

Bush pledges more funds for Colombia's dirty war

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President George W. Bush used a brief stopover in the Colombian seashore city of Cartagena Monday to announce his intention to pour billions more in US military aid into the country's 40-year-old civil war.

As with his entire Latin American tour, the extraordinary security arrangements for the US president overshadowed anything he had to say. The entire city was placed under a state of siege. Some 15,000 military personnel were mobilized, all air and sea travel in the vicinity was cancelled, and the streets were lined with heavily armed troops.

Bush made his way from the airport to a military installation in an armored Cadillac that had been flown in from Washington for his three-and-a-half-hour visit. He was isolated from any contact with the people, delivering a short speech and taking only three questions from reporters at an appearance with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, held at the Colombian Naval School of Cadets.

"Plan Colombia enjoys wide bipartisan support in my country, and next year I will ask our Congress to renew its support so that this courageous nation can win its war against narco-terrorists," Bush declared in his prepared remarks.

Under "Plan Colombia," Washington has provided the Colombian government with some \$3 billion worth of helicopters, arms and military training since the program was inaugurated under the Clinton administration in 2000. The program has made Colombia the third largest recipient of US military assistance, following Israel and Egypt. The funding is set to expire in December 2005.

Initially, the Clinton administration maintained the pretense that the military hardware was intended solely for the eradication of coca cultivation, as part of a joint effort to stem the export of cocaine from Colombia to

the US. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US, however, the Bush administration incorporated the Colombian civil war into its global "war on terrorism." It erased any distinction between attacking narcotics trafficking and suppressing the country's rural-based guerrillas, whom it and the Colombian government refer to as "narco-terrorists."

Bush praised Uribe for bringing about "significant results" through Plan Colombia, declaring, "[T]he number of acres under cultivation are down significantly. The number of arrests are up." He added, "Since July of last year, dozens of leaders and financiers of the FARC narco-terrorist organization had been killed or captured."

The reality is that Colombia remains the source of some 90 percent of the cocaine coming into the US, and there is no sign that the drug is any less available today than it was four years ago. The attempt to eradicate crops through aerial fumigation has only led to the dispersal of coca fields over a far larger area of Colombia and into neighboring countries, which ship coca leaves back for processing.

The Bush administration has expanded the US intervention in Colombia with the organization of a specific military aid program aimed at protecting an oil pipeline running through the province of Putumayo against guerrilla attacks. A special Colombian army battalion was created for that purpose, with its operations directed by US Special Forces advisors. Meanwhile, Washington has pushed through "free market" reforms that have opened up Colombia's oil fields to nearly unrestricted exploitation by US-based energy corporations.

On October 10, with the passage of the 2005 Defense Authorization Act, the US Congress approved a provision doubling the size of the US military

contingent permanently deployed in Colombia from 400 to 800. It also raised the ceiling on the number of US-supplied military contractors and mercenaries from 400 to 600. These forces are regularly supplemented by military units rotating through Colombia on “exercises” and training missions.

In the course of Bush’s fleeting encounter with the Colombian press, one reporter asked him if he supported the Uribe government’s negotiations with the right-wing paramilitary forces organized under the umbrella of the AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia).

There is a long record of close collaboration between the Colombian military and the AUC, which has been the end recipient of not a small share of the increased military aid from Washington. The rightist paramilitaries have been blamed for the lion’s share of massacres of civilians and assassinations of trade unionists, peasant organizers and other perceived opponents of the government and Colombia’s ruling elite.

The Uribe government is negotiating with the AUC leaders, including several who are under indictment in the US on drug-trafficking charges, seeking the organization’s military demobilization in return for what amounts to amnesty for the crimes it has carried out. Critics have charged that several leaders of drug cartels have joined the talks, claiming to be part of the AUC, in order to avoid prosecution or bargain for sharply reduced penalties. According to some estimates, AUC and traffickers under its protection account for 40 percent of Colombian cocaine exports.

During 2003, the last year in which the government attempted a negotiated settlement with the AUC, the ultra-rightist group carried out 16 massacres, 362 assassinations and 180 kidnappings.

Bush dodged the question about Uribe’s talks with the AUC, answering with praise for the Colombian government’s “effective strategy and the willingness to fight the FARC.” This exchange accurately reflected the US government’s indifference to the war crimes and drug trafficking of the Colombian rightists—even though Washington has officially classified the AUC as a terrorist organization—while it calls for a redoubled offensive against the anti-government guerrillas.

Bush’s lightning visit to Cartagena marked the fifth time he has met with Uribe since the latter’s election in

2002. The Colombian president is the only leader of a major Latin American country who supported the US invasion of Iraq. He has hewed so closely to the US foreign policy line that Colombians refer to him as *Bushito*, or little Bush.

The last meeting between the two took place in April at the White House, where they announced an agreement to pursue a bilateral free trade pact. Uribe referred repeatedly to the proposed pact in his remarks on Monday, stressing “the importance of the legal agricultural economy in Colombia prospering to give real alternatives to our peasants.” Bush, however, remained virtually silent on the pending deal.

One senior Colombian diplomat expressed the Uribe regime’s disappointment over Bush’s failure to strongly endorse the pact. “The backing in the struggle against drugs and matters of cooperation was magnificent,” he told the AFP news agency, “even though I must admit that we had hoped for a more forceful pronouncement in relation to President Uribe’s appeal for achieving the signing of the free trade agreement.”

Washington’s focus is not the signing of free trade pacts in Latin America, but rather the escalation of its military intervention in the region as a means of asserting control over its markets and sources of strategic raw materials, particularly oil.



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