

MILITARY OPERATIONS

US AIRCRAFT CARRIER ARRIVES IN CARIBBEAN



JOHN CLARK, ASSOCIATED PRESS

The USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier leaves Naval Station Norfolk on June 23 in Norfolk, Va.

Administration claims counterdrug move, but intentions questioned

BEN FINLEY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The nation’s most advanced aircraft carrier arrived Sunday in the Caribbean Sea in a display of U.S. military power, raising questions about what the new influx of troops and weaponry could signal for the Trump administration’s intentions in South America as it conducts military strikes against vessels suspected of transporting drugs.

The arrival of the USS Gerald R. Ford and other warships, announced by the Navy in a statement, marks a major moment in what the administration insists is a counterdrug operation but has been seen as an escalating pressure tactic against Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Since early September, U.S. strikes have killed at least 80 people in 20 attacks on small boats accused of transporting drugs in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific Ocean.

The Ford rounds off the largest buildup of U.S. firepower in the region in generations. With its arrival, the “Operation Southern Spear” mission includes nearly a dozen Navy ships and about 12,000 sailors and Marines.

The carrier strike group, which includes

squadrons of fighter jets and guided-missile destroyers, transited the Anegada Passage near the British Virgin Islands on Sunday morning, the Navy said.

Rear Adm. Paul Lanzilotta, who commands the strike group, said it will bolster an already large force of American warships to “protect our nation’s security and prosperity against narco-terrorism in the Western Hemisphere.”

Adm. Alvin Holsey, the commander who oversees the Caribbean and Latin America, said in a statement that the American forces “stand ready to combat the transnational threats that seek to destabilize our region.”

Holsey, who will retire next month after just a year on the job, said the strike group’s deployment is “a critical step in reinforcing our resolve to protect the security of the Western Hemisphere and the safety of the American Homeland.”

In Trinidad and Tobago, which is only 7 miles from Venezuela at its closest point, government officials said troops have begun “training exercises” with the U.S. military that will run through much of the week.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Sean Sobers

described the joint exercises as the second in less than a month and said they are aimed at tackling violent crime on the island nation, which has become a stopover point for drug shipments headed to Europe and North America. The prime minister has been a vocal supporter of the U.S. military strikes.

The exercises will include Marines from the 22nd Expeditionary Unit who have been stationed aboard the Navy ships that have been looming off Venezuela’s coast for months.

Venezuela’s government described the training exercises as an act of aggression. It had no immediate comment Sunday on the arrival of the aircraft carrier.

Meanwhile, Army Secretary Dan Driscoll said Sunday that U.S. troops have been training in Panama, underscoring the administration’s increasing focus on Latin America.

“We’re reactivating our jungle school in Panama. We would be ready to act on whatever” President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth needed, he told CBS’ “Face the Nation.”

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ROD LAMKEY, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Elise Stefanik, a Republican U.S. representative from New York who is campaigning for governor, says the top issue facing her voters is affordability, in stark contrast to President Donald Trump, who continues to insist the U.S. economy is the best it’s ever been.

Trump supporters insist there’s no affordability crisis

GOP leaders also dismiss sweeping election losses

STEVE PEOPLES
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Almost two weeks after Republicans lost badly in elections in Georgia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia, many GOP leaders insist there is no problem with the party’s policies, its message or President Donald Trump’s leadership.

Trump says Democrats and the media are misleading voters who are concerned about high costs and the economy. Republican officials aiming to avoid another defeat in next fall’s midterms are encouraging candidates to embrace the president fully and talk more about his accomplishments.

Those are the major takeaways from a series of private conversations, briefings and official talking points involving major Republican decision-makers across Washington, including inside the White House, after their party’s losses on Nov. 4. Their assessment highlights the extent to which the fate of the Republican Party is tied to Trump, a term-limited president who insists the economy under his watch has never been stronger.

That’s even as an increasing number of voters report a different reality in their lives.

But with few exceptions, the Trump lieutenants who lead the GOP’s political strategy have no desire to challenge his wishes or beliefs.

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