

The “Ugly American Problem” in Colombia

By Frida Berrigan, World Policy Institute

President Bush worries that the “United States might become militarily engaged” in Colombia. It’s a little late for that. Reports that American civilians were involved in an exchange of fire between FARC guerrillas and Colombian police last week put U.S. military involvement in sharp focus. The millions of dollars invested in renovating military bases in El Salvador, Ecuador, and the Caribbean, together with the training of new counternarcotics battalions, indicate that the U.S. has long term military plans in the region—even if George W. Bush hasn’t figured it out yet. His meeting with Colombian President Andres Pastrana provides an important and timely opportunity to evaluate and even reverse U.S. military involvement.

The February 18 exchange of fire between FARC guerrillas and Colombian police, which involved a DynCorp Search and Rescue helicopter flown by M-16 toting Americans, made the depth of U.S. engagement obvious for the first time since Congress voted yes on Plan Colombia—the \$1.3 billion aid package—eight months ago.

DynCorp, based in Reston, Virginia, is the largest of a growing number of private military corporations. It boasts \$1.2 billion in contracts per year—95% with the U.S. government—and has 30 personnel in Colombia, mostly pilots and mechanics for helicopters and fumigation planes. The incident, in which the DynCorp helicopter rescued the pilot amid what one Colombian police officer described as a “shower of bullets,” highlighted the presence of U.S. civilians in the conflict region. In the past two years at least six U.S. private military corporations have set up offices in Bogota, positioning themselves to receive aid package dollars and raising serious questions about accountability and transparency. While American soldiers in Colombia are under strict orders to avoid entering combat areas or joining

military operations, employees of DynCorp and other private corporations face no such restrictions and are not required to report to the Pentagon or Congress.

Many, including former Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey, are in favor of this arrangement. McCaffrey says, “I am unabashedly an admirer of outsourcing. There’s very few things in life you can’t outsource.” Proponents of outsourcing say it is cheaper and helps avoid the public outrage over U.S. troops being sent home in body bags. DynCorp lost three pilots in three years in Colombia and hardly anyone noticed. By contrast, when five active duty American soldiers were killed in a spy plane crash in the Colombian jungle, the incident occupied the front page for days. “It is very handy to have an outfit not part of the U.S. Armed Forces, obviously. If someone gets killed, or whatever,” you can say he’s not a soldier, said Myles Frenchette, former U.S. ambassador to Colombia.

The U.S. allocation of almost \$120 million to renovate and upgrade air bases in El Salvador, Ecuador, and the Caribbean is another sign of the escalating U.S. military operation in the region. The FARC called it a “declaration of war.” A recent *Washington Post* article exposed U.S. expansion of the Ecuadorian air base, which is home to 150 military advisers, mechanics, and crew. By summer 2001 the base will be able to accommodate surveillance planes and over 400 personnel. This was news to many, including members of Congress like Arizona Senator John McCain, who confessed, “We’re upgrading a base in Ecuador, which I found out—perhaps I shouldn’t admit this—by looking at a newspaper.”

Base expansion also has ramifications for Colombia’s neighbors. The mayor of an Ecuadorian border town said “If Colombia is going to be another Vietnam... then Ecuador is



going to become the Cambodia.... We are being dragged into the conflict against our will.”

U.S. training of Colombia soldiers and police officers is another indication of the depth and breadth of U.S. involvement. As part of Plan Colombia, U.S. Special Forces are training three 950-man counternarcotics battalions. Two of the battalions graduated in December amidst the pomp and circumstance of a high school commencement—with U.S. Special Forces videotaping like proud parents. Though they have been described as “outstanding soldiers” by their trainers, a recent State Department report stated, “Government forces continued to commit numerous, serious abuses, including extrajudicial killings.” The training program increases the danger that

U.S. imparted skills and weapons will be used in paramilitary atrocities. Human Rights Watch has found “abundant, detailed, and continuing evidence of direct collaboration” between paramilitaries and the military.

A recent massacre demonstrated clear collaboration between the military and paramilitary. On January 17th, 50 members of the AUC, wearing army uniforms, marched into a village on the northern coast, where they crushed the heads of twenty-four “guerrilla sympathizers” with rocks. Survivors of the massacre told reporters and human rights workers that Colombian military aircraft surveyed the area in the days leading up to the massacre and in the hours immediately following it. The paramilitaries were armed with automatic

weapons, but used stones to kill the men, probably “to heighten the horror of the message to surrounding villages” reported the *Washington Post*. It was the largest of twenty-three paramilitary massacres in January.

Plan Colombia, complete with private military actors, base expansions, and military training programs, epitomizes what President Bush recently called “our ugly American problem.” Bush could use his meeting with Pastrana to develop an alternate Plan Colombia that provides resources for sustainable development, humanitarian assistance, and judicial and civil institutions, as a way of concretely and proactively addressing the challenges Colombia faces. At the same time, he would help address “our ugly American problem.”

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