

US steps up counter-insurgency operations in Colombia

Bill Vann
3 August 1999

Even as the Pentagon abandons its principal base of operations in Latin America, Washington is paving the way for a major military intervention on the continent.

US troops lowered the Stars and Stripes for the last time in the Panama Canal July 30, ending nearly a century of military presence in the territory and closing down the last remnants of an installation that had served as the linchpin of US domination and intervention throughout the hemisphere. The string of military bases in Panama had housed the US Southern Command, which coordinated military operations and the Pentagon's "aid" to Latin American armies. They also were the site of the notorious School of the Americas, a facility in which generations of Latin American military officers were trained in counter-insurgency and repression. Graduates of the institution—Pinochet, Videla, Banzer and many more—went back to their countries to lead military coups and unleash waves of assassination and torture.

While the Pentagon pulls out of Panama, however, there are ominous indications that it is preparing a full-scale intervention just across the border in Colombia. A series of high-level talks between US and Colombian officials have set the stage for a major escalation of US military aid to the country—already the third-largest recipient of American arms, equipment and training, trailing only Israel and Egypt. An increasingly direct role for US troops in what is Latin America's oldest guerrilla war appears imminent.

During the so-called "battle for Bogota," last month's ill-fated offensive by the FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the country's largest guerrilla group, the Pentagon coordinated military actions by governments of the surrounding countries. Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela all placed their forces on alert and moved troops up to the Colombian border. The offensive, aimed at improving FARC's prospects in proposed peace talks with the government, resulted in the deaths of more than 200 guerrillas and scores of government soldiers and police.

Meanwhile, the top US commander in the hemisphere made it clear that the conflict in Colombia could provide the pretext for US military forces marching back into the Panama Canal Zone. Under a treaty negotiated by the Carter administration in 1977, the full hand-over of the Canal to Panamanian authority is set to take place December 31.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last month, Gen. Charles Wilhelm, chief of the US Southern Command, warned that Panama's security forces, reorganized under the Pentagon's supervision following the US invasion of the country in 1989—also carried out under the pretext of combating the drug trade—were undermanned and unprepared to counter threats from Colombian guerrillas and drug traffickers.

Wilhelm pointedly referred to a section in the 1977 treaty allowing the US to intervene in Panama if the canal's security is threatened. Recent events in Colombia, he added, have led the Pentagon to draw up contingency plans for such an intervention "either cooperatively with the Panamanians or unilaterally if the conditions dictate."

The implied threat of US military aggression provoked a sharp protest from the Panamanian government. Its foreign minister, Jorge Ritter, called Gen. Wilhelm's statements "inadmissible," adding, "Panama is in no way being subjected to aggression by anyone or any foreign force."

Relations between Panama and the Pentagon have deteriorated since the Panamanian government's rejection last year of a US proposal to create a "counter-narcotics" center in the zone that would have allowed more than 2,000 US troops to stay at Howard Air Force base to coordinate anti-drug operations throughout the hemisphere. Negotiations over the center broke down over US demands that the troops be allowed to be used for non-drug-related operations and over Panama's demand that the base agreement be subject to a three-year, renewable lease.

General Wilhelm said that the Colombian guerrillas were out of control and posed a threat to the four other bordering countries—Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru.

Gen. Manuel Bonett, the commander-in-chief of the Colombian armed forces, responded with certain umbrage to the US officer's statements, while seemingly confirming his assessment. "There are more deaths here in one month than in the Gulf War and more battles than in Vietnam," he said. Bonett added that his forces were inadequately equipped and that he would be willing to accept any US aid, including "atomic bombs."

US military operations in Colombia are not just beginning now. Since 1989 more than \$500 million in US military aid has flowed into the country, nearly half the amount provided to the entire continent. Included in the aid has been sophisticated military equipment, such as Black Hawk helicopters, six more of which are scheduled to arrive next month, M60 machine guns and communications gear.

The Pentagon deploys more than 200 US military personnel in Colombia at present. US troops staff radar facilities, while Green Berets train Colombian troops or carry out jungle training of their own. All of these operations are justified in the name of the "war on drugs." The scope of US military operations in the country came into focus late last month with the downing of a US Army plane over guerrilla territory in southern Colombia. Seven people were killed in the crash, including five US Army soldiers and two Colombian Air Force officers.

The Colombian press reported that the US plane, operating under orders of the US Southern Command, was carrying out intelligence operations against the FARC. It was earlier reported that the US supplied the Colombian army with military intelligence during the guerrilla offensive last month.

Gen. Barry McCaffrey, director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, flew to Colombia last week, declaring the US intention to respond to an "emergency situation" there. During a visit to Washington by Colombia's defense minister, McCaffrey had called for more than \$1 billion to be allocated to the "war on drugs" in Latin America, \$600 million of it to Bogota. This was more than the amount of aid the Colombian government had requested.

McCaffrey made it clear that Washington is making no distinction

between the anti-drug effort and the counter-insurgency campaign against the guerrillas. "You've got 25,000 people out there with machine guns, mortars, rockets and land mines," said General McCaffrey, a former chief of United States military forces in Latin America. "We keep arguing over what is it you call them. I don't know what we ought to call them, but I know what they're doing: They are operating, they are massing, in forces of up to a couple of thousand people, and they are carrying out simultaneous attacks on 11 provinces on the same night."

President Clinton, meanwhile, sounded a similar note in Washington, declaring at a press conference that his government sees the anti-drug effort in Colombia as a critical issue. He said it was "in our national security interests to do what we can" to help the country win the battle against the guerrillas.

Amid growing speculation in Colombia that the US is preparing to send troops, the country's president, Andres Pastrana, was compelled to broadcast a speech to the nation declaring that "there will be no foreign military intervention in Colombia.... The solution to Colombia's problem is political, not military."

Whatever the timetable for direct US military intervention, the present drive to increase military aid is already crossing limits that Washington had previously set upon its involvement in the Latin American nation. Previously, US aid had gone overwhelmingly to Colombia's National Police. Assistance to the military was tightly restricted because of the army's involvement in widespread human rights atrocities against the civilian population and its covert assistance to paramilitary militias utilized by the landlords and capitalists to defend their interests. These militias have accounted for the bulk of the civilian deaths. The Commission of Justice and Peace estimates that the military and the paramilitary forces combined have carried out 70 percent of the killings over the past decade.

Now, however, the Pentagon is forging ever closer ties to the Colombian military. Key to this approach is the US training of an elite 1,000-member Anti-Drug Battalion which is to be deployed in guerrilla-held territory.

The erosion of any distinction between the "war against drugs" and the counter-insurgency operations of the Colombian military will inevitably lead to justification of human rights violations on a massive scale. The civil strife in Colombia constitutes Latin America's longest running armed struggle. During the period known as "la violencia," from the late 1940s into the 1960s, an estimated 200,000 people were killed in rural civil war fueled by a bitter conflict between the Liberal and Conservative parties for control of the government.

Underlying the five-decade-old conflict are conditions of gross social inequality and a ceaseless struggle between landless peasants and Colombia's rural oligarchy in this country of 33 million. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, the gap between the rich and poor in Colombia, as throughout Latin America, is the highest in the world. In the countryside 48 percent of the land is owned by wealthy absentee landlords, who make up just 1.3 percent of the population, while the poor peasants, comprising 63 percent of the population, own less than 5 percent of the land. The rise of coca cultivation and the drug cartels have only deepened the profound social conflicts that have long dominated the country.

Colombia's President Pastrana, the Conservative Party leader elected last year, has attempted to forge closer relations with Washington while implementing International Monetary Fund-crafted economic policies that have sent the official unemployment rate up to the 20 percent mark. Over the past decade, the country's foreign debt has nearly doubled to \$33.8 billion, while the gross domestic product has fallen alarmingly.

At the same time, Pastrana has sought to bring about a negotiated settlement with the FARC, ceding effective control to the guerrilla movement of a swath of territory in southern Colombia the size of Switzerland. The order to cease operations by the armed forces in the zone

led to the resignation of the country's defense minister, who denounced the move as a "humiliating" concession to the guerrillas. Much of the armed forces high command—17 generals, 40 colonels and scores of other officers—followed suit, leading to fears of a potential military coup.

For their part, the guerrilla movements have employed military means in an attempt to better their bargaining position with the government. FARC launched its ill-fated offensive last month, and previously the second-largest guerrilla movement, the ELN, carried out a series of mass kidnappings, including the hijacking of a plane with 41 people aboard and the seizure of 140 people from a Catholic church in Cali.

The ELN was founded by an ex-Spanish priest, Manuel Perez, and continues to mix "liberation theology" with Marxist phraseology. After the church kidnapping, the group's senior commander flew to Rome for a meeting with a senior aide to Pope John Paul II. The group has also sought the intercession of German intelligence in its attempts to mediate a settlement with the Pastrana government.

The FARC similarly combines pseudo-Marxist rhetoric with appeals to the US and Western Europe to organize and finance a reorientation of Colombian agriculture from coca to some less controversial cash crop. It is estimated that at least two-thirds of FARC's combatants are involved in protection operations for coca growers or drug traffickers. In the case of the ELN, such activities involve more than half of its guerrillas.

One indication of the guerrilla movement's outlook was the cordial welcome it offered to Richard Grasso, the chairman of the New York Stock Exchange, who flew to FARC-held territory in Colombia at President Pastrana's request in June. In a meeting with FARC leaders, Grasso stressed the danger that continued civil strife would pose both to Colombia's credit rating and to international capital markets. While calling upon the guerrillas to play a responsible role in the global capitalist economy, he said he stressed "the opportunities capital markets will present to Colombia when peace is achieved."

Grasso concluded his visit by inviting the camouflage-clad guerrilla commanders to come to New York for a personally guided tour of the stock exchange. The FARC leaders said they would consider the invitation.

In the beginning of the 1990s two other guerrilla movements—the M-19 (19th of April Movement) and the EPL (People's Liberation Army) reached a negotiated settlement with the government and turned in their arms to incorporate themselves into the country's political system. In some cases, former guerrillas were granted small business loans to set themselves up as farmers or shopkeepers. Some of their leaders pursued careers as parliamentary deputies.

Other former advocates of armed struggle from the FARC joined with members of the Colombian Communist Party to form the UP, or Popular Unity Party, and enjoyed electoral success in many areas. Its members, however, came under the gun of the paramilitary forces backing the landlords and business interests, and an estimated 3,500 UP members have been murdered over the past several years.

The US pretext for joining the counter-insurgency operation in Colombia is the alleged involvement of the guerrillas in providing protection to coca growers and cocaine cartel operations. Undoubtedly there is a basis for these charges. The FARC and other guerrilla movements have experienced a marked growth in revenues and resources even under conditions in which popular support for the groups has declined. Operating in rural areas where coca is grown, they levy a "tax" which, according to some estimates, brings in hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

But the guerrillas are not alone in profiting from the drug trade. The country's former president, Ernesto Samper of the Liberal Party, was charged with taking hefty campaign contributions from Colombian drug cartels. Military officers and right-wing paramilitaries have also forged their own lucrative relations with the drug traffickers.

During his recent visit to Colombia, General McCaffrey compared the conflict in Colombia with the recent civil war in Kosovo, where Washington carried out its latest war of intervention, saying that the civil strife in Colombia had led to even more internal refugees than in the Yugoslav province.

Aside from the obvious aim of justifying a new military intervention, the comparison between Kosovo and Colombia exposes the duplicity of US policy in the so-called "war on drugs." As can be seen from the intimate ties between the US government and the Kosovo Liberation Army—a movement whose connections with the European narcotics trade have been well documented—Washington has a flexible approach to the issue of drug-trafficking. When it is used to finance movements whose aims correspond with US strategic interests, it is either ignored or actively abetted. When narcotics are an issue in an area where Washington has plans to intervene militarily, they provide a useful pretext for sending in troops.



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