

US pushes Colombia to brink of all-out war

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Colombia, for the moment, has avoided the all-out eruption of its four-decade-old civil war following a last-ditch mediation effort launched by the United Nations, a group of governments including France, Mexico and Cuba and the Catholic Church. Bowing to the call for renewed negotiations, Colombian President Carlos Andres Pastrana announced the postponement of an ultimatum he had delivered to the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla movement to abandon a 25,000-square-mile “demilitarized zone” in the south of the country.

More than 23,000 Colombian troops had massed on the border of the zone in anticipation of a full-scale offensive. Thousands more members of the right-wing paramilitary death squads of the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC, were also prepared to join the military push, carrying out massacres against the 100,000 people who live in the towns and villages that are located in the area under FARC control.

The Colombian military command prepared the offensive without any explicit orders from the government after Pastrana government broke off peace talks with the FARC, claiming that the guerrillas had refused to negotiate. FARC commanders insisted that the government was lying.

According to reports, the guerrillas began withdrawing from the area, fearing that the military would launch a surprise bombing campaign, just as it did 18 years ago when the government of Virgilio Barco delivered a similar ultimatum after breaking off dialogue.

The planned offensive followed a growing military buildup by the government made possible by the \$1.3 billion “Plan Colombia” begun two years ago under the Clinton administration. This military aid package—combined with much smaller economic assistance programs that serve as fig leaves for US intervention—was ostensibly aimed at halting the cultivation of coca and the production of cocaine in the South American country.

US Green Berets have trained three battalions of Colombian troops and equipped them with arms and combat helicopters. Just days before Pastrana delivered his ultimatum, US Ambassador to Bogota Anne Patterson turned over 14 more Black Hawk choppers to the Colombian

military at a ceremony held at the Tolemaida military base. She pledged continued assistance, pointing to the Bush administration’s recent enactment of a \$625 million Andean Regional Initiative, which is further beefing up military aid to Colombia and neighboring countries.

Pastrana announced at the ceremony that another 25 helicopters that were sent back to the US would soon be returned, bringing the country’s total fleet to 74, which he said could be used to fight the “narco-guerrillas.”

Behind the threats of the Pastrana government lie both the strengthening of Colombia’s military and the turn by the Bush administration toward more direct intervention in the country.

In the weeks before Pastrana’s ultimatum, top administration officials have held discussions on dispensing with the legal fiction that US aid is designed solely for narcotics enforcement. When Congress approved Plan Colombia in 2000, it restricted use of the military aid to aiding the drug war. Under the plan now under discussion, the US would train another rapid-reaction battalion for use against the guerrillas, and would use spy flights and other intelligence-gathering methods to help the Colombian military prosecute a war against the insurgent groups.

US drug surveillance flights over Colombia and Peru were halted last spring after a CIA-guided Peruvian combat fighter shot down a civilian aircraft carrying American missionaries

According to government sources in Washington, one of the principal missions of the new counterinsurgency forces would be to protect pipelines operated by US oil companies exploiting petroleum resources in the country. Significantly, one of the companies with exclusive oil-drilling contracts in areas where the FARC and ELN now operate is the Texas firm, Harken Energy Co., whose former director is George W. Bush.

The discussions in Washington have been justified in the name of the worldwide war on terrorism proclaimed in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11. In point of fact, the State Department has classified both the FARC and the smaller ELN (National Liberation Army) as terrorist groups, but it

has given the same designation to the AUC, the right-wing paramilitary group which functions as an indispensable partner to the Colombian military in its counterinsurgency operations.

Much of the US military aid has filtered down to the AUC, which is headed by Carlos Castaño, a long-time “asset” of the US Central Intelligence Agency. Even Colombia’s Defense Ministry acknowledges that the AUC is principally responsible for the widespread massacres of civilians throughout the country. It attributed 1,000 deaths to its operations last year, and blamed AUC for displacing two million people.

Orders given to the Colombian military to suppress the AUC are routinely disobeyed, while military units hand over U.S.-supplied arms and ammunition to the paramilitaries to use in conducting bloodbaths against communities believed to harbor sympathy for the guerrillas.

U.S. preparations for war in Colombia already extend far beyond the materiel and training Washington has supplied to the Colombian military. The Pentagon has virtually completed the construction of a string of military bases in the region designed to facilitate direct intervention. Air bases have been set up in El Salvador, Ecuador and the Dutch colonies of Aruba and Curacao. These facilities would be used to conduct bombardment of the country, as well as to maintain supply lines.

Meanwhile, US military “advisers” have already been deployed in 34 military bases scattered throughout Colombia. This does not include the thousands of Special Forces troops that are rotated in and out of the country under the cover of training missions and joint military exercises.

Leading the Bush administration’s discussions on escalating the US intervention in Colombia is Otto Reich, appointed earlier this month to the position of assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere. The position had been vacant since Bush took office a year ago. The administration lacked sufficient votes in Congress to win approval for the nomination of Reich, a right-wing Cuban exile who was intimately involved in the illegal US “contra” war against Nicaragua under the Reagan administration in the 1980s.

Bush appointed Reich while Congress was in recess under a statutory provision allowing such appointments under conditions of emergency. While some Democratic Congressional leaders protested the action, the party’s leadership allowed the president to carry out this predictable action by failing to demand Congressional hearings on the appointment. In the face of the Bush administration’s propaganda for a global war on terrorism, none of them had the courage to expose the administration’s own intimate links with terrorism expressed in the nomination of Reich.

The new assistant secretary of state headed up an Office of Public Diplomacy in the State Department under the Reagan administration, engaging in what amounted to a propaganda campaign aimed at the American people to build up support for the CIA-backed contra mercenaries in Nicaragua.

The office, acting in violation of the Constitution, utilized psychological warfare methods to boost the image of the contras in the US and to discredit and intimidate opponents of the US-sponsored war in Nicaragua. An investigation into the Reagan administration’s illegal operations in Nicaragua forced the closing of the office.

From there, Reich went to Caracas to serve as US ambassador. He is best remembered in Venezuela for compelling the government to release Orlando Bosch, who was jailed in connection with a 1976 terrorist attack which destroyed a Cuban passenger jet, taking the lives of 73 people.

There is no doubt that Reich’s appointment to the State Department signals a further turn toward US militarism and unilateralism. The opposition of the European powers as well as the governments of Latin America to US intervention in the Colombian conflict will be swept aside in the name of the so-called war on terrorism.

There may not be long to wait for this policy to make itself felt on the ground in Colombia. In lifting his deadline for the FARC to abandon the demilitarized zone in southern Colombia, Pastrana issued what amounted to another ultimatum, demanding that the guerrillas submit concrete proposals to implement a halt to military operations nationwide by January 20. Should the Colombian government and its patrons in Washington reject the FARC plan, the rush to a full-scale war may quickly resume.



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