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President Uribe Tries To Rally US Support

by LADB Staff
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Looking to consolidate US support for his war policies, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe took a four-day trip to meet with Washington's top officials in late March. Spokespeople for Uribe said he would be seeking a five-year extension of Plan Colombia and setting dates to negotiate a free-trade treaty, while the administration of US President George W. Bush said it would be asking Congress to allow doubling the number of US troops stationed in Uribe's country.

President Uribe talked up advances in "the war on drugs" and "the war on terror" in his country, claiming that support from Washington, which is mostly military support, has succeeded partially in making Colombia a safer country. Uribe sought to strengthen his relationship with the Washington establishment in meetings with President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, drug czar John Walters, Commerce Secretary Donald Evans, and House Speaker Dennis Hastert. He also visited with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Sens. Tom Daschle (D-SD) and Bill Frist (R-TN).

"Plan Colombia II" proposed to last until 2009 Uribe was trying to demonstrate that the US-funded Plan Colombia has enjoyed success, since it is scheduled to expire in September 2005. He and the Bush administration are now working out details for a Plan Colombia II, which would last until 2009. This would lock the program in until after both presidents' administrations had ended.

Plan Colombia is a US$7.5 billion package of mostly military aid to the Colombian government, ostensibly for counternarcotics operations. The US has sent about US$2.8 billion to the country so far. Colombia receives the most US aid of any country in the hemisphere and is the third-largest US aid recipient worldwide, after Israel and Egypt. The aid program was first set up under US President Bill Clinton and Colombian President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002).

Critics of the program claim that it provides too little funding to encourage the development of alternative crops to coca and poppy, that it is excessively oriented toward military solutions to the drug war, and that the aid goes as much toward counterinsurgency efforts in the country's four-decade-old civil war as it does toward drug eradication.

Uribe argues that his hard-line policy toward leftist guerrillas and a mix of negotiations and combat with rightist paramilitary forces is succeeding and claims that now is not the time to march backward. The Bush administration seems to agree and has asked Congress to authorize the expansion of the US military presence in Colombia, increasing the number of US troops in the country from 400 to 800 and the number of US contractors who can operate there from 400 to 600.

Officials from the State Department and Pentagon initiated a series of meetings with commissions from the US House of Representatives and Senate with the goal of authorizing the increase in the number of US troops allowed.
Bogota's ambassador in Washington, Luis Alberto Moreno, expressed support for the push for increased military presence, even though the Colombian government is not the one pressing for the change. "For ten years there have been meetings with the different congressional commissions," Moreno said. "We, the Colombian government, are not looking to change the 'cap.' But obviously we want the cooperation between the two countries to be the best possible. If they believe that five or ten are necessary, that is their decision. We are in agreement that a revision is necessary that will allow for the help they give us to adapt itself to the specific conditions in the country." The maximum limit of 400 US troops in Colombia was established in mid-2000.

Critics warn that raising the cap would be further proof of Washington's increasingly murky role in Colombia's drug-fueled civil war. Free-trade treaty negotiations set for May The further alignment of US-Colombia economic policy became evident when the two countries announced that they would begin free-trade negotiations on May 18-19. Peru and Ecuador may participate in those negotiations if they fulfill certain conditions.

Trade Representative Robert Zoellick and Uribe made the announcement after meeting in Zoellick's office. "This is a hopeful announcement," said Uribe, who saw Zoellick after meeting with Bush. "These negotiations are an opportunity to demonstrate to the world that economic integration has to advance itself in a manner that is democratic and common." He said the proposal would "broaden possibilities and help excluded sectors recover."

The US is the number-one market for Colombian goods, while Colombia is the fourth-largest market for the US in Latin America, after Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela. More than three-quarters of Colombian exports enter the US market without tariffs, and direct US investment in Colombia totals US$8 billion. In 2003 Colombia exported US$6.3 billion in products like petroleum, gold, gas, coffee, flowers, confections, textiles, and footwear to the US.

Zoellick said Peru had been intensifying its efforts to "resolve pending disputes with US investors, in harmony with Peruvian law," with the purpose of joining negotiations. Similarly, the Ecuadoran government has been seeking to resolve "certain concerns in relation to the protection of workers' rights and disputes with investors," said Zoellick. Ecuador has been working to resolve litigation with US corporations in order to begin negotiations (see NotiSur, 2004-02-20). "We hope that in the coming weeks these countries will adopt the necessary steps that will allow us to include them at the negotiating table, together with Colombia," said Zoellick.

The presidents of Peru and Ecuador, however, do not enjoy the popular support Uribe has, which may indicate that they will not be able to negotiate as eagerly as Colombia without facing popular backlash (see NotiSur, 2004-02-13, 2004-01-30, 2004-01-09). Chile is the only South American country to have negotiated a free-trade treaty with the US.

Eradication called "historic," but no street effect

Colombian and US officials have said the amount of land used to cultivate coca has dropped 21% in the past year, calling the reduction "stunning" and "historic." "A big decline for a second year in a..."
row is excellent news," said Deborah McCarthy, assistant secretary for narcotics for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. "The squeeze is being put on."

Historically, the greatest area cultivated with illegal crops reached 170,000 hectares, according to the calculations of Colombian authorities. Currently, authorities say, there remain only 69,000 ha of coca, marijuana, and poppy, which is refined to make heroin. Officials from both countries credit a large-scale aerial-fumigation program for reducing the number of fields cultivated with coca, but environmentalists and farmers have said the chemical spraying causes health problems, widespread contamination, and destroys legitimate crops (see NotiSur, 2002-09-20).

Ecuadoran officials and residents of Ecuadoran regions bordering Colombia have also complained about environmental impacts from spraying. Many analysts argue, contrary to official statements, that eradication programs are not having a significant effect on drug availability.

"If a product becomes scarce, the price goes up," said Adam Isacson, an analyst at the Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP). "Stable prices shows cocaine is as plentiful as ever." Isacson argues that, because the price, purity, and availability of cocaine on US streets have not wavered, traffickers are winning the drug war. Critics like Isacson argue that eradication of supply is the least cost-effective method of reducing the social harm illicit drugs do, while treatment programs in first-world countries are the most cost effective. "It's been stable since the mid-1990s.

How can that be?" Isacson said in a telephone interview with The Miami Herald. "Maybe the satellite pictures are not getting the new crops? Are growers going deeper into the Amazon region where we aren't looking? Are they using smaller plots? Growing in the shade? Getting higher yields?" McCarthy said the challenge is to hit the Colombian drug trade at all levels, such as financing and exports, which should soon translate into lower purity.

Will Uribe’s boasts extend US support?

Uribe has tried to advertise his policy of "democratic security" around Europe and the US, receiving a hostile reception in the European Union (EU) and strong criticisms from human rights organizations (see NotiSur, 2004-02-13). An anti-terror law approved last December provides sweeping powers to the military to arrest suspects without warrants, tap phones, and collect evidence in war zones. Passage of the legislation has led critics to allege that the policy will militarize the judicial system. But Uribe's team points to large declines in violent crime since he implemented his hard-line policies.

Colombian Minister of Foreign Relations Carolina Barco says the homicide rate has dropped 27%, kidnappings about 30%, and massacres almost 80%. The war in Colombia kills about 3,500 people per year, about 60% of them civilians, and has displaced about 3 million Colombian citizens, meaning that even a large drop in the violent-crime rate leaves Colombia's level of violence high above that of other countries in the region.

Facing the loss of support for his security policies from Spain with the departure of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, Uribe now can only count on significant foreign support from the US government.
Now that the Partido Socialista Obrera de Espana (PSOE) has won power in Spain, the EU will probably form a unified bloc of critical opposition to Uribe's policies.

Currently, the incoming Spanish government of Socialist Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero is reviewing a deal the Aznar government signed with Colombia to sell 40 tanks and several artillery pieces to the South American country to see if the new government will want to follow through with the sale (see NotiSur, 2004-03-26).

The Colombian government is Bush's closest ally in Latin America; it is the only country in the region that joined his "coalition of the willing" in the war against Iraq. "Bush and Uribe have much to gain in this week's meetings," Isacson told Spanish news service EFE, "because Bush doesn't have many good friends in Latin America." "It's worthwhile for them to show that they share many points of view and that they're pursuing a common strategy in the war against terrorism," said Isacson.

The CIP released a document that calls the results of Plan Colombia mixed and says Uribe's petition for more assistance "doesn't deserve an automatic green light." The CIP report says the US should, like any investor, examine the meager results of Plan Colombia with a magnifying glass before "throwing more money" at it.

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