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COLOMBIA

New rules of engagement

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US sends funds and Army Special Forces to protect an Occidental Petroleum pipeline.

This month, as many as 100 US Army Special Forces will arrive in Colombia to provide counterinsurgency training to Colombian troops. The US soldiers are being dispatched as part of a US\$94 million counterterrorism aid package intended to protect an oil pipeline used by Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum.

The September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States have allowed the administration of US President George W. Bush to escalate the US military role in Colombia under the guise of the war against terrorism. The posting of US troops to a region largely controlled by rebels will dramatically increase the possibility of US soldiers being killed.

A handful of US Special Forces are already on the ground in the northeastern department of Arauca preparing the Army base in Saravena for the US troops' arrival. Saravena, on the Colombia-Venezuela border, has been the target of more rebel bombings and mortar attacks — more than 60 by last November — than any other Colombian town. The region is a stronghold of Colombia's largest rebel force, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and its second-largest guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN). Both groups are on the US list of terrorist organizations.

The Colombian Army's 18th Brigade is responsible for conducting counterinsurgency operations in Arauca and protecting the 478-mile Caño Limón oil pipeline. Local paramilitary units belonging to the Campesino Self-Defense Groups of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU), which have moved into the region over the past several years, have worked closely with the army to combat the guerrillas.

By the time oil was discovered in Arauca and the Caño Limón pipeline was completed in 1985, the ELN had established itself as the region's dominant armed group. For the most part, the rebels refrained from bombing the pipeline as long as local municipalities and businesses paid "war taxes." But in the late 1990s, the FARC began targeting the pipeline, which was bombed 170 times in 2001, resulting in losses of more than \$75 million to Occidental Petroleum.

Arauca includes one of the two "rehabilitation and consolidation zones" established as part of a series of measures announced in September by President Alvaro Uribe (*LP*, Sept. 9, 2002). Military rule superseded civilian rule and the Army was authorized to control the movement of people in and out of the zone and conduct searches without warrants. While there is no evidence that the new measures have reduced guerrilla operations, they have affected local people's lives.

By detaining increasing numbers of citizens and restricting the flow of legal goods that are used in the processing of cocaine, including gasoline and cement, the military has exacerbated the already difficult living conditions. The military crackdown has resulted in a 150-percent increase in the cost of gasoline, which is essential for transporting goods in and out of the remote corner of Colombia.

On Nov. 26, the Constitutional Court ruled that the suspension of civil liberties in the rehabilitation and consolidation zones was unconstitutional (*LP*, Dec. 16, 2002). The court's ruling means that the administration must either reform the policies or attempt to amend the Constitution. Meanwhile, the military can no longer conduct searches and arrests without warrants, restrict the movement of civilians or prevent foreign journalists from entering the zones.

Besides using detentions and economic controls in an attempt to curb rebel activities in the region, the military is accused of colluding with right-wing paramilitary death squads that were blamed for 70 percent of the 420 political killings in the vicinity of Arauca City last year. Commander Freddy, leader of an ACCU unit known as the Arauca Vanquishers Block, admitted that his group shares the Army's agenda. "We are living in a state of war with the guerrillas," he said. "We are not here to combat the state."

According to human rights groups, the Army fights the rebels, but not the paramilitaries, who, like the Colombian military, have a history of defending the interests of multinational corporations operating in Colombia. Gen. Carlos Lemus, commander of the 18th Brigade, however, denies collusion between his troops and local paramilitary units. Colombia's paramilitary forces are also on the US list of terrorist groups.

Lemus' office is filled with Occidental Petroleum souvenirs. When a foreign reporter requested permission to accompany an Army patrol that was preparing to respond to a rebel attack against the pipeline, the general said the request would have to be approved by Occidental officials.

The \$94 million US counterterrorism aid package represents \$3.70 in security costs for every barrel of Occidental oil that flows through the Caño Limón pipeline. The figure contrasts sharply with the \$0.50 per barrel that the oil company has been paying for security.

With the ongoing unrest in the Middle East, US officials have their eye on alternative sources of oil. Although Colombia supplies only 3 percent of US oil imports, US Ambassador to Colombia Anne Patterson has said that "with problems in other countries, each percentage [point] is important."

On the ground in Arauca, US troops will have to contend with more than the guerrillas' military strength. According to Saravena Mayor Jorge Sierra, the rebels also have substantial local support. Saravena's police commander, Maj. Joaquín Enrique Aldana, has also admitted, "The people here love the guerrillas. They care for them. They lend them their houses so they can shoot at us."

The rebels possess both the military strength and the popular support to effectively target the US Special Forces that will be based in Arauca. If US soldiers are killed by guerrillas on the US foreign terrorist list, the Bush administration could use that as justification to send combat troops to Colombia to protect US economic interests.



Garry M. Leech



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