

Mounting provocations against Venezuela

Washington backs kidnapping of Colombian guerrilla exile in Caracas

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The barrage of US provocations against Venezuela since the beginning of the year is a clear indication that the oil-rich South American country will be one of the principal targets in the global war on “tyranny” elaborated by George W. Bush in his inauguration speech last week.

The latest campaign mounted by Washington has centered on the kidnapping in Caracas last month of a senior international representative of the Colombian guerrilla movement, the FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

The FARC representative, Rodrigo Granda, was abducted by a combined force of US-trained Colombian special forces and elements of the Venezuelan military, who were reportedly paid over \$1.5 million to collaborate in the kidnapping. Several Venezuelan national guardsmen—ironically, leading members of an elite anti-kidnapping unit—have been placed under arrest for their part in the seizure of Granda.

The operation, a flagrant violation of Venezuela’s national sovereignty, recalled the cross-border seizures and murders of exiled political dissidents carried out by Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s under the CIA-backed “Operation Condor.”

While branded a “terrorist” by both the rightist government of President Alvaro Uribe in Colombia and the Bush administration in Washington, Granda was a public figure who served as a political spokesman for the FARC, traveling to numerous conferences in Latin America and Europe.

On December 8 and 9, just days before his kidnapping, Granda had addressed a Venezuelan government-sponsored “Bolivarian Congress of the Peoples” attended by other international delegations. He had not been charged with any crime, outside of speaking publicly against the policies of the US-backed Colombian regime.

Washington’s reaction to the escalating diplomatic confrontation between Venezuela and Colombia provoked by the incident leaves no doubt that the kidnapping involved US collaboration and constituted a deliberate extension of the Bush administration’s “global war on terror.”

In its manner of execution, the kidnapping bore the hallmarks of the criminal and unilateral military aggression that has characterized this so-called war by the US administration. No warning was given to the Venezuelan government, much less any evidence of Granda’s supposed guilt or formal request for his extradition. Rather, the FARC official was grabbed off the street in downtown Caracas, forced into a vehicle and taken incommunicado across the border in violation of international law.

Granda was a political refugee who had fled Colombia because of the murderous repression that successive governments there have unleashed against the left, the working class and the poor. He had lived in Venezuela for several years and enjoyed dual citizenship.

The movement that he represented, the FARC, has existed in Colombia for over 40 years. It has exerted control over large sections of the country and, on various occasions, participated in negotiations with the

government. In the mid-1980s, it declared a truce and sought to enter politics through a new party, the Union Patriótica. While the party gained broad popular support, its candidates and members were subjected to relentless repression, with some 5,000 of them—teachers, workers, intellectuals—murdered or “disappeared” at the hands of government security forces and right-wing death squads.

The Colombian government defended its cross-border kidnapping, declaring in an official statement that it had “the right to free itself from the nightmare of terrorism.” It described its bribing of Venezuelan military personnel as a “bounty,” which it said was a “legitimate instrument of state, which aids in the process of defeating terror.”

US Ambassador to Colombia William Wood affirmed “100 percent support” for the Colombian statement, declaring it of “transcendental importance, not only for Colombia but for the struggle against terrorism in the Andean region.”

The Colombian provocation has been accompanied by a series of denunciations of the Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chavez by both US government officials and influential sections of the US media. Most prominently, Condoleezza Rice, Bush’s secretary of state-designate, condemned the Chavez government in the course of her nomination hearing before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee January 18.

“I think it’s extremely unfortunate that the Chavez government has not been constructive,” declared Rice. “And we do have to be vigilant and to demonstrate that we know the difficulties that that government is causing for its neighbors, its close association with Fidel Castro in Cuba...and those relationships are deeply concerning to us and to me.”

She said the US government was “very concerned” about Chavez because he is “a democratically elected leader who governs in an illiberal way.” She described his government as a “negative force” in the region, accusing it of taking “very troubling” steps against the privately owned media and the right-wing opposition in Venezuela.

Rice’s menacing tone was in line with an editorial published by the *Washington Post* just four days before the hearing, entitled “Venezuela’s ‘Revolution.’” It described the Chavez government’s limited land reform efforts as an “assault on private property” and “the latest step in what has been a rapidly escalating ‘revolution’ by Venezuela’s president that is undermining the foundations of democracy and free enterprise in that oil-producing country.” It also cited a proposed arms deal between the Venezuelan government and Russia. The editorial noted that in an earlier period such developments would have sparked a US military intervention.

The *Miami Herald* published a column based on an interview with General James Hill, the outgoing chief of the US Southern Command, which directs US military operations throughout Latin America. Hill charged that Caracas was “allowing the FARC to set up camps” in Venezuela and giving money to the MAS, the Bolivian left-nationalist

movement led by Congressman Evo Morales—charges vehemently denied by both the Venezuelan government and Morales. Hill described Chavez as having “all the potential for becoming a destabilizing factor” and declared that the US government would have to impose “consequences if he continues to meddle with violent groups.”

Finally, the *Wall Street Journal*, whose editorial pages most closely reflect the thinking within the right-wing layers that direct the affairs of the Bush administration, published a column January 21 citing the controversy over the Granda kidnapping. “President Bush has made it clear that any government that gives safe haven to terrorists is a US enemy,” it said. “That would seem to require a more serious approach to whether Venezuela is supporting terrorism in Colombia.” It also cited the Moscow arms proposal and added, “The US cannot ignore Venezuela’s alliance with the worst criminal organizations on the continent or its support of aggression against a neighboring government.”

The Venezuelan government of President Chavez has responded to the kidnapping by withdrawing its ambassador to Colombia, freezing trade relations with the neighboring country, and demanding that the Uribe government issue an apology.

The confrontation with Colombia over the Granda kidnapping was the focus of a mass demonstration in Caracas Sunday marking the 47th anniversary of the 1958 overthrow of Venezuelan military dictator Gen. Marcos Perez Jimenez. The crowd carried banners reading, “Bush: Venezuela is Not Iraq” and “Colombia, Stay Out of Venezuela.” Thousands marched across the city from the sprawling slums of eastern Caracas to the Miraflores presidential palace.

In a speech from the palace balcony, Chavez mocked Rice’s statements at the Senate hearing, referring to the secretary of state-designate as “Condolencia” and describing her as a “complete illiterate on what is happening in Venezuela, the world and in Latin America.”

“The most negative force that there could be for this world is North American imperialism,” said the Venezuelan president. “So if we are classified from there as a negative force, we’re all right.”

Referring to last month’s kidnapping as “one more assault by the US government,” Chavez added, “I am conscious of where this provocation comes from. It comes from Washington, not Bogota.”

The US State Department has attempted to fan the flames of confrontation between Venezuela and Colombia, demanding that the Chavez government respond to a list of alleged “terrorists” presented by the right-wing Colombian regime. Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel described the list as “irrelevant,” noting that it conveniently ignored Colombian drug traffickers and right-wing paramilitaries who had entered Venezuelan territory. Nearly 130 heavily armed Colombian paramilitaries were discovered in the country last year. They were collaborating with Venezuelan rightists in a plot against the government.

The Venezuelan government further indicated that it would draw up its own list of right-wing Venezuelan fugitives harbored by the Uribe government in Colombia. Chief among them is Pedro Carmona, the former head of the Venezuelan business federation, who played a key role in the abortive US-backed coup that saw Chavez briefly deposed and imprisoned in April 2002. The coup attempt led to the deaths of some 60 Venezuelans. Senior Venezuelan military officers involved in the coup are also hiding in Colombia and continuing to plot against the Chavez government from there.

Venezuela’s VTV television network this week carried an interview with a recently retired Colombian army officer who testified that Carmona and the Venezuelan military coup plotters had been allowed to use Colombian military installations to hold meetings.

The Bush administration’s use of the Granda kidnapping to attack Venezuela is the clearest manifestation of the fraud and hypocrisy of the so-called global war on terror. Out of the more than 40,000 civilian

victims of Colombia’s four-decade-old civil war, more than 80 percent have been killed by the military and its allied right-wing death squads. State terrorism has been ruthlessly employed to defend the interests of the native oligarchy and the multinational corporations with investments in Colombia.

Meanwhile, Washington has built up the machinery of state terrorism wielded by the regime in Bogota, providing some \$3 billion in military aid and dispatching some 800 US military “advisers” and another 600 civilian contractors to the country. This vast military program has bought the Bush administration the unqualified support of Uribe, the only Latin American head of state who supports the US intervention in Iraq.

Since Chavez was first elected in 1998, Washington has continuously sought to undermine and topple his government. The Venezuelan president survived the US-backed coup attempt of 2002 thanks to a mass outpouring against the seizure of power. After repeated attempts to unseat him through a presidential referendum, a vote was held on August 15 of last year, with Chavez winning a landslide that was certified by international inspectors, including former US president Jimmy Carter.

Now, it appears that the Bush administration is attempting to paint the Venezuelan government as a state sponsor of terrorism to prepare for possible military aggression. US hostility to the Chavez government is fueled by his anti-imperialist rhetoric and populist reforms. In 2001, the government enacted a land reform law allowing for the redistribution of unused or underutilized land, and it appears that it may now be taking the first steps to meet the demands of landless squatters, who have occupied some estates. According to the latest census figures, 60 percent of Venezuela’s land is owned by 1 percent of the population.

In addition, Washington opposes Venezuela’s policy of supplying Cuba with oil, thereby defying a US blockade designed to strangle the island nation’s economy and force the downfall of the Castro government. This issue looms large among the right-wing ideologues in the Bush administration.

The most essential question in Venezuela, however, is the oil itself, which is why it has joined such other major petroleum producers as Iraq and Iran as a prime target in the “global war on terror.” The South American country currently exports approximately 1.2 million barrels of oil a day to the US. This accounts for nearly 15 percent of American imports and more than half of Venezuela’s total production.

The Chavez government has taken steps both to exert greater control over the country’s oil wealth and diversify its markets. Rising oil prices, meanwhile, have strengthened its political position and given it greater leeway in placing demands on foreign oil companies, as well as in granting concessions to the Venezuelan people.

Last October, Chavez suddenly announced that his government was raising royalties paid by foreign companies pumping oil from the Orinoco fields from 1 percent to 16.6 percent. ChevronTexaco was one of the companies most affected. The government also recently announced that it is reviewing 33 operating agreements negotiated with foreign energy conglomerates in the 1990s to see if they still meet Venezuela’s needs.

Meanwhile, Venezuela has negotiated a series of agreements with China, which is aggressively seeking global energy supplies for its growing economy. The deals grant Chinese oil companies preferential terms in the development of oil and gas exploration and production in Venezuela. In announcing the agreements, Chavez declared expanded relations with Beijing represented the best means of ending “100 years of US domination” of Venezuela’s oil industry. Caracas has reportedly begun negotiations with Panama over the opening of a pipeline to speed exports to China.

US imperialism will not willingly cede hegemony over the largest oil reserves in Latin America. Behind the rhetoric about “democracy” and “terrorism” lie the profit interests of the US oil conglomerates and America’s financial oligarchy.



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