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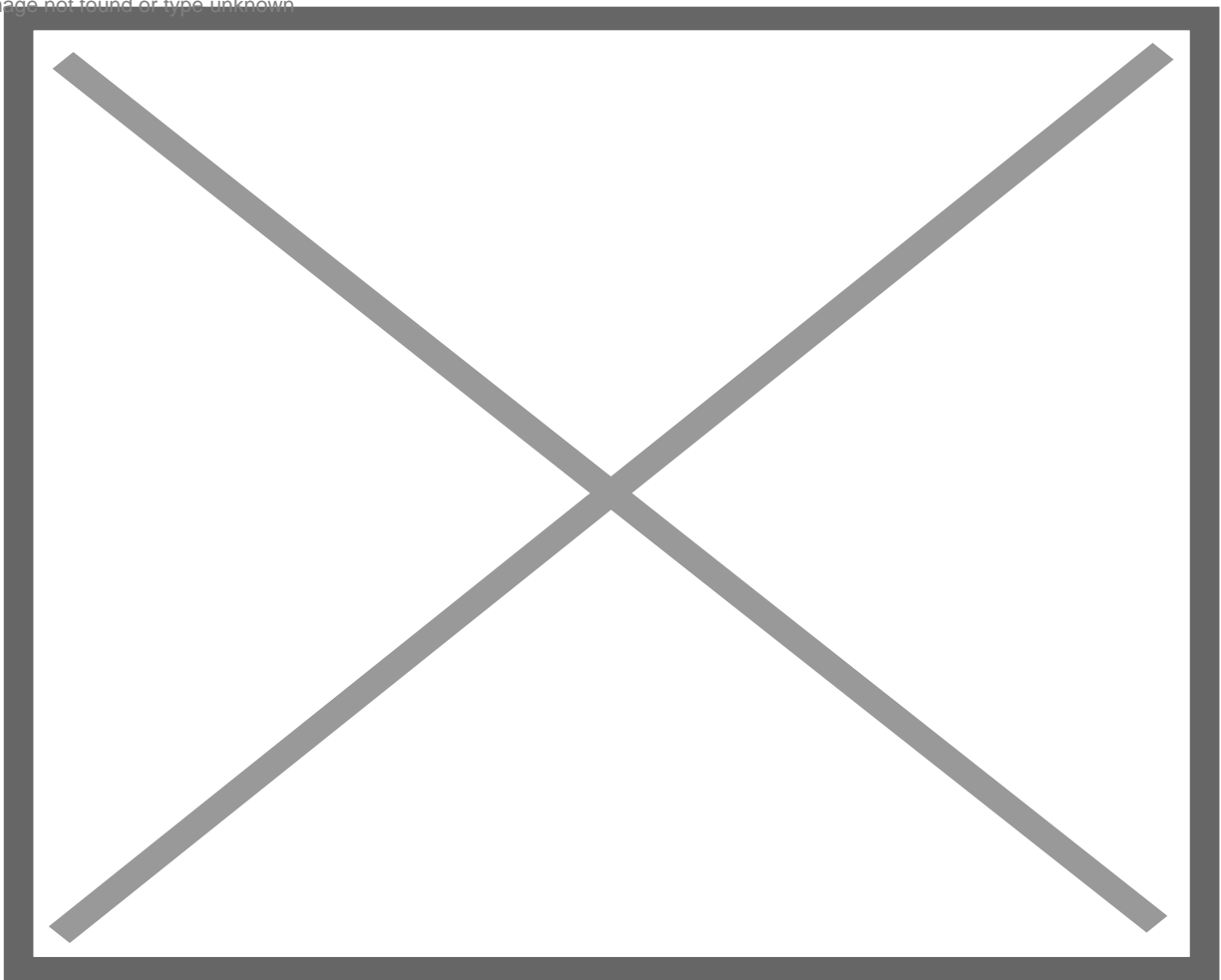
U.S. Conducts Joint Military Flight Drills in Guyana After Venezuela Ordered “Immediate” Exploitation of Disputed Essequibo Region

Guyana and international community respond to Maduro's controversial moves amidst escalating border dispute

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An American Soldier mans the machine gun in a Blackhawk helicopter By. GETTY IMAGES

Tensions between Guyana and Venezuela have ratcheted up since last Sunday’s controversial referendum in the latter country. Initial claims by Venezuelan authorities of over 10 million people – more than half of the country’s registered voters – turning out to participate in the vote have been cast into doubt by media reports of sparsely-attended polling stations across the

republic.

Nevertheless, buoyed by what he called the “overwhelming” result in favor of his plans to ignore a [recent ICJ ruling](#) and proceed with the annexation of the Essequibo region, a vast swathe of Guyanese territory, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on Tuesday ordered state-owned entities to “immediately” begin the exploitation of Guyana’s Essequibo region for minerals, oils and gas.

To support his directive, Mr. Maduro also deployed military assets to create a staging location near the Venezuela-Guyana border, previewed new legislation to create a new state in the disputed territory, and announced the appointment of Major-General Alexis Rodríguez Cabello as that state’s provisional authority. He has also declared that companies currently operating in Essequibo under license from Guyana cease their activities.

“We are giving three months to the companies that are exploiting resources there without Venezuelan permission to comply with the law,” Mr. Maduro said. American oil giant ExxonMobil is currently operating in the region, under licenses issued by Guyana.

The Caribbean and international community has reacted with alarm to the latest developments. In an emergency meeting convened on Friday, CARICOM issued a joint statement which pledged unequivocal support to Guyana in the border dispute. “Further, CARICOM urges Venezuela to respect the conservatory measures determined by the ICJ in its recent ruling until a final resolution,” the regional body declared. Reiterating that the Caribbean was a “Zone of Peace”, CARICOM called for “a de-escalation of the conflict and for appropriate dialogue between the leaders of Venezuela and Guyana to ensure peaceful coexistence.”

Given that Venezuela has already seemingly decided to ignore the edict of the ICJ, it is unclear how much impact the CARICOM statement will have when it comes to lowering the temperature between the feuding nations.

The UN Security council also met on Friday in a closed door session requested by Guyana.

Meanwhile, the United States is supporting Guyana with a show of force, conducting joint military flight drills on Thursday. A statement from the U.S. Embassy in Guyana announcing the exercise promised that “the U.S. will continue its commitment as Guyana’s trusted security partner.”

In response to this week’s developments, President Maduro on Friday debuted a map which incorporated the disputed region within Venezuela’s borders, and the country’s defense minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez chastised the United States for its “unfortunate provocation.”

“Guyana and ExxonMobil will have to sit down with us face-to-face sooner rather than later,” President Maduro said.

Other members of the international community have become increasingly vocal in calling for a peaceful solution to the dispute. Brazilian president Luiz “Lula” da Silva, who has met with both Mr. Maduro and Guyana’s President Irfaan Ali, told attendees at a recent summit of South American countries, “if there’s one thing we don’t want here...it’s war.”

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron warned against “unilateral action” from Venezuela, while Maria Zakharova, a spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry called on both Guyana and Venezuela to “refrain from any actions that could unbalance the situation and cause mutual

harm.”

President Ali, as well as international analysts, have framed the dispute as a bid from Maduro to shore up his own popularity ahead of a presidential election in the country next year. “We are very concerned that President Maduro and the government of Venezuela can use their own internal scenario and internal politics to create...instability within our region, to create fear and terror within the hearts and minds of their neighbors,” Mr. Ali said during a France 24 interview. “The international community has a great responsibility to ensure that peace prevails.”

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