

Rumsfeld's Latin American tour

Pentagon chief escalates threats against Venezuela

By Bill Van Auken
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US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld used his brief three-nation tour of Latin America this week to step up US threats against Venezuela and pressure the region's governments into joining Washington's campaign to isolate the government of President Hugo Chavez.

Echoing US rhetoric from the Cold War, Rumsfeld described Venezuela's agreement to buy military hardware from Russia as a threat to the hemisphere. "Certainly I'm concerned," he said, referring to the arms deal, which involves the purchase of 100,000 AK-47 rifles as well as 10 military helicopters from Moscow.

"I can't imagine what is going to happen to 100,000 AK-47s," Rumsfeld said in Brazil Wednesday before meeting the country's president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. "I cannot imagine why Venezuela needs 100,000 AK-47s.... I can't imagine that if it did happen, that it would be good for the hemisphere."

The orchestration of propaganda campaigns over arms deals to justify US military aggression is an old game in Washington. In 1954, the news that the nationalist government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala had purchased small arms from Czechoslovakia provided the pretext for a CIA-orchestrated coup that reversed land reform efforts and ushered in more than 30 years of dictatorship and repression.

Then, the intervention was directed at restoring the United Fruit Company's monopolization of the country's most fertile land and its ability to reap profits without the encumbrance of labor laws and taxation.

Today, similar considerations of corporate profits and US strategic interests are involved. The left-nationalist government of Chavez has become an impediment to the US-backed drive to privatize Venezuela's considerable oil resources as a step towards their takeover by Washington and the US-based energy conglomerates.

While Rumsfeld "can't imagine" why Venezuela would want to modernize its armed forces, apparently the Venezuelan government does not suffer from a similar lack of imagination when it comes to the US military buildup on its borders.

The Bush administration is requesting close to \$575 million in military aid this year for the right-wing government of President Alvaro Uribe in Colombia. Washington has increased military assistance to Colombia more than tenfold over the past decade. In the last six years alone, the US has lavished close to \$4 billion in aid on Colombia, 80 percent of it for the country's security forces.

In 2003, the Pentagon doubled the number of Colombian troops that receive US training to nearly 13,000. Last October, Congress voted to

raise the official cap on the number of US troops deployed in Colombia from 400 to 800, along with a corresponding hike in the number of military contractors from 400 to 600. These forces play a decisive role in Colombian military operations, providing intelligence, planning and logistical direction, maintaining equipment and organizing and training a number of new counterinsurgency battalions.

A focus of these US-backed operations has been the oil-rich province of Arauca, on Venezuela's border. The area has been the scene of mass arrests, abductions and killings directed against suspected guerrilla sympathizers, trade unionists and community activists, and a wave of state violence that has frequently spilled over into Venezuelan territory.

"In Venezuela we are worried about the elevated military spending by the United States, which stands around \$450 billion," said the country's vice president, Jose Vicente Rangel, in response to Rumsfeld's comment in Brazil. "What are they fearing in order to justify such high military spending?"

Rangel characterized the remarks by the Pentagon chief as a "propaganda war" that represented "a new phase in [US] imperialist aggression" aimed at "taking possession of our energy resources. Venezuela is just one step in their global ambitions."

Venezuela currently supplies 1.5 million barrels of oil a day to the US, a quantity that represents 60 percent of the country's exports and 15 percent of American foreign oil consumption.

The propaganda war to which Rangel referred was prominently displayed in a front-page story in the right-wing magazine *National Review* that included a cover photograph of Venezuela's Chavez and Cuban President Fidel Castro and the headline "Axis of Evil." The author was Otto Reich, who until several months ago was the Bush administration's senior adviser on Latin America.

"The emerging axis of subversion forming between Cuba and Venezuela must be confronted before it can undermine democracy in Colombia, Nicaragua, Bolivia or another vulnerable neighbor," wrote Reich, a veteran propagandist for the dirty wars carried out by the CIA and the Pentagon in Central America in the 1980s.

CIA Director Porter Goss expressed a similar view in his testimony earlier this month before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, where he advocated greater attention to threats "in our own back yard."

Goss pointed out that presidential elections are to be held in eight South American and Central American countries next year and warned that "destabilization or a backslide away from democratic

principles ... would not be helpful to our interests and would be probably threatening to our security in the long run.”

Accusing Venezuela of backing anti-government forces in Bolivia and Colombia, Goss declared, “We are talking about meddling in sovereign affairs of different countries by state actors.” He described Venezuelan President Chavez as someone who is “very clearly causing mischief for us,” citing in particular Venezuela’s close relations with Cuba, which it supplies with cheap oil.

The CIA director acknowledged that threats to US interests in Latin America had been overshadowed by US interventions in the Middle East under the mantle of the “war on terrorism.” As a result, he said, the CIA’s own position on the continent had been weakened. “We’ve phased out a lot of activities that we wish we hadn’t at this point,” he said.

The “activities” for which his agency is infamous in the region include organizing violent military coups against elected governments, assassination attempts against heads of state and other officials and the organization of illegal terrorist wars, as in Nicaragua.

Echoing Goss in his testimony before the same committee, US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Commander General Bantz Craddock on March 15 described the growth of “radical groups” as a key threat to US interests and said he was “concerned with Venezuela’s influence” in the region.

“SOUTHCOM supports the joint staff position to maintain military-to-military contact with the Venezuelan military in support of long-term interests in Venezuela and the region,” said Craddock. Washington hopes to use such contact to cultivate a fresh layer of Venezuelan officers willing to participate in a coup against Chavez. After a failed US-backed coup in April 2002, the Chavez government dismissed a large number of rightist military commanders.

The general added, however, “I believe we need a broad-based interagency approach to dealing with Venezuela in order to encourage functioning democratic institutions.” This “interagency approach” consists of a protracted destabilization campaign coupled with preparation for a military coup or even a direct US military intervention.

Craddock also warned that “an increasing presence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the region is an emerging dynamic that must not be ignored”. He cited a recent Chinese report indicating that in 2004 China had plowed nearly \$900 million into Latin America, accounting for close to half the country’s overseas investment. He also noted increasing cooperation between the Chinese and Latin American militaries, reflected in 20 visits to the region by Chinese military officials.

“Growing economic interests, presence and influence in the region are not a threat,” said Craddock, “but they are clearly components of a condition we should recognize and consider carefully as we form our own objectives, policies and engagement in the region.”

US hostility to the Venezuelan government escalated following Chavez’s signing of multiple agreements covering oil exports to China as well as Chinese infrastructure projects in Venezuela.

While the US campaign to isolate Venezuela was a key focus of Rumsfeld’s talks in Argentina and Brazil, leaders of both countries made public statements affirming their good relations with the Chavez government and their respect for Venezuelan sovereignty.

The US defense secretary was met by large protests in both countries, where he was denounced as an architect of the Iraq war—a subject that was discreetly avoided in his meetings with Brazilian and Argentine officials. In Buenos Aires, protesters blocked a bridge

leading into the Argentine capital for two hours.

Rumsfeld arrived in the city just two days before the anniversary of the 1976 military coup that brought to power a dictatorship which murdered, tortured and “disappeared” tens of thousands of Argentines. Also during that period, Rumsfeld occupied the top post at the Pentagon and participated in formulating policies that aided and abetted the police-state repression.

Groups representing relatives of the disappeared and former political prisoners denounced Rumsfeld for repeating in Iraq the crimes carried out in Latin America three decades earlier. Some of them filed a symbolic court suit charging the US defense secretary with responsibility for “torture, executions, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and crimes of war committed by US troops in the prisons of Guantánamo, Afghanistan and Iraq.”

After a one-hour meeting with Rumsfeld, Argentine Defense Minister Jose Pampuro indicated that the two had discussed the importance of renewing “joint military exercises” that were suspended in 2003. He made it clear, however, that his government was still unwilling to accept the US demand that ended them: blanket immunity for any crimes carried out by American troops. Argentine officials indicated that Washington feared US military officials could be charged with war crimes before the International Criminal Court and extradited from Argentina, which is a signatory to the Treaty of Rome, the document that created the body.

Rumsfeld concluded his four-day tour in Guatemala, the scene of the classic CIA-organized Latin American coup half a century ago. There he announced the resumption of US military aid to the Guatemalan military after a 15-year suspension, releasing some \$3.2 million. Washington imposed a ban on such aid in 1990 amid revelations of the genocidal violence carried out by the Guatemalan military. A United Nations-organized commission conservatively estimated that over 200,000 people were killed in the US-backed counterinsurgency war.

Earlier this month, the State Department certified Guatemala’s compliance with conditions set by Congress for a resumption of military aid, including ensuring military respect for civilian leadership.

Just 10 days before Rumsfeld’s visit, Guatemalan troops opened fire with live ammunition on protesting peasants, workers and teachers opposed to the Central American Free Trade Agreement. At least one man was shot dead and several others were wounded by gunfire. Human rights advocates charge that the military has refused to cooperate in investigations of the mass killings in which it participated. Terrorist groups apparently linked to the country’s armed forces have repeatedly targeted those demanding such an accounting.

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