

As Green Berets deploy in war zone

Colombian president seeks massive US intervention

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In a remarkable comment to the international press last month, Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe Velez called upon Washington to mount a military intervention in his country equal in scope to the one that is now being prepared against Iraq.

"I believe that the drug-trafficking and terrorism conflict in Colombia is more serious for the democratic stability of the continent in the medium and long term than the Iraq conflict itself," said Uribe. "If they are mounting this deployment in the face of Iraq, why don't they consider a similar one to put an end once and for all to the transport of cocaine between Colombia and California, for example."

Uribe, a right-wing pro-Washington politician who took office six months ago, made the comments at the swearing in ceremony for Ecuador's new president, Lucio Gutierrez, in Quito January 14. He repeated the statement in several interviews and told other Latin American presidents present for the inauguration that he intends to press for his proposal in bilateral meetings with Washington as well as in multilateral forums. He indicated that European countries as well as Latin American military forces could be invited to contribute naval and air power to interdict traffic in drugs and arms.

The plea for a full-scale US military intervention in the region is a reflection of the desperation of Uribe and the Colombian oligarchy that he represents in face of the country's deepening economic and social disintegration. Even as the military presence has increased in Colombia, there is a sense within the country's ruling elite that the attention of official Washington is fixated exclusively on the Persian Gulf and that it is not paying attention to the mounting crisis in Latin America.

Colombia is already the third-largest recipient of US military aid, with some \$2 billion having gone to Plan Colombia, a military program initiated by the Clinton administration ostensibly to combat cocaine production in the country. The Bush administration has since September 11, 2001 designated the US intervention in Colombia as part of its worldwide "war on terrorism." It has explicitly permitted the use of US military assistance in prosecuting a counterinsurgency campaign against two Colombian guerrilla movements: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

Last month, the Pentagon carried out a qualitative escalation of the US intervention in Colombia, sending a contingent of 70 Special Forces troops to the province of Arauca, one of the country's most violent regions, to train a newly formed Colombian army brigade.

The mission of this new unit will be fighting the FARC and ELN and protecting the Cano-Limon oil pipeline from attack. The pipeline

carries oil pumped out of the fields operated by the California-based Occidental Petroleum. This marks the first time that US soldiers have been sent with the stated assignment of training Colombian forces to combat the guerrillas. Previously, they operated under the official pretext that the military was being assisted in cocaine eradication efforts. It was claimed that the conflict with the guerrillas was a concern only to the extent that the FARC and the ELN hampered the battle to wipe out illicit drug crops.

One US official said last month that the Green Berets are training the Colombian troops not only to guard the 490-mile-long pipeline against attacks, but to "sniff out" the guerrillas. In other words, they will be teaching the same kind of counterinsurgency "search-and-destroy" tactics that were employed in Vietnam, El Salvador and elsewhere with catastrophic results for the civilian population.

While US officials have insisted that the Green Berets are assigned to training duties only and are strictly prohibited from engaging in combat, Colombian newspapers have already published photographs of heavily armed US troops operating together with Colombian forces.

The connection between the impending war in Iraq and the growing US intervention in Colombia is not just in Uribe's head. Colombia is the seventh-largest exporter of crude oil to the US market, and it is believed to have some of the greatest untapped reserves in the world. Given the threat of war disrupting oil supplies from the Persian Gulf, together with the continuing effects of the employers' strike in Venezuela, oil coming out of Colombia could provide a crucial margin in an attempt to hold down prices.

The expanded US military presence in Arauca has contributed to a steady escalation of violence in the oil-rich northeastern province. Uribe declared the province a "rehabilitation and consolidation zone" last September, giving the military extraordinary powers to arrest and hold people without charges, search homes and restrict internal movement.

Just this week, Uribe announced proposals to reinforce the Colombian military presence in the province and the appointment of a new governor. The last one, a retired army colonel, resigned saying that the situation was uncontrollable.

Colombia's Minister of Defense Marta Lucia Ramirez, meanwhile, has unveiled plans for a dramatic increase in the size of Colombia's armed forces. The proposed buildup includes the creation of 11 new mobile brigades, the strengthening of the military intelligence apparatus and the addition of 10,000 new members to the National Police. Some 35,000 additional soldiers would swell the army's ranks.

Meanwhile, the Uribe regime has proposed the recruitment of a vast

network of informants that is supposed to include some 1.5 million Colombians. The military has reportedly attempted to initiate this program in the zones of conflict by pressuring school children with threats and bribes to inform on their neighbors. The government has also proposed the recruitment of at least 15,000 “peasant soldiers” to carry out vigilante activities in the rural areas.

The recently initiated “negotiations” between the government and the right-wing paramilitary outfit known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) are widely seen as a bid to legalize and reorganize these elements as part of the government’s new official vigilante force.

The AUC functions as an auxiliary force of repression, operating in close collaboration with the military while receiving ample financial support from both drug traffickers and the Colombian oligarchy. Human rights groups have estimated that it is responsible for over 80 percent of civilian deaths in Colombia’s protracted civil war. Its death squads target not only suspected guerrilla supporters, but union activists, human rights advocates and leaders of peasant and social action groups. Last year, more than 8,000 such killings were recorded in Colombia.

The AUC leadership proclaimed a “truce” as a precondition for the talks with the government, but it has continued the killings, including the recent massacre of 11 farmworkers in the province of Antioquia.

While the US State Department declared the AUC a “foreign terrorist” organization and officially requested the extradition of two of its principal leaders, Washington has in practice turned a blind eye to the close collaboration between the army and the death squads. It has also flaunted US laws requiring a severing of such ties as a condition for military aid to Colombia. There is substantial evidence that the CIA and Pentagon themselves played a major role in forging the intimate connections between the military and AUC under a US-supervised reorganization of Colombia’s military intelligence apparatus over a decade ago.

With the “dialogue” between AUC and the Uribe regime—brokered by the Catholic Church hierarchy—the conditions are being created to legitimize the death squads and provide them with direct state funding.

During a brief visit to Bogota in December, Secretary of State Colin Powell gave Washington’s blessing to the negotiations with a group that the US government has described as terrorist, while repeating for the record the State Department’s extradition request. “The US will stand behind President Uribe as he moves down this road,” he said.

For its part, the Colombian government has indicated that it is prepared to shelve arrest orders issued against the AUC leaders supposedly wanted by Washington.

Retired US Army Lt. Gen. Gordon Summer, who served as the Reagan administration’s special envoy to Latin America, provided a somewhat more candid assessment in an interview with the *Washington Times*. “The battle is never too crowded to have friends,” he said. “First have them answer the law, cut out the drugs, and embrace human rights. Try to bring them under the tent, to fight against the guerrillas, who are the biggest threat.”

The Bush administration successfully pressured for an end to peace talks with the main guerrilla movement over a year ago. Unlike the FARC—which the US also branded as a terrorist organization—the AUC is a vocal proponent of the economic policies prescribed by Washington and the International Monetary Fund. “We are defenders of business freedom and of the national and international industrial sectors,” declared the right-wing paramilitaries’ principal leader,

Carlos Castaño, one of those whose extradition the State Department has requested.

With the government’s protection, these paramilitary elements are already being used with numbing regularity against opponents of Uribe’s social and economic policies. According to human rights groups, three out of every four murders of trade union leaders and activists worldwide take place in Colombia. More than 150 unionists were assassinated last year, while scores more were reported disappeared.

Last month, security forces raided the headquarters of the CUT union federation in Cali, while prosecutors have sought the arrest of other union leaders on “terrorism” charges for organizing protests against death squad murders of their members.

The Uribe government is implementing policies that can only intensify the class struggle. It recently reached an agreement with the IMF on a \$2.1 billion standby loan conditioned on the implementation of far-reaching privatization and austerity measures.

To cut deficit spending, it is firing 40,000 public employees while drastically reducing social services. Among the agencies that are to be eliminated outright is Colombia’s National Geological Service, which conducts surveys of the country’s mineral resources. This task is now to be left entirely in the hands of Occidental and other foreign oil monopolies.

Following the Bush administration’s instructions that it proceed with “free market” policies, the Uribe regime has carried out a “tax reform” that provides a windfall for the country’s wealthy while raising the sales tax as well as fuel and transportation costs. It has advanced a restructuring of the country’s pension system, cutting benefits and raising the retirement age. A “labor reform” raises the maximum working day to 16 hours, freezes salaries and attacks other workers rights.

The government’s policies, aimed at fulfilling debt payment requirements that consume nearly 40 percent of the national budget, are deepening the pervasive social misery in a country where at least 20 percent of the economically active population is unemployed and 70 percent of the people live in poverty.

Behind Uribe’s call for a massive US military intervention lies the growing fear within Colombian ruling circles that these conditions will give rise to a social explosion that will prove a far greater threat to their wealth and privilege than the conflict with the guerrillas.



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