

The Death of a Colombian Guerrilla Leader: Diplomatic Distractions and the Consolidation of the Para-Military State

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by Mario A. Murillo

The gruesome image of the bloodied corpse of Raul Reyes, the 59-year-old number two of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, killed in Ecuador in a dramatic cross-border incursion by Colombian government forces over the weekend, is yet another public relations victory for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Vélez. For Washington's closest ally in the region, the demise of this veteran guerrilla leader could not have come at a more opportune time, given recent developments that were beginning to raise questions as to the overall success of his war against the FARC, and the inherent contradictions in the government's approach to terrorism carried out against civilians.

Just last week, four Colombian senators who were held captive by the guerrillas for over five years were handed over to the Venezuelan government after weeks of behind the scenes discussions aimed at winning their release. Once freed from their painful captivity, the former hostages praised President Hugo Chávez for his efforts in playing the role of intermediary, while calling into question the effectiveness of Uribe's so-called "democratic security strategy." In post-release interviews with the media, the ex-hostages described walking "250 kilometers without ever seeing even one soldier," concluding that the "FARC moves in the jungle like fish in the water."

This was not what President Uribe wanted the people of Colombia to hear, especially given his repeated criticisms of Venezuela's Chávez for his ongoing efforts, on behalf of the hostages, to nail down a humanitarian accord between the guerrillas and the Colombian government. Uribe's conviction that there is no need to sit down and negotiate with terrorists who kidnap innocent civilians, despite the universal demands that something needed to be done to break the long impasse, was beginning to look somewhat frivolous in the face of several high-profile hostage releases over the last month.

For weeks, as calls grew louder for a so-called "humanitarian accord" between Uribe's government and the FARC to exchange hostages for rebel combatants currently in prison, Uribe was looking for anything that would enable him to side-track the issue, refusing to accept any situation that would give FARC the belligerent status it had lost after Uribe's predecessor broke bilateral talks in 2002.

President Uribe needed something to happen in order to shift the focus once again, and it needed to be more than the large scale and highly publicized pseudo-event that took place on February 4. It was on that date last month that hundreds of thousands of Colombians took the streets of various cities in Colombia to publicly denounce the FARC's use of kidnapping. The "national mobilization for peace" was characterized as a non-governmental protest against the "terrorism of the guerrillas," which called for an end to their use of kidnapping as a tool in their war against the state.

While not an "officially-sanctioned" protest, the government led the charge, calling on every sector of society to participate. The event received non-stop media coverage leading up to February 4, with media outlets like El Tiempo, Colombia's paper of record, even opening up a space for people to post videos and photographs of the march on their website. Every important news media outlet in Colombia provided specific details about locations for the march, with pop-up maps of each city a regular feature on the websites of the nation's newspapers, radio, television and magazines. The march was talked up constantly on television programs and radio talk shows. It was an uncommon multi-media mobilizing blitz that one would usually only see before national elections, or when the national soccer team was playing in a big game in an important international tournament.

Uribe didn't have to do much to make this march and rally a public relations success. Colombia's media owners promoted the mobilization as a legitimate public service, since it was considered a popular referendum against a guerilla group—FARC—that for years had alienated great sectors of the population with its reckless military tactics and attacks on civilians, what universally has been described in the media as terrorism. After all, who could possibly be against a march that was demanding an end to kidnapping and the release of all hostages, a horrific strategy the rebels have used for decades? One would have to be at best insensitive, at worst a “terrorist sympathizer,” not to support the goals of this march. For most media it was a no-brainer. In the end, the dramatic images of hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets that day in every major city of the country were quite impressive, if not unprecedented, and needless to say, it warranted substantial coverage.

However, what was rarely presented in the buildup to the march by these same media outlets was the outrage felt by those sectors of the population who for decades had been victimized, not by FARC, but by right-wing paramilitaries, very often operating with the direct collaboration of the Colombian Armed Forces. For these people, there was an inherent contradiction in the media's—and the government's—large scale cheerleading: if you're sincerely going to call for an end to los violentos, the violent ones, why not be consistent and confront them all simultaneously? Or is it that the victims of the FARC are worth more to the editors and publishers in the media than those tens of thousands of people terrorized for years by right-wing death squads?

Furthermore, in previous years, when popular, national mobilizations for peace were organized to denounce paramilitary terror, there was nowhere near the kind of media frenzy that accompanied the February 4, 2008 action. Most of them were totally ignored until the day of the event. Yes, the FARC's tactics may be deplorable, was the argument of many critics, but so are those of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), the paramilitary group with which Uribe has openly negotiated since his first year in the presidency. Somehow, the contradictions evident in Uribe's policies were getting harder each day to sweep under the rug, especially after the still unresolved “para-politics” scandal linked top officials in the Colombian government to drug traffickers and paramilitary leaders.

In fact, in response to the apparent double standard of the anti-FARC mobilization, a broad coalition of civic groups and human rights organizations have organized a second rally, which is scheduled for this Thursday, March 6, 2008, to denounce the crimes of the AUC and its allies in the Colombian Armed Forces. The rally is supposed to draw attention to the almost complete institutional impunity that exists in Colombia, particularly under the Uribe-backed Law for Peace and Justice, the measure that ostensibly protects paramilitary fighters and drug dealers from criminal prosecution as part of the government-AUC negotiations.

This second march and rally is by no means designed to condone the FARC, its tactics, or its platform, as some of the most intolerant members of the Colombian punditry have hinted, but to challenge those leaders who, in supporting the February 4 anti-FARC mobilization, had publicly stated it was time to stand up to the “terrorists threatening Colombian democracy.” Needless to say, the March 6 rally has not had the large-scale media endorsements of the earlier one, and in fact, considerable space is being provided in the major media to openly defy the anti-paramilitary message of the organizers.

Which is precisely why the assault on the guerrilla encampment just over the border in Ecuador on March 1 should be considered a political and strategic master-stroke on the part of the Colombian government. Not only did the Colombian Armed Forces accomplish something they have never been able to do in over forty years of counter-insurgency warfare—kill a top leader of the FARC's Secretariat—but in so doing have made any talk of sitting down with the FARC over a humanitarian accord ring hollow in the ears of a Colombian public that is easily convinced that the guerrillas are indeed losing the war. It was also a pro-active way of completely discrediting Hugo Chávez, accused for years of embracing the FARC at the expense of Colombian national security.

And the timing of Reyes' violent death is made even more useful, precisely because of the round the clock attention it is getting in the Colombian news media. The drumbeat coverage this attack has generated will make Thursday's anti-paramilitary mobilization—designed to call attention to the impunity characteristic of the Uribe administration—seem like a college homecoming parade held on the first day of Spring break. Who will be paying it any attention?

The situation has been complicated further by the fact that the attack on the guerrilla encampment resulting in Reyes' death took place on Ecuadoran soil, something that under normal circumstances would have been universally condemned. Yet the cries of protest emanating from President Rafael Correa have been rendered meaningless by Colombia's claim that the left-leaning Ecuadoran government was developing close ties with FARC leaders, including Reyes. Colombian security officials were quick to point out that documents recovered in the camp where Reyes was killed show that Ecuador and FARC were beginning to work together, and had met on several occasions in the last several months.

Once again, the high art of diversion was kicking into full gear in Bogotá. Who would dare protest the violation of another country's sovereignty when there is "evidence" that the invaded country was collaborating with a "terrorist organization?" It is language taken straight out of Washington's post-9/11 playbook, justifying any military invasion on national security grounds, and then finding ways to distract public opinion when anybody stops to ask questions.

The bottom line is that the attack that killed Raul Reyes, perhaps the most visible of all Colombian rebel leaders who, not coincidentally, was also the one most capable of carrying out a dialogue with both allies and antagonists alike, cannot be understood outside the context of Washington's unbending support for President Uribe, despite the inherent contradictions in his so-called security policy. After eight years of Plan Colombia, over \$5 billion in military assistance and training, and non-stop public endorsements by the Bush administration of Uribe's policies, it should come as no surprise that Washington was the first government to openly applaud the military action, described by some observers as a massacre carried out while the guerillas were sleeping.

The sophistication of the intelligence intercepts that resulted in Reyes' death were eerily reminiscent of the manner in which drug kingpin Pablo Escobar was hunted down and killed by Colombian special forces units operating with US agents in 1993. It is hard to imagine that US officials were not directly involved in the intelligence exchange that led up to the action against Reyes, or at least privy to the incursion prior to and as it was happening.

Once again, Uribe can play the victim, and openly accuse his neighbors Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa of supporting terrorism. In the meantime, a so-called diplomatic dispute has erupted, with Chávez moving troops along the border with Colombia, and Ecuador breaking diplomatic ties with Bogotá. Colombian police chief Oscar Naranjo described in detail how the FARC was trying to obtain uranium in order to create a dirty bomb, and how the Ecuadoran government was complicit in this potential disaster. And as all of this is unfolding on center-stage, while behind the scenes where nobody is watching, Uribe can take a few more steps in consolidating the paramilitary state that he has been carefully constructing since winning the presidency in 2002.

Mario A. Murillo is an Associate Professor of Communication at Hofstra University in New York, and author of Colombia and the United States: War, Unrest, and Destabilization (Seven Stories, 2004). The host of "Wake Up Call" on WBAI Pacifica Radio, he is currently working on a book about Colombia's indigenous movement and its community media strategies.