

As US intervention grows:

Colombian army lays siege to Medellín neighborhood

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Colombian assault troops and police backed by tanks and helicopter gunships laid siege Wednesday to an impoverished neighborhood in Medellín, the South American nation's second largest city.

The operation, the biggest counterinsurgency campaign to be waged in a crowded urban area in recent years, was launched on the direct order of Colombia's new right-wing president, Alvaro Uribe.

At least 14 people were killed in the first day of fighting, including a 16-year-old boy. Scores were wounded, most of them old people, women and children.

Medellín's mayor, Luis Pérez, said Uribe had instructed the army to continue the operation until it secures full control of the district, known as Comuna 13, which is home to some 130,000 of Medellín's 2.5 million people. General Mario Montoya, the army commander in the Medellín area, said that his forces intended to carry out house-to-house searches in a hunt for weapons.

The military assault was preceded by violent attacks by right-wing paramilitary units that work in close collaboration with the army. Both the military and the rightist paramilitaries are attempting to wrest control of the area from a militia known as the Armed Command of the People, which is affiliated to Colombia's second-largest guerrilla movement, the National Liberation Army.

The Colombian office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights expressed its "deep concern" over the clashes.

Many residents of the neighborhood said that the army assault had forced them to take cover in their homes, preventing them from going to work, while some 6,000 students were kept out of schools and health clinics in the area were shut down. High-powered bullets in some cases found their victims after crashing through the windows and walls of homes.

Wounded civilians who streamed into the health clinic in the San Javier neighborhood recounted how a helicopter gunship flew over and began firing its machine-gun into the crowded residential area.

"We're under fire from machine-guns," one distraught

woman told the local media. "The bullets come out of the helicopters and fall onto our roofs. It is terrifying. This is like Vietnam."

This escalation of military repression coincides with a marked increase in the US intervention in Colombia's 38-year-old civil war. Washington revealed earlier this month that US Army Special Forces units are being deployed in the country this month for the purpose of training a new Colombian special forces commando battalion dedicated to fighting the armed guerrilla organizations.

Last week, the Bush administration gave official authorization for the Colombian government to use military aid granted under Plan Colombia—whose ostensible purpose was to combat coca cultivation and the export of cocaine—for counterinsurgency operations against the guerrillas. This would include the use of US-supplied Black Hawk helicopters and other equipment.

Congress also recently authorized the Pentagon to begin training two Colombian army brigades that will be assigned permanently to protect the Cano-Limon pipeline, which carries oil that is being pumped out of fields in northern Colombia by Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum.

Special Forces units have begun arriving in the country to train the 5th and 18th Brigades of the Colombian Army to guard the pipeline. Both brigades have been charged by human rights groups with abuses against the civilian population and with working closely with the paramilitary death squads.

Colombia is one of Latin America's poorest nations. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization issued a recent report indicating that fully 11 million Colombians, or approximately one in three, live in poverty. Even the government has recognized that the roots of the country's endemic political violence is widespread misery and the vast gulf between rich and poor.

For US corporate interests, however, Colombia's strategic importance is linked to oil. While the country's known oil reserves amount to 2.6 billion barrels, only about 20 percent of its potential oil fields have been explored. Even now, Colombia is producing roughly the equivalent amount of petroleum that

Kuwait supplied on the eve of the last Persian Gulf War. Together with neighboring Venezuela and Ecuador, it supplies the US market with more oil than all of the Persian Gulf producers combined.

Washington's growing military role in Colombia is aimed essentially at assuring access to this oil, and repressing not only the armed guerrilla movements, but any popular opposition to US corporate domination of the country's natural resources. Occidental Petroleum, Amoco, the ill-fated Enron Corporation—which owned Centragas, a 357-mile natural gas distribution system in northern Colombia—and several other energy firms have jointly lobbied Congress and the administration for increased military aid and involvement in Colombia.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International released a report based on its own investigations as well as those of the United Nations and the Organization of American States warning that President Uribe's "security policies will only serve to entrench the cycle of violence affecting the whole of Colombia."

The report noted that since 1985, more than 60,000 have been killed, four out of five of them civilians, and most of them victims of massacres by right-wing paramilitaries. Last year alone, more than 4,000 civilians were killed in political violence, the human rights group said, and the toll for 2002 is likely to be higher. Those displaced by the conflict, tortured or "disappeared" number in the hundreds of thousands.

Presenting the report at a Madrid press conference, Marcelo Pollack, an investigator for Amnesty International, said that evidence gathered by the human rights group as well as other agencies had demonstrated that "the link between the armed forces and the paramilitaries is an institutional relationship."

The report states: "As the Colombian armed forces have faced mounting international condemnation for human rights violations in recent years they have resorted increasingly to the use of paramilitary auxiliaries to implement the 'dirty war' tactics. The security forces can no longer depend on traditional judicial mechanisms of impunity. International and national attention is increasingly focused on the urgent need to dismantle these mechanisms which have until now guaranteed that members of the armed forces would, in all but the most exceptional cases, escape investigation or appropriate sanction. To circumvent these pressures, those responsible for designing and implementing the 'dirty war' can continue their strategy without fear of prosecution by devolving these tasks to paramilitary forces."

This report further exposes the fraud of legislation passed by the US Congress making the Colombian government's observance of human rights standards a prerequisite for the release of military aid. The act demands effective action to sever ties between the Colombian army and the paramilitaries. Last month, the State Department once again "certified" Colombia's compliance with the act, clearing the way for the release of another \$70 million in training, arms and munitions

Amnesty International also condemned the government's attempt to create a network of civilian informers that would recruit up to one million Colombians to aid the military in counterinsurgency operations. The Army claims it has already signed up 40,000. This initiative, the human rights group warned, will "inevitably further fuel the spiral of political violence." The creation of similar civilian units in the province of Antioquia, when Uribe was governor, gave rise to death squads that in many cases became the forerunners of the present paramilitary units.

The report provides a detailed account of the reign of terror implemented by the Colombian army and its paramilitary allies in San Vicente del Caguán, one of five municipalities that made up the demilitarized zone that was controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

After talks between the government and the guerrillas were broken off last February, the town, which served as the guerrilla organization's headquarters, was retaken by the military in an operation that included an aerial bombardment that inflicted heavy civilian casualties.

According to the human rights group, the military has branded the district's civilian population as guerrilla collaborators, subjecting them to a relentless campaign of harassment. This has included the arbitrary searches of workers' and peasants' homes, accompanied by the destruction and theft of property and the burning of some residences. The military has also arrested many people without charges, refusing to inform relatives that they are under detention or why they have been taken.

Residents of the area also recounted incidents in which those detained have been physically tortured to force them to identify members of the FARC or their collaborators from photo albums carried by military interrogators. One young unemployed man told Amnesty International that soldiers had wrapped a wet towel around his head, blocking his nose and mouth, and then poured water on it, asphyxiating him. When he continued to deny that he was a guerrilla, they went on to other methods.

"So they burned me with a cigarette in the neck," he said. "They asked me how long I had been with the guerrillas and I said I wasn't a guerrilla, so they burned my arms and feet with the cigarette [...] They threw me to the ground and stamped on my face, feet and arms and began to cut my feet and stomach with a machete. They grabbed my testicles and placed the edge of the machete on them [...] I then felt a blow to my head and passed out."



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