

As hunt for captured “contractors” continues

US escalates Colombian military intervention

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1 March 2003

Over the past month, the Pentagon has nearly doubled the number of US military forces it acknowledges are deployed in Colombia, while special operations units are joining directly in a massive search-and-rescue operation that has been mounted to locate three US military contract personnel captured after their plane was downed over guerrilla-held territory February 13.

Another Pentagon contractor and a Colombian military intelligence agent were killed in the incident after they apparently resisted capture by elements of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

According to figures supplied by the Bush administration, the number of US military personnel on the ground in Colombia has climbed from 208 in January to 411 last week. A State Department spokesman disputed published reports that 150 special operations troops had been sent to join the manhunt in the dense jungles of Caqueta province in southern Colombia, where the contractors were captured.

State Department spokesman Philip Reeker claimed on February 25 that only 49 new troops had been brought in to hunt for the captured Americans and that the other 101 new arrivals represented “pre-planned deployments of military planners.” Whatever the case, the incident in Caqueta and the buildup that has followed signals a significant shift in both the size and focus of Washington’s military intervention in the war-torn South American nation.

The Bush administration has continued to withhold any details on the identity or the mission of the Americans captured in Caqueta. The one who was killed, however, was identified as Thomas Janis, 56, a retired career soldier and Vietnam veteran thought to have been the pilot of the downed Cessna aircraft.

Janis and the other three Americans worked for California Microwave Systems, a subsidiary of Northrop Grumman, one of the Pentagon’s largest contractors. The company specializes in aerial surveillance equipment. US

and Colombian sources have indicated that the plane was involved in an attempt to target leaders of the FARC for an attack by the Colombian armed forces.

The FARC has declared the three Americans “prisoners of war,” offering to release them in exchange for the guerrilla group’s own imprisoned members. At the same time, it has warned that the massive military operation that has been mounted in search for the captured Americans could put their lives in danger. An estimated 3,000 Colombian troops, backed by helicopter gunships and US military and FBI “advisors,” are involved in the manhunt. Both the US and Colombian governments have ruled out any prisoner exchange.

The province where the search is taking place was once a huge demilitarized zone established in 1999 as part of a truce between the Colombian government and the FARC. But the truce, which was opposed by the Bush administration, ended a year ago and Colombian troops and right-wing paramilitary squads rushed back into the area, unleashing a wave of killings of suspected guerrilla sympathizers. The FARC, however, continues to control much of the jungle and the outlying villages.

The incident in Caqueta has had the effect of sharply accelerating what is already a qualitative expansion of US involvement in Colombia’s civil war. The US has sent some \$2 billion in military aid to Colombia, making it the third-largest recipient of such assistance, trailing only Israel and Egypt.

The country’s right-wing president, Alvaro Uribe Velez, has sought an expanded US involvement in the country ever since he was elected last May, suggesting recently that Washington should mount a military operation in Colombia on a similar scale as the one being prepared against Iraq.

Colombia’s Vice President Francisco Santos felt compelled last week to deny that the steady increase in the number of US military “advisers” on Colombian soil represented a “Vietnamization of the Colombian

conflict.” Suggestions to the contrary, he affirmed, were the work of “enemies of the US aid to Colombia.”

Meanwhile, the Bush administration has shifted the axis of US involvement in Colombia from the so-called “war on drugs,” which was the pretext for the “Plan Colombia” military aid program begun under the Clinton administration, to the “global war on terrorism.” The effect has been to free up military resources that had previously been provided for coca-eradication efforts to be used in counterinsurgency campaigns against the FARC and another guerrilla movement, the National Liberation Army, or ELN.

The downing of the US spy plane over Caqueta is only one in a series of setbacks for this counterinsurgency campaign that together could pressure Washington to increase its direct military involvement. On Wednesday, 23 Colombian troops died when a US-supplied Black Hawk helicopter crashed in the mountainous northeast of the country in the midst of an anti-guerrilla operation. While military sources initially blamed the crash on weather conditions, peasants in the area reported that they heard gunfire before the helicopter went down. The US has supplied Colombia with nearly 50 Black Hawks for use as gunships and to transport troops.

Meanwhile, the campaign has increasingly focused on protecting US oil interests in Colombia, with the deployment of some 70 US Special Forces troops and the allocation of \$98 million for the training of a new Colombian brigade to guard the oil pipeline that is jointly operated by Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum and Ecopetrol (Empresa Colombiana de Petroleo), Colombia’s state-run oil company. With a war against Iraq imminent and continuing disruption of supplies from Venezuela, a steady flow of oil from Colombia has become an increasingly important US interest.

Part of this battle to secure US domination of the country’s oil wealth is being waged against Colombia’s oil workers, one of the most combative sectors of the country’s workforce.

Colombian army troops and police are continuing to occupy the country’s two main oil refineries in Cartagena and Barrancabermeja after they were brought in February 21 to suppress a protest march by workers inside the Barrancabermeja facility. Nine workers were wounded and 15 arrested in the confrontation, which saw security forces use tear gas and rubber bullets against the workers.

The union representing some 6,000 employees at state-run Ecopetrol is currently negotiating a contract and has denounced attempts by the government to roll back gains

won over decades by the oil workers. In particular, it has opposed provisions allowing the contracting out of work, which is says is part of the Uribe government’s preparations to privatize the country’s oil resources.

Workers have charged that the government is conducting a lockout by militarizing the refineries, while management insists that it is guarding against “sabotage” and “subversion,” implicitly threatening the union with the same treatment meted out to the guerrillas.

The union has also denounced a deal between the government and Texaco-Chevron that cedes control of one of the country’s main natural gas fields in La Guajira to the multinational for another 12 years after the current contract expires next year. Under the existing deal, Ecopetrol was to take over both the gas reserves and the infrastructure in December 2004.

The union, the USO, has also pointed to deals ceding control of pipelines to the foreign oil companies, the elimination of subsidies on gas prices, the slashing of maintenance budgets for the refineries and a halt to independent exploration for new oil reserves as warnings that the Uribe government is planning to sell off the country’s petroleum resources to the multinationals.

The oil workers union issued a statement denouncing the repressive measures of the Uribe government and linking them to the Bush administration’s war drive: “behind the policy of smashing the USO there is hidden a perverse proposal for paving the way to the liquidation of Ecopetrol as the public property of the Colombians and to deprive the nation of the exploration, exploitation, refining, transportation, distribution and technological investigation of petroleum and other strategic fuels for national development.

“The attack is not separate from Bush’s crusade to trade ‘blood for oil’, which was justly denounced last week by formidable demonstrations of millions of people throughout the world against the unjust war against Iraq that is promoted by North American imperialism.”

The oil workers union has suffered persistent repression at the hands of both the military and the right-wing death squads. Since 1988, more than 80 oil workers, including a number of union leaders, have been murdered, without any action taken by the government against their killers.



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