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Colombia-Venezuela: Diplomatic Relations Severed After Puzzling Gambit by President Álvaro Uribe

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On July 22, two weeks before President-elect José Manuel Santos was to be sworn in, Venezuela announced it was breaking diplomatic relations with its neighbor (economic ties had been frozen since 2009). The decision came after outgoing Colombian President Álvaro Uribe's administration denounced at a special session of the Organization of American States (OAS) the alleged presence of Colombian guerrilla groups in Venezuelan territory with the backing of the Venezuelan government. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez responded, saying that, "out of dignity, and with much sadness," his administration "had no other choice" but to make a predictable decision that only confirmed what had seemed inevitable for more than a week.

Brandishing documents that failed to convince most of those present, Colombia's Ambassador to the OAS Luis Alfonso Hoyos asserted that 1,500 guerrillas had set up camps in Venezuela, and he proposed creating a commission to inspect "the 39 sites" where they were. Hoyos said, "If Venezuela says that this is an invention, it should not fear our going to those sites."

His Venezuelan counterpart, Roy Chaderton, rejected the accusations and asked, "Why doesn't a delegation of many ambassadors visit the US military bases in Colombia?"

Thus began the final phase of a conflict that Uribe and Chávez never stop fueling.

Evidence fails to convince OAS

Hoyos showed maps, photographs, and video clips allegedly taken in camps in the Venezuelan state of Zulia, 23 km inside the border. Not only countries expressly friendly toward Venezuela (Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua) but also the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Guyana, Paraguay, Surinam, and Uruguay said they were not satisfied with the "evidence" offered by Colombia.

Adam Isacson, senior associate for regional security at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), told the Argentine daily Clarín that no one rules out that the photographs and satellite maps Colombia presented were "made in the USA." Isacson said, "Colombia does not have planes flying over Venezuelan territory or satellites capable of capturing those images. Therefore, where did they come from? They are a product of US intelligence."

An analyst quoted by the Italian news agency ANSA said, "Seldom has something as frivolous as what Colombia presented been seen in the OAS."

It was a defeat for the Uribe administration because, at OAS headquarters, and despite the stated US support, it was unable to convince the organization to come out against Venezuela and accept the validity of the evidence presented.

It was a victory for Venezuela because, with the authority of the OAS discredited, the issue moved to the Unión de Naciones Sudamericanas (UNASUR), an organization in which Venezuela's friends play a prominent role and to which the US does not belong.
The situation allowed the Venezuelan president to assert that Uribe leaves his country "in the hands of the Yankees, which could mean that he could attempt some action, in the last days of his administration, that would lead to a war, which Venezuela would have to enter crying, but it would have to go. Uribe is responsible, sick with hate, a tool of Yankee imperialism who ends his term in office isolated on the continent, marching alone toward the trash heap of history."

Despite his hard-line posturing, Chávez left open the possibility of resuming relations with the future Santos administration. "We are open to a rapprochement," he said.

Days later, Chávez addressed Santos directly, inviting him to re-establish ties between the two countries as soon as "the great disruptive factor, the Uribe factor" disappears.

Chávez also addressed the guerrillas, whom he called on to demobilize "because these are not the times to win power through armed struggle."

### Long history of animosity between presidents

Relations between the two countries have been minimal since March 2008, when the Colombian Army violated Ecuadoran sovereignty and bombed a clandestine camp of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), 30 km inside Ecuador, killing at least two dozen people, including a top FARC leader and four Mexican students([NotiSur, 2008-03-07](http://www.notisur.com/)).

Trade relations were frozen last year when details became known of a US-Colombia military agreement in which the Uribe administration gave the Pentagon unrestricted use of seven military air, land, and maritime bases in Colombian territory and agreed to legal immunity for US personnel who operate from those bases.

At that time, Caracas said that the US troops were "a threat to Venezuelan security and the security of the entire region," and Bogotá is now using the same terminology, saying that the alleged guerrilla camps "are a threat to Colombian security."

The two countries share a 2,219 km border, one of the most porous on the continent, according to analysts of international affairs. Until relations were frozen, bilateral trade between Colombia and Venezuela stood at nearly US$6 billion, which has now fallen to somewhat less than US$4 billion and has caused the loss of thousands of jobs in Colombia, according to Colombia's Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas (DANE).

"The loss this year of economic relations with Venezuela has cost us blood, sweat, and tears, more than a half-million jobs, 5 million people affected who live on the border, US$2.5 million a day in lost business," former President Ernesto Samper Pizano (1994-1998) told the Colombian daily El Tiempo. Since July 28, the day Venezuela ordered the freeze, Colombia has lost 75% of its market in neighboring Venezuela.

### Analysts examine Uribe’s motives

As the most recent phase of the crisis began, leading analysts and the largest media in the region posed the same questions and most agreed that Uribe's actions were a mistake. Why, just a few days before leaving office, did the Uribe administration decide on such a high-stakes game when it knew what the outcome would be beforehand? Why did Uribe give Chávez such an enormous gift?
Answers differ, but all point in the same direction, having to do with domestic politics in Colombia. "Uribe seems to be extracting a price from Santos for the latter's gradual independence and also for his positioning himself for post-Aug. 7, when he takes office as the new president," read an editorial in Clarín. "[Uribe] knows that everything that smacks of guerrillas and Chávez helps his cause, which today consists of not losing leadership, remaining at center stage, and forcing Santos to reverse his intention to have good relations with his neighbors. While Santos seems to have been left in an awkward position, the prudence of his statements will leave him well-positioned upon taking office. He didn't create this situation, and everything he does to put things right will benefit him."

"What Uribe has done is incomprehensible," said Venezuelan economist José Guerra, a former Banco Central de Venezuela (BCV) official. "He did not say anything new, and he has created a profoundly negative situation that will have to be resolved by an administration that has not yet taken over. Some speculate that there is friction between [Uribe and Santos], but not even that explains it to me."

Other analysts point in a different direction. Since Uribe is the US's strongest ally in Latin America, they point out that this attitude of provoking an energetic Venezuelan response follows a strategy designed by the superpower.

Argentine academic Atilio Borón said that, given "Costa Rica's recent authorization for the Pentagon to deploy in its territory 46 warships, 200 helicopters, fighter planes, and 7,000 Marines," Uribe's action is part of a strategy with which the US wants to make Venezuela feel that "it is surrounded."

Borón said that the US request to Costa Rica was accompanied by a narrative in which the White House told the Central American country that the prevailing situation in Mexico—where the drug cartels are waging all-out war—forced drug traffickers to modify their traditional routes for getting their product to the US and that to thwart that maneuver the US needs to expand its military installations in the region.

"This initiative," said Borón, "has to be viewed in the context of the growing militarization of US foreign policy, whose most important expressions within Latin America have been reactivating the Fourth Fleet, obtaining the use of the seven bases in Colombia, the de facto military occupation of Haiti, constructing the wall of shame on the border with Mexico, the coup in Honduras, and Panama's concession of new military facilities."

Borón added, "It is ridiculous that they try to convince us that the 20-some bases established from Central America and the Caribbean to South America are intended for fighting drug trafficking."

For many analysts who, with different emphases, agree with Borón, those bases' real function is to warn Venezuela, and any other country in the region that adopts similar policies, that the US is watching. In this context, they say that Uribe's denunciations are serving as a reminder for Venezuela.

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