

# Clinton pushes \$1.6 billion military plan for Colombia

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The Clinton administration last week intensified its campaign to win a massive increase in funding for US-directed military operations in Colombia.

Combined with military aid already delivered in the current fiscal year, the total in US funds proposed for Colombia's civil war would amount to nearly \$1.6 billion over two years. Fully 75 percent of the aid is to be in the form of military equipment, training and funding for the country's security forces. The lion's share of the aid will be funneled into the creation of new mobile battalions and equipping them with attack helicopters for use against the Colombian guerrillas of the FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

Directed against what the US has dubbed "narco-guerrillas," the military aid package represents a bid by Washington to apply an El Salvador-style solution to both cocaine trafficking from Colombia and the country's decades-long civil war. The inevitable consequences of this policy will be the deepening of a conflict that has turned more than a million Colombians into refugees and a proliferation of the death squads that have claimed at least 35,000 lives over the past decade.

Barry R. McCaffrey, a retired general who is serving as the White House director of drug policy, and General Charles Wilhelm, chief of the US Southern Command, led the administration's drive for the military aid package, testifying before a Congressional subcommittee on drug policy on February 15.

General Wilhelm said that the quadrupling of military aid to Colombia—which already receives the third largest infusion of arms funding from Washington, trailing only Israel and Egypt—"will change in subtle ways" the functioning of US military personnel in Colombia. He insisted, however, that the number of US soldiers on the ground in the South American country would not rise above 250.

There are already at least 180 servicemen deployed on an average day in Colombia, many of them involved in training the new rapid-deployment battalions. As in El Salvador's war in the 1980s, the Pentagon can easily conceal the real size of the US force involved in the conflict by rotating troops in and out on "training missions" and other ostensibly temporary assignments.

Wilhelm added that the Pentagon would assign a general to head the US Military Group in Colombia. The colonel who had previously headed the unit was recently transferred out after his wife was charged and ultimately convicted of smuggling cocaine from Bogota to New York.

"We won't allow the US presence to get out of control," the Southern Command chief assured the Congressmen.

In advance of the hearing and as part of the Clinton administration's attempt to ram through the funding package, the Central Intelligence

Agency issued a report in which it nearly tripled an earlier estimate of cocaine production in Colombia for 1998. It further claimed that output rose by almost 20 percent last year.

McCaffrey, speaking on the aid package during a visit to Mexico, painted a bleak picture of the situation in Colombia. "We have a drug emergency in Colombia," the White House drug war chief said. "The violence is unbelievable, they've lost 40 percent of their land area. The suffering is enormous. The economy is terrible."

The aid package, which is larger than the amount which the US provided for El Salvador during the bloodiest stage of the counterinsurgency campaign there, is expected to win Congressional approval. Leaders of the Republican majority in the House have demanded a stepped-up war against the "narco-guerrillas" and have directed their fire at the Clinton administration for not having acted sooner.

Curiously, amid the grim predictions accompanying the demands for a military buildup in Washington, negotiators for the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas report that they are closer than ever before to reaching a settlement to Latin America's longest armed conflict. Over the past week, negotiators for both sides have conducted a joint five-nation European tour, seeking support for a negotiated settlement.

"We have advanced more than in the past 40 years, but peace cannot be achieved in one day or two," said Victor Ricardo, following a week of secret talks with FARC leaders in Sweden. Colombian President Andres Pastrana initiated talks one year ago, having made pursuit of a negotiated settlement his main campaign pledge. It is widely believed that pouring a billion dollars into the Colombian military's coffers will effectively scuttle this effort, as a military solution becomes more profitable for the regime.

The first points on the agenda of the talks in Stockholm were reportedly economic development and agricultural policy in Colombia. The FARC leadership has cast aside its previous socialist pretensions in the negotiations, proposing a series of agrarian reform measures to assist Colombia's small farmers in switching to new cash crops as an alternative to the profitable cultivation of coca.

This aspect of the problem is virtually ignored in the US anti-drug campaign. While Washington poured nearly \$300 million in military aid into the country last year, along with another \$70 million for a crop fumigation program, it offered just \$7 million in assistance to cover not only alternative agricultural development, but also judicial and police reforms. US aid to assist the nearly 1.5 million refugees displaced by the conflict since 1985 came to just \$2 million.

The disparities between military and economic funding will only be exacerbated by the new package, which is directed entirely toward a

full-scale military campaign aimed at seizing two states in southern Colombia—Putamayo and Caqueta—where much of drug cultivation and processing takes place and which are effectively under the control of the guerrillas.

Washington's indifference to the social roots of the cocaine trade in Colombia is of a piece with the "drug war" in the US itself. Drug use has been criminalized, and hundreds of thousands of poor and minority workers and youth subjected to lengthy incarceration on petty narcotics charges, while the impoverished social conditions which gave rise to the cocaine epidemic continue to fester.

Under the Leahy Law, legislation backed by the Clinton administration in 1996, the US is barred from providing aid or training to military units directly involved in human rights violations. The creation of the new "counternarcotics" battalions allows Washington to skirt this prohibition in a country where the military has been broadly linked to massacres and assassinations, both directly and through right-wing paramilitary squads.

Scores of poor peasants were reported killed in a recent offensive by the paramilitaries in the rural area of Flor del Monte, about 300 miles north of Bogota. Witnesses reported entire villages burned to the ground and the bodies of their inhabitants left amid the ruins, riddled with bullets or their throats slit. The army claimed it was unable to reach the region because of snipers.

According to a report by the Colombian Commission of Jurists, the paramilitaries were responsible for 78 percent of the atrocities carried out against the country's civilian population last year. It blamed the guerrillas for 20 percent and state security forces for 2 percent.

Human rights groups, however, charge that the army and the paramilitaries often act as direct accomplices. In a December 1999 report, Human Rights Watch cited the collaboration between the Medellin-based Fourth Brigade and a paramilitary unit commanded by Carlos Castano. Under a standing arrangement, "paramilitaries killed those suspected of supporting guerrillas, then delivered the corpses to the army. In a process known as 'legalization,' the army then claimed the dead as guerrillas killed in combat while the paramilitaries received their pay in army weapons."

In another report issued in 1998, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights said "witnesses frequently stated that massacres were perpetrated by members of the armed forces passing themselves off as paramilitaries."

While the FARC has undoubtedly gained considerable resources by collecting "war taxes" from coca cultivators and processors in areas under its control, the right-wing paramilitary units enjoy a far closer relationship with the drug mafia. One of the largest and most notorious of the paramilitary groups, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), was formally outlawed in 1989 after government investigations revealed that much of it was under the effective control of then-Medellin cartel boss Pablo Escobar. During that period, the drug mafia brought in mercenaries from Israel and Britain to train the death squads. They have since gotten additional support from landowners and businessmen who have been targeted for extortion and kidnapping by some of the guerrilla groups.

The top echelons of Colombia's military and police together with senior government bureaucrats and leading figures in the country's financial and corporate elite have likewise been linked to the trafficking of cocaine and the laundering of the immense amounts of money generated by its sale, particularly in the US.

Washington has shown little interest in waging a "war" against these privileged social layers who control the cocaine trade and reap the

vast bulk of its profits. Ultimately, it must depend upon them to defend a social system in which 75 percent of the population lives in poverty and structural adjustment programs demanded by the International Monetary Fund extract more than a third of the national budget to service debts to the Wall Street banks.

In preparing a wider war in Colombia, Washington is pursuing definite economic and strategic interests, which have little to do with the purported aim of suppressing the cocaine trade. Just as the US invoked an alleged threat of Soviet- or Cuban-backed subversion to justify its support for military dictatorships throughout the region in the 1960s and 1970s, so today it is using the "war on drugs" as a justification for building up the US military presence in the region and building up Latin America's armed forces.

Having dismantled its string of military bases in Panama, the Pentagon has used the Colombian conflict as the pretext for setting up a new military intelligence base in Manta, on Ecuador's Pacific coast. Meanwhile, the US has promised additional military assistance to Colombia's neighboring states for the supposed purpose of containing the spread of the conflict across national borders.

In the short term, this policy will likely result in a military response by the governments of these countries to refugees attempting to flee an intensified war in Colombia. Its more long-term effect will be to accelerate the drift towards militarism and dictatorship, which has already found diverse and contradictory expressions from Fujimori's militarized regime in Peru, to the election in Venezuela of former coup leader Hugo Chavez, to the recent coup attempt in Ecuador.

Driving this process are irrepressible social tensions in a region where the gulf between wealth and poverty is among the largest in the world.



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