

Colombian government steps up civil war preparations

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31 August 2001

Newly inaugurated Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez has followed up his August 12 assumption of emergency powers [See “Colombia’s new president declares state of emergency”] with further measures aimed at crushing militarily the country’s guerrilla insurgencies and stepping up repression against human rights and trade union activists.

The character of the assault being unleashed was indicated by the reinstatement and promotion of several generals long associated with right-wing death squads, as part of a shakeup of the military high command. At an August 15 ceremony with US embassy military attachés looking on and US-supplied Black Hawk helicopters circling overhead, Uribe swore in General Jorge Enrique Mora as commander of all of Colombia’s armed forces, General Carlos Alberto Ospina as commander of the army, and the formerly retired General Teodoro Campo Gómez to take over the national police force.

General Mora, formerly commander of the army, has close ties with the United States military. Last September he was inducted into the International Hall of Fame for graduates of the US Army’s Command and General Staff College in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. In an interview at the time, Mora compared the situation facing Colombia with the US interventions in Vietnam and El Salvador.

General Ospina, who replaced Mora as commander of the army, headed the army’s Fourth Brigade during the period when, according to Human Rights Watch, there was “extensive evidence” of “pervasive ties” between the Fourth Brigade and paramilitary groups. Ospina has specifically been linked to a 1997 massacre of 11 civilians in El Aro, and a 1998 massacre of unarmed peasants in Antioquia province.

General Campo has been brought out of retirement to oversee the doubling of the 100,000-strong national police force, which has been shaken by a corruption scandal in which \$2 million in US aid disappeared. He received strong backing from the United States, with the State Department’s director of Andean affairs, Philip Chicola, describing him as “a man who is trained for this work and to carry out his responsibilities.”

Two other retired military men were also pressed back into service. Retired General Ricardo Cifuentes will head the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC), while Retired Colonel Alfonso Plazas will take charge of the

Narcotics Department, which oversees operations against drug cultivation and trafficking, including control of confiscated assets.

The appointment of Plazas, who also attended the US Army’s Command and General Staff College in the early 1980s, is particularly controversial. In 1985, he led the army’s retaking of the Palace of Justice from M-19 guerrillas, an operation in which over 100 people, including several Supreme Court justices being held hostage, were killed. Later, investigations by the attorney general’s office and a regional court found that Plazas created and led the notorious Death to Kidnappers (MAS) death squad in the early 1980s. Subsequent testimony linked him with paramilitaries protecting drug kingpin Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha.

His record of human rights violations led the German government to force his withdrawal in 1995 as Colombia’s honorary consul to the city of Hamburg. The US State Department subsequently denied him a visa when Colombian officials sought to appoint him consul to San Francisco.

As for General Cifuentes, a 1996 Human Rights Watch report implicates him in protecting death squad operations in the Magdalena region when he was commander of the army’s Fifth Brigade.

At their installation ceremony, President Uribe charged the assembled generals with the need to “obtain results” in the counterinsurgency campaign and justify the tax increase he had just imposed under the emergency decree, raising some \$780 million to pay for the expanded military operations.

A week after the command shakeup, Defense Minister Martha Lucia Ramirez announced a new plan to arm 15,000 peasants to supplement military and police forces in rural areas. The government is seeking cost estimates for assault rifles, machine guns, mortars and grenade launchers to be provided to those selected for the new program, along with uniforms and boots. Unattached to any regular military units, they will continue to live in their homes. They are also to receive a small stipend.

This program, which is in addition to the previously announced plan to recruit 1,000,000 civilian informers, will create legally sanctioned paramilitary units.

When Uribe set up armed vigilante units in his native

province of Antioquia during his term as governor from 1995 to 1998, they were infiltrated by local paramilitary forces and began operating as auxiliaries to the death squads. Similar village militias set up by Guatemala's military dictatorship during the civil war in that country were later found to have carried out assassinations, massacres and the burning of villages.

One human rights activist said the new plan would lead to increased bloodshed: "This will only intensify the conflict, widen the war, worsen the humanitarian situation and turn civilians into military targets" said Jorge Rojas of the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (Codhes).

Even in advance of the government's new measures, Uribe's election has given the paramilitaries the green light to step up their campaign of terror against political opponents and local populations. On a single day, August 15, four members of the Central Workers Union (CUT) were assassinated in separate attacks. The leftist New Colombia News Agency (ANNCOL) reports that since the beginning of the year, 116 CUT members have been murdered by paramilitary groups, 8 have been "disappeared" and 16 more have been kidnapped. No arrests have been made in any of these cases.

A statement by a member of the National Executive Committee of the CUT points out that Uribe's emergency powers allow him to legally carry out actions which the paramilitaries have been conducting illegally for years. In particular, the government can now give people only two days' notice to evacuate their homes and land for reasons of "national security." The paramilitaries are notorious for ordering the abandonment of whole villages seen to support the guerrillas, killing anyone who tries to stay.

Similarly, the emergency order gives the government the authority to ban cell phones, something that the paramilitaries have carried out in practice by executing villagers found to be carrying them. Cell phones can be used to warn about the movements of paramilitary and regular military units.

Contrary to a statement made by Justice Minister Fernando Londono that the emergency declaration would not be used to restrict civil liberties, the first raid was carried out under the new powers in the city of Cali on August 16. Acting without a warrant, police broke down the door to the home of Jesús Antonio Gonzalez, the national director for human rights of the CUT, allegedly looking for subversive literature and weapons. No arrest was made, but substantial damage was done to the Gonzalez home.

Mr. Gonzalez released a statement saying, "This event has just confirmed exactly what we expected: that the new state of emergency legislation will be used to persecute human rights defenders and union leaders."

Just as the Uribe administration is stepping up its civil war preparations, the US government is demanding its cooperation in shielding US forces deployed there from potential prosecution for war crimes. On August 14, US Undersecretary

of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman, along with the deputy commander-in-chief of the US military Southern Command, Major General Gary Speer, officially requested that the Colombian government sign an agreement not to turn any US nationals over to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Netherlands. The ICC, established to prosecute accused war criminals under international law, started operating July 1. Colombia formally ratified its participation on August 5.

In face of worldwide condemnation, Washington was recently forced to back down from its demand that the United Nations provide US military personnel with blanket immunity from ICC prosecution. Now the Bush administration is seeking to negotiate bilateral agreements with 180 different countries to accomplish the same thing, threatening a cutoff of military aid to those countries that refuse.

The US government has given its Colombian client nearly \$2 billion in military assistance in the last three years, with another \$500 million on the table for the coming year. It was no surprise, then, when Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos said he saw no problem complying with the US request.

Reflecting widespread opposition to the US demand, Colombia's largest circulation daily, *El Tiempo*, editorialized against it on August 17, declaring: "The way the United States is sabotaging the International Criminal Court is frankly infuriating." On August 21, Vice Foreign Minister Clemencia Forero hinted that her government might turn the US down, saying, "We respect the US decision not to take part in the ICC and we also look forward to US respect for Colombia's decision on the issue."

The US arm-twisting has provoked a crisis among Colombia's political elite, who seek to cover up their repressive rule by claiming the government's dictatorial measures are required to protect the human rights of average Colombians against kidnappings and terrorism. Washington's demand for an exemption from war crimes prosecutions points to the criminal character of the operations it is supporting and carrying out in Colombia and elsewhere.



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