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LADB Staff

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U.S. to Boost Military Aid to Colombia to Fight Guerrillas, Drug Trafficking

by LADB Staff

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As the Colombian government and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) guerrillas skirt around possible negotiations, US President Bill Clinton is asking for more military aid. US lawmakers who support the increase cite recent stinging losses by the Colombian military at the hands of the rebels whom they link to drug trafficking as evidence of a need for additional support. Meanwhile, Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), is holding several Americans hostage.

In late March, the Colombian government confirmed press reports it had signed a secret agreement with the ELN on Feb. 9 in Madrid, Spain, as a first step toward formal peace negotiations. The document included a commitment to hold a June 5-9 preparatory meeting in Colombia, with delegates from the ELN and the government as well as representatives of the Comision de Conciliacion Nacional (CCN), headed by the Catholic Church. The preparatory meeting was to lead to a National Peace Convention representing all sectors of society to "lay the groundwork" for reconciliation and a lasting peace accord.

Making "a vehement call" for peace, Colombian President Ernesto Samper said all Colombians should "accompany this initiative toward reconciliation, which is opening up before eyes tired of seeing so much violence." The political opposition at first criticized the agreement, saying the Samper administration was "politicizing" peace. Later, however, three of the four leading presidential candidates backed the talks.

Before the "pre-accord" had a chance to take effect, however, the ELN called off further meetings, saying politicians were trying to capture short-term "political dividends" from the peace process. The rebels said they would still support a national convention. "The pre-accord is now in doubt because it has been manipulated by opportunists, including the government," said Francisco Galan, jailed spokesperson for the ELN. "It has been used for political advantage."

Military defeat brings more US aid

Latin America's longest-running guerrilla war has heated up in recent months. In early March, the rebels dealt the military the severest defeat since the insurgency began in the 1960s (see NotiSur, 03/13/98). Appearing before a congressional inquiry into the defeat in Caguan, Defense Minister Gilberto Echeverri Mejia and armed forces chief Gen. Manuel Jose Bonnett Larcano said the military does not have the capability to defeat the guerrillas. Only 20% of the army is being used to combat the guerrillas. Another 45% is engaged in protecting infrastructure such as oil pipelines and electric facilities from guerrilla attacks.

The remaining 35%, students doing their obligatory military service, are not sent into combat because of their inexperience, Bonnett said. The Colombian security forces have strong supporters

in the US government who are pushing for increased military aid. Both US and Colombian officials have deliberately blurred the lines between counterinsurgency and counternarcotics operations, and calls for increased military aid are peppered with references to "narco-guerrillas."

On March 31, the Clinton administration asked Congress to increase funds to fight drug trafficking in Colombia, setting as its goal that, within three years, Colombian cocaine and heroin would disappear from American streets. Announcing "an ambitious new strategy to attack narcotics trafficking in Colombia on all fronts," R. Rand Beers, director of the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, asked for a US\$21 million increase over the original US\$30 million package presented two months ago. Total aid to Colombia, including military aid, was US\$95 million in 1997, Beers said.

The added money would improve intelligence about drug cartels, expand fumigation of coca crops, intercept planes and boats transporting coca paste and cocaine, and strengthen the work of Colombian police, Beers said. Gen. Charles Wilhelm, commander of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in Miami, told a House International Relations Committee hearing that recent attacks and kidnappings were alarming signs of the growing strength of the insurgency, which he tied to drug trafficking. "Colombia is the most threatened country in the US Southern Command's area of responsibility," said Wilhelm.

Colombia's military faces an increasingly violent guerrilla uprising, an expanding cocaine and heroin industry, and brutal paramilitary organizations that are causing havoc among the civilian population, he said. The government has lost control over 40% of the rural countryside, and large numbers of people are being displaced by the violence. "At this time, I see little hope for a negotiated settlement," said Wilhelm. The House voted March 30 to press the Clinton administration to provide the Colombian police with three sophisticated Black Hawk helicopters for the drug war. Sponsors of the resolution said Congress had voted last year to procure the helicopters, but the administration has failed to follow through (see NotiSur, 10/03/97).

Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-NY) also said a congressional order to upgrade 12 helicopters for use by the Colombian police had not been acted upon, though the money has been available since 1996. Some aid was withheld last year because of concerns about human rights abuses by the military. As lawmakers call for increased aid, some caution that it will only increase the violence in Colombia. The US State Department, Human Rights Watch-Americas, and the UN human rights observer in Colombia have all accused the army and right-wing paramilitary groups linked to the armed forces of being responsible for a large share of all murders in Colombia (see NotiSur, 03/06/98).

US bird-watchers kidnapped

Amid the widespread violence in Colombia, the FARC kidnapped a group of tourists, including four US citizens, who were in Colombia on a bird-watching expedition. The tourists were kidnapped after being stopped at a roadblock on a major highway 50 km east of Santa Fe de Bogota on March 24. When the rebels accused the army of endangering the hostages, the army scaled back its operations in the area. The rebels threatened to kill the Americans if they proved to be undercover US intelligence agents. The US strongly denied that the hostages have any US-government connection or that they were in Colombia on any intelligence-gathering mission.

Earlier this month, another FARC commander said the rebels would target US advisers, claiming they head covert counterinsurgency operations. US officials say there are about 220 US military advisers assisting anti-drug operations in Colombia. The ELN warned that Colombia would "become another Vietnam" if Washington sends more military advisers into the country. "If the US gets involved then there will be a generalized action," ELN leader Felipe Torres told the El Espectador newspaper. "The insurgent groups will become true armies and this will become another Vietnam."

On March 31, the ELN again said the lives of the hostages were in danger because the army was flying bombing raids in the area where they were being held. He said all the hostages were unharmed. "But if things continue as they are then we will wash our hands of responsibility for them," he added. One hostage, Thomas Fiore, escaped on April 2. While his escape was celebrated, officials also stressed their concern about the remaining hostages. (Sources: CNN, El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 03/25/98; Inter Press Service, Notimex, 03/25/98, 03/31/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/24/98, 03/31/98, 04/01/98; The Miami Herald, The New York Times, 04/01/98; Reuter, 03/25/98, 03/29-31/98, 04/03/98; Associated Press, 03/25/98, 03/31/98, 04/03/98)

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