

British navy sails for Gibraltar as tensions escalate with Spain

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A rapid reaction force comprised of nine British Royal Navy vessels set sail Monday for the Mediterranean for the start of a four month exercise in the Persian Gulf. Three of the ships will dock in Gibraltar, where tensions over fishing rights have erupted into a major diplomatic crisis.

Gibraltar, classed as a British Overseas Territory and inhabited by 30,000 people, connected to the Spanish province of Andalucia, occupies a strategic position at the entrance to the Mediterranean. It was seized in 1704 during the War of the Spanish Succession by a combined Anglo-Dutch fleet and was formally ceded to Britain in 1713 by the Treaty of Utrecht.

The dispute was sparked last month when Gibraltar's boats dumped concrete blocks with spikes into the sea to create an artificial reef, which Spain says will prevent fishing vessels casting their nets in the area. Its construction provoked a furious response from the Spanish Popular Party (PP) government, which described it as "a violation of international law in Spanish waters" and "an environmental attack."

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said his government would "take the necessary measures to defend the interests of Spanish citizens."

Rigorous border checks were imposed, which have led to hours-long delays. In a sideswipe at Gibraltar's role as one of the world's leading tax havens, Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo declared that he wanted to strengthen "Spanish and European legislation relating to the fight against smuggling, tax fraud and environmental protection" and was considering a €50 (\$67) charge for each crossing. Restrictions on flights into Gibraltar's airport have been stepped up.

The Gibraltar government criticised Margallo's statements as "clearly reminiscent of the politics and

tactics deployed by the fascist regime led by Franco in the 1950s and 1960s,"—a reference to Spain's closure of the border under General Franco's dictatorship.

Last week, British Prime Minister David Cameron stepped in, stating that he was "seriously concerned" about the situation and the British Foreign Office intended to "use all necessary measures to safeguard British sovereignty."

Despite UK officials and naval chiefs insisting that the Gibraltar docking was planned months ago, the deployment comes just days after Gibraltar Chief Minister Fabián Picardo warned that there could be another Falklands War unless gun boats were sent to protect Gibraltar. He told the *Daily Express*, "We all recall how Argentina took the absence of the right sort of Royal Navy vessels in the South Atlantic in the Eighties as encouragement to invade."

"I believe we need a much greater Royal Naval presence in our waters," Picardo declared.

Over the weekend Conservative Party London Mayor Boris Johnson wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, "Perhaps it really is a coincidence—as the Foreign Office claims—that we have just sent a fleet of warships to Gibraltar."

"Maybe it's just a fluke that HMS *Illustrious* is about to bristle into view on the southern coast of Spain, complete with thousands of Royal Marines and other elite commando units.

"But I hope not. I hope that one way or another we will shortly prise Spanish hands off the throat of our colony, because what is now taking place is infamous."

On Monday, Britain announced it was considering legal action against Spain.

In response, the Spanish government said it was considering taking the matter to the International Court of Justice or the United Nations, where it will seek

support from Argentina. The latter is currently a two-year non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and could use its position to put Gibraltar on the agenda alongside the Falkland/Malvinas islands.

The marked escalation of the dispute over territorial limits and fishing rights, which has seen many tit-for-tat incidents over the years, is taking place between two countries supposed to be partners and allies in the European Union and NATO. Behind the sabre-rattling, both governments are exploiting the issue to stir up nationalism to detract from the savage austerity measures they are imposing at home.

Spain, mired in recession, has carried out sweeping privatizations, labour reforms and tax increases that have had terrible consequences for workers' jobs, wages, working conditions, pensions and basic social rights. Unemployment is 27 percent (50 percent amongst young people). In La Línea de la Concepción, the Spanish town bordering Gibraltar, about 10,000 of its 65,000 inhabitants are without work, compared with 4,000 five years ago. Last year, public servants were not paid their salaries for months on end.

The Spanish fishing fleet has been devastated by declining fish stocks, tighter quotas on catches and rising operating costs. "We have now reached a crisis point, with a generation of fishermen whose boats are owned by banks and who have no fish to catch," a fishing industry spokesman said. "95 percent of the owners here have a mortgage on their boat, which many simply can no longer afford."

Rajoy is posturing as the leader of a united nation, attacking the opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) for not giving full support to the government because it made a call for dialogue with the UK. Rajoy has been photographed embracing King Juan Carlos, who is fully involved in the dispute.

The UK is also experiencing the deepest and most protracted economic downturn in a century. The Conservative Party/Liberal Democrat coalition government has imposed £166 billion in budget cuts since its election in 2010. Welfare provision is under constant attack, and public services have been slashed. Cuts to the National Health Service budget of 20 percent have led to the closure of hospitals and vital health care services and an increasing use of the private sector.

Hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs have

been lost, and a further 144,000 job cuts are planned by 2015-2016. The decline in wages is even greater than that resulting from the Great Depression of the 1930s—an unprecedented 6 percent in real terms over the last five years. Employment is scarce, with much of that available temporary and low-paid. The use of zero-hour contracts has mushroomed.

In contrast Gibraltar's economy has grown by 30 percent since the 2008 global economic crash by attracting companies with its low tax regime. The number of hedge funds based there has grown from 20 in 2006 to 150 today, worth £3 billion. Picardo has made attracting them a key aim of his administration and was in London last week telling multi-millionaire fund managers that they would only have to pay £30,000 a year income tax, whatever they earn.

The escalating tensions between London and Madrid have exposed long-standing pretensions that Gibraltar's status could be resolved diplomatically, through the medium of the European Union (EU). Since talks began in 1986 after Spain's entry into the EU, negotiations have been bitterly opposed by the outcrop's government. In January 2007 a new constitution was agreed with the British Government, without any reference to Spain, which renamed the House of Assembly the Gibraltar Parliament and decreased the Governor's powers, but did not affect the issue of sovereignty.



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