

US, Colombia stage war games as Pompeo threatens Venezuela

By Bill Van Auken
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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo began a three-day tour of Latin America Thursday, visiting all of the countries bordering Venezuela—Colombia, Brazil and Guyana—along with neighboring Suriname. The trip has been organized to coincide with joint US-Colombian war on the Colombia's northern Caribbean coast. These actions are clearly directed at escalating aggression against Venezuela in the run-up to the November elections in the US.

The thuggish US secretary of state is also using his tour to further a global crusade against China as military tensions between Washington and Beijing in the South China Sea and over Taiwan continue to escalate.

Pompeo's trip began with stops in Suriname and Guyana, where he met not only with the newly elected presidents of the two countries, Chan Santokhi and Irfaan Ali, respectively, but also the local representatives of US energy conglomerates and mining companies.

Both countries' economies have grown as the result of the discovery of large off-shore oil reserves. ExxonMobil, which found the reserves off the coast of Guyana in 2015, began production in December of last year under an arrangement that grants the country only 50 percent of the proceeds, an exploitative arrangement that has been widely criticized by Guyanese.

Speaking in Suriname's capital of Paramaribo, Pompeo declared it an "exciting time" for the economy, referring to the oil reserves, while arguing that the country should align its interests with the US rather than China.

"We've watched the Chinese Communist Party invest in countries, and it all seems great at the front end and then it all comes falling down when the political costs connected to that becomes [sic] clear," he said.

Both Suriname and Guyana have been invited by Beijing to join its global Belt and Road trade and infrastructure initiative, and both have significant amounts of Chinese investment. The presidents of both countries were circumspect in addressing Pompeo's anti-China campaign. "It was not a topic of discussion, so it is not a question of making choices," Santokhi said.

Asked whether Suriname's government would allow the US to use its territory to mount military operations against

Venezuela, Santokhi again stated that the question was not discussed, and that "Suriname is of the view that the political leaders in Venezuela have to principally resolve their internal matters."

Pompeo then flew on to a lightening three-and-a-half-hour stopover in Brazil's Amazonian state of Roraima, participating in a photo-op at an intake center for Venezuelan refugees in the state capital of Boa Vista and then holding a meeting with his Brazilian counterpart, Foreign Minister Ernesto Araujo.

The US secretary of state used the visit to feign concern for the millions of Venezuelans who have left their country. The overwhelming majority have done so because of the catastrophic decline of the Venezuelan economy under the impact of plummeting oil prices, a US sanctions regime tantamount to a state of war and the capitalist policies pursued by the so-called "Bolivarian Socialist" government of President Nicolas Maduro, which defends the interests of a parasitic financial oligarchy.

For Pompeo to posture as the savior of refugees goes beyond hypocrisy. Thousands of Venezuelans who have attempted to enter the US claiming asylum have been sent back across the border into the squalid tent camps and dangerous border cities of Mexico to wait indefinitely for their cases to be heard. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is attempting to deport some 400,000 refugees from countries like El Salvador and Haiti, admitted under the temporary protected status (TPS) program, many of whom have been living in the US for decades, with US born children. And a recent whistleblower complaint has revealed conditions resembling "an experimental concentration camp" at an immigrant detention center where women were subjected to forced sterilization through hysterectomies.

Appearing with Araujo at a press conference held at an airbase outside Boa Vista, Pompeo said "we're going to throw him out of there," referring to Maduro, and declared that it was Washington's mission to "assure that Venezuela has a democracy."

Araujo, who has described climate change an invention of "cultural Marxists" to undermine Western economies and boost China, is ideologically aligned with the Trump administration and the extreme right in the US. Both

governments have pursued criminally negligent and homicidal policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with equally disastrous results. Brazil has recorded the second highest death toll—over 135,000—in the world, trailing only the US, and the third highest number of cases, after the US and India, some 4.5 million.

The ravages of the worldwide pandemic far from diminishing, have only intensified US imperialism's drive toward military aggression in pursuit of global hegemony.

In Venezuela, the Trump administration continues to maintain the fiction that the self-proclaimed “interim president” Juan Guaidó represents the legitimate government, despite his lack of any significant popular support and his repeated failures in bringing about the regime change demanded by his controllers in Washington.

Most of the country's right-wing opposition has abandoned Guaidó and his corrupt clique, some of it announcing participation in parliamentary elections set for December, despite Washington having declared them illegitimate before the fact. This has only led the Maduro government to turn further to the right, pardoning last month over 100 rightists who engaged in attempted coups and terror plots, in hopes of forging some kind of national unity accord with the aid of the European Union and Turkey. Even while granting impunity to the rightists, the Maduro government has continued to ruthlessly repress strikes and social protest from below.

Washington has no interest in any such compromise, however. It continues to insist on regime change and maintain that military intervention is an option that remains “on the table.”

This crucial component of US policy was made clear in the last leg of Pompeo's trip, with his arrival in Bogota, Colombia late Friday for talks with the country's right-wing President Ivan Duque. The visit coincided with US-Colombian joint military exercises dubbed “Operation Poseidon,” involving joint air operations along with naval exercises simulating “the interdiction, interception and neutralization of illicit maritime targets.”

These exercises, like the US deployment of warships and other assets in the Caribbean ordered by the Trump administration last April, are being carried out under the pretense of combatting drug trafficking. Washington has ludicrously tried to paint Venezuela as the main source of the drug flow to the US, when its own agencies have long acknowledged that Colombia accounts for the bulk of the drug traffic, which flows not through the Caribbean, but up the Pacific coast and through Central American countries, also ruled by right-wing governments aligned with Washington.

The exercises have drawn widespread denunciations in Colombia, whose courts had ruled that Duque overstepped his constitutional authority in inviting US troops back into the country in June without the approval of the country's Senate.

Colombia has been rocked by mass protests against a brutal

police murder, resulting in the massacre of 15 civilians. As Pompeo arrived in Bogotá, police were carrying out raids and arrests against oppositionists in a bid to intimidate the population in advance of nationwide protests and strikes planned for Monday.

The threat of a war against Venezuela is intimately bound up with Washington's simultaneous threats of military aggression against Iran, which like the South American country is suffering under the weight of a US “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign. This connection has been made explicit with the Trump administration's naming of Elliott Abrams as the “Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela,” after the former US envoy on Iran, Brian Hook, quit his post last month.

In a press briefing Wednesday, Abrams said that Washington will unveil punishing new sanctions against both countries in the coming days. This includes the US pretense that it has the power to invoke the “snapback” provision of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, reinstating UN sanctions that were lifted when Tehran struck its deal with the major powers. The UN Security Council has rejected the US position, insisting that Washington, having unilaterally abrogated the accord, has no standing to reinstate UN sanctions, which include the indefinite reimposition of a ban on conventional weapons sales to Iran, which is set to expire next month.

The media has failed to note the irony of Abrams serving as the champion of such sanctions, having been charged with felonies in the 1980s for his role in the Iran-contra affair, which involved illegal US arms sales to Iran to fund the illicit CIA-backed contra war against Nicaragua.

In his press conference, Abrams denounced Venezuela for having “turned to another international pariah, Iran, shipping it gold to buy gasoline.” Iran has shipped both gasoline and condensate, a natural gas needed to turn Venezuela's crude oil into gasoline. Last month, Washington claimed to have intercepted four ships carrying Iranian gasoline to Venezuela. The UAE, Oman and UK-based owners of the cargo shipped on Greek-owned tankers are suing the US government, insisting that the fuel was bound for Trinidad, destined for sale to Colombia and Peru.

Abrams told reporters Wednesday that the US is “watching what Iran is doing” in relation to fuel shipments to Venezuela. Washington's stepped-up sanctions against both countries and the threat of a US military hijacking of Iranian vessels on the high seas poses the danger of a new and catastrophic war.

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