State Department documents confirm

US hypocrisy on human rights

The case of Colombia

18 September 1999

The Clinton administration justified its military onslaught against the people of Serbia with the claim that the massive bombing was motivated by concern over the violation of human rights in Kosovo. The State Department and the White House, backed by the American media, charged that the government of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was engaged in a Nazi-like campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Albanian majority in Kosovo.

The claim of humanitarian concern has been undermined by the events which have ensued in Kosovo since the Yugoslav surrender. Subsequent investigation has shown that Serb atrocities against the Albanians, while they did take place, were grossly exaggerated in order to provide a suitable pretext for war. Meanwhile the Albanian KLA has launched its own equally brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Serb minority, which has been largely expelled from Kosovo.

The claim of humanitarianism has been refuted from another source—in documents released by the American government itself, in the annual State Department review of human rights violations worldwide. In lengthy, country-by-country reports, the same agency which spearheaded the propaganda barrage against Yugoslavia details charges mass repression against many of the closest American allies.

These reports demonstrate irrefutably, out of its own mouth, that the American government is a well-informed, knowing collaborator in some of the worst atrocities being perpetrated against oppressed peoples around the world, arming and financing governments which engage in ethnic cleansing, the forced removal of the population of villages and entire regions, and mass murder.

We have selected four of these reports for careful review. All four countries—Turkey, Sri Lanka, Israel and Colombia—have governments considered friendly by Washington. As a result there will be no bombs dropped on their capital cities and no magazine covers with mug shots of their presidents, although the crimes committed by these regimes put Milosevic in the shade.

The following segment on Colombia is the final part in the series.

Colombia is strategically situated as the only South American country with coastlines on both the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea. The former Spanish colony has a population of 39 million and is nearly three times the size of Montana. The country is rich in natural resources such as petroleum (3.5 percent of the world's total), natural gas, iron ore, nickel, gold, copper and emeralds. It has 14 percent of the world's coal reserves.

Vast sections of these rich mineral resources are under the control of large multinationals such as Shell, Gulf, British Petroleum, Chevron, PetroCanada, Amoco and Occidental Petroleum. Any discovery on their behalf automatically gives the multinationals one-half ownership, while the Colombian government is restricted to purchasing the other half from them.

Colombia has been wracked by civil war over the last 40 years, with various governments fighting against thousands of guerrillas and, in doing so, financing and arming up to 500 right-wing paramilitary groups. Government and paramilitary forces openly collaborate and are indicted by the State Department report for responsibility in a widespread campaign of terror organized from the highest offices of the political, military and judicial establishments of Colombia. The "Colombia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998," was issued February 26, 1999 by the department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. The report says:

"The Government continued to face a serious challenge to its control over the national territory, as long standing and widespread internal armed conflict and rampant violence—both criminal and political—persisted. The principal participants were government security forces, paramilitary groups, guerrillas, and narcotics traffickers.

"In some locations on a few occasions the army attacked and captured members of illegal paramilitary groups; in others members of the security forces collaborated with such groups, and several general officers were under investigation during the year for arming and sharing intelligence with such groups. Although their record showed some improvement, the armed forces and the police committed numerous, serious violations of human rights throughout the year.

"The Government's human rights record remained poor; there was some improvement in several areas, but serious problems remain. Government forces continued to commit numerous, serious abuses, including extrajudicial killings, but at a level below that of previous years. The authorities rarely brought officers of the security forces and the police charged with human rights offenses to justice."

The scale of the killing in Colombia dwarfs that in Kosovo, while the forced removal of people—almost entirely imposed by the government, not the guerrillas—is roughly equivalent. But there has been no government and press campaign to portray President Andres Pastrana as the "Hitler of the Andes." On the contrary, the American media has begun to give greater attention to Colombia as a country where the American military might have to intervene on the side of the government, not the insurgents. The State Department report continues:

"The National Institute for Forensic Medicine stated in a preliminary report that at least 19,665 murders occurred during the year ... a final homicide rate of 60 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. The police and the Prosecutor General's office have insufficient resources to investigate most killings adequately. In 1996 the Superior Council of the Judiciary reported that 74 percent of all crimes go unreported, and between 97 and 98 percent of all crimes go unpunished. The 1996 Government Commission on Public Spending placed the impunity rate for all crimes at 99.5 percent.

"The cycle of violence involving government forces, paramilitary groups, and guerrillas resulted in the deaths of 2,000 to 3,000 persons; according to one non governmental organization, during the first 9 months

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of the year in cases in which the perpetrator was identified credibly, government forces committed at least 21 extrajudicial killings in the context of the internal conflict and in other actions, paramilitary groups committed at least 573, and guerrillas at least 160. Violence and instability in rural areas displaced 300,000 civilians from their homes during the year, more than any other similar period during the past decade. The total number of internally displaced citizens during 1995-98 probably exceeded 750,000."

The government of Pastrana's predecessor, Ernesto Samper, presided over the bulk of the forced displacements, while taking little responsibility for the subsequent suffering. According to the State Department, a Colombian government agency estimated that some 65 percent of these displacements became permanent:

"The Samper Government's response to the needs of the displaced population was inadequate, and by its own estimate reached only 10 percent of the displaced population. Most displaced citizens receiving government assistance received it for only 90 days. Conditions at the Government's two camps for displaced persons, at Pavarando and Turbo, were poor and unhygienic; health care is poor and there are few educational or employment opportunities.... Thousands of displaced persons also fled to Panama, Ecuador, and Venezuela, where they usually were denied refugee status, treated as illegal immigrants, and denied protection or assistance."

Colombia is the third largest foreign recipient of US military aid, after Israel and Egypt, despite a record of human rights violations by its military forces which even the State Department concedes is abysmal:

"The military judiciary convicted 76 security force members, including 3 police officers and 1 army officer, during the year, including some for human rights violations. Those courts convicted 29 of homicide, 41 of assault, 4 of deprivation of liberty, 1 of abuse of authority, and 1 of rape.

"However, the Ministry of Defense reported neither the nature of sentences in the 76 cases nor the circumstances of the crimes.... The Penal Code authorizes restriction to base as an acceptable substitute for imprisonment when military jails or prisons are unavailable."

The Colombian government has admitted its role in only a handful of the thousands of deaths perpetrated by soldiers and right-wing paramilitary squads:

"In July just before leaving office, President Samper publicly and formally recognized state responsibility for the deaths of some 50 citizens in 3 massacres and 2 extrajudicial killings that occurred during 1991-93.... Despite the President's statement, military courts had already absolved those army and police personnel investigated of any responsibility for the killings....

"The other 4 cases for which President Samper accepted state responsibility are the December 1991 massacre of 20 Paez Indians by the police at Caloto, Cauca; the November 1992 killing of 10 persons in Medellin's Villatina neighborhood by police officers; the April 1992 murders of Faride Herrera and Oscar Ivan Andrade by members of the army and the police; and the June 1993 killing of a youth, Roison Mora Rubiano, by members of the army.

"On March 31, an anonymous civil court judge sentenced five police and army officers.... The officers had been charged with terrorism and complicity in the November 1988 paramilitary massacre of a group of 49 people and the injury of 56 others."

Colombian military personnel have received training in the United States or in US military schools in Panama. The United States has provided equipment to the Colombian military through the military assistance program and foreign military sales. During the period 1988-95, the United States provided approximately $691 million in assistance to Colombia. In 1996, US assistance totaled $73.9 million.

It is estimated that up to 54 percent of forced displacement of civilians is due to the terror campaigns of paramilitary forces who alongside the Colombian military are responsible for social genocide. The State Department report gives details:

"Vigilante and paramilitary groups that engaged in 'social cleansing'—the killing of street children, prostitutes, homosexuals, and others deemed socially undesirable—continued to be a serious problem.... Throughout the country, paramilitary groups murdered, tortured, and threatened civilians suspected of sympathizing with guerrillas in an orchestrated campaign to terrorize them into fleeing their homes, thereby depriving guerrillas of civilian support....

"The paramilitary groups centered their actions in selective killings, intimidation, and the forced displacement of persons not directly involved in the hostilities. They targeted teachers, labor leaders, community activists, mayors, town council members, and peasants whom they accused of supporting the leftist guerrillas.

"Credible allegations of cooperation with paramilitary groups, including instances of both silent support and direct collaboration by members of the armed forces, in particular the army, continued. There were tacit arrangements between local military commanders and paramilitary groups in some regions, and paramilitary groups operated freely in some areas that were under military control. The authorities assigned two senior officers with links to paramilitary groups to top leadership positions.

"Paramilitary groups continued to target and kill judicial and criminal investigative employees for their efforts to enforce the rule of law ... the number of killings of Prosecutor General's office employees grew during the last 2 years to 30; in the Medellin office alone 7 were killed between January and June.... CINEP reported that paramilitary groups were responsible for 573 extrajudicial killings.

"On November 7, the authorities found the skeletons of 25 children in a common grave near Pereira, Risaralda department. Forensics experts concluded that the children had been murdered. Some observers speculated that the killings may have been the result of a social cleansing campaign."

Like most countries, Colombia's constitution and laws prohibit torture. But these strictures have no effect on the conduct of the security forces when someone has the misfortune to fall into their hands as a "suspected" guerrilla or supporter of the guerrillas. The State Department report concedes: "reports of incidents of police and military torture or mistreatment of detainees continued. Of the 140 investigations of security force members completed by members of the human rights unit of the Attorney General's office between January and July, 108 investigations involved allegations of torture committed in previous years.

"The Office of the Attorney General received 119 complaints of torture during the year; they reported investigating 462 cases of torture committed by the police, DAS, army, prison officials, and other agents of the State between June 1995 to October 1996."

A Colombian government investigation attributed 41 of 42 cases of murder to paramilitary groups. An independent non-governmental organization, CPDH, "reported that 5,429 persons were threatened with murder between January and June. The NGO reported that nearly half were public school teachers."

Such is the barbaric state of the country's prison system that the La Modelo prison had the highest incidence of homicide of any "neighborhood" in Bogota, the country's capital. There were 150 murders in the country's 168 prisons during the year. According to the US State Department:

"Prison conditions are generally harsh.... Severe overcrowding, and dangerous sanitary and health conditions remained serious problems. In December 1997, a visiting IACHR mission declared that the living conditions in Bogota's La Picota prison constituted 'cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of the inmates.' According to the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners, a majority of prisoners' food was provided by outside, private sources. The nation's 168 prisons and jails

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held nearly 45,000 inmates at year's end, 59 percent more than their planned capacity. In a number of the nation's largest prisons, the overcrowding was severe. Medellin's Bellavista prison, the nation's largest, was built to house 1,700 inmates; in December 1997 it housed more than 5,100 inmates. Bogota's La Modelo prison and the Palmira prison outside Cali both held more than 250 percent of their designed capacity."

The judicial system not only protects the murderous activities of military and paramilitary forces, it is also weighed down by a civilian judiciary system that has a backlog of a staggering 3.5 million cases and 150,000 outstanding arrest warrants:

"The use of 'faceless' prosecutors, judges, and witnesses, under cover of anonymity for security reasons, continued in cases involving kidnapping, extortion, narcotics trafficking, terrorism, and in several hundred high profile cases involving human rights violations. Human rights groups accuse these courts of violating fundamental rights of due process, including the right to a public trial."

Trials involving charges against soldiers and officers are particularly liable to manipulation:

"The Superior Judicial Council assigned most cases involving high-level military personnel to the military courts, where convictions in human rights-related cases were the rare exception.... On October 1, the Superior Judicial Council determined that Brigadier General Fernando Millan Perez's alleged organization of a paramilitary group constituted an act of service and therefore turned General Millan's case over to the military judiciary for prosecution....

"In cases where military officers were tried, convicted, and sentenced for human rights violations, they generally did not serve out prison terms and in some cases remained on active military duty."

The Colombian authorities systematically intimidate and murder those in the media and human right's organizations that threaten to carry out any exposition of the government's abuse of civilians:

"Both Colombian and international journalists typically work in an atmosphere of threats and intimidation. Fearing for their safety, journalists often refrain from publishing or airing stories counter to the interests of paramilitary groups, guerrillas, or narcotics traffickers. Unknown assailants murdered at least 13 journalists during the year, although not all the murders apparently were related to the journalists' work.... According to Pais Libre, 16 journalists were kidnapped during the year. Most of the incidents appeared to have been related to journalists' work and aimed at intimidation."

"The human rights community came under intense pressure during the year. Human Rights Watch/Americas cited a 'shocking record' of killings of human rights defenders. Human rights monitors were subject to a systematic campaign of intimidation, harassment, and violence. Human Rights Watch also reported that 6 human rights defenders were killed in the first 10 months of the Year ... in addition, many human rights workers fled the country for their own safety."

The brutal measures carried out by the Colombian military and the death squads are in the main directed against the working class and peasantry. The violent suppression of any form of opposition to the inhuman conditions faced by most is to ensure that the country's vast mineral resourses are freely exploited by the large landowners and multinational firms. The General Secretary of the Federation of Petroleum Workers, Pedro Galindo, claims that the country's largest private army, 5,000 forces, operates in the oil field controlled by the Texas Petroleum Company. The private army was trained by ex-officials of the Israeli and British armies who were contracted by a vice minister in the government. The narco-traffickers give them logistical help, and the government army gives the private army its weapons—all this occurs in a private field of Texaco.

"In May the International Labor Organization (ILO) expressed its serious concern at allegations of murders, forced disappearances, death threats, and other acts of violence against trade union officials and members. The ILO documented more than 300 murders of trade unionists during 1995-98. The ILO harshly criticized the Government for failing, since November 1996, to provide it with information on a single case of detention, trial, and conviction of anyone responsible for the murder of unionists ... more than 10 percent of all victims of politically motivated homicides during the year were public school teachers."

"The Government has not addressed other ILO criticisms of the Labor Code. In 1993 the ILO had complained about the following provisions of the law: the requirement that government officials be present at assemblies convened to vote on a strike call; the legality of firing union organizers from jobs in their trades once 6 months have passed following a strike or dispute ... the prohibition of strikes in a wide range of public services that are not necessarily essential; various restrictions on the right to strike; the power of the Minister of Labor and the President to intervene in disputes through compulsory arbitration when a strike is declared illegal; and the power to dismiss trade union officers involved in an unlawful strike."

"Labor leaders throughout the country continued to be targets of attacks by paramilitary groups, guerrillas, narcotics traffickers, and their own union rivals.... In December the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions announced in Geneva that at least 50 union members had been killed because of their union activities during 1998."

The State Department's human rights report on Colombia is an indictment of successive governments that have utilized the ongoing civil war to carry out a campaign of murder and terror against the most impoverished sections of society. It is also an indictment of successive American governments which have served as paymasters, armorers and advisers to the rulers in Bogota.

In August 1997 President Clinton waived a 20-year ban on selling advanced weapons systems to Latin American countries, a restriction imposed by the Carter administration on the grounds of the rampant human rights violations in the region, where military dictatorships—installed with US backing—ruled in nearly every country. Clinton claimed that the restoration of civilian rule in the hemisphere meant an end to human rights abuses.

This decision has allowed the US to sell or license arms sales worth $440 million to the Colombian government, which uses these weapons against the civilian population in order to protect the strategic economic and political interests of the country's ruling elite and of the large transnational firms that dominate the economy.

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