

Colombian general served CIA, death squads and drug dealers

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The resignation last month of Gen. Ivan Ramirez Quintero, the number three man in the Colombian military command, has shed light on the shadowy activities of the Pentagon and the CIA in Colombia and throughout Latin America.

Gen. Ramirez headed an elite military intelligence unit that was set up by US military and intelligence officers with the ostensible purpose of combating both drug trafficking and the guerrilla movements that have operated in Colombia since 'la violencia,' the protracted rural civil war that erupted a half-century ago.

At the same time, according to a report published last month in the Washington Post, the general served as a key asset of the CIA, funneling information into the agency. The Post claimed that Gen. Ramirez was paid for his services. He responded indignantly that his was a labor solely of ideological conviction.

Whatever the truth about the motivations for his services to US imperialism, there are other aspects of the general's career that are highly revealing of the nature of Washington's ongoing intervention in Latin America.

The US State Department has revoked Gen. Ramirez's visa for his alleged involvement with 'terrorism.' Some of his closest collaborators in the Colombian high command are under investigation for their role in funneling money and weapons to paramilitary organizations that are responsible for the executions, disappearances and torture of thousands of Colombians, in their majority peasant farmers caught in the middle of the conflict between the military and the guerrilla movements.

According to one estimate, more than a million Colombians were turned into internal refugees under the government of the previous president, Ernesto Samper, while over 30,000 people have been the victims of politically motivated killings over the past decade. The State Department itself estimated that 70 percent of the dead were victims of right-wing paramilitary outfits that

operate with the support of the Colombian military, while frequently providing protection for the country's cocaine processing and exporting sector.

General Ramirez, it seems, was at the center of this nexus between military repression, right-wing death squads, drug trafficking and the CIA. This is hardly a unique relationship. Gen. Manuel Noriega, Panama's former military strongman, also served as the CIA's informer and collaborator for many years before Washington decided to topple him, using his well-known connections with the Colombian cocaine cartels as a pretext. Similarly, the US-backed contra mercenaries in Nicaragua coordinated gun and drug running through a network set up by the CIA.

General Ramirez's rise to the top echelons of the Colombian military was a product of his long-standing relations with the Pentagon. In 1983, he was brought to Washington for intelligence training and then sent back to Colombia where he commanded the 20th Brigade, a unit that was disbanded last May after extensive evidence came to light that it had played a central role in the widespread assassinations and political 'disappearances' of the 1980s and 1990s.

When the US decided to help Colombia's military set up a new military intelligence agency in the early 1990s, General Ramirez was tapped for the job. During this period, Washington was coordinating an international campaign against Pablo Escobar, the leader of the Medellin cocaine cartel. General Ramirez, it appears, had established close relations with a paramilitary outfit that provided protection for the Cali cartel, Escobar's principal rival in the cocaine business.

If Washington has moved to distance itself from Ramirez, it is a measure of the crisis of the Colombian regime and the failure of US policy over the past decade. The two principal guerrilla movements, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by the Spanish

acronym FARC, and the National Liberation Army, or ELN, are operating on nearly 50 percent of Colombian territory and have dealt a series of humiliating blows to the Colombian army.

Upon taking office, Colombia's new president, Andres Pastrana, carried out a wholesale shakeup of the military command, bringing in a new set of generals and announcing that his aim was to impose order while reaching a settlement with the guerrillas. At the same time, the basic structure of Colombia's military, as well as the dominant influence exercised by the Pentagon over its operations, remains intact.

In Colombia, as throughout Latin America, the US military has played an increasingly active and autonomous role in dealing with its counterparts south of the border.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the Pentagon has enjoyed the closest relations with Latin America's military commands. In Panama it ran the School of the Americas, also known as the school for dictators, training the military officers who were to launch military coups and carry out savage repression from Argentina to Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and elsewhere on the continent. US military groups assigned to virtually every country provided military aid and 'advisers' who helped perfect methods of repression and torture that horrified the world.

Faced with revelations of the dirty wars fought by US-trained military forces in Latin America, Congress passed various pieces of legislation imposing limits on US military aid and demanding that human rights criteria be met before any training missions are undertaken.

The Pentagon, however, has had no problem working around these feeble legislative gestures. Some 56,000 US troops were rotated through Latin America in 1997. In many cases they included National Guard or Army Reserve units involved in so-called humanitarian operations or relieving troops already stationed in the region.

But thousands of these troops belonged to special operations units like the Army's Green Berets, or the Navy Seals were sent in under a program known as Joint Combined Exchange Training or JCET. Under a 1991 bill establishing the program, JCET is supposed to serve primarily as a means for training US troops. In practice, it has provided the Pentagon with a cover for continuing its role as 'adviser' to repressive Latin American military forces, instructing them in counterinsurgency methods. According to the Pentagon's own figures, there have been

30 deployments of US military 'trainers' in Venezuela this year, 30 in Bolivia, 24 in Colombia and 21 in Ecuador.

In Colombia, the Pentagon's training operations are supposed to be directed exclusively at counter-narcotics operations. But, as one senior U.S. military told the Washington Post, 'We can call anything counter-drugs. If you are going to train to take out a target, it doesn't make much difference if you call it a drug lab or a guerrilla camp. There's not much difference between counter-drug and counterinsurgency. We just don't use the [counterinsurgency] word any more because it is politically sensitive.'

Hundreds of 'trainers' have been deployed in Colombia each year since the early 1990s. Marine units have been sent in secretly to train Colombian police in urban counterinsurgency operations while the Pentagon has supplied the country's security forces with heavy weapons, including M-60 machine guns.

Under conditions of protracted political crisis and paralysis in Washington--and with an absence of any clear policy toward Latin America, outside of isolating Cuba and preaching the benefits of free trade--the US military is once again exercising a predominant and increasingly autonomous role in influencing US policy on the continent.

While the Clinton administration and the State Department ritualistically celebrate the return of 'democracy' to Latin America, the US is laying the foundations for another round of military coups, dictatorships and mass repression.

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