

To crush the poor

First it was Reds, then drugs, then terror. So who have the US really been fighting in Colombia?

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Last week, on the day George Bush delivered his state of the union address, the Pentagon received a visitor. A few hours before the president told the American people that "we will not permit the triumph of violence in the affairs of men", General Carlos Ospina, head of the Colombian army, was shaking hands with his American counterpart. He had come to discuss the latest instalment of US military aid.

General Ospina has done well. Just four years ago he was a lieutenant-colonel in command of the army's fourth brigade. He was promoted first to divisional commander, then, in August last year, to chief of the army. But let us dwell for a moment on his career as a brigadier, and his impressive contribution to the war against terror.

According to Human Rights Watch, the fourth brigade, under Ospina's command, worked alongside the death squads controlled by the paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño. In a report published three years ago, it summarises the results of an investigation carried out by the attorney general's office in Colombia. On October 25 1997, a force composed of Ospina's regulars and Castaño's paramilitaries surrounded a village called El Aro, in a region considered sympathetic to the country's leftwing guerrillas. The soldiers cordoned off the village while Castaño's men moved in. They captured a shopkeeper, tied him to a tree, gouged out his eyes, cut off his tongue and castrated him. The other residents tried to flee, but were turned back by Ospina's troops. The paramilitaries then mutilated and beheaded 11 of the villagers, including three children, burned the church, the pharmacy and most of the houses and smashed the water pipes. When they left, they took 30 people with them, who are now listed among Colombia's disappeared.

This operation was unusual only in that it has been so well-documented: among other sources, the investigators interviewed one Francisco Enrique Villalba, who was a member of the death squad that carried out the massacre, and who had witnessed the prior co-ordination of the raid between the army and Castaño's lieutenants. The attack on El Aro was one of dozens of atrocities which Human Rights Watch alleges were assisted by the fourth brigade. Villalba testified that the brigade would "legalise" the killings his squad carried out: the paramilitaries would hand the corpses of the civilians they had murdered to the soldiers, and in return the soldiers would give them grenades and munitions. The brigade would then dress the corpses in army uniforms and claim them as the

bodies of rebels it had shot.

A separate investigation by the Colombian internal affairs agency documented hundreds of mobile phone and pager communications between the death squads and the officers of the fourth brigade, among them Lieutenant-Colonel Ospina. On Tuesday, Ospina fiercely denied the allegations, claiming that they were politically motivated and that "honest people around the world know that we are serving our people well".

In same press conference, however, he also revealed that this month the Colombian government will start to deploy a new kind of "self-defence force", composed of armed civilians backed by the army. Human rights groups allege that the government has simply legalised the death squads.

Official paramilitary forces of this kind were first mobilised by the current president, Alvaro Uribe, when he was governor of the state of Antioquia in the mid-1990s. The civilian forces he established there, like all the paramilitaries working with the army, carried out massacres, the assassination of peasant and trade union leaders and what Colombians call "social cleansing": the killing of homeless people, drug addicts and petty criminals. They joined forces with the unofficial death squads and began to profit from drugs trafficking. They were banned after Uribe ceased to be governor. One of his first acts when he became president in August last year was to promote General Ospina, and instruct him to develop similar networks throughout the contested regions of Colombia.

Uribe, a landowner with major business interests, was the US government's favoured candidate. After he was elected, but before he assumed the presidency, it granted Colombia a special package of military aid worth \$80m. Its military funding, through the programmes it calls Plan Colombia and the Andean Regional Initiative, now amounts to \$2bn over the past four years. At the beginning of last month, US special forces arrived in Colombia to help train General Ospina's troops. One of the two brigades they are assisting - the 5th - has also been named by Human Rights Watch for alleged involvement in paramilitary killings. It has been equipped with helicopters by the US army.

The United States has been at war in Colombia for over 50 years. It has, however, hesitated to explain precisely who it is fighting. Officially, it is now involved there in a "war on terror". Before September 2001, it was a "war on drugs"; before that, a "war on communism". In essence, however, US intervention in Colombia is unchanged: this remains, as it has always been, a war on the poor.

There is little doubt that the Farc, the main leftwing rebel group, has been diverted from its original revolutionary purpose by power politics and the struggle for the control of drugs money. It finances itself partly through extortion and kidnap. Whether it could fairly be described as a terrorist network, though, is open to question. What is unequivocal is that the great majority of the country's political killings are committed not by Farc or the other rebels but by the rightwing

paramilitaries working with the army. Their task is to terrorise the population into acquiescence with the government's programmes.

The purpose of this unending war is to secure those parts of the country that are rich in natural resources for Colombian landowners and foreign multinationals. Colombia has one of the most unequal economies in the world - the top 10% of the population earns 60 times as much as the bottom 10% - and there is no room in that country for both the aspirations of the poor and the aspirations of the super-rich. One faction has to be suppressed. The Colombian army is making the country safe for business. This is why, over the past 10 years, the paramilitaries it works with have killed some 15,000 trades unionists, peasant and indigenous leaders, human rights workers, land reform activists, leftwing politicians and their sympathisers. This is why it is the world's third largest recipient (after Israel and Egypt) of US military aid.

The people funding this programme are Britain's allies in the war against terror. They are the people who have awarded themselves the power to arbitrate between good and evil. They are the people who will, within the next few weeks, attack Iraq on behalf of civilisation. "Throughout the 20th century," Bush told the US last week, "small groups of men seized control of great nations, built armies and arsenals, and set out to dominate the weak and intimidate the world. In each case, their ambitions of cruelty and murder had no limit." America's continuing adventure in Colombia suggests that little has changed.

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