

After capture of Pentagon contractors:

Wider US war threatened in Colombia

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The threat of a wider US war in Colombia just as Washington is preparing to unleash an invasion of Iraq has escalated sharply following the killing of a Pentagon contractor and the abduction of three others by guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The incident occurred February 14 after the airplane in which the four Americans and one Colombian soldier—who was also killed—were flying made an emergency landing in an area in the south of the country that has long been a FARC stronghold.

The circumstances surrounding the downing of the Cessna aircraft, as well as the identity and mission of its American passengers, remain shrouded in mystery as both Pentagon and US State Department officials have refused to release any information.

Even after the body of the one US contractor killed was flown back on Sunday, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher refused to identify the dead man, claiming it was out of “respect” for relatives.

The US government plane had landed near the town of Florencia, about 250 miles south of the Colombian capital of Bogota. Apparently, the two men killed had attempted to resist capture. Officials said that the plane was traveling from Bogota to a military base at the southern town of Tres Esquinas.

The incident marks the first time that a US citizen acting in an official capacity has been killed since Washington began a steady escalation of its military intervention in Colombia under the Carter administration. Today, the South American country trails only Israel and Egypt as the third-largest recipient of US military aid.

About \$2 billion in arms aid has poured into Colombia, first under the pretext of combating cocaine.

Since September 11, 2001, however, the Bush administration has proclaimed the US intervention to be part of its global “war on terrorism.”

It has now explicitly assigned weaponry and US military personnel to assist the Colombian army in waging a four-decade-old counter-insurgency campaign that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. It likewise unveiled a new program that last month brought 70 US Special Forces soldiers to the war-torn province of Arauca where they are to organize Colombian army troops in the protection of a 500-mile pipeline that carries oil from fields operated by the Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum Corp.

The four Americans on the plane apparently were not involved in drug eradication, as claimed by some official sources, but electronic spying on the FARC guerrillas. *Washington Post* columnist Robert Novak cited sources in the US Embassy in Bogota as saying that the civilian contractors were from a company called California Microwave Inc based in Sunnyvale, California.

The unit, now a subsidiary of the Northrop Grumman arms-manufacturing giant, specializes in airborne reconnaissance and surveillance systems. “Mission planning involves the use of computer-aided systems to provide planners with checklists of activities necessary to ensure a successful mission by the warfighter,” according to the company’s web site. In other words, the mission in Colombia was in all likelihood one of providing targeting information for air strikes by Colombian warplanes against FARC positions.

Washington’s use of such contractors has become increasingly pervasive in recent years. Such arrangements are used both to increase the amount of military-related personnel on the ground in given countries beyond the numbers authorized under

existing legislation and to use contractors to perform the kind of activities that are specifically prohibited for soldiers in uniform.

At present, there are some 500 US military advisers in Colombia and at least another 300 civilian, many of these ex-military personnel. In addition, some 83 US helicopters are being used in the Colombian counterinsurgency campaign.

The Colombian government has deployed some 4,000 troops in an attempt to recover the three Americans. US FBI agents as well as military personnel have joined the operation.

Meanwhile, a Congressional delegation visiting Colombia issued threats that the abduction of the three Pentagon contractors would provoke severe “retaliation” from the US military.

Rep. Tom Davis, a Virginia Republican and chairman of the House Governmental Reform Committee, told the Colombian press, “I don’t think there is any question that this precipitous act by the FARC is going to meet with very strong retaliation. Precisely what happens is being discussed as we speak, but they’ve made a very grave error.” He added that the incident had proven that the FARC was not a “legitimate” group, but rather “bandits and outside the law” and would bring “a greater commitment” from the US.

“We have many areas in the world where we are involved, but Congress and this administration will carry out whatever actions are necessary,” added Rep. James Moran, a Virginia Democrat. “The details of what will happen are being discussed, but the FARC committed a very serious error and are going to have to pay a very high price for this.”

Davis described the US contractor who was killed as someone who had “a stellar career serving our military and working here in Colombia.”

Colombia’s right-wing president Alvaro Uribe Velez, has utilized the incident as the pretext for ramming through new “anti-terrorist” legislation that would expand even further the near-dictatorial powers that his government has assumed since taking office last year.

The proposed laws would create a whole series of new “terrorist” crimes. Membership in an organization deemed terrorist by the government, for example, would carry an automatic penalty of five to 10 years in prison, while anyone found to be a leader or “chief of a terrorist cell” could be jailed for 30 to 40 years. In

addition, anyone “promoting terrorism in general” could be imprisoned for two to five years, even if they had no participation in any alleged act of violence.

In a further measure that would impose an iron censorship over the Colombian media, the legislation states that any newspaper or broadcast network that reports “information that could interfere with the effective development of operations by the military and police, places the lives of members of the public forces in danger... or carries out any other act that attacks public order, public moral health, improves the position or image of the enemy or stimulates terrorist activities to cause a greater impact through their actions, will incur a prison sentence of eight to 12 years” along with the shutdown of the offending media outlet.

Meanwhile, Colombia’s civil war has continued to intensify. At least 70 people were reported killed in clashes in the province of Arauca between FARC guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary units backed by the Colombian army.

The fighting erupted last Sunday afternoon when FARC guerrillas attacked the paramilitaries near the border between Arauca and Casanare. Last week, the FARC also reported killing 46 paramilitaries in Putumayo province.



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