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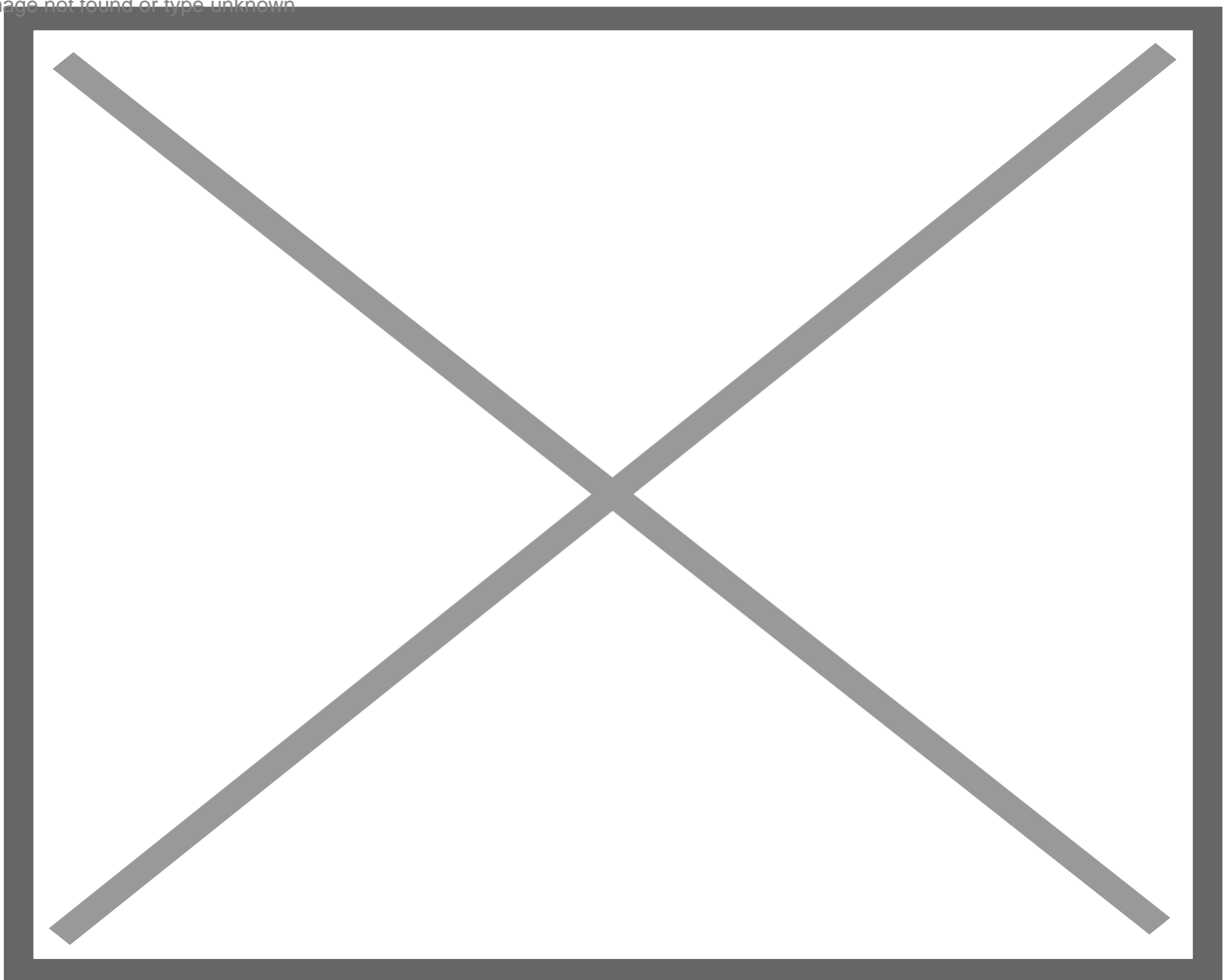
U.S. Dept. of Defense Officials To Visit Guyana This Week Ahead of Planned Venezuelan Referendum on Disputed Territory

U.S. DOD to visit Guyana as Venezuelan claims intensify over disputed territory

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Janeke Simon **November 27, 2023**

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While the attention of many around the world may be on conflicts in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, an increasingly tense land dispute on the South American continent is prompting action from the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD).

DOD officials are scheduled to arrive in Guyana this week, as the country explores its options in the face of Venezuela's intensifying efforts to claim ownership of a vast swathe of mineral-rich land east of the Essequibo River.

Two teams from the Defense Department will be in Guyana in the coming days, ahead of Venezuela's planned national referendum on December 3, which will, among other things, ask Venezuelan voters if a new state should be created in the Essequibo territory, with Venezuelan citizenship granted to current residents of the region.

Guyana's government sees the 5-question referendum as an existential threat to the country's territorial integrity, and has petitioned the International Court of Justice (World Court) to order the exercise halted. The over 60,000 square miles of disputed land makes up more than two-thirds of Guyana's national territory.

Venezuela has laid claim to the Essequibo region since 1811, when it gained independence from Spain. It has never accepted the border between Venezuela and what was then British Guiana, established by international arbitrators in 1899.

The long-simmering dispute came to the forefront again approximately eight years ago, when in 2015 ExxonMobil announced the discovery of significant quantities of oil in offshore deposits along the Essequibo coast.

Venezuela's claim is a "textbook example of annexation," according to Paul Reichler, a lawyer representing Guyana in the World Court. The two initial visits by DOD officials, followed by several others scheduled for December, are part of efforts by Guyana to ensure that it is prepared for any security threats that may be posed by the flaring dispute between the two nations.

"Although we are of the opinion that Venezuela will not act recklessly, we cannot be unprepared," declared Guyanese President Dr. Irfaan Ali, speaking at a recent meeting with residents of the country's Mabaruma district in Region One. Dr. Ali said that the country had the support of countries and multilateral organizations in the region and beyond, including Brazil, the United States, CARICOM, and the commonwealth.

He pledged his commitment to a peaceful resolution of the dispute between Guyana and its South American neighbor, but promised residents that the state is prepared to defend its sovereignty. "We are not taking anything for granted," Mr. Ali said.