3-9-2007

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Colombia, U.S. Focus Military Spending on Plan Colombia

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2007-03-09

The US government is concentrating its anti-narcotics funding on Colombia's war with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and other rebel and paramilitary groups as the government of Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe steps up spending for the same effort. The US plan to further fund Colombia's war and anti-narcotics programs comes as the administration of US President George W. Bush seeks to reduce anti-drug funding to Colombia's Andean neighbors including Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Colombia: US$3.7 billion for 4-year military upgrade plan

Colombia plans to buy new helicopters and aircraft and send more troops to counter rebels after approving a US$3.7 billion, four-year investment plan to upgrade its military, the government said on Feb. 27.

Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said the government would purchase fighter aircraft and helicopters and put 38,000 more police officers and soldiers on patrol to consolidate a US-backed crackdown on Marxist rebels. Washington has funneled about US$4.7 billion in mainly military aid to Colombia since 2000, helping key ally President Uribe battle the drug trade that partly fuels Latin America's oldest guerrilla war.

"We are not going to engage in an arms race with any of our neighbors," Santos told local radio. "This simply maintains a strategic base, bolsters troops on the ground, and maintains our capacity to consolidate the policy of democratic security."

Neighboring Venezuela, whose left-wing President Hugo Chavez is increasingly at odds with the US, has spent billions of dollars of its oil revenues on arms purchases including Russian attack helicopters, fighter jets, and automatic rifles (see NotiSur, 2006-09-01). This has led to US accusations that Chavez is inflaming a regional arms race, even as the US has funded military purchases for Venezuela's closest neighbor.

Santos said much of Colombia's new military spending would come from a special tax the government proposed last year on wealthy Colombians and companies. Uribe has called for the inheritance and corporate tax to fund military spending in the coming four years (see NotiSur, 2006-10-27). Under the investment plan, Colombia's police force would expand by around 20,000 officers, with investment in better transport and intelligence equipment. Aging naval frigates and submarines will also get upgrades.

Uribe remains popular for security policies that have pushed back the FARC rebels from urban areas and highways and disarmed right-wing militias who once battled the guerrillas.

**Bush seeks continuation of Plan Colombia**

In the 2008 fiscal year budget request released Feb. 5, the US State Department seeks US$446 million for Colombia security forces in 2008, a slight decrease from US$457 million in 2006. The budget also calls for US$139 million for social programs for the world's leading cocaine producer.
The Bush administration is asking Congress to approve another US$3.9 billion over seven years for Colombia, but some Democrats are concerned about a scandal tying many of Uribe's political allies to illegal right-wing militias accused of atrocities (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02). In its written budget presentation, the State Department said total aid to Latin America would amount to US$1.6 billion, a 4% increase over the 2006 budget.

The administration has long denied complaints that it is ignoring Latin America's social needs, and its budget document says US aid to the region nearly doubled under Bush. Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Haiti would account for 70% of the 2008 budget request for the Western Hemisphere. The increase includes money spent through the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which conditions aid to countries complying with a set of policy benchmarks like combating corruption and respecting private property.

The 2008 budget's numbers on Colombia brought some criticism that Washington is still directing too much money into Colombia's security forces and too little for social and other programs. "After weeks of talk about a new 'social' approach to aid to Colombia, the aid request for next year looks almost exactly the same as the past several years," said Adam Isacson, a Colombia analyst for the Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP), who favors more spending on social programs.

European donors were expected to fund the social programs when Plan Colombia was unveiled in 1999 as a way to help the country attack its cocaine and heroin industries. But the Europeans never provided the level of financing the Colombians had hoped for. Unofficial copies of the Colombian government's proposals for a second phase of Plan Colombia showed the government wanted to spend US$44 billion in the 2007-2013 period, of which only 14% would be for the security forces. The 77-page document did not say how Colombia would raise the US$44 billion.

**Will Democrats seek more aid and military spending?**

The level of international aid Uribe will be able to secure is in some doubt since the scandal regarding paramilitary links to top officials has escalated. Eight pro-Uribe lawmakers and his former security police chief have been arrested on charges they aided or helped organize paramilitaries. Rights groups say militia commanders have been allowed to keep crime gangs intact even after entering into a peace deal with Uribe.

The New York Times editorial page criticized the US government on Feb. 4 for sending former ambassador to Colombia William Wood to Afghanistan for the top diplomatic post there. The editorial criticized the paramilitary demobilization process as an "overly generous amnesty program for right-wing paramilitary leaders and drug traffickers, which has seriously compromised the rule of law."

The Times saw Wood's tenure in Bogota as nonproductive in helping Colombia overcome its decades-old conflicts, saying, "American aid has been disproportionately directed into military and police programs, leaving far too little to promote alternative livelihoods for Colombia's farmers. Despite all the money spent, the amount of land planted with coca crops has risen and the net
harvest has been reduced only slightly. Afghanistan's problems will not be solved by copying these mistakes."

Defense Minister Santos wrote to the paper on Feb. 28, saying the editorial failed to recognize serious declines in homicide and kidnapping under Uribe and Plan Colombia. But criticisms related to the "parapolitics" scandal appear to be gaining traction in Washington. "This obviously concerns us, and the American people need assurances that the government has severed links with any paramilitary terrorist group," said Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), chair of the Senate panel that overseas funding of Plan Colombia.

The convergence of the scandal, the new US Congress, the aid renewal, and debate on approving a US free-trade deal with Colombia could not have come at a worse time for Uribe and US proponents of Plan Colombia, but that has so far not dented Uribe's support in Washington, analysts said. "The mood in Congress is going negative quickly. The tilt is not against Uribe so far, but against the paramilitaries," said Riordan Roett, Latin America studies director at Johns Hopkins University.

Given the fact the administration has few friends in the Andean countries, he [Uribe] is still the strongest candidate for a face-to-face relationship." US and Colombian officials say probes into paramilitary links are a natural outcome of the demobilization and show Colombia’s institutions are working.

Bogota is already lobbying hard to counter any fallout in Congress. "Of course there are concerns," Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos said. "But we have to work to explain this in full detail and clarity."

Critics say Uribe needs to do more to curb the influence of jailed paramilitary commanders who rights groups fear have kept their criminal networks active and are threatening victims seeking justice. Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) said that Congress could seek to amend Bush's Colombia aid package to trim the military component in favor of more development funds and demand more rights guarantees from Uribe. For years, activists charged that politicians and military officers colluded with paramilitaries, but analysts say investigations and confessions by jailed commanders could now unearth the depth of their political influence.

Foreign Minister Maria Consuelo Araujo resigned in February after her senator brother was arrested on charges he aided militias and orchestrated a rival's kidnapping. Prosecutors have since ordered the arrest of her father Alvaro Araujo Noguera, a former party boss, in the same case. Leahy and Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), Western Hemisphere affairs subcommittee member, said the paramilitary scandal would likely be among subjects debated in hearings on new Colombia aid later this year.

"I am concerned about the corruption scandals in Colombia," said Engel in a statement. "Nevertheless, democracy is not neat and tidy. I am hopeful that these investigations reflect a maturing of Colombia's democracy." [Sources: www.ciponline.org, 11/06; Washington Office on Latin America and Center for International Policy analysis of 2006 Foreign Military Training Report, 11/15/06; Los Tiempos (Bolivia), 02/07/07; Associated Press, 02/06-09/07; BBC News, 02/12/07; The Miami Herald, 02/06/07, 02/07/07, 02/13/07; www.bbcmundo.com, 02/08/07, 02/12/07, 02/19/07; El
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