

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

COLOMBIA'S LABOR MOVEMENT FACES ECONOMIC ASSAULT—BACKED UP BY DEADLY FORCE

BY DAVID MOBERG
BOGOTÁ

Military victory in Iraq has inflated the Beltway Rambo's fantasies of using American firepower to remake the world. This new imperial hubris could propel the United States into far riskier adventures than the war against Saddam Hussein, including one not far from home in violence-torn Colombia. Here, a militarily toughened but politically degraded guerrilla movement faces a hard-line, right-wing government aided by brutal paramilitary forces. Caught in the middle is a small, embattled progressive movement that rejects armed struggle but demands social justice and democratic reforms.

The conflict has roots in widespread political violence dating back more than 50 years, but the United States has made matters worse by encouraging military solutions, pursuing a failed drug policy and promoting "Washington consensus" economic policies. In 2000, President Clinton's "Plan Colombia" provided \$765 billion in aid to Colombia's military to fight cocaine production. Aid declined sharply the next year, but the "war on terror" has greased the path for President Bush to broaden the commitment, including \$105 million for Colombia (on top of nearly \$500 million appropriated earlier) that was tacked on to funding the Iraq war, partly as thanks to Alvaro Uribe for being the only South American leader to support the United States in Iraq.

How much further will it go? "I'm not predicting American intervention in Colombia," says Doug Cassel, director of the Center for International Human Rights at Northwestern University. "If you'd asked two to three years ago, I would have said, 'No way, it's not in the cards.' I can't say that anymore."

Unlike other countries on the terrorism hit list, the Colombian government itself is not the target, though even the State Department acknowledges that elements of the Colombian armed forces collaborate closely with an estimated 15,000 right-wing paramilitaries, mainly organized through the United Self-Defense Forces (AUC). The United States has certified the AUC and the two main guerrilla groups—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), with about 17,000 fighters, and the National Liberation Army (ELN), with 4,000 fighters—as terrorist groups. Both the FARC and AUC now finance much of their military activity through the drug trade.

The social development promised as part of Plan Colombia has been minimal, and Washington largely ignored the human rights conditions in the law (though aid was denied to one notorious Air Force unit). Last year, while escalating military aid to Colombia, the third-largest package after Israel and Egypt, Congress explicitly expanded the use of U.S. military trainers and equipment to fight guerrillas and protect an oil pipeline. This year, three planes carrying U.S. civilian contractors have gone down in FARC territory; guerrillas killed six and took three hostages.

The Uribe government wants the United States to send troops to stomp out the conflict, which has killed roughly 5,000 civilians annually in recent years. "We'll get drawn in," says Adam Isaacson, a Colombia expert at the Center for International Policy in Washington. "After a three-week success in Iraq, we'll think we can take on all the bad guys everywhere. All we need is provocation."



A textile factory occupied by union activists. The graffiti on the building reads, "Welcome, class brothers."

The main victims of the decades-long violence have been Colombian civilians, including more than 2 million displaced from their rural homes to urban slums. The paramilitaries, with varying degrees of government complicity, have been responsible for 85 percent of the civilian killings, according to the Colombian Commission of Jurists, a human rights organization. During the past few years, most human rights observers believe that the military has essentially subcontracted much of the dirty work to its paramilitary allies. But recently the guerrillas have been blamed for a growing share of offenses.

Labor union leaders and members have been especially hard hit. From 1991 to 2002, according to the National Union School (ENS), 1,925 union members were assassinated in Colombia, including 421 union leaders. In 2002, 184 unionists were killed, and another 400 suffered serious human rights abuses. Public sector workers, especially teachers, were the most common targets. The ENS says nearly 80 percent of unionists were attacked because of their labor activity. AUC leader Carlos Castaño, whom the United States seeks to extradite on drug charges (but not for his murderous human rights violations), admitted, "We kill trade unionists because they interfere with people working."

Indeed, paramilitaries often collaborate closely with employers. In two high-profile cases, lawsuits filed in the United States charge that Coca-Cola and Drummond Company, an Alabama-based coal-mining company, used paramilitary forces to kill union leaders. In 1996, paramilitary gunmen assassinated a union leader at a Coca-Cola plant in Carepa where the manager had

threatened to use paramilitaries "to sweep away the union." Later the same night, the gunmen burned down the union office; they returned the next day to tell workers to quit the union or be killed. On March 31, a federal judge ruled that under the Alien Tort Claims Act the case could go forward against Coca-Cola, and Colombian unions are calling for an international boycott.

Union researchers have found that the paramilitaries were responsible for the vast majority of killings of unionists. Yet in the 30 percent of assassinations during 2002 where there was a suspect, paramilitaries were responsible for only about 60 percent, reflecting a disturbing surge in the assassinations attributable to guerrillas. Equally serious, there has not been a single conviction in a trade union assassination since 1995—and not even a single arrest for the killings in 2002.

Workers and the labor movement are under assault on the legal and economic front as well. In the early '90s, on the recommendation of the International Monetary Fund, the government initiated a program of economic deregulation. After an initial moderate growth spurt, the economy collapsed, and it's still sputtering. Manufacturing's share of the economy shrank by 22 percent over the decade as thousands of firms, especially in industries such as textiles, closed their doors. Many are still occupied by workers hoping to get back their jobs or at least severance pay. Subsidized agricultural exports from countries like the United States, followed later by a depression in global coffee prices, devastated the rural economy.



"Lucho" Garzon, a founder of Colombia's largest labor federation, has become the country's principal opposition leader, arguing for foreign debt relief, peace negotiations and political reform.

As a result, there were sharp increases in unemployment (now 18 percent officially), underemployment (60 percent of the work force is in the "informal sector," such as street peddling) and poverty (60 percent of the population). Per capita income plummeted by 30 percent from 1997 to 2001, and income inequality rose sharply—with the poorest 10 percent of the population receiving 1 percent of national income, and the richest 10 percent receiving 44 percent. Attacks by paramilitaries on peasants in contested areas often clears land for takeover by the rural elite. Three percent of landowners now own over 70 percent of arable land.

At the same time, Colombia's foreign debt—which this strategy was supposed to reduce—grew from \$22 billion in 1994 to \$37 billion last year, with government payments on foreign debt now consuming 41 percent of the budget. During the '90s, the government slashed social services and more than 100,000 public jobs. But when the free-market austerity policies failed, the IMF demanded further budget cuts, wage freezes and reductions in pensions, as well as accelerated privatization of public utilities, health care and education. This economic assault—backed up by deadly force—partly accounts for the decline of unions from representing 15 percent of workers in the '80s to representing less than 5 percent now. In addition, new labor laws reduce worker protections and benefits, and help employers use individual contracts and "cooperatives" to thwart unions and to evade legal responsibilities.

Though diminished, the labor movement has played a key role in creating a new progressive political opposition. Two years ago, Luis Eduardo "Lucho" Garzon, a founder of the Unitary Workers Confederation (CUT), which represents more

than 60 percent of union members, created the Social Political Front, a center-left coalition of unions and other progressive groups. Last year, under the banner of the Democratic Pole, he ran for president with the support of 12 minor parties, the three labor federations, and two major indigenous organizations. Though he won only about 6 percent of the vote (and the Democratic Pole has similarly tiny legislative representation), he has become the principal opposition leader, arguing for temporary relief from foreign debt to invest in social needs, negotiations to resolve the armed conflict, and political reform.

As Uribe adopts a tougher strategy of military attack and legal repression, the Democratic Pole has become more constrained. "Our plans and areas of action will be reduced," Garzon says. "The Democratic Pole feeds on union and popular movements and the democratic sector. You're beginning to see the stigmatization of any alternative proposals on the pretext of confronting terrorism."

But when Uribe's strategy eventually fails, Garzon thinks the Democratic Pole can seize a political opportunity. "The labor movement has to change," he argues. "The union movement has to speak to the entire society, not just organized workers," by pushing for jobs, education, health care and women's rights.

In one seven-year struggle, unions at the Emcali telephone, electricity and water utility in Cali have tried to fight against privatization of the municipally owned services. In January 2002, hundreds of workers and supporters occupied the utility headquarters for 36 days. Now the Uribe government wants to overturn an agreement that was reached then not to privatize. The union blames the utility's problems on massive debts incurred for shady deals, such as a 20-year contract to buy electricity at three times the market rate from a power plant built by InterGen, a joint venture of the Bechtel Corporation and Shell Oil.

There have been similar scandals at other utilities, which have typically raised rates—as the government proposes to do at Emcali—and reduced services to poor communities after usually corrupt, publicly subsidized privatization deals. While workers voluntarily take on extra tasks to save Emcali, paramilitaries kill unionists who resist privatization. Last February, shortly after the end of the Emcali occupation, Julio Enrique Galiano left home at 5:55 a.m. to go to work. Two burly men approached him and quickly fired four bullets, killing him. Today his young widow, Viviana Villamil, spends her work breaks in the basement of the Emcali headquarters, volunteering with other workers to prepare bills to save the company money and prevent privatization.

As social needs grow, economic policies are undermining services. Colombia is now trying to earn foreign exchange by luring wealthy Latin Americans to expanded private health care centers. But cutbacks in government spending, as well as the exclusion of the growing informal work force from the nation's social security system, mean that fewer poor Colombians can obtain health care. San Juan de Dios, one of the oldest hospitals in Bogotá, was until four years ago a center for advanced research and medical training. Now the 700-bed, relatively modern facility is empty, except for workers who show up every day in hopes of the hospital reopening or the government providing them severance pay. Periodically, the hospital unions invite poor people to come for a day of free care. Meanwhile, women in the labor movement are organizing workers in the informal sector, like custodians or day care workers, into union-affiliated cooperatives that can qualify the workers for health care and pension coverage.

Uribe seems just as determined to tighten the economic screws as to press the military attack against the guerrillas. He is calling for a referendum that will freeze most wages and further reduce workers rights. The labor movement is urging abstention to deny Uribe the share of registered voters necessary for approval, but AUC leader Castaño has menacingly warned that urging abstention is tantamount to aiding the guerrillas.

The most immediate threat is posed by Uribe's plan for "democratic security." Taking a page from John Ashcroft's book, Uribe wants to establish a network of 1 million—later expanded to 5 million—citizen informers in a country of 42 million, and to incorporate peasants as part-time soldiers, making them likely guerrilla targets. "That means militarization of daily life in the countryside," argues Gustavo Gallon, director of the Colombian Commission of Jurists, "increasing citizen involvement in armed conflict and exposing their wives and families to armed conflict."

At the same time, the government is negotiating with some of the paramilitaries to reach cease-fires (while rejecting recent overtures from the FARC to re-establish talks that ended last year). The strategy may be intended to give amnesty to paramilitary human rights abusers and effectively legalize the paramilitaries again, as they were until 1989. Uribe has also established "rehabilitation zones," where the military has greater control over daily life, even though the establishment *El Tiempo* newspaper reported that the zones repressed civilians but did not reduce armed conflict. Meanwhile, around the rest of the country, Uribe is eliminating local human rights investigators and limiting civil liberties.

Some strategists hold out hope that aerial spraying of coca fields will destroy the drug trade and undermine the guerrillas and paramilitaries. Bush administration officials have signaled that the United States hopes to pull back in a couple of years, when it unrealistically predicts that aerial spraying will have eliminated coca production. Although the United States claims that record spraying reduced coca production by 15 percent last year in the principal drug-growing areas, coca production has simply spread to many more parts of Colombia and into neighboring countries. Also, more potent, herbicide-resistant coca strains have been developed.

At the same time, spraying destroys peasants' food crops and, according to a forthcoming Witness for Peace report, increases the number of ready recruits for the guerrillas or paramilitaries. There is

growing conviction among progressives in Colombia, including Lucho Garzon, that the solution to Colombia's drug-trafficking problems lies in legalizing cocaine to remove criminal profits. Much as the drug trade fuels the conflict, suppression of the drug trade will not end it, given the growing inequalities and hardships in Colombia.

With the end of government negotiations with the guerrillas and the arrival of Uribe, backed by a newly triumphalist Bush administration, advocates of peace and progressive reforms are glum. "The pendulum, unfortunately, is swinging, in my mind, the furthest to the right it's ever been," says Daniel Garcia-Pena, director of Planeta Paz, a reform-oriented non-governmental organization. "It's very frightening, to tell the truth, and the pendulum has further to the right to swing."

Among the guerrillas, the pendulum has swung to favor the military faction, especially after many of the most political insurgents and other leftists tried to enter electoral politics in the late '80s by

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forming the Patriotic Union Party. Nearly 3,000 candidates and activists were assassinated. Garcia-Pena criticizes the guerrillas, especially the FARC, for increasing violence against civilians and failing to make persuasive political arguments to build popular support. "They're as crazy as Uribe," he says. "This moment is like being between Bush and bin Laden, two loonies."

Even if the guerrillas were defeated, which seems unlikely, the clashes over rights to land, jobs and basic necessities of life will continue. The decades-long struggle does not stem from victimization of the government by narco-traffickers, guerrillas or paramilitaries, according to Gustavo Gallon, but rather from a longstanding failure of the state to make broad human rights the basis of its security strategy. "We need security," Gallon says. "But real security is based on human rights and basic levels of social and economic rights."

If the Bush regime charges into Colombia with more military aid or troops under the guise of fighting terrorism, it will simply be an escalating force behind a fundamentally flawed policy. It would be unlikely to bring peace and security, even after a tremendous cost in lives. It most certainly will not bring justice. But in the aftermath of Iraq, such considerations are even further than usual from the minds of the Washington warriors. ■

No Justice, No Peace

The battle for Baghdad may be over, but the war is only getting more dangerous

By Rashid Khalidi

Go back 33 years and look at the pretexts given for the war in Indochina. See how hollow they look today? In far less than 33 years, the pretexts for the war in Iraq, which now appears to have ended, will be revealed as being equally hollow, shortsighted and mendacious.

This was explicitly described as being a preventive or pre-emptive war, meaning it absolutely had to be waged to prevent an imminent, present danger to the national security of the United States. It is now crystal clear, if it were not so before the war began, that there was no demonstrable danger to the United States from Iraq. The country was so debilitated after the 1991 war and subsequent sanctions that even its immediate neighbors did not feel threatened. Most of them did not support this war, even though all of them had strong grievances against the regime in Baghdad. We have now seen just how feeble Iraq was: Barely four divisions of American and British troops crushed its military and occupied the country in little more than three weeks. Iraq's execrable and tyrannical regime posed no threat to anyone but its own people. There was absolutely no connection between Iraq and 9/11.

Its backers justified this war largely because of the dangerous arsenal of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons that Iraq allegedly possessed. If they existed, the Iraqi regime did not use such weapons defensively against U.S. forces when its very existence was in peril. This shows that Iraq was eminently deterrable, contrary to the hysterical frothing of the war proponents about the irrationality of its regime. Moreover, U.S. forces have not yet found these weapons, meaning at the very least that they were probably not issued to military units. Indeed, they may all have been destroyed, as the defector Lt. Gen. Hussein Kamel stated during his interrogation before his ill-fated return to Baghdad. And evidence from a variety of sources shows that Iraq had no nuclear or biological weapons (though it had programs to develop them before the 1991 war).

Iraq did have chemical weapons. Declassified government documents revealed that the United States facilitated their acquisition and acquiesced to their use during the '80s against Iran and Iraq's own Kurdish citizens. But when Donald Rumsfeld visited Baghdad as a presidential envoy in 1983, he never mentioned them. If chemical weapons still exist, they are illegal and should



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be removed. But chemical artillery shells and short-range rocket warheads posed no direct threat to the United States, and were no justification for a war.

Nor would such weapons warrant war if they exist in Syria. These and all other non-conventional weapons in the Middle East, notably Israel's well-documented nuclear arsenal, should be removed (just as Israel should be brought into compliance with Security Council resolutions it has flouted). This should not be achieved by war, but rather as part of a multilateral effort to end the proliferation of non-conventional weapons and resolve disputes throughout this dangerous region.

This war was unjustified and foolish because it represented a dangerous challenge to international law and morality, to the stability of the international system, to traditional alliance systems, and ultimately to the security of the United States. Pre-emptive war on flimsy pretexts establishes dangerous precedents that will now be cited by other would-be aggressors, for whom the elevation of the law of the jungle to the guiding principle of international morality will be most convenient. We have benefited enormously from the existing post-World War II international order anchored in the United Nations, which the Bush administration cavalierly decided to discard. While it did so, the administration deceived the public via its compliant organs of war propaganda, FOX, CNN and MSNBC, with transparent fictions like the existence of a "coalition"