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Venezuela & Increased Colombian Militarization

Following an announcement on July 20, 2009 made by President Alvaro Uribe, that Colombia would permit the United States to utilize at least 3 Colombian air bases (now up to 7) and increase its military personnel in the country from the current capacity of less than 300 soldiers to 800 soldiers,ⁱ allegedly to help with anti-narcotics operations, President Hugo Chavez announced that neighboring Venezuela would undergo a revision in its relations with Colombia. Chavez's concern, also expressed by a number of regional leaders, is that allowing the United States, a country with established hostility towards Venezuela, access to territory on Venezuela's borders is an openly aggressive act and puts his country's national security at risk.

Just a few days later on July 26, 2009, the Colombian government leveled attacks against Venezuela, alleging that 3 anti-tank rocket launchers found in a FARC guerilla camp had been provided by the Venezuelan government.ⁱⁱ Uribe claimed that if he hadn't released this information the rebels would, "fire them and obtain more and no one in the international community will halt their sale."ⁱⁱⁱ President Chavez rejected the claims and announced that he would recall Venezuela's Ambassador to Colombia.^{iv}

The anti-tank launchers in question were actually found in October of last year, leaving many to wonder why the Colombian government withheld this information until this particular moment.^v Upon further investigation by Venezuela, President Chavez reminded the press that in 1995 the Venezuelan National Guard had shared a public document with the Colombian government showing that 5 anti-tank rocket launchers had been stolen during an armed excursion into Venezuelan territory by the FARC. This was 4 years before Chavez became the president of Venezuela.

Politicizing the Debate

In Latin America, Venezuela has faced the brunt of the demonization waged by the George W. Bush administration under the auspices of the so-called "war on terror", while Colombia has been advanced as the model democracy most intricately involved in the fight against narco-terrorism.

Early on, Venezuela was characterized by the Bush administration as an impediment to the national security of the United States. With critical help from the Colombian government, the Bush administration and sectors of the right wing U.S. political establishment have continuously floated a series of false accusations as facts through biased news reports and the issuing of factually inaccurate US government agency reports. They have wrongly branded Venezuela as a country that supports and harbors terrorists.

While testifying before the U.S. Congress last year, OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza pondered, “does Venezuela support terrorist groups? I don't think so. There is no evidence, and no member country, including this one [the U.S.] has offered the OAS such proof.”^{vi}

Colombian Decision is a Threat to the Region

It is not only Venezuela who is alarmed over this increase in US military aid to Colombia. The regional body of South American nations, UNASUR, on August 28, 2009 expressed concern over the military capabilities it could afford the United States and reminded them of the sovereignty of all nations in the region. “The presence of foreign military forces -with their means and resources linked to their own objectives- cannot threaten the sovereignty and integrity of any other South American nation, and in consequence threaten the peace and security of the region.” Even the former Colombian Defense Minister Rafael Pardo stated the arrangement is “like lending your apartment's balcony to someone from outside the block so that he can spy on your neighbors.”^{vii}

The region seems to agree. Brazilian President Lula de Silva said the idea of a U.S. military base in Colombia doesn't please him,^{viii} Ecuador called it “worrying”, and Bolivia suggested it was “treason.”

ⁱ Hugh Bronstein, "Colombia backs plan for increased U.S. military aid," Reuters 21 Jul. 2009. <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE56J5NC20090721>

ⁱⁱ “Rebels Obtained Arms Sold to Venezuela, Colombia Says,” New York Times 27 Jul. 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/28/world/americas/28Colombia.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} “Venezuela Freezes Ties With Colombia, Recalls Ambassador,” Voice of America 29 Jul. 2009. <http://www.voanews.com/english/2009-07-29-voa10.cfm>

^v “Rebels Obtained Arms Sold to Venezuela, Colombia Says,” New York Times 27 Jul. 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/28/world/americas/28Colombia.html>

^{vi} “OAS Chief to US Congress: No Venezuela-Terrorist Link,” AFP 10 Apr. 2008. <http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/news/04-10-08afp.html>

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Carlos Caminada and Joshua Goodman, “Lula Says US Military Base in Colombia Doesn't ‘Please’ Him,” Bloomberg 30 Jul. 2009. <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601086&sid=a7fWY0fi.PJY>