

Regional relations sink to a new low

Outgoing Colombian President Uribe ratchets up the rhetoric against neighbouring Venezuela

by Allison Richards,
 Hands Off Venezuela

Claims by the Colombian government that up to 1,500 Colombian guerrillas, including key leaders, are operating from camps in Venezuela have put already tense relations between the sister countries under further pressure.

The accusations were made by outgoing President Alvaro Uribe on 16 July and immediately denounced as a “provocation” by Caracas. The following week, Colombia’s ambassador to the OAS, Luis Alfonso Hoyas, presented his government’s evidence for these claims to the regional body.

The “proof” consisted of a collection of date-less photographs and videos of insurgents (presumably in Venezuela) and an explanation of where on Google Maps the alleged camps can be found (unfortunately, as Street View is not yet available in the densely forested border area, there was nothing to indicate whether rebels were actually present in these locations or not).

A few days later, President Chávez announced he had received a letter from a source inside the US who had previously alerted him to the 2002 coup attempt and a 2004 assassination plot which culminated in the arrest of 100 Colombian paramilitaries just outside of Caracas. The letter cautioned that “the idea remains to generate a conflict on your western border” and warns of plans for a military operation carried out by “those from the north” to overthrow the government.

In response to the Colombian accusations, the threats detailed in this letter and the mobilisation of 46 US warships and 7,000 troops to Costa Rica earlier in the month under the



Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño (centre) speaks at the opening of the Unasur meeting on July 29 2010

pretext of fighting drug trafficking, Venezuela has been on high alert, concerned about a possible invasion.

“The strategy of the Yankee Empire, for which Colombia serves as a player,” Chávez explained, “is for the war in Colombia to be internationalised in order to later have the excuse to intervene in Venezuela.”

Recognising that the presence of irregular armed

groups poses a regional challenge, Venezuela has proposed that a regional plan for peace in Colombia be developed.

The Colombian government rejected this idea on principle before any details were put forward, arguing that it is an “internal matter” not a regional one and proposing instead that Colombian prosecutors go to Venezuela to escort combatants back to Colombia “to process them there”.

A special meeting of Unasur (Union of South American Nations) was held in Quito, Ecuador, in an attempt to find a solution to the diplomatic crisis between the two countries. Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro spent several days prior to the meeting touring the region and meeting with his counterparts in some South American countries to discuss the issues.

Colombian Foreign Minister Jaime Bermúdez, however, said no consensus would be reached – and sure enough, none was.

The meeting of foreign ministers concluded with a recommendation that the issue be addressed at a higher level and taken up by heads of state at a later meeting, and it appears unlikely that a compromise will be reached before Uribe leaves office on 7 August.

Brazilian proposal to Unasur in Quito:

- South America as a zone of peace
- Commitment to resolve differences by peaceful means
- Common commitment to the fight against illegal groups, particularly those linked to drug trafficking
- Commitment of the parties to not make public declarations that could aggravate the situation
- To urge the President to collate the proposals of all of the countries for the next meeting

Stirring up fear to reap the 'cold war' benefits

by Walaa Quisay,
Hands Off Venezuela

Colombia's soon to be ex-president Alvaro Uribe is ending his term in controversy. The Colombian government claims that Venezuela harbours 1,500 FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and ELN (National Liberation Army) insurgents within its territory.

The Colombian government has claimed many times over the years that Venezuela arms and aids Colombian guerrilla groups. This has furthered Uribe's career in many ways, allowing him to shift attention away from economic failures, army massacres, his children's excesses, repression against journalists and human rights activists, and scandals around his personal links to right-wing paramilitary groups and the drug trade.

Uribe believes that by provoking nationalist fervour he can end his presidency with some degree of popularity, allowing him to return as a senator or at least impeding those who hope to put him behind bars for crimes against humanity and drug trafficking.

Colombia's president-elect Juan Manuel Santos is another element in this renewed hostility against Venezuela and the Latin American left. As



President Chávez speaks to members of his party, the Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela

Uribe's former defence minister, he was heavily involved in cross-border attacks in Ecuador and much of the recent military escapades against the impoverished peasants.

He could benefit massively from the ongoing "cold war" between Colombia and the Latin American left — not just Venezuela. A warrant for Santos's arrest was issued by an Ecuadorian court following military operations in 2008 in which Colombian troops car-

ried out an offensive on Ecuadorian territory.

The conservatives and media — much of which is owned by Santos's family — have much of the middle class and a fraction of the working class convinced that the United States is Colombia's big brother and that Venezuela is a destabilising force in the region. The media is able to keep the population fearful by fabricating stories about Chavez's ties with the FARC.

Painting the leftist govern-

ments in the region as supporters of terrorism and insurgency can provide a pretext for aggression against these nations. The Venezuelan, Ecuadorian and Bolivian governments all say that coup attempts in their countries have been paid for and supported by Washington, rightist movements and the Colombian government.

Colombia is the third-largest recipient of military aid from the United States after Israel and Egypt and last year the Uribe government announced a new agreement under which US forces will be allowed to lease seven Colombian military bases for their operations in South America.

This is both a threat to the people of Colombia and to the socialist democracies. The Colombian government claims that Venezuela harbours insurgents; it is only a matter of time before the leaders in Washington make their intentions clearer under the pretext of eradicating terrorism from its "source".

The Venezuelan government has responded to these accusations by breaking diplomatic ties with Colombia and deploying defensive troops to the border, and other countries in the region are attempting to mediate.

In the long run, however, real and fundamental change has to come from the Colombian working and middle class. They need to see through the government's propaganda and hold it responsible for their financial failures and blood-thirsty excess.

Uribe's 'evidence' could be used to wreck new president's trade agenda

by Allison Richards, *Hands Off Venezuela*

The "evidence" presented by the Colombian government is several years old (most of it is claimed to have been recovered from a laptop captured during a 2008 Colombian raid on a FARC camp in Ecuador), raising the question of why these accusations are only now coming to the surface.

Incoming Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, despite having served as Uribe's Minister of Defence and being seen as a hardliner, had been giving indications that, once in office, he would seek to improve relations with Venezuela, as the suspension of much trade between the two countries since last year has proven economically difficult for Colombia.

This is one possibility — some believe that by creating a conflict in the last few days before he leaves office on 7 August, Uribe is trying to limit the degree to which his successor can seek common ground with Venezuela.

Another possibility is that the Colombian right and the United States have been plan-

ning a military intervention, but given recent statements by Santos, have decided that whatever plans they may have are better carried out while Uribe is still in power.

Upon leaving office, Uribe will lose the immunity from prosecution enjoyed by heads of state and it is also possible that these accusations are timed to deflect attention from his human rights record and other accusations against him, particularly in light of the recent discovery of the largest mass grave in Latin America in La Macarena, containing the remains of some 2,000 people.

Yet another possibility is that the timing is linked to upcoming Venezuelan National Assembly elections in September, attempting to create tension within the country and to link the Bolivarian Revolution to "terrorism and drug trafficking" in the run-up to this important vote.

The timing of these accusations could be linked to any or all of these, or to something else altogether. What remains clear, however, is that now is a critical time for solidarity movements to be alert and ready to defend the Bolivarian Revolution from whatever aggression may come from this.