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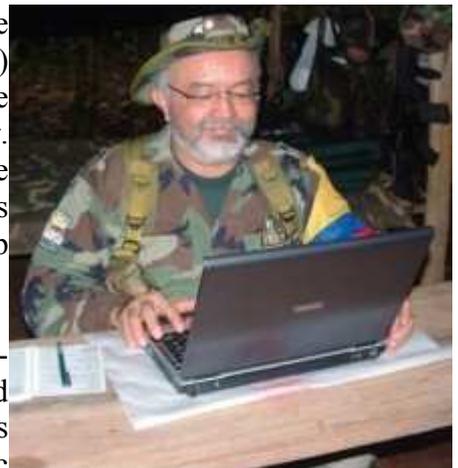
The Upside-Down World of Bush and Uribe: Slandering Chávez and the FARC

by Garry Leech

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President George W. Bush yesterday declared, “America fully supports Colombia’s democracy. We firmly oppose any acts of aggression that could destabilize the region.” He then made clear that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez’s deployment of troops to the border with Colombia, which Bush labeled as “provocative maneuvers,” were the acts of aggression that the United States opposed. These statements represent a denial of reality that is extreme for even the Bush administration. After all, the origin of this crisis was Colombia’s military offensive into Ecuadorian territory. It was this blatant violation of national sovereignty that represents the “act of aggression that could destabilize the region.” And yet, Bush is painting the aggressor as the victim and a neighboring nation that has not violated the sovereignty of another country and seeks to defend itself against a similar attack as that endured by Ecuador as the provocateur. Bush is not alone in his politically-motivated assault on Chávez, the Uribe government in Colombia has also attacked the Venezuelan president and others with blatant lies and gross exaggerations.

On March 1, the Colombian military launched a cross-border air strike that killed Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) Commander Raúl Reyes and at least 16 other guerrillas while they were sleeping in their jungle camp located just over one mile inside Ecuador. US-supplied helicopters then transported Colombian troops across the border where they engaged in combat with the remaining guerrillas before retrieving Reyes’s body and the rebel commander’s laptop computers.



FARC Commander Raul Reyes working on the infamous laptop in a remote jungle camp eight months before he was killed in an airstrike by the Colombian military. (Photo: Garry Leech)

Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa quickly declared Colombia’s cross-border attack as “the worst aggression suffered by Ecuador” and proceeded to sever diplomatic ties with his country’s neighbor. For its part, the Colombian government responded with a distortion of logic befitting the Bush administration by acknowledging that its military did indeed launch an air strike and deploy troops across the border, but it simultaneously claimed that “Colombia did not violate Ecuador’s sovereignty.” Eh? The Colombian government then declared that it “acted in line with the principle of legitimate self-defense.” Legitimate self-defense? At the time they were killed by the Colombian military, the victims were fast asleep in a foreign country.

The day after the assassination of Reyes, Colombia’s Vice-President Francisco Santos spoke at a United Nations conference on disarmament where he announced that evidence found on the FARC commander’s laptop showed that the rebel group was seeking to obtain uranium to manufacture “dirty bombs.” According to Santos, Reyes’s laptop contained “information from one commander to another indicating that FARC was apparently negotiating for radioactive material, the primary basis for generating dirty weapons of mass destruction and terrorism.” He then suggested that this constituted a threat to the entire region by declaring that “terrorist groups, based on the economic power of drug trafficking, constitute a serious threat not to just our country but to the entire Andean and Latin American region.”

But when the documents from Reyes’s laptop were released to the media, they did not corroborate the vice-president’s allegations. In fact, the document related to the so-called dirty bomb was simply a communication from a lower-ranking FARC guerrilla to Reyes raising the possibility of purchasing 50 kilos of uranium and then selling it for a profit. There was absolutely no mention of using uranium to

build a dirty bomb or any other sort of weapon. Meanwhile, mainstream media outlets, including the *New York Times*, have dutifully performed their role as propagandists for the US government by continuing to report that the FARC intends to build a “dirty bomb” even after the documents were made public.

Three days after the attack, the Colombian government also claimed that it had retrieved documents from Reyes’s laptop proving Venezuela’s President Chávez had recently provided the FARC with \$300 million in funding. Colombia’s President Uribe stated that, given this evidence, “Colombia proposes to denounce the President of Venezuela Hugo Chávez in the International Criminal Court for sponsoring and financing genocide.” The Colombian president’s pronouncement, in reality, had no legal basis and was little more than an irresponsible attempt to publicly discredit Chávez.

Firstly, the documents from Reyes’s laptop again fail to corroborate the Colombian government’s allegations. The only documents that mention Chávez or his government directly illustrate that Venezuela sought to: include the FARC in an international group to analyze Colombia’s conflict; request documentation from the rebel group of civilian casualties caused by Colombian military attacks in FARC-controlled regions; persuade Latin American governments to help get the FARC removed from international terror lists. None of the above constitutes an illegal activity.

And secondly, the only “amount” that the communiqués mention is the number “300,” without any reference to any currency, or any other type of, denomination. The Colombian government claims that the number “300” stands for \$300 million. While the communiqués do suggest that the FARC was negotiating potential deals with someone in Venezuela, they imply that if the deals were to be consummated then the rebel group would receive some sort of merchandise that it could sell for a profit rather than a delivery of cash. Most importantly, none of the communiqués related to the “300”—re-named the “dossier” at one point in the communiqués—mentioned Chávez or any other representative of the Venezuelan government. The communiqués, which were only discussions between FARC leaders, could have been referring to anybody in Venezuela. Ultimately, this amounts to very flimsy evidence upon which to publicly accuse a head of state of “sponsoring and financing genocide.”

And what about Uribe’s politically-charged claim that the FARC are responsible for committing genocide in Colombia? In actuality, it is a ludicrous and irresponsible charge intended to discredit both Chávez and the FARC. Under international law, genocide is defined as the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” In no way can the FARC’s actions be deemed genocide under this definition. The rebel group is seeking to achieve power in Colombia in order to restructure the political, economic and social institutions along socialist lines. And while the FARC has committed human rights abuses, it is impossible to construe them to be an attempt to destroy a “national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”

In the meantime, while President Bush distorts reality by portraying the aggressor as the victim, many other countries in the region have responded with far greater levels of clarity and integrity. Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Cuba and Nicaragua, among others, have condemned Colombia for its act of aggression against Ecuador and have refused to criticize Venezuela for deploying troops to its border to ensure that it does not become a target of its US-backed neighbor. These nations represent the voice of reason in the midst of this crisis as they challenge the lies and exaggerations that constitute “reality” in the upside-down world of the US and Colombian governments.