

Rumsfeld: “Frontline in terror war”

Washington signals escalation of US intervention in Colombia

By Bill Vann
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The Bush administration signaled strongly last week that it is preparing to escalate its military intervention in Colombia’s four-decade-old civil war.

Back-to-back visits to Bogotá by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, were accompanied by the announcement that President Bush has given the go-ahead for the resumption of an aerial interdiction program aimed at intercepting and shooting down planes suspected of carrying illegal drugs or weapons.

Arriving in the Colombian capital at the head of 50-member delegation, Rumsfeld reiterated the Bush administration’s support for the country’s right-wing president, Alvaro Uribe.

“I’m here because in the United States we are interested in the regional stability,” Rumsfeld told a press conference at the end of his one-day visit to Colombia. “Colombia is a very important country that is in our same hemisphere,” he added, stressing that it is “on the front line of the global war against terrorism.”

The visit by Rumsfeld, which followed that of General Myers by barely a week, was aimed in part at reassuring Uribe of Washington’s support in the wake of the Bush administration’s cutoff of military aid to Colombia last month. The move, which involved a relatively small amount of funds left over from the previous fiscal year, was part of a global US retaliation against countries that had failed to repudiate the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court and assure a blanket exemption for US personnel from any potential war crimes charges.

There is no doubt that the two countries will arrive at an understanding. Colombia is presently the third-largest recipient of US military aid, trailing behind only Israel and Egypt. In terms of US military training, Colombia ranks first, with American Special Forces troops having trained 15 regular Colombian battalions as well as a specialized brigade created at Washington’s behest for the purpose of guarding a 500-mile pipeline that carries petroleum from oilfields operated by the US-based Occidental Petroleum Corporation. About 75 Green Berets are stationed at two military bases in oil-rich Arauca Province for the purpose of training the Colombian pipeline protection brigade.

It is now three years since then-President Clinton initiated Plan Colombia, approving \$1.3 billion in military aid ostensibly aimed at countering drug trafficking from the country, the main source of cocaine for the US market. The US military assistance has since risen to more than \$3 billion.

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the Bush administration proclaimed Colombia a

battlefield in its war on terrorism, and the US Congress explicitly approved the use of US military assistance not just to combat drugs but to suppress anti-government guerrilla movements.

It is estimated that at least three quarters of the US funds are being dedicated to combating the guerrilla movements, with only a fourth of the money used against drug traffickers. Following his meeting with the Colombian president and the country’s military commanders, General Myers indicated that even more US funds would be shifted from the drug program to supporting counterinsurgency operations. While the US and Colombian governments point to various indices of success in their anti-drug campaign, there is no evidence that the effort has had any effect on reducing the amount of cocaine available in the US.

Under Uribe, who recently completed his first year in office, there has been an increasing militarization of Colombian society, characterized by growing repression against trade unionists, the poor and all those perceived as potential opponents of the government. The government has increased the size of the army from 120,000 to 135,000 troops, and the ranks of the national police have similarly swelled from 100,000 to 110,000. US military advisers, meanwhile, are assigned to Colombian military units, where they work directly in planning and directing repressive operations. Uribe has also launched a program to recruit civilian spies to assist the military and police in monitoring the activities of those deemed to be sympathizers of the guerrillas or opponents of the government.

The inevitable result of these policies has been an intensification of the bloodshed. According to one recent report, the Colombian military has increased its combat operations by 55 percent, while attacks on the army have also risen by 26 percent. The brunt of the violence, however, is borne by the country’s civilian population. According to one estimate, the number killed in the last year alone strands at approximately 7,000—an average of 19 people killed every day. The death toll in Colombia has nearly doubled in the last four years.

“Anti-terrorist” laws introduced by the Uribe government have granted police sweeping powers to search homes and carry out arbitrary detentions. Security forces increasingly label political and social organizations that oppose government policies as “guerrilla fronts” in order to suppress them. Recent military operations have included the mass roundup of hundreds of civilians in the province of Sucre on the grounds that they were guerrilla sympathizers.

State repression has been turned full force against those opposing the right-wing economic policies pursued by the Uribe government in collaboration with Washington and the International Monetary Fund

(IMF). Approximately 130 Colombian union leaders and militants have been assassinated just since the beginning of this year. Last year, 184 unionists were assassinated, the largest number for any country in the world.

This campaign of political murders has gone hand-in-hand with the use of the military to suppress working class opposition. The privatization of state enterprises, a central component of Uribe's economic program that has been pushed by Washington as a condition for the country concluding a free trade pact with the US, has met with mass protests and strikes. The government has responded with the militarization of areas slated to be privatized—Ecopetrol (the Colombian state oil corporation), Telecom (the government-owned telephone network) and the public hospitals.

Carlos Hernandez, president of the National Association of Hospital Workers of Colombia, was recently forced to flee the country because of a plot by government-backed paramilitary forces to assassinate him and his recognition that the authorities would do nothing to stop them.

Other leaders of the union had already been killed. On July 24, Carlos Barrero Jimenez, a nurse and leader of the hospital workers union, was assassinated in Barranquilla just hours before the government militarized the University Hospital in neighboring Cartagena to prevent an occupation aimed at blocking its privatization.

A mass strike called by three of the country's trade union federations on August 12 was observed by some 400,000 workers with tens of thousands crowding into Bogotá's Plaza Bolivar to protest Uribe's policies. Riot police attempted to provoke confrontations and filled the square with tear gas in an unsuccessful attempt to break up the demonstration.

State-sector workers have suffered intense attacks since Uribe came to power. With the liquidation of the state-owned Telecom, around 10,000 workers were laid off two months ago. Hospital and oil workers face similar attacks. In all, 30,000 state employees have been fired thus far. The ranks of the unemployed will be further swelled by the firing of another 40,000 government workers as part of a "restructuring" plan to be completed by 2006.

Officially, the unemployment rate in Colombia stands at 14.2 percent, or 3 million workers. The unions, however, state the real figure is closer to 4 million. Official figures further list fully one third of the working population as subsisting off the "informal sector," with no real full-time jobs.

Though the Uribe government claims to have brought about an economic recovery, recent figures released by the government underscore that only the wealthy have benefited, while the working class and the poor are facing ever-greater deprivation. The most ominous statistic recorded a 7 percent fall in food sales since the year began, even as production increased by 3 percent. While construction has recorded the largest growth of any industry, projects to build affordable housing for the working population have declined by 50 percent.

In short, Uribe has presided over a vast widening of the social gulf between the thin layer of wealthy at the top and the masses of people who live in poverty, an estimated 33 million out of the country's 42 million people. This social polarization is the essential source of Colombia's 40-year-old civil war.

Under Uribe's rule, Colombia has become a key beachhead for US intervention throughout the region. Both Myers and Rumsfeld stressed during their visits the regional implications of the Colombian civil war. The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs was the more provocative,

suggesting that the government of Hugo Chavez in neighboring Venezuela is supporting the Colombian guerrillas of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia).

"It's not helpful when countries don't fully support the anti-terrorism fight," Myers declared. "And I think there's more to learn with respect to Venezuela, and we're going to continue to explore that." Myers compared Venezuela's role to that of Syria, a country that Washington has threatened with military attack.

Chavez and other Venezuelan officials vigorously denied any collaboration with the FARC. Recent sensationalist stories in the Venezuelan and Colombian media alleging such ties have been exposed as fabrications. Chavez, who was briefly ousted from power in a US-backed military coup in April 2002, has come under renewed fire from Washington in the wake of the Iraq war. He has refused to label the Colombian guerrillas as terrorists and, along with Cuba's Fidel Castro, declined to sign the so-called Declaration of Asunción in which other Latin American leaders pledged solidarity with the Colombian counterinsurgency campaign in the name of combating drugs and terrorism.

Ominously, the Bush White House and the Pentagon are increasingly portraying the intervention in Colombia in the same terms that were used to prepare the war on Iraq. Testifying before a Senate Committee in June, General James Hill, chief of the US Army's Southern Command, described drugs from Colombia as "weapons of mass destruction," and warned that instability there could create "safe havens" for "international terrorist organizations."

The latest US move to resume the shooting down of aircraft over Colombia will no doubt add new innocent victims to the country's massive death toll.

The program was suspended over two years ago after a Peruvian fighter plane, working together with a US surveillance aircraft staffed by CIA contract employees, shot down a single-engine plane carrying a family of American missionaries. Veronica Bowers and her infant daughter were killed in the shoot-down.

US officials privately acknowledge that a repetition of the type of incident that took the lives of the mother and her young daughter in April 2001 is virtually inevitable despite claims that new safety procedures have been put in place.

Like so many other measures taken by the Bush administration in the name of a global war on terrorism, the shoot-down policy in Colombia is a blatant violation of international law, which prohibits any armed attack on civilian aircraft in flight, regardless of whether or not there is suspicion of criminal activity.

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