

Panama Canal naval exercise planned

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The U.S. Southern Command in Doral is staging a huge naval exercise in the waters off Panama starting this week.

It is called Panamax 2007 and will host civilian and military forces from 20 countries and run from Wednesday to Sept. 7.

"The exercise is focused on ensuring the security of the Panama Canal, from both the Caribbean and Pacific approaches to the Canal," a Southcom news release said. "This year, more than 30 vessels, a dozen aircraft and 7,000 personnel will take part."

After the so-called UNITAS exercise further south, Panamax is one of the most ambitious Pentagon-sponsored multinational naval exercises of the year in Latin America.

Adm. James Stavridis, the Southcom commander, said the exercise, which also includes a ground forces exercise at a U.S. base in Honduras, is meant "to ensure the security of one of the world's most important waterways."

Participating nations include Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Canada, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, France, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Netherlands, Panama, Peru, the United States and Uruguay.

Four other nations are acting as observers: El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay and the United Kingdom.