Cyprus: Riots outside British military base

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Britain's plan to build six massive radio antennae at its Akrotiri military base on Cyprus has sparked protests by local residents.

On Tuesday July 3, Democratic Party (DIKO) member of parliament Marios Matsakis was arrested as he tried to cut open a perimeter fence surrounding the Akrotiri base. Military police took Matsakis, a member of the House Environment Committee, to their station at Episkopi, where he was detained along with a TV journalist.

As news of Matsakis' arrest spread, protesters gathered outside the police station where he was being held. When the protesters tried to enter the building to free the MP, a riot developed, the Episkopi police station was ransacked and 35 vehicles outside were torched. The protesters then moved to the adjacent Akrotiri base, where water cannon were used against the crowd, as police in riot gear fought to expel the protesters.

According to press reports, 34 base police officers, 10 British soldiers and five protesters were injured.

The day before, protesters had climbed onto a 60-foot mast (18 metres) at the RAF Akrotiri base, refusing to come down for six hours. Those involved included Matsakis who told the press, "the local population will be bombarded with electromagnetic radiation and the risks of that will be cancer, leukaemias and brain tumours, particularly among children".

According to *Reuters* news agency, London has rejected a request from the Cyprus government to halt work on the antennae while environmental impact reports are considered, or to wait for the results of new tests on existing masts in the area.

As well as being motivated by health and environmental concerns posed by the six planned radio masts, many of those protesting also denounced Britain's continued military presence on Cyprus.

Remarks made by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw epitomised Britain's colonial attitude to its possessions on the island. Following the protests at Akrotiri, Straw told the *BBC*, "These bases are British sovereign bases, British territory," adding that the Cyprus government had been "consulted" about the plans for the antennae.

Standing in front of a smashed jeep, military police Commander Jim Guy denounced the protesters as "criminals and hooligans". The British High Commissioner to Cyprus described Matsakis disparagingly as "a medical monkey stuck up a stick".

The six planned masts will be 190 feet (58 metres) high, and will be sited at a large salt lake within the Akrotiri base that is also home to much wildlife, particularly flamingos. London says the antennae should go into service in 2003, and are needed for the UK's military global communications network.

Under the terms of the treaty granting Cyprus independence in 1960, Britain retained sovereignty over nearly 100 square miles of the island, some three percent of its entire land area. The British presence mainly comprises the so-called Sovereign Bases Areas (SBAs) of Akrotiri, in southern Cyprus, and Dhekalia, in the east. The UK also retains the use of a listening post at the top of Mount Olympus, the island's highest peak. The treaty grants Britain sovereignty over the sites in perpetuity. The SBAs have the status of a British Overseas Territory, with supreme authority vested in the Commander of British Forces Cyprus, Air Vice-Marshall Bill Rimmer. The SBAs also retain the services of a resident Judge and Chief Constable appointed by London.

Built when Cyprus was still a British colonial possession in the 1950s, shortly after the Suez crisis, the Akrotiri facility formed a strategic part of the West's nuclear capacity against the Soviet Union. Up to seven squadrons of Vulcans equipped with nuclear bombs were stationed there at any one time during the Cold War.

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Akrotiri is strategically located for reconnaissance aircraft, which can be mobilised quickly to monitor developments in the Middle East, and the base is also an operational centre for America's U-2 spy planes.

The base's key role is for gathering British military intelligence, and providing a staging post for interventions in the Middle East and North Africa. "It was the hub of British operations during the Gulf War," a defence ministry spokesman said, adding, "It is also a very convenient holding base for any special forces operations".

Nick Cook, an aviation expert with *Jane's Defence Weekly* told the press that given the location of Cyprus at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, Britain and the RAF were "particularly interested in maintaining a presence there... It is the jumping off point for the Middle East".

There are currently 3,325 British military personnel stationed on the island, along with some 5,000 dependants. The Army presence includes two 600-strong infantry battalions, tasked with protecting the SBAs, 16 Flight Army Air Corps (equipped with Gazelle helicopters) and supporting arms such as the Royal Logistics Corps, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, medics and military police. RAF units on the island include 84 Squadron, based at Akrotiri, which is equipped with Wessex Mark 2 helicopters. There is also a Joint Service Signals Unit, as well as personnel specifically tasked to operate and evaluate intelligence gathered from Britain's listening posts on the island.

The two RAF bases and ground forces stationed on the island will cost £168 million this year, "a price worth paying" according to a Ministry of Defence spokeswomen. "It is used continuously as a staging point for operations east of Suez and for training purposes," she said.

Although Cyprus President Glafcos Clerides and other government spokesmen condemned the protest, the *Cyprus Mail* noted that "many Cypriots viewed the riots as a justifiable reaction to British antennae plans and what is often seen as a 'colonial' attitude among bases authorities."

One local resident is quoted saying, "Last night's demonstration began as an anti-antennae demonstration but then it turned into an anti-bases protest because people have just had enough. The British just do what they want. They pollute us with their planes, they stationed nuclear weapons here in the past, and now they say they will put up an antennae that could poison the whole area."

In Greece, some of the press were also critical of Britain. *Simerini* wrote that on Tuesday night "Colonialism rose from the grave", and *Politis* headlined "Shame—Like British in Colonies". The paper blamed British deception for the events, saying London had said Monday that work on the antennae would be suspended, only then to go ahead with it. "Serious injuries and countless damage at the bases were the result of the provocation of the British".

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