

7-30-1999

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### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Crash of Spy Plane Spotlights Growing U.S. Involvement in War in Colombia." (1999).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12666>

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## **Crash of Spy Plane Spotlights Growing U.S. Involvement in War in Colombia**

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 1999-07-30

The crash of a US spy plane over rebel-dominated territory in Colombia, which killed five US military personnel and two Colombians, has spotlighted growing US involvement in Colombia. "It's a clear marker along the way to the growing involvement of the US in a very dirty war," said Carlos Salinas of Amnesty International (AI). The plane, which the US says was on an anti-drug reconnaissance mission in southwestern Colombia near the Ecuador border, apparently hit a mountain and crashed July 23. Rough terrain and bad weather kept rescuers from reaching the crash site until July 28. All on board were killed.

The four-engine, De Havilland RC-7 plane routinely flies at an altitude of between 6,000 and 25,000 feet, out of range of ground fire, and carries sophisticated radar and imaging systems to locate coca plantations on the ground, intercept electronic communications, and follow the radar paths of aircraft suspected of carrying cocaine. The five US soldiers on board were among the approximately 240 US personnel based in Colombia at any one time, most of them involved in anti-drug operations.

Last July, two US civilian pilots, Gary Clyde Chestnut and Wayne Harley Mulgrew, died when their small plane crashed in Guaviare in southeast Colombia. They were in a plane used to fumigate crops grown for illegal-drug production, but at the time of the crash were on a training mission. US pilots are often contracted to fumigate coca and poppy fields and to train new pilots.

### ***Drug czar visits Colombia***

The spy plane's disappearance came on the eve of a visit to Colombia by US National Drug Control Policy director Gen. Barry McCaffrey, who arrived July 25. Although in both Peru and Bolivia the amount of crops grown to produce illegal drugs has been reduced, Colombia's cocaine production has doubled in the last three years despite huge amounts of counternarcotics aid.

During a conference with the business community, McCaffrey said the increase in coca production has occurred mainly in "narcoguerrilla" areas beyond the government's control. Both US officials and the Colombian military blame the increase on growing links between drug traffickers and insurgents (see NotiSur, 1998-05-29).

McCaffrey said the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) is financed, "probably up to two-thirds," through ties to drug-trafficking organizations, and he estimated the rebels earn up to US\$600 million annually from the drug trade. He said peace talks to end the nation's 35-year conflict would only work if Colombia's security forces were strengthened against the "narcoguerrillas."

Before leaving Washington, McCaffrey proposed an additional US\$1 billion in counternarcotics aid to Colombia and its neighbors. More than a third would go to the Colombian army and police.

Meanwhile, Colombian Defense Minister Luis Fernando Ramirez went to Washington to ask for an additional US\$500 million for 1999 and 2000 to modernize the armed forces. Ramirez said if the peace talks fail, "we must be prepared to go to war."

Colombia, scheduled to receive US\$289 million in US anti-drug assistance this year, is already the third-largest recipient of American aid, after Israel and Egypt. Colombian military leaders and US Republican lawmakers have conducted a largely successful campaign to link the guerrillas and drug-trafficking to justify the increased military aid.

A member of a human rights organization who requested anonymity told Inter Press Service that Washington accepts the "narcoguerrilla" category because it is convenient for justifying US de facto "participation in the counterinsurgency war." Colombian President Andres Pastrana, who has made forging a peace with the guerrillas his top priority, denied the link between drug traffickers and guerrillas and said the fights against the guerrillas and against the drug traffickers "are two distinct things." "No evidence exists at this time that the FARC are drug traffickers," said Pastrana in an interview. "It's true they charge taxes to the drug traffickers."

But the FARC has always said they are interested in eradicating illicit crops." US trains elite battalion McCaffrey's three-day visit included a tour of an army base where the US military is training and equipping a new elite 1,500-member army counternarcotics battalion. Set to be deployed in December, the battalion will add heavily armed ground forces to police raids on drug labs and airstrips and on fumigation runs over illegal drug-crop fields. Although the battalion's purpose is ostensibly to fight drugs, Colombia's military sees its usefulness against the rebels.

The rebels "are investing in arms, in explosives, in sophisticated communications equipment, in intelligence," said armed forces chief Gen. Fernando Tapias. The only way to stop the FARC "is to cut off their source of funding."

But the US role in training the battalion, which will be based in a cocaine-producing, guerrilla-occupied region in the south, further emphasizes the blurring between anti-drug efforts and counterinsurgency operations. McCaffrey said there is greater support from Washington for the Colombian army's fight against "narcoguerrillas," because "we have verified that there is a new culture [among government forces] of respect for human rights."

Last year, Washington conditioned military aid on greater respect for human rights from Colombia's military forces, which have been linked to paramilitary massacres of civilians (see NotiSur, 1999-04-16). But Jose Miguel Vivanco, Executive Director, Human Rights Watch/Americas, wrote in The Washington Post July 18 that any belief by the State Department or Pentagon that the Colombian military has significantly improved its human rights record was overly optimistic.

### *Latin American concern about US role*

US officials have repeatedly denied giving counterinsurgency aid and dismissed reports that the US is considering sending US troops to fight in Colombia. But many Colombians believe the possibility of an intervention has grown amid steady rebel advances, frequent visits by high-ranking US officials, and growing US support to the military. Following the crash of the spy plane, the

Colombian newspaper El Espectador questioned why there were more foreigners than Colombians in the operation.

Last week, US President Bill Clinton called the situation in Colombia a national-security concern and McCaffrey spoke of the internal threat posed by the guerrillas to the Colombian government. The Argentine newspaper Clarin said, "experience shows that when the US begins to speak of an "internal threat" and of "national interests," it ends up talking about an intervention.

Press reports in both Argentina and Brazil said the US had been putting out feelers, warmly received by Argentine President Carlos Menem, regarding a Latin American intervention force. The reports, denied by US and Argentine government officials, prompted statements from the governments of Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela condemning outside interference in Colombian affairs.

Argentine Defense Minister Jorge Dominguez emphatically denied that Menem supported an invasion. "Argentina does not agree with military intervention in any country in the region, nor has it received any kind of proposal" to that effect, he said. Nevertheless, the deteriorating security situation in Colombia where rebels control about 40% of the countryside and a continued increase in coca and opium-poppy cultivation will strongly influence the level and specified use of future US military assistance.

"What's happening is that people with views like [McCaffrey's] are filling the policy vacuum," said Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue (IAD). "The people who want more military aid are in the driver's seat now." The Washington Post quoted a senior congressional aide who specializes in anti-drug issues saying, "The policy debate now undoubtedly becomes more intense as to whether to get more assets down there of the kind that should have been there four or five years ago as things intensified." [Sources: Notimex, 07/23/99; Xinhua, 07/24/99; Clarin (Argentina), El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 07/23/99, 07/25/99; Spanish news service EFE, 07/23/99, 07/26/99, 07/27/99; The Miami Herald, 07/25/99, 07/27/99; Reuters, 07/26/99, 07/27/99; The New York Times, 07/27/99; Associated Press, 07/24-26/99, 07/28/99; CNN, 07/23/99, 07/26/99, 07/29/99; Inter Press Service, 07/26/99, 07/29/99; The Washington Post, 07/28/99, 07/29/99]

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