

Brazilian Airports Chaos Threatens Military Crisis

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The decision of Waldir Pires, Brazilian Defense Minister, to open a direct dialog with the air traffic controllers who brought chaos into air travel in Brazil when they opted for a work-to-rule campaign that began October 27 ignited a crisis between Brazil's Defense Ministry and the FAB (Brazilian Air Force)

The Air Force commander got angry accusing the civilian authorities, especially the Defense Ministry, of overstepping his authority. There are even rumors that brigadier Luiz Carlos Bueno, the air Force chief, might ask for his walking papers to register his protest.

Pires is being recriminated by the brigadier for encouraging anarchy and opening a serious precedent by engaging in negotiations with the rebellious sergeants who are leading the flight controllers' action. After all, Bueno reasons, air controlling is Air Force territory and should be left for the military to deal with.

The Defense Minister says that he didn't want to challenge anyone's authority, but only find a fast solution for a problem that has been crippling the nation and leaving people waiting in the airports for a plane for up to 20 hours. In his talks with leaders of the controllers he promised to study some of their demands like better salaries, creation of a career and demilitarization of the sector.

While Pires together with Labor Minister, Luiz Marinho, have chosen the negotiation path the Brazilian military brass insist that militaries shouldn't be treated as union workers and most of all they should be punished for bringing out their problems into the open and starting a slowdown, which the same as strikes are expressly forbidden.

Brazil has now 2,112 military and 571 civilians working as air controllers, but there is a total of 10.327 people employed in several other related areas like engineering, communications, and computer science, among others. All of them might learn from the slowdown that this is the only way to get some attention.

The military fear that the controllers' example might get imitators in other areas unleashing a series of protests and strikes for better wages and work conditions all across the three forces: Army, Navy and Air Force.

They are also concerned that the controllers' rebellion is undermining the core of the military institution, which is based in hierarchy and discipline.

Minister Pires reasons that dialogue is the weapon used in such cases in a democracy and asks his critics: "Was there any other option? What the military wanted us to do? That we just let things the way they were?"

Bueno was particularly upset with the fact that Pires met with the Air Force sergeants without him. Pires contends, however, that he was encouraged by the brigadier himself to promote the meeting.

Before the Pires meeting with the rebels, the Air Force commander had summoned on Thursday all the controllers, forcing them to gather in the air traffic control center of Brasília (Cindacta 1) threatening them with court martial in case they left their post before Sunday.

Bueno has already said that even though he feels "hurt, sad, bothered and dejected" he owes loyalty to president Lula. And it's known that he would like to keep his post in Lula's second term in office.

Worried with the situation, president Lula, took a break from his vacation in Bahia - in the Aratu military basis, by the way - to ask his chief of staff Dilma Rousseff to talk to Pires and Bueno. His message: put down the fire, this quarrel can trigger a military crisis.