

# Spinning the News - The FARC-EP Files, Venezuela and Interpol

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First some background. On March 1, the Colombian military (with US Special Forces help) illegally attacked a FARC-EP rebel camp inside Ecuador. US satellite telephone tracking located the site. Washington signed off on the mission. Over 20 people were killed, including 16 or more FARC-EP members while they slept. Key among them was Paul Reyes, the FARC-EP's second-in-command, key peace negotiator and public voice, and lead figure in the Chavez-led hostage negotiations with Colombia.

The action was a clear act of aggression and premeditated murder. It's not how the dominant media played it. Hostile verbal exchanges took place between Hugo Chavez and Ecuador's Raphael Correa on the one hand and Colombia's Alvaro Uribe and George Bush on the other. US presidential candidates, as expected, supported the White House and Bogota.

Tensions heightened further when Colombia's vice-president, Francisco Santos Calderon, revealed his nation's army recovered three laptops and other material at the FARC-EP camp with provocative evidence on their hard drives. He claimed it showed Chavez and Correa have links to the FARC-EP, and Venezuela provided weapons, munitions, and \$300 million or so to the rebel group. In addition, the FARC-EP was accused of acquiring 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of uranium, that it wishes to sell it for a radioactive dirty bomb, it also sold 700 kilograms of cocaine for about \$1.5 million, and more.

The story is preposterous, but the media grabbed hold of it. No evidence exists, so they invent it. In March, Colombian authorities asked Interpol to examine the computer files for authenticity. The organization released its report on May 15. On its web site, it states that Secretary General Ronald Noble "advised senior Colombian law enforcement officials that INTERPOL's team of forensic experts discovered 'no evidence of modification, alteration, addition or deletion' in the user files of any of the three laptop computers, three USB thumb drives and two external hard disks seized during a Colombian anti-narcotics and anti-terrorist operation on a FARC camp on 1 March 2008."

But Interpol admitted that lacking evidence doesn't prove "there was no tampering." In fact, some files had future date stamps and other indications of data alteration. It questions their authenticity, and Interpol (deep in its report) acknowledged that Columbia likely manipulated the contents - with an explanation needing close reading to understand. It delegitimizes Colombian claims and would get an international court to dismiss them out of hand. Reporters doing their job should as well. Data accuracy can't be verified or worse - they may be entirely fraudulent, and made-in-Washington mischief may be behind it.

Interpol's report continued saying "between 1 and 3 March, direct access to the seized

computer exhibits....did not follow internationally recognized principles in the handling of electronic evidence under ordinary circumstance." Its experts "verified that this....had no effect" on file contents, but other report evidence contradicts that statement. Interpol, in fact, stated that "Direct access may complicate validating this evidence for purposes of its introduction in a judicial proceeding because law enforcement is then required to demonstrate or prove that the direct access did not have a material impact on the purpose for which the evidence is intended."

In short, hard drive data prove nothing and may, in fact, be fake. With US involvement clear, it wouldn't be the first time, and Washington is rich in talent to do it.

Independent computer experts are also troubled. They believe that failure to follow standard evidence handling procedures seriously jeopardizes its reliability. With care, forensic specialists or computer professionals can add, delete or alter hard drive material without leaving a footprint.

Dominant media reports ignored this and more. They passed over or played down key findings, including Interpol's statement: that its experts didn't "evaluate the accuracy or the source of the exhibits' content." How could they? The volume was enormous amounting to the equivalent of "39.5 million pages in Microsoft Word...." At the rate of 100 pages a day, "it would take more than 1000 years to read" it.

That alone begs the question. In a few days or even weeks, how were Colombian authorities able to analyze the data to discover provocative information therein. That notion also got no attention in the dominant media. Neither did most other parts of the truth.

#### Spinning the News - How Big Media Does It

Here's how Murdoch's Wall Street Journal's played it on May 16. Its editorial page said Interpol's May 15 report "won't make Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez's day." It reported Interpol's claim about no evidence of file tampering, but ignored the issues of authenticity, accuracy, manipulation, or impossible "speed-reading" skills of Colombian verifiers. It concluded that "Interpol's certification proves that Mr. Chavez is trying to destabilize a US ally (and that he's a proven supporter of terrorism in our own hemisphere."

The New York Times' Simon Romero was little better. His May 16 article was headlined: "Files Tying Venezuela to Rebels Not Altered, Report Says." He called Interpol's report "a setback for Venezuela, which had claimed that the computer files....were fabrications...." It "may advance efforts under way in the Congress to add Venezuela to the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism...."

Well down in his report, Romero admitted that "Interpol could not vouch for the accuracy of the files" and that "a Colombian antiterrorism unit (seized them improperly and) in violation of internationally recognized rules on handling electronic evidence...." No further comment was added.

In contrast, Romero played up State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack, saying these "are serious allegations about Venezuela supplying arms and support to a terrorist organization....that has deep implications for the people of the region." He had to acknowledge, however, what credible experts agree on. Given the importance of US and Venezuelan relations, chances of declaring the country a state sponsor of terrorism is highly

remote – “particularly without more evidence (read any evidence) of the country’s support of the FARC...”

Latin American history professor Greg Grandin goes further. He believes “Almost all of Latin America and most of the world would take Venezuela’s side in this dispute. Any move (against the Chavez government) would further isolate the United States in a region where it has been hemorrhaging influence.”

That doesn’t phase Romero. Piling on is his specialty. Truth isn’t. He returned on May 18 with a provocative feature story headlined: “Chavez Seizes Greater Economic Power.” Some key points in it are:

- “Chavez is intensifying state control of the Venezuelan economy through a wave of takeovers of private companies and creation of government-controlled ventures with allies like Cuba and Iran; fears are intensifying (over) more nationalizations;”

- it’s happening “just months after voters rejected a referendum to give the president sweeping constitutional power (leading critics to accuse him of being) more interested in consolidating power than in fixing Venezuela’s problems;”

- “while he has argued that (he aims) to correct social injustices and fight soaring inflation, his critics say his moves are instead compounding these troubles;” no supporter voices in sight;

- to avoid “outright confiscation (he’s) offering ‘some’ compensation;” unmentioned is it’s fair market value and nothing was, is or will be “confiscated;”

- Romero stresses Venezuela’s ties to Iran and China with joint ventures and infrastructure projects; also that Chavez will “export more oil to China in exchange for more Chinese investment in Venezuela;” implied, of course, are his relations with US rivals, and, in the case of Iran, a country George Bush calls “the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism;”

- he ignores Venezuela’s successes; along with Argentina, it’s the fastest growing regional economy and one of the fastest in the world at a time of economic weakness; its impressive employment growth with most of it coming in the private sector; that Chavez is friendly to business and boosts the private economy; the country’s huge social gains; and Chavez’s immense popularity and growing world stature; instead he lists problems – high inflation, less foreign investment, food shortages, capital flight, and more that are only mitigated by “high oil prices;”

- near the article’s end, he’s forced to admit what economist Mark Weisbrot explains – that Chavez “is so far mainly just reversing some of the privatizations that took place in the 1990s;”

- Romero reverts to form with some provocative ending quotes about Chavez “stimulating a pre-insurrectional climate;” that his nationalizations aim “to annihilate the productive apparatus so that we depend more on petroleum, which is to depend more on the state, or in other words, to depend more on Chavez.”

For the dominant US media, Chavez-bashing is full-time. Washington Post writers excel at it on any pretext, and Juan Forero’s May 16 Interpol report article was typical. It’s headlined: “FARC Computer Files Are Authentic, Interpol Probe Finds.” He echoed the Wall Street

Journal and New York Times and said files seized “contain e-mails (Interpol never mentioned any) and other documents that show how Venezuela’s populist leader had formed such a tight bond with guerrilla commanders that his key lieutenants had offered help in obtaining sophisticated weaponry such as surface-to-air missiles while delivering light arms. The files also document links between FARC and Ecuador’s president, Raphael Correa, a close ally of Chavez.”

Similar reports appeared throughout the US and western media. They never miss a chance to play down facts and attack populist leaders. In response, Hugo Chavez dismissed the allegations as “ridiculous.” He urged Colombia’s president to have “a moment of reflection (and added) The government of Columbia is capable of provoking a war....to justify a US intervention in Venezuela.” He also called Colombia’s assertion “a new act of aggression.” It means relations with his neighbor will come “under deep review,” and Reuters reported May 15 that “Venezuela is deeply revising diplomatic, economic and political relations with Colombia” following Interpol’s report and the Uribe government’s allegations.

Ecuador’s Correa was abroad in France, but took time to say the computer file documents “prove absolutely nothing. We have information that the Colombian government had the computers for some time and prepared all this.” Quite possibly because the entire story is unraveling. But don’t expect Big Media to report it.

#### Revving Up Gunboat Diplomacy

While it continues, the Pentagon announced in April that it’s resurrecting its Fourth Fleet in Latin America and the Caribbean after a 60 year hiatus. It was created during WW II and disbanded in 1950. Reasons given were vaguely stated – to “conduct varying missions including a range of contingency operations, counter narco-terrorism, and theater security cooperation activities.”

US Naval Forces Southern Command chief Admiral James Stevenson said the move would send a message to the entire region, not just Venezuela. Commandant of the National War College, General Robert Steel added that: “The United States’ obsession with Venezuela, Cuba and other things indicates they are going to use more military force, going to use that instrument more often.” Bolivian President Evo Morales called the move “Fourth Fleet....intervention.”

The Fleet begins operating in July and will be headquartered out of Florida’s Mayport Naval Station. It’ll be part of the Pentagon’s Southern Command, extending from the Caribbean to the continent’s southern tip. Its strength will be formidable – aircraft carriers, submarines, various attack ships, and several nuclear-armed ones.

With no Latin American threat, why then this move, and why now with an administration nearing its end and bogged down in two unwinnable wars? Like the Middle East and Central Asia, the region’s importance is crucial. Venezuela alone is why. Its proved oil reserves were just raised to 130 billion barrels, but include what’s uncounted and they’re far higher. On its web site, the US Department of Energy (DOE) estimates the country’s extra-heavy oil at 1.36 trillion barrels, or 90% of the world’s total. That’s more than all “proved” world reserves combined and in addition to Venezuela’s “proved” light sweet resources of around 80 billion barrels that alone ranks it seventh in the world behind the five largest Middle East producers and Canada.

With stakes that high, it's significant that Admiral Joseph Kernan will become Fleet commander when it's activated. He currently heads the Naval Special Warfare Command that includes Navy Seals and other counterinsurgency units. His choice is troublesome, and regional leaders are mindful. Hugo Chavez especially. It may be why he's buying nine Russian submarines, but against America it hardly registers. In total, Venezuela spends \$1 – 2 billion on its military annually or less than half of 1% of the Pentagon's budget. Nonetheless, it's another reason Washington targets him with a hawkish commander now charged to do it.

Rumor also is that the Pentagon plans building a Colombian military base near Venezuela's border. Washington's Colombian ambassador, William Brownfield, said it's possible if its Manta, Ecuador one is closed. Its lease expires in 2009, and Raphael Correa said renewal depends on the US granting Ecuador equivalent basing rights in South Florida – his way of confirming renewal won't happen.

Chavez is justifiably alarmed at the prospect of US troops on his border. He warned Colombia not to do it and said this action will force Venezuela to revive a decades-old territorial conflict over its possible La Guajira location. He further added: "We will not allow the Colombian government to give La Guajira to the empire." Stationing US troops there will be "a threat of war at us." So far, neither Washington or Colombia confirm what's planned. But Colombia's defense minister, Juan Manuel Santos, denies the base rumor, at least in La Guajira. In a May 14 televised address, Chavez called it "good news." Nonetheless, the situation bears watching.

Chavez is justifiably wary. As long as he's president, he'll be vilified and targeted. Latin America is vital to Washington. Venezuela is a key part of it. But America's dominance is weakening, neoliberal pillage caused it, the Bush administration accelerated it, Bolivarianism challenges it, so muscular militarism may replace diplomacy to restore it.

Colombia's belligerency, the FARC-EP files, Fourth Fleet reactivation, continued funding of Venezuela's opposition, CIA's covert mischief, disruptive street violence, and other planned schemes are troublesome. They're to reassert regional control and rid Washington of its leading hemispheric antagonist. No guessing who, and no telling when the next attempt will come or in what form. Everything tried so far failed. Even worse, it's been counterproductive. Chavez has enormous stature and immense popular support.

That makes him an even greater threat and hints at something bigger coming. So far, it's just speculation, however, with the administration's tenure winding down. But it may or may not deter those running it who are always wrong, never in doubt, and apparently willing to risk making a bad situation worse. Stay tuned, expect surprises, and be assured the months ahead won't be boring.

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