

# Bush's threats to blockade Colombia give big boost to drug cartels

by José Restrepo

The Bush regime's scheme for blockading Colombia with the excuse of fighting drugs, "would result in the invaders being repulsed and would backfire to the benefit of international drug trafficking," Colombia's leading anti-drug newspaper *El Espectador* wrote in an editorial on Jan. 7. It described the U.S. naval moves as a "stupid procedure that can not be justified even by the invincible blindness of the U.S. chiefs of state" (see *Documentation*).

On Jan. 5 the Bush regime dispatched the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Kennedy*, carrying planes fitted with sophisticated radar surveillance equipment, its convoy, and the cruiser *U.S.S. Virginia* into international waters around Colombia to check any ship or aircraft with a Colombian flag, as well as other aircraft and ships coming from Colombian ports.

From the very beginning, the government of President Virgilio Barco made clear that the operation was unilateral, and had nothing to do with Colombia's war on drugs. "The government has not participated, and will not participate in, any joint maneuver in international waters of the Caribbean with airborne military or navy units of the United States," said an official communiqué issued on Jan. 7 by the Palacio de Nariño, Colombia's presidential palace. The government, said the statement, "has not authorized and will not authorize the maneuvers in territorial waters."

Soon afterwards, in response to widespread denunciation in Colombia and in other Ibero-American countries, Bush had to postpone the blockade. But the plan is still active, and the U.S. is simply waiting for a more opportune time to give the go-ahead.

Bush had the cooperation of Social Democratic Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, whose government had advance knowledge of the activities of the U.S. fleet and promised Venezuela's cooperation and logistical support, and even the use of the waters and port service around the Maracaibo Gulf—waters which are in dispute between Colombia and Venezuela. However, even Pérez was under enough pressure that he had to say, "I believe it is up to Colombia to respond to the decision or proposal of the United

States to put ships in territorial waters."

The plan was strongly denounced by Colombia's foreign minister, as well as by the entire spectrum of political parties there. "Necessarily, any type of interference [against Colombian-flag ships] on the high seas will require authorization from the Colombians," said Foreign Minister Julio Londoño Paredes, who also attacked the U.S. government's lack of will to fight drugs on its own territory. "It's not possible to believe that a country like the United States, which has the most sophisticated means for interception and control of ships or airplanes entering its territory, would have to pass into international waters to carry out a job that belongs to its own national jurisdiction." Londoño observed that the United States has done nothing to prevent "the drug traffic [from penetrating] into its territory, nor [has it stopped] the shipment of arms and chemical substances [used to process cocaine] to Colombia and other countries."

Londoño rejected the plan to install a network of radar tracking stations that would be operated by U.S. troops. "As long as Barco is President of the republic, it will be very difficult for these kind of things get approved."

## The second Panama?

The foreign minister made these comments while he was on the island of San Andrés in the Caribbean north of the mainland, where Colombia maintains an important naval base. In response to Bush's persistence in blockading Colombia, the Colombian Air Force sent aircraft to San Andrés to patrol Colombian continental waters, and its Navy sent two corvettes and four submarines on a "sovereignty mission." Londoño refused to meet with a U.S. Navy delegation whose ostensible mission was to explain the operation. All these military forces are still in place, and any incident could become the pretext for a clash between the superpower and Colombia, possibly even leading to an invasion similar to what was done in Panama.

Former Colombian President Julio César Turbay, who currently leads the ruling Liberal Party and is a very powerful

political figure, stated on Jan. 8 that the actions planned by the United States, "because of their proximity to the recent invasion of Panama, are considered by Latin American public opinion as something threatening, such as to make them lose the character of simple naval training maneuvers." Turbay added that the U.S. fleet's actions are an "absolutely unnecessary show of force, because nobody doubts that the U.S. is the top Western world power." Turbay, himself a longtime friend of the United States, asked Bush to respect international law, in order to prevent "the growth of anti-North American feelings in our peoples."

Hernando Durán Dussán, a candidate for the Liberal Party's presidential nomination, said on Jan. 7 that Colombia does not need to be watched over, because the country itself, without U.S. help, is able to deal with the problem of drug trafficking. The following day, he said that "traveling our national waters without authorization by our government would be a clear invasion, which we are not willing to accept, even if it is done by a friendly country with which we have dynamic trade relations."

Gustavo Vasco Muñoz, Colombian ambassador to Venezuela and a very close adviser to President Barco, said that "there exist other much more effective means of fighting the drug trade, and not what the U.S. government is announcing. . . . In the first place, repressing consumption in the industrialized countries . . . control of chemical products . . . effective control of arms trafficking . . . effective control through the major financial institutions of what is known as dollar laundering . . . supply of some helicopters . . . personal protection of our judges . . . avoiding adoption of economic measures on the part of the industrialized countries which enormously affect our economy [a reference the U.S. refusal to renew the coffee trade pact], which not only affect our foreign exchange income but also create situations of growing unemployment which also doesn't help in the fight against the drug merchants."

Colombia has received support from other countries' governments and press throughout Ibero-America. Mexico's daily *El Nacional* editorialized on Jan. 10, "the mere announcement of this new operation has provoked profound unrest in Latin America, while simultaneously producing a ministerial crisis in Bogotá. . . . What would happen, for example, if the captain of a ship from some country with a history of adversarial relations with the United States refused to recognize the authority of the U.S. fleet? What could happen if, through neglect, another ship of any flag continued on course, 'disobeying' the 'orders' to stop?"

A little common sense even poked through the U.S. media. The *Baltimore Sun* wrote on Jan. 11: "The fact is that U.S. efforts to organize a cooperative assault on narco-trafficking have been badly set back by the Panama invasion. While General Noriega may be in jail, many bigger fish in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia have more swimming room because their own beleaguered governments are now inhibit-

ed from working closely with Washington. Soothing words from George Bush and Dan Quayle won't be enough. Add to the price of Panama higher costs for shoring up Andean regimes whose zeal and capacity for choking cocaine at the source are vastly reduced."

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## Documentation

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El Espectador, *the courageous Bogotá daily whose printing plant was bombed by the drug traffickers last year, wrote in its Jan. 7 editorial:*

The runaway U.S. foreign policy toward the hemisphere is becoming weird. From the perspective of the historical clock, it looks like a premeditated turning back to the most opprobrious armed interventionism. To that must be added the unjustified economic intervention against the nations of the continent. . . .

It is as if we were returning to the territorial rape in 1835 against Mexico, or William Walker's filibusters, to the armed interventions against Nicaragua at the beginning of the century, the occupation of Haiti in 1915, or General Pershing's "punitive expedition" against Mexico. When one adds to this our mistreatment by international terms of trade, one would have to conclude, despairingly, that we have before us new evidence of an imperial policy which lacks only the concept of *Pax Romana* as the unappealing norm imposed on subject peoples. All this, at a time when international détente prevails, and the world begins to sense a breath of freedom.

The blockade of Colombia's coast was announced, allegedly in order to combat drug trafficking—precisely against the nation and the government which has paid the highest toll of blood and death in fighting that conflict, and when the capos of narcotics trafficking are trapped and almost defeated. This stupid measure cannot be justified even by the invincible blindness of U.S. rulers. It seems to be an attempt to displace the war on drugs away from their own borders, closing their eyes—eyes and noses—to their inhabitants' increasing [drug] consumption and moving the war from their land and sea territory to ours. This is a scandalous act, which, if carried out, would result in the repudiation of the invaders and would backfire to the benefit of international drug trafficking.

A thousand times No! . . .

The silence on the invasion of Panama by no means justifies this new act of continental aggression. Our countries should form a common front against this violation. And Colombia, the government, our people, and all Colombians, must be on guard to defend our national sovereignty. What is happening is no longer a precedent, but is evidence of a demented, absurd, unacceptable, and humiliating policy.