

# USA steps up aid to Colombian military

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At the beginning of last month an estimated 12 million people took to the streets of Colombia to coincide with start of talks between the government and the guerilla group FARC. They demanded an end to the civil war that has claimed over 35,000 lives in the last decade. With the USA increasing its covert military intervention Keith Harvey looks at the prospects for peace

The world's most tenacious guerilla army and the world's only superpower are squaring up to each other.

For the last 40 years the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have been fighting against landowners, their paramilitary squads and their friends in government. The civil war has been provoked by the landowners who have ruthlessly herded and murdered peasants in order to grab their land for themselves. Around 1.5 million Colombians have been forcibly displaced during the civil war.

Over the years, the rebel army has concentrated on protecting poor farmers in the south who grow coca and opium (the basis of cocaine and heroin) to support their families. The FARC has up to 20,000 members with around a quarter of this total, active and armed at any one time.

They have forced the government onto the defensive and now control large parts of the country in the south. Together with the actions of the smaller groups, the ELN and EPL elsewhere in the country, some 40 per cent of the country's territory is outside the control of the government.

The quick and just solution to the civil war would be for the government to disarm the right-wing paramilitaries (AUC) who wage a war of intimidation and destruction against peasants, and to give peasants their land back. But the army and landowners will not do this. So the government follows a two-pronged strategy.

On the one hand, it sues for peace. President Pastrana is seeking to persuade the FARC to follow guerrilla groups like the FMLN in El Salvador to hand in their weapons in return for some moderate social reforms and a place in the constitutional reform process.

But this has been tried before, leading to the massacre of hundreds of ex-guerrillas. This time around a large section of the bourgeoisie wants to smash the guerrillas, not negotiate with them.

Given the slump in world prices for traditional agricultural products, and the collapse of demand for many traditional products made by Colombian small farmers, growing coca is the best option for many. Groups like the FARC provide protection in return for cash and this helps finance the armed struggle.

According to US officials, 80 percent of the cocaine and 80 per cent of the heroin in the USA comes from Colombia. Since 1985, nearly 500,000 acres have been sprayed with chemicals by US-backed anti-drug squads, and the environmental damage is incalculable. But the Colombian drug crop has expanded to almost 300,000 acres of coca and 7,000 acres of opium. The real aim of the 'war on drugs' is to defeat the FARC and prevent it providing a positive example to others fighting social injustice to others in Uncle

Sam's backyard.

Earlier this year the CIA and the US State Department decided to ratchet up their financial and military intervention. In 1996 the FARC scored some spectacular military victories. In August they attacked and captured a military base in the south, killing 26 soldiers and taking 60 others prisoner. In March 1998 the FARC killed 83 soldiers in battles during the Congressional election campaign.

FARC success in the field prompted more aid from Washington. US aid to Colombia rose from \$95.7 million in 1997 to \$289 million in 1998. Now, US senator McCaffrey wants a billion dollars in "emergency assistance" for fighting drugs in Colombia and other countries. Republicans in Congress are pushing for \$1.6 billion.

In addition, at any one time there are about 300 US military personnel in Colombia. Special forces are busy training the Colombian army - the 1000 strong Anti-Narcotics Battalion is now up and operational. The US recently upgraded Colombia's entitlement to military hardware and now supplies spy planes, helicopters and other equipment.

Washington has put diplomatic pressure this year on the surrounding states in the region to move troops to the Colombian border closest to the FARC strongholds. Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela and recently Brazil have moved troops to their borders with Colombia to restrict the cross-border operations of the FARC while turning a blind eye to the murderous antics of the death squads.

It is unlikely that the US will send in its own combat troops on the ground against the FARC in the short term: US military operations are still circumscribed by the "Vietnam syndrome". In the short term it is aiming at containment and forcing the FARC to negotiate.

But what will the FARC settle for? The FARC's political roots lie firmly in Stalinism. As such the FARC's strategy has always been to create a coalition government which embraces themselves and "patriotic" sections of the ruling class, marginalising the "reactionary" sections.

For the FARC the main enemies are the parties bound up closely with the big landowners and the parts of the army tied to the drug cartels. The FARC has no programme for a root and branch destruction of the armed forces themselves or the institutions of the bosses' state. Rather, the guerrillas seek to be incorporated within the bourgeois state in order to push for social reforms.

The FARC dispensed with much of the "socialist" rhetoric attached to its programme in the wake of the collapse of Stalinism after 1989. Its demands in the current process of negotiations include: sweeping land ownership reforms, an end to free market economic policies, greater social spending and limits on foreign ownership and exploitation of the country's oil reserves.

This platform is aimed to appeal to a broad coalition of classes, including some employers. Naturally, the biggest beneficiaries would be the displaced and land hungry peasants; this is the main social base of the FARC. But the guerrillas would aim to form a government with those sections of the capitalists that could be found to reverse decades of neo-liberal economic policies - privatisations, cuts in social expenditure, lower taxes on business, deregulation etc.

For the working class this plan is a disaster. Even if such a section of the Colombian capitalist class existed, its agreement to agrarian reform with the FARC would come with a price tag - namely, leaving the policies for industry and finance intact. This would spell continued misery for the urban working class.

The attempt to categorise the Colombian ruling class into progressive and reactionary sections is

completely unrealistic. The economically dominant and politically leading sectors of the Colombian bourgeoisie are locked into US imperialist interests.

The only conceivable way that the FARC would find itself in government is if it dropped the key parts of its anti-capitalist demands and settled for a moderate version of agrarian reform. But even here the experience of El Salvador, where rural based guerrilla armies surrendered their arms in return for incorporation into the 'political process', is a bad one. Ten years on the masses are still waiting for serious agrarian reforms to be put into practice. But one neo-liberal austerity package after another has been pushed through with the support of the ex-guerrillas.

Would the FARC act any differently? Last year one of Wall Street's top financial barons, R Grasso, met FARC leaders in Colombia to hear reassurances that FARC had no evil intentions against US investments.

What is the path to social justice and political change in Colombia today? The axis of the struggle in the countryside needs to be shifted. At present the FARC engages the enemy at moments when it thinks it can score headline making successes. But the masses in their villages remain largely defenceless in the face of retribution by the right-wing paramilitaries. Self-defence organisation is a priority.

This can only be done effectively if the FARC put their weapons and command structures under the control of the population in the villages, starting with the areas that the army have ceded to them. When the balance of forces allows for it then the displaced masses and land hungry need to organise the takeover of the big estates and destroy the death squads in the process.

The key to the success of the struggle lies in the urban centres where the working class is found - places such as Barrancabermeja, a city based on the oil industry. Places such as the plantations where workers with a history of organisation and struggle exist. At present the workers are led by union federations such as the CUT. This federation, along with two other smaller ones, has had more than 2,500 of its members killed by the state and paramilitaries over the last 12 years. There is no doubting their heroism, including that of its leaders.

They have organised a series of protest strikes against pay cuts, sackings, privatisations and social spending cuts which have delayed and occasionally thwarted the plans of government. But they have taken place in the context of a self-defeating strategy.

Organisations such as the CUT refuse to criticise the shortcomings of the guerrilla groups and thereby abandon any attempt to influence the direction of the peasants' struggle or actively link it up with that of the workers in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government. Implicitly, at least, the leaders of the CUT agree with the FARC's strategy of bringing about a government of all 'fair-minded' sectors of society; the CUT imposes the same limits upon the struggle of the workers as does the FARC.

What is missing is a revolutionary internationalist party that aims to forge a fighting unity of the poor peasants and workers in Colombia, that devises a co-ordinated fightback embracing all aspects of the struggle to expropriate the big estates, raise wages, defend and extend social services. It would link the present struggles with the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, organised through delegate councils and defended by a mass, accountable workers' militia.

What we fight for

- US advisors and bases out of Colombia. No funding or training for the Colombian military. Cancel Colombia's debts to international creditors. Money without strings for emergency housing and jobs for the displaced. For mass demonstrations in the US and Europe demanding an end to US support for

Colombian government and army.

? Halt all privatisations. Renationalise all privatised companies without compensation under workers' control. Expropriate all operations of foreign multinationals. Massive wealth tax on business. Stop the flight of capital.

? For massive increase in social spending on projects devised and directed by the masses of the city and countryside. Nobody without a job, nobody working more than 40 hours. For a minimum living wage of \$500 a month.

? Take over the big landowners' estates and turn them over to those that work the land. For state credits to help them work it.

? For mass vigilance and armed self-defence in the villages and the workers' barrios in the cities to crush the death squads

? For a workers and peasants government elected and accountable to the mass organisations of the people. For a socialist federation of Latin American republics.

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