

# Media Disinformation; Britain's The Economist backs down over misleading its readers on Venezuela

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On its July 18, 2009, edition *The Economist* on article on Bolivia ("Bolivia's divisive president. The Permanent Campaign", July 18), asserted that "Venezuelan troops helped quell a rebellion centred on the airport at Santa Cruz in the east in 2007." The article did not bother to substantiate such a serious charge against Venezuela and is buried as one of several unjustified and unsubstantiated allegations against the president and government of Bolivia,

The piece "Bolivia's divisive president. The Permanent Campaign" does not even pretend to be 'even-handed' or 'balanced.' Some of the statements in it are simply unalloyed anti-Morales propaganda. Putting the blame squarely on Evo Morales, for example, for the diplomatic difficulties Bolivia has been having with the US (without informing the readers that Bush unilaterally had ended Bolivia's export preferential treatment on some exports or that Bolivia expelled US ambassador Mr Phillip Goldberg because he had been actively supporting secessionist efforts in Santa Cruz), and with Peru (without telling readers that Peru gave asylum to Bolivian Cabinet minister indicted for civilian deaths resulting from military repression of protests six years ago during the government of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada), but explaining them as a deliberate Morales drive to isolate Bolivia because, according to *The Economist*, "Many in the government dream of an economic autarky, powered by gas." The article goes even further by quoting government's opponents in Santa Cruz, who describe Morales as an "indigenous fascist" with *The Economist* accepting such a highly inflammatory label with no qualification whatsoever. And, if there was any doubt as to where *The Economist* stands on the Morales government, the piece ends by sympathetically paraphrasing one pundit who says "Bolivia is suffering a classic bout of Latin American populism: personalised politics, mild paranoia, bad economic policy and a weak opposition." No journalistic objectivity or even the pretension of it.

Venezuelan Ambassador to the United Kingdom, HE Samuel Moncada, responded to the allegation regarding the participation of Venezuelan troops in the suppression of a rebellion in Santa Cruz in 2007, with letter to Michael Reid, *The Economist's* Latin American editor, in which he stated that "Unfortunately, dangerous and negative consequences in the region may arise due to this blunder published in your magazine. I would therefore demand a correction of such fallacy". (The Ambassador's letter can be found in full at [http://www.vicuk.org/index.php?ption=com\\_content&task=view&id=503&Itemid=30](http://www.vicuk.org/index.php?ption=com_content&task=view&id=503&Itemid=30)).

Subsequently Ambassador Moncada wrote again to Michael Reid who had responded to the first letter by saying that *The Economist* stood by their story. In his second letter Ambassador Moncada wrote: "As we believe that the videos in your possession are

absolutely false, this matter can only be settled with evidence. Therefore, either you publish your data in order to prove your point, or our request in the first letter stands. Then, you will have no choice but to correct the statement in your article issued on the 18th of July."

A campaign of letter writing to Michael Reid was initiated so that he published the video material in his possession and proved his story or correct the false statement made about Venezuelan troops having participated in quelling a rebellion in Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

On its July 25, 2009, edition, The Economist did publish a 'correction' on its story "Clarification:                      Bolivia                      and                      Venezuela" ([http://www.economist.com/world/americas/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=14142418](http://www.economist.com/world/americas/displaystory.cfm?story_id=14142418)).

See also the video footage on which the allegation was based:

[http://video.economist.com/index.jsp?fr\\_story=f2f7691c61dd984f635cbc089e53ecb36666289f](http://video.economist.com/index.jsp?fr_story=f2f7691c61dd984f635cbc089e53ecb36666289f)

The full text of the 'correction' is:

*Clarification: Bolivia and Venezuela  
July 30th 2009*

From The Economist print edition

*In our recent story on Bolivia ("The permanent campaign", July 18th), we stated that "Venezuelan troops helped quell a rebellion centred on the airport at Santa Cruz in the east in 2007". Both the Venezuelan and Bolivian governments deny this (see Letters), and Venezuela's government has publicly asked us to retract this assertion. We based our statement on television footage aired at the time which shows a Venezuelan air force plane and uniformed Venezuelan personnel at Santa Cruz airport shortly after it had been seized by the Bolivian government from the local authorities. No official explanation has been given for their presence. However, we are happy to clarify that this footage does not prove Venezuelan troops played an active role in quelling the rebellion. We have placed the television footage on our website.*

The explanation, "we are happy to clarify that this footage does not prove Venezuelan troops played an active role in quelling the rebellion", not only TOTALLY contradicts the assertion made in the July 18 story -defended by Latin American editor, Michael Reid in correspondence with Venezuela's ambassador-, but also shows the type of bias The Economist tends engage in when it comes to covering developments in Venezuela in particular but also in Latin America in general.

The fact is that the assertion that "Venezuelan troops helped quell a rebellion centred on the airport at Santa Cruz in the east in 2007" was based on the flimsiest of 'evidences' which no serious editor should use to make such a grave assertion. Furthermore, the facts themselves, as presented by The Economist 'correction' speak for themselves. The footage which Latin American editor Michael Reid was forced to make public NOWHERE shows anything of any kind whatsoever that could be construed as "Venezuelan troops [having] helped quell a rebellion" in Bolivia in 2007 as affirmed in the July 18 article.

The footage comes from a TV channel which is clearly opposed to President Evo Morales, at

a time when the Bolivian government faced a serious destabilisation threat from a radical opposition to the Bolivian government whose epicentre was/is the Department of Santa Cruz and the capital city of the same name. The Half Moon 'autonomist' movement in Bolivia has strenuously tried to demonstrate in its propaganda that Morales is a puppet of Hugo Chavez and falsely claim that it is Venezuelan 'domination' they have been fighting against.

The Economist 'explanation' as to why it had asserted that there had been Venezuelan military participation in the quelling of an anti-government rebellion at the Santa Cruz airport is that the TV "footage aired at the time [...] shows a Venezuelan air force plane and uniformed Venezuelan personnel at Santa Cruz airport shortly after it had been seized by the Bolivian government from the local authorities", adding, "No official explanation has been given for their presence". None was asked. Mr Reid, as the Latin American editor, ought to have corroborated the story by requesting confirmation or otherwise from the Bolivian and Venezuelan authorities as to the alleged participation of Venezuelan troops in repressive activities against Bolivian citizens on Bolivian soil. It is just incredible that such grave assertion could have been made on the bases of the video footage published in The Economist and without this elementary safeguard of sound journalism.

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