

U.S. Bases in Colombia Rattle the Region

By Benjamin Dangl, March 2010 issue

On the shores of the Magdalena River, in a lush green valley dotted with cattle ranches and farms, sits the Palanquero military base, an outpost equipped with Colombia's longest runway, housing for 2,000 troops, a theater, a supermarket, and a casino.

Palanquero is at the heart of a ten-year, renewable military agreement signed between the United States and Colombia on October 30, 2009, which gives Washington access to seven military bases in the country. Though officials from the U.S. and Colombian governments contend the agreement is aimed at fighting narcotraffickers and guerrillas within Colombian borders, a U.S. Air Force document states the deal offers a "unique opportunity" for "conducting full spectrum operations" in the region against various threats, including "anti-U.S. governments."

The Pentagon sought access to the bases in Colombia after Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa canceled the lease for the U.S. military base in Manta, Ecuador. The U.S. capability in Colombia will now be greater than at Manta, which worries human rights advocates in Colombia and left-leaning governments throughout the region.

"The main purpose of expanding these bases is to take strategic control of Latin America," opposition senator Jorge Enrique Robledo of the Polo Democrático Alternativo told me over the phone from Bogotá.

Every president in South America outside of Colombia is against the bases agreement, with Hugo Chávez of neighboring Venezuela being the most critical. Chávez said that by signing the deal the United States was blowing "winds of war" over the region, and that the bases were "a threat against us."

"Colombia decided to hand over its sovereignty to the United States," said Chávez in a televised meeting with government ministers. "Colombia today is no longer a sovereign country. . . . It is a kind of colony." The Venezuelan president responded by deploying troops to the border in what has become an increasingly tense battle of words and flexing of military muscle.

Correa in neighboring Ecuador said the new bases agreement "constitutes a grave danger for peace in Latin America."

Colombian President Alvaró Uribe dismissed critics and said the increased U.S. collaboration

was necessary to curtail violence in the country. Uribe told The Washington Post, "We are not talking about a political game; we are talking about a threat that has spilled blood in Colombian society."

But plans for the expansion of the bases show that the intent is to prepare for war and intimidate the region, likely spilling more blood in the process.

The Palanquero base, the largest of the seven in the agreement, will be expanding with \$46 million in U.S. taxpayers' money. Palanquero is already big enough to house 100 planes, and its 10,000-foot runway allows three planes to take off at once. It can accommodate enormous C-17 planes, which can carry large numbers of troops for distances that span the hemisphere without needing to refuel.

The intent of the base, according to U.S. Air Force documents, "is to leverage existing infrastructure to the maximum extent possible, improve the U.S. ability to respond rapidly to crisis, and assure regional access and presence at minimum cost. . . . Palanquero will provide joint use capability to the U.S. Army, Air Force, Marines, and U.S. Interagency aircraft and personnel."

The United States and Colombia may also see the bases as a way to cultivate ties with other militaries. "The bases will be used to strengthen the military training of soldiers from other countries," says John Lindsay-Poland, the co-director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation Task Force on Latin America and the Caribbean Program. "There is already third-country training in Colombia, and what the Colombia government says now is that this agreement will strengthen that."

"This deal is a threat to the new governments that have emerged," says Enrique Daza, the director of the Hemispheric Social Alliance, currently based in Bogotá. These new governments are "demanding sovereignty, autonomy, and independence in the region, and this bases agreement collides directly" with that, he says.

The Obama Administration, with the new agreement, is further collaborating with the Colombian military in spite of that institution's grave human rights abuses in recent years.

In a July 2009 letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Senators Patrick Leahy and Christopher Dodd wrote: "What are the implications of further deepening our relationship with the Colombian military at a time of growing revelations about the widespread

falsos positivos ("false positives") scandal, in which the Colombian military recruited many hundreds (some estimates are as high as 1,600) of boys and young men for jobs in the countryside that did not exist and then summarily executed them to earn bonuses and vacation days?"

The military base agreement needs to be understood in the context of two other U.S. initiatives in Colombia.

First, Plan Colombia, which began under President Clinton, committed billions of dollars ostensibly to fight the war on drugs but also to fighting the guerrillas, intensifying the country's already brutal conflict in rural areas. This has led to increasing displacement of people from areas that are strategically important for mining multinationals.

Second, the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement, which was signed in 2006, could pry open the country to more U.S. corporate exploitation. But it has been met with opposition in the United States, delaying its ratification. Daza says the signing of the bases deal is part of "a military strategy that complements the push for the free trade agreement." The trade accord will serve "transnational corporate investments," and these investments, he says, "are sustained by a military relationship."

Opposition to the military bases agreement is vocal in Colombia. In a column written in July 2009, Senator Robledo denounced it, saying, "There is no law that allows bases of this type in Colombia." One struggle, Robledo said, is on the legal and political front. The other is among social movements in Colombia and beyond. "It is important to organize a type of democratic citizens' movement, a national campaign against these foreign bases, as well as a continental social alliance that promotes the denunciation of this agreement," he says.

Daza is working with Mingas, a cross-border solidarity organization consisting of activists in Colombia, Canada, and the United States. Mingas wrote a letter to Obama, condemning the President's decision to go forward with the deal on the bases. "At the Summit of the Americas in April 2009 you promised to foster a 'new sense of partnership' between the United States and the rest of the Western Hemisphere," the letter states. "But your Administration has yet to address the grave concerns expressed by national leaders throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean regarding the U.S.-Colombia military base agreement."

By signing this bases agreement, and by

equivocating over the coup in Honduras, Obama has sent ominous signals to Latin America.

"Obama has not renounced the policies of Bush," Robledo says. "Speaking in economic and military terms, on the fundamental issues, the similarities between Bush and Obama are bigger than the differences. Obama has not produced a change."

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