

US Congress approves \$1.3 billion military package for Colombia

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With Congressional approval of a \$1.3 billion aid package to Colombia, the US government is preparing a major escalation of its military intervention into Latin America's longest-running civil war. While the massive aid package has been sold as part of the "war on drugs," Washington's principal aims are geopolitical and economic.

"Plan Colombia," as the intervention has been dubbed, will pour approximately \$2 million a day into the coffers of the Colombian armed forces over the next two years. The money will buy the Colombian army a fleet of new attack helicopters—either 30 of the more advanced Blackhawks, or 60 Huey choppers—and finance the formation of three new battalions, to be trained by US Green Berets and equipped with American weapons. These 2,800 new soldiers will then be unleashed in the dense jungles of the southwestern state of Putumayo, the stronghold of the guerrilla movement FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

President Clinton hailed the Senate vote, declaring it a demonstration of US commitment "to fighting the drug wars in Colombia, and to strengthening the oldest democracy in Latin America." Retired general Barry McCaffrey, the Clinton administration's drug czar, called it "a crucial step ... that will greatly enhance counter-drug efforts in Colombia."

The dramatic increase in US involvement is expected to have its most immediate impact in the scuttling of attempts by the Colombian government of President Andres Pastrana to reach a negotiated settlement with the two main guerrilla groups, FARC and the ELN, or National Liberation Army. Branding both groups as "narco-terrorists," Washington is determined to seek a military settlement to the complex social and economic problems that have given rise to Colombia's 40-year-

old civil war and the growth of the drug trade.

Shortly after his election two years ago, Pastrana floated a proposal for "Plan Colombia," promoting it as a Marshall Plan for southern Colombia, based on the introduction of new economic and social programs to provide an alternative to coca cultivation and drug trafficking. Little remains of that proposal outside of the funding that last year made Colombia the third largest recipient of US military aid in the world.

The US intervention will have disastrous implications for the Andean region as a whole. While voting down amendments that would have shifted military funds to pay for social programs and alternative crop development in Colombia, as well as drug treatment efforts in the US itself, the Senate approved emergency relief for 10,000 people whom the plan projects will be displaced by the military campaign.

This is a vast underestimation of the real impact of the redoubled "drug war." The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has already warned Ecuador, which shares a border with Putumayo, to prepare for upwards of 30,000 people fleeing the military campaign.

At least 35,000 people have died in the civil conflict over the past decade and the death toll from civil strife since 1948 is estimated at 300,000. More than 1.5 million, mostly peasants, have been driven from their homes. Some 200,000 emigrate each year, with 336,000 applying for visas at the US Embassy in Bogota in 1999 alone.

The suffering of the civil war has been intensified by a deepening economic recession gripping most of Latin America. At least one in five Colombian workers is jobless and economic output shrank by more than 5 percent last year.

Much of the US aid is expected to find its way into the hands of right-wing paramilitary outfits that act as

enforcers for Colombia's ruling class and the multinational corporations, waging a dirty war of massacres in the countryside and assassinations of union activists, peasant leaders, journalists and human rights investigators.

Repeated investigations by the Colombian government itself over the past three years have uncovered evidence of senior army officers collaborating intimately with the Colombian United Self-Defense (AUC) led by Carlos Castano. According to one study, 18 brigade level army units are directly linked to the paramilitary activity, providing the right-wing bands with weapons and ammunition, using helicopters to supply them and coordinating joint military operations.

Despite the fact that the right-wing paramilitaries (not to mention the army itself) have been linked even more directly to narcotics trafficking than the guerrillas, there is no indication in the proposals advanced for Plan Colombia of any intention to curb their activities. The paramilitaries, backed by Colombian security forces, have been blamed for at least 70 percent of the country's human rights violations, including the bulk of the 402 massacres reported last year.

One of the administration's point-men for the Colombian escalation is the State Department's Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering, who last February declared that Plan Colombia would contribute to “fostering peace, increasing the rule of law, improving human rights, expanding economic development ... and giving the Colombian people greater access to the benefits of democratic institutions.”

Pickering was Ronald Reagan's ambassador to El Salvador during the 1980s, where he helped direct a savage counterinsurgency campaign that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of peasants, workers and students.

Alongside Plan Colombia, the US is funneling tens of millions of dollars in new military aid into Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia in the name of the “drug war.” This regional effort has as its strategic aim the bolstering of US domination and the interests of US multinational banks and corporations in the region.

Meanwhile, Washington, with the assistance of Prime Minister Tony Blair's government in Britain, is attempting to get the European Union (EU) to foot a

large part of the bill for the Colombian intervention. Senior EU and US officials met in London last week to discuss European backing for the plan.

Britain has emerged as a leading weapons supplier to the Colombian regime, with 72 licenses for arms exports to the country issued by London in the last three years. British machine guns, thermal imaging equipment, semiautomatic pistols and other hardware have been flowing into the country. Other EU members, however, including France and Italy, have expressed skepticism about being dragged into what some describe as a new “Vietnam War in Latin America” at a time when the European powers are increasingly pursuing their own interests in the region.



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