

Uribe's Colombia is Destabilizing a New Latin America: A Response to the Murder of FARC Commander Raúl Reyes in Ecuador

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by James J. Brittain and R. James Sacouman

A few weeks after the Ecuadorian and Venezuelan state called on the Colombian government to respect the need for peace and negotiation with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP), the administration of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez supported an extensive armed air and land assault against the insurgency movement—not within Colombia's borders, but rather on the sovereign territory of Ecuadorian soil. On March 1, 2008, the Colombian state, under the leadership of Uribe, Vice-President Francisco Santos Calderón, and his cousin Defence Minister Juan Manuel Santos, illegally deployed a military campaign within Ecuador, which resulted in the deaths of Raúl Reyes, Julian Conrado, and fifteen other combatants associated with the FARC-EP. Such actions are a clear display of the US-backed-Colombian state's open negation of international codes of conduct, law and social justice.

The actions of March 1 took place days before a major international demonstration scheduled for March 6. Promoted by The National Movement of Victims of State-Sponsored Crimes (MOVICE), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), and countless social justice-based organizations, March 6 has been set as an international day of protest against those tortured, murdered and disappeared by the Colombian state, their allies within the paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) and the newly-reformed Black Eagles. Recently, President Uribe's top political adviser, José Obdulio Gaviria, proclaimed that the protest and protesters should be criminalized. In addition, paramilitaries in the southwestern department of Nariño—not far from where the illegal incursions were carried out in Ecuador—have threatened to attack any organization or person associated with the protest activities.



FARC Commander Raul Reyes in a remote jungle camp. (Photo: Garry Leech)

It is believed that the Uribe and Santos administration is utilizing the slaughter of Commander Raúl Reyes and others as a method to deter activists and socially conscious peoples within and outside Colombia from participating in the March 6 events. Numerous state-controlled or connected media outlets, such as *El Tiempo*—which has long-standing ties to the Santos family—have been parading photographs of the bullet-ridden and mutilated corpse of Raúl Reyes throughout the country's communications mediums. Such propaganda is clearly a tool to psychologically intimidate those preparing to demonstrate against the atrocities perpetrated by the state over the past seven years.

Over the past two months, numerous researchers, scholars and lawyers have supported the call to declare the FARC-EP a legitimate force fighting against the corrupt Colombian state. In January 2008, Ecuador's Foreign Minister Maria Isabel Salvador argued that the FARC-EP should no longer be depicted as a terrorist organization. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez also announced that the FARC-EP are far from a terrorist force, but are rather a real army, which occupies Colombian territory and shares in a Bolivarian vision for a new Latin America. Mexican deputy Ricardo Cantu Garza also has promoted the recognition of the FARC-EP as a belligerent force legitimately fighting against a corrupt and unequal socio-political system. As prominent US attorney Paul Wolf argued:

The FARC-EP are a belligerent army of national liberation, as evidenced by their sustained military campaign and sovereignty over a large part of Colombian territory, and their conduct of hostilities by organized troops

kept under military discipline and complying with the laws and customs of war, at least to the same extent as other parties to the conflict. Members of the FARC-EP are therefore entitled to the rights of belligerents under international law ... there is no rule of international law prohibiting revolution, and, if a revolution succeeds, there is nothing in international law prohibiting the acceptance of the outcome, even though it was achieved by force.

From Copenhagen to Caracas, numerous state officials have denounced the description of the FARC-EP as a terrorist organization. Progressive officials and administrations in Mexico, Ecuador and Venezuela have rather opted for the status of belligerent or irregular forces to more accurately depict the FARC-EP's domestic and geo-political stance. Disturbingly, in the face of this evidence and the FARC-EP's consistent promotion of a humanitarian prisoner exchange and peace negotiations with the state in a demilitarized zone in southwestern Colombia, the Uribe and Santos administration has moved ever farther away from supporting an end to the civil war within Colombia by opting for systemic violence.

Over the past several years, different aspects of the FARC-EP's real social, political and cultural activities for progressive social change have been censored or marginalized by the private press or governments in support of the Colombian state. Nevertheless, after researching the FARC-EP and the country of Colombia for years, independent journalist Garry Leech argued that, "while there is little doubt regarding the global reach of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, there is no evidence that the FARC is anything but one of the armed actors in Colombia's long and tragic domestic conflict."

In actuality, the FARC-EP is an actor within the strategic confines of Colombian society that aims its directives at domestic social change. In light of such realities, how can this insurgency be a terrorist threat to external nation-states? Coletta A. Youngers, of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), responds to this question by describing how:

The U.S. government now views the Latin American region almost exclusively through the counterterrorist lens, though the region poses no serious national security threat to the United States ... little evidence has been put forward to substantiate such claims, and whatever activity is taking place there appears to be minimal.

While Youngers does not trivialize its revolutionary tactics, she clearly argues that the FARC-EP cannot be correctly framed within the concept and rhetoric of global terrorism. Youngers argues that the insurgency is not a direct political threat to administrations within the United States, Canada, the European Union and any other foreign nation-state in the fact that the FARC-EP's activities "are targeted inward, not outward," hence, "applying the terrorism concept to these groups negates their political projects."

Characterizing the FARC-EP as a foreign terrorist organization dramatically alters the dynamics of the peace process in favour of a killer state. Stipulating that the FARC-EP is terrorist results in the inability for legal peace negotiations to take place between the FARC-EP and any government that subscribes to the categorization. According to James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, promoting the FARC-EP—and its supporters—as terrorists "puts them on the list of targets to be assaulted by the US military machine" and "thus subject to total war."

The terminology of terrorism is perfect for imperialist ideology and expansionism. It is a very open-ended reference that "allows maximum intervention in all regions against any opposition" and "that any group engaged in opposing militarism, imperialism (so-called 'globalization') or local authoritarian regimes could be labelled 'terrorist' and targeted," thus legitimizing external invasion or attack, say Petras and Veltmeyer.

Internal and external condemnation of the Colombian state has fallen upon the deaf ears of the Uribe and Santos administration. After years of increased violations of civilian human rights, the ongoing suppression of trade-unionism, assassinations of left-of-centre activists and politicians, and a political reality that has witnessed 75 governors, mayors and Congressional politicians alleged or found guilty of having direct links to the paramilitaries—including Vice-President Francisco Santos Calderón and his cousin Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos and President Uribe's brother Santiago and their cousin Senator Mario Uribe—now the Colombian state has deemed it necessary to illegally encroach upon those nations that deviate from their ideological model of political and economic centralization.

Not only has the Uribe administration criticized its neighbours, but after the actions realized on March 1 it is clear that the Colombian state, with the full backing of the United States, will impose its own ideological goals and values through force, regardless of the democratic rights and privileges of conventional electoral law and procedure. While the neighbouring states of Ecuador and Venezuela struggle for peace and try to assist the people of Colombia in the quest for an end to the civil war, the Uribe and Santos administration has bypassed judicial realities and governance to impose its own objectives.

Careful analysts of the Colombian situation continue to debate whether the Colombian state is pre-fascist or actually fascist. It is certainly neither humane nor actually democratic. The current Colombian state must be transformed, sooner rather than later. Those fighting for peace must condemn the action of this regime. In solidarity, we must protest the policies of the Colombian state and raise our voices in support for a New Colombia that stands for peace with social justice.

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