

Canada Backs Colombia's Growing Embrace of US Military

6 Aug 2010, *TheTyee.ca*

The mayor of Puerto Salgar, a town of 16,000 people wrapped around Colombia's Palenquero Air Force Base, has high blood pressure; he postponed our 8:00AM meeting so he could see his doctor for a shot. The sun had climbed painfully high above the Magdalena river valley by the time Antonio Moreno Veran came stumping up to city hall, shirt buttoned halfway down his chest and droplets of sweat beading under his baseball cap.

"We're not a country that picks fights with our neighbours," Veran said over the occasional roar of fighter jets taking off three blocks away. He was referring to the latest round of [war drumming](#) between Venezuela and Colombia, stirred up by the accusation that Hugo Chavez is hosting FARC rebels across the border. But I was more interested in the Defense Cooperation Agreement that Colombia signed with the U.S. last October. The DCA will see American troops take up permanent residence at seven bases around Colombia, and Palenquero -- already the largest air base in Colombia -- is its centrefold; once the \$46 million expansion of the base is complete, American planes will be in striking range of all South America except southernmost Tierra del Fuego.

Having passed without congressional debate in either country, the agreement consolidates the informal liberties U.S. troops have enjoyed here ever since [Plan Colombia](#) began in 1999. That plan's unpopularity was compounded several times over by the DCA, which provoked the [condemnation](#) of every government on the continent before it had even been announced.

But many Colombians, maybe even most, support the agreement. The threat of a Venezuelan invasion or a FARC kidnapping looms larger in the popular imagination here than the guns of Washington or [Chiquita Banana](#). For his part, Mayor Veran brushed off the suggestion that the July 20 celebrations marking Colombia's 200th year of independence were a little premature. "The Americans will only be here as long as it takes to solve our narcoterrorist problem," he said. "In the meantime the president has assured us there will be no threat to our national sovereignty. We retain absolute control over our bases regardless of who we invite inside them."

The reason I was speaking to Veran, however, instead of the Colombian general in charge of the base, was that said general had insisted on first running the visit by the American embassy in Bogota. By the time I arrived at Palenquero, weeks after placing the request, permission had yet to be granted. So I wound up listening to a staunch defense of Palenquero from the man who ran the town outside the gates.

Veran spoke highly of the Defense Cooperation Agreement without really knowing anything about it -- he didn't know, for instance, when American troops would arrive, or how many would be stationed here, or whether the expansion plan included an environmental impact assessment, or what measures his office would take to deal with the corresponding rise in crime and prostitution that accompanies military bases the world over (Women Against War, a Colombian

NGO, has documented 800 cases of rape around the country's bases in the past five years, including 12 involving American troops. Fortunately for them, American soldiers and contractors are granted immunity under the DCA).

Despite this, Veran was confident that "when the Americans do come, the impact on Puerto Salgar will be positive; we've been promised a new hospital, and with 20 per cent unemployment they'll bring some much-needed business."

Canada's big resource investment in Colombia

Veran's statements echoed those of outgoing President Alvaro Uribe, the man who invented the term "narcoterrorist," as well as the man taking Uribe's place on Saturday, former defense minister Juan Manuel Santos. Both men have stressed that the agreement's wording restricts American military excursions outside Colombia to humanitarian missions like the post-earthquake Haitian [relief mission](#) launched from Palenquero in January. Besides, no more than 800 American troops will be allowed on the bases -- never mind the clause allowing American troop levels to be increased in case of emergency.

And Canada? Our government supported the agreement too. Canadian mining, oil and gas companies are Colombia's third biggest source of foreign investment, operating almost exclusively in remote zones of the country where armed protection is a precondition to profit. The question is, protection from whom? Both Plan Colombia and the new Defense Cooperation Agreement identify FARC as the enemy, a view now echoed from Ottawa: speaking in favor of the Canada-Colombia free trade deal last fall, Liberal MP Scott Brison claimed that "Enbridge [a Canadian energy company] has been recognized for human rights training that it has provided to security personnel which are required to protect its investments and its workers against FARC."

Unfortunately, the facts don't support the assumptions. Over the course of Plan Colombia, more than 2.5 million rural Colombians have been displaced; their exodus overlaps neatly with a map of the country's oil and mineral resources. Yet according to the Colombian government's own statistics, compiled from testimonies of the displaced, it wasn't the FARC who kicked most of those campesinos out -- it was the paramilitary groups employed by Colombia's army to improve the country's investment climate, encouraged by \$7 billion from Plan Colombia and counting.

'Armed actors live everywhere'

Around the corner from the mayor's office, a group of union leaders from the national oil union described life on the the other side of the coin.

"Because armed actors live everywhere amongst us, we aren't free to speak our minds unless international witnesses are present," one intensely focused young man told me. It wasn't long ago that local paramilitaries kept an office across the street from Palenquero's front entrance, he said; threats and assassinations emanating from that office reduced the oil unions' membership from 25,000 to 2,800 over the past 10 years.

Yet his opposition to the Defense Cooperation Agreement was based on more than personal fear. "It's an absolute violation of Colombia's sovereignty," he bristled. "Americans are here to gain access to Colombia's resources, not to help our country develop; they're after strategic control of the region, and all they'll leave behind is war, conflict and poverty."

Many would dismiss these as the complaints of a radical minority, which, after the Colombian government's systematic dismantling of the left, is an accurate description. Ten years ago, when paramilitary activities were at their peak and Plan Colombia went into effect, the plan explicitly demanded that Colombia embrace free trade, foreign investment, and the import of American agricultural products in exchange for military aid. The union leaders and human rights groups who represented the most vocal opposition to Colombia's economic overhaul were subsequently decimated along with the FARC.

One third of Colombia's senators and congressmen have either been indicted or are under investigation for ties to the paramilitary groups that carried out this dirty work. That relationship is the open secret behind Uribe's "Democratic Security," an Orwellian policy that Santos has promised to maintain. Democratic Security, after all, has boosted foreign investment and tourism in the country; the downtown cores of Colombia's major cities are safer than ever, even if the slums to which hundreds of thousands of displaced farmers move each year are getting worse. These days, you can drive from Bogota to Cartagena without fear of a FARC attack, or [buy an oil field](#) without fear of a workers' strike.

The new neighbours: Navy and Air Force

Or you can take a boat from the coast of Buenaventura, halfway down Colombia's Pacific coast, deep into Bahia Malaga where humpback whales gather each September to calve. This is where a good portion of the country's slave population settled following independence in 1810, taking up new lives as free fishermen, hunters and farmers.

Then in 1986, a pair of naval and air bases were installed; aside from increasing the humpback's mortality rate, the Navy closed off substantial portions of the bay to the fishermen who have relied on them for over a century. The Air Force, in turn, prohibited hunters from entering large tracts of the surrounding jungle, on the grounds that anyone with a rifle would be treated as a terrorist.

"We are campesinos," a fierce woman told me at one community meeting, "and all we want is to stay in the countryside. We don't want to move to the city, because we don't know how to live there. But the bases are slowly pushing us off the land and the ocean." She was well aware that both bases would soon house American troops, as part of the Defense Cooperation Agreement. "If they have been doing this on their own for years, what should we expect once the Americans arrive?"

"It's no secret that to denounce the government around here is to hang a tombstone around your neck," said another man. Inexplicably, he continued. "Every time I go out to hunt, I risk running into a soldier who will shoot me for carrying a gun." He'd barely survived a recent encounter that ended up with soldiers confiscating his weapon, he added; he hadn't set foot in the jungle since.

The same day I was listening to these and a dozen similar stories in Bahia Malaga, a pair of teenage brothers went hunting on the other side of the country. The fact that they didn't know they were trespassing on military property didn't prevent soldiers from opening fire, putting one boy in critical condition while his younger brother died on the spot.

Links made explicit

If there were any lingering doubts over the link between military and economic strategy in Colombia, U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates' visit to Colombia in April cleared the air. Speaking well outside his jurisdiction, Gates promised Uribe that he would push "to get ratification of the free trade agreement. It's a good deal for Colombia. It's also a very good deal for the United States."

One can only imagine his consternation when, two months later, Canada beat America to the finish line and became the first Western nation to conclude a free trade agreement with Colombia.

Despite the glaring discrepancies in agricultural subsidies, or the toothlessness of the labor and environmental clauses, or the secrecy under which they were negotiated, rational arguments can be made for free trade and military collaboration with Colombia. But a [report](#) published last week by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an American NGO, reveals a far less defensible connection between Plan Colombia and the extrajudicial killings that have proliferated in the country over the past 10 years.

The report focuses on the "false positives" scandal that broke in late 2008, when it came out that Colombian soldiers had murdered over 2,000 civilians and dressed their cadavers up as guerrillas in order to boost results in the war on drugs and terror. The report, which draws on statistics provided by the State Department and the Colombian military, shows that the Colombian army units which received the most American funding committed the most atrocities. The reverse held true as well, with the number of false positives dropping as funding was revoked. To be precise, the 16 largest single-year increases of aid to army units led to a 56 per cent increase in executions in their jurisdictions, while precisely the same *reduction* in killings was reported from those jurisdictions where Plan Colombia's aid was most sharply reduced.

Correlation doesn't equal causation, but one can see why certain segments of society might be less than thrilled about the prospect of more soldiers showing up. As Colombia's investment climate improves, reports of extrajudicial killings and disappearances continue to accrue throughout the country. Meanwhile, less than two per cent of the false positive murders have led to charges, and the one person who might have been expected to resign over the scandal -- Colombia's defense minister at the time, Juan Manuel Santos -- has instead become president.