

# Colombia's new president declares state of emergency

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Only five days into his term of office, Colombia's right-wing President Alvaro Uribe Vélez declared a state of emergency Monday, allowing him to rule by decree and restrict basic civil liberties. The declaration signals the launching of an all-out war against the 38-year-long guerilla insurgency, as well as stepped-up attacks on workers and peasants who resist the crushing poverty that government policies impose.

To justify the emergency declaration, Uribe seized on an escalation of violence that saw some 115 people killed beginning August 7 with an Inauguration Day mortar attack on the presidential palace, when an apparently errant shell landed in a nearby shantytown and killed 20 people, injuring 70 others. The main guerilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), was blamed for the attack, but no one has actually taken responsibility. The attack in the heart of Bogotá took place in spite of unprecedented security measures, including the mobilization of a contingent of 20,000 police and the banning of all commercial air traffic over the capital city.

Under the emergency declaration, known as a "state of internal commotion" under Colombia's constitution, the government can restrict personal movement, detain people for suspicion with no evidence, conduct warrantless searches and wiretaps, and limit press freedom. While Justice Minister Fernando Londoño claimed that no restrictions on civil liberties were being imposed immediately, he refused to rule them out in the future.

The immediate measure decreed by Uribe is the imposition of a 1.2 percent tax on all businesses and individuals with liquid assets of \$60,000 or more. The tax is intended to raise \$780 million to finance military expansion, including the creation of two new elite mobile units of 6,000 soldiers and 10,000 additional

police, as well as to pay a network of 100,000 civilian "police auxiliaries".

During his campaign, Uribe pledged to double the size of the military and national police, as well as to recruit 1 million civilians, out of a total population of about 40 million, as government informers. A similar program, which Uribe set up in the province of Antioquia when he was governor there from 1995 to 1997, became little more than an adjunct to the paramilitary death squads, known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), responsible for the assassination of hundreds of Antioquia union leaders during Uribe's two years in office there. The paramilitaries, which have their origins in hit squads set up to protect Colombia's drug barons and which are financed by wealthy landowners, are notorious for the massacres they have perpetrated on entire villages that they perceived to be supporting the guerillas. The AUC are estimated to be responsible for three-fourths of the civilian death toll in the ongoing civil war, estimated at about 4,000 a year.

Uribe's actions were widely supported by Colombia's political establishment, including Luis Eduardo Garzón, the head of the country's largest trade union who was a candidate in the recent presidential election. He told the daily *El Tiempo*, "Any government has got the right to defend itself."

Whatever the position of the local politicians, however, the key backing for Uribe's right-wing course comes from Washington. The Bush administration pressed the previous Colombian president, Andrés Pastrana, to break off negotiations with the FARC. While giving no official endorsement to the state of emergency, the Bush administration's representative at Uribe's inauguration, Drug Control Policy Chief John Walters, praised Uribe the day after the emergency was

announced for showing “particular courage” in the fight against “narco-terrorism.”

Beginning with the Clinton administration’s Plan Colombia, Washington has used its “war on drugs” to justify a massive military intervention there, providing some \$2 billion in military aid in the last three years alone. Colombia is now the third largest recipient of US military assistance, behind only Israel and Egypt.

The latest package incorporates \$98 million specifically for the training and funding of units to protect a key oil pipeline, a frequent target of guerilla attack, owned by US-based Occidental Petroleum.

Washington’s support for Uribe is bipartisan. Only days before his swearing-in, Democrats joined Republicans in Congress to overwhelmingly approve the lifting of restrictions on US military aid, which had legally limited its use to fighting the drug trade. The new legislation makes no distinction between “narcotics trafficking” and “terrorist organizations,” freeing up American trained elite Colombian army units to use their US-provided advanced Black Hawk and Huey II helicopters to attack guerilla units directly, as well as civilian populations that are seen to support them.

The prior restriction, known as the “Leahy Amendment”—named for Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy—was imposed supposedly out of concern for human rights. There have been numerous documented instances of the Colombian military cooperating with the paramilitaries in the massacre of civilians. The Leahy provision was never more than a fig leaf, however, as the US State Department continued to certify the Colombian government’s “progress” on human rights, even though according to Human Rights Watch virtually nothing had been done to discipline, let alone prosecute, army generals and others notoriously associated with the paramilitaries.

While lifting restrictions on the use of US military aid, Congress inserted into its legislation a specific requirement that “the newly elected President of Colombia has ... (B) committed, in writing, to implement significant budgetary and personnel reforms of the Colombian Armed Forces; and (C) committed, in writing, to support substantial additional Colombian financial and other resources to implement such policies...” By imposing the new tax as its first measure under the emergency decree, the Uribe administration is

merely following Washington’s orders that Colombians pay a greater share of the costs of organizing the repression.



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