US Military Seeks Larger Presence in Latin America

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
US Military Seeks Larger Presence in Latin America

Gen. James T. Hill, chief of the US Southern Command, the combined military forces covering the Caribbean and Latin America, has testified to the Senate that he wants greater US troop deployments in the region.

Critics of US military involvement in Latin America say such a move would be a recipe for abuse and entangle the US in regional conflicts. Gen. Hill also seeks a continuation of "Expanded Authority" to use counterdrug funds for counterterrorism missions in Colombia. Critics point to this as proof of "mission creep" that they warned about when Plan Colombia was first proposed toward the end of the Clinton administration.

Pressure to increase troop cap in Colombia Gen. Hill asked Congress to double the number of US troops allowed in Colombia, from 400 to 800, saying, "There is a real opportunity [for progress] with only a small increase in US personnel." The approval of a cap increase would be part of the 2005 Defense Authorization Bill now making its way through the House and Senate.

As of mid-May, legislators had passed an amendment only raising the cap to 500, but they continue to work on the bill. Before the amendment passed, Senate Armed Services Committee chair John Warner (R-VA) had sought to abolish the troop cap entirely, according to a spokesperson for the Center for International Policy (CIP) who is monitoring legislative activity around US forces in Colombia.

The Southern Command, also known as SOUTHCOM, perceives threats to the US from the region as twofold: "traditional" terrorists, a category that includes drug traffickers, urban-crime gang members in Central America, and guerrilla paramilitary groups linked to drug trafficking in Colombia, and "emerging" terrorists.

Gen. Hill describes these as "radical populists" who tap into "deep-seated frustrations of the failure of democratic reforms to deliver expected goods and services." This is a likely reference to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Bolivian indigenous leader Deputy Evo Morales.

By seeking to double the number of US troops legally allowed to be in Colombia, Hill is echoing requests made recently by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe (see NotiSur, 2004-04-02). They also want to increase the number of private military contractors allowed there from 400 to 600. Hill also asked for a review of whether troops flying low over the country should be counted in the personnel cap Gen.

Hill has told his SOUTHCOM troops that President Uribe is "one of the men I most admire in the world." Critics say increased presence a recipe for abuse Various Latin America analysts and
academics expressed grave concerns about Gen. Hill's testimony before Congress, where he called for greater cooperation with and assistance in "professionalizing" regional armies.

Harley Shaiken, chair of the University of California-Berkeley’s Center for Latin American Studies, told The San Francisco Chronicle, "In the 20th century, all Latin American militaries had to do was call someone a communist, and that person became fair game. Terrorism could become the communism of the 21st century that puts someone under a death sentence."

"The notion that we should strengthen Latin American armies misses the role they played in human rights abuses in past decades and how Latin American governments have been trying to diminish their role ever since other than being just the army," Shaiken said. "In many countries, they were the terrorist organization, killing and disappearing thousands."

Adam Isacson from the CIP in Washington, DC, a policy institute calling for demilitarization in Latin America, told LADB that US troops have now become involved in rearguard action in the southern part of Colombia in what is probably the largest offensive in the history of the country's government.

The US is giving logistical, communications, and surveillance support to the deployed Colombian forces as they fight, he said. One of the reasons opponents of Plan Colombia and further US involvement in the Colombian civil war gave for keeping troops out of the country was their concern about "mission creep," or the potential for anti-narcotics operations to entangle US troops in the complex conflicts that have vexed the Colombian countryside for decades.

Isacson thinks, regarding Gen. Hill and his colleagues calling for an increase in the troop cap after living with it for three years, that "all of a sudden, after all these years of saying the troop cap was no problem, it's a clear indication that we've gotten in deeper."

Critics like Isacson previously said that the mission would change from anti-narcotics operations to anti-insurgency. Gen. Hill says there is no longer a meaningful distinction between narcotics trafficking and terrorist activities in the region, referring to the kidnapping, extortion, and drug-smuggling guerrilla groups use to maintain their strength. He argued in his congressional testimony that "narcoterrorist" reflected the absence of "a useful distinction between a narcotrafficker and his terrorist activity." Other analysts, by contrast, concur with Hill's testimony.

Miguel Diaz, who heads the South America Project for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, says, "If you put it all together the lack of rule of law, dysfunctional judicial systems, corruption, the widespread circulation of arms, a culture of impunity, and countries that have not been able to get a grip on the poverty problem, there is a deteriorating security situation that lends itself to terrorist movements gaining a foothold in Latin America."

Whether Uribe, SOUTHCOM, and the US Defense Department get the increase in personnel they seek is an open question. "There's a lot more concern about our military being thinly stretched all around the world and how can we take on new commitments when we barely have enough troops..."
in the Middle East," says Isacson. "And there's of course a lot of concern about this whole question of contractors. We've seen them getting in a whole lot of trouble in Iraq, and Colombia's a place where the use of contractors was pioneered as part of the drug war, and to go before Congress in this climate and ask to increase the number of contractors allowed in Colombia may not go down well with members of both parties."

Some Colombian exiles are also speaking out against the expanded deployment. Luis Alberto Galvis Mujica is a Colombian exile living in the US who lost most of his family to a 1998 bombing incident in his home village of Santo Domingo in the northcentral department of Arauca.

While touring various US cities to speak against Plan Colombia, Galvis told LADB, "The people of the United States should pay closer attention to what their government is doing with their taxes, because the extension of Plan Colombia will only cause our people to bleed to death. All it will create is war, poverty, and problems with the environment." Galvis' mother, sister, and cousin were among the 17 people who died in the bombing and his father was seriously wounded. Galvis says later investigations revealed that it was a US-made Blackhawk helicopter that launched the bomb and that US contractors working for Occidental Petroleum provided coordinates. He uses his story as part of the argument that expanded US military support in his country guarantees more tragedies like his.

General calls "radical populism" a threat Much of Gen. Hill's testimony to Congress blurred the line between military issues, law-enforcement issues, and issues of political and economic stability. In addition to addressing "narco-terrorism," he also talked about the destabilizing impact of "growingly sophisticated criminal gangs" in Latin American countries, saying the regional GDP would be 25% higher if there were crime rates in Latin America that resembled the rest of the world.

The general criticized Venezuela for going down "an authoritarian path" and sought to discredit cocaleros, or traditional coca growers in the Bolivian and Peruvian highlands, saying "limited amounts never seem to stay limited, and the cocaleros who seek expanded rights to grow coca almost certainly envision the profits from illicit narcotics rather than the practice of ancient traditions."

Hill's statements also highlighted the US mission in Haiti and claimed there was "a lesser but sophisticated threat from Islamic radical groups" in the triborder region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.