

US troops join invasion of Colombian rebel zone

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The appearance of US Army Special Forces in the Colombian town of San Vicente del Caguan is a clear indication of the escalating US intervention in South America's oldest civil war. San Vicente del Caguan is the capital of the so-called "safe zone" that was invaded by Colombian troops after heavy aerial bombardment last week.

Colombia's President Andres Pastrana called a halt to peace negotiations with the largest of the guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, after the guerrillas hijacked an airplane and kidnapped a senator. Pastrana ordered the retaking of the zone, in which FARC had been allowed sanctuary for the past three years.

While the Colombian army failed in the initial invasion to engage any of the FARC guerrillas, bombs falling on an isolated hamlet killed a man, his two-year-old son and a 15-year-old girl. In Colombian cities, meanwhile, police rounded up suspected leftists, accusing them of being FARC sympathizers.

This latest armed adventure by the guerrillas provided the immediate justification for the government's shift toward all-out war. But the essential motive force behind the sudden escalation in the nearly 40-year-old conflict lies in the US-organized buildup of the Colombian military. The Bush administration recently unveiled plans to allocate \$98 million more for the creation of a new Colombian army brigade dedicated to anti-guerrilla operations and the defense of oilfields and pipelines operated by Occidental Petroleum and other US-based energy corporations.

With the billion dollars in US arms aid already poured into the Colombian military, the army has nearly doubled the number of its soldiers in recent years, while Washington has supplied more than 50 assault helicopters. All of this military assistance was provided in the name of furthering a "war on drugs" by enabling Colombian troops to search out and destroy coca-growing areas and clandestine laboratories for producing cocaine. The US Congress attached provisions restricting this aid, while requiring that Washington certify the Colombian government's compliance with human rights provisions. In particular, Congress called for the severing of

the pervasive links between the Colombian military command and the right-wing paramilitary death squads that are responsible for the lion's share of massacres and assassinations that have claimed some 40,000 Colombian lives in the last decade alone.

While independent human rights groups—including those denounced by the guerrillas as CIA stooges—unanimously affirm that the military continues to aid and abet the paramilitaries, collaborating directly in their bloody operations, and that the Colombian government has done virtually nothing to punish senior commanders linked to these activities, the US aid continues to flow.

It is now feared the military incursion into the 16,000-square-mile neutral zone will pave the way for the paramilitaries to move in as well, subjecting a widely dispersed population of some 100,000 poor peasants to reprisals as suspected guerrilla supporters. While little or no fighting was reported between the army and the guerrillas in the first days of the campaign to retake the zone, clashes between the FARC and right-wing paramilitaries belonging to the Colombian Self-Defense Units, or AUC, left at least 73 people dead and eight missing.

The Bush administration is preparing to invoke September 11 and the worldwide "war on terrorism" to brush aside all restrictions on the use of US military aid, and make the annihilation of the Colombian guerrilla movements a stated goal of US foreign policy. Government officials told the *Washington Post* that increased aid, including supplying the Colombian army with satellite and electronic intelligence on the movement of the guerrillas, could be justified under a National Security Directive signed by Bush in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. At the same time, US officials argue, drawing a distinction between counterinsurgency and anti-drug operations is unrealistic because the FARC provides protection for coca growers and narcotics traffickers in return for "taxes" it levies in the safe zone.

The fact that the right-wing paramilitaries, who have benefited at least as much as the Colombian army from US

arms aid, also provide protection for the narcotics trade and are responsible for far more murderous terror than the guerrillas is ignored by Washington policymakers.

President Pastrana has already requested that Washington allow the unrestricted utilization of military aid supplied under the Clinton administration's "Plan Colombia" anti-drug campaign for the war against the guerrillas.

After pictures of US Army Green Berets operating alongside the Colombian military in the invasion of the safe zone appeared on the front page of the Colombian daily *El Tiempo*, one politician, Liberal Party presidential candidate Horacio Serpa, called the US military presence "very grave" and demanded a clarification from the government.

General Hector Fabio Velasco quickly replied that the US Special Forces had "come simply as observers." Serpa's opponent for the Liberal Party nomination, the rightist Alvaro Uribe Velez, said he welcomed the US presence and would support the sending of US combat troops to fight in Colombia, rather than merely providing aid and training.

With presidential elections set for May, the official political spectrum in Colombia has lurched violently to the right. Uribe, considered a reactionary extremist until recently, is projected to win a plurality of the vote in the first round. As the governor of the northeastern province of Antioquia, he allowed free rein to the paramilitary forces and helped create the type of peasant defense groups used by the Fujimori regime in Peru and the military dictatorship in Guatemala. The result was a bloody campaign of repression against working class and peasant militants and all those identified with the Colombian left.

Uribe has been feted by the Bush administration, which invited him to meet with State Department officials recently. Given his backing for US intervention, Washington is prepared to ignore evidence presented by his Colombian critics linking him to the operations of cocaine kingpins like Fabio Ochoa and Pablo Escobar in the 1980s.

Apparent support for Uribe as well as for Pastrana's escalation of the war, particularly within the middle class, is in part a reflection of the increasing social and political weight of the military, which has grown in size, power and influence as a result of the flood of arms aid that has turned Colombia into the third largest recipient of US military hardware in the world.

It is also attributable, however, to the political bankruptcy and duplicity of the guerrilla movements themselves, which have managed to grow and buy more and better weapons using money extorted from narcotics traffickers, foreign oil companies and the families of those they kidnap, even as their popular support has waned.

The latest guerrilla action is the FARC's kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt, the presidential candidate of a minor

party who earned the enmity of Colombia's right-wing establishment and the drug traffickers with a book exposing corruption under the government of former president Ernesto Samper. A sympathizer of Green Party-style politics, Betancourt was abducted while en route to the newly invaded safe zone to speak out against any repression of the area's civilian population. The kidnapping, which has provoked popular disgust in Colombia and internationally, was apparently aimed at improving the guerrilla group's bargaining position with the government.

The FARC and the second largest guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army, or ELN, have kidnapped hundreds of civilians. In some cases, they have been ransomed back to their families to raise funds, while in others they are held to exchange for captured guerrillas. In one case, the ELN kidnapped an entire planeload of passengers, and in another, all the worshipers in a Cali church. Some estimates have attributed half of the FARC's income to kidnappings.

Founded during the 20-year rural civil war known as "la violencia," the FARC, like the ELN, which emerged in the 1960s, embraced the ideologies of Maoism and the Guevarism, holding that revolution in Colombia would be accomplished by a peasant guerrilla army encircling and ultimately conquering the cities. This discredited and socially retrograde theory reflected contempt for the struggle to politically educate and organize the working class, and promoted tactics that served only to divide the urban workers from the poor peasantry.

Alienated by armed actions that have no apparent connection to revolutionary or even socially progressive ends, broad sections of the Colombian population have come to see the guerrilla organizations as little more than mercenary bandits offering no political alternative to the oppression and social polarization that dominate the South American country.

The Colombian ruling class and its backers in Washington aim to exploit the prevailing political confusion to promote a campaign of military repression against the broad masses of workers and poor peasants. Those who resist or challenge the interests of the Colombian elites, the foreign oil companies and the Western banks will be the targets of Washington's expansion of the "war on terrorism" into Latin America.



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