

Washington escalates military buildup in Latin America

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Under the pretext of combating terrorism, the Bush Administration is promoting the most intense US military buildup in Latin America since Washington backed a series of military coups that brought right-wing military dictatorships to power in much of the continent in the 1960s and 1970s.

The resurgence of American militarism in what US imperialism has historically regarded as its “own backyard” was evident at the fifth Conference of Defence Ministers of the Americas held in Santiago, Chile in late November. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, together with top American military commanders, attended the meeting.

Citing terrorism, drug and arms trafficking, organized crime and other “new transnational threats,” Rumsfeld told the Latin American defence ministers that it was necessary to “strengthen the operational and planning capabilities of partner nations, upgrade national command-and-control systems, and improve regional information-sharing.” He proposed cooperation in naval operations and the creation of an integrated military force that could “participate as a region in peacekeeping and stability operations.”

In the lead-up to the conference, the US floated stories that Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, and other Islamic fundamentalist groups had developed “ sleeper cells” in the tri-border area between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, a claim discounted by all three countries. Rumsfeld, however, pressed the issue at the defence conference, alleging that there were “thousands of Al Qaeda spread across the globe and, no doubt, there are some in the hemisphere besides the US and Canada.”

Much of the discussion at the defence ministers’ meeting concerned the ongoing military intervention in Colombia. Plan Colombia funding approved in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks already marked a dramatic escalation of US operations in the country. Washington has shifted the axis of its intervention from a “drug war” to the “global war on terrorism.” Legislation approved last year by the US Congress specifically sanctioned the Colombian government’s use of US military aid for counterinsurgency operations against the country’s guerrilla movements.

While the bulk of the media coverage of Washington’s multi-billion-dollar military operations in Colombia has focused on anti-narcotics efforts and guerrilla activity, the Pentagon’s intervention there—like the impending war against Iraq—is driven by US determination to assert control over the country’s extensive

strategic oil reserves.

Besides the giant Cano-Limon oil field in Arauca province operated by Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum, British Petroleum operates the Cusiana and Cupiagua fields in the foothills of the eastern Andes. Canadian and US firms have secured rights from the Colombian government to explore potential reserves of 2.5 billion barrels in the Putumayo Basin. It is estimated that only about 20 percent of the country’s potential oil fields have been explored. Neighboring Venezuela and Ecuador are already major petroleum exporters.

On December 3, US Secretary of State Colin Powell travelled to Colombia to announce that the Bush administration had requested \$537 million from Congress in 2003 for Plan Colombia. The total spent on aid to Colombia comes to over \$2.3 billion since 2000, making the Latin American country the third largest recipient of US military assistance in the world. More than \$130 million is to be used to send dozens of Special Operations forces to train two Colombian army brigades protecting the Cano-Limon pipeline.

In a clear sign that the US forces are being prepared for direct military involvement, Powell pressed the Colombian government to formally exempt all American forces serving in Colombia from future war crimes prosecution at the International Criminal Court.

Having allocated \$180 million to the Andean Ridge nations of Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Panama, the Pentagon is paving the way to intervene militarily in these countries on the same pretext used in Plan Colombia. The Pentagon has already made inroads into Ecuador, where US forces are training the military. It has also established a joint Peruvian and Colombian training centre in Iquitos and set up a military presence in Bolivia’s Chapare coca-growing region.

Rumsfeld also used the conference to elaborate a security structure that the Pentagon’s Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)—responsible for US military activities in Latin America and the Caribbean—has worked to develop since the fall of the Soviet Union. The purpose of this structure is to utilize US military strength to tighten Washington’s political and economic stranglehold over the hemisphere.

“Given the increased importance and geographic proximity of the region, our theatre security cooperation focuses on ... affording our forces greater access, if needed, during crisis response,” SOUTHCOM’s acting commander-in-chief, Major General Gary D. Speer, told Congress earlier this year. “Southern Command security cooperation seeks to expand United States influence and

to reassure our friends, while dissuading and deterring potential adversaries,” he added.

In many ways, the Pentagon’s plans mark a return at a higher level to the so-called National Security system that prevailed from the 1960s through the 1980s, when the military ruled much of Latin America. The central thesis of this military doctrine was that the security of the Latin America regimes was threatened not by outside military powers, but by their own people. Its realization during that period entailed the murder, torture and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of workers, students, intellectuals and others seen as opponents of US-backed regimes.

While the pretext for the repression then was “communist subversion,” the justification given for the proposed new joint security system is “terrorism.”

Following the closure of its base of operations in Panama in 1999, SOUTHCOM moved its component headquarters to Puerto Rico, and has since established three additional air bases in Ecuador, the Netherlands Antilles and El Salvador. With these bases, the US military is able to project air power over the Eastern Pacific, the Western Caribbean, all of Central America, and South America’s Andean ridge.

Purportedly used for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions to monitor and perform interdiction operations in the so-called drug “source and transit zones,” the bases also provide a launching pad for military interventions.

Washington has already set in place the intelligence-sharing networks discussed by Rumsfeld at the November security meeting. Previously restricted to counter-narcotics operations, arrangements such as the South American Net, the Caribbean Information Sharing Network, and the Cooperating Nations Information Exchange will be used to repress not only the armed guerrilla movements, but any popular opposition to US corporate domination over the region’s resources.

A week prior to the hemispheric defence meeting, President George W. Bush requested that Congress ratify an anti-terrorist convention adopted by the Organization of American States earlier in the year. Like Operation Condor, a clandestine agreement between the security forces of five Latin American dictatorships that cooperated in exterminating left-wing and working class opponents in the mid 1970s, the convention mandates the establishment of an intelligence database to collect and disseminate to security forces information concerning “terrorist” organizations.

The type of information that is to be shared was made clear several years ago, when Paraguayan attorney and human rights advocate Martin Almada made public a secret memo sent by a Paraguayan colonel to the Conference of American Armies then being held in Quito, Ecuador. Entitled “subversion in the first semester of 1997 in Paraguay,” this document provided a list of alleged “subversives” that included the country’s trade union leaders, opposition politicians and students, as well as social and peasant organizations. Presumably, similar lists are being prepared by military intelligence throughout the hemisphere.

Over the past decade, the Pentagon has stepped up inter-regional military exercises and multilateral operations. In 2001 alone, the American military conducted 17 combined exercises and 178

training deployments, using more than 12,000 US troops. The most recent and largest joint exercise was Cabañas 2002, held in Chile.

As during the Cold War era, the links with Latin America’s military commanders and chiefs of state are reinforced by institutions like the US Army’s School of the Americas. It was at this and other American schools that mass murderers such as Chile’s secret police chief, Manuel Contreras, and Argentina’s military dictators, generals Roberto Viola and the recently deceased Leopoldo Galtieri, were inculcated with anti-communist doctrine. The US International Military Education and Training program (IMET), described by SOUTHCOM as “the backbone of our combined professionalization and military education,” trained 2,684 Latin American military officers and civilians in 2000 and has projected a steady increase in student intakes.

Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, meanwhile, have participated in UN observer missions and peacekeeping operations “as a measure to free United States troops for other missions,” wrote General Speer, adding that Chile’s commitment to purchase ten F-16 fighter jets “opens the door for even more cooperation and bilateral training with an eye toward increased interoperability and coalition operations.”

One indication that such “coalition operations” may already be in the works came in a little noted report published by *Jornal do Brasil* last July. The newspaper revealed that the Chilean government of President Ricardo Lagos is considering plans to send three army battalions—up to 2,600 men—into Colombia as part of a multinational force led by the US. When the article appeared, the Chilean government categorically denied that it is contemplating such a deployment.

Rumsfeld, however, indicated during his recent visit to Chile that other countries besides the US were already providing Colombia with military assistance. “I think it is hard for a single country to solve problems that are global or regional... it is not surprising that other countries want to participate,” the defence secretary told the Santiago daily *La Tercera*.

In requesting additional defence funding from the US Congress, General Speer reported that the SOUTHCOM’s current capabilities “fall short of meeting our requirements, particularly where we need to be proactive rather than reactive in crucial mission areas such as combating terrorism, force protection, counterdrug support, and anticipating crisis.”

This last area is undoubtedly the most crucial from the standpoint of US strategic interests. After decades of International Monetary Fund-prescribed austerity programs, the bulk of Latin America is already plunged into a deep social and economic crisis. Washington fears that worsening conditions will provoke revolutionary upheavals on the part of the working class and oppressed rural masses. It is this danger that the new military strategies are designed to confront.



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