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Guantanamo: The meaning of 120 years of illegal occupation

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The view of the people of Guantanamo. Photo: Bill Hackwell

To a great many people of the world, the word Guantanamo has become synonymous with torture since the U.S. opened up its military prison center there in 2002. Over 780 people captured by U.S. forces have suffered from massive human rights violations there carried out by the CIA since that time. For the people of Cuba, a society that places human rights and well-being above all else, this is a collective horror carried out on their sovereign soil by a foreign military.

This article hopes to go beyond that because today marks the 120th year of continuous U.S. Naval occupation of Guantanamo. Our president Miguel Diaz Canal

made the collective sentiment of the Cuban people clear this morning, “Our sovereignty was severed, this day in 1903, when Tomás Estrada Palma signed the cession of the territory that remains illegally occupied by the United States against the will of the Cuban people”.



The 1903 signing was a “Treaty for the leasing of naval and coal bases,” which gave the United States the right to use four of the island’s best bays to build military facilities. The treaty was signed under Article VII of the Platt Amendment, a document drafted by the U.S. Congress and annexed to the recently passed Cuban Constitution (1901). It was a mandatory action to end the U.S. occupation that had already lasted four years. The amendment was nothing but the lid of the grave on the recently born Cuban “independence.” It drew out clearly that for U.S. troops to leave, Cuba will have to get U.S. approval for any and all significant decisions of the country.

The framework of international law does not adequately represent the sentiment of the Cuban people; to them, the signing of that treaty was nothing but an act of coercion by the hemispheric power over a small country that bore the heavy cross of a constant threat of military intervention, a threat that is ever-present today.

The naval station base's history, its details, and the U.S. military forces' usual overseas excesses have been addressed in a number of articles and books during these 120 years. However, the Cuban people's feelings, especially those who have lived near the military base, are the best legal and moral argument to understand why it is a territory seized by force and illegally occupied.

For them, those almost 118 square kilometers represent more than their proven geographic or economic importance. It is something that goes deep into the nation's soul. There are still some witnesses among local people who remember how the facility shaped their lives for over five decades.

Before our revolution in 1959 Guantanamo was a place where education and health services barely existed, but there were plenty of bars and brothels. Even the scarce water sources were dedicated exclusively to satisfying U.S. Marines' needs. For local people, it was like being foreigners in their own country. Today, this reality is only a bitter memory, but the base remains an anachronistic symbol that prevents us from obtaining our complete sovereignty. Of the more than 750 U.S. military bases that dot the world, Guantanamo is the oldest.

During the armed struggle led by Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra, the U.S. military devised several plans to fabricate a pretext to invade the island or provide more aid to Batista's dictatorship to defeat the rebels. After the Triumph of the Revolution the U.S. military moved towards real actions. From the base, they supported counterrevolutionary groups, planned attacks against the Revolution's leaders, and even launched mortar attacks against local populations.

It was during the early years of the revolution when the Border Brigade was created to protect the area, perhaps not from a possible attack, which was always a possibility, but more from provocative acts along the border of the base that went as far as the assassination of two Cuban soldiers. Thousands of young Cubans have passed through this military corp there in six decades, ensuring that this enduring blight on our country is understood by each generation.

Although tensions along the border have decreased to the point of cautious co-existence, disrespectful behavior towards Cuban soldiers seems to be an inheritance. Pointing rifles at Cuban posts, especially those guarded by women, or violating Cuban territorial waters, are persisting practices.

From the perspective of a young Cuban soldier from the Border Brigade, the Cuban military uniform has an additional value in that place. People understand much better how much honor it carries and how much responsibility it implies. He also explained about the affront that takes place at 8 a.m. every morning, when the U.S. anthem resounds thanks to dozens of loudspeakers installed on the base's perimeter. The sound floods the silent characteristic of the desert areas and extends to the nearest towns and surrounding Cuban military camps.

Despite the passage of time, no one has gotten used to it, and every morning they share the same feeling that the Cuban poet Bonifacio Byrne expressed in his poem "My Flag" when he returned to Havana at the beginning of the U.S. military occupation:

"Eagerly I looked for my flag

and I saw another next to my own!

today I loudly say

that two flags should not float

one is enough: mine!"

This feeling explains why this is the region where the Cuban flag flies with incomparable beauty, even though the landscape seems desolate and is not impregnated with the typical greenery of the Cuban countryside.

That feeling cannot be wielded in an international court by any of the best International lawyers. However, every Cuban who has had a foot in this zone would be able to convince the toughest of juries that Guantanamo Bay is illegally occupied, a usurpation of the land that belongs to all Cubans that can only continue with the vilest blackmail lingering from 120 years ago. It is the only possible explanation since no Cuban has ever accepted the vile nature of the *yanqui* naval base in our Guantanamo.

Source: [Resumen Latinoamericano - U.S.](#)



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All Guantanamo is

