

Paraguay rejects joint military drills with US

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The Paraguay's leftist leader has rejected a US plan for joint military exercises after US-Colombia military deal sparked controversy in South America.

"There would be about 500 US military and other personnel in the country and that wouldn't go unnoticed," President Fernando Lugo said on Thursday.

He also noted that he was no longer in favor of hosting US troops participating in the Pentagon's "New Horizons" program.

Washington's ambassador in Asuncion, Liliana Ayalde, said that the US 'regretted but respected' the decision.

Meanwhile, Paraguayan Foreign Minister Hector Lacognate denied Thursday's announcement could raise tensions between the two nations.

"We have an excellent bilateral agenda with the United States. We have more than 30 current agreements with the US in diverse areas, of which six are in the area of military cooperation," Lacognate said.

The US program in Latin America deploys active duty, reserve and National Guard forces from across the US to work on projects ranging from building schools and medical clinics to paving roads.

Lugo's remark came after South American leaders expressed their concern over a deal between Washington and Bogota that would allow US troops to use seven Colombian bases for a 10-year period.

US officials say American troops will continue to be involved in helping Colombia in counter-drug operations and in supporting its fight against leftist rebels.

However, Latin American governments notably Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil and Argentina believe that the US uses the regional war on drugs as a pretext to boost its regional military presence.

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