
Interview: Gen. Jorge Arzola

Radar system in Puerto Rico will boost anti-drug capabilities

General Arzola is the military official in charge of the anti-drug radar for the U.S. Department of Defense. He was interviewed on Nov. 28, 1995, in his offices in San Juan, Puerto Rico, by Iván Gutiérrez del Arroyo. The interview has been translated from Spanish.

EIR: In the context of President Clinton's war on drugs, what is the strategic value of the anti-drug radar which is planned to be built in Puerto Rico?

Arzola: The radar being established in Puerto Rico is the third prong of a system, which we already have set up in Virginia and Texas. It will allow us to complement and complete the capacity to see the air transport of drugs from Central and South America, and the Caribbean. The two systems in Virginia and Texas already allow us to cover the southern flank of the United States, up to the northern coast of South America. When this radar system includes Puerto Rico, it will allow us to cover as far as Bolivia and Peru, which are the places of origin of this drug [cocaine].

As you know, the Defense Department is the leading agency in this anti-drug strategy, which is established by law, with the task of aerial and maritime oversight over all the traffic which approaches the United States. This is not only the function of the Department of Defense; that is to say, this anti-drug strategy spans all the federal agencies. The Navy is just one of the components of the Department of Defense.

The strategic value of this system is to complement the aerial oversight of the transfer of drugs on the southern border of the United States. What is the use of this system? We can compare it to the system they want to establish in Brazil, which is certainly very different from the system we want to set up in Puerto Rico.

Brazil's system has the purpose of preserving sovereignty over their airspace, and it is a commonly known system of radar, in which the beam travels on a straight line. When you reach the horizon, this radar beam keeps going straight, and what is beyond the curvature of the Earth, it does not see. The ROTH (Relocatable Over the Horizon Radar), which is going to be set up in Puerto Rico, has the shape of a fan, which stretches from 500 to 2,000 miles out from the transmitter, and there is nothing that can hide from it.

Because, now, instead of coming directly from below, the radar comes from above, off of the stratosphere. This system has a look-down capacity.

Is that useful? Of course it is. I can cite you a period of time—I will give you the exact dates—i.e., 1993 to 1995, in which some 20,000 trajectories were identified with the radar in Virginia. Two hundred of these were linked to the drug traffic; 90% of those were followed, and \$5 billion worth of drugs was captured. Of course that's useful.

The good thing about this system, is that it works if the plane is going toward the United States. If the airplane is flying east to west, then we are not interested. This system, given its technical capabilities, is a Doppler effect system, and hence, if it is not coming toward us, we are not going to see it.

EIR: If the radar is installed, how much additional time would it give to the anti-drug agencies in Puerto Rico and the United States?

Arzola: This would double the time we have now. Right now, the present systems cover 500 miles; or two hours, and with radar this time is doubled, and additional time is given to the police and Coast Guard. . . . This radar is going to be a terrific help. . . .

ROTHR extends the limits of oversight, it gives us early warning, and then when the target is getting closer to Puerto Rico, now we can wait and we can start to eliminate the target; . . . we already know where it is coming from. The police of Puerto Rico and FURA [United Rapid Action Forces] are the agencies which have jurisdiction here in Puerto Rico. If the landing is in Puerto Rico or near the coast, the jurisdiction is the police's. If it is on the high seas, the jurisdiction is the Coast Guard's. . . .

EIR: How would ROTH help the anti-drug struggle on the continental level?

Arzola: The information obtained is processed at a central point, and then, it is made available to an interagency group, and, via the team we have, it is made available to these countries, where the flights came from.

The Southern Command of the United States does not have the power to send planes and down these flights in

Peru and other lands. This is the jurisdiction and sovereignty of each country; that is, the information is given to that country, and they are the ones to act on it. This is going to allow us to cooperate with those countries in their battle against drug trafficking.

EIR: What do you think about the accusations that drug traffickers are financing the opposition to establishing the radar in Puerto Rico?

Arzola: I have no evidence, but clearly this system is going to do tremendous damage to the drug traffickers. We are talking about billions of dollars in traffic. A system which will allow us to focus a beam on the air traffic over any one of those countries—well, look, this is a tremendous threat to the Colombian cartel. Those gentlemen have the capacity to move big quantities of money, they have large funds. I am speaking now as an ordinary citizen. . . .

How can you explain, that in the area of Lajas, where there is a plan to set up this system—floodplains which are only useful for cattle grazing—there is so much protest being raised? This is strange. If you read between the lines, you can realize that something is happening there.

I have no evidence in hand which says whether the drug traffickers are involved, but, yes, I do find it strange, as a citizen who sees and perceives what is going on, I find it very strange. Also, I am surprised by the level of opposition, although it is still a minority in Puerto Rico, but it is going far beyond what was expected. You know that the pro-independence movement, which I respect, as a very beautiful but not very practical idea, only gets 5% [of the overall vote in elections]. However, although it is a minority, it has succeeded in raising up a movement which goes well beyond its vote. . . .

EIR: The opponents of the radar refer to this as a piece of junk, which really does not fulfill the requirements for dealing with this threat. What do you think about that?

Arzola: Well, I would like to already have a “piece of junk” that would let me see from 500 to 2,000 miles of distance, which could see the drug trafficking as it approaches the United States. There is no radar system at present which gives us this capacity, they are all of limited reach.

EIR: And what about the assertion that this radar system will affect the environment?

Arzola: As a matter of fact, we just finished the environmental impact statement on the system last night. We already have these systems operating in the United States, and I know a person who was there on his own and knows it from up close. The receiving antenna, like the one that will be installed in the Lajas Valley, the signal it receives, is 1,000 times weaker than the signal you have on the antenna of your car. It is like looking for the needle in a haystack.

That’s the receiving station. The transmitting station,

which is going to be on federal property on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, is like a radio transmitter, and quite powerful. But it is designed with a fence with a warning sign posted on it, and everything that indicates that you cannot go in. Beyond this fence there is no problem. You and I can go in and out, the technicians tell me, even when this antenna is transmitting in the vicinity, and as long as it is within an interval of two or three hours, it is not going to affect us because of the type of waves we are talking about. If we stay there to have lunch and sleep there, then there will be a gradual effect, and we are going to start getting warmer. . . . It could even have an effect, but that’s where it is.

But even if somebody pays no attention to the signs on the fence, beyond that fence certain engineering safeguards kick in. That is what you would expect in any transmitter station for television or radio. If somebody grabs an antenna which is transmitting, they are going to get burned; it will cause a microwave burn.

EIR: Aren’t you afraid of the possibility of an attack by terrorist groups on the radar, or against Navy personnel, by terrorist groups such as the Macheteros, who are publicly against the radar?

Arzola: I have no evidence in that regard. Yes, these groups were active some years ago when there was an ambush of a Navy bus. Every democracy today is exposed to these kinds of groups, as happened in Oklahoma with an extremist group.

I cannot say it won’t happen. This is a democracy, and so I would like to examine all the alternatives and listen to all the arguments about the problem and the concerns about it and what should be done, in terms of dialogue and through democratic procedures. And that is what we are doing with the public hearings.

EIR: David Noriega, the gubernatorial candidate for the the Puerto Rican Independence Party, PIP, recently mentioned that in an election year, President Clinton will not want to have problems with the Hispanic vote, and that, ultimately, he is the supreme commander of the Armed Forces of the United States. And Noriega says that, therefore, the radar will not be installed, because it would create political problems for President Clinton. Is there any truth in that?

Arzola: Well, Mr. Noriega, as I said, is the head of a very precious ideal, which I respect, but this has to be supported in terms of votes. What he is expressing, has barely reached 5% of the vote. Politicians make their decisions based on a whole heap of considerations, and one of those is that this is a democracy, in which the majority decides.

At the moment, the majority, although silent—not necessarily silent, because there was a poll here that I have just seen, that, right now, the majority is indeed pro-radar and not anti-radar. That’s the democratic process.