

US militarism targets South American oil

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Washington's military intervention into Colombia's four-decades-old civil war was initiated nearly two years ago by the Clinton administration with a \$1.3 billion emergency military aid package dubbed Plan Colombia. The plan was justified in the name of waging a "war on drugs."

In the aftermath of September 11, the Bush administration has decided to dramatically expand US military involvement in the South American country. As in Afghanistan, the escalation is being carried out under the banner of the struggle against terrorism, while its real objectives center on securing US corporate control over the region's strategic oil reserves.

Even as it prepares to intervene in a more direct military fashion in Colombia, Washington is intensifying its threats against the government of President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, the third-largest exporter of petroleum to the US market.

Earlier this month, the administration unveiled plans for the creation of a special 2,000-4,000-member "Critical Infrastructure Brigade" of the Colombian army that would be deployed to protect US-owned oil installations. Specifically, it would be assigned to guard a nearly 500-mile pipeline that carries oil belonging to Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum Corporation from the Caño Limón oilfields in northeast Colombia to the Caribbean port of Coveñas. The pipeline has been a frequent target of guerrilla bombing attacks.

The White House has asked Congress to approve \$98 million in the 2003 budget for training, arming and supplying US air support for the Colombian pipeline troops.

The pipeline "is important for the future of ... our petroleum supplies and the confidence of our investors," US Ambassador Anne Patterson said in an interview with the Bogota daily *El Tiempo*.

The funding is on top of \$731 million that the administration is seeking "to support anti-drug activities ... economic development and the strengthening of democratic institutions" in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela and Panama.

The lion's share of this funding will go to strengthen the already bloated military establishments that have in the past overthrown elected governments and established dictatorships in each of these countries, with the exception of one. Colombia, which often bills itself as the "oldest democracy in Latin America," has not had the same experience with US-backed military coups. It has, however, existed under a state of siege or emergency for most of the last 50 years. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed by the army and its allies in the paramilitary death squads, and more than 2 million people have been turned into refugees in the last two decades alone.

According to press reports, the administration is planning to funnel another \$1 billion in military supplies and training to the Colombian military. US Green Beret special forces troops, meanwhile, will play a more direct role as "advisors" to a counterinsurgency campaign waged against the country's two largest guerrilla groups, the

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish acronym FARC, and the National Liberation Army, or ELN.

At the same time, the Pentagon is preparing to expand intelligence-sharing with the Colombian military, providing it with communications intercepts and satellite photos to allow it to prosecute a deadlier campaign against the guerrillas and the peasant communities in which they operate.

The deployment of additional advisors, together with providing air support and intelligence, marks a qualitative change in the US role in Colombia, which officially had been limited to military aid linked directly to anti-narcotics operations.

Even under Clinton, however, securing oil supplies was an unstated objective of Plan Colombia. The provision of attack helicopters and the training of new anti-narcotics brigades in the southern coca-growing regions freed up other units to protect Occidental Petroleum's interests in the north. It was no accident that the California-based petroleum company and the now bankrupt Enron, which carved out extensive natural gas holdings in Colombia, were among the biggest backers of Plan Colombia, lobbying Congress to approve the military aid package.

Colombian oil workers union leaders and community leaders in towns in the oil-rich northeastern Arauca province have warned that the proposed new pipeline brigade will mean an intensification of the fighting and the killing of noncombatants.

The region has been a center of operations for right-wing paramilitary groups that function as allies of the Colombian armed forces, while receiving funding and supplies from US oil companies to carry out massacres of suspected guerrilla members and sympathizers. These mercenary killers have assassinated union leaders, human rights advocates and government prosecutors, while slaughtering entire villages believed to have harbored the guerrillas.

In a report released earlier this month, three human rights groups—Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Washington Office on Latin America—recommended that US military aid be withheld from Colombia on the grounds that the government in Bogota had failed to meet conditions set by previous legislation, particularly relating to the collaboration between the military and the rightist death squads. While required by law to consult with the human rights groups, the Bush administration brushed aside their findings.

The report cites Colombia's Office of the Public Advocate as recording 92 massacres in the first 10 months of 2001, the vast majority attributed to paramilitary groups working in conjunction with the security forces. It provides numbing details of assassinations and slaughters carried out by these elements, as well as lists of known leaders whom the government refuses to arrest.

Collaboration between the death squads and the military, the report said, includes "coordination during military operations between government and paramilitary units; communication via radios, cellular

telephones, and beepers; the sharing of intelligence, including the names of suspected guerrilla collaborators; the sharing of fighters, including active-duty soldiers serving in paramilitary units and paramilitary commanders lodging on military bases; the sharing of vehicles, including army trucks used to transport paramilitary fighters; coordination of army roadblocks, which routinely let heavily-armed paramilitary fighters pass unchallenged; and payments made from paramilitaries to military officers for their support.”

Last year, the US State Department placed the largest of the paramilitary groups, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia, or AUC, on a list of “Foreign Terrorist Organizations” alongside the Colombian guerrilla organizations.

Despite this formal proscription, the AUC has been one of the principal beneficiaries of the ballooning US military aid, with the military passing on a substantial portion of the increased arms and funding from Washington to the death squads. As a consequence, the ranks of the AUC have swelled dramatically in the last two years.

It is widely recognized that the paramilitaries benefit from Colombia’s cocaine trafficking even more than the guerrillas do. To a large extent, they originated in the attempt of major narcotics traffickers to protect themselves against kidnappings by the guerrillas. Yet there has been no attempt in the “war on drugs” to interfere with their activities.

After a visit to Colombia in December, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights protested the impunity enjoyed by the paramilitaries, noting that “the confessed perpetrators of crimes against humanity, with pending orders of arrest against them, move throughout Colombia while giving press interviews.” Carlos Castaño, the leader of the AUC and a one-time “asset” of the US Central Intelligence Agency, recently published his memoirs and has frequently appeared on television.

Just as US forces intervened in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia to assert American hegemony over the oil supplies of those regions, now Washington is openly pursuing the same agenda in South America. While Colombian oil exports to the US are not today decisive for the US economy, Washington is looking to the region from the standpoint of its strategic objective of diversifying its sources of petroleum supplies.

Already, Colombia and its oil-producing neighbors, Venezuela and Ecuador, export more oil to the US than all the Persian Gulf countries combined.

Venezuelan oil figures centrally in the US strategy for the region. The third-largest US oil supplier and the hemisphere’s sole OPEC member, Venezuela has 77 billion barrels in proven reserves—the most of any country outside the Middle East.

The Chávez government’s populist and nationalist rhetoric combined with its role in urging OPEC members to cut production has made it a target of Washington’s wrath. In particular, the US government and the big oil companies are hostile to its vow to prevent the privatization of the national oil corporation. While Bush has yet to add Caracas to his “axis of evil,” his administration has issued clear warnings that it could face the same treatment as other regimes viewed as hostile to US interests.

“We have expressed our disagreement on some of his policies directly to him,” Secretary of State Colin Powell said of Chavez earlier this month during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, describing the Venezuelan president’s positions as a “serious irritant.” He added that Chavez had visited “strange countries,” referring to his trip to Iraq in 2000, the first by a head of state since

the Gulf War, as well as trips to Cuba, with which Venezuela has established commercial ties.

Powell’s statements were followed by an even blunter warning from Assistant Secretary of State Carl Ford, who claimed that there was evidence that Chavez was aiding the FARC and other guerrilla groups in Colombia, adding that “we are going to watch much more carefully what is happening in Venezuela, and particularly with its president.”

Within days of the US threats, a Venezuelan Air Force Colonel and a Captain in the National Guard publicly called for the overthrow of the Chavez government and participated in an anti-government demonstration in Caracas. The two officers turned themselves in after the failure of any military units to join their call for a coup. Officials in Washington and at the US-dominated Organization of American States expressed concern that the rights of the two putchist officers be respected.

The area in Colombia where the new US-backed brigade is slated to operate is situated on the porous border with Venezuela. This border divides an oilfield spanning both countries, and it is widely believed that any intensified fighting would quickly spill across the frontier, raising the threat of a direct military confrontation between Washington and Caracas.

A US delegation arrived in Colombia recently to begin talks on the expansion of the US military presence. Leading it were Otto Reich, the undersecretary of state for western hemisphere affairs, and John Maisto, the director of inter-American affairs on the National Security Council. Reich, a right-wing Cuban émigré, ran an illegal propaganda operation supporting the CIA-backed contra mercenaries waging war against Nicaragua in the 1980s. He then went on to become ambassador to Venezuela. Maisto was the US ambassador to Managua during the contra war and went on to serve as charge d’affaires in Panama during the 1989 US invasion that ousted General Manuel Noriega. Joining them was General Gary Speer, chief of the US military’s Southern Command.

The type of military intervention now contemplated by Washington would ultimately dwarf both the contra war in Nicaragua and the Panama invasion. US imperialism is proceeding with the same combination of recklessness and gangsterism in Latin America as in the Middle East and Central Asia. It sees the post-September 11 “war on terrorism” as a window of opportunity to lay hold of strategic resources at the expense of both the Colombian and Venezuelan people and its economic rivals in Europe and Japan.



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