

Militarizing the Americas

By Laura Carlsen | September 3, 2003

The Bush administration has launched renewed efforts to reach out to Central and South American countries over the past month. The recent visits of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard Myers signal that Latin America is back on the U.S. government's geopolitical map—but the map is being significantly redrawn.

That both overtures were military comes as no surprise. The trips emphasized hemispheric security as the number-one priority for the region, and Myers and Rumsfeld noted that security depends on fighting terrorism. The U.S. has pushed its southern neighbors to support its anti-terrorist agenda both in the UN and in actions such as the recent dispatch of Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, and Honduran troops to back up U.S. forces in Iraq.

The war on terrorism has accelerated funding for establishing new U.S. military centers and beefing up old ones in the hemisphere. In the past four years, the U.S. has broadened its military presence throughout Latin America, opening new "Forward Operating Locations" in Ecuador, El Salvador, Aruba, and Curacao.

Spurred in part by anti-terrorism, Plan Colombia alone has funneled over \$3 billion in U.S. aid to that region over the past three years, most of it military. The State Department's list of terrorist organizations includes three based in Colombia: the leftist Colombian Armed Revolutionary Front—FARC, the National Liberation Army—ELN, and the rightwing paramilitary group the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia—AUC.

Following his two-day visit to Bogotá, Gen. Myers stated that Plan Colombia military aid and equipment will be increasingly used in counterinsurgency efforts, despite former restrictions to antinarcotics activities. Myers underlined the government's position: "Terrorism of any kind affects the stability of not only Colombia, but also the entire Western Hemisphere."

The implications of increased U.S. involvement in internal counterinsurgency efforts could have grave implications, not only for Colombia but for its neighbors as well. Erasing the line between terrorism, the drug war, and

counterinsurgency fighting opens the door to increased involvement in Bolivia, where coca producers form the backbone of the opposition movement, and Ecuador, where the indigenous-led movement has ousted governments.

Nobel Peace prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel recently warned: "I have no doubt that if Ecuador should become involved in Plan Colombia, Latin America could become a new Vietnam, with consequences as serious as, or more serious, than those of the war in Iraq." (Latinamerica Press, 5/7/03)

Speaking in Honduras, Sec. of Defense Rumsfeld called terrorism a "terrible problem" in the region and also coupled it with the drug trade. But the U.S. government's focus on the war on terrorism clashes sharply with the way Latin American civil society groups are reformulating the concept of security in the Western Hemisphere. These groups note that the region has seen a marked decrease in international imbroglios and an increase in what they call "intrastate insecurity." They emphasize growing threats *within* national borders, stemming primarily from the social causes of poverty, impunity, and discrimination.

It seems that in the lexicon of the Bush administration, "terrorism" has become a catchall term for interpreting conflicts that have plagued Latin American countries for years, including narcotics production and trafficking, guerrilla and paramilitary activity, and illegal migration. In lumping together deeply rooted conflicts under the rubric of terrorism, the U.S. has allocated huge sums for mostly military solutions while ignoring the larger causes.

However, military solutions to social and political problems not only escalate violence, they don't work. Despite



evidence that funding to Colombia has not reduced the violence, U.S. military involvement has increased in the wake of the Sept. 11th attacks with little congressional debate about its effectiveness. Unrestricted funding to the Colombian military, which has a long history of human rights violations and paramilitary ties, will end up fanning the flames of an extremely volatile situation that affects the whole region.

On the U.S.-Mexico border, the Department of Homeland Security has included illegal migration among terrorist threats, resulting in a record \$6.7 billion budget for border security, much of it earmarked for infrastructure to prevent the entry of mostly Mexican and Central American job seekers. The measures have so far increased migrant deaths and done little to abate the flow of undocumented workers.

The anti-terrorism lens fails to see crucial factors in regional conflicts: the drug trade may fund terrorists, but it stems from peasants' lack of other productive options and the incessant demand for illegal drugs in U.S. cities. Counterinsurgency efforts may decimate organizations like the FARC, but they also lead to the displacement and death of thousands of civilians, thus creating new sources of social instability.

By framing Western hemisphere security in anti-terrorism terms, the U.S. seeks the moral authority to intervene in regional conflicts in defense of its own particular interests, rather than the interests of long-term conflict resolution. Granting the U.S. a *carte blanche* for intervention

based on its post-Sept. 11th victim status would be a fatal mistake.

The campaign against terrorism should not be viewed as a boilerplate for security policy in the Western Hemisphere. The results could be the opposite of peace.

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