

Oil makes U.S. raise military stakes in Colombia

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President George W. Bush's quick stop in Colombia on his return from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Chile on Monday brought this forgotten front in Washington's war on terrorism briefly into the headlines. Bush promised Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe - his closest South American ally - to boost aid for his military campaign against leftist guerillas.

Just two weeks earlier, 100 unarmed peasants were killed in a massacre reportedly by rightist paramilitary troops in Colombia's southern jungle province of Putumayo. Unlike the Bush visit, this failed to make headlines here.

Colombia has received \$3.3 billion in U.S. aid since 2000 - making it the top recipient after the Middle East. In October, Congress approved doubling the Pentagon's troop presence in Colombia to 800 - although they are officially barred from combat.

The Iraq war may have knocked Colombia off the front page, but Mideast chaos has made South America's energy resources more strategic to the United States. Colombia itself is among the top 15 global suppliers to the United States, and Uribe hopes to privatize the country's oil industry as part of his push to join President Bush's Free Trade Area of the Americas. Venezuela, bordering Colombia, is the fourth-largest U.S. supplier after Saudi Arabia, Mexico and Canada. Venezuela's populist leader Hugo Chavez is himself a White House target for Western hemisphere "regime change" - as seen by the current push for sanctions.

Meanwhile, the oil industry has charted a new thrust into the Amazon regions of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia - countries all now receiving U.S. military aid under the Andean Regional Initiative, the Bush administration's expansion of President Bill Clinton's "Plan Colombia."

The White House has now dropped the fiction that Plan Colombia is an anti-drug operation. A post-9/11 \$28.9 billion supplemental anti-terrorism package allowed U.S. military aid to be targeted against groups on the State Department's terrorist list - including both Colombia's two leftist rebel groups, as well as the rightist paramilitary network known as the United Colombian Self-Defense Forces (AUC), which is responsible for the vast majority of massacres and atrocities, according to groups like Amnesty International.

The problem, say human rights organizations, is that Uribe is not fighting the AUC - his government is negotiating with them, while refusing to talk with the guerillas. Rights

advocates cite reports of collaboration between the AUC and Colombia's military, although they have been officially denied. Targets of AUC's terror have included not only guerillas, but union oil workers opposing Uribe's privatization plan, Indians demanding their constitutional right to local autonomy and non-involvement in the war, and - as in the recent Putumayo massacre - peasants simply trying to survive.

One beneficiary of the increasing troop presence in Colombia is Occidental Petroleum, known colloquially as "Oxy." The United States is training and equipping a Colombian army brigade to protect Oxy's 480-mile pipeline linking the oil fields of Arauca province with the Caribbean. Arauca, the heart of Oxy's operations, hosts the greatest concentration of U.S. military advisers and has Colombia's worst human rights situation.

Oxy is also building a new pipeline over the Andes to get oil from Ecuador's Amazon to Pacific ports, while in Peru, Hunt Oil and Halliburton have launched a massive natural gas project in the Amazon, with a new pipeline to the Pacific. And in Bolivia, a consortium including Shell hopes to build a pipeline linking natural gas fields to a terminal on the Chilean coast. In each case, the protests by peasants and Indians charging illegal land grabs and pollution have been violently broken by security forces. Last November, Bolivia's government was brought down following weeks of protests over the gas pipeline plan.

With leftist governments in power in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, securing the oil and gas resources of the region is more critical than ever for Washington. But the United States may be on a proverbial slippery slope to a second counter-insurgency quagmire - this one in our own hemisphere.