

Britain and Spain escalate dispute over Gibraltar

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The Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition government in Britain and the Popular Party (PP) government in Spain are escalating the dispute over Gibraltar as part of an effort to whip up nationalist sentiment and deflect attention away from the social crisis in both countries. In addition the PP and the Spanish monarchy are embroiled in corruption scandals, which have seen support for the two institutions plummeting.

Gibraltar is a British overseas tax-haven, which is inhabited by just 30,000 people and connected to the Spanish province of Andalucia. It occupies a strategic position at the entrance to the Mediterranean and was formally ceded to Britain in 1713 by the Treaty of Utrecht, following its seizure by a combined Anglo-Dutch fleet during the War of the Spanish Succession.

The dispute was sparked last month when boats from Gibraltar 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 PP government, which described it as “a violation of international law in Spanish waters” and “an environmental attack”.

Spanish 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.

The Spanish government indicated that it might impose a “congestion charge” on traffic crossing the border and restrict British access to Spanish air space and the refuelling of ships. It is also considering appealing to the International Court of Justice or the United Nations (UN), and seeking support from Argentina, which 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.

On Friday, British Prime Minister David Cameron told European Commission President José Manuel Barroso of his “serious concerns” over the legality of the border checks and demanded a monitoring mission be sent “urgently”. Gibraltar’s chief minister, Fabian Picardo, declared, “This is an unseemly political row and it is causing a breakdown of the European treaty right at our border. The sooner the EU [European Union] can intervene and make Spain see sense the better”. Picardo insisted that “hell will freeze over before the government of Gibraltar moves any of those blocks”.

On Sunday, more than 40 Spanish fishing boats accompanied by coastguard vessels staged a protest near the reef, claiming they had already lost £1.5 million [\$US 2.3 milion] in income. Royal Gibraltar Police Chief Inspector Castle Yates accused the boats of crossing into Gibraltarian waters before being “pushed” out again. “About 38 Spanish fishing boats and seven or eight pleasure craft converged in the area of the western anchorage”, Yates said. “We had our own police cordon along with the Royal Navy and we corralled them in the area of the south mole. They tried to breach the cordon several times but they were not successful”.

On Monday, the British government said it was gathering evidence in preparation for a possible legal challenge in the European courts. Admitting this could take years, however, a spokesman for the Cameron government indicated that it was considering further action, including putting restrictions on Spanish tourists coming to Britain.

On the same day, three British warships, including

the frigate HMS Westminster, sailed into Gibraltar harbour en route to a training exercise in the Persian Gulf. Julie Girling is the Conservative Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the South West England constituency that was expanded in 2003 to include Gibraltar. She declared, “I think what the people of Gibraltar have really appreciated with the arrival of Westminster today, and the two support ships, is that it is flying the flag, it is saying ‘we British people support the Gibraltarians, we are not abandoning you’, and that has been very, very welcome”.

Girling continued, “People should consider going to places other than Spain on their holidays while this conflict continues, instead of giving their support to a hostile government”, before she warned, “if things can’t get solved through diplomatic means then citizen action is called for”.

Another MEP for the constituency, Graham Watson, president of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party, demanded that the EU mission continue until Spain agrees “to only carry out checks that are proportionate to the threat posed”. “Anything short of this is unacceptable”, he said. Watson has called for checks on Spanish seafood entering Britain and on Spanish aircraft leaving UK airports.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* Tuesday, Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo declared that the UN had not recognised any right to self-determination in the case of Gibraltar and that negotiations “have been on hold for too long”.

“The UN has clearly established, in several resolutions, that the colonial situation in Gibraltar must end and that this should be achieved through negotiations between Spain and the UK”, he added.

García-Margallo announced that the Spanish government had initiated proceedings to end the environmental hazard of bunkering (refuelling of ships at sea) off Gibraltar and was also implementing measures to combat the territory’s tax fraud.

“According to the British tax authorities, Gibraltar has 21,770 registered companies, of which only 10 percent pay taxes. As Gibraltar has a population of only 30,000 people, it is obvious that most of these companies are formed by non-residents relocating to avoid taxes. This situation is especially harmful to the countries in which these companies actually operate”, García-Margallo explained.

The minister said, “We are willing to accept the creation of ad hoc forums in which other authorities, such as the Gibraltarian government and the regional government of Andalusia, could participate”.

However, a British government spokeswoman rejected García-Margallo’s overtures, declaring, “Sovereignty is clear in our minds”. Talks could take place over fishing practices, she said, but not over Gibraltar’s status or the fate of its territorial waters.



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