with the publicly stated temporary nature of the JTF-B mission. (pp. 2-3, pp. 5-8/GAO Draft Report)

Now on pp 1-2 and 6-7.

See comments 1 and 4.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially concur. See the DoD comments to Finding A. Additionally, it is important to note that there is no ceiling of 1,205 personnel at Soto Cano Air Base (formerly

called Palmerola Air Base). The Secretary of Defense has approved a level of 1,100-1,200 troops. Review by the Secretary is required if troop strength is to exceed that range.

FINDING C: Logistics Support Capabilities of the JTF-B. The GAO reported that, according to the DoD, when the JTF-B was first established, its logistics support procedures were confusing, cumbersome and time-consuming. The GAO noted that, since then, the JTF-B capabilities have improved. The GAO identified several logistics procedural improvements made, and reported that the JTF-B now believes it has established logistic supply and service systems to sustain its forces and to serve as the control, communication, transportation, maintenance and supply center for virtually all U.S. military activities in Honduras. As an example, the GAO reported that during the March 1988 troop deployment, the JTF-B supplied fuel, water, fresh fruit, medical assistance and housing, and assisted in the redeployment. The GAO noted that the JTF-B Commander believed that the deployment would not have been as successful without the JTF-B logistical support. (p. 2, pp. 8-10/GAO Draft Report)

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

FINDING D: Composition and Maintenance of JTF-B Facilities. The GAO found that the JTF-B headquarters and supporting units are connected by about 10 miles of predominantly gravel roads and consist of a variety of wooden structures. The GAO reported that the U.S. Southern Command and the JTF-B have sought to upgrade the base, particularly to improve the sanitation, security and quality of life for personnel. As examples of the improvements, the GAO noted the Army has constructed an air conditioned mess hall, a swimming pool, a movie theater, and new clubs. The GAO further reported that, since 1984, U.S. contractors have provided JTF-B base operations and maintenance service. For FY 1987, the GAO reported that contractor costs totaled \$4.5 million, the major expenses being for base engineering projects, motor pool operations, materials, food, maintenance, and supplies. (p. 2, pp. 10-11/GAO Draft Report)

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

FINDING E: JTF-B Operation and Construction Costs. The GAO reported that, for FY 1987, JTF-B operating expenses for items such as supplies/equipment, the base maintenance service contract, per diem, civilian salaries and transportation, totaled about \$25 million. The GAO noted this amount does not include costs for military salaries or expenses for intelligence missions that originate at Palmerola. The GAO reported that the funds used to construct and improve the base were derived from

Now on pp. 1 and 7-8.

Now on pp. 1-2 and 8-9.



military construction funds and each Service operation and maintenance funds. The GAO noted that, according to the U.S. Southern Command, \$28.4 million was spent on construction at the Palmerola Air Base between FY 1983 and FY 1988. The GAO reported that, of this amount, \$20.8 million in construction funds was primarily used to construct permanent facilities associated with the airfield and facilities to support intelligence units stationed at Palmerola. The GAO pointed out, however, that the bulk of the JTF-B camp--the wood structures and roads--was constructed with \$7.6 million of operation and maintenance funds and by units deployed to Honduras. (pp. 11-13/GAO Draft Report)

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The bulk of the \$20.8 million in construction funds noted by the GAO were directed to constructing a portion of the runway, an additional parking apron, connecting taxiways and fuel storage at Soto Cano Air Base. These funds (\$13.0 million) were appropriated by the Congress, and, in coordination with the Government of Honduras, the money was spent to improve Soto Cano Air Base to an acceptable level as a contingency base capable of fighter operations for U.S. forces.

Now on pp. 2 and 9-10.

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## GAO Comments

The following are GAO's comments on DOD's letter dated January 6, 1989.

1. We have modified our description of JTF-B to clarify its role and the differences between it and a unified command. However, in our discussion of JTF-B's duties, many of which are similar to those of a unified command, we added that some DOD officials refer to JTF-B as a sub-unified command. Further, as its capabilities improved over the years, JTF-B assumed increasing responsibility in supporting U.S. military deployments into Honduras and neighboring countries. Regarding JTF-B resupply capabilities, we note in appendix I that it can requisition directly from the U.S. military supply system. Additionally, the base maintenance contractor obtains the basic materials, supplies, food, and spare parts necessary to keep the Task Force operating. We have also modified the report to indicate that rations and medical supplies are supplied directly from SOUTHCOM.

2. GAO has previously reported extensively on U.S. construction at Soto Cano, as noted in the body of the report. We did not state that the United States "built" Soto Cano but rather that it built an F-16 capable airfield, including the structures necessary to support a U.S. military operation.

3. We have changed the characterization of the military presence in Honduras to "temporary but indefinite."

4. We have deleted reference to the personnel ceiling. Nonetheless, a troop strength level that can be exceeded only by approval from the Secretary of Defense is, in effect, a ceiling.

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