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German Weapons Sold Illegally in Colombia Pass Through U.S.

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A photograph delivered to the German daily Süddeutsche Zeitung’s newsroom showing a Colombian policeman pointing a "made in Germany" pistol recently sparked an investigative-journalism project. The investigation is now beginning to show that both Germany and the US are involved in the weapons trade.

Germany’s laws explicitly prohibit exporting any weapons to countries 1) experiencing internal armed conflicts, 2) with security forces accused of "excessive" use of force in applying repressive measures (being trigger-happy or allowing extrajudicial executions), or 3) where recurrent human rights violations have been proven. Colombia has ranked first in all three criteria for more than 50 years.

US government program may be conduit for 100,000 guns
The Munich newspaper’s investigation discovered that the guns shown in the images from Bogota are SP2022s produced by the Sig Sauer factory. The state radio and television network Deutsche Welle, government-owned ZDF and private NDR and WDR channels joined the newspaper’s investigation, which also revealed that the South American country’s police force has 100,000 such weapons and that they came through the US, most likely as part of Plan Colombia, a US assistance agreement dating back to the 1990s (NotiSur, March 9, 2007).

The case came to light on May 28 and picked up momentum after July 3 when the Prosecutor's Office in Kiel—capital of the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein and home of the Sig Sauer arms factory—raided the offices of the company suspected of illegal exports. The investigation is focusing on Germany’s federal agency in charge of controlling exports, the Bundesamt für Wirtschaft und Ausfuhr Kontrolle (BAFA). Sources at the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi), concerned about the investigation, called the incident "very serious" and urged Deutsche Welle "to be cautious; before concluding that US firms or government agencies are acting illegally, it is necessary to get to the bottom of what has happened here in Germany."

While German media and government officials haven’t speculated on the probable implications of US arms trafficking, they haven't avoided reporting facts that point in that direction. Both indicate that, between 2009 and 2011, Sig Sauer sent hundreds of thousands of SP2022 pistols to the US and that all the shipments left Germany with BAFA authorization after the manufacturer certified the US was the final destination. The weapons, BAFA certificates indicated, were being sent to the US civilian market and would not leave the country.

Remarkably, no one involved in the investigation has focused on the Colombian government or its police force. Chief of the metropolitan force in Bogota Gen. Humberto Guatibonza limited his comments, saying only, "Actually, 185,000 police in the country have such weapons, which are much appreciated by them." John Marulanda, a private security-firm expert in the Colombian capital, expressed the same opinion.
If Guatibonza's figures are correct, it would mean that, before or after the shipments under investigation that include 100,000 weapons, another 85,000 pistols would have been shipped to Colombia. Both the Prosecutor's Office and the BMWi, as well as the press, are taking great care when they talk about what may have happened in the US, not specifically naming any agency or organization that might be implicated in an operation allowing German arms to reach Colombia illegally. They use vague terms such as "the US military" or "US authorities."

Angelika Rettbert, a political scientist at the Hamburg-based German Institute of Global and Area Studies, who specifically identified the Pentagon, was the only one to be direct in her analysis. In a statement to Deutsche Welle on May 28, Rettbert said, "Washington will be reproached that its armed forces acted wrongly, and the US can allege that they didn’t even know the arms transfer had occurred. But the fact that US authorities didn’t know that German weapons passed through its deposits to Colombian security forces is quite serious and does not absolve it of any responsibility. ... After all, even small businesses are required to ensure their products or actions do not harm the countries importing them—whether food or weapons."

On July 2, Süddeutsche Zeitung and TV channels NDR and WDR were on the story again, revealing that they were in possession of internal documents from Sig Sauer proving the pistols were destined for Colombia and "would get there via the US."

In Bogota, both the Tiempo newspaper and the weekly magazine Semana reported the story, not to investigate it internally but to speculate about US participation. Their reports noted that Kiel’s Attorney General Brigit Hess had said the weapons factory was being investigated by the judiciary for a 2010 shipment of arms to the Kazakhstan presidential guard, also via the US. Strangely, the rest of the Colombian media was absolutely silent on the subject even though the story made the covers of both Tiempo and Semana.

In its July 13 issue, the magazine quoted an unidentified legislative source as saying, "No one in Congress or elsewhere wants to talk about this affair, which touches on two sensitive issues: security and the failure of Plan Colombia."

**Colombia: third-largest recipient of US military aid**

Plan Colombia—which has turned the South American country into the third-largest recipient of US military assistance (estimated at about US$7 billion according to the Bogota-based legal firm of José Alvear Restrepo)—is a bilateral agreement drawn up in 1999 by then Presidents Bill Clinton and Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002). The program’s goal was to initiate social and economic revitalization in Colombia, a country beaten down since the 1970s by bloody internal conflict, by ending the conflict and creating a strategy to combat the drug cartels supplying the US appetite for illegal drugs.

With successive extensions, the plan has continued unchanged under US Presidents George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Barack Obama and Colombian Presidents Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and Juan Manuel Santos.

It was announced during Plan Colombia's inauguration that the initiative had the support of the Andean Counterdrug Initiative (ACI) and received support from the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program and the Department of Defense’s Central Counternarcotics account. The US government’s main goal is to prevent the constant flow of drugs into its territory. For Colombia, the objective is to promote peace and economic development, end illegal drug trafficking, and increase
security. Colombia received the 100,000 German pistols for its police force to shore up security under the program.

In an article published by the Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI) June 5, Andrés Aristizábal, renowned international relations professor at the private Universidad del Externado, analyzed Plan Colombia. He said, "US military assistance in the fight against drug trafficking is questionable." He also quoted the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as saying that, despite Plan Colombia’s 15 years of existence, the country is still the world’s number-one producer of cocaine; drug trafficking continues; and drug gangs and cartels continue to control the business domestically and diversify their organizational structures to counteract the arrest of their bosses, detained in Colombia and extradited to the US.

Meanwhile, Aristizábal says, Plan Colombia allows the US to keep a permanent force of 400 military personnel as well as other Pentagon contractors in the South American country. They have access to Colombian military installations, including Colombian radar systems that allow the US to carry out intelligence surveillance.

Although never officially acknowledged, the Movimiento No Bases—an organization formed in 2008 to oppose President Uribe’s plan to allow the Pentagon to use Colombian air and sea bases and to reject installation of Forward Operating Locations (FOLs) in Colombian territory—is using secret Pentagon documents released by WikiLeaks and published by The Washington Post in March 2011 to prove that the US has also used drones flying from Colombia to spy on the Caribbean and Andean regions since 2006.

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