CIA role in Colombia assassination program bared

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Both the US Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency have participated for over a decade in a secret targeted assassination program that has killed at least two dozen leaders of guerrilla movements in Colombia, according to a lengthy article written by the *Washington Post*'s investigative reporter Dana Priest.

The operation involved the provision of "smart bomb" GPS guidance systems—at the cost of $30,000 for each bomb—that would allow the pinpointing of targeted individuals in the Colombian jungle. It was also based on the systematic and continuous interception of Colombian communications by the NSA.

Those target included senior commanders of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), a peasant-based movement that emerged nearly five decades ago in the context of armed resistance to the forced expropriation of small landholdings by Colombia's oligarchy and the ELN (National Liberation Army), a smaller Castroite guerrilla movement operating in the northeast of the country.

The operation was funded through a secret "black" budget, over and above the $9 billion in primarily military aid that Washington has poured into the South American country since the Clinton administration launched "Plan Colombia" on the pretext of carrying out a "war on drugs." In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the Colombian intervention was woven into the "war on terror" propaganda used to justify US militarism internationally and focused increasingly on destroying the guerrilla movements challenging the Colombian government.

The operation was massive in scale. "By 2003, US involvement in Colombia encompassed 40 US agencies and 4,500 people, including contractors, all working out of the US Embassy in Bogotá, then the largest US embassy in the world," the *Post* reports.

The US presence in the country grew to include at one time some 1,000 US special operations troops. The CIA set up in Bogota a special intelligence fusion center known as "the Bunker"

The *Post* reports: "It was a cramped, 30-by-30-foot room with a low ceiling and three rows of computers. Eight people sat at each row of consoles. Some scoured satellite maps of the jungle; others searched for underground FARC hiding places. Some monitored imagery or the movement of vehicles tagged with tracking devices. Voice intercepts from radio and cellphone communications were decrypted and translated by the National Security Agency."

According to the *Post* report, the CIA's and NSA's participation in the assassination program has continued uninterrupted under the Obama administration.

The article indicates that the covert CIA assassination campaign against the Colombian guerrillas was launched in earnest beginning in February 2003 after a plane carrying American "war on drugs" contractors cashed in the Colombian jungle and three US contractors were taken prisoner by the FARC. It would appear, however, that the fate of these individuals was more a pretext than a motive for the US buildup. Washington was concerned that the Colombian government could lose control of the country to the guerrillas, which at one point controlled over 40 percent of the country's territory.

As the *Post* points out, the methods used to murder the FARC and ELN leadership were adopted more or less intact from those utilized by the CIA to hunt down and kill Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan. And the Bush administration's lawyers invoked the same "war on terror" rationale to justify an assassination program, which is formally prohibited under US law. The killings were legal, supposedly because of the FARC's involvement cocaine trafficking, which was said to pose a "threat to national security."

Much of the article focuses on the March 1, 2008 killing

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by a US-supplied "smart bomb" of the No. 2 figure in the FARC's command, Raul Reyes, in a cross-border raid on his encampment in Ecuador.

Again US national security lawyers worked up a legal rationale for this blatant violation of Ecuador's national sovereignty—an act of war—arguing that if a terrorist group is operating in a country that is unwilling or unable to suppress it, than the country being attacked can launch military strikes of its own in self defense. This is the same pseudo-legal justification used for drone assassination strikes in countries like Pakistan and Yemen.

The *Post* account of this attack presents it as a success in which "the bombs landed as programmed … killing Reyes, who according to Colombian news reports, was asleep in his pajamas" and resulting in "the most valuable FARC intelligence discovery ever."

The article acknowledges that the incident touched off a serious "diplomatic crisis," with Ecuador and Venezuela rushing troops to their borders with Colombia. According to US officials cited by Priest, the apology given by then Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to repair relations was greeted with anger in Washington. "For them to be giving up an important legal position was crazy," said one.

The *Post* article effectively whitewashes the murder of Reyes and the assassination program as a whole, claiming that it there was no "collateral damage from the smart bombs." In fact, 24 others were killed in the raid to assassinate Reyes, including three Mexican students.

The article also makes no mention of the real purpose of the attack, which came as Reyes—who had been the FARC's lead negotiator in talks with the Colombian government as well as US State Department officials—was involved in advanced preparations for a hostage release involving the American contractors as well as the former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt.

The talks, brokered by Venezuela's Chavez, involved then French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was prepared to go to the Colombian border area to accept the release of Betancourt, who held both French and Colombian citizenship. The day before the bombing raid, French envoys were en route to Reyes' camp a mile inside the Ecuadoran border when they received a phone call from a Colombian official warning them not to go.

The US had no desire to see such a negotiated release involving its regional enemy Chavez and allowing France to play a prominent role on a continent that Washington regarded as its "own backyard." It therefore murdered Reyes before the hostages could be freed.

The role of the CIA in this affair hardly comes as a surprise to those in the region. Colombian military officials more or less acknowledged the agency's involvement at the time. Ecuador's Defense Minister Wellington Sandoval said in the immediate aftermath of the attack that it had included the use of five "smart bombs" of the type used by the US military. He added that to carry out such a raid, Colombia "needed equipment that Latin American armed forces do not have."

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa responded to the *Post* report Monday by warning that the revelations may have been intended to scuttle ongoing peace talks in Havana between the FARC and the Colombian government.

"At this point, I don't believe in 'coincidences,'" Correa wrote on his Twitter account. "Colombia and the international extreme right are capable of anything!"

Meanwhile, the Colombian daily *El Tiempo* reported Sunday that a US federal court in Virginia has submitted a request to the Colombian government for the extradition of two members of the FARC's negotiating team in Cuba, Omar Retrepo y Adán Jimenez, on charges of arms and drug trafficking. The Colombian government, which has been negotiating with the guerrilla movement for the last year, suspended all arrest orders against FARC members involved in the talks.

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