

THE WORLD

Sardinia Says It's Time for the U.S. Navy to Leave Port

• The military's presence impedes the island's growth as a tourist haven, locals say.

By Tracy Wilkinson, Times Staff Writer

LA MADDALENA, Italy — The ferry churns through royal-blue Mediterranean waters to reach this speck of an island off the northern tip of secluded Sardinia. Small houses are built into La Maddalena's gentle hillside, in colors of maize, eggshell and dusty rose. Languid, green palms hang over tranquil streets.

Only little by little does the U.S. Navy make its presence known.

Officers in crisp khakis stroll near the gigantic anchor that marks Commando Square. Locals know how to spot the license plates used by American seamen and their families. They can be seen shopping at an enormous, Wal-Mart-type store, sign-less behind large gates in the center of La Maddalena, or jogging along the edge of this island about 120 miles west of the Italian mainland.

Sardinia may be best known as a lush playground for the rich and famous who cavort amid its pristine waters and secluded beaches, but it also plays host to U.S. nuclear submarines and more military installations and activity — American, Italian and NATO — than anywhere else in Italy. Plans to draw down the U.S. military elsewhere in Europe and in the United States do not apply here.

That does not sit well with the man who governs Sardinia and a small but growing movement of activists who say the soldiers and sailors have overstayed their welcome.

"The real issue for us is, after 30 years, we still have an American base here in our archipelago. Is that necessary?" Sardinia's regional president, Renato Soru, said in an interview in Cagliari, the capital city at the opposite end of the island from La Maddalena.

For too long, Soru said, Sardinia has borne the brunt of this military presence, and it's time for other parts of the world to do their share. Moreover, he said, repairing and resupplying nuclear subs in a pristine area of national parks is dangerously inappropriate.

It is not that Sardinians don't like Americans, he insisted. It is a matter of national sovereignty.

"We love American tourists, entrepreneurs, professors.... We are good friends with the U.S.," Soru said. "But would you want a nuclear submarine next to your house?"

Soru, the 48-year-old son of a shopkeeper, earned a degree in economics and went on to make billions of dollars in Internet communications. He joined Italy's center-left political scene in the 1990s and was elected last year to the top government job on the island.

Since then, he has been calling for the removal of the island's 2,500 U.S. military personnel and dependents. And, to the chagrin of developers who salivate over Sardinia's potential as a resort, he has slapped a moratorium on shorefront construction.

"We have a different vision than in the past," Soru said.

The American Navy has been here since 1972, operating one of only two stations in the world outside the U.S. that services nuclear submarines.

U.S. Navy Capt. Fritz Roegge, commander of the Naval Support Activity, as the operation here is formally known, said his men and women were "friends and neighbors" to the Italians. The Navy, he said, contributes more than \$40 million a year to the local economy through service and construction contracts, rents and direct employment of about 175 Italians.

The American crews and vessels have taken pains to avoid damage to the delicate ecology of the surrounding waters, wildlife and vegetation, Roegge said.

The only publicized accident here involved the Hartford, a nuclear-powered sub that ran aground near La Maddalena in October 2003, causing more than \$9 million in damage to the vessel. Two top officers were relieved of their command as a result and six crewmen were punished for dereliction of duty.

Navy officials have said there was no environmental damage in the accident, but it stoked the fears of residents, who were especially upset that the grounding was kept secret for many days.

Roegge defended the need for the base in the post-Cold War world, saying it keeps some of America's stealthiest and most powerful weapons at the disposal of forward-based military commanders.

As U.S. military deployments go, the contingent in this part of Sardinia is pretty subtle. La Maddalena still has the feel of a sleepy Italian seaside town, not another Panama Canal Zone.

But residents who oppose the military presence blame it for holding back Sardinia's economic development. No-go zones set up by the Navy, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Italian armed forces cut into potential tourism and other public uses, the critics contend.

"It is such a contradiction to have a military base in the middle of a national park," said Francesco Palazola, a 52-year-old philosophy professor who lives in La Maddalena. "You can't fish. You can't set anchor. You can't stop. You can't pass through," he said, pausing on a cornice overlooking the water and gesturing toward a line of floating rubber "sausages" that the Navy has laid to block access.

"Instead of nuclear subs, let's have yachts and sailboats."

It is difficult to gauge how deep such sentiment runs. La Maddalena exhibits few of the anti-U.S. graffiti visible in other parts of Italy and Europe. Many residents are ambivalent, caught in a sort of love-hate relationship with their uniformed neighbors; others note approvingly that the Americans provide an important boost to the economy.

"We don't have anything against Americans," said Anna Petrina Durrighile, a local government official. "They can marry our sisters. They can live peacefully with us. The problem is with the submarines. People are afraid of the nukes."

Narciso Sanna, a restaurateur in Palau, just across the water from La Maddalena, said the presence of the Americans was fine by him.

"They are part of the area. They bring work and money for everybody," Sanna, 42, said as he dished out plates of baby shark in vinegar and octopus-bean salad. The military, he said, "has always existed and never been a problem before. Why should it be a problem now?"

The campaign led by Soru has undoubtedly drawn attention. The U.S. ambassador to Italy, Melvin F. Sembler, has sought him out on several occasions. According to an account by Sardinian sources, Sembler suggested to Soru that he reconsider both his opposition to playing host to the military and his ban on coastal development.

Sembler held up his native Florida, where the ambassador ran a huge construction business, as an example of development coexisting with military installations and attractive beaches, according to the account.

The bottom line of the issue, as the Sardinians acknowledge, is that Soru is powerless to do anything about the U.S. military presence because it is regulated by treaties between national, not regional, governments.

Soru has more power when it comes to building on the island. He has ordered a halt to construction within a mile and a quarter of the coastline, pending a comprehensive study of how the land is being used and how to promote a more accessible but benevolent tourism. Some of Sardinia's gorgeous seaside towns have lately been invaded by builders who erected chockablock housing that catered to middle-income tourists but threatened to spoil the landscape.

And Soru is clearly tired of the wealthy elite who use Sardinia for their vacation getaways but don't contribute to the tax base or pay for schools and hospitals.

"We are looking for something more appropriate for our island," he said. Not a Florida, as Sembler suggests, nor a Riviera. Maybe another Capri, he said — an island that is popular with tourists but retains its Italian culture and

remains accessible to locals.

One of the people most hurt by the construction ban is Thomas Barrack, a Los Angeles developer who owns most of the best hotels and beachfront properties along Sardinia's coveted northeastern shoulder, known as the Emerald Coast. Barrack's ambitious plans to expand his holdings there have been repeatedly stymied.

The developer already owns expensive hotels that cater to a top-drawer global elite, including Hollywood stars and American chief executives, who enjoy the white sand and price-enforced seclusion.

Soru doesn't say those people have to go. But they can't be the island's only visitors.

Soru has also clashed with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, one of the world's richest men, who has erected a fabulous mansion on the Emerald Coast, complete with a pseudo-Greek amphitheater that would seem to be in complete violation of building codes. Berlusconi refused to allow access to Sardinian inspectors, saying his need to host President Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the like made the property top-secret and off limits.

Soru continues to battle Berlusconi. Meanwhile, he is dealing with another problem: Sardinia's fishermen.

Dozens of them have been camped outside his office for weeks and draped their nets on the façade of the building. Annual NATO exercises make it impossible for them to harvest the waters, and for many years the government compensated them for that with cash. But now they want more.

Soru is telling them to forget the money and stand up for their sovereignty, their national dignity and reclaiming the seas.

"I'm telling them, we don't want money," he said. "We want our territory back."