Colombian president sanctions US military operations amid earthquake disaster

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14 August 2026

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced Wednesday that the newly inaugurated government of Colombian President Abelardo de la Espriella has formally requested joint military operations with US forces on Colombian soil.

Speaking at a meeting of the Americas Counter-Cartel Coalition (ACCC or A3C) in Panama, Hegseth stated: "Through the newly inaugurated president, as our president likes to say, President El Tigre, Colombia has already requested that the Department of War join Colombia in its fight against narco-terrorism, authorizing joint military operations to destroy terrorists and terror networks."

Speaking in Panama on Thursday, after touring the US- and Panamanian-run Jungle Operations Training Course beside the canal, Hegseth said the official motto of the ACCC would be: "We do bad things to bad people." He added: "That's the mentality I want to have inside this room."

Warning that the targets of the coalition were "about to meet a new sheriff in town," he described narcotraffickers as "the ISIS and al-Qaeda" of the Americas—language that makes explicit the transplanting of the "war on terror" framework, with its two decades of torture, extrajudicial assassination, mass detention and the systematic destruction of any legal restraint, onto the countries of Latin America.

Colombia simultaneously became the 19th member of the "Shield of the Americas" initiative, a group of far-right governments launched in March whose operational arm is the ACCC. Colombian Defense Minister General Jorge Mora formalized the accession in Panama.

That the announcement was made not in Bogotá but by Hegseth in Panama underscores the illegal character of the decision: the Colombian Constitution reserves to the Senate alone the power to permit the transit of foreign troops through national territory, and neither Senate authorization nor the constitutionally required prior consultation of the Council of State has been sought.

A disaster met with militarization

The announcement came three days after a 7.4 magnitude earthquake devastated western Colombia. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, Washington is seizing upon the humanitarian catastrophes in Venezuela and Colombia to tighten its military noose over the region.

On Thursday, the government updated the number of casualties from the earthquake to 281 confirmed dead, 377 missing, and 3,971 injured.

In Chocó, the poorest department in Colombia, authorities concluded the search-and-rescue phase on Wednesday after confirming 13 dead in the department, nine of them in the capital Quibdó. Mayor Rafael Bolaños was blunt: "This unexpected emergency has completely laid bare the institutional capacity to respond."

Vice President José Manuel Restrepo summarized the outstanding needs to EFE after a Wednesday night unified command meeting: "Shelters, tents, water tanks, hygiene kits, fuel and electrical generators."

What is being dispatched—and rapidly—is the Colombian military.

In Cali, one of the hardest-hit cities, Mayor Alejandro Eder and the national government imposed a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. and militarized sectors of the city, citing the need to contain looting.

The NGO Justicia y Democracia denounced these operations: "A population affected by an earthquake does not need streets full of weapons. The first hours cannot be wasted on curfews." Every minute, the organization insisted, must go toward locating, stabilizing and rescuing people.

The population subjected to curfew and rifles is the same working class and rural poor that bore the brunt of the earthquake. Far from the cartels, they are the ultimate target of the joint military operations now being authorized.

De la Espriella, a lawyer for the cartels and right-wing death squads, entered office committed to freezing social spending and imposing a program of austerity and deregulation. He confronts a population of which half viewed him negatively before he was even sworn in. He held his inauguration inside a military garrison, warning it would send "a clear message to those who threaten the tranquility of our people."

His first act as president was not to sign any of the 70 decrees he had promised, but to convene an all-night security council with military commanders in Cali. The earthquake has now furnished the pretext to accelerate what was already planned.

The precedents across the region are explicit about what "joint operations" mean in practice. In Ecuador, the Noboa government launched joint operations in March against organizations designated as terrorist by Washington, opening what the Defense Ministry called "a new phase against narcoterrorism and illegal mining." This has involved torture, mass detentions, and the bombing of agricultural workers and peasants. Similar operations have been extended to Honduras and Guatemala.

César Niño, professor at the Universidad Militar Nueva Granada, identified the qualitative shift to *El Tiempo*: "This represents a qualitative leap, if you will, from security cooperation toward a form

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of operational alignment with the United States." He posed the questions that remain unanswered: "Who identifies the enemy, who selects the targets, who authorizes the operation, who provides intelligence, who has command, under what legislation do they act, who answers for eventual harm to civilians?"

History supplies the answers to these questions.

Beyond the immediate suppression of domestic opposition, the military integration serves a broader strategic purpose. As US imperialism confronts economic decline, record debt, and the loss of ground to Chinese influence across Latin America, it is moving to lock down the hemisphere's resources, strategic waterways and cheap labor platforms in preparation for global conflict.

The activation of Joint Task Force Western Hemisphere under SOUTHCOM, the occupation of Venezuela, the strikes on boats in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific whose victims include Colombian fishermen—these are not counter-narcotics measures. They are maneuvers in an ongoing world war against geopolitical rivals and a counterrevolutionary war against the working class.

A quarter century of intervention and impunity

At the Panama meeting, Hegseth urged the assembled Latin American governments not to recognize the International Criminal Court. The message could hardly be clearer: these operations are designed to function outside any legal constraint whatsoever.

Plan Colombia was launched under Democratic President Bill Clinton with $1.3 billion approved by Congress in June 2000. Clinton personally waived the human rights conditions Congress had attached, including requirements to suspend military personnel charged with gross violations and to prosecute right-wing paramilitaries.

Total US military aid has since exceeded $10 billion, at times making Colombia the third-largest recipient of American military hardware in the world, behind only Israel and Egypt.

The "war on drugs" pretext collapsed under its own evidence: a 2007 White House report found cocaine street prices had fallen by nearly a third while purity rose. The actual objectives were geopolitical—securing US domination of the Andean region and protecting the pipelines and oilfields of Occidental Petroleum, for which a dedicated army brigade was created.

The human consequences are also documented. Between 2002 and 2008, under Álvaro Uribe, the Colombian military murdered 6,402 civilians in the "false positives" scheme, dressing corpses in guerrilla uniforms to inflate body counts in exchange for bonuses, leave and promotions. Some 1,500 military personnel were implicated.

Washington knew. A 2010 WikiLeaks cable from the US Embassy in Bogotá recorded the Colombian army's own inspector general telling Ambassador William Brownfield directly that "the extrajudicial execution problem was widespread," that it had originated in the 4th Brigade in Medellín before spreading, and that it stemmed from commanders' insistence on body counts and from military ties to criminals and narco-traffickers. Within five months of receiving this information, the Obama administration concluded the agreement granting US forces access to seven Colombian military bases.

US personnel committed their own atrocities with total impunity. At least 54 documented cases of rape and sexual abuse of Colombian minors by US soldiers and contractors have been recorded, some victims as young as 12. At Tolemaida Air Base, a 12-year-old girl was drugged, kidnapped and raped by a US Army sergeant and a contractor. Confronted by the child's mother, they replied: "Yeah, we raped her, so what? We're in Colombia, the law doesn't affect us."

They were correct. Not one US soldier or contractor has ever been prosecuted in Colombia.

The 2009 Supplemental Agreement for Cooperation and Technical Assistance in Defense and Security, building on bilateral treaties from 1952 and 1974, grants US military personnel the privileges and immunities accorded to administrative and technical staff under the 1961 Vienna Convention—diplomatic protection for soldiers. Colombia may request a waiver of immunity, but the decision rests entirely with Washington.

Colombian military personnel enjoy parallel protection. Military judges have consistently qualified atrocities as "acts of service." Human Rights Watch identified this as "one of the pillars of impunity in Colombia."

This is the legal framework into which De la Espriella has now invited expanded US operations, alongside a $1 billion security assistance package announced by Trump, already dubbed Plan Colombia 2.0.

Nominally left President Gustavo Petro, elected on the back of mass protests and general strikes, sought to aggrandize the military in populist terms to prepare the current buildup. Petro also ultimately capitulated to Trump, traveling to Washington hat in hand in February, handing over intelligence reports, with the aim of preserving Colombia's role as Washington's closest military ally in the region.

Both Petro and De la Espriella, for all their apparent antagonism, looked to the same armed apparatus—built, financed and trained by US imperialism—as the ultimate guarantor of capitalist property.

Following the deadly earthquake, the government's response has been marked by curfews, militarization and an invitation to foreign troops. The struggle to make Colombian workers whole and to halt the US-backed militarization now underway cannot be entrusted to any faction of the bourgeoisie or to the institutions of the capitalist state. It requires the independent political mobilization of workers in Colombia, in Venezuela, throughout Latin America and in the United States itself, on the basis of a socialist program.

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