

Colombia civil war intensifies as US escalates intervention

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The Colombian military suffered its worst setback of the year in the ongoing civil war against several peasant-based guerrilla groups, as 54 soldiers and national policemen were killed in a three-day battle earlier this month in the northwestern state of Antioquia, near the border with Panama. Almost half of the casualties came when guerrillas shot down a US-made Black Hawk helicopter with 22 soldiers on board.

The helicopter crash took place October 20 near the town of Dabeiba, about 80 miles northwest of Medellin, after the army launched an offensive into territory long controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest of the insurgent groups fighting the central government in Bogota. Three other helicopters on the same mission were riddled with gunfire but survived to return to their bases.

While a Colombian army spokesman claimed the counterinsurgency sweep had been successful, local reports said that the FARC remained in control of the major towns. The military was unable to recover the \$11.7 million helicopter and the bodies of the dead, because of the continued strength of the FARC resistance as well as the roughness of the terrain.

While maintaining intense pressure on the army position in Dabeiba, the guerrillas opened up a second front in the fighting in the northwest, overrunning the town of Bagado in Choco Province and capturing or killing the 17 policemen stationed there.

Other fighting was reported in the southern province of Putumayo, near the border with Ecuador and Peru, a jungle region which has long been dominated by the FARC. There the combat was between FARC units and right-wing paramilitary forces which have been equipped and backed by the army and by cocaine traffickers. Thousands of coca farmers have fled the fighting by crossing the border into Ecuador, and many towns and villages have been cut off from regular supplies of food,

water and fuel.

Colombian government officials had predicted rebel attempts to disrupt nationwide local elections, held October 29 amid a massive security operation, and to preempt an army offensive in the coca-growing region, which is set to begin in December. But the scale of the fighting came as a surprise, press reports indicate.

The fighting in Putumayo is particularly savage because of the involvement of the right-wing paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, whose gunmen routinely invade hospitals to execute wounded guerrillas or peasants believed to sympathize with them. FARC has replied in kind, stopping ambulances to kill wounded paramilitaries, and the Red Cross has halted operations in the area.

The conflict apparently spilled over into Ecuador October 12, when 10 oil workers were kidnapped at a production site at Tivacuno, 47 miles south of the border, and taken back into Colombia. Ecuador's Vice President Pedro Pinto declared that "the FARC have claimed that they carried out this kidnapping in retaliation for Plan Colombia"—Bogota's \$7.5 billion plan, backed by the Clinton administration in the United States, to wage war against the guerrillas.

Two incidents underscored the increasing involvement of the United States in the war. Late last month FARC issued a statement on the Internet headlined "The FARC declares United States soldiers a military target," warning US personnel against taking any direct role in military operations. On October 16 a bomb packed into a truck exploded outside a Colombian military base, damaging a US spy plane which was parked inside. The attack took place near the country's main oil field, Cano Limon, 225 miles northeast of Bogota.

Under the terms of "Plan Colombia" the Clinton administration has dispatched as many as 800 US "advisers" to work with Colombian military and police

officials against the guerrillas. The plan has been enthusiastically backed by Democrats and Republicans in Congress in the name of fighting narcotics, although both sides in the civil war are involved in the growing and processing of coca, the country's largest single crop.

Eighty percent of the \$1.3 billion US contribution to Plan Colombia is for the Colombian government's purchase of US-built weapons systems, including 60 attack helicopters, the most expensive single item. The bipartisan congressional support is linked to the sharing of the lucrative weapons contracts between Connecticut-based Sikorsky Aircraft, manufacturer of the Blackhawk, and Texas-based Bell Textron, which makes the Huey. Leading Senate Democrat Christopher Dodd of Connecticut pushed for the Blackhawk, while the Texas House delegation, which includes Republican Majority Leader Richard Arney and Majority Whip Tom DeLay, lobbied for the Huey.

Two battalions of Colombian troops have been training in the US for the offensive in the south, which is planned to begin in December after the US presidential elections. For now, US Green Beret military trainers are prohibited from going on combat missions and remain on Colombian army bases near Bogota or elsewhere outside the rebel-controlled areas.

The civil war has had a devastating impact on the civilian population, with an estimated 2 million Colombians turned into refugees during this decade, more than were displaced in Kosovo, although with little or no publicity in the international media. The majority have fled after massacres or assassinations by the right-wing paramilitaries, who are in the pay of the large landowners who want to drive out peasant farmers and clear lands for cattle raising, coca plantations or mining. Only \$22.5 million of the \$1.3 billion US aid package is earmarked for refugee assistance.

The US contribution to Plan Colombia is the biggest US military aid package to Latin America since the Reagan administration's backing for the Nicaraguan contras and the right-wing death squads in El Salvador during the 1980s. The Clinton administration has backed the government of President Andres Pastrana despite the atrocious human rights record of the police and military. On August 22 Clinton waived human-rights conditions set in the legislation approving the aid package, conceding that only one of six conditions had been met, but authorizing the aid to go forward anyway.

The Pentagon has sent Brig. Gen. Keith M. Huber, director of operations at the US Southern Command in

Miami, to Bogota to run the military side of Plan Colombia. The only US general posted to Latin America, Huber has a background in Special Forces.

The administration is also seeking to rally support for the counterinsurgency war from Colombia's neighbors—Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama. US Secretary of Defense William Cohen met with defense ministers from the region October 17 in a conference in Manaus, Brazil, in the heart of Brazil's Amazon jungle, to urge them to greater efforts.

Panama, whose army was dissolved after the US invasion in 1989, has stepped up the arming of police and deployed hundreds to the Colombia border. The government has asked for \$30 million from Washington to bolster this campaign. Brazil has launched a series of military sweeps along the Colombian border, the latest dubbed "Operation Cobra," and bought four French Cougar AS-532 helicopters to assist in the effort. Venezuela has mobilized 25,000 troops along the border, although President Hugo Chavez has been critical of both the Colombian government and the guerrillas.

Conflicts have emerged between the United States and the European Union, as the EU has refused to provide military assistance to what is viewed as a Vietnam-style counterinsurgency war. A meeting of diplomats from EU member states, held in San Jose, Costa Rica October 18, produced pledges of \$321 million in nonmilitary aid, but no weapons or military advisers for the Pastrana regime. The amount is only a quarter of the sum which Pastrana requested. One official said the EU supported a negotiated settlement between the guerrillas and the government. "The EU and member states are supporting the peace process in Colombia and not specifically the Plan Colombia, which is an American project," he said.



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