

Clinton begins final push for passage of Colombia aid bill

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In a speech May 2 to the Council of the Americas, a lobbying group for corporations with investments in Latin America, President Bill Clinton called on Congress to approve a huge \$1.6 billion plan to boost military and economic aid to Colombia. The measure would set the stage for broader US military intervention throughout the Andean region of South America.

The United States would make the largest contribution to the \$7.5 billion "Plan Colombia" drawn up by Colombian President Andres Pastrana. European and other Latin American countries would be expected to contribute lesser amounts once the US portion is approved.

The House of Representatives passed an aid bill in March, by a lopsided bipartisan margin. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, in a face-to-face meeting with Pastrana in Washington two weeks ago, agreed to bring the legislation to a vote in May. A spokesman for Lott said only procedural issues were holding up passage of the bill, which would make Colombia the third largest recipient of US military aid, after Israel and Egypt.

In his speech Tuesday, Clinton portrayed the conflict in Colombia between the Pastrana government and several guerrilla groups as a struggle for democracy against terrorism and drug trafficking. He warned in apocalyptic terms of the possible consequences of the collapse of the Colombian regime, saying, "Make no mistake about it. If the oldest democracy in South America can be torn down, so can others."

Clinton told the assembled corporate executives and think tank officials that defeat of the guerrillas in Colombia was essential for the realization of a Free Trade Area of the Americas that would stretch from Alaska to Argentina by 2005. "We have to win in Colombia. We have to win the fight for the free trade

area in the Americas," he said. "We have to prove that freedom and free markets go hand in hand."

Reuters News Agency described the purpose of the aid package in unusually blunt terms, in a dispatch reporting Clinton's speech. The goal, the agency said, was to "dent the rebels' military power and force them to moderate radical socialist demands at year-old peace talks and to negotiate a swift end to their uprising that has claimed more than 35,000 lives in just 10 years."

The political goals of the two main guerrilla groups, the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), can hardly be characterized as socialist. Both groups espouse an eclectic ideological mixture of Maoism, Castroism and nationalism. But the long-running conflict is clearly seen by Washington both as an obstacle to its plans to establish a US-dominated hemispheric trading bloc, and a significant strategic threat.

The latter issue concerns not only Colombia's key geographical position as the land bridge between Central America and South America, bordering on Panama, but its importance in US oil supply calculations. The oil factor was spelled out most explicitly by Paul Coverdell, a Republican senator from Georgia, in an op-ed commentary published in the *Washington Post* last week. He wrote:

"The destabilization of Colombia directly affects bordering Venezuela, now generally regarded as our largest oil supplier. In fact, the oil picture in Latin America is strikingly similar to that of the Middle East, except that Colombia provides us more oil today than Kuwait did then. This crisis, like the one in Kuwait, threatens to spill over into many nations, all of which are allies ...

"Let me restate the crisis: We import as much oil from this hemisphere as we do from the Middle East;

more Colombians than Kosovars have been forced to flee their homes; 35,000 Colombians are dead. That's why the situation demands our immediate attention."

From 1990 to 1999 Colombia's oil production rose by 78 percent, the bulk of it going to the United States. Colombia is the seventh largest US oil supplier, while neighboring Venezuela is number one. Colombia's proven oil reserves are tiny compared to Venezuela's 73 billion barrels, but its unexplored reserves are believed to be substantial, as much as 25 billion barrels.

It is these material interests, not concerns for "democracy", which impel US ruling circles toward military intervention in the region, in which all five nations—Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia—are increasingly wracked by political instability and violence.

As for Clinton's remarks on terrorism, it is a well-established fact that the principal terrorist force in Colombia is not the guerrillas, but right-wing paramilitaries closely linked to the military. According to reports by human rights groups, right-wing death squads accounted for 78 percent of all human rights violations and political murders last year.

A United Nations report released April 14 said that members of the military participated in the paramilitary groups, organizing massacres and spreading death threats. "The security forces also failed to take action, and this undoubtedly enabled the paramilitary groups to achieve their exterminating objectives," the report added.

The threat of right-wing terror is so pervasive that President Pastrana's chief representative in talks with the FARC and ELN, Victor G. Ricardo, resigned April 26 after receiving numerous death threats from the paramilitaries for alleged concessions to the guerrillas. Ricardo stepped down two days after announcing the terms of an agreement with the ELN, the second armed guerrilla group to sign a cease-fire with the regime.

Under the agreement the government will pull troops out of 1,800 square miles, comprising three counties in the states of Bolivar and Antioquia. But the ELN, which has an estimated 5,000 men under arms, agreed to much more restrictive terms than those accorded FARC in the latter's base area in southwest Colombia. It agreed not to impose its own government in the demilitarized zone or to use the zone as a base for more extensive military operations.

The accord also establishes an "international verification commission" of four or five nations to assure that both sides are abiding by the agreement, the first time that outside countries have been given a formal role in the civil war and the first time that countries other than the United States have been involved in any way. Press reports mentioned Norway, Spain, Venezuela and Germany as likely candidates for the commission, as well as Cuba, which has past ties with the ELN leadership.

Pastrana announced the agreement in a speech to the nation in which he declared, "In no way will there be any impact on the rights and obligations established for all residents in accordance with the national Constitution and the reigning legal order. That means all of the civil authorities established in the area will continue in the exercise of their functions with no alteration whatsoever."

Colombian radio networks broadcast a parallel statement by Nicolás Rodríguez, the ELN's top commander, pledging "to take serious steps toward the construction of a solution to this conflict by methods other than war."

The likelihood, however, is not peace but a more irregular and savage form of civil war, since the right-wing paramilitary groups have heavily infiltrated the demilitarized area, encouraged by local landlords. Moreover, the ELN zone is far more important strategically to the Colombian military, since it sits astride the country's main waterway, the Magdalena River, and highways leading from Bogota to the coast. The area is also rich in gold and oil, and is adjacent the oil center of Barrancabermeja, home of the country's main oil refinery.



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