

Building its Ties to Colombia: Canada's Imperial Adventure in the Andes

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On May 5th, 2008 Canada's Trade Minister, David Emerson, proudly declared that Canada is "very close" to concluding free trade negotiations with Colombia. According to Foreign Affairs officials, a deal could be reached in a few short months, meaning that Canada would complete its free trade agreement with Colombia before the United States completes its own deal with the Andean country. In the U.S., Bush faces strong Congressional opposition to such a partnership.

Canada's push into Colombia is part of its broader interest and growing economic influence in Latin America going back to the 1990s. Canadian political and business leaders have been clear that economic expansion into Latin America (and the Caribbean) is a central priority of Canadian foreign policy. This agenda has been stepped up under the Stephen Harper Tory government, with cabinet ministers scurrying across the region building up Canada's political and economic ties. By 2006, Canada was the third largest foreign investor in Latin America and the Caribbean. It's the biggest investor in mining and has a strong presence in financial services, telecommunications and oil and gas among other industries.

Colombia is a centrepiece of this engagement with the Americas. Three cabinet ministers in the Harper Tory government, including Harper himself, visited Colombia and met with high ranking politicians there within an eight month period between July, 2007 and February, 2008. Harper met with Uribe in July, 2007 to discuss the free trade initiative. Beverly Oda, minister for International Cooperation, met with Colombia's Minister of Foreign Affairs in January, 2008, to discuss aid projects and mining policy. And Maxime Bernier, Minister of Foreign Affairs, met with Uribe in February, 2008 to again discuss economic relations. Aside from the U.S. (Canada's neighbour and largest trading partner) and Afghanistan (where Canada is at war) no other country has received this kind of high level attention from Canadian political leaders in recent years.

Colombia: A Human Rights Disaster

Canada's effort to deepen its ties with Colombia comes despite the latter's well documented human rights problems. Privatization, foreign investment and extreme inequalities are maintained through extraordinary levels of military and paramilitary violence. This terror, primarily directed at trade unionists, and indigenous peoples and peasants whose land contains subsurface riches, has increased with neoliberal restructuring and the growing presence of foreign, including Canadian, corporations. While the main guerrilla forces, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), have also committed violence against social movement actors, according to the Colombian

Commission of Jurists state security forces and paramilitaries account for the overwhelming majority of such incidents.

Colombia stands without close rival in the world today for the number of trade unionists assassinated. Since 1991, more than 2,000 labour leaders have been killed. Forty-two percent of human rights violations against unionists take place in the mining-energy sector. Ninety-seven percent of the homicides against unionists have been perpetrated by military and paramilitary actors, with three percent being carried out by guerrillas and other armed actors.

Meanwhile, three million people have been displaced in Colombia, two million of whom were displaced from mining regions as military and paramilitary forces make way for foreign capital. This displacement is bound up with extraordinary levels of violence in the mining zones. According to mining union leader and target of paramilitary assassination attempts, Francisco Ramírez Cuellar, in the mining zones between 1995 and 2002, there were 828 homicides, 142 forced disappearances, 117 people injured, 71 people tortured, 355 death threats and 150 arbitrary detentions, every year. On top of those figures, there were also 433 massacres.

Whether or not foreign corporations are working directly with paramilitaries (and they often are), they benefit from this culture of violence. Indeed, an earlier wave of Canadian corporate expansion into Colombia in the 1990s — including Enbridge's investment in the OCENSA pipeline, Corona Goldfield's mining investment in Simiti and Nortel's investment in the privatized telecommunications market, among others — was directly facilitated by state and paramilitary terror against social movement actors. It was also facilitated, it's worth noting, by the Canadian state, which was helmed at the time by Liberal governments. One of the more egregious examples of this support, perhaps, was the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) funding the rewriting of Colombia's mining code in a strongly pro-foreign investor fashion.

In Praise of Colombia: The Harper Government's Willful Ignorance

The Harper government defends its move to deepen Canada's relations with Colombia further by playing down the profound human rights problems plaguing the country and the Colombian state's and political leaders' intimate involvement in them.

Harper took the occasion of his visit to the country to laud Uribe, declaring that "President Uribe and his government have made tremendous progress against the vicious cycle of conflict, violence and under-development that has plagued Colombia for decades." Harper's praise for Uribe is actually parroted word-for-word by Bernier during his subsequent trip to the war-torn country, as if by saying it enough it may actually become true (or they are afraid of what might happen if they do not stick religiously to a simple, straightforward and easily quotable message on the subject).

After announcing in May, 2008 that a free trade deal is near at hand, Emerson also eschewed concerns about Colombia's and Uribe's rights record: "Unless we were presented with overwhelming and solid evidence that the government is somehow behind some of the killings of labour leaders, I just don't think it's right to simply ... hold them back and to penalize them when they're trying very hard to make progress." Instead, the problem rests with the ideological blinkers of the trade deal's critics: "There are people who, for dogmatic reasons candidly, do not want us to do a free trade deal with Colombia."

But shortly after Bernier's comments, and just two months before Emerson's, at least six trade unionists that participated in or helped to organize country-wide demonstrations against state and paramilitary violence on March 6, 2008 were assassinated. Four were killed within a week of the demonstration. Observers argue that the assassinations and death threats were facilitated by the comments of Uribe's close political ally and advisor, José Obdulio Gavaria, who called the protest organizers FARC guerrillas in the media. Such accusations are tantamount to placing a bounty on a person's head, given that the government and the paramilitaries are at war with the FARC and thus consider its members and supporters to be legitimate targets. It is also well known that labelling government opponents as FARC members or supporters — and thus "terrorists" — is often little more than an excuse used to exterminate them.

But the murders surrounding the March 6th demonstrations, most likely done by paramilitaries, are not anomalous under Uribe. The rate of paramilitary murders each year, according to the Colombian Commission of Jurists, is between 800-900 people, and has been essentially unchanged since 2003 when the Uribe government supposedly began "demobilizing" them. Moreover, the Uribe government is facing a corruption scandal in which seventy-seven political leaders, most of whom have strong ties to Uribe and some of whom are members of his family, are under investigation for ties to paramilitaries.

Violence and corruption are deeply entrenched in Colombian political life. Elections regularly feature assassinations of candidates, threats against candidates and voters, vote buying, illegal campaign financing, fraud and disenfranchisement of the country's significant displaced population. Following the October 28, 2007 elections for governors, mayors and municipal posts, OAS observers noted that these election irregularities, some of which they witnessed first hand, undermine democracy in the country. One observer declared that "Colombia has the most backward electoral system in Latin America."

Contrast that observation with that of international observers who found the recall referendum and presidential election of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez to be fair and legitimate. But according to Canadian political leaders, Chavez's Venezuela, despite having a far superior human rights and electoral record than Colombia and efforts to redistribute wealth to poorer communities, is authoritarian. Uribe's Colombia, on the other hand, is a beacon of freedom and democracy. During his visit to Colombia, Harper praised the government and presented it (and Chile, which he also visited) as an alternative to Left-Wing governments in the Andean region. "While many nations are pursuing market reform and democratic development," he opined, "others [read Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia] are falling back to economic nationalism and protectionism, to political populism and authoritarianism."

An Imperialist Client State

Harper et al.'s misleading portrayal of political developments in the Andean region, and their cozying up to Uribe despite his support for state and paramilitary violence, is not an accident. But while the caricature they paint of Colombia and its neighbours serves to justify continuing corporate investment in the country, it also serves another equally important purpose. Colombia's political leaders are proudly compliant with imperial interests in the region, while the governments around them increasingly are not; it is a reliable imperial ally in the midst of political and economic uncertainty represented by strong social movements and Left Wing governments.

Thus the United States and Canada have chosen to promote Colombia as an aggressive and

heavily militarized bulwark against anti-imperialism in the region — an Israel of the Andes. Like Israel, Colombia receives strong diplomatic support from its imperial allies despite its terrible rights record and its belligerence towards its neighbours. And like Israel, it has also been the beneficiary of American military largesse, most notably via the \$4.1 billion Plan Colombia. As critics have pointed out, Plan Colombia, introduced under Bill Clinton and nominally designed to target the coca industry, has led to an increase in violence and displacement in regions where foreign companies are hoping to exploit natural resources. Despite this, Canada's Foreign Affairs publicly supports the scheme.

Canada has also contributed directly to Colombia's military build-up, if in a small way compared to the USA. At least forty-five helicopters have been sold from Canada by the military and private companies — thirty-three by the Department of National Defence (DND) — to the Colombian military since 1995. DND sold the Bell CH135 choppers to the U.S. State Department, which retrofitted them with machine guns and sent them to Colombia. DND knew where the helicopters were headed when it made the sale. Even though the Canadian government requires export permits for military hardware and says it's opposed to the sale of weapons to countries in conflict and with a record of human rights abuses, no export permit was required for DND's sale because the helicopters were originally sold to the USA. Another Canadian company, Vector Aerospace, was contracted in 2001 by the Colombian military for helicopter maintenance and servicing.

Recently, in a tell-all book called *Nous étions invincibles* (We were invincible) an ex-Joint Task Force 2 member (Canada's highly secretive commando unit) alleges that Canadian commandos battled the FARC in the late 1990s. If true — and it's hard to independently verify given the secretive nature of JTF2, although there's no good reason for the author to make up stories about fighting the FARC in particular — it's an astonishing revelation that the Canadian military has been actively intervening in Colombia.

Colombia's policing role in the region was bluntly demonstrated on March 1st, 2008, when its military violated Ecuadorian sovereignty and bombed a FARC camp located just inside the Ecuadorian border with Colombia. Colombian ground soldiers then crossed into Ecuador to secure the camp. Twenty-three people were killed in the attack, including the FARC's second in command and a key player in the recent release of the guerrilla group's hostages, Raul Reyes. Ecuador and Venezuela (which has been threatened by Colombia in the recent past) responded to this violation of international law by cutting off diplomatic ties and sending troops, tanks and planes to their Colombian borders.

While the Colombian and the international mainstream media reported widely that those killed were FARC guerrillas, it turns out that one was an Ecuadorian citizen and four were Mexican graduate students interviewing FARC members for their research on the country's peace process. Uribe also claims, as was widely reported in the media, that Reyes' computer, found by Colombian soldiers despite the camp being turned to rubble, contained direct evidence linking Hugo Chavez and Venezuelan money to the FARC. This claim has not been independently verified, and no illicit relations between Chavez and the FARC have ever been documented. Uribe also alleges that a picture of Reyes with Ecuador's Security minister was on the FARC leader's laptop. The photo was printed on the front page of the Colombian daily, *El Tiempo*, before it was revealed that the person with Reyes was in fact the secretary of the Argentine Communist Party.

Uribe steadfastly refuses to guarantee that Colombia will not violate its neighbours' sovereignty again. Instead, he maintains Colombia's right to pre-emptive intervention in the

region as a supposed defense against terrorism. The intervention in Ecuador and the threat to do it again is a clear warning from Colombia to its left-leaning neighbours that it will not hesitate to throw its military might around should they get out of line.

Chavez actually claimed well before the March 1st raid that Colombia, with the backing of the United States, was trying to provoke Venezuela into a military conflict. In the last few years, the Colombian government covertly recruited Venezuelan military and security officers for the kidnapping of a Colombian leftist leader; Colombian paramilitaries infiltrated Venezuela to violently support would-be anti-Chavez plotters; and paramilitaries routinely crossed into Venezuelan to hunt down people fleeing them.

Canada supports Colombia's violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty, if not as bluntly as the United States. Despite Colombia's role as the aggressor, the serious nature of its actions and the potential instability it could cause the region, Canada's intervention at the OAS debate on the incident was a mere one minute and ten seconds. Canada's representative at the OAS, Graeme Clarke, made a brief and general call for a respect for sovereignty, without naming Colombia as the violator of international law or criticizing it for threatening to do it again. It's not a stretch to read Clarke's intervention as directed not only at Colombia but also at Venezuela and Ecuador for supposedly supporting terrorism and for sending troops to their borders with Colombia in response to the latter's aggression. He then urged dialogue between the three countries and proposed mediation if necessary, as if they are all equally at fault or Uribe has ever showed any serious interest in mediation in the past. Combine these remarks with the efforts of Canadian political leaders to strengthen ties with Colombia, and it is clear where Canada's interests in the Andes lies.

A more blunt Canadian assessment of the situation is provided by Vladimir Torres, an analyst with the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), a Right- Wing think tank funded by Foreign Affairs that has political leaders' ears on policy matters relating to the Americas. Torres defends Colombia's actions in Ecuador quite sharply in a Globe and Mail op-ed piece: "One could argue that if Israel were right to bomb Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, then Colombia was right to act in self-defence in Ecuador." The real danger in the region, according to Torres, is Venezuela, Ecuador and Nicaragua (whose president, Daniel Ortega, he claims is moving closer to Chavez) who are anti-democratic and support "terrorism." Despite its human rights record, then, Colombia is again presented as the defender of freedom in the Andes.

The Israel analogy is indeed apt, if not for quite the same reasons as Torres might think. Colombia, as I noted above, is clearly positioned as the regional bulwark against democracy and progressive economic policy for imperialist powers like the United States and Canada. While a direct invasion by the U.S. and Canada to defend their interests in the region is unlikely at this point, a well-armed, aggressive and compliant Colombia may help to strengthen their imperial hand in the Andes. This is what lies behind Canadian foreign policy towards Colombia.

It's crucial, therefore, that the Canadian Left opposes the proposed free trade deal with Colombia and Canada's general foreign policy orientation in the Andes. Nothing positive can come from this orientation. Its aim is to stifle progressive efforts to begin rolling back the imperialist gains made in the region in the last couple of decades. And it's being prosecuted at a tremendous cost to the rights and security of Colombia's poor majority.

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