

CounterPunch

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Blueprints for the Colombian War

We've been saying it all along. The war in Colombia isn't about drugs. It's about the annihilation of popular uprisings, by the FARC, the ELN or Indian peasants fending off the ravages of oil companies, cattle barons and mining firms. A good old-fashioned counter-insurgency war, designed to clear the way for American corporations to set up shop in Colombia, with cocaine as the scare tactic. Here we review two Defense Department commissioned reports both outlining in chilling terms the same strategy of ongoing military intervention under the cover of the drug war and both urging the Bush administration to drop the pretext of counter-narcotics and get on with the business of wiping out the insurgents.

Last year the US Air Force commissioned the RAND think tank to prepare a review of the situation in Colombia. In early June RAND submitted its 130-page report, called "The Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability". The other report is a paper written by Gabriel Marcella, titled "Plan Colombia: the Strategic and Operational Imperatives". Marcella is a former chief adviser to the head of the US Southern Command. He now teaches on national security matters at the Army War College.

Together, the two reports reach the same conclusion: the US needs to step up its military involvement in Colombia and quit forfeiting options by limiting its operations to counter-narcotics raids. Along the way, both reports make a number of astonishing admissions about the paramilitaries and their links to the drug trade, about human rights abuses by the

US-trained Colombian military and about the irrationality of crop fumigation.

RAND argues that the drug war approach is on the brink of not only failing, but also of prompting a wider conflict that might require the insertion of US troops. "If the Pastrana administration falters, either in its counter-narcotics or counter-insurgency approach, the US would be confronted with an unpalatable choice. It could escalate its commitment to include perhaps an operational role for US forces in Colombia, or scale it down, which would involve some significant costs, including a serious loss of credibility and degradation of the US's ability to muster regional support for its counter-narcotics and political objectives."

The RAND study draws heavily from a December 2000 report by the World Bank, titled "Violence in Colombia: Building Sustainable Peace and Social Capital," which concluded that the quid pro quo for Colombia getting any future large infusions of international financial aid will depend on their successful suppression of the FARC and other rebel groups. Another World Bank memo describes the FARC's fundraising strategy as a "loot-seeking" assault on "primary commodities": cattle ranches on the eastern plains, commercial agriculture in Urabá, oil in Magladena, gold mines in Antioquia and the coca fields of Putumayo. RAND cites a former CIA analyst as saying that the FARC has invested its "taxes" on these industries into "a strategic financial reserve", which will enable them to "sustain an escalation of the conflict". While the FARC peasant army has doubled over the past decade, it still only

(Colombia continued on page 5)

Our Little Secrets

AMAZING SHU STRIKE

In an extraordinary feat of organizing, about 900 prisoners in the so-called Secure Housing Units (SHUs) in the infamous California prisons of Pelican Bay and Corcoran staged a hunger strike in the first week of July. The hunger strike concerned the policy of the California Department of Corrections (CDC), whereby those designated as prison gang members are removed from the general population and isolated in SHUs, confined for 22 hours per day for years on end in 8x10 windowless cells. SHU inmates are always shackled when they leave their cells, exercising in a "yard" which is really a larger concrete cell with no exercise equipment and no view of the outside world.

Unsurprisingly, the CDC's evidentiary requirement for prisoner gang "validation" is vague and open-ended. The most frequent way to doom a prisoner is by an anonymous informant's summary assertion that "prisoner x is a gang member or associate". Other conduct that the CDC uses to justify gang membership includes possession of literature or art; writing to another prisoner's family; assisting another prisoner with legal work; signing birthday or get well cards to prisoners; exercising or otherwise interact-

ing with another prisoner. Prisoners are not allowed to present evidence or witnesses in their defense.

There is no requirement that the information be current; a parolee returned to prison for a new offense after ten years on the outside can be thrown in the SHU as a gangster based on information from his previous incarceration.

Assignment to a SHU is for an indeterminate period. Before 1999, the only way for an alleged gang member to be released from a SHU was to parole, die, go insane, or "debrief" (become an informer for the CDC, and finger other prisoners as gang members). Since rule change 99/08, a prisoner can also be released to the general inmate population, if prison investigators determine that he has been free from gang activity for six years.

The strike was organized by Steve Castillo, an inmate at Pelican Bay's Security Housing Unit who has waged a legal campaign for years on this issue. In a visit to Pelican Bay on the fourth day of the hunger strike, Friends of CounterPunch were struck by Castillo's warmth, intellect, invincible spirit, and the charming smile beneath his bushy mustache. From his letter:

"Rarely in a lifetime do we ever witness a sane person go insane. And even more rare is it to witness such an occurrence happen more than once. It is more common for us to just see a person when they have already lost their sanity. But here, I have seen such things more times than I want to remember. I thought that seeing a prisoner get shot by staff was a frightening and chilling event, but that in no way compares to seeing a prisoner calmly playing a game of chess with pieces made out of his own feces. Or, prisoners smearing their bodies and cells with their feces. Or, watching prisoners throwing urine and feces at each other through the perforated cell doors. And worse yet, since we are cell fed, we eat our meals under these conditions.

"In sum, this place seems to lose all semblance of a prison and instead takes on a laboratory environment for human experimentation...

"Think about it for a second: we are told not to talk to prisoners who are validated gang members or associates. And it doesn't matter if you know that they are members or associates or not. Once, I was in a section where I was the only prisoner who was

not validated at the time. How can I not talk to anyone?! Before I won that case in 1999 in Sacramento, the means for obtaining release from the SHU was by paroling, debriefing, dying, and (following the Madrid court decision) the loss of sanity. Well, if a prisoner like me doesn't have an established parole date, parole from the SHU is out of the question. The parole board doesn't give parole dates to prisoners in the SHU. Dying, well, I don't want to die. Insanity, who really wants to lose their minds?

"That leaves debriefing: I don't want to become an informant for the same reasons that prison staff told the Madrid court why they don't inform on their fellow employees, i.e. for fear of retaliation or death. Plus the safety of my family is more important to me than anything...

"Following my court victory in 1999, CDC's new rule is that debriefing is no longer the only requirement for SHU release. Now, it's supposedly an option (yeah right). [The new rule is that six years of gang inactivity can qualify an inmate for SHU release, at the discretion of prison administrators.] But, CDC refuses to define 'gang activity' and so in the eyes of the CDC, everything and anything is gang activity. And, should a prisoner have no gang activity, there is an exception clause that allows them to keep us in the SHU anyway... Thus, for the most part, the majority of us aren't going anywhere.

"I've not held my daughters for nearly 10 years. I want to hold my mother before she gets any older and passes on. I want to see trees, grass, birds, sky, anything besides just cement and steel. I want to feel the warm of the sun and maybe rid myself of this deathly pale skin color. Most importantly, I don't want to die or go insane in here. Nor do I want rage to be an everlasting byproduct of my life. Like many other prisoners here, I see no other way to obtain immediate attention and change."

The SHU inmates suspended their hunger strike after California state senator Richard Polanco (chairman of the Joint Committee on Prison Construction and Operations) asked the prisoners to call off the hunger strike and promised to look into their complaints. If their grievances are not addressed, the prisoners vow to resume their hunger strike next January.

CHEEKTOWAGA CONT.

CounterPuncher Jack Bradigan Spula, a resident of Rochester NY, brings new fuel to the debate over what precisely is the es-

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