

‘The WEU Satellite Centre, to be located in Torrejón, will open in June 1992 and cost 1 600 million’ from El País (22 November 1991)


Caption: Published on 22 November 1991 in the Spanish daily newspaper El País, this article reports on the opening, in June 1992, of the Satellite Centre of Western European Union (WEU) in Torrejón de Ardoz, Spain, and reports on the tasks and resources that will be assigned to this operational body.

Source: El País. 22.11.1991. Madrid. "El Centro de Satélites de la UEO, ubicado en Torrejón, se abrirá en junio de 1992 y costará 1.600 millones", auteur:González, Miguel.
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The WEU Satellite Centre, to be located in Torrejón, will open in June 1992 and cost 1 600 million

Europe saw the Gulf War through the 'electronic eyes' of the United States

Miguel González — Madrid

The Satellite Centre of Western European Union (WEU) will open at the Madrid base in Torrejón de Ardoz on 1 June 1992, says Enric Trillas, Director General of the National Institute of Aerospace Technology (INTA) and the chief Spanish expert in charge of the project. On the 18th of this month, the defence ministers of the European organisation, which includes all the Community countries except Ireland, Greece and Denmark, agreed in Bonn to locate the Centre — for which France and the United Kingdom were also contending — in Spain. It will be WEU's first operational installation.

An initial investment of some 1 600 million pesetas, of which Spain will contribute 450 million, will be needed to make the Centre operational. It will be housed in a building vacated by the US Air Force alongside the INTA facilities in Torrejón and begin operations with a minimum staff of 30, to be doubled after three years at the end of the experimental phase. From 1994 onwards, when the Centre will be fully operational, it will employ a maximum of 300 technicians. During the experimental phase its main function will be to train its own technicians in photo interpretation, using images provided by France's *Spot* satellite and the US *Landsat*, as well as simulated images from *Helios*, a European military satellite to be launched in 1994. The Centre will cost 1 200 million pesetas a year to maintain, of which Spain will pay 200 million, minus the rent for the facilities, which has been set at 12 million. It will be headed by a British electronic engineer, and the staff will be trained by personnel from the nine WEU countries, although no system of national quotas will be applied.

The Centre's real test will come in 1994, after completion of the experimental phase, when the WEU members will decide whether they want only to maintain a training establishment for technicians or are prepared to overcome mutual suspicion and pool the information acquired from their respective military satellites.

Trillas is optimistic in this respect. In his view the Bonn agreement would make no sense if that were not the final objective, since it gives the Centre the tasks of verifying and monitoring disarmament agreements, especially the Conventional Forces in Europe agreement (CFE), monitoring crises both military and environmental (caused by natural or industrial disasters), and monitoring the environment.

During the Gulf War, in which various WEU Member States took an active part, the European governments depended on information supplied by the United States — the only Western country with observation satellites positioned over the war zone — for their knowledge of the movements and real situation of the Iraqi army. Washington provided its NATO partners with satellite images, but it did so according to its own criteria and in an unequal fashion, giving some capitals more information than others. 'Europe saw the war through the eyes of US satellites,' a Spanish diplomat recalls.

Spain contributes 4.5 % to the budget of the European Space Agency (ESA) and will launch its first communications satellite *Hispasat* at the end of 1992. It will also be contributing 6 % to the Franco-Italian military observation satellite *Helios*, which will be one of the Torrejón centre's main sources of images.

INTA now has considerable experience of managing satellite tracking stations. In addition to two of its own in Maspalomas (Gran Canaria) and Cebreros (Ávila), it is responsible for running two others: one at Robledo de Chavela (Madrid), which belongs to NASA, and another, belonging to ESA, at Villafranca del Castillo (Madrid).

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