

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-Peoples Army (FARC-EP): The Cost of Unilateral Humanitarian Initiatives

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

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President Uribe's troop and missile assault, violating Ecuadorian sovereignty came very close to precipitating a regional war with Ecuador and Venezuela. During an interview I had with President Chavez, at the time of this bellicose act, he confirmed to me the gravity of Uribe's doctrine of 'preventive war' and 'extra-territorial intervention', calling the Colombian regime the 'Israel of Latin America'. Earlier, during his Sunday radio program 'Alo Presidente', in which I was an invited guest, he followed up with an announcement that he was sending ground, air and sea forces to the Venezuelan frontier with Colombia.

Uribe's cross-border attack was meant to probe the political 'will' of Ecuador and Venezuela to respond to military aggression, as well as to test the performance of US-coordinated remote, satellite directed missile attack. There is no doubt also that Uribe aimed to scuttle the imminent humanitarian release of FARC prisoner, Ingrid Betancourt, being negotiated by the French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, Ecuador's Interior Minister Larrea, the Colombian Red Cross and especially Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Kouchner, Larrea and Chavez were in direct contact with FARC's leader, Raul Reyes who, along with 22 others, including non-combatants of various nationalities, were assassinated in Ecuador by Uribe's American-coordinated missile and ground attack. Uribe's military intervention was in part directed at denying the important diplomatic role, which Chavez was playing in the release FARC-held prisoners, in contrast to the failure of Uribe's military efforts to 'free the prisoners'.

Raul Reyes was recognized as the legitimate interlocutor in these negotiations by both European and Latin American governments, as well as the Red Cross; if the negotiations succeeded in the prisoner release it was likely that the same governments and humanitarian bodies would pressure Uribe to open comprehensive prisoner exchange and peace negotiations with the FARC, which was contrary to Bush and Uribe's policy of unrelenting warfare, political assassinations and scorched earth policies.

What was at stake in Uribe's violating Ecuadorian sovereignty and murdering 22 FARC guerrillas and Mexican visitors was nothing less than the entire military counter-insurgency strategy, which has been pursued by Uribe since coming to office in 2002.

Uribe was clearly willing to risk what eventually happened - the censure and sanction of the Organization of American States and the (temporary) break in relations with Venezuela, Ecuador and Nicaragua. He did so because he could count on Washington's backing, which covertly (and illegally) participated in and immediately applauded the attack. That was more

important than jeopardizing cooperation with Latin American nations and France. Colombia remains Washington's military forward shield in Latin America and, in particular, it is the most important politico-military instrument to destabilize and overthrow the anti-imperialist Chavez government. Clinton and Bush have invested over \$6 billion dollars in military aid to Colombia over the past 7 years, including sending 1500 military advisers and Special Forces, dozens of Israeli commandos and 'trainers', funding over 2000 mercenary fighters and over 10,000 paramilitary forces working closely with the 200,000-man strong Colombian Armed Forces.

Notwithstanding these and other international considerations, influencing Uribe's extra-territorial 'act of war', I would argue that the main consideration in this attack on the FARC campsite in Ecuador was to decapitate, weaken and isolate the most powerful guerrilla movement in Latin America and the most uncompromising opponent to Washington and Bogotá's repressive neo-liberal policies. International politicians, including progressive leaders like Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez and Rafael Correa, who have called for the end of armed struggle, seem to overlook the recent experiences of FARC efforts to de-militarize the struggle, including three peace initiatives (1984-1990), (1999-2001) and (2007-2008) and the heavy costs to the FARC in terms of the killing of key leaders, activists and sympathizers. During the mid-1980's many leaders of the FARC joined the electoral process, formed a political party – the Patriotic Union. The scores of successfully elected local and national officeholders and...5,000 of their members, leaders, congress-people and three presidential candidates were slaughtered. The FARC returned to the countryside and guerrilla struggle. Ten years later, the FARC agreed to negotiate with then President Pastrana in a demilitarized zone. The FARC held public forums, discussed policy alternatives for social and political reforms to democratize the state and debated private versus public ownership of strategic economic sectors with diverse sectors in 'civil society'. President Pastrana, under pressure from US President Clinton and later Bush, abruptly broke off negotiations and sent the armed forces in to capture the FARC's high level negotiating teams. The US-funded and advised Colombian military failed to capture the FARC leaders but set the stage for the scorched earth policies pursued by paramilitary President Uribe.

In 2007-2008, the FARC offered to negotiate the mutual release of political prisoners in a secure demilitarized zone in Colombia. Uribe refused. President Chavez entered into negotiations as a mediator. The French government and others challenged Chavez to ask for 'evidence' that the FARC prisoners were alive. The FARC complied with Chavez request. It sent three emissaries who were intercepted and are being detained by the Colombian military under brutal conditions. Still the FARC continued with Chavez request and attempted to relocate the first set of prisoners to be turned over to the Red Cross and Venezuelan officials – but they came under aerial attack by Uribe's armed forces thus aborting the release. Still later, under increased risk, they were able to release the first batch of captives. The French Foreign Minister Kouchner and Chavez made new requests for the release of Ingrid Betancourt, a dual French-Colombian national and former presidential candidate. This was sabotaged when Uribe, with high-level US technical assistance, launched a major military offensive throughout the country, including a comprehensive monitoring program, tracing communications between Reyes, Chavez, Kouchner, Larrea and the Red Cross.

It was this high-risk role played by Reyes as the highest level FARC official involved in the negotiations and coordination for captive release that led to his assassination. Outside pressures for a unilateral release of prisoners caused the FARC to lower their security. The

result was the loss of leaders, negotiators, sympathizers and militants – without securing the release of any of their 500 comrades held in Colombian prisons. The entire emphasis of Sarkozy, Chavez, Correa and others demanded unilateral concessions from the FARC – as if their own tortured and dying comrades in Uribe’s jails were not part of any humanitarian consideration.

The subsequent summit in the Dominican Republic during the weekend of March 8-9 led to a condemnation of Colombia’s violation of Ecuador’s territorial sovereignty, but the Uribe government, responsible for the invasion, was not actually named or officially sanctioned. Moreover, no mention was made (let alone respect shown) for the treacherously assassinated leader, Raul Reyes, whose life was lost in pursuit of a humanitarian exchange. If the meeting itself was a disappointing response to a tragedy, the aftermath was a farce: a smiling Uribe, walked across the meeting hall and offered a hand shake and perfunctory apology to Correa and Chavez, while Nicaraguan President Ortega embraced the murderous leader of Colombia. By that vile and cynical gesture, Uribe turned the entire military mobilization and weeklong denunciations by Chavez and Correa into a comic opera. The post-meeting ‘reconciliation’ gave the appearance that their opposition to a cross-border attack and the cold-blooded murder of Reyes was merely political theater – a bad omen for the future if, as is likely, Uribe repeats his cross border attacks on an even larger scale. Will the people of Venezuela or Ecuador and the armed forces take serious another call for mobilization and readiness?

Less than a week after the Santa Domingo ‘reconciliation’ meeting, Chavez and Uribe renewed an earlier military agreement to cooperate against ‘violent groups whatever their origins’. Clearly Chavez hopes that by dissociating Venezuela from any suspicion of providing moral support to the FARC, Uribe will stop the large-scale flow of paramilitary infiltrators from entering Venezuela and destabilizing the country. In other words, ‘reasons of state’ take precedence over solidarity with the FARC. What should be clear to Chavez however is the fact that Uribe will not abide by his side of the agreement because of his ties to Washington, and the latter’s insistence that the Chavez government be destabilized by any or all means, including the continued infiltration by Colombian paramilitary forces into Venezuela.

Uribe could apologize to Correa and Chavez because the real purpose of his military attack was to destroy the FARC leadership, any way, any place, any time and under any circumstance – even in the midst of international negotiations. Washington placed a \$5 million dollar bounty on each and every member of the FARC secretariat, long before Chavez or Correa came to power, Washington’s top priority – as witnessed by its military aid programs (\$6 billion dollars in 7 years), size and scope of its military advisory mission (1500 US specialists) and the length of its involvement in counter-insurgency activities within Colombia (45 years) – was to destroy the FARC.

Washington and its Colombian surrogates were willing to incur the predictable displeasure of Correa, Chavez and the slap on the wrist by the OAS if they could succeed in killing the Number Two commander of the FARC. The reason is clear: it is the FARC and not the neighboring leaders, who influence a third of Colombia’s countryside; it is the FARC’s military-political power which ties down a third of Colombia’s armed forces and prevents Colombia from engaging in any major military intervention against Chavez at the behest of Washington. Uribe and Washington have pressured Correa into cutting most of the FARC’s logistical supply lines and many security camps on the Ecuadorian-Colombian border. Correa claims to have destroyed 11 FARC campsites and arrested 11 guerrillas. The

Venezuelan National Guard has turned a blind eye to Colombian cross border military pursuit of FARC activists and sympathizers among the Colombian refugee-peasantry camped along the Venezuelan-Colombian border. Uribe and Washington's pressure has forced Chavez to publicly disclaim any support for the FARC, its methods and strategy. The FARC is internationally isolated – the Cuban Foreign Ministry proclaimed the phony 'reconciliation' at Santo Domingo to be a 'great victory' for peace. The FARC is diplomatically isolated, even as it retains substantial domestic support in the provinces and countryside of Colombia.

With the 'neutralization' of outside support, or sympathy for the FARC, the Uribe regime – before, during and immediately after the Santo Domingo meeting – launched a series of bloody murders and threats against all progressive and leftist organizations. In the run-up to a March 6, 2008 200,000-strong 'march against state terror', hundreds of organizers and activists were threatened, abused, followed, interrogated and accused by Uribe of 'supporting the FARC', a government label, which was followed up by the death squad killings of the leader of the march and four other human rights spokespeople. Immediately following the mass demonstration, the principle Colombian trade union, the CUT (the Confederation of Colombian Workers) reported several assassinations and assaults including the head of the banking employees union, a leader of the teachers union, the head of the education section of the CUT and a researcher at a pedagogical institute.

All told, over 5,000 trade unionists have been killed, 2 million peasants and farmers have been forcibly removed and their land seized by pro-Uribe paramilitary forces and landlords. Former self-confessed death squad leaders publicly have admitted to funding and controlling over one-third of the elected members of Congress backing Uribe. Currently 30 congress-people are on trial for 'association' with the paramilitary death squads. Several of Uribe's most intimate cabinet collaborators were exposed as having family ties with the death squads and two were forced to resign.

Despite international disrepute, especially in Latin America, with powerful support from Washington, Uribe has built up a murderous killing machine of 200,000 military, 30,000 police, several thousand death squad killers and over a million fanatical middle and upper class Colombians in favor of 'wiping out the FARC' – meaning eliminating independent popular organizations of civil society. More than any other past Colombian oligarchic rulers, Uribe is the closest to a fascist dictator combining state terror with mass mobilization.

The opposition political and social movements in Colombia are massive, committed and vulnerable. They are subject to daily intimidation and gangland-style murder. Through terror and mass propaganda, Uribe has so far been able to impose his rule over the working class opposition and attract mass middle class support. But he has utterly failed to defeat, destroy or disarticulate the FARC – his most consequential opposition. Each year since he has come to power, Uribe has pledged massive, all-out military sweeps of entire regions of the country, which would finally put an end to the 'terrorists'. Tens of thousands of peasants in FARC-influenced regions have been tortured, raped, murdered and driven from their homes. Each of Uribe's military offensives has failed. Yet he absolutely and totally fails to recognize what some generals and even US officials observe: the FARC cannot be militarily annihilated and at some point the government must negotiate.

Uribe's failures and the enduring presence of the FARC have become a psychotic obsession: All territorial, legal, international constraints are thrown overboard. Alternating between euphoria and hysteria, faced with internal opposition to his mono-maniac strategy of terror,

he screams 'FARC supporters' at any and all overseas and Colombian critics. To Ecuador and Venezuela, he promises 'not to invade their territory again' unless 'circumstances warrant it.' So much for 'reconciliation.'

The period of humanitarian exchange is dead; the FARC cannot and will not accommodate the requests of well-intentioned friends, especially when it puts in risk the entire FARC organization and leadership. Let us concede that Chavez intentions were well meant. His pleas for a mutual release of prisoners might have made sense if he had been dealing with a rational bourgeois politician responsive to international leaders and organizations and eager to create a favorable image before world public opinion. But it was naïve for Chavez to believe that a psychotic politician with a history of annihilating his opposition would suddenly discover the virtues of negotiations and humanitarian exchanges. Without question, the FARC understands better than its Andean and Caribbean friends through hard experience and bitter lessons, that armed struggle may not be the desired method but it is the only realistic way to confront a brutal fascist regime.

Uribe's killing of Raul Reyes was not about Chavez initiatives or Ecuador's sovereignty or Ingrid Betancourt's captivity, it was about Raul Reyes, a consequential and life-long revolutionary and leader of the FARC. The war-scare is over, differences have been papered over, the leaders have returned to their palaces, but Raul Reyes has not been forgotten – at least not in the countryside of Colombia or in the hearts of its peasants.

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