US moves towards deeper intervention in Colombia civil war

Patrick Martin
9 August 2001

There was little reporting and less commentary in the national media on the actions of the House of Representatives July 24, giving its approval to $676 million in military, social and economic aid to Colombia and six other countries in the Andean region of northwestern South America. The House approved the Bush administration's $15.2 billion foreign aid bill by a vote of 381-46, after 12 hours of debate focused largely on US policy in Colombia.

The aid package represents the second installment of "Plan Colombia," the US program of stepped-up backing for the Colombian government in the ongoing civil war with several rural-based guerrilla groups. The Clinton administration introduced Plan Colombia last year, and a government offensive against the guerrillas has been under way since January, with mixed results.

All told, the US government supplied more than $1 billion in weapons, equipment and training to Latin American armies and police in 2000, more than all the economic and development aid for the largely impoverished region.

The House cut $55 million from the Bush administration's initial request for Colombia, a reflection of uneasiness over the growing extent of the US role in that region, but it defeated efforts to cut another $100 million and transfer the funds to international medical treatment programs.

More significantly, the House by voice vote retained a ceiling of 800 on the combined US military and contractors (mainly retired military personnel) employed as advisers and technical support for the Colombian armed forces.

The Clinton administration, to win congressional support for the adoption of Plan Colombia last year, agreed to limit the total US military personnel to 500 and the number of US contractors to 300. The totals reached 200 civilians and 200 military this spring, and US officials estimated that the ceiling of 300 civilians would be reached by the end of the year, with a projected 500 contractors next year.

The Bush administration sought to eliminate the ceiling on contractors, allowing an indefinite expansion of the number of Americans employed as airplane and helicopter pilots, aircraft mechanics and in other technical specialties, as well as civilian advisers to the military and police. The House approved a compromise plan, worked out between Republican Congressman Jim Kolbe and Democrat John Conyers, to allow more than 300 civilians but retain the overall cap of 800 civilian and military personnel combined.

At a press conference in Bogota after the passage of the legislation, Ambassador Anne Patterson said that the US military advisers would be shifting to smaller and shorter but more frequent training missions. The effect will be to expand US influence in the Colombian military, with the goal of training at least one battalion in each brigade of the Colombian armed forces. With infinite cynicism, she suggested that such training would improve the human rights record of the Colombian military.

The main US army unit involved, however, the 7th Special Forces Group, was responsible for training the infamous Atlacatl Battalion in El Salvador, which carried out some of the most hideous massacres in the civil war of the 1980s. The Special Forces Group recently completed the training of more than 2,000 Colombian troops as a specialized jungle warfare brigade. These troops are now being deployed against the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the major rebel group).

The Bush administration has relabeled Plan Colombia as the "Andean Counterdrug Initiative," acknowledging its wider geographic scope—Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil are all now included—while maintaining the pretense that the intervention is aimed at reducing the flow of narcotics from the region into the United States.

The ceiling of 800 total US personnel applies only to the number in place in Colombia at any one time. It does not include hundreds more military advisers and contractors who are deployed in Ecuador, where a US-run airbase is being built near the port city of Manta; in Peru, where US civilian personnel were involved in the shoot-down of a missionary plane in April, killing a young woman and her child; and elsewhere in the region. Nor does it include thousands of American personnel outside the war zone who are engaged in logistics, telecommunications or direct operational support (the Peru plane shoot-down, for instance, was guided by a US radar station based in Vieques, Puerto Rico).

The entire region is being transformed into a zone of military operations against the guerrillas of the FARC and the ELN, two groups which have waged sporadic warfare against the Colombian government for several decades. The FARC's base is southern Colombia, particularly the province of Putumayo, along the border with Ecuador, and the Amazonian jungle region where Colombia, Peru and Brazil come together. The smaller ELN is based in north-central Colombia, in the province of Bolivar.

Successive US administrations have justified intervention in the Colombian civil war with the claim that they were not engaged in fighting guerrillas but in fighting narcotics trafficking, especially the growing of coca, the plant from which cocaine is derived. Colombia grows an estimated 90 percent of the world's coca, a figure which reflects the impact of US-backed coca eradication programs in Bolivia and Peru, the original centers of cultivation.

From the standpoint of their relation to narcotics, however, there is little to distinguish the rival sides in the civil war. Coca production is one of the principal agricultural activities in Colombia, especially in the southern half, and coca farmers are taxed by whoever holds power in their locality, whether it be the FARC and ELN, descended from Maoist and Castroist elements of the 1960s, or the Colombian military and its allies in the right-wing UAC death squads.

The most significant military event so far this year, for instance, was the offensive by the UAC in southern Bolivar province against the ELN, disrupting the cease-fire agreement between the ELN and the government. President Andres Pastrana had agreed to a partial halt in military operations against the ELN, similar to that already in effect with the FARC. When the UAC militia moved in, with army backing, they began

collecting taxes from the coca farmers and using the revenue to buy weapons and supplies. The cynicism of Bush administration policy is that, in the name of the "war on drugs," it is arming the Colombia military, and indirectly the fascist death squads, who pursue cocaine profits with enthusiasm.

In the five southernmost provinces, where the FARC is strongest, systematic spraying of the coca fields with herbicides began last December. More than 125,000 acres of coca plants have been destroyed, according to government figures, regularly updated, that bear an eerie resemblance to the body counts of the Vietnam War. Despite this destruction, however, the actual total coca acreage in Colombia has increased by 11 percent over the past year, as more and more impoverished farmers turn to the one crop that has a seemingly assured and profitable market.

The campaign of defoliation—a word avoided by the Bush administration because of its association with Vietnam—is only the first phase of the stepped-up US role. The second began last week when US-supplied Blackhawk helicopter gunships first went into action against FARC guerrillas near the village of Juan Jose in eastern Colombia.

The armed forces command portrayed the firefight, in which 60 rebels were reportedly killed, as a major battlefield victory—itself an indication of the dismal past performance of the Colombian military. Helicopter gunships and jet fighters systematically strafed the village, reportedly using information from US spy satellites for targeting. Aerial footage of fleeing guerrillas was shown repeatedly on Colombian television in an effort to boost the military's image.

The spraying and fumigation campaign has provoked an increasing outcry within Colombia as reports mount of the widespread health impact. The chemical herbicide glyphosate, produced by US-based Monsanto Corp. and sold commercially under the Roundup name, is blamed for a host of health problems in the affected areas, including respiratory and intestinal illnesses, skin rashes in children, dead animals and ruined food crops.

The governors of four southern Colombian provinces traveled to Washington in March to protest the sprayings. A second delegation arrived in August and held a press conference in Washington to publicize the dangers of the defoliation campaign. They noted that Roundup, while legal for spraying in the United States, carries warnings to use protective eye covering and to avoid inhalation, spraying on water supplies or allowing domestic animals to graze in sprayed fields. Such precautions are of course impossible for peasants sprayed without warning while cultivating their fields. The Washington-based World Wildlife Fund has also called for suspension of the fumigation until the "potentially grave environmental impact" can be studied.

On July 23 a judge in Bogota ordered a halt to the spraying program, acting on a legal complaint filed by Indian communities in the Amazonian jungle region of southeast Colombia. After Ambassador Patterson warned that a shutdown in spraying might trigger a cutoff in US military assistance, the Pastrana government obtained a "clarification" from the judge, who ruled that the ban would apply only to the areas where the plaintiffs lived—a few square miles—rather than to the country as a whole. Large-scale spraying resumed July 31.

In the face of deep public opposition in the United States to intervention in a guerrilla war—to say nothing of the enormous hostility which such an intervention would provoke throughout Latin America—the Clinton and Bush administrations have relied on subcontractors to perform roles which would have been assigned to uniformed personnel in previous American wars.

There are 11 US-supplied spray planes now in Colombia, with 14 more on order. Some of the pilots are Colombian, others US and other foreign nationals supplied by DynCorp, a big US defense contractor with a long record of participation in State Department, CIA and Pentagon projects overseas. The company was awarded a $170 million contract for support operations in Colombia in 1998.

Another subcontractor, Military Professional Resources Inc., recently completed a contract with Colombia's Ministry of Defense. MPRI is notorious for its role in the former Yugoslavia, where it first trained Croatian military units before a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Serb-population in the Krajina region, then worked with the terrorists of the Albanian KLA.

A third US company, Aviation Development Corporation of Montgomery, Alabama, has CIA contracts for flying surveillance planes over coca-producing areas in the Amazon rainforest. ADC personnel were flying the spotter plane in Peru which targeted the missionary flight in which Veronica Bowers and her infant daughter were killed.

While DynCorp and other companies mainly supply pilots, mechanics and trainers, some contractors are being hired for directly military roles. Former Navy SEALs are reportedly operating a riverine patrol in northeastern Peru, manning four gunboats based in the city of Iquitos—the destination of the doomed missionary flight. Unlike US military personnel, contract employees are not bound by congressional restrictions on engaging in combat, either in Colombia or the neighboring countries.

As the level of US involvement in Colombia increases, there are signs that the Bush administration will drop the "drug war" pretext and declare its political motivation openly. A newly published study by the influential RAND Corporation declares Colombia "the most serious foreign and security policy crisis in the Western Hemisphere since the Central American wars of the 1980s." It dismisses the focus on drug interdiction, saying it "misses the point."

The report criticizes President Pastrana's agreement to a limited cease-fire with the FARC in a Switzerland-sized region in the south, and warns that the rapid growth of the guerrilla army—from 3,000 fighters to 20,000 in the past 15 years—poses real dangers to the survival of the US-backed regime in Bogota.

"The United States ought to rethink whether this distinction between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency can be sustained, and whether Colombia and its allies can be successful in the war against drugs if the Colombian government fails to regain control of its territory," the RAND study concludes.

Brutal battles in dense jungles, helicopter gunships strafing villages, widespread spraying of chemical defoliants, hundreds of American military advisers, billions in US aid for a corrupt and unpopular regime, RAND Corporation studies justifying military escalation: it is no wonder that comparisons are frequently made between the current situation in Colombia and the early stages of US intervention in Vietnam.

There are of course many important differences, not the least of which is the vastly different international context in which the conflict in Colombia is unfolding. But one similarity is particularly striking: the virtual absence of any serious public discussion in the United States as the US government involves itself ever more deeply in a bloody civil war.