

Plan Colombia: The Real Destabilizing Force in South America

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In surveying US press coverage of the recent tensions between Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, one might come to the conclusion that Colombia has become the victim of the wrath of its evil next door neighbor, Hugo Chavez. Once again, the media spin machine has been turned against Venezuela, bypassing a contextual analysis of the situation for a simplistic story line. With headlines such as, "Chavez Picks a New Fight" (Business Week March 4, 2008) the story perpetuates the US government's claims that Venezuela is a destabilizing force in the region while ignoring the alarming actions perpetrated by the Colombian government.

While Chavez has certainly made it easy for international attention to be focused on his actions, the lack of coverage on the response of other South American presidents is disconcerting. The most egregious example of this blind spot is with Ecuador itself, the country whose territory was trespassed in Colombia's attacks. The protests raised by Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa have been sorely underreported in comparison to Chavez's response, potentially leaving one with the impression that Ecuador does not consider Colombia's actions to be of major concern.

Nor is it being acknowledged that this is not the first time Ecuador has suffered the negative consequences of Colombia's war on "narco-terrorism" as articulated through Plan Colombia. For years the northern region of Ecuador has been subject to [tremendous contamination](#) of legal crops, animals, and whole communities as a result of aerial herbicide spraying of coca crops in Colombia.

A statement published by White House spokesperson Gordon Johndroe maintains that Venezuela is simply overreacting to a legitimate operation. "This is an odd reaction by Venezuela to Colombia's efforts against the FARC, a terrorist organization that continues to hold Colombians, Americans and others hostage."

A quick review of responses from other countries would in fact show that the US government's assessment is deeply flawed and out of step with international opinion. President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, proclaimed, "A situation of this nature undoubtedly warrants an explanation from Colombia to the people of Ecuador, the President of Ecuador and the rest of the region." The governments of Paraguay, Peru, and Argentina have all released similar statements of disapproval with Colombia's actions.

Meanwhile, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner expressed despair at the killing of his government's primary contact in negotiating the release of former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who also holds French nationality. Referring to the killing of

FARC second-in-command Raul Reyes, he asserted, "It is bad news that the man we were talking to, with whom we had contacts, has been killed."

While some press in the United States question whether Chavez is using this situation as an opportunity to distract Venezuelans from their social problems, this excessive focus on him is in fact distracting people in the US from having a much needed dialogue on their own government's role in fomenting this so-called "Andean Crisis." As a result, the tough realities and repercussions from the US government's support for a military solution in Colombia are being overlooked.

Emboldened and armed with the multibillion dollar support of Plan Colombia, the Uribe government has decided to violate international law rather than attempting mediated discussions with the FARC. This is simply the latest controversy to discredit Colombia, already renowned for having the greatest number of human rights violations and politically motivated murders per year in the Western Hemisphere.

This is an important time to consider the consequences of the United States' blanket support for the Colombian government's militarism and the destabilizing effect this is clearly creating, not simply to talk about Chavez.

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