

# Rapa Nui People Oppose NASA Base

In June of 1985, U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger announced that NASA and the military government of Chile under General Augusto Pinochet were proceeding with plans to install an aerospace station on Rapa Nui (Easter Island). Its stated purpose is to serve as an emergency landing strip for space shuttles flying a polar (north to south) orbit.

Rapa Nui is located in the South Pacific approximately 2,350 miles west of the Chilean coast and is part of Polynesia. It is triangular and covers 113 square miles. Its population is around 1,000.

The Dutch first arrived on the island Easter Sunday of 1722. It was taken over by the Chilean Navy in September of 1888. In 1963, under the government of Jorge Alessandri, the United States installed a satellite tracking station on what is now the Mataverí Airport.

On October 29, 1983, the Committee for the Defense of the Patrimony and Interests of Rapa Nui elected officers, and on November 15 the Council of Elders and Chiefs of Rapa Nui was formed once again. The council consists of one chief from each of the 36 clans. It had not functioned since 1888.

In a letter written to Lieutenant de los Rios Echeverría, Pinochet-appointed governor of the 5th Region of Chile (in which Rapa Nui is included), the Council of Elders and Chiefs of Rapa Nui, by unanimous agreement, asked that in the future when the mayors and other officials on the island are selected their organizations be consulted, since they represent the people of Rapa Nui.

In May of 1985, Chilean Minister of Defense Lieutenant Patricio Carvajal made a surprise visit to Rapa Nui and met with the governor and other local authorities. A few days later, the people of Rapa Nui heard over national television that NASA was planning to expand Mataverí Airport so that space shuttles (such as Columbia, Challenger and Discovery) could land there beginning in 1986. In a press conference after his visit, Carvajal stated that the Rapa Nui people (with whom he did not meet) were in total agreement with the project.

In June of 1985, U.S. Ambassador James Theberge visited Rapa Nui. During a reception held for him, the officers of the Council of Elders and Chiefs of Rapa Nui informed Mr. Theberge that the council opposed the project. When Mr. Theberge returned to Santiago, he stated to the press that the people of Rapa Nui approved of NASA's plans.

In a letter to Pope John Paul II dated May 28, 1985, the Council of Elders and Chiefs of Rapa Nui stated: "Our problem begins when Chilean authorities make an agreement with the United States. They make public projects and declarations without considering the people of Rapa Nui, who are the only and true owners of the entire island.

"The Council of Elders and Chiefs of Rapa Nui has the duty of defending the patrimony, culture, interests, and above all else the dignity of the people of Rapa Nui. We do not accept that our rights be stepped on using our island as a strategic point for the scientific and military interests of a powerful nation."

