

Italians Protest Upgrade of U.S. Military Base

by Claudio Celani

A couple of years ago, the Bush-Cheney Administration signed an agreement with the Italian government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, to allow the expansion of the U.S. Army base in Vicenza, in northern Italy. The agreement followed the decision by the U.S. Department of Defense under Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to upgrade the 173rd Airborne Brigade, in anticipation of fighting aggressive wars against Third World countries.

“Few units are as emblematic of the Defense Department’s vision of the transformed Army as the 173rd Airborne Brigade,” reports an article in *Stars and Stripes* on Sept. 16, 2006. “The Sky Soldiers, based in Vicenza, Italy, are doubling their battalion-size units and number of soldiers, adding new and enhanced capabilities in the process, all with the goal of being the agile, independent, and modular force that the Pentagon has touted as the mainstay of 21st-Century warfare. The brigade will have more than 3,000 soldiers, up from about 1,500.”

The 173rd is the only brigade in the Army that does not answer to a division, and thus has full flexibility of deployment as a combat team. It is clear that this brigade is intended to be used to “fight the natives” in wars against Third World countries. The plans now are to unite the brigade, which is presently divided between bases in Italy and Germany, in one base, in Vicenza. This will be accomplished by enlarging the Camp Ederle base in Vicenza, to include the existing Dal Molin barracks, no longer used by the Italian Army, and building a new air field practically in the middle of the city.

Bush/Berlusconi Deal Provoked a Revolt

When the secret agreements between the Bush and Berlusconi governments were discovered, in mid-2006, they catalyzed a large anti-war sentiment in the country. Vicenza mayor Enrico Hullweck, an ally of Berlusconi’s, who had been part of the secret agreements, saw his entire city revolt, supported by most of the political parties, including members of his own coalition.

Current Prime Minister Romano Prodi, who succeeded Berlusconi in May 2006, is known as an opponent of the Iraq war, and was under strong pressure to cancel the Vicenza

agreement. However, the Bush-Cheney Administration pressured him as well, and on Jan 16, he announced that he would respect the agreement.

This stirred a national protest, one result of which was that more than 120 members of Parliament who are part of the government coalition, signed a petition against the base. And a national demonstration was organized to take place on Feb. 17.

This is going to be a strong challenge to Prodi, and links up with other issues, which all involve Italian-U.S. relationships in the context of the Bush-Cheney war policy. The Italian government, in fact, is expected to send extradition requests for 26 CIA agents, who are on trial in Milan for the kidnapping of an Egyptian citizen in 2002; at the same time, three parties of the government coalition are demanding an “exit strategy” for Afghanistan, where Italy has kept a contingent of 2,000 troops.

A Government Crisis in the Making?

If popular participation in the Vicenza demonstration on Feb. 17 is large, frictions inside the government coalition could escalate into a real government crisis. But even if the Prodi government survives the challenge, the future of bilateral relations between Italy and the United States is jeopardized by decisions such as the one to expand the Vicenza base. Italians are afraid that they might wake up one day and discover that a base on their territory has been used to invade a Third World country. At that point, a crisis with unpredictable implications could develop.

A Jan. 16 article by Sen. Silvana Pisa, a member of the Defense Committee of the Senate and a party colleague of Foreign Minister D’Alema, is indicative of the mood among political circles. In the article, which was released to *EIR* by Senator Pisa, she connected the decision on the Vicenza base to the “surge” policy in Iraq. Senator Pisa wrote that Italy has no interest in accepting the doubling of the air base, “the more so, when today U.S. bases are serving a political-military strategy [the supposed war on terror—ed.] which has made the world more insecure.” “The new scenarios outlined by U.S. military policy (from the surge in Iraq to the bombings in Somalia) raise concern about global stabilization,” Senator Pisa wrote.

Italy has been a faithful ally of the United States throughout the Cold War, sharing the burden of an alliance aimed at defending the West from the Soviet threat. Today such a threat is no longer there, and the upgrading of U.S. military bases in Italy is correctly seen as an aggressive policy which is not only immoral, but is forbidden by the Italian constitution. There is still time to correct wrong decisions taken by governments in Washington and Rome in the past years; it is in the interest of the United States that the U.S. Congress scrutinize this matter, and eventually use its authority to reverse such decisions, or deny their funding.