

U.S. Military Base in Vicenza, Italy Gets Final Approval

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At a press conference on Friday, February 20, Italian Special Commissioner Paola Costa and U.S. Consul General from Milan, Daniel Weygandt, announced final approval for a new U.S. military base in Vicenza, Italy. The project, approved by a joint Italian-US Military Construction Committee working under the still-classified 1954 Bilateral Infrastructure Agreement, includes 25 new buildings with lodging for 1200 soldiers and multi-story car parks for over 800 vehicles.

Weygandt noted his satisfaction “that the entire process had been developed in full compliance and that we were able to arrive at this final result.” Costa said that while no environmental impact assessment would be carried out, he assured everyone that “this project is the best possible and based on the most stringent regulations in effect in Italy and the United States.”

These words rang hollow for the thousands of local residents who have kept up constant protests against this second U.S. Military base – Vicenza is already home to Camp Ederle dating back to the 1950s – since word of the project, initially denied, first leaked out in May 2006.

Costa’s aversion to an environmental impact assessment certainly came as no surprise. Just last year a July 2007 letter from Costa to then Defense Minister Parisi surfaced, in which the Special Commissioner reiterated that an environmental impact assessment “represents an obvious risk to the possibilities of proceeding while respecting deadlines; and it is possible that it could even put the final decision in jeopardy.” An important groundwater source, supplying water to the cities of Vicenza, Padua and Rovigo, lies directly below the base.

This final approval was announced as the official opening of the construction site, yet substantial demolition work has been ongoing for weeks.

In a press release from Mayor Achille Variati, who won last year’s election thanks to his opposition to the base, Weygandt was reminded “that Vicenza has always been hospitable towards the Americans, but hospitality doesn’t translate to stupidity or lack of common sense.” Variati asked that local needs and desires be respected and announced that, having been unsuccessful in getting a response from the Italian government with regards to the environmental impact assessment, he will “take the case to the European Union.” Variati also had some advice for Costa: “the construction period will be lengthy, and if the local population’s concerns are not taken into account, that period could be drawn out to a very long time.”

The new base was initially sited for the city's little used civilian airport Dal Molin, which is hosted inside an Italian airbase due for closure. In a failed attempt to quell fierce local opposition, in November 2007 changes were made to the project that moved the base just a few hundred meters away to the Italian military side of the same area. The airport itself has been shut down and the runway has just recently been destroyed to make room for the new base. As part of the "compensation package" offered by the Italian government, a new runway will be rebuilt on what is left of Dal Molin at a cost of 11.5 million euros to Italian taxpayers.

The announcement of the final approval did nothing to dishearten the movement that has been working for nearly three years to block construction of the second base. In fact, that same day, a demonstration was held near the entrance to the new base and the following day saw gazebos set up all over the city to talk to local residents about the latest developments with regards to the base.

And though it might be the shortest month of the year, in Vicenza, February has definitely been one of the most intense. Things kicked off when over two hundred activists entered and occupied the civilian airport side of the Dal Molin site. The police had been caught completely off guard, falling for false announcements of a series of initiatives by the No Dal Molin movement slated for the following week.

Having become experts at setting up encampments – the movement has operated a permanent encampment No Dal Molin for over two years – in a matter of minutes a large tent was erected inside the airport, the occupied area was sealed off on three sides, and a new entrance was created, complete with concierge and a crosswalk painted on the street.

The police arrived on the scene in riot gear. However, in a surprise move, Enac – Veneto, the regional civilian aviation authority responsible for the ex-airport, informed the police that they were not requesting the area to be cleared, believing that forcibly removing the protesters would only serve to increase tensions. Perhaps the fact that Enac is effectively losing an airport played a role in their decision. The police packed up and left as the activists celebrated. And like clockwork, volunteers arrived with meals for the occupiers; that evening saw a choice of 4 pasta dishes!

The occupation continued for four days and concluded with two important results. First, the long awaited *Parco della Pace*, or Peace Park, came a step closer to becoming a reality. The city government, together with Enac, agreed to open up discussions to make a portion of the now closed airport available to the public. This was a particularly important result, as it now makes it more difficult for the area in disuse to revert to state control, which would open up the door for the U.S. military, unlikely to allow a civilian airport to operate right next door to a major military base, to be given control of the entire area. Secondly, after having been denied an official environmental impact assessment of the new base, the city, together with the volunteer technicians and engineers of the No Dal Molin movement, will carry out their own evaluation of the project using office space provided them inside the ex airport.

However, the view from inside the airport during the occupation was that of the illegal work being carried out on the new base. Trucks carrying demolition material came and went. And while important gains had been made to protect the ex airport from falling into the hands of the U.S. military, the activists knew the next step was to block the construction of the base. In fact, they had been saying from the very start back in 2006, that once construction

began, they would put their bodies on the line to block it. And on Tuesday, February 10, that's exactly what they did.

Out on the streets at 6am, over 150 people were determined to block the trucks entering and leaving the base. Waiting for the demonstrators, however, was a police presence the likes of which had never been seen in Vicenza – 400 police in riot gear had completely sealed off the area, and immediately started to push the protesters back. Realizing that they were outnumbered, the protesters reorganized and chose to target one of the companies doing work inside the base, Carta Isnardo. They arrived at the company's headquarters just outside Vicenza and managed to block a truck for over one hour before the police arrived. 18 demonstrators were arrested, but as the protesters proclaimed, "Every minute lost by the U.S., is a minute gained by the city of Vicenza."

Valentine's Day brought over 7,000 citizens out into the streets to proclaim their love for their city and their determination to protect it. They were also marching to reaffirm their right to protest. Just days prior, the police chief had floated the idea of declaring the grassroots No Dal Molin movement *un'associazione a delinquere*, or a criminal organization. And Italian police agents have been taking down the license plate numbers of activists attending the weekly assemblies held at the Permanent Encampment No Dal Molin.

The march started from the city's historic center, a UNESCO World Heritage site dotted with buildings by renaissance architect Andrea Palladio and just one mile from the site of the new base. Mayor Variati spoke to the crowd gathered on the square. "My role as the mayor of all the citizens of Vicenza prevents me from marching with you today. But I will continue my opposition on the legal and institutional fronts." It ended in front of the police headquarters, where thousands held their hands up in the air to underline the non-violent nature of the movement.

City Council member and one of the leaders of the No Dal Molin movement, Cinzia Bottene, had circulated a petition calling on her colleagues to support the citizens' right to protest and reject the ridiculous accusations of the police chief. "Participation and dissent are not forms of delinquency, but the salt of democracy." It was signed by 18 city council members, three regional council members and nine from neighboring cities, as well as the mayor of Venice.

Meanwhile, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi was in also Italy where she met with Prime Minister Berlusconi and thanked him for the hospitality given to U.S. troops in Italy. Speaking to Italian parliament she said, "I wonder how many Americans know that there are 14,000 U.S. troops in Italy, how many know of the Italian leadership role in combating nuclear proliferation." She promised a new era of cooperation between the U.S. and allies. "There is no way that we will establish a policy that then imposes upon others obligations for which they have no consultation."

Pelosi's remarks raise a number of questions. Does the Speaker know that Italian taxpayers cover close to 40% of the operating costs of U.S. bases in Italy? Does she know that last October in a local referendum, which had officially been suspended just four days before it was to take place but was held with help of hundreds of volunteers, 95% of the 24,094 voters who *did* participate, voted against the new U.S. base at Dal Molin? And was she aware that, while visiting the US Air Force Base in Aviano, she was practically sitting on top of 50 U.S. nuclear warheads stored at the base (another 40 are stored at the Ghedi Torre base) in

violation of the spirit of the non-proliferation treaty?

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