

US continues buildup

Warnings of "Vietnamization" of Colombian civil war

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Warnings that the United States was preparing a major military intervention in the conflict between the Colombian government and the country's 40-year-old guerrilla movement grew more insistent as Washington prepared yet another high-level diplomatic tour to discuss the crisis in the Latin American nation.

The Clinton Administration's "drug czar" Gen. Barry McCaffrey will commence a swing through Latin America beginning next week in an attempt to drum up support from regional governments for a more concerted international effort to bring the Colombian guerrillas to heel.

The trip will be McCaffrey's second to the region. In between, Gen. Charles Wilhelm, the commanding officer of the US Southern Command, flew to Bogota to consult with his military counterparts, and Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering completed a visit to the Colombian capital where he held talks with President Andres Pastrana.

While in Bogota, Pickering found himself compelled to offer reassurances that Washington was not preparing a military invasion of Colombia. Speculation about a direct US intervention, he said, is "totally false, totally crazy."

Even as Pickering spoke, however, 1,000 US Marines were preparing to land at the Colombian military base of Bahia Malaga to conduct joint war games dubbed "Unitas 99," further fueling fears that a US intervention is imminent. The country's leading news magazine, *Cambio*, devoted an entire issue to the threat.

Hugo Chavez, the former military officer and new president of Venezuela, warned recently that increased outside military involvement in Colombia could unleash "a little Vietnam" on the Latin American continent.

Having adopted a de facto military policy of engaging US forces only in one-sided conflicts where it is able to

wage war at long distance with cruise missiles and high-altitude bombers, it would appear highly unlikely that Washington is preparing the large-scale deployment of US troops as its preferred option in Colombia.

What is increasingly apparent, however, is that preparations are underway for a greatly expanded US participation in a low-intensity counterinsurgency campaign the likes of which Washington sponsored and directed in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s at the cost of hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties.

While Pickering disparaged the "canard" that "the United States is about to introduce a military intervention Colombia," a key element that emerged from his mission to Colombia was a US attempt to discourage the on-again, off-again peace talks between the Pastrana government and the largest of the guerrilla movements, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish acronym FARC.

"The question we ask ourselves is, 'Has there been sufficient action to make the process worthwhile,'" the US Undersecretary of State said in Colombia.

Writing in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright sounded a similar note, declaring that while Mr. Pastrana may have had reason to initiate talks with the guerrillas, "...the question is whether he can muster a combination of pressure and incentives that will cause the guerrillas to respond."

The peace talks, revived last year after Pastrana was elected as the candidate of Colombia's Conservative Party, were placed on hold again following an offensive by the FARC in June. The guerrillas have rejected the government's demand that they accept an international commission to oversee a Switzerland-sized demilitarized zone in southern Colombia, where the guerrilla group has

concentrated its 20,000-strong force. FARC leaders have charged that the condition was imposed at Washington's suggestion.

US expressions of distrust about the so-called peace process came as the Colombian military command made its own demands for increased power to wage war on the guerrillas. Leading military commanders have branded the negotiations a farce and have called for the imposition of what amounts to martial law throughout the country to pave the way for a more aggressive counterinsurgency campaign.

"We need juridical instruments of war for a nation that is at war," declared Gen. Jaime Cortes, the commander of the Army's Third Division. "We now have a Constitution and laws for a country at peace." The commander of the country's armed forces, Gen. Fernando Tapias, demanded that the government formally indict FARC for "international terrorism" in connection with the guerrillas' hijacking of a Venezuelan aircraft.

Earlier this year the country's defense minister and much of the military's high command resigned in protest over Pastrana's concessions to FARC to get the negotiations going. While he accepted the minister's resignation, the senior officers were asked to remain on duty. With polls showing the Colombian president's support having dropped to an all-time low and with increasing pressure from Washington for a more aggressive military posture toward the guerrillas, the dangers of a military coup will inevitably grow.

Gen. McCaffrey will begin his Latin American tour on Aug. 23. The goal, he said, will be to get other Latin American governments to participate in containing the Colombian conflict. "The argument is that this is not the problem of Colombia," McCaffrey said. "This is a regional problem and they need the political participation of all of us in the hemisphere."

The US drug czar may sound out the possibility of creating a regional intervention force to aid the Colombian military against the guerrillas. He will almost certainly seek political backing for an increased US military role.

Similar efforts to win Latin American backing, or at least acquiescence, were carried out in the early 1980s as the US steadily escalated its involvement in El Salvador's civil war. Washington's diplomatic efforts succeeded in bringing some direct support—for example military "advisers" from Argentina—and in staving off continent-wide criticism.

While discounting direct participation of US troops in

the fighting, McCaffrey added, "We can support them with resources, training, equipment and intelligence."

The US already has some 370 "advisers" in Colombia—including military personnel as well as agents of the CIA and the Drug Enforcement Administration—and is providing the country with \$289 million annually in military aid. This makes it the third-largest recipient of US military aid in the world, trailing only Israel and Egypt. McCaffrey suggested recently that Washington increase the military aid to \$600 million.

US forces are operating out of three bases in Colombia: Palanquero, Tolemaida and Tres Esquinas. The last of these bases, where the US installed a \$20 million radar facility, will be the home of an elite Colombian anti-drug battalion that is being trained by the Pentagon, the CIA and the DEA. According to one recent report, the Pentagon has asked the Colombian military for permission for US personnel to operate out of three other bases as well—Bahia Malaga, Barranquillas and San Andres.

Washington has justified its growing involvement in the Colombian conflict as part of the "war on drugs," pointing to links between the guerrilla movements and the cocaine trade. There is little doubt that FARC and other guerrilla organizations have seen their coffers swell—even as their base of popular support has diminished—as a result of ties with coca cultivators and others involved in the drug trade. But this is hardly unique to the guerrillas. The vast economic resources of the cocaine cartels have been used to buy support in Colombia's military and police, to fund right-wing death squads and even to finance presidential campaigns.

The corrupting influence of the drug trade is pervasive in a country where the rest of the economy—as throughout Latin America—has been driven into depression. This reality struck all too close to home earlier this month with the indictment of the wife of the chief US military officer in Colombia on charges of shipping \$235,000 worth of cocaine back to the US through the US Embassy's mail. Laurie Hiett, the wife of Col. James Hiett, who headed the US Military Group in Colombia, was arraigned on the drug charges August 5 in Federal court in Brooklyn. The Colonel was transferred to another post.



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