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Expanded U.S. Military Presence Increases Tensions with Colombia's Neighbors

by LADB Staff

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The fragile balance in relations among the northwestern Andean nations Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela was badly shaken July 17. On that day, the Ecuadoran government celebrated the beginning of US troop withdrawal from Manta air base, following President Rafael Correa's order that they leave the country (see NotiSur, 2009-06-12). Some imagined that would end US military presence in the region forever. But, across the border in Colombia, at almost the same time, President Alvaro Uribe's administration announced agreement on a new treaty, negotiated largely in secret, by which US military personnel would be welcome at a minimum of three bases in key locations in the country.

At the same time, in Washington, the office of Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN) provided reporters several paragraphs from a new Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigation alleging that, under the administration of President Hugo Chavez, Venezuela had become a "major drug transit country."

For many analysts and political commentators, such a cocktail does not simply happen by chance. Colombian Foreign Minister Jaime Bermudez and Freddy Padilla, head of the armed forces and interim defense minister, said the arrival of more US military personnel had absolutely no relationship to the dismantling of the base at Manta, a strategic point on the Pacific Coast where the foreign forces arrived with the stated objective of fighting drug trafficking in the Andean region. "And, besides, it cannot be seen as worrisome for the sovereignty of any of our neighbors," said Bermudez.

What's more, in a public appearance where parts of the agreement were disclosed, and again at a summit of the presidents and foreign ministers of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) in Asuncion, Paraguay, Bermudez said, "We are sure that the effective fight against drug trafficking, carried out jointly by the armed forces of my country and the US, will benefit not only Colombia but the entire region."

'A battle against terrorism, drug trafficking'

With a strong dose of pride, Uribe had already said, "It is very convenient for Colombia to obtain agreements with countries like the US, which, with total respect for the Constitution and Colombian autonomy, come to help us in the battle against terrorism and drug trafficking." Everything known about the agreement thus far comes from press accounts, with officials of both countries limiting their comments to a simple "yes" or "no."

There is, however, no doubt that US troops and the contractors arriving with them civilians like those in Iraq and Afghanistan seen by many as nothing more than mercenaries will, at the start, be at three bases: Malambo, a Caribbean port in northern Colombia; Palanquero, in the center of the

country on the Rio Magdalena, 100 km northeast of Bogota; and Apiay, in the eastern department of Meta. Agence France-Presse reports that soon the bases of Larandia, in Caqueta, 100 km from the border with Ecuador and Peru, and Marandua, close to the border with Venezuela, home of the Grupo Aereo de Oriente, and the only Fuerza Aerea Colombiana (FAC) base on the border, will be added to the network.

An Associated Press story said that Palanquero will be the network's operations headquarters and that, with approval by the US House of Representatives, the only thing lacking is Senate approval of US\$46 million to enlarge the base (see NotiSur, 2009-07-22). Palanquero has a 3,500-meter runway, hangars for more than 100 aircraft, a radar system installed by the US at the end of the 1990s, and accommodations for more than 2,000 people (housing, a hospital, restaurants, a cafeteria, and a supermarket).

Just as there were no consultations with other countries in the region or with multilateral agencies to which Colombia belongs, so also were negotiations kept secret nationally. Added to the most virulent criticism from Venezuela (which announced it would review its relations with Colombia) and Ecuador (which had broken off relations in 2008) were those from all sectors in Colombia, including the governing party.

Critics ask Uribe for explanations

The Council of State demanded explanations from President Uribe. Council president Rafael Ostau Delafont said, "According to Article 189 of the Constitution, during the Senate recess, it corresponds to the president, but with the Council's prior approval, to authorize the movement of foreign troops in national territory, which was not done because no Council member knows the terms nor was told what has been agreed to or is being negotiated."

In general, criticisms focus on the unconstitutionality of the agreement, but they add two basic points: first, that authorizing US troops to operate in the country is a useless act of hostility toward neighboring countries; and second, that authorization means a loss of sovereignty because US troops will enjoy immunity, meaning that any US personnel who commit a crime on Colombian soil will be tried in the US under US laws.

Regarding the first point, Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) leader and presidential candidate in the 2010 elections Carlos Gaviria said, "This pact has weakened Colombian sovereignty; we're behaving like a country that is a subject of the US."

As for the second, sociologist and university professor Francisco Leal Buitrago said, "The sad human rights history of US soldiers in the world and in Colombia means that they should not be given immunity." He added, "Palanquero was off limits for US military operations until April 2008, following the massacre of 17 civilians in a northern town who were machine-gunned from a helicopter during an episode that the government tried to cover up."

US President Obama also criticized

Colombian critics did not spare US President Barack Obama, who, they said, does not control the situation and allows the hawks to continue dominating vital issues concerning security and

international relations. "What we are doing is lending the Pentagon a balcony of our house from which it can spy on our neighbors. Everyone understands that what the White House wants is to increase its surveillance in the entire region, and Obama cannot ignore that," said former defense minister and Partido Liberal presidential candidate Rafael Prado.

"Colombia is being transformed into a large aircraft carrier, into a type of Afghanistan or Israel of Latin America, and, whether Mr. Obama likes it or not, [former US President George W.] Bush loyalists continue writing his security strategy," said Camilo Gonzalez, director of the nongovernmental Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ).

Amid an information avalanche, some heretofore unknown antecedents have surfaced, as Colombian government officials repeated the Uribe line in unison and US diplomacy stuck more than ever to the famous "no comment." (Let's talk later," was the most US Ambassador to Bogota William Brownfield said when asked if the US was thinking of setting up the center of operations in Palanquero.)

Marco Gandasegui, university professor, author, and researcher at the Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos (CELA) in Panama, said that, in April 2009, at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, a Pentagon document came to light. He said the document, titled, "Global En Route Strategy," offers some clues regarding the US's intentions, such as when it speaks of "cooperative security locations" and specifically refers to Palanquero, pointing out that, from there, "nearly half the continent can be covered with a C-17 without refueling."

The weekly news magazine Cambio reported that, in the draft agreement, which has six chapters and 25 articles, "they still could not include such sensitive matters as immunity for the US military personnel and contractors, and there is disagreement on what to call the warships that operate from the port of Malambo. It would seem that they could call them 'ships of state,' since that name would suggest that the bases would be used in offensive actions and not against drug trafficking and terrorism."

Cambio also summed up perfectly the situation in the region. "In Colombia," it said in its July 23 edition, "the debate is heating up on sensitive issues like sovereignty and immunity for US personnel. And if it's raining in Colombia, it's not clearing up in the neighborhood. The military cooperation agreement is being cooked up at a time when tensions are high with the neighbors, who have their alarms turned on and their nerves on edge.

And although the agreement responds to the urgency of the US, which was left without bases of operation by the removal of Manta, it is also in keeping with Colombia's commitments in security matters." In coming weeks, officials from both countries will meet again to redact the final version of the agreement. The only thing left to know is whether good weather will prevail or whether the rain will become a downpour.

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