



Panama Joins Coalition against ISIS Despite Having No Army

Central American Nation's Announcement Provokes Retaliation Fears, Ridicule

By Elisa Vasquez

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On Thursday, January 5, Panama became the first country in Latin America to join the international coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), in order to “confront the threats to international peace and security posed by this group,” according to a statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

According to the government of the Central American state, the jihadist rebel group based across Iraq and Syria is violating human rights in order to “spread panic, grief, and pain among the peoples of the international community.”

The coalition, led by the United States, so far includes 40 countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Canada.

The announcement has provoked some controversy in Panama, with analysts citing the lack of a clear ISIS threat against the nation, and fears that Panamanian involvement could violate the 1977 “Canal policy” which requires it to remain neutral in armed conflicts.

Juan Carlos Hidalgo, public-policy analyst at the Washington DC-based Cato Institute, labelled the measure “senseless,” chiefly because the country decommissioned its armed forces in 1990.

During an interview with local daily La Estrella, Panamanian political analyst Julio Yao claimed the declaration jeopardizes the country’s history of neutrality, due to its role as home to the interoceanic Canal.

An analyst close to the government told the PanAm Post under condition of anonymity that he believed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had made a severe mistake in pronouncing on the issue, arguing that the alleged threat posed by ISIS globally was overblown.

A Defensive Measure?

However, Panamanian political analyst Renato Pereira argued that the decision corresponded to the global threat posed by ISIS.

“We are talking about a group that declared war on the world in order to impose a caliphate. Panama has a canal to protect, plus a cardinal appointed by the Vatican, and ISIS is waging a religious war. All Western countries have to speak out against it,” he argued.

Former President Mireya Moscoso also told La Estrella that she agreed with the decision, arguing that the government should not “remain silent” against “acts of terrorism.”

In the same vein, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement detailed that Panama was joining the international coalition “to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and acts of indiscriminate violence arising from religious, cultural, and ethnic intolerance.”

The announcement also emphasized that Panama was a “lover of peace that promotes dialogue and peaceful coexistence of all peoples.”

Pereira suggested that the Canal could be leveraged to support the coalition, and that the National Police’s State Border Service (SENAFRONT) could be deployed to assist with peace-keeping tasks.

Panama Enters the Fray

Multiple Panamanian citizens took to social media to criticize their government for engaging in global issues at the expense of local problems, such as the lack of water in deprived areas. Several Twitter users also questioned the value that their nation could offer to the international coalition, currently engaged in a heavy aerial bombardment campaign against ISIS ground forces.

ISIS is accused by the United Nations of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. The armed group has taken advantage of the civil war in Syria and instability in neighboring Iraq to expand its grip to between 40,000 and 90,000 square kilometers of territory, according to the BBC.

In 2003, it emerged onto the global scene as an Al-Qaeda-affiliated organization to combat the US invasion of Iraq. The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 led to a rapid expansion of the group’s activities, with the eastern Syrian city of Raqqa now considered its capital. The group’s stated aim is to unite the world’s Muslims under a religious caliphate, centered on the Middle East.

BBC estimates suggest that at least 8 million people live under ISIS control, who must follow strict interpretations of Islamic law (sharia) or face severe punishment, including execution.

The group, meanwhile, is the richest terrorist organization in the world, claiming to hold US\$2 billion in cash, alongside revenues from oil and gas sales and “taxes.”

By January 15, the international coalition against the group had reported 16,000 air strikes against ISIS since the beginning of operations in August 2014. Sixty percent of these were committed by the United States, which invested between \$7-10 million a day in the bombardment in September 2014 alone.

Britain, the second largest contributor of the coalition, deployed 100 airstrikes by the same date.

Other countries such as Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Canada, have sent weapons and military equipment to support coalition forces in Iraq. New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, and Austria are among those to have sent humanitarian aid to the region.

In late January, Pentagon press secretary Admiral John Kirby told press that the war on ISIS could take three to five years. The Panamanian government is yet to clarify how it will contribute to the coalition.