

Guatemala escalates drug war with a declaration of martial law

By Kevin Kearney
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On December 19th, Guatemalan president Alvaro Colom unilaterally declared martial law in Alta Verapaz—a state near the country’s northern border with Mexico—eliminating the few political and due process rights of the region’s impoverished indigenous masses for a period of at least 30 days.

The decree is not limited to criminal activity, but instead broadly suspends the right to free association and protest, allowing the military to detain, without judicial oversight, anyone in the region suspected of “altering public order” or “conspiring against the state”. Additionally, the decree empowers the military to demand that media sources “avoid publications that contribute to altering the public order”, according to Guatemala’s *Prensa Libre* newspaper.

Colom invoked the country’s Law of Public Order, which he claims allows him to declare a state of siege, so long as his decision is ratified by a quorum of legislators within three days. The declaration was made suddenly after the country’s legislature had adjourned for the year and shortly before the Christmas holiday, based on Colom’s independent assertion that the shadowy Mexican drug cartel “Los Zetas” (The Z’s) had completely infiltrated the region rendering it ungovernable and lawless. He claimed that he and his advisers had been secretly investigating the situation in Alta Verapaz for months, although their findings were not made public.

An emergency session of the legislature held on December 22, 2010, approved the decree in a little over an hour. Although many legislators were not present, a quorum of 105 votes was reached with all political parties—including a majority of Colom’s National Unity Party—approving the measure without any significant alterations. Two unaffiliated legislators voted against the measure—Otilia Lux and Aníbal García—arguing that the measure was a step backward to those utilized by the military during the country’s horrific civil war.

The stated basis for martial law in Alta Verapaz is dubious. Colom’s assertion that the region is a site of the drug trade and home to a criminal element—a situation widely accepted as the norm for decades not only in Guatemala but throughout Central America and Mexico—is nothing new. By Colom’s logic, virtually any country or region of the world where poverty and desperation has fostered a criminal element could justifiably be subjected to military rule. Moreover, according to *El Proceso*,

Guatemala’s ambassador to Mexico claimed there were no more than 20 Mexican citizens being prosecuted in the entire country for drug crimes as of March 2010.

Essentially, nobody can confirm Colom’s wild claims that the entire region is ungovernable and dominated by Mexican cartels. His statements seem likely exaggerated to justify a national escalation of drug war police-state measures. No official statistics are cited to back up the claims except an article in the *Prensa Libre* citing an estimate of 23 deaths by gunfire from January to May 2010 in the region. If this is true, then military rule in Oakland, California—with a murder rate of 82 between January and September 2009 according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*—would also be justified.

Since the military took control of the streets of the region’s principal towns—Cobán, Carchá and Santa Cruz Verapaz—it has found four subjects “believed” to be members of the Zeta organization. All of these individuals were native to the region, and no proof of a Zeta connection has been provided other than the fact they were found with guns. These four presumed “Zetas,” a number of weapons and several thousand dollars are all that has been produced in nearly a week of invasive military actions throughout the region.

Nonetheless, over the next month, the president will evaluate whether to extend military rule to other states where drug traffickers are present, according to Ronaldo Robles, spokesperson for Colom. Minister of Defense Abraham Valenzuela also announced the establishment of a permanent military base in Alta Verapaz. For its part, Mexico has recognized the Guatemalan forces and has pledged its support and close communication.

For a little over a decade, through a phony war on drugs, Washington has planned and financed the militarization of Colombia, Mexico and the Central American isthmus stretching between the two countries. This process began in 2000 when Bill Clinton negotiated Plan Colombia, promising billions in exchange for the country’s militarization under the direct guidance of US imperialism. Guatemala and several other Central American countries were drawn into the militarization project via the Merida Initiative—negotiated by George W. Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderon in 2007. Both plans have proven a bloody mess for Mexico and

Colombia, increasing violence and destruction throughout both countries with questionable impact on the drug trade.

According to a Fox News series on US military intervention in the region frankly titled “America’s Third War,” Guatemalan soldiers are currently being trained by the Navy Seals while other US special operations units are developing “tactical strike teams” with the Guatemalan military. The Fox series includes another article entitled, “US secretly trains Guatemalan forces,” which describes a US-run military base located near Alta Verapaz. Here Guatemalan soldiers are being trained “relentlessly” to carry out, “air assault operations, advanced marksmanship and structure breaches using explosives which allow the teams to break down doors while maintaining the element of surprise.”

The article concludes by noting, “U.S. officials who specialize in counter-narcotics worry that Al Qaeda will soon realize the porous nature of the Central American-U.S. corridor. They suggest that America’s border problems don’t end at border cities like El Paso and Brownsville, Texas.” Despite the close military cooperation with Guatemala, the article also laments, “there are set-backs in other countries within the region,” citing Costa Rica as another site of Mexican cartel infiltration.

The series cites statements from US ambassador to Guatemala Stephen McFarland—who led a civilian-military Reconstruction Team embedded with the Marine Corps in Iraq before becoming the country’s ambassador—as further proof of the dangerous drug trafficking organizations in the country.

However, the ambassador reveals more pressing concerns in a signed comment concluding a diplomatic cable to Hillary Clinton from September 29, 2009, in which he states: “Guatemala’s current electorate is distinct from that of many Latin American countries in that it ranges from center-left to hard-right. However, widespread poverty, hunger, marginalization of the large (but fractious) indigenous minority, and a long history of state neglect of the poor could prove fertile ground for the rise of a new, more radical left.”

McFarland and the US government know the country is a tinderbox for social upheavals. According to the World Bank, Guatemala has one of the world’s most unequal income distributions. The richest 20 percent of the population consumes 51 percent of Guatemala’s GDP, while more than half the population lives on less than \$2 a day, and 15 percent on less than \$1 a day. Social development indicators like infant mortality, chronic child malnutrition, and illiteracy are among the worst in the hemisphere.

McFarland’s comments were made in regard to a discussion of President Alvaro Colom’s wife Sandra Torres de Colom and her likely bid for the presidency in 2011. The discussion evinces some concern that she may have leftist proclivities. To a certain extent, the declaration of martial law by Colom may have been designed to allay US concerns and strengthen Torres de Colom’s credentials with the country’s military and the far

right.

Another likely motivation is the desire to obtain a greater share of US financing through the Merida Initiative. As it stands, Guatemala and other Central American countries have received some aid through Merida, but the lion’s share has consistently gone to Mexico. Just a month ago, Guatemalan Interior Minister Carlos Menocal told CNN en Español that the US should give Guatemala more money to fight the drug war instead of focusing on Mexico. Moreover, Colom has indicated his desire to expand martial law throughout the country, but in the last few days he has publicly complained that he lacks the resources.

In any country, a declaration of martial law would be cause for concern about the government’s real motives, but Guatemala’s history lends the question a particularly grave character.

Intervention by the US military and intelligence apparatus to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 culminated in military rule and genocide against the country’s left-wing and indigenous populations during a 36-year-long civil war. According to the book *Guatemala Nunca Mas* (Guatemala Never Again), some 200,000 were killed or disappeared during this period.

Although the organized military force of Guatemala kidnapped and slaughtered civilians largely unobstructed, the horrors radicalized many young indigenous youth—most of these coming from Alta Verapaz’s Q’eqch’í indigenous community, according to the *Prensa Libre*. Without a genuine Marxist perspective and disconnected from the working class, thousands of these young people became enamored with the suicidal Guevarist tactic of the “guerrilla foco” and were ultimately defeated.

This terrible chapter only ended in 1996 with the signing of the Peace Accords. Among other things, these accords put strict limitations on the size and internal uses of the country’s military force, which had become a hated and discredited institution in the eyes of working and poor Guatemalans.

The declaration of martial law and the Colom government’s clear desire to bring the US military and intelligence apparatus back into Guatemala represent a new descent toward military rule that threatens to revive the horrors of the civil war for a new generation.

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