

US troops, immune from prosecution, raped dozens of Colombian children

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US soldiers and military contractors were responsible for the rape and sexual abuse of scores of Colombian children, but faced no legal repercussions because of a treaty between Washington and Bogota granting them full immunity.

A fresh revelation of these appalling crimes came as a byproduct of ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia) guerrilla movement taking place in Havana, Cuba.

Last month, a Historical Commission on the Armed Conflict and its Victims in Colombia, formed jointly by the Colombian government and the FARC, presented an 800-page report documenting the causes and consequences of the decades of civil war that have claimed millions of victims in terms of dead, wounded, abused and displaced. The commission was composed of leading Colombian academics and intellectuals acceptable to both parties.

A section prepared by Renan Vega Cantor, a professor of history at the National Pedagogical University of Bogota, dealt with the role played by the US military. The Pentagon has sent advisers and contractors to the country as part of Plan Colombia, which has included \$6 billion in mostly military aid directed at combatting both drug trafficking and the anti-government guerrilla movements.

The report cites 54 cases of rape and sexual abuse of minors, some as young as 12. "In one of the best known cases, in Melgar and in Giradot [both are to the southwest of the capital of Bogota, with a major Colombian air base that housed US "advisers" located in Melgar], 53 minors were abused sexually by mercenaries, who also filmed it and sold the tapes as pornography," the report states. The young girls were subsequently threatened with death, and they and their

families had to leave the area.

Another infamous case included in the report was that of a 12-year-old child, who in August 2007 was drugged, kidnapped and raped by a US Army sergeant and a military contractor in Melgar. The two men accosted the child in a restaurant, drugged her and took her back to their barracks at the Tolemaida Air Force Base, where she was raped. In the morning, she was again sexually abused and then driven to a municipal park where they left her.

The young girl's mother, Olga Castillo Campos, learned the identity of the two men, Sgt. Michael J. Coen and defense contractor Cesar Ruiz, and confronted them. She recounted that they dismissed her child as "a little whore" and told her, "yeah, we raped her, so what? We're in Colombia, the law doesn't affect us."

"They laughed at me and said they had immunity," she recalled in a recent interview. "I didn't even know what it meant."

Colombia, like well over 100 other countries, signed a so-called bilateral immunity agreement, a condition imposed by Washington for the receipt of aid. The agreement bars prosecution under Colombian law of US military personnel as well as contractors for any crimes committed in the country. Prosecution under US law would require the intervention of American prosecutors and judges, unlikely to say the least. The result is that US personnel can effectively commit crimes with impunity.

Olga Castillo Campos sought justice for her daughter, going first to the Colombian Air Force, then to federal prosecutors and even the country's supreme court. Turned away by all of them, the results of her efforts was that she and her children were followed by what appeared to be Colombian security forces and subjected

to death threats, forcing her to move repeatedly to different cities.

Coen was sent home from Colombia, while Ruiz stayed on. Neither was ever prosecuted for the rape or spent a single day in jail, either in Colombia or in the US.

The 54 cases cited by the historians' commission, acknowledged by the Colombian government, Washington's closest ally in South America, represent only the tip of the iceberg.

As the web site *El Turbion*, set up by the Movement for the Defense of the Rights of the People (MODEP) reports, another 23 cases of sexual abuse by US soldiers were reported in 2006 alone, as well as 14 such cases in 2007. Given the refusal of the Colombian government to take any action, and the extreme pressure and threats against anyone reporting such crimes, the real number of rapes of minors by US personnel undoubtedly numbers in the hundreds if not thousands.

These crimes committed by US personnel are by no means unique. According to a report released by Oxfam in 2013, close to 50,000 minors are known to have suffered sexual violence in the course of Colombia's armed conflict. Another report found that 98 percent of such crimes go unpunished.

The Office of the High Commission of Human Rights reviewed the situation in Colombia at a session Wednesday. While it expressed hope that a negotiated settlement between the government and FARC would improve conditions in the country, it noted that "impunity persisted for gross human rights violations, particularly at command levels" of the military.

The UN's deputy human rights commissioner, Flavia Pansieri, also warned that the Colombian government's "efforts to continue expanding the reach of military jurisdiction for these crimes [human rights violations] are contrary to Colombia's international obligations."

It is noteworthy that the report on the rape and sexual abuse carried out by US troops in Colombia, while widely reported in that country, has effectively been blacked out by the corporate media in the US.



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