

# Venezuela breaks with Colombia over guerrilla accusations

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Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez broke off diplomatic relations with neighboring Colombia Thursday over charges made by that country's government that Caracas has sheltered Colombian guerrillas on its territory.

In a histrionic presentation to the Organization of American States in Washington, DC, Colombia's ambassador accused the Chavez government of "continued and permanent tolerance" of guerrillas from the FARC (the Spanish acronym for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) on Venezuelan soil.

The Colombian ambassador to the OAS, Luis Hoyos, claimed that some 1,500 FARC members are present at dozens of camps on the Venezuelan side of the border between the two countries. He insisted that an international commission must be created for the purpose of going to the region and investigating Colombia's accusations and charged Chavez with refusing to "collaborate in the anti-terrorist struggle."

Consisting of satellite coordinates, videotapes and photographs of supposed victims of guerrilla attacks, the Colombian *dossier* resembled nothing so much as the "weapons of mass destruction" presentation made by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell to the United Nations in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Venezuela's ambassador to the OAS, Roy Chaderton, accused the Colombian government of trying to create "the atmosphere for an armed intervention in Venezuela" and dismissed Bogota's supposed evidence, saying that there was no way of knowing where the videos and photographs presented to the inter-American body had been taken.

Chaderton compared the veracity of the allegations by the Colombian government to the so-called "false positives"—the term used to describe innocent civilians deliberately murdered by the Colombian army in order

to increase its body count of guerrillas supposedly killed in battle.

The charges were made at a special session of the OAS convened at Colombia's request. While the majority of the country's 32 member states had proposed putting off the presentation, the government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe succeeded in holding the session with strong backing from the Obama administration in Washington.

The extraordinary character of the session was underscored by the resignation of the Ecuadorean ambassador to the OAS, Francisco Proaño, the current president of the body's permanent council, who had been instructed by his government not to set a date for the Colombian indictment of Venezuela in order to "give dialogue a chance."

There is nothing new about Colombia's accusations. In 2003, for example there was the sensational account of Moises Boyer, who approached Colombian intelligence and gave an interview to the right-wing daily *El Espectador* in Bogota claiming that he had personally followed a FARC commander to Caracas to receive money from the country's vice president. It soon emerged that the story was a complete fabrication, forcing the newspaper to publish a retraction.

More recently, Colombia charged that anti-tank weapons found in a guerrilla camp had been provided by the Venezuelan government, when they in fact had been stolen from one of the country's military installations in the 1990s, something well-known to the Colombian authorities.

The 1,400-mile border between the two countries is in many areas undeveloped and ill-defined, with the Colombian government unable to assert its control in many areas against not only the FARC, but also right-wing paramilitary groups and narco-traffickers.

One reason for the rush to convene the OAS session is that Uribe is leaving office early next month, having failed in his attempt to change the Colombian constitution and appropriate a third term as president. His successor, Juan Manuel Santos, will be inaugurated August 7.

Santos, a member of Colombia's wealthy oligarchy, served as Uribe's minister of defense and is deeply implicated in the human rights crimes of the military. In the election campaign, however, he had pledged to improve relations between Colombia and Venezuela, which had been formally "frozen" before being broken off entirely this week. Santos has remained silent about the present confrontation.

"The pathetic media show on Thursday was a desperate attempt to damage a possible normalization of bilateral relations, in which the intrigue of the US Embassy in Bogota, whose ambassador was consulted by the defense minister before offering his press conference, has not been absent," the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

There can be little doubt that behind Uribe's decision to stage a provocation as he prepares to leave the presidential palace is Washington's own desire to unleash a fresh crisis in South America in order to further its own interests in the region. The Colombian president has functioned as the chief US puppet in the hemisphere, while receiving the greatest amount of US aid—some \$7.3 billion since 2000, the lion's share going to the country's security forces.

The Obama administration lost little time in solidarizing itself with the Uribe government's dubious charges. "There should be an investigation," US State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley said. "We think that Venezuela itself has responsibilities to be forthcoming in responding to the important information presented by Colombia." The charges by the Uribe government, he said, "should be taken very seriously."

Crowley added that the State Department was not surprised by the charges, as since 2006—under the Bush administration—Venezuela had been "judged not to be fully cooperating on antiterrorism efforts."

Under the pretext of combating "terrorism" and drugs, the Obama administration has pursued an even more aggressive policy in Latin America than Bush. Colombia has been a key part of this strategy, with Washington secretly negotiating an agreement that

gives it control of seven military bases in the country as well as access to many other facilities.

While the Obama administration has claimed that the bases are meant to combat drug trafficking, the deal has drawn fire from governments throughout the region, including that of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, which has been closely aligned with Washington, but sees the bases as a threat to its own expansionist aims in the region.

In a further escalation of US military intervention, the Obama administration secured an agreement with Costa Rica's new president, Laura Chinchilla, to allow the entry of seven thousand US troops together with nearly 50 warships, as well as combat aircraft and helicopters, also supposedly to combat drugs.

Deals have also been reached in Panama and Peru for new US bases, as well as in Honduras, where the US backed the right-wing coup that ousted President Manuel Zelaya.

Finally, Obama has kept in place the decision of George W. Bush to revive the US Navy's Fourth Fleet, which had been out of commission since the aftermath of the Second World War, allowing for a major escalation of US military operations in the region.

It is in this context that the tensions between Colombia and Venezuela contain serious dangers. With its economic and political power increasingly challenged by rivals in China, Europe and Latin America itself, US imperialism is seeking the means and the pretext for employing its continuing military superiority.



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