

An Anti-Bases Network Finds its Base

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The consolidation of an international network for the abolition of foreign military bases marks an important advance for the global peace and justice movement. Herbert Docena reports.

On the perimeter fence of the Eloy Alfaro air base in Manta, Ecuador hangs a sign, "Warning: Military Base. No Trespassing." Since 1999, the base has been used as a "forward operating location" by the US military - just one of over 737 US military installations currently scattered in over 100 countries around the world.

On 9 March, about 500 visitors showed up at the base's main gate. One of them walked up to the fence and pasted a bright blue and red sticker saying "No Bases!" on the warning sign, a broken rifle forming the diagonal line with the letter "o" to make the universal sign of prohibition.

It was a small, symbolic act of trespassing for a newly formed international network with a big goal: the closure of all such military bases worldwide. But with the successful convening of a conference that launched the International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases (No Bases) in Quito and Manta, Ecuador from 5 to 9 March, 2007, that goal has become a little closer to reality.

Perhaps the largest gathering against military bases in history, the conference drew over 400 grassroots and community-based activists who are at the forefront of local struggles from as far away as Okinawa, Sardinia, Vieques, Pyongtaek, Hawaii, and dozens of other places from more than 40 countries. There were environmentalists, feminists, pacifists, war resisters, farmers, workers, students, parliamentarians, and other activists from social movements, human rights groups, faith-based organisations, and various regional and global networks and coalitions.

But even the final tally of those present probably underestimated the extent of participation in the conference: In the network's e-mail list on the eve of the conference, an anti-bases activist from Iceland wrote to say that their absence in Ecuador should not be taken to mean that they are absent from the movement. The range of groups that made it to the conference - both in terms of where they come from geographically and politically - demonstrates just how broad the movement against bases has become.

International conferences are sometimes dismissed as talk-fests where nothing gets done. But getting together and talking to each other is often an important first step in building a community. In various panels and self-organised seminars, film-showings, and forums, participants deepened their understanding of the role of military bases in global geo-politics, the various forms and guises that military presence takes, and their impacts on local communities and the environment. They also exchanged lessons about strategies and approaches to more effectively campaign against bases back home. Even the Pentagon has taken note of the growing domestic opposition to their bases and it is these grassroots campaigns that are foiling their plans.

But this was not all. What was significant about the conference was that the participants went beyond talking about how bad bases are and why we should all oppose them. They rolled up their

sleeves and, in one intensive workshop after another, set out to establish a network, articulate the bases of unity, agree on a higher level of coordination, and decide more concrete plans for common action.

That task proved to be daunting yet illuminating. As the participants tried to clarify what exactly brought them together, potentially divisive but fundamental questions soon rose to the surface: should the network just target foreign military bases or also domestic bases? Since they all have military and war-making purposes, shouldn't all military bases - regardless of whether they are the US' or Cuba's - be abolished? What about the "domestic" military bases in Hawaii, Guam, or Puerto Rico? Or in occupied countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan? What about NATO bases which are arguably both "foreign" and "domestic" at the same time? If the network targets only "foreign" bases, how does this distinguish it from all those right-wing nationalist groups in Europe or the Middle East who oppose bases just because they're "foreign"? And while it was generally agreed that no one comes close to the US in terms of the sheer number of bases, how much effort should the network exert against the bases of Russia or France?

These proved to be important questions because the answers to them touch on the values and identity of the network. Underlying them are broader questions that define some of the diverging - but also overlapping - currents within the network and, perhaps, within the larger anti-war movement.

Broadly - and perhaps crudely - categorised, there are those within the network who oppose bases from what could be called an "anti-imperialist" perspective. They see foreign military bases as both the instruments - as well as the visible manifestations - of imperialism. They are against US bases on foreign soil but will defend Cuba's or Iran's right to have domestic military bases for self-defence. Within this current, there are differences on the extent to which the US should be singled out. While there is unanimous recognition that the US is the primary threat, others are quick to point out that the European powers have their own imperialist drives and are equally dangerous. On the other hand, there are those who oppose bases from the perspective of "anti-militarism": they're against all military bases - regardless of who owns them.

These debates also raise questions about the nature of "nationalism" and "sovereignty." In many contexts, mainly but not exclusively in the South, opposition to foreign bases draws from a deep nationalist well, with bases seen as "external" incursions against "sovereignty" and with "nationalism" seen as a necessary bulwark against colonialism. In other contexts, however, "nationalism" and "sovereignty" have become bad words, used to rally public support for wars against "the other" and to justify repressive measures against "foreigners." Cautiously, the network treaded the fine line between self-determination and chauvinism.

After ten hours of spirited but cordial deliberation, the draft declaration presented in plenary was widely commended as a sharp but nuanced formulation (see full text [here](#)) that succeeded in drawing the approval of both anti-imperialist and anti-militarist positions (or, at the very least, it was not expressly rejected by either). What may have clinched the day was the broadening of the target of the network to include not just foreign military bases but "all other infrastructure used for wars of aggression."

The formulation thus takes a more sophisticated understanding of the complex configuration of military bases by allowing for the inclusion of domestic military bases inside the US, as well as in NATO and in other countries. It appealed to those who insisted on a strong focus on foreign military bases - most of which are owned by the US and all of which are arguably used for aggression - while at the same time not contradicting those who wish to expand the focus of their own work.

In contrast to the right-wing, chauvinist opposition to bases, the declaration makes it clear that the network's objection to bases is not premised on what analysts call the NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) logic - i.e. foreign military bases are fine as long as someone else bears the noise, the waste, and the crimes - but on the NIABY logic (not-in-any-one's backyard), i.e. foreign military bases are bad because they "entrench militarisation, colonialism, imperial policy, patriarchy, and racism." In light of the influence of the right-wing objection to bases, the network's opposition to all bases - and not just those in one's locality - offers a global counter-pole premised on internationalism and solidarity.

For an incipient grouping still struggling to define its purpose and to sharpen its focus, the importance of clarifying and reaching agreement on the network's bases of unity should not be underestimated. As Helga Serrano, one of the conference organisers, concluded: "The ideological and political bases of unity of the network is more consolidated than we had thought." It is true that the subsequent session for planning concrete actions and strategies proved to be less clarifying: only a grocers' list of ideas emerged, not a clear set of priorities. But without coming to an agreement on its common vision, the network could have been paralysed by unresolved contradictions and confusion. The articulation of collective principles lays the foundations for future actions.

Carrying out these actions requires, in turn, a certain degree of organisation. On-guard against threats to their autonomy, wary of centralising tendencies, but keen to achieve their objectives, many delegates stressed the need to combine openness and horizontality with strategic and organised action. As Joel Suarez, a participant from Cuba said, "We cannot continue with the way we have been organising. Horizontality is correct but, applied wrongly, it has led to the disintegration and paralysis of the movements. Our advancement depends on the efficiency of our organisation. We can't let this fall apart." The question, said Serrano, is "how do we create new forms of horizontal relationships?" The challenge, as posed in one panel, was to strengthen the coordination within the network without centralising and bureaucratising it.

Put this way, the dilemmas faced by the network is little different from that faced by other networks that have emerged in recent years. Accepting the need for closer interaction while cautious of rushing the process, participants in the end reached a consensus to remain as a loose grouping but with a higher level of coordination. A process was set up for putting in place an open international coordination committee with a clear but circumscribed political mandate and a defined set of responsibilities for carrying out collective projects.

Still, there are significant hurdles to overcome: The network still has to reach out to so many more local anti-bases activists, especially from West and Central Asia; the issue of bases is still not high on the agenda of the anti-war movements; the network lacks resources because the issue is seen as too radical even for sympathisers; and even within the network, there is uneven access to resources and capacities; translation remains to be worked out more efficiently; and so on.

Despite all these obstacles, the network has come a long way. The conference is a milestone in that it marks the consolidation of the international network as both a space where the broadest grouping of organisations, coalitions, and movements can come together and as an organisational vehicle which can carry out globally coordinated campaigns while providing continuing and sustained support to local struggles everywhere.

But it's more than this. The network's development could also be seen as evidence of the consolidation of the anti-globalisation/anti-war movements that emerged in the last decade. While the idea has been germinating before, the birth of the network could be traced back to a gathering of anti-war/anti-globalisation activists, shortly after the invasion of Iraq, in Jakarta, Indonesia in May 2003. Attended by representatives from some of the groups that were behind the coordination of the historic 15 February 2003 global day of action against the war in Iraq and who had previously been

active in the anti-globalisation movement, the Jakarta meeting endorsed the proposal of launching an international network against bases as one of the priorities for the movements.

A group of organisations in that meeting then carried the idea forward through various World Social Forums, local and regional social forums, and other activist gatherings. As Wilbert van der Zeijden of the Transnational Institute, an activist who was among those who steered the network through the years, said, "This would not have been possible without the World Social Forum process." While the concept remains debated, the "open space" provided by the social forum process provided opportunities for networking, information-sharing, and organising that would have been too difficult or too expensive had the space not existed. The consolidation of the network proves that the movement is capable not only of uniting around a proposal but of actually seeing it through.

The degree by which the movement has been getting more efficient at organising is also often underrated and unreported. While there were a few of the usual glitches and some internal disagreements, it felt as though the conference and the run-up to it was, on the whole, better organised politically and logistically than similar projects in the past. International conferences of the scale that activists had been organising in the last few years require a high level of organisation and coordination but, with very limited human and financial resources, and activists are stepping up the plate. As one participant remarked, "Five years of organising the World Social Forums and other meetings and we're learning." Ecuadoran organisers of the network conference themselves acknowledge that they have gained confidence and valuable experience from organising the Americas Social Forum and other international meetings in the past.

What is remarkable - but often taken for granted - is how activists - who are not trained and salaried professional events organisers - have succeeded in realising ambitious projects for a small fraction of the cost that corporations or governments spend on similar meetings. That the movements are learning and becoming more proficient heralds their development and growing capacity for organised action.

More than anything, the consolidation of the anti-bases network demonstrates that the movements have become more deliberately strategic. The network is a "single-issue" campaign focused on the issue of bases. And as Lindsey Collen, an activist from Mauritius, warned, "Single-issue fragmentation may lead to short-term success but long-term failure." The single-minded focus on bases, however, is neither fragmentary nor fragmenting; on the contrary, it arises from a comprehensive understanding of the conjuncture that locates bases within the global strategy of domination.

Rather than being divisive, the emphasis on bases brings together a much more holistic understanding of the ways in which the coercive and corporate sides of militarized globalization come together to perpetuate structures of dispossession and injustice. As Joseph Gerson, an activist-scholar on bases, put it "Bases perpetuate the status quo." The decision to zoom-in and focus on the issue of bases in a coherent and consistent manner comes out of an objective assessment and a compellingly simple logic: without foreign military bases, wars would be so much more difficult to wage; without wars, the pursuit of geo-strategic and economic interests over democracy and self-determination would be so much harder. As Corazon Fabros, a veteran anti-bases activist from the Philippines, said, "The strategy of empire is global. So must our response."

P.S.

* From www.no-bases.org.