

Colombian vote sets stage for US military escalation

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Presidential elections to be held in Colombia on Sunday will set the stage for a sharp escalation of the US military intervention in the war-torn South American country.

Alvaro Uribe Velez, a right-wing former governor and the candidate favored by Washington, is projected to come at least within striking distance of winning more than half the ballots cast, thereby avoiding a run-off next month.

Uribe, the Harvard-educated scion of one of the wealthiest land-owning families in the northwestern province of Antioquia, has called for doubling the size of Colombia's armed forces. He also advocates the creation of vigilante-style civil patrols, similar to those used by the Fujimori regime in Peru and the military dictatorships in Guatemala to wage counterinsurgency campaigns in those countries.

Not surprisingly, Uribe is also endorsed by the AUC, or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, the right-wing paramilitary death squad outfit that operates in cooperation with the country's armed forces. AUC, which has been blamed for three quarters of the massacres and assassinations of civilians in Colombia's protracted civil war, has reportedly threatened to wipe out entire villages if they do not deliver the vote for Uribe.

Running as an independent, Uribe's success is a measure of the alienation of the electorate from the two parties—Liberal and Conservative—that ruled on behalf of the country's oligarchy for decades, alternating their terms in office. In recent elections, up to 60 percent of the voting population has stayed home.

The Conservative Party of incumbent President Andres Pastrana, who is barred from seeking another term, is not even fielding a candidate, while the Liberal Party's candidate, Horacio Serpa, is trailing far behind. Also running in the election are: Luis Garzon, the president of the Colombian Workers Union or CUT, Colombia's largest union federation, who is vying with Serpa for second; former foreign minister Moemi Sanin; and ex-Senator Ingrid Betancourt, the Green party candidate who was kidnapped by guerrillas in February.

Uribe's strength at the polls is also a manifestation of the tremendous social weight exerted by the growing US presence in the country and the more than \$2 billion in military aid that has poured in since Clinton inaugurated "Plan Colombia" three years ago. Uribe has not only urged an increase in military aid, but has said he would welcome the deployment of US combat troops on Colombian soil.

The flow of US arms and "advisors" is expected to increase dramatically as a result of legislation proposed by the Bush administration that the US Congress is preparing to approve in the next few days. The Senate Appropriations Committee earlier this week voted in favor of an "emergency supplement" for Colombia that provides more funding for military aid. The most significant feature of

the legislation, however, is that it would for the first time allow money and arms previously provided for anti-narcotics efforts to be openly used in a counterinsurgency campaign against the country's two major guerrilla movements, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army).

While Congress had initially attached restrictions on the use of the military aid ostensibly with the aim of preventing human rights abuses, the Bush administration, acting under the mantle of the worldwide "war against terrorism" and with congressional support, is preparing to brush aside all such restraints in the unleashing of a brutal war of repression.

Moreover, the legislation now before Congress would alter the nature of the US intervention by providing funds to finance the deployment of specialized Colombian troops—trained, advised and directed by the Pentagon—to protect a key petroleum pipeline that services two US-based oil giants, Occidental and Repsol. The Senate's supplemental funding measure provides \$3.5 million for this purpose, while a House version would grant \$6 million. The Senate version calls for these companies to reimburse the US government for a share of these funds, an arrangement that would effectively make the new pipeline brigades paid enforcers for the oil monopolies.

The redirection of military resources toward the protection of oil pipelines is an indication of the broader strategic interests that Washington has pursued, until now, under the cover of a "war on drugs."

Together, Colombia and Venezuela have the capacity to supply the US with more oil than is now being pumped out of all the countries of the Persian Gulf combined. The major oil companies have been pressing Washington to escalate its intervention in the region to create a better climate for the exploitation of its vast potential reserves. Similar considerations also underlay US involvement in the abortive coup attempt against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in April.

Already, some 500 US military personnel are permanently stationed in the country, while hundreds more US mercenaries employed by Pentagon contractors are working with the Colombian armed forces. Under a provision in the existing aid legislation dubbed the "empire clause," the US military can send whatever reinforcements it deems necessary in the event of a major escalation in the fighting that puts US forces in danger.

The Colombian election and the growing US intervention are being watched warily by governments throughout the region. An intensification of the US-backed counterinsurgency campaign, it is widely expected, will spill over the borders into the neighboring countries of Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela, triggering a continental crisis.

If elected, Uribe will likely appeal to the governments of these countries for assistance in the war against the guerrillas, asking them to fortify their frontiers and collaborate in military campaigns in border areas. Already, in the wake of the government's invasion earlier this year of a safe haven that it had previously established for the FARC, there have been reports of growing activity by Colombian guerrillas in Brazil, Peru and Ecuador.

Earlier this week, 4,000 Brazilian troops were deployed on the Colombian border, using planes, helicopters and boats to comb the western Amazon region for possible FARC infiltration.

Colombia itself has seen stark indications of a wider and more brutal war. At least nine people, nearly half of them children, were shot to death May 21 in a pre-dawn assault carried out by Colombian troops and police in an impoverished hillside slum in Medellin, the country's second city. In the worst outbreak of urban warfare in recent memory, troops poured automatic rifle fire into the zinc-roofed shacks. At least one US-supplied helicopter was used in the operation, firing indiscriminately into the heavily populated neighborhood.

Maria Isabel Jaramillo Giraldo, a six-year-old, was eating breakfast in the kitchen as her mother got ready to go to work and drop her off at kindergarten when a bullet struck the little girl in the head, mortally wounding her. Her older brother took her in his arms to a nearby clinic. After handing over the girl's lifeless body, he was grabbed by police, who beat and kicked him before taking him into custody.

Another rifle shot ripped open the stomach of Yiseth Tascon Olarte, an 11-year-old girl, who was going to call her school to say she couldn't come because of the fighting. "She had to bring in some homework and make a presentation, and that's why she was worried," her mother told the Colombian daily *El Tiempo*. The girl loved math and seldom went out in the street, her mother said. The bullet that killed her passed through her body striking her cousin, also 11, in the shoulder.

A 16-year-old boy, John Wilmar Ayala Munera, was shot to death while trying to help a friend who had been wounded by the gunfire. Relatives were unable to recover his body for over an hour as the police continued firing. Then a group of women carried the body to the health clinic as the security forces were beating and arresting every man who came down from the slum.

Also killed was a 17-year-old boy—his sister said that the soldiers continued firing into his dead body—and a 31-year-old mother of four, felled by a bullet that came through the window of her home.

The army/police operation was aimed at capturing members of the FARC who were living in the neighborhood. The guerrillas returned the soldiers' fire. Large numbers of youth and young men also took to the streets to oppose the security forces, throwing rocks and rolling burning tires at them.

Meanwhile, the United Nations released a report on its investigation into one of the worst losses of life in the ongoing civil war, caused by a stray mortar shell fired earlier this month by FARC guerrillas at paramilitaries of the AUC in the remote western jungle village of Bojayá. The shell struck a church where civilians had sought shelter, killing 119 people, most of them women and children.

Both the Pastrana government and Washington have seized on the killings in Bojayá as a pretext for escalating the campaign against the FARC, with the Colombian president going so far as to label the incident as "genocide."

As atrocious as the loss of life was, the misfiring of a mortar shell in combat hardly constitutes an intentional massacre of the kind for which the AUC is notorious. US officials have denounced the FARC

for "terrorism," but when American bombs and cruise missiles have claimed thousands of lives in US wars from Iraq to the Balkans and Afghanistan, the US military has routinely dismissed the carnage as "collateral damage."

While blaming the guerrillas for firing the weapon and the AUC for taking combat positions near the civilians, the UN report sharply criticized the government for collaborating with the right-wing death squads and thereby setting the stage for the battle.

The government ignored warnings from local officials that AUC gunmen were pouring into the region. According to the UN report, the paramilitaries had entered the area aboard boats, sailing through three river checkpoints set up by the army. It also cited witnesses who reported that AUC commanders had arrived in the area by aircraft several days after government forces had moved in, and had been seen meeting with Colombian army officers.

Washington formally lists the AUC, headed by Carlos Castano, who has long-standing ties with the CIA as well as with the Colombian drug cartels, as a terrorist organization, and the Colombian government claims it is committed to fighting the right-wing paramilitaries.

In practice, however, AUC operatives serve as shock troops in the US-backed war, operating in conjunction with the army, sharing intelligence, communications equipment and weapons as it assassinates suspected opponents of the government and massacres civilians. It has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of US arms aid, which has been passed along by the Colombian military.

These ties are only expected to increase under an Uribe presidency. The paramilitaries enjoyed free rein in Antioquia when he was governor of the province in the 1990s. Their repressive activities were facilitated by Uribe's own security policies, particularly his establishment of the type of civilian defense groups that he now proposes to create nationwide. These groups, provided with motorcycles and radios by the provincial government and allowed to carry guns, collaborated with the paramilitary units, informing on suspected leftists and carrying out assassinations themselves.

In the final analysis, the US strategy in Colombia is to suppress by military force a social conflict that is deeply rooted in the country's class divisions. More than half of Colombia's 40 million people live in poverty and 20 percent of the working population is unemployed. In the countryside, 85 percent of the population, made up of poor peasants, control just 15 percent of the land, while 1.3 percent, the country's rural oligarchy, are owners of 48 percent, including Colombia's most productive acreage.

The growing US military presence in the South American country is aimed at propping up this reactionary social structure while pursuing the profit interests of the big oil corporations through the use of armed force.



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