

5-9-2003

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### Recommended Citation

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## President Uribe Asks Washington for Aid

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 2003-05-09

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe visited Washington, DC, April 29-May 2 to ask the administration of President George W. Bush for more help in his country's four-decade conflict with guerrilla forces. Just after his return to Colombia, 10 hostages including Antioquia Gov. Guillermo Gaviria being held by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) were killed during a botched rescue attempt by the military.

Uribe, the only South American president to join Bush's "coalition of the willing" in the US war against Iraq, went to Washington expecting reciprocity. Uribe wanted to put Colombia back on Washington's agenda in the face of concerns that Congress might be questioning the endless flow of aid that has produced few positive results. After his meeting with Bush on April 30, Uribe said he had emphasized the need for a bilateral free-trade agreement with the US.

While the US prefers to focus on the hemispheric Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which it hopes to have operational by 2005, Colombian officials want tariff-free entry of more goods into the US to generate jobs at home. They also say little progress has been made in negotiating the larger free-trade agreement (see NotiSur, 2002-11-08).

US Treasury Secretary John Snow admitted as much during a visit to Colombia in late April, saying that talks on establishing the FTAA were moving too slowly. Uribe's meeting with Bush yielded partial success on the trade issue when Bush agreed to send US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick to Colombia in the near future to explore bilateral trade talks. Nevertheless, Bush said the US is more interested in closing the FTAA deal because it is the "most hopeful trade agreement there is."

Uribe also said he had discussed with Bush the need for the US to grant Temporary Protective Status (TPS) to more than 100,000 Colombians who are living and working without papers in the US. TPS is a temporary program for immigrants who fled their countries because of natural disasters or armed conflicts and are unable to return. Using the "terrorism" card, Uribe said that Colombia, as the recipient of the third-largest amount of US aid, faces enormous challenges from terrorism and therefore needs more technical and military assistance. To defeat terrorism, he said, "we don't need US troops...but we need planes, satellites, radar, Predators." He said, "Colombians need to participate in a solid coalition, over the long term, against terrorism."

### *Uribe asks for leftovers from war against Iraq*

In later meetings with other US officials, Uribe asked the US to give Colombia military equipment no longer needed in Iraq. "We have asked for technical assistance to be more effective in operations, to have more precise information and better equipment, especially in aviation" for the fight

against terrorism, said Uribe. Without such help, it will be difficult to rescue the three US contract employees kidnapped by the FARC in February, he said (see NotiSur, 2003-02-28).

On May 1, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said the US was considering transferring some military equipment from Iraq to Colombia. He did ask, Wolfowitz said, "and he even suggested that maybe we had some capabilities that are no longer needed in Iraq and might be useful in South America and...it's a serious question. I don't know if there's anything in that category, but the president told us to look so we're going to look."

Officials also announced that the US and Colombia have signed an agreement to resume drug surveillance flights, suspended for two years after a missionary group's plane was shot down over Peru, killing a US woman and her baby daughter (see NotiSur, 2001-05-18). Separate US government and congressional investigations concluded that poor communications, a failure to follow established procedures, inadequate Peruvian air traffic control, and inadequate foreign-language skills by both US personnel and Peruvians contributed to the accident (see NotiSur, 2001-11-09). The agreement was signed in Colombia on April 29, and the flights will resume "very, very, very soon," Uribe told reporters as he met with House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL). "The bureaucratic task is done."

A State Department official said the flights probably would not begin until summer, after the US confirms that Colombia has taken the steps called for in the agreement to prevent accidental downings of planes. US national security agencies would then recommend to President Bush whether to proceed with the program. Congress would also be consulted, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. When the program resumes, the State Department will be the lead US agency. The congressional investigation had recommended that the CIA no longer be in charge.

A congressional aide said Uribe has also asked that air interdiction apply not only to drug flights, but also to suspected shipments of illegal weapons. He said the House International Relations Committee would consider including weapons trafficking in the air-interdiction program when it prepares a bill authorizing 2004 State Department programs.

### *Attempted rescue goes bad*

Just after Uribe returned to Colombia, Gov. Gaviria, Echeverri, and eight other hostages were killed during a rescue attempt by the Colombian military, the government said on May 5. The victims were in a FARC camp in Encarnacion, in the municipality of Urrao, 170 km east of Medellin. The government said the military had located the rebel camp where the hostages were being held last week and launched rescue operations the morning of May 5. Seventy-five troops were transported by helicopter to areas near the site and began advancing on the camp. Government officials said a rebel commander ordered the hostages killed. Only three captives, all soldiers, survived the rescue attempt. The officials insisted that, during the operation, there was no combat and the troops did not open fire.

"The survivors said that when they heard the helicopters one rebel nicknamed El Paisa gave the order to murder the hostages," the government statement said. Gaviria, 41, and Echeverri, 67, were

kidnapped April 22, 2002, as they led 1,000 people on a peace march to the town of Caicedo. They were being held by FARC guerrillas at the jungle camp with 11 soldiers and were part of a group of 80 hostages the rebels wanted to trade for imprisoned comrades. The FARC said the deaths occurred during a confrontation and blamed the Uribe government for the deaths.

"In the confrontation between the FARC guerrillas and the fascist army, Guillermo Gaviria and Gilberto Echeverri died, along with the other prisoners," said a FARC communique. "It was the arrogant attitude of...President Alvaro Uribe Velez, who is convinced that by force, through blood and fire, he will rescue prisoners of war in our power, that led him to venture the rescue," a FARC rebel said, reading a statement on local radio.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) condemned the killings and said the FARC was responsible. "The onus for these deaths lies squarely on the guerrillas, who held them hostage for over a year," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of HRW/Americas. When Gov. Gaviria set out on his peace march last year he was aware of the dangers. Before leaving Medellin, he wrote, "If I am kidnapped, it is my desire that the country not make any type of concession to my captors for my release. If I am killed, my spirit will be praying for peace for Colombia."

Gaviria's wife blamed Uribe's government for the deaths. "The government provoked this situation," Yolanda Pinto said. "We had asked that the president communicate any decision to us, and he promised to do that. He didn't." She added that she and other family members had feared the rebels would kill the prisoners if a rescue was attempted. She said that "now more than ever" she would continue working for a humanitarian agreement that would lead to the release of all the hostages. While Uribe assumed responsibility for the failed operation, he accused the FARC of having executed the hostages and called the act "a new genocide of innocent citizens."

In an emotional televised statement, he said the killings would not sway him from his hard stance toward the rebels. Analysts say the government will now be under increased pressure from some to exact revenge and from others to make a deal to swap the hostages for FARC prisoners.

Sen. Antonio Navarro Wolff said the killings would polarize the nation with respect to a humanitarian accord. "There will be those who will use the deaths to try to convince the government that it should not negotiate with the rebels," he said, "while the families of the other hostages are going to apply much more pressure for an immediate swap."

Uribe has been under intense pressure from the Catholic Church and relatives of political prisoners to negotiate an exchange. He has said he would only consider an agreement if it was brokered by the UN and included the freedom of all hostages, not just the political hostages. But the chance of a peaceful exchange has been greatly damaged by the deaths of the hostages.

"This peace process is going to get much more complicated now," Sen. Luis Alfredo Ramos told local radio. Former presidential candidate Luis Eduardo Garzon said the situation in the country "has become absolutely untenable" because of the "degradation that this conflict has come to."

## *US policy questioned*

US Representative William Delahunt (D-IL) and a member of the House International Relations Committee, who met with Uribe in Washington, expressed concerns about US policy in Colombia. "There is no military solution," Delahunt said. "The social and economic needs need to be addressed." Since 1999, Colombia has received over US\$2 billion in mostly military aid from the US. Despite the massive amounts of money and military equipment, plus increasing numbers of US contract personnel and US military in the country, little success either against drug trafficking or against the guerrillas is evident.

Since Uribe's last visit to Washington in September 2002, the rebels have increasingly attacked Colombia's cities in operations reminiscent of the drug-cartel violence of 1989- 1990. The largest was the Feb. 7 bombing of a Bogota social club that left 36 people dead and more than 160 injured.

At a forum at Ohio State University, former US ambassador Robert White of the Center of International Policy (CIP) criticized the Bush administration for increasing military aid to a country with a long history of instability, corrupt governments, paramilitary groups, and guerilla warfare. "The truth about Colombia is that over the past century, the democratic governments have failed to provide minimum standards of equity, stability, and justice for the Colombian people," White said. "Counterinsurgency programs have never worked. Military aid does not work, and cannot even be justified, without political programs."

White said the US has been unsuccessful in the war on drugs partially because it targets "the least crucial link" in the drug-exportation process. "Drugs are Colombia's largest export," he said, "and there is no way that an operation of that magnitude can exist and prosper without the participation of businessmen, bankers, transportation companies and the government." White noted that, to prevent Colombian farmers from growing the plants used to make cocaine, the US sprays harsh chemicals on the fields from the air. He said that not only is this dangerous to the people in the area, but it also provides little reduction in the amount of drugs exported to the US.

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