US-backed border massacre brings South America to brink of war

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The Colombian military's massacre last Saturday of 17 members of the guerrilla movement FARC, including its second in command, on Ecuadoran soil has brought tensions in the region to an unprecedented level, raising the serious threat of armed conflict.

Both Ecuador and Venezuela have massed thousands of troops on their borders with Colombia, while breaking off diplomatic relations with the right-wing government of President Alvaro Uribe in Bogota and expelling its ambassadors and diplomatic personnel from Quito and Caracas.

Authorities in Bogota initially claimed that the killing of the FARC leader Raul Reyes and the other guerrillas was a matter of Colombian troops pursuing and killing them in battle. A forensic investigation by Ecuador, however, established that murdered FARC members were the victims of a bombardment launched while they were sleeping and that some of them were then finished off by Colombian ground forces, execution-style.

Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa denounced the attack as a gross violation of Ecuador's sovereignty and warned that the actions of the Uribe government threatened to turn the region into "another Middle East."

Indeed, the killing of Reyes, who served as the FARC's main international representative, pursuing diplomatic contacts in Europe and Latin America, had all the earmarks of a "targeted assassination."

Colombian police officials made no secret of the fact that the targeting was carried out by US security forces, which are extremely active in the south of the country near the Ecuadoran border. US intelligence resources were used to track Reyes's satellite phone, according to the Colombian officials. The US has funneled some US$5 billion in military aid into Colombia under the aegis of "Plan Colombia," an operation that was launched on the pretext of waging a "war on drugs," but which has increasingly been focused on a counterinsurgency campaign against the FARC, a rural-based guerrilla movement that has been fighting government forces for 40 years and which has controlled up to 40 percent of Colombian territory.

Correa indicated in a televised address Monday that the attack was launched in the context of intense discussions involving the Ecuadoran government and Reyes over the release of nearly a dozen high-profile hostages held by the FARC, including the former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three captured US military contractors.

"I regret to inform you that the conversations were very advanced for the freeing in Ecuador of 12 hostages, among them Ingrid Betancourt," said Correa. "It was all frustrated by the militarist and authoritarian hands. We cannot discount that this was one of the motives of the [Colombian] incursion."

The French Foreign Ministry also revealed Tuesday that it had been in discussions with Reyes over the release of hostages—particularly Betancourt, who holds French citizenship—and that the Colombian government was informed of these contacts.

Betancourt's ex-husband denounced the actions of the Uribe government as "abominable," charging that it launched the attack to block any agreement on a hostage release.

The principal committee in support of Ingrid Betancourt's release in France issued a statement declaring its "dismay" over the turn of events. "When the exit door was wide open, dark intentions have preferred to slam it violently shut," it said.

Last December, the Colombian government attempted to sabotage the last efforts to broker a

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hostage release, launching a massive bombardment of the area in which the FARC was supposed to let the hostages go on New Year's Eve. Only 10 days later was it possible for the guerrillas to safely release the two hostages, Clara Rojas, a former vice presidential candidate, and former congresswoman Consuelo Gonzáles.

Uribe's motives are obvious. He has no interest in any negotiated agreement with the FARC, humanitarian or otherwise. Like his patrons in Washington, he has taken the position of no negotiations with "terrorists" and is seeking to maintain himself in power through a relentless campaign of military suppression. The threat that a release of Betancourt and the American contractors would undermine this US-backed policy led to last Saturday's attack in Ecuador.

The Uribe government has attempted to distract international attention from its aggression with a flood of accusations against both the FARC and the governments of Correa in Ecuador and President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. It has claimed that computers captured in the FARC camp in Ecuador revealed that Caracas had supplied the guerrilla movement with funding and arms and that the government in Quito had likewise supported it. The Uribe government claimed it would bring charges against Chavez in the International Criminal Court.

It also claimed that it contained information suggesting that the FARC was attempting to buy uranium to make a "dirty bomb." "This means the FARC is taking big steps in the world of terrorism to become a global aggressor," Gen. Oscar Naranjo, director of Colombia's national police, said during a news conference.

Both Caracas and Quito dismissed the charges. The Venezuelan government announced that it had captured its own computer from a Colombian drug trafficker implicating the Colombian police chief in drug deals.

The US State Department initially stressed that the crisis was a bilateral matter to be worked out diplomatically between Ecuador and Colombia, while condemning the Chavez government for intervening in the matter.

On Tuesday, however, US President George W. Bush made a public statement from the White House unconditionally supporting the Colombian regime's military aggression.

Announcing that he had spoken with Uribe earlier, Bush declared, "I told the President that America fully supports Colombia's democracy, and that we firmly oppose any acts of aggression that could destabilize the region. I told him that America will continue to stand with Colombia as it confronts violence and terror and fights drug traffickers."

He went on to demand that Congress immediately pass a US-Colombian free trade agreement, declaring it a matter of "national security."

Significantly, both of the candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination echoed Bush's unconditional support for the right-wing government of Uribe and its aggression against Ecuador.

Senator Hillary Clinton, speaking Tuesday to the Spanish-language television network Telemundo, asserted that "the Colombian state has the right to defend itself against terrorist drug-trafficking organizations which have kidnapped innocent citizens, including Americans."

She added, "In supporting the FARC, [Venezuelan President] Chavez is openly taking the side of illegal groups that are threatening Colombian democracy and the peace and security of the region."

Taking a nearly identical position, Senator Barack Obama issued a statement declaring, "The Colombian people have suffered more than four decades at the hands of a terrorist insurgency and the Colombian government has every right to defend itself against the FARC."

Neither of the Democrats evinced the slightest concern for the violation of Ecuador's sovereignty, much less the suffering inflicted on the Colombian people by decades of massacres and assassinations perpetrated by the Colombian military and its allies in the right-wing paramilitary death squads.

The message was unmistakable. No matter which party wins the White House in November, Washington's pursuit of its strategic interests in Latin America by means of aggression and provocation will continue unabated.

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