

Clinton to visit Cartagena

US intervention heats up Colombian conflict

By Bill Vann
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With a new \$1.3 billion US military package beginning to flow to the Colombian armed forces, and preparations under way for President Clinton to visit the South American nation on August 30, there are growing indications that the escalating US intervention is already intensifying the country's four-decade-old civil war.

Scores have died in recent weeks as the country's two main guerrilla groups, the FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the ELN, or National Liberation Army, have battled with security forces and right-wing paramilitary units.

The US package amounts to a tenfold increase in arms aid to Colombia, which is already the third largest recipient of American military assistance, trailing only Israel and Egypt. Earlier this month, Clinton issued a presidential directive declaring US aid to Bogota a "national priority." The White House did not spell out the contents of the directive, beyond saying that it "supplements and supports" the \$1.3 billion in aid.

While the Clinton administration has touted human rights and judicial and economic aid components of the package, the amount of funding provided for these initiatives is minuscule compared to what is being spent on military training and hardware. In the final analysis, the nonmilitary assistance serves merely as window dressing for the largest US military operation in Latin America since Washington's intervention in the civil war in El Salvador and its support for a CIA-backed "contra" mercenary force to attack Nicaragua.

There have been ominous indications that this new military aid, provided under the pretext of fighting the production and export of cocaine, will be utilized in a counterinsurgency campaign directed against both the guerrillas and the poorest and most oppressed sections of the Colombian people.

At the end of last month, six US-supplied Black Hawk helicopters were used to support Colombian security forces during a clash with guerrillas in the small southern town of Arboleda. While the helicopters—another 63 of which are to

be brought into the country as part of the aid package—are supposedly for the purpose of combating drug trafficking, US officials said after the operation that Pentagon rules of engagement allow them to be deployed in defense of the Colombian police and army during clashes with guerrillas in drug-producing areas. A State Department spokesman said it was not known whether the helicopters were flown by American or Colombian crews.

The incident underscored the blurred distinction between counterinsurgency and counter-narcotics operations. US intervention is directed principally at the guerrilla movements. Coining the phrase "narco-guerrillas," Washington has attempted to justify this focus by pointing to the guerrillas' use of funds collected from cocaine producers in the areas under their control.

Similar relations, however, have been established between narco-traffickers and elements of the Colombian army as well as right-wing paramilitaries. For that matter, the ex-head of the US military assistance group in Colombia and his wife were recently sentenced to prison by a US federal court in Brooklyn, New York for involvement in cocaine trafficking.

Officially there are 280 American military personnel presently in Colombia, with the number set to climb to over 500 with the infusion of arms aid. The Pentagon has sent 83 Special Forces "trainers" to a Colombian military base in the southern town of Larandia, just two hours by highway from the stronghold of the FARC guerrillas. The Green Berets are preparing an "anti-drug" battalion that is to be sent into the rebel-held territory by December, joining a similar unit that was formed at the end of last year. A third such battalion will be formed with the coming infusion of US arms aid. Part of this preparation is a review of officers to be assigned to the unit to see if they have any record of human rights violations.

The great majority of the massacres and assassinations in Colombia have been attributed to right-wing paramilitary death squads, which operate in direct collaboration with the country's armed forces. Human rights organizations have

charged that the Clinton aid plan is a blatant violation of the so-called Leahy Amendment, legislation that formally bars the Pentagon and US intelligence agencies from providing materiel and training to foreign military units that engage in human rights violations.

The individual vetting of officers assigned to the anti-drug battalions cannot obscure the fact that the connection between the armed forces and the paramilitaries is pervasive and systemic. A recent report by Human Rights Watch estimates that 75 percent of the Colombian military commands have provided support and engaged in joint operations with the death squads.

In repeated incidents, the military has acted to seal off escape routes from towns where paramilitaries massacre suspected rebel sympathizers and protected the death squads from retaliation by the guerrillas after such operations. While there have been a few well-publicized purges of human rights violators from the Colombian military—such as the firing last February of two high-ranking generals implicated in a massacre of 140 civilians by paramilitaries in southern Putumayo province—the collaboration continues.

The principal commander of these right-wing paramilitaries is one Carlos Castano, a former Colombian military officer and graduate of the Pentagon's infamous School of the Americas. Together with his brother Fidel, Castano amassed a fortune providing protection for drug kingpin Pablo Escobar.

An ex-informer of the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Baruch Vega, has publicly stated that he served as a go-between for the agency, attempting to broker a deal with the death squad leader. He said that the DEA had promised covert US funding and arms in return for Castano's help in capturing 200 Colombian drug traffickers wanted by US courts. While a State Department official indignantly denied the contacts, US "drug czar" Barry McCaffrey, who was visiting Colombia, said that his office was investigating the report.

The emergence of these connections only underscores the certainty that a substantial part of the money the Pentagon will funnel into Colombia will wind up in the hands of the paramilitaries.

While US officials have yet to divulge details of Clinton's planned visit, reports from Colombia indicate that he will be going to the Caribbean port city of Cartagena, which is considered more secure than the capital of Bogota. Clinton's stated mission is a show of support for Colombia's president, Andres Pastrana, who this month marked two years in office. He is the most unpopular head of state in memory, with 70 percent of the population indicating disapproval of his leadership.

Pastrana has failed to fulfill promises to reach a negotiated

settlement of the civil war, which is claiming 3,500 lives a year and has displaced some 1.9 million people. With the growing US presence and the vast expansion of military aid, it appears increasingly likely that the on-again, off-again peace talks with the guerrillas will be abandoned for a military solution.

Meanwhile, Pastrana's government has presided over the country's worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. The official unemployment rate has topped 20 percent—the highest in Latin America—and nine out of ten of the country's households has experienced a serious decline in living standards.

"Structural adjustment" policies imposed by the Pastrana government at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and international creditors guarantee that social misery for the masses of Colombians will only intensify in the months ahead. Mounting opposition within the Colombian working class to these policies compelled the country's union federations to call a nationwide general strike earlier this month in which over 600,000 workers participated.

The immediate prelude to the walkout was the announcement of what the government termed a "sweat and tears" 2001 budget plan that includes the layoff of 5,000 public employees, as well as reductions in real wages and cuts in social security benefits. In a number of cities, demonstrators clashed with security forces and, in Bogota, the army took control of the entrances to the city.

In the name of a "war on drugs," Washington is preparing an intervention aimed at propping up an unpopular government. Just as helicopters ostensibly provided for use against cocaine have been deployed to aid the security forces against the guerrillas, it is inevitable that the military aid that is flowing to the Colombian military will be used to step up repression in the face of mounting social unrest.

The use of military might under the pretext of combating narcotics is not a new policy. Drugs were invoked more than a decade ago to justify "Operation Just Cause," when the US invaded Panama with 26,000 troops to overthrow the government of General Manuel Noriega.

Just like that operation—directed by then-president George Bush and his defense secretary, Richard Cheney—the Clinton administration's military intervention in Colombia is aimed at using armed might to further US strategic and economic interests throughout the region.

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