

Is George Bush Restarting Latin America's 'Dirty Wars'?

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Two soldiers in Paraguay stand in front of a camera. One of them holds an automatic weapon. John Lennon's "Imagine" plays in the background. This Orwellian juxtaposition of war and peace is from a new video posted online by U.S. soldiers stationed in Paraguay. The video footage and other military activity in this heart of the continent represent a new wave of U.S.-backed militarism in Latin America.

It's a reprise of a familiar tune. In the 1970s and 1980s, Paraguay's longtime dictator, Gen. [Alfredo Stroessner](#), collaborated with the region's other dictators through Operation Condor, which used kidnapping, torture and murder to squash dissent and political opponents. Stroessner's human rights record was so bad that even Ronald Reagan distanced himself from the leader. Carrying on this infamous legacy, Paraguay now illustrates four new characteristics of Latin America's right-wing militarism: joint exercises with the U.S. military in counterinsurgency training, monitoring potential dissidents and social organizations, the use of private mercenaries for security and the criminalization of social protest through "anti-terrorism" tactics and legislation.

In May of 2005, the Paraguayan Senate voted to allow U.S. troops to operate in Paraguay with total immunity. Washington had threatened to cut off millions in aid to the country if Paraguay did not grant the U.S. troops entry. In July of 2005 [hundreds of U.S. soldiers arrived](#) in the country, and Washington's funding for counterterrorism efforts in Paraguay doubled. The U.S. troops conducted various operations and joint training exercises with Paraguayan forces, including so-called Medical Readiness Training Exercises (MEDRETEs). Orlando Castillo, a military policy expert at the human rights organization Servicio, Paz y Justicia in Asunción, Paraguay, says the MEDRETEs were "observation" operations aimed at developing "a type of map that identifies not just the natural resources in the area, but also the social organizations and leaders of different communities."

Castillo, in his cool Asunción office, with the standard Paraguayan herbal tea, *tereré* in his hand, said these operations marked a shift in U.S. military strategy. "The kind of training that used to just happen at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia, is now decentralized," he explained. "The U.S. military is now establishing new mechanisms of cooperation and training with armed forces." Combined efforts, such as MEDRETEs, are part of this agenda. "It is a way to remain present, while maintaining a broad reach throughout the Americas." Castillo said this new wave of militarism is aimed at considering internal populations as potential enemies and preventing insurgent leftists from coming to power.

Bruce Kleiner of the U.S. Embassy in Paraguay said that the MEDRETEs "provide humanitarian service to some of Paraguay's most disadvantaged citizens." But [this video](#) by

Captain William Johnson shows that there's more to the MEDRETE operations, with local Paraguayans being questioned as they receive treatment, as well as events and ceremonies aimed at strengthening ties between the military personnel of both countries. Often, heavily armed men are seen walking past lines of local families while they wait for medicine and questions. The lighthearted depiction of these joint military operations seen in the video is in sharp contrast with reports from local citizens.

A group of representatives from human rights organizations and universities from all over the world, including the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and a group from the University of Toulouse, France, traveled to Paraguay last July as part of the Campaign for the Demilitarization of the Americas (CADA) to [observe and report on](#) the repression going on in the country linked to the presence of U.S. troops. The local citizens they interviewed said they were not told what medications they were given during the U.S. MEDRETEs. Patients said they were often given the same treatments regardless of their illness. In some cases, the medicine produced hemorrhages and abortions. When the medical treatment took place, patients reported that they were asked if they belonged to any kind of labor or social organization. Among the leaders of such organizations, dozens have been disappeared and tortured in recent years, just as they were during Latin America's "dirty wars" in the Reagan era.

While Orlando Castillo is adamant that the historic military links between Paraguay and the United States remain strong, the U.S. troops that arrived in 2005 have reportedly left the country. In December 2006, the Paraguayan Senate and executive branch, responding to pressure from neighboring countries, voted to end the troops' immunity. Paraguay would have been excluded from the lucrative regional trade bloc of *Mercosur* if it continued to grant immunity to U.S. forces.

Privatizing repression

Castillo sees private mercenaries, or paramilitaries, as another key piece of the new militarism puzzle. In Paraguay, the strongest paramilitary group is the Citizens Guard. "These paramilitary groups are made of people from the community. They establish curfews and rules of conduct, and monitor the activity of the community. They also intervene in family disputes and can kick people out of the community or off land ... this all very similar to the paramilitary activities in Colombia." Castillo said that while this activity is illegal, the police and judges simply look the other way. Many of the paramilitaries are connected to large agribusinesses and landowners and have been linked to increased repression of small farming families that have resisted the [expansion of the soy](#) industry, a cash-crop mostly for export. The shadow army of the Citizens Guard is as big as the state security forces: [These paramilitary groups](#) have nearly 22,000 members, while the Paraguayan police force is only 9,000 strong and the military has 13,000 members.

The use of private security is on the rise throughout the Americas. Journalist Cyril Mychalejko reported that the Bush administration was [recently incriminated](#) in a scandal involving Chiquita Brands International Inc. and their funding of paramilitaries to repress a discontented labor force in Colombia. The paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Force of Colombia (AUC) is designated by the State Department as a terrorist organization. In 2003, a former executive at Chiquita told Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff that they were paying the paramilitary group. Chertoff looked the other way, allowing the company to pay an additional [\\$134,000](#) to the AUC throughout that year.

Castillo's comments about the new U.S. military strategy for the region apply to all of Latin America. Carrying on the legacy of the School of the Americas, the [International Law Enforcement Academy \(ILEA\)](#) was recently opened in El Salvador, where similar training is going on to broaden the military's reach in the area.

Exporting the "War on Terror"

Anti-terrorism rhetoric and legislation is being mixed into this deadly cocktail in Paraguay, as it is across Latin America. The Paraguayan Senate is scheduled to pass an anti-terrorism law that will criminalize social protest and establish penalties of up to 40 years in prison for participating in such activities. A large march against the passage of the law took place in the country's capital on July 26.

The U.S.-based corporate media plays a part in what has become a war against labor movements and leftist politicians. Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, has regularly [been portrayed](#) in the American media as a haven and training ground for Middle Eastern terrorist organizations. [Regional analysts](#) believe this terrifying narrative has aided the Pentagon in its military plans for the country. Terrorism talk is similarly being used for political purposes elsewhere in Latin America. The U.S.A Patriot Act [was used to revoke](#) the U.S. travel visa for Bolivian human rights leader and labor organizer Leonilda Zurita shortly after leftist president Evo Morales came to power.

In Venezuela's national divide between pro- and anti-Chavez citizens, everything is political. CNN recently entered the fray when it aired footage that Venezuelan governmental officials said falsely linked Chavez to Al-Qaeda. The Venezuelan government has [filed charges against CNN](#) for the act. Information Minister William Lara said CNN showed photos of Chavez alongside those of an Al-Qaeda leader. He explained that "CNN broadcast a lie which linked President Chavez to violence and murder." CNN denied having "any intention of associating President Chavez with al Qaeda ..."

In Nicaragua, the media has recently been used as a tool by Washington to promote its foreign policy agenda. A long time lab rat for U.S. imperialism, Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America and the site of a socialist revolution in the 1980s when the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza dictatorship. The specter of a Sandinista-led government still haunts the White House. In a 2001 presidential election in Nicaragua when Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was running for re-election, (right after 9/11) similar tactics were employed, and the media was a key tool. In an ad in the Nicaraguan paper *La Prensa*, Jeb Bush [was quoted as saying](#): "Daniel Ortega is an enemy of everything the United States represents. Further, he is a friend of our enemies. Ortega has a relationship of more than 30 years with states and individuals who shelter and condone international terrorism." The tactic worked, and the pro-free market, right-wing Washington ally Enrique Bolaños beat Ortega. In the lead up to the presidential election on Nov. 5, 2006, former U.S. Lt. Col. Oliver North visited Nicaragua to warn voters not to elect Daniel Ortega. In the 1980s North was convicted of violating U.S. law to organize the Contra guerrillas against the Sandinista government. North reminded voters that the same terror could return to Nicaragua under a new Ortega administration. Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., threatened another trade embargo and to prevent money sent from Nicaraguans in the United States from reaching their families at home. U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, [Paul Trivelli said](#) that if Ortega won the elections, the United States would "re-evaluate relations" with the country. The media was used against Ortega as well, with TV commercials showing corpses from the Contra war in the 1980s, warning citizens against voting for the left's choice. This time, however, the

media campaign backfired, and Ortega won the election.

Paraguayan journalist Marco Castillo shook as head while contemplating this new landscape of repression. Dozens of social organization leaders and dissidents have been disappeared and tortured in recent years. "Impunity reigns," he said. "This is as bad as it was during the worst years of the Stroessner dictatorship."

Benjamin Dangl won a 2007 Project Censored Award for his coverage of U.S. military operations in Paraguay. He is the author of [The Price of Fire: Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia](#) (AK Press, 2007).

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