

11-20-2009

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### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Venezuelan Relations with Colombia Worsen." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13830>

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## Venezuelan Relations with Colombia Worsen

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Region

Published: 2009-11-20

The immediate fallout from the US-Colombia military agreement giving the US access to seven Colombian bases naval, land, and air was the cooling of relations between Venezuela and Colombia to their lowest level ever. Tensions continue to escalate, worrying the rest of the region and the Organization of American States (OAS).

The first consequences were economic and hit Colombia hard. In addition to having its export-flow frozen, it lost the subsidized fuel that Venezuela provides to help Colombians in the towns along the vast 2,216-km shared boarder.

Within weeks, trade sanctions were deteriorating into denunciations of conspiracies, sabotage, and even the killing of alleged paramilitaries in Venezuelan territory. With an eye on agents from the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), the intelligence service that reports directly to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez sent 15,000 troops to the critical areas and told the military and the civilian population to prepare for war.

Experts from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were quoted by Agence France-Presse saying that the Colombian economy could enter a period of contraction as a result of the drop in trade with Venezuela. The government Direccion de Impuestos y Aduanas Nacionales (DIAN) said that Colombian exports to Venezuela had fallen an unprecedented 71% from October 2008 to October of this year.

In July, after the agreement with the US regarding the bases became known, Venezuela froze diplomatic and trade relations, the effects of which began to be felt in September and exploded in October. While the trade cutoff affects a wide range of sectors light industry, textiles, leather, inputs for medicines, cosmetics, paper products, and practically everything related to foodstuffs the biggest hit is to the automotive industry. The 10,000 units that Colombia was to ship to Venezuela, including public-transport vehicles, utility vehicles, family cars, trucks, and tow trucks, were sent instead to Argentina.

But that was not all. Saying, "We are not willing to continue subsidizing the Colombian economy when on their side they make unfriendly decisions affecting our people," Venezuelan Minister of Energy and Oil Rafael Ramirez announced on Aug. 19 the freezing of the agreement to provide 4.5 million gallons of fuel per month to the Colombian departments of La Guajira and Santander along the border with Venezuela. Colombia was paying US\$1.50 a gallon, well below the US\$3.50 a gallon that it cost away from the border area. Following a series of increasingly strident statements, the first 10 days of November marked the high point in an escalation to which analysts still see no end.

On Nov. 7, after Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro said that the US-Colombia military agreement was "the most shameful that has ever been signed in the history of our continent,"

the Venezuelan government dispatched 15,000 soldiers to critical spots along the border with Colombia. Maduro said that the purpose of the installation of US military bases in Colombia "is to establish control and domination of Colombian territory to later implement a strategy of fear, threats, and military aggression against the liberation processes in the region 200 years after its independence" (referring to Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela).

That same day, the government in Caracas announced the deportation of 90 Colombian citizens, a measure not taken in years. Simultaneously, various border-crossing posts were closed to impede the passage of "pimpineros" (fuel smugglers) and *maleteros* (people who make their living bringing merchandise from one side of the border to the other).

On Nov. 8, Chavez somberly told the military and civilian population to "prepare for war." After warning US President Barack Obama not to "make the mistake of ordering an overt aggression against Venezuela, using Colombia as a base from which to launch an invasion," the Venezuelan president spoke to the troops. "Officers of our Bolivarian armed forces," he said, "the best way to achieve peace is to prepare for war."

And, in a bellicose tone, he added, "We will not waste one day in working toward our principal mission. We must prepare for defensive war and help the people prepare for war because that is everyone's responsibility. Commander of the military garrison, militia battalions, we are going to get ready. Revolutionary students, workers, women, everyone get ready to defend our sacred country against an imperialist invasion."

A few days earlier, the Venezuelan government had announced the capture of three alleged DAS agents who were purportedly conducting espionage operations in the country. Chavez said they entered the country illegally looking for sensitive military information and carrying out various subversive operations, which the president did not elaborate on.

Eligio Rojas, a Colombian journalist whom British news service BBC Mundo called an expert on citizen security, said that the presence of Colombian spies in Venezuela "is not altogether impossible." Rojas said, "The matter of the US military bases has surely activated these practices."

The official announcement coincided with a TV denunciation from journalist and former vice president Jose Vicente Rangel, who said, "There are documents confirming the activity of these DAS agents financed by the US Embassy in Caracas and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)." Choosing his words carefully, former DAS director Felipe Munoz emphatically denied that agents from his department operated outside the country, and Colombian Defense Minister Gabriel Silva accused Venezuela directly of being "the flight platform for drug flights headed toward the US."

Although the situation seems to have gotten away from the diplomats, in a concerted effort the Organization of American States (OAS) and the US and Brazilian governments called on the two parties to dialogue. Brazil offered to mediate between Uribe and Chavez when the presidents of the Amazon countries meet Nov. 26 in the Brazilian city of Manaus. Although Brazil's Defense Minister Nelson Jobim tried to play down the crisis, he could not hide his concern and said, "There is still time to avoid the worst."

The US, which Venezuela blames for the situation caused by its arrival at the seven Colombian bases, called for negotiations and said that it did not consider that the tensions were related to any attitude of the White House or the Pentagon. "We are aware of the recent tensions on the Colombia-Venezuela border, but we certainly don't think this is about the US," said State Department spokesperson Phillip Crowley.

OAS Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza asked the two countries to re-establish dialogue. "Common problems must be solved together and differences must be settled through diplomatic channels," he said in a statement printed by Agence France-Presse.

The various pleas went unanswered. Chavez merely denied that he had called for war. "What I have told my people and my soldiers is that they must prepare to defend this country against the threat signified by having seven bases next door." Colombia only said that it would resort to the highest international forums the OAS and the UN.

During this time of high tensions, Venezuela did not stop its policy of expropriating assets of US-based multinationals. In the last two weeks of October, it decreed the "forced acquisition" (expropriation) of the Hilton hotel-chain complex in the state of Nueva Esparta. The Margarita Hilton & Suites thus joined the Caracas Hilton, which had already been taken over by the Venezuelan state.

The government also took control of a lucrative gold mine operated by Gold Reserve Inc. in the southern state of Bolivar. While the crisis with Colombia was unfolding, more than 20 petroleum businesses, including several US companies, expressed an interest in exploiting hydrocarbons in the Orinoco Oil Belt, 235 billion barrels of heavy and extra-heavy crude with which Venezuela plans to double its present production. Energy experts say this must be understood as the byproduct of "mutual needs": The US needs Venezuela's oil, and the South American country needs US technology and capital.

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