

US Military Aggression Against Venezuela Escalating

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Caracas, 20 December – Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez revealed today on his Sunday television and radio program, *Aló Presidente*, that unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), also known as drones, have illegally entered Venezuela’s airspace during the past several days. “A few days ago, one of these military planes penetrated Venezuela as far as Fort Mara,” a Venezuelan military fort in the State of Zulia, bordering Colombia. The drone was seen by several Venezuelan soldiers who immediately reported the aerial violation to their superiors. President Chávez gave the order today to shoot down any drones detected in Venezuelan territory. Chávez also directly implicated Washington in this latest threat against regional stability by confirming that the drones were of US origin.

On Thursday, President Chávez denounced military threats against Venezuela originating from the Dutch islands Aruba and Curacao, situated less than 50 miles off Venezuela’s northwest coast. Both small islands host US air force bases as a result of a 1999 contract between Washington and Holland establishing US Forward Operating Locations (FOLs) in the Caribbean colonies. Originally, the contract stipulated US military presence in Aruba and Curacao solely for counternarcotics missions. However, since September 2001, Washington uses all its military installations to combat perceived terrorist threats around the world. The military bases in Aruba and Curacao have been used for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions against Venezuela during the past several years.

In 2006, Washington began conducting a series of high level military exercises using Curacao as the principal zone of operations. Hundreds of US aircraft carriers, warships, combat planes, Black Hawk helicopters, nuclear submarines and thousands of US military troops have been engaging in different military exercises and missions in the Caribbean region during the past three and a half years, causing substantial alarm and concern to nations in the region, particularly Venezuela, which has also been subject to hostile and aggressive diplomatic actions from Washington.

In 2008, the Pentagon reactivated the Navy’s Fourth Fleet, charged with defending US interests in the Latin American region. The Fourth Fleet was deactivated in 1950, after accomplishing its original defense mission during World War II. The fleet’s reactivation nearly 60 years later was perceived by a majority of nations in Latin America as a direct threat to regional sovereignty and provoked South American countries to establish a Defense Council to deal with external threats. The Pentagon responded by proudly admitting the Fourth Fleet’s reactivation was a “showing of US force and power in the region” and a demonstration that the US “will defend its regional allies”. This was perceived as direct support to Colombia, and an attempt to intimidate Venezuela.

On October 30, Colombia and the US signed a military cooperation agreement authorizing US occupation of seven military bases in Colombian territory and all other installations as required. The agreement is seen as the largest US military expansion in Latin American history. Although the two governments publicly justified the agreement as an increased effort to fight drug trafficking and terrorism, official US Air Force documents revealed that the US would conduct “full spectrum military operations” throughout South America from the Colombian bases. The Air Force documents also justified the disproportional military expansion as necessary to combat “the constant threat...from anti-US governments in the region”. The documents further revealed that the US presence in Colombia will increase the success of “Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance” operations and will improve the Pentagon’s capacity to conduct “expeditionary warfare” in Latin America.

Since 2006, Washington has classified Venezuela as a nation “not fully collaborating with the war against terror”. In 2005, Venezuela was labeled by the State Department as a nation “not cooperating with counter-narcotics operations”. Despite no substantive evidence to prove such dangerous accusations, the US has utilized these classifications to justify an increase in aggression towards the Venezuelan government. In 2008, the Bush Administration attempted to place Venezuela on the list of State Sponsors of terrorism. The initiative was unsuccessful primarily because Venezuela is still a principal supplier of oil to the US. Should Washington consider Venezuela a terrorist state, all relations would be cut off, including oil supply.

Nevertheless, Washington still views Venezuela as a major threat to US interests in the region. The US is particularly concerned about Latin American nations engaging in commercial relations with countries such as China, Russia and Iran, perceived as economic threats to US control and domination in the region. Last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a warning to countries in Latin America that have recently forged relations with Iran, such as Bolivia, Brazil, Nicaragua and Venezuela. “...I think that if people want to flirt with Iran, they should take a look at what the consequences might well be for them, and we hope that they will think twice...”, Clinton stated during remarks made regarding the State Department’s Latin American policy.

The Colombian government announced yesterday that a new military base will be built right near the border with Venezuela, with funding and equipment from the United States. Colombia’s Defense Minister Gabriel Silva also announced the activation of two air battalions at other border areas near Venezuela. The new military base, located in the Guajira peninsula, which borders the Venezuelan State of Zulia, would have up to 1,000 troops and would also allow the presence of US armed forces and private military contractors. This announcement clearly ups the ante against Venezuela.

Today’s statements made by President Chávez regarding the US military drones discovered violating Venezuelan territory just days ago further escalate the growing tensions between Venezuela and Colombia. The MQ-1 Predator UAV, a type of combat drone, has been used over the past year in Afghanistan and Pakistan to assassinate suspect terrorists. The drones are equipped with Hellfire missiles and are capable of hitting ground targets in sensitive areas.

Venezuela is on high alert in the face of this dangerous threat. Chávez made the statements regarding the drone detection during the launching of the new National Police Force, a recently created communal police force directed at preventive security operations and community-based service.

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