

Clinton visit inaugurates Colombian intervention

Wider Andean war feared

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President Bill Clinton's eight-hour visit to the Caribbean port city of Cartagena August 30 marks the initiation of "Plan Colombia," the blueprint for an open-ended US military intervention on the South American continent.

A week before the presidential trip, Clinton authorized a \$1.3 billion military aid package for the government of President Andres Pastrana, brushing aside demands by Congress that the Colombian government carry out measures that would supposedly protect human rights. These included provisions for the suspension of military personnel charged with "gross violations of human rights," and the prosecution of right-wing paramilitary groups that are responsible for widespread massacres and assassinations in Colombia.

"We think it's necessary to get the money out now," said a senior State Department official, defending Clinton's decision to invoke national security needs in waiving the human rights requirements. "We've already seen the difficulty down there with the program because of delays."

More than \$1 billion of the aid will go directly to the Colombian armed forces, in the form of new military equipment, US "advisers" and training. This will include the delivery of 18 Black Hawk and 42 Huey 2 Helicopters. US Green Berets will be sent to train three new Colombian counterinsurgency battalions.

The Colombian intervention is being carried out under the pretext of the "war on drugs." The new US-trained units will have the mission of wresting a swath of territory comprising nearly half of the country from the control of guerrillas to ensure that eradication efforts aimed against the cultivation of coca—the plant that is refined into cocaine—proceed without interference. Powerful herbicides are then to be sprayed on the coca fields from small aircraft. Scientists warn the impact of these chemicals, both on the population in these areas and on the country's ecology, could prove catastrophic.

The escalation of the "war on drugs" being prepared in Colombia will clearly be directed at the most oppressed and impoverished sector of the population that makes its living from the cultivation of the coca plant. It is a war that will kill, terrorize and chemically poison thousands upon thousands of

poor peasants, driving them from their land and depriving them of a means of subsistence.

Those who make the super profits from the drug trade—the bankers who launder the money and the major exporters—will adapt themselves to whatever changes the war creates in business conditions, just as they have in the past. Ironically, the growth of Colombia's role in cocaine trafficking is itself the product of earlier US efforts to curb the drug trade in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.

Clinton has touted the nonmilitary component of the US aid package, claiming that Washington has no intention of becoming directly involved in Colombia's 40-year-old civil war. In fact, the so-called nonmilitary funds account for barely \$200,000 of the \$1.3 billion package. A large portion of these funds will go to the government and the military for "human rights training," consisting of State Department and Pentagon officials instructing Colombian officials in how best to contain and deflect criticism of the inevitable increase in bloodshed that the massive influx of US arms aid will produce.

Indeed, the days leading up to the Clinton visit have seen uninterrupted carnage on the part of Colombian soldiers and the right-wing paramilitary groups that work in collaboration and under the protection of the Colombian military.

Barely a week before the US president enacted the aid package, Colombian troops massacred six children who were on an excursion with their school class outside a village in the department of Antioquia. Several others were wounded. All of the victims were between eight and ten years old. While the army initially claimed that the children were caught in a "crossfire" between the troops and guerrillas, witnesses said there were no rebels present and the only shots came from the soldiers.

On August 24, a massacre of at least 25 people by right-wing paramilitaries was reported in the municipality of Puerto Concordia in southeastern Colombia. The following day, the bodies of six farm laborers were found by the roadside in the eastern department of Sucre. Scrawled on the vehicle in which the workers were traveling were the words "guerrillas out" and "death to outlaws."

Finally, on August 27, a group of 60 armed men from the main rightist paramilitary band laid siege to a residential area south of the port city of Cienaga, less than 100 miles from Cartagena. Dragging 20 people from their homes in the early morning hours, they executed 10 with gunshots to the head and kidnapped another four. The paramilitary leaders describe this type of operation as a “social cleansing.”

One by one the victims were forced to their knees and shot. Among the dead—who ranged in age from 20 to 54—were farm workers, a nurse, a butcher, a fruit vendor and a janitor.

The Clinton administration's claims notwithstanding, the influx of huge amounts of US military equipment along with several hundred “trainers” and “advisers” will inevitably mean a dramatic escalation of the country's civil conflict and a vast increase in this grim slaughter of unarmed peasants, workers and youth.

The paramilitaries, led by a former US-trained Colombian army officer, have received the bulk of their weapons and ample logistical support from the country's military. While the armed rightist thugs are themselves deeply involved in the country's cocaine industry, they have also enjoyed intimate ties with Washington. According to one long-time Colombian agent of the US Drug Enforcement Agency, the DEA attempted to negotiate a pact with paramilitary leader Carlos Castano in which the rightist death squads would have received US weapons and support in return for helping capture and extradite 200 drug traffickers to face trial in the US.

Castano has publicly voiced his support for “Plan Colombia,” clearly confident that a substantial share of the US aid will wind up in the hands of his forces, which have grown rapidly in the last several years with the backing of powerful Colombian business interests.

The US has pledged to limit its presence in the country to 500 military “advisors” and another 300 civilian military contractors, but the aid agreement includes a provision—termed “the empire clause” by the plan's critics—that allows the dispatch of more troops in the event there is “evidence of aggression.” In other words, should those who are the targets of the military aid choose to resist, and should US soldiers become the targets of their wrath, the conditions will emerge for an escalating involvement of US military forces.

The initiation of the US military aid program has drawn expressions of concern from governments in neighboring countries. Officials in Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela voiced fears that an all-out war against the guerrillas could send waves of refugees flooding across their borders and quickly regionalize the conflict. The Brazilian Foreign Ministry expressed similar worries, and warned about potential damage to the Amazon's sensitive ecosystem from extensive herbicide use. In each of these countries, the military has deployed increased forces near the Colombian border in anticipation of an escalation of the conflict.

The Clinton visit is itself emblematic of the military

aggression the Pentagon is preparing against Colombia. In planning the visit, the Colombian capital of Bogota was ruled out as far too dangerous for the US president and instead Washington chose Cartagena.

More than 5,000 members of the Colombian security forces as well as several hundred Secret Service agents are to be deployed in the city itself, while military units will be conducting operations in the surrounding rural areas to avoid any potential threat.

In an attempt to present the proper image to the US president, security forces launched a round-up of the Caribbean port's hundreds of homeless street children, taking them to a center outside of town where they are to be held until Clinton leaves. Human rights advocates described the police action as “kidnappings,” adding that most of the children had been taken against their will. Street vendors, who account for a large section of the country's informal economy, have likewise been driven from the city.

Under a security decree, all marches and demonstrations were banned from the day before Clinton's visit until the day after.

Unions and civic groups vowed to defy the order. “Whatever the decree says, we are going to carry out rallies on August 30,” said Estaban Barboza, general secretary of the local United Confederation of Labor. “And if they beat us, it will be worse for them.”

The Pastrana government has hailed the visit, hoping to use it to salvage some vestige of popular support. Initially, the Colombian authorities had planned to call a civic holiday, but US officials vetoed the idea, making it clear they want as few people on the streets as possible.

In the end, Colombia remains a society torn by class divisions and social polarization, with more than half of its 40 million people living in extreme poverty and being driven into greater misery each day by the worst depression in the country's history. While “structural adjustment” programs dictated by the International Monetary Fund and the major world banks suck out what little resources were directed towards ameliorating the desperate social conditions facing the country's majority, a thin layer of Colombian bankers and businessmen have become fabulously wealthy, many of them through their connection to the drug trade.

Whatever Washington's pretensions of waging a war on drugs and upholding human rights, the US intervention will inevitably be directed at defending the wealth and privileges of this small minority through the ruthless suppression of Colombia's workers and peasants.



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