AZORES AGREEMENT MEANS INCREASED U.S. BACKING OF PORTUGAL'S COLONIAL WARS

-Background Facts-

After almost ten years of public and private, on and off negotiation, the United States and Portugal have just signed a pact which will give the U.S. five years continued use of its air and naval bases on the Portuguese Island of Terceira in the Azores, 1000 miles west of Portugal in the Atlantic. In return for entering into this formal agreement the Portuguese are to receive considerable economic assistance from the U.S. in the form of long term loans and financial grants. Financial aid from the United States at this point is particularly important for Portugal, whose economy has been badly shaken by the 10 year war in Africa and is now desperately short of foreign exchange.

History of the Azores Agreement

It is the geographic position of the Azores in the mid-Atlantic that has led to their military significance and consequent role in Portuguese-U.S. relationships. The Allied forces established bases there in the Second World War, Britain's R.A.F. was using the Lajes airbase in 1943, the U.S. moved in a year later, Portuguese "neutrality" having been broken down by the British insistence and Salazar's perception of the way the war was going. George Kennan, then stationed in Lisbon, arranged for assurances to Portugal that "the United States of America undertakes to respect Portuguese sovereignty in all Portuguese colonies." [Dept. of State Bulletin, v 14 (1946) p. 108] Portuguese fears that the Atlantic Charter might be applied to their colonies were assuaged. The Azores served as a support point for war-time trans-Atlantic flights, it became a key stop-over point for the OVERLORD operation (the Normandy invasion).

The U.S. stayed on at Lajes airbase after the war, Britain relinquishing it to American control in 1947. The accord entered into between the Portuguese and Americans made no provision for rent payments, but the U.S. presence on the island has pumped considerable money, estimated currently at $12 million annually, into the local economy. There are now about 1500 American servicemen and 2000 dependents on the Azores. But Portugal's most important gain from the U.S. presence is reflected in the continued support the U.S. has given the colonial power in the last 25 years.

Thus the U.S. sponsored Portugal's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization despite the fact that the Portuguese military dictatorship contradicted NATO's principles; the U.S. has, through the years, refused to support resolutions at the United Nations which called for a total arms embargo on Portugal despite incontrovertible evidence that equipment supplied to Portugal "to be used only outside Africa" is in fact constantly used against the liberation movements in Africa.

The last formal agreement between the Portuguese and the U.S. for the use of Lajes base lapsed in 1962, since then the use of the base by the U.S. has continued on an ad hoc basis; initially the Portuguese apparently intended to use the potential denial of the base usage in order to persuade the U.S. to moderate its criticisms of Portuguese colonialism. In 1961, just after the Kennedy administration came in, the struggle for liberation in Angola reached the fighting stage. In debates
at the UN, Adlai Stevenson, on behalf of the U.S., took a position clearly supporting eventual self-determination for the Portuguese colonies. This earned the keen displeasure of Portugal.

Later, as it became apparent that the U.S. position did not place it in real opposition to Portuguese interests, the "price" for agreement renewal became some kind of material assistance....1968 and 1969 reports indicated that the Portuguese were demanding direct military assistance; this position was later modified to other forms of financial assistance which have now in fact been granted in the new accord.

Military Importance of the Azores to the U.S.

The first and most important role of the Azores until recently has been as a stop-over point. It was used in 1958 for the Lebanon crisis, and played a role in the Berlin crisis of 1961 and the 1964 Stanleyville drop in the Congo. In 1963 it was still true that "approximately 75% of normal U.S. military air traffic to Europe and the Middle East transits the air facility on Terceira Island." Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Frank K. Sloan in _The Angolan Revolution_ by John Marcum, p. 273

In the summer of 1961 the Joint Chiefs of Staff had declared the Azores base essential to American security in case of trouble over Berlin. Given this estimate by the military, Portugal had considerable leverage in 1961 and 1962 in trying to get the U.S. to refrain from giving any further support to self-determination in Portuguese Africa, or perhaps even to backtrack on action already taken. The fact that the base agreement was to expire at the end of 1962 gave special force to this factor. The result, of the importance of the Azores in particular, and of more general convictions of the relative importance of Africa and Europe, was quite clear. The United States, with the General Assembly session of 1962, ceased to support UN resolutions as they moved from the symbolic condemnation of colonialism of 1961 to more vigorous condemnation of Portugal and calls for action to bring Portugal into line with previous resolutions.

The present real military importance of the Azores has, by all accounts, lessened considerably. Longer range aircraft make less necessary such a stopover point. A recent visitor commented that "at present it is an almost inactive operation." "Formerly known as 'the crossroads of the Atlantic,' - Lajes now generally has fewer than a dozen aircraft on the ground - United States C-54's and C-47's and a few Portuguese Navy DC-6 reconnaissance planes. It is still used by short range transport planes for refueling.

"The American operation there is unusual in that the Navy maintains an air facility, the Air Force handles the ground support and the Army operates port facilities at nearby Praia da Vitoria." [New York Times, May 10, 1970] There are reported to be only about half the staff that were originally employed at the peak of operations in the early '60's. The Azores base has been described as "a highly overstaffed operation that is costing the American taxpayer a lot of money." [Walter Hackett, in an article in the Congressional Record-Senate, June 5, 1969. At the time of the article by Hackett there were 1,795 American military personnel, 500 American civilian employees, and 2,500 dependents at the base.] James Reston, in his column
of March 5, 1969, pointed out that "Washington needed the Azores as a ferry base in the last war for aircraft of limited range; it needs the Azores no longer, but the old arrangements go on." However, the Pentagon can always find a use for a base.

In an article inserted in the Congressional Record for June 5, 1969 by Senator Pell, of Rhode Island, the following is given as the rationale for continued use of the Azores: "The basic mission of the USAF in the Azores...is to maintain Lajes (Field) as a bastion of defense in case of global war. The mission also calls for the United States to assist Portugal in local defense, to maintain a Navy air-sea rescue operation and center of operations for anti-submarine warfare and to run a weather station operation. The Military Airlift Command also uses Lajes as a shuttle point for mail, supplies and personnel to our forces in Europe." Pentagon officials have emphasized the anti-submarine warfare function. By virtue of its location, it still may be useful, if not essential in the contingency of U.S. intervention in the Mediterranean or in Africa. The evaluation of the importance of the Azores for American defense obviously depends on an evaluation of what sort of defense is necessary. If one assumes that it is necessary to be prepared for all contingencies, any base is of course useful, and the Azores not the least useful among them. What emerges clearly is that the Azores base plays a role leading to a close U.S. association with Portugal, the last "colonial" power fighting three colonial wars in Africa.

U.S. Relations with Portugal

The Azores pact, which gives Portugal economic aid in return for the U.S. base, formalizes and strengthens the continuing U.S. support of Portuguese colonial rule in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. Until recently U.S. military and economic assistance to Portugal has been indirect and disclaimed. Now the Nixon administration has dropped all pretenses and has openly declared its intention to come to the aid of its struggling ally. Portugal is finding it increasingly difficult to survive on the three battlefronts in Africa. The liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau have all won important victories in the last few years, and continue to win increasing popular support as they control new areas of territory and establish democratic self-government in the liberated zones. The Portuguese now have to support an army of over 150,000 men in Africa, and are spending close to 50% of their annual budget on the wars. This is a crippling burden for a small, poor country. The dictatorial regime is also facing increasingly militant opposition internally and a faltering economy. Against this background the new U.S. economic aid emerges clearly as an effort to strengthen Portugal, thus helping it to re-establish control in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau.

The aid being given to Portugal under the new agreement is considerable. It is reported to include $15 million for each of two years under the PL 480 program, to be used for the purchase of food, an undertaking by the Export-Import Bank to consider projects in metropolitan Portugal to a value of $400 million, an oceanographic vessel for fishery research, $1 million towards educational development, and the waiver for two years of $175,000 annually which represents Portugal's payment towards the maintenance of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (M.A.A.G.) still provided for under the Military
Assistance Program which the U.S. operates in relation to Portugal. This U.S. aid will serve to relieve the enormous pressure on foreign exchange which currently bedevils the Portuguese economy, releasing funds for the purchase of necessary military equipment, in the long run may serve to strengthen the whole economic base of Portugal, providing much needed capital for development, thus enabling Portugal to maintain its hold on its African colonies.

This last U.S. action is the culmination of a number of recent U.S. actions which have all pointed in the same direction. Recent U.S. Government and private aid to Portugal includes:

-the sale of 707's and 747's to Portugal which Portugal says will be used for troop transport to Africa; (Daily Telegraph, June 21, 1971 and Flight International, Jan 21, 1971)

-over $21/2 million in direct military aid to Portugal each year; (Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense, New York Times Almanac, 1971 and Office of Statistics and Reports, A.I.D. 1969)

-$12 million put into the Portuguese economy by U.S. military expenditures in the Azores each year; (New York Times, Dec. 9, 1971)

-the sale of five Bell helicopters to the Portuguese for use in Mozambique; (AFP, Jan. 12, 1971)

-Gulf Oil's operations in Cabinda, Angola, which had brought the Portuguese government over $30 million by the end of 1970; (A statement by Gulf Oil Corporation, April 1971)

-the training of Portuguese armed forces, both in the U.S. and in Europe and the continuing exchange of military missions. U.S. Vietnam-style tactics (herbicides, napalm, strategic hamlets, bombings of civilians) are now used by the Portuguese against the people of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau; ('US Military Involvement' by William Minter in "Allies in Empire", Africa Today, July-Aug. 1970, p.29)

There has been no recent development on the international scene which can in any way be said to threaten U.S. military security so as to make the Azores base suddenly critical for the defense of the U.S. In fact, the 1970 military bases agreement with Spain has further reduced the military significance of the Azores to the U.S. The change and the threat relate to Portugal's hold on its colonies in Africa, and the signing of the Azores pact places the U.S. government firmly in the camp of a colonial power fighting against the peoples of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, all of whom are determined to wrest their freedom and independence from Portugal and its allies.

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