

Colombia: a Proxy Country for US Intervention in Venezuela

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Global Research, December 28, 2004

18 June 2005

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Introduction

In the past few years one coup d'Etat by the Venezuelan military, four general strikes to disrupt its economy and a Recall Referendum on August 15, 2004, which allows a President to be removed from office after mid-term, have failed. (See our analysis in a previous publication [1].) Now the imperialist forces are left with few avenues of toppling him. One of them is a military intervention, on some excuse (s) and through a shill or proxy country.

But what excuses and which country?

The two most likely ones are “war on terrorism (counterinsurgency) and war on drugs”; and the country likely to spearhead the military intervention is Colombia-a neighbor of Venezuela, struggling to defeat its own internal Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, and others) who control a considerable part of Colombia. (See below).

To date, Colombia has received the largest amount of US military aid in Latin America. The aid has grown ten-fold since 1995. Since 2003 there are 800 US military trainers and 600 civilian contractors in Colombia.

The US has provided \$3 billion in military aid to Colombia in the past three years [2A]. An armada of 60 US made Huey II and Blackhawk attack helicopters are the main weapons bought for quick deployment of Colombian troops in FARC controlled southern Colombia to provide security for the planes doing aerial spraying of drug crops (coca plants) [3].

To protect the pipelines owned by the US-based Occidental Petroleum in Arauca department (province) on the land of the indigenous U'wa tribe, a \$98 million aid was given in 2002 for the purchase of 12 surveillance and attack helicopters. Occidental has spent years lobbying for military assistance to Colombia [4]. In July 2002 another \$35 million was allocated for operation in Peru and areas of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil where drug smugglers presumably operate [5].

Colombia -the background

Colombia is a country of 44 million, where 56 percent of land is owned by 0.4% of the population and 23 percent of the population earn less than \$ 1 a day [6]. Since its independence from Spain in 1823 till today it had a violent history. After its independence there were eight general civil wars, 14 local civil wars, countless small civil uprisings, two international wars with Ecuador, and three coups d'Etat. It took several years, starting in 1858, to create a constitution and from 1885 the country began to call itself Republic of

Colombia. In the wake of this poor peasants and indigenous people rose in revolt.

A civil war, called “War of Thousand days” broke out in 1899-1902. Approximately 100,000 people were killed. From 1903 to 1920 a semi dictatorial regime was established by the oligarchs that pursued the policy of brutal repression of union movements and indigenous people [7]. From the late 1920s on, the country began to industrialize. Labor strikes led by the unions became common. To suppress them the army was often called upon. In 1928, the army fired on a peaceful demonstration of banana workers in Cienaga killing 1,000 workers.

In 1948 Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a leftist populist Mayor of Bogotá was assassinated. Riots and rebellion went on for a decade-1948-1958- called “la violencia” period. Some 20,000 armed rebels, organized in rebel groups, operated in Colombia. One of the groups was to become The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1964-the largest peasant/workers organization. [8]. Other guerilla groups called National Liberation Army (ELN) and M-19 (April 19 Movement) were formed in 1965 and 1970 respectively. In 2000-2001 these groups control and administer approximately 50 percent of Colombian national territory [9].

Enter the Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and the US Involvement

By 1970 a large number of MNCs -mostly from US- had billions invested in Colombia: The MNCs were: Petroleum and natural gas reserves-, ExxonMobil, Occidental, Cano-Limon and British Petroleum. Coal mines- Drummond Company, Birmingham Alabama;, Coca Cola, with 17 plants employing 10,000 workers. Banana exporting companies-Chiquita, Dole, and Del Monte. Dole bought 20% of Colombia’s flower industry and is now the largest single exporter of fresh-cut Colombian flowers [10]

Throughout Colombia indigenous tribes, peasants, small cultivators and small miners stand in the way of oil drilling, pipeline laying through Indian tribal lands, agro-businesses, and large scale mining that causes dispossession of land and environmental damage. Revolutionary peasants and indigenous organizations developed armed resistance and disrupted the operations of MNCs. Between 1982 and 1999 there were more than 600 guerilla attacks on the pipelines-with a 1.6 billion barrels of oil spilled along the way; in 2001 the pipeline was bombed 170 times and was out of commission for 266 days cutting heavily into [Occidental] company’s profits [11]. It became obvious that to safeguard MNCs investment and profits, US military protection and security was (is) required.

Paramilitary, revolutionary peasants and first excuse for intervention

A first step was taken in the early 1970s to subdue insurgency, which was to encourage the Colombian military, in conjunction with the big landlords and financed by drug cartels, to arm and train civilian to form paramilitary force [12] The mandate of the Paramilitary was to pacify-assassinate through its death squad-the revolutionary peasants and guerrillas in the countryside, and to do the same to the activists, labor leaders and organizers in the urban areas. These included hospital workers unions, electrical workers unions, teachers unions, journalists, priests, nuns, lawyers, women’s right’s groups, human right groups, indigenous community leaders, directors of agriculture cooperatives, journalists and other activists. Those journalists not in favor of military and paramilitary and large coca growers were also assassinated [14]

Second excuse for intervention-drugs.

During the post Vietnam years drug use (primarily recreational) began to increase in US, and so did the drug (cocaine) export from Colombia. Drug barons in conjunction with large landlords controlled the expanding cocaine production and trade reaping windfall profits US and Colombian media and diplomatic sources have steadfastly maintained that it is the revolutionary groups- FARC and EL N, and not the paramilitary, that finances its operations through drug (cocaine).

However, a report by "Klaus Nydholm, the representative in Colombia of the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) told reporters on May 8, 2001 that right wing paramilitary 'are indeed involved' in drug trafficking', even more than the guerrillas of the FARC, to such an extent that there are regions of the country in which it is hard to tell who are drug traffickers and who are paramilitary' Although the rebels 'finance their war with taxes on the drug trade, Nydholm said, 'we do not consider the FARC drug traffickers. We believe that it is still a matter of guerrilla organization with political objectives', and the ELN 'never has been very involved' in drug trafficking" [16].

Expansion of US military aid and bio-chemical warfare

Although the cover story for the expansion of US military aid to Colombia is that it is a part of a "war on drugs" in Latin America, yet its real purpose is well understood by the commanders of FARC and the Colombian military and paramilitary military forces. As one of the guerilla leaders stated, increased militarization of antinarcotics operation is a pretext for stepped up counterinsurgency action and extending the war against them by the U.S. [17]. And so did the paramilitary and military commanders who said "we do not differentiate between counter-insurgency and counter-narcotic operations-its the same thing. We do a raid on the drug-traffickers, and we know we're hitting the guerrillas" [18].

However, to perpetuate the charade that U.S. is not directly intervening in Colombia, rather private corporation and organizations are the primary participants, much of the military and biochemical operation is "contracted out" to private firms and private armies. Early in 2003 the U.S. State Department reported that there are 17 primary contracting companies working in Colombia, initially receiving \$3.5 billion [20].

Biochemical warfare

Biological-chemical-bacteriological warfare against the peasants also started, full force, during 1998. DynCorp, a defense contractor and a Fortune 500 company, has a \$ 600 million contract to carry out aerial spraying to eliminate coca crops which also contaminates maize, Yucca, and plantains-staple foods of the population; children and adults develop skin rashes. The herbicide that is sprayed, glyphosate, commonly known as Roundup, is manufactured by Monsanto, a US company. It should be noted that the aerial spraying with Roundup, in the manner in which it is done in Colombia, is illegal in the US where Glysohate is considered to be category II, highly toxic. Other chemicals sprayed are registered as category I, extremely toxic [22]. Fumigation, along with machine gun shootings, and a heavy military and paramilitary presence, linked to a low-intensity warfare have taken the lives of more than 1,300 villagers in various municipalities in FARC controlled Putumayo department [23].

US and Colombia allege that revolutionary guerillas and drug traffickers from Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela work in tandem; they find shelter in the trackless 1.9 million square

miles area of rain forests and rivers of Amazon. To crush them a new American financed, \$1.4 billion system for radar and sensor was installed to monitor this area [24]. (See below).

Resistance by Colombian revolutionary forces, along with Venezuela's progressive populist policies is a major threat to imperialist and its allies in Latin America. A victory for or even a modus vivendi with the revolutionary forces in Colombia along with Venezuela's successful policies are likely to present an alternate socio-economic model spawned by the WB/IMF and MNCs. This momentum has to be defeated by military force, if necessary, and Chavez has to go [25].

Chavez has to go if Colombia is to be secured for MNCs

Coups and strikes failed to topple Chavez. With his victory at the Recall Referendum on August 15, 2004, he has emerged a bigger threat than before for imperialist and its subalterns in Latin America. Venezuela presents an example for other indebted and exploited countries of Latin America countries to take charge of their nations for its people. In the wake his Referendum victory, Chavez called on the country's private business operators to work with his government in moving the country away from capitalism. He stated "We have to eliminate large land holding in Venezuela. What we have done so far has been very, very superficial. Everybody expects Chavez to get tougher and deepen the revolution [26]. These are threatening words for those who follow the US, WB/IMF lead in establishing a capitalist, free enterprise, for profit economic order, and Colombia has affirmed to follow the WB/IMF policies [27].

Grounds for intervention.

Venezuela and Colombia share a common, semi porous, 1370 miles border where drug trafficking, kidnapping and smuggling are common. Since 2003 there have been several incursions by Colombian paramilitary forces into Venezuela's western provinces of Zulia and Tachira killing civilians and National Guard troops, both as a provocation and a threat. In July 2003 Chavez ordered an additional 2,700 troops to reinforce security, in addition to the 20,000 already posted along the Colombian border [28].

In 2001 the US State Department put two Colombian revolutionary groups, FARC and ELN on "terrorist list", accusing them of drug trafficking-smuggling, disrupting country's democratic process and sabotaging country's economy. US also charged that Venezuela facilitates Middle Eastern terrorist to enter the US via Venezuelan territory [30]. In contrast, in 2004, US removed Colombian paramilitary force, which has one of the worst human right recorded, from the terror list, where it had been placed three years previously [31]. This gives the US military a clean chit to supply paramilitary with arms.

Grounds are also being laid on a political-ideological level. In 2004, in his annual Posture Statement, US Southern Commander General James Hill identified "radical populism" (Venezuela) and gangs (revolutionary guerillas) as major dangers facing the region. At the same time a new doctrine, called "Effective Sovereignty", was developed by the Bush administration which contends that the US national security is threaded by Latin American governments failure to exercise control over the "ungoverned spaces", such as Amazon basin, which invites unlawful elements of societies. This doctrine permits US to intervene in other countries to protect and maintain its security. And permits a steady flow of weapons and military personnel for this region. [32]

In fact attempts to foment a revolt/coup started three months prior to Chavez's referendum victory in August 2004. In May 2004, about 120 members of Colombian paramilitary, wearing Venezuelan military uniform, landed clandestinely near Venezuelan capital to link up with other anti national groups and disgruntled unions within the country to foment revolt, sabotage and help remove Chavez. Most of them were apprehended by local police [33].

Because of these developments Venezuela reduced its military ties with Washington. To strengthen its security, in November 2004 it ordered 100,000 Russian semi-automatic rifles, anti-tank guns, 40 helicopters and 50 MiG-29MST warplanes as replacement for US made F-16 jets. Both Washington and Colombia viewed it with suspicion and alarm. Colombia accused Chavez as a military threat it poses to Colombia. It is the purchase of Mig-29 that is regarded as hostile act toward Colombia and Colombian officials declared that Chavez resembles a war leader who has put in military officers in government posts traditionally occupied by civilians. [34]

In November 2004 assassination of Venezuelan judicial prosecutor Danilo Anderson, who was prosecuting 2002 coup leaders, was assassinated. Other Venezuelan rightist fugitive in Florida and Colombia openly advocate on Florida-Colombia TV assassination of high officials, including Chavez. In June 2004 Miami TV Channel 41 hosted a fund raiser to overthrow Chavez. In October 2004, an asylum seeker-fugitive anti Chavez actor Urdaneta stated that efficient commandos be hired to assassinate Chavez.

Discredited former President Carlos Perez and other high ranking military fugitives in Colombia advocate assassination of high government officials, showing that subversion has made a qualitative leap to a generalized offensive indicating a well-financed and organized terrorist network based in Colombia and Florida which along with assassinations, also begin attacks against energy and transport infrastructure [35-Solo].

Other pressures to disrupt Venezuelan economy were also set in motion. Soon after Chavez's Referendum victory (August 16, 2004), on September 11, 2004 US decided to impose sanctions on Venezuela because of its alleged role in the international trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation-trafficking within the country and abroad to Spain and Guyana. Countries such as Sudan, Cuba and North Korea that oppose US policies are also accused of not combating trafficking and thus subject to sanction. The sanction that US may impose is blocking a loan request of \$250 million by Venezuela to the Inter American Development Bank aimed at combating poverty [36].

However, thus far such methods and tactics have not deposed Chavez. Hence a military intervention is anticipated. Early in 2004 Colombia agreed to buy 46 tanks from Spain equipped with 120 mm (4.7 inch) guns and its accompanying shells, which according one security official "are clearly targeted against Chavez" particularly in the border area. The form the war is likely to take would be where Colombian military and paramilitary attack border communities which Venezuelan army would repel. This would then be presented as Venezuelan aggression against Colombia and the US would "help" Colombia repel aggression and take over the war [37]

At the same time due to Colombian internal conditions, protests and demonstrations have grown in intensity and density which have engaged much of the Colombian military and paramilitary forces, and hence they may find it difficult to mount an incursion, other than the border engagements by paramilitary forces [38]. In this context, the Colombian President

Alvaro Uribe-the only South American leader to back Bush's invasion on Iraq-has invited Americans to invade Colombia [39], which should present several opportunities to intervene in Venezuela and the newly re-elected war president, as Bush calls himself, will certainly seize the first opportunity to do so.

Footnotes

1-Today Colombia spends \$7.3 million a day on arms, ammunition, purchase of equipment, intelligence, maintenance of troops, fuel, etc. The guerilla and the paramilitary spend around \$2.6 million daily, and the US sends more than \$1.6 million a day for military expenditure [2B-]

2 - Railways, roads, river navigation, ports, oil drilling, coal mining, gold mining, textile and other factories were established.

3- The paramilitary is armed and trained by the regular Colombian military. The US provides arms for both the military and the paramilitary. One of the major source of paramilitary financing is drug trafficking-cocaine-many of whom are directly involved in its manufacturing and trafficking [13]

4- Three out of five murders of labor activists in the world occur in Colombia, although Colombia has one of the lowest rates of unionization in Latin America-about 7% of the working population, a total of 900,000 members [15]

5- From 1998-1999 a stampede to supply armament and biochemical weapons to Colombia started. What started the stampede? In 1998 a peasant guerilla force wiped out an elite counter-guerilla unit of 228 troops. General Charles Wilhelm of US Southern command recommended military intervention. The State Department concurred, circulating a paper, stating that FARC and ELN could take over power in Colombian in five years, and the stampede started. [19].

6-Virginia-based DynCorp, with 17,500-plus employee, one of the Pentagon's largest contractors, has annual revenues of more than \$ 1.3 billion. Its services are integrated into the Drug Enforcement Agency, Department of Justice, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Communication Commission, Internal Revenue Services and Treasury Department. It recruits its pilots,, aerial spraying experts, and technical personnel in Latin America, mostly Colombia and Bolivia [21]

7-In March 20 Colombian paramilitary attacked and killed seven national Guard troops, ambushed army troops, looted and burned homes and killed civilians in the border areas. On March 31, 2003, Chavez ordered bombing of an area where Colombian paramilitary attacked. During August-September, 2004 more than 20 soldiers were killed and more than a dozen unidentified bodies were found. It is not yet confirmed who killed them [29]

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