

COLOMBIAN LABOR MONITOR

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Abstract

U.S. personnel carrying M-16 assault rifles were on the ground as long as 10 minutes and exchanged fire with rebel forces, the Miami Herald reported. Mixed Colombian-U.S. crews are commonplace, and such run-ins with guerilla forces are on the rise.

Resumen

En EE.UU. personal encargado de rifles de asalto M-16 estaban en el terreno, por 10 minutos e intercambiaron disparos con las fuerzas rebeldes, informó el Miami Herald. Las mezclas de tripulaciones Colombia-U.S. son comunes, éstas alianzas están con la guerrilla están en aumento

Summary

Officially, Washington's dispatch of billions of dollars in counter-narcotics aid to Colombia is designed to avoid direct U.S. involvement in Colombia's civil war. There are supposed to be just 500 military and 300 civilian U.S. personnel in Colombia. But in reality, the U.S. government is circumventing the limit; by autumn there will probably be about 2,000 Americans stationed in the Andean region. The influx of Americans calls into question the potential success of U.S. aid and poses risks for these personnel.

Analysis

The rebel conflict in Colombia is escalating, as insurgents have responded with some of their heaviest resistance to date to the U.S.-supported Plan Colombia counter-drug

offensive. U.S. military and civilian personnel have become a primary target for the increasingly aggressive guerrillas, who have threatened retaliation against the United States inside and outside Colombia.

The United States, the largest supporter of Colombia's war on drugs, has sought to avoid getting dragged into the country's civil war, making a clear distinction between counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency operations. Part of this distinction includes limiting the number of U.S. military personnel and contractors operating in Colombia to 500 and 300 respectively.

But a study of the American presence in the Andean region shows that the United States is helping fight the drug war - and indirectly the civil war - in Colombia by sending more and more U.S. personnel there. A new military base in Ecuador will host 400 U.S. military personnel later this year. Military personnel are augmented by an unusual assortment of U.S. government civilians, including people from the U.S. Bureau of Prisons.

Civilian contractors are also helping to build up the American presence in the region. A contract belonging to one contractor, Dyncorp, indicates that the company is not only flying drug eradication missions in Colombia on behalf of the U.S. government, but is increasingly being used by Washington in other roles elsewhere in the region. The flow of U.S. personnel - in uniforms and otherwise - indicates that aid alone is not helping the Colombian government so far. And the higher profile poses risks to U.S. personnel.

The Increased U.S. Military Presence

The U.S. military is training three new counter-narcotics battalions in the Colombian army and outfitting their security services with hundreds of millions of dollars in aircraft and equipment. It also advises, plans and in some cases participates in

dangerous counter-drug operations throughout the coca-rich and rebel-infested Putumayo state in southern Colombia.

The United States has also recently constructed a forward operating location across the border from Colombia in Ecuador. Eloy Alfaro Airport in Manta, Ecuador, will be the primary forward operating location for a variety of surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft and will hold an estimated 400 U.S. soldiers. The buildup comes as Ecuador is seeking assistance from the United States, European Union and Japan to help prevent a spillover of Colombia's conflict, the BBC reported June 15.

Myriad Civilians and Contractors

Along with the increase in military assistance and presence of U.S. soldiers, there has been a parallel rise in the number of other U.S. government, contractor and civilian personnel in Colombia and neighboring countries. The number is fast approaching the U.S.-set limit, with Congress likely to be given a proposal extending those limits. The rebels are unlikely to differentiate between military and non-military targets.

For instance, Washington increasingly relies on ex-soldiers in the employ of defense contracting firms such as Dyncorp, Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI) and Virginia Electronics. In Colombia, Dyncorp carries out fumigation against coca crops, drug interdiction, transport, reconnaissance, and search-and-rescue missions, among other operations, according to a copy of a recent \$600 million contract it was awarded by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL).

According to the contract documents, Dyncorp personnel either have or will operate at various locations, many of them in or near Colombia's primary battle zones. Outside hires are spread throughout the countryside at main operating bases and forward operating locations where anti-drug efforts emanate. The planned delivery of

nine new T-65 spraying aircraft in 2001 and 2002 is likely to increase such contractor support, at least in the short term.

A heavy firefight Feb. 18 near the town of Curillo in southern Colombia illustrates the extent of the U.S. contractors' involvement in the country's rebel war. A group of four crop-spraying planes, all piloted by U.S. personnel, and six helicopters, three of which were also piloted by Americans, were fired on by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and one of the helicopters was forced to land.

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The U.S. presence in the Andean region extends beyond military and State Department contractor personnel. The Defense Department, Drug Enforcement Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Customs Service, Internal Revenue Service, United States Information Agency (USIA) and even the Bureau of Prisons are all increasing their involvement in Colombia and elsewhere in the region.

For example, the DEA now develops "numerous major [drug] cases" with the assistance of its Special Operations Division, a multi-agency effort that targets the communications of Colombia-based trafficking groups, according to agency documents. The DEA also operates sensitive investigation units in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil and soon will create one in Ecuador.

The Customs Service trains law enforcement personnel in Colombia and seven other countries, and an increasing number of customs agents are expected to be detailed to DEA operations in the region, according to recent testimony to the U.S. Congress. A small number of Department of Defense contractors have also posted 29 personnel in Colombia to support remote radar installations, force protection and counter-drug

operations.

Raised Profile and Greater Risks

The business sector also provides the rebels with more potential U.S targets, as American investment in Colombia is thriving.

With that rise in investment comes heightened risk to American citizens. U.S. assets such as rail cars owned by coal miner Drummond and an oil pipeline co-owned by Occidental Petroleum Corp. are being attacked with greater frequency.

U.S. policymakers are becoming concerned that the United States, by putting itself in a situation in which Americans are attacked, could become embroiled in Colombia's civil war. A current proposal in the House of Representatives would prohibit U.S. funds from being used to contract with private military companies, although it is not likely to be passed.

The risk to Americans has grown considerably now that a new and even deadlier phase in Colombia's war-torn history is emerging. In what was apparently the heaviest-known rebel resistance to the U.S.-backed counter-drug offensive, at least 30 Colombian soldiers and 26 rebels were killed June 22 in clashes that broke out at an army base near the riverside town of Puerto Leguizamo, the Associated Press reported.

Meanwhile, insurgent groups such as the FARC and National Liberation Army (ELN) are sharpening their hostage-taking skills and relying more on bombings in urban areas. The kidnapping of 207 people by the FARC May 18 is believed to be the largest incident of hostage-taking on record, according to the British Medical Journal. And the recent approval of a prisoner-exchange agreement between the government and the FARC - as well as proposals for granting a demilitarized zone to the ELN - raises the

risk of a violent reaction by independent paramilitary groups, the Economist's intelligence Unit warned on June 22.

Against this backdrop, the U.S. counter-drug strategy shows signs of failing. In a recent unpublished study for the U.S. Air Force, the Rand Corp. warned that fighting drugs while ignoring the civil war is futile because the guerillas, backed by unlimited drug money, are taking over Colombia. The presence of Americans in such large numbers indicates that aid alone is insufficient to boost the government in its efforts against drugs and left ist guerrillas.