

As Colombia's right-wing government mounts savage repression, Canada criticizes "violence" of impoverished protesters

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Strikes and protests in Colombia triggered by a regressive tax reform and fuelled by hostility to police violence, widespread poverty, social inequality and political corruption have been ongoing for over a month. According to Amnesty International, at least 400 people have been disappeared by the country's paramilitary police, which had committed 1,876 acts of violence against protesters as of May 9.

The latest estimates put the death toll at over 60 since the protests began. This figure rose by at least 10 last weekend after police savagely repressed demonstrations in the city of Cali on Friday, May 28. Far-right President Ivan Duque responded by calling in the military.

Yet as far as Canada's Liberal government is concerned, the protesters are as guilty of perpetrating "violence" as the thuggish US- and Canadian-backed Duque regime. In a cynical statement released last month that painted a fraudulent picture of even-handedness, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau managed to avoid mentioning Duque or his far-right government, never mind the heavily armed paramilitary police force that has used American- and Canadian-made weaponry to terrorize protesters.

While condemning the "disproportionate" use of force by vaguely defined "security forces," Garneau emphasized, "We are also concerned with the acts of vandalism and attacks directed against public officials responsible for the protection of all Colombian citizens. Canada calls upon those responsible for road blockades to allow the free passage of goods and services essential to fight the COVID-19 pandemic."

This is the same lying propaganda used by the Duque regime to blackguard any opposition as illegal and thereby justify its vicious repression, and covers up the fact that the main reason for the disastrous COVID-19 situation is the refusal of successive governments to adequately fund health care and social services. Underscoring that Ottawa is firmly on the side of its authoritarian ally in Bogota, Garneau concluded his statement by praising the Duque government's bogus "commitment to fully investigate and hold accountable those who may be guilty of violating human rights."

In other words, even though photographic and video evidence together with eyewitness testimony confirm that widespread abuses have been carried out by state forces at the behest of the Duque government, Ottawa is not only content with the

perpetrators investigating themselves but is also calling into question whether human rights violations have in fact occurred.

Garneau's statement, like the brutal state repression of the Colombian protesters, has passed almost without comment in the Canadian media and political establishment. This only goes to show the hypocritical double standards of Canadian imperialism. While establishment politics has been rife in recent months with lurid allegations about a "genocide" carried out by China against the Uyghur population, for which there is no evidence, the well-documented killing and sexual abuse of protesters in Colombia have provoked barely a peep of concern from the "human rights" crusaders in the editorial offices of the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*, or from the Liberal, New Democrat, Greens, Conservative and Bloc Québécois parliamentarians.

The NDP, which has been propping up the Liberal government since the 2019 federal election, chose for its own reasons to totally ignore Garneau's defence of the repressive Duque regime. In its only statement to date on Colombia, released nine days after Garneau's declaration of support for Duque, the NDP provided cover for the Trudeau government by portraying it as a neutral arbiter in Colombia. "Canadians are very concerned about what is happening in Colombia and want to be assured that the Liberal government is doing all it can to stand up for human and civil rights," stated the NDP.

Canadian imperialism is in no position to lecture anyone about human rights anywhere in Latin America, especially Colombia. The country, whose capitalist elite waged a five-decade-long bloody civil war against the FARC guerrilla movement until 2017, is one of the closest allies of Canadian and US imperialism in the region. It has served as a base of intrigue and is a firm ally in imperialist-orchestrated provocations against the Maduro regime in Venezuela, which the US-Canada imperialist alliance sees as critical to maintaining their dominance in the hemisphere against rivals like Russia and China. Colombia is also home to billions of dollars in investments by Canadian mining and other commercial interests.

Bogota played host in February 2019 to a meeting of the Lima Group at which then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued belligerent threats against the Venezuelan government and demanded that the Maduro regime recognize the self-appointed interim president and opposition leader Juan Guaido as

Venezuela's legitimate leader.

The Lima Group is a coalition of North and South American states led by Canada that has worked tirelessly since its founding in 2017 to give Washington's aggressive military provocations against Venezuela a degree of diplomatic legitimacy. It was central to the US-backed regime change operation fronted by Guaido, who declared himself Venezuelan president in January 2019 after receiving assurances of support from Canadian diplomats and backing from the Lima Group. (See: **Canada mobilizes support for US coup in Venezuela**)

Just one week prior to the Bogota meeting of the Lima Group, Colombia's top military commander was in Florida for a meeting with the US Southern Command to discuss military operations against Venezuela. Six weeks later, Guaido and his right-wing pro-imperialist backers launched another ill-fated coup that was rapidly suppressed.

Throughout the Colombian civil war and up to the present day, Washington has supplied firearms and other military equipment to the army and police, both under the control of the country's Defence Ministry. Earlier this month, Amnesty International issued a statement noting that it has visual evidence of US-made weaponry being used to repress protesters.

"The United States' role in fueling ceaseless cycles of violence committed against the people of Colombia is outrageous," commented Philippe Nassif, the advocacy director for Amnesty USA. "The United States government has been an agonizing party to the killing, disappearances, sexual violence and other torture, and horrendous repression of dozens of mostly peaceful demonstrations."

Much less known, however, is Canada's booming business in supplying lethal weaponry to the murderous regime in Bogota. Under the Chretien-Martin Liberal government, Canada shipped its surplus military CH-135 helicopters through the US to Colombia to evade export controls on military equipment to countries engaged in armed conflict. In a 2001 briefing, Amnesty International Canada and the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America noted that Canadian companies carried out extensive maintenance and repair work on Colombian military equipment, including helicopters. Prohibitions on the conducting of such work on military equipment destined for countries engaged in armed conflict were circumvented by classifying the helicopters as "civilian" aircraft.

In 2012, the Harper government added Colombia to the list of countries that are eligible to receive exports of high-powered assault weapons from Canadian manufacturers. Among the weaponry this decision allowed Canadian producers to sell to Bogota were electric stun guns, fully automatic firearms and high-capacity magazines. At the time, Colombia was the only country in Latin America to receive such a designation from Ottawa.

In 2017, the Trudeau government announced the deployment of a small contingent of Canadian police officers to help train the Colombian police, the same force that is now savagely gunning down protesters.

Ottawa's firm backing for the repressive Colombian government expresses the predatory interests of Canadian imperialism, which has enjoyed a significant economic and financial presence in Latin

America and the Caribbean for over a century. Over the past two decades, Colombia has emerged as Canada's second most important export market in South America, after Brazil. Canadian companies have invested more than \$5 billion in Colombia, including in the mining and energy sectors, financial services and lucrative public/private partnership contracts for infrastructure projects.

Ottawa finalized a free trade agreement (FTA) with Colombia in 2011. By 2019, trade between the two countries had risen by 50 percent. Export Development Canada, a government agency that helps Canadian businesses establish and maintain a presence in foreign markets, enthused in a 2019 that the Colombian market had been "reinvigorated" for Canadian big business. "The FTA provides Canadian companies with a competitive edge by protecting our intellectual property and investments," noted the EDC. "Today, more than 100 Canadian companies operate in Colombia."

The methods which these companies use to "protect their investments" in Colombia are ruthless. Toronto-based Grand Colombia Gold (GCG), which purchased the title to a gold mine near the town of Segovia for \$205 million in 2010, promptly reversed the previous owner's policies of allowing locals to mine secondary shafts at the site, a practice that has been engaged in for centuries.

GCG labelled these miners, who have no other means of making a living, as "illegal miners" who are "stealing gold" from the company. When the Colombian government refused to enforce the company's title, fearing a social explosion in Segovia, a town of 42,500 inhabitants, 80 percent of whom are employed by the small-scale traditional mining sector, GCG used the FTA to sue Bogota for a minimum of \$250 million in damages.

In Marmato, a mountaintop village about a seven-hour drive from Segovia, GCG proposed razing the village of 8,000 residents to the ground in order to build an open pit gold mine on land it bought up from local miners.

It should come as no surprise that a ruling class capable of employing such brutal methods of exploitation to boost corporate profits turns a blind eye to the massacring of dozens of protesters and the disappearance of hundreds more, especially when the government responsible for these outrageous crimes is a willing partner of Canadian imperialism's plundering of Colombia's natural resources.



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