

Colombia: Washington's Other Oil War

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After almost five years, and countless thousands of people dead and disappeared, the US\$7.5 billion initiative known as “Plan Colombia” has failed — politically and militarily — to bring an end to the crisis that characterises the violence-ridden South American country of Colombia.

Begun in 2000, Plan Colombia was ostensibly designed to take the “war on drugs” to the drug producers. The US argued these were primarily “narco-terrorists” — the Marxist guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the smaller Army of National Liberation (ELN), as well as the right-wing paramilitaries, the so-called United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC).

However, the US has other motives. While most of the country has not been explored for oil, Colombia is already the third-largest exporter in Latin America, after Venezuela and Mexico. The industry accounts for one third of Colombia's exports, and most of Colombia's oil exports are to the US.

Colombia sits on the Venezuela-Orinoco belt, the planet's largest accumulation of hydrocarbons, which it shares with Venezuela and Ecuador. However, the latter two countries, like most of South America, are part of a left-wing revolt against Washington's neoliberal policies.

In Ecuador, a popular uprising just overthrew one president seen as too close to Washington. In Venezuela, the Bolivarian revolution, led by Hugo Chavez, has reasserted popular control over the country's oil reserves, and used the revenue to the benefit of the poor majority. Washington has responded to such anti-capitalist behaviour with support for an unsuccessful coup, an attempted shutdown of the oil industry, and a relentless propaganda campaign against Chavez, all with little effect.

This situation makes securing Colombian oil a priority for the US. US military expenditure and training is in fact concentrated in the oil rich areas of Colombia, particularly Arauca and Putumayo, which are in the guerrilla heartland.

A key part of the International Monetary fund (IMF) “restructures” connected to Plan Colombia has been changes to the oil industry. The government oil company ECOPETROL has been essentially privatised to “encourage” foreign investment in the oil industry. Royalties have been cut to 8%, leases extended indefinitely, and the Colombian government now buys its own oil from foreign companies such as California-based Occidental Petroleum at market rates.

Colombia also remains important to the US as a counterweight to the growth of left-wing,

anti-imperialist governments and movements throughout South America, which are threatening Washington's interests.

Plan Colombia

Plan Colombia, due to expire this year, has made Colombia the third-largest recipient of US military assistance after Israel and Egypt, receiving US\$3 million per day in military aid. Eighty per cent of Plan Colombia has come in the form of military funding.

The initial draft of Plan Colombia called for \$1.3 billion from the US and \$4 billion from the Colombian government, then in recession. Much of the final \$7.5 billion funding was therefore supplied by loans from the IMF, which has demanded a series of structural reforms to the Colombian economy. European countries, while initially supportive, pulled out because of the excessive military focus, with the exceptions of Spain and Britain.

In April 2001, when US President George Bush established the Andean Regional Initiative (ARI), a \$1.1 billion regional expansion of Plan Colombia into Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Brazil and Panama, 54% of the funds were spent on military aid. Since 2003, US military expenditure in Colombia has been more than \$500 million annually, and has totalled more than \$3 billion since 2000. A bill is currently before US Congress requesting another \$741.7 million for 2006.

With US training, two-thirds of the Colombian army are now involved in protecting the oil-rich sectors of the country. Under US supervision, the Colombian military recently launched "Operation Shield", a new attempt to secure oil pipelines, to which the US has donated 10 Huey and Blackhawk helicopters. A new counter-guerrilla unit has been created especially to police the Cano-Limon oil field, in Arauca, near the Venezuelan border, which some fear could become a base for aggression against Venezuela.

Fumigation

Despite the supposed anti-drug focus of the plan, most of the military effort has been expended in the departments of Putumayo and Caqueta, in southern Colombia, an area largely controlled by the FARC. This is despite a 2001 Colombian government report estimating that the guerrillas received only 2.5% of total cocaine revenues — mostly as taxes levied on crop producers. In contrast, around 40% of the drug profits make their way into the hands of the right-wing paramilitaries and their allies. It is not surprising, then, that the supply and price of cocaine has remained relatively stable over the period of Plan Colombia.

While Plan Colombia is meant to target "large-scale" coca plantations, most plantations in the Putumayo region are on small plots owned by peasants. Sixty per cent of Colombians live in poverty, while nearly half are barely employed, and for many peasants, growing coca is the only viable alternative to starvation.

A central part of this "anti-drug" strategy has been the spraying of herbicides over the region, particularly a strengthened version of Roundup, or glyphosate, produced by US mega-corporation Monsanto. Over 600,000 hectares of Colombian jungle, the second-largest portion of the Amazon Rainforest after Brazil, has been sprayed in the past five years. The spraying has had a devastating impact on the region, poisoning animals, the water table, crops and the jungle, and causing illness, birth-defects and death amongst the local

population.

“Counterinsurgency”

The main reason for this focus on the south is the insurgency of the leftist FARC and ELN guerrillas, based in disenfranchised peasant communities of the region.

The guerrilla war in Colombia dates back more than five decades, to “La Violencia” (The Violence), the 10-year civil war between the Conservative and Liberal parties of the Colombian oligarchy that caused at least 200,000 deaths. Many workers and peasants fled the violence, creating independent “peace communities” in the south of the country.

When the government and ruling-class persecuted these communities, the guerrilla organisations were formed as instruments of self-defence. They now control almost half of the country.

Washington justified its Cold War spending on the Colombian military as preventing the spread of “communism”. One of the main effects was the growth of the right-wing paramilitaries, currently responsible for more than 80% of human-rights violations in Colombia, including the assassinations and massacres of union leaders, human rights activists and student leaders.

Narco-president

The current president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe Velez, has ties to these groups stretching back decades. Uribe was mayor of Medellin in 1982, a city at the heart of the drug trade, and was an associate of the notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar. From 1995 to 1997, Uribe was governor of the state of Antioquia, of which Medellin is the capital.

Escobar poured millions into Uribe’s civil projects, and in 1991 the US Defense Intelligence Agency concluded that Uribe himself was one of the top 100 drug traffickers. Throughout this time, the paramilitaries, “Convivirs”, were the loyal supporters of both Uribe and the drug barons.

In 1997, the Colombian government stripped the Convivirs of their legitimacy, but most simply took their weapons and joined the ranks of AUC. Despite being added to Washington’s list of terrorist organisations, the AUC remains Uribe’s most loyal support base.

Uribe recently initiated an amnesty, yet to be passed as law, encouraging the paramilitaries to disarm and face charges for human rights abuses, a development welcomed by many observers of strife-torn Colombia.

This amnesty, however, enables most paramilitaries to escape justice, as charges must be laid within 24 hours, investigations concluded in 30 days, there is no mechanism for confiscating illegal wealth and sentences are capped at eight years.

On June 14, the 400 followers of paramilitary leader Diego Murillo “laid down” their weapons, but many of them will likely soon end up in the Peasant Soldier Program, a government initiative to arm rural “civilians” in support of the security forces. In effect, the process means nothing more than the re-legalisation of the paramilitaries. The bill is likely to be passed soon, not least because it is believed that the AUC has influence over 35% of

the Colombian Congress.

The development has been accompanied by a fairly sudden turn by Washington to condemning the paramilitaries' role in the drug trade. In an August 2 article on Colombia Online, Gary Leech argued, however, that the US is trying to derail the amnesty, by pressuring the Colombian government not to appear to be dealing with drug runners. In reality, Leech argues, the US is worried that without the armed paramilitaries, the FARC will make rapid military ground.

"Plan Patriota"

Over the past year, the Colombian government has launched a new component of Plan Colombia, the Patriot Plan, a military offensive of 18,000 soldiers and about \$100 million in US military aid to drive the guerrillas from the oil regions. Despite the huge increase in US military personnel, contractors and equipment, the guerrillas have not been defeated. On the contrary, they have intensified the guerrilla war on all fronts.

The rebels recently destroyed nine energy towers in Antioquia state, temporarily cutting electricity to thousands of residents on Colombia's northern coast, and have successfully attacked the Colombian special forces in several regions, including destroying an elite battalion in Arauca.

The FARC and ELN have repeatedly made clear their preference for a negotiated solution to the violence, but this appears unlikely under present circumstances, as both the Colombian and US governments are bent on military solutions. When Plan Colombia began, the Colombian government under president Pastrana pulled out of ongoing peace negotiations with the FARC and ELN and went on a military offensive.

Now, in the lead-up to next year's elections, where Uribe hopes the Supreme Court will change the constitution to allow him to run again, he wants to show the success of his "national security" policy by inflicting as many defeats on the armed groups as possible. However, the fraudulent "disarmament" of the AUC and the failed offensive against the FARC show the bankruptcy of this solution.

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