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Colombia

“Plan Colombia means war”

- IV Online magazine - 2000 - IV324 - October 2000 -

Publication date: Saturday 7 October 2000

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The following interview with FARC Comandante Raúl Reyes was carried out by Fernando Román, for the Buenos Aires daily Página/12.

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Comandante Raúl Reyes

It is difficult to enter to the zone controlled by the FARC, covering as it does some 44,000 square kilometres. From the airport at Las Delicias, only half an hour's flight from Bogota, to the FARC camp at San Vicente del Caguán there are only 150 kilometres. The commonest way to get there is by bus, running the risk of an assault or in taxis driven by kamikaze drivers along a road eroded by torrential rains listening to songs played at full blast that recount heroic legends of narcotics traffickers. After passing three roadblocks staffed by soldiers armed to the teeth, and the FARC roadblocks - which only differ from the others because of their footwear - an immense poster by the side of the road with the faces of Bolivar and Che Guevara tells you that you have arrived in New Colombia, the centre of the zone of the peace negotiations between the FARC and the government of Andrés Pastrana.

I meet with commandante Raul Reyes, "chancellor" of the FARC, in his office, built from wood and nylon. In his hands, a book of poems by the Uruguayan Mario Benedetti and resting on his desk his M16 gun. He seems more like a university professor than a guerrilla who has been fighting for decades in the Colombian forest.

What is the vision of the FARC as opposed to Plan Colombia?

Plan Colombia is a plan for war. It is a plan that opens the doors wide to the hawks in the United States so that they can have a greater intervention in the Colombia's internal affairs. It is a plan that means pain for the two peoples, both North American and Colombian, bringing the two nations into conflict. For that reason, we call on the international community, the Latin American peoples, so that the US is not allowed to intervene on behalf of the Colombian governing class in the guise of the fight against drug trafficking.

What future is there for the peace negotiations with the government after Plan Colombia?

Plan Colombia puts the dialogue at serious risk. We know that even in the government of the United States there are different factions. There is a sector that is against Plan Colombia, that views with great concern the increased presence of US military advisers in Colombia, the airplanes, the helicopters, the sophisticated elements to detect communications that are part of Plan Colombia. These sectors are in the US Congress, the thinking circles of the United States, the US people, who see that Colombia is going to be an experiment for imperialist war. To them also we want to appeal, so that they can affect their own country, their own government, so that Colombia can settle its internal problems without interference from the world powers.

And we have said to the national government in our last meetings with all frankness that we do not accept any commission that comes to control the behaviour of the FARC in this area nor anywhere else in Colombia, because we are the insurgency, we are the people in arms, we are an armed organisation that rose up against the State, against the injustice of the State. Therefore, it does not recognise any of the laws of the State. For that reason they cannot accept that the FARC is put under their laws because they are not going to accept them. The FARC has every intention of engaging in a dialogue, to look for agreements by means of dialogue for the solution of the problems of our people, of the 18 million Colombians who are unemployed, in poverty and misery. The FARC accepts no kind of pressure, neither external nor internal.

What risks does Plan Colombia carry for the region?

Plan Colombia is not about fighting drug trafficking. That story is, in fact, the excuse. It is a plan of extermination against the Colombian population. It is a plan that not only destroys the precarious forms of subsistence that the peasantry has by means of the production of cocaine leaf or the poppy but also contaminates the ecosystem, destroys the water and oxygen resources of the Colombian Amazonia, which has been called the lung of the world. An Amazonia that we share with Brazil, Venezuela, Peru and Ecuador, the heritage of humanity because it is an oxygen laboratory and a rich source of fauna and flora.

How do you see the presence of the United States in the region today?

As a serious danger to the national sovereignty of Colombians, as a serious risk for the peace dialogue, as a threat to Colombia and the continent because today it is our country and tomorrow it could be any other. The United States is much emboldened since the collapse of the Soviets and looks for war everywhere with any pretext. Today in Colombia it is the pretext of the fight against the drug trafficking, but the United States does not fight the drugs trade in its own country. And in other areas it is the pretext of the fight for human rights, which it does not respect in its own country either. It is a very great threat because it seeks to intimidate any people or organisation who is against its policies. It is what it has done all these years against socialist Cuba and all the peoples that have fought their imperialist policies.

Is the launching of the Bolivarian Movement in April of this year an answer to the political and military extension of the United States across the Andean region?

Plan Colombia not only affects the dignity of the Colombian people but also all the countries of South America, and in particular Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador and Brazil. It is a very great offensive by the empire against those dependent peoples and the so-called Third World that is in a situation of poverty, exploitation, misery and backwardness as a result of the policies of the United States, that have been applied by the rulers of our country over the last 50 years. That situation of pauperisation of Colombian life has now intensified with the application of the economic opening, the neo-liberal model, the policies of the IMF and the World Bank. To this we must add the doctrine of national security that has been applied in Colombia where the military have been the best students of the school of torture, disappearance, massacre and murder that the School of the Americas with US instructors has represented. For that reason the responsibility that the United States has in the situation of violence which Colombia and the countries of the area live in is very great. In Colombia there are paramilitary organisations financed by narcotics dedicated to crime, directed, supported and trained by the Colombian military.

With the Bolivarian Movement for the New Colombia, the FARC seeks in the first place to offer the people a different option, of struggle, combat for dignity, life and rights. We consider that the work of our Liberator is unfinished, we have made it reality and for that we offer the popular masses a different option so that they protest, different from that offered by the Liberal and Conservative parties, distinct also from the armed struggle, different from a clandestine organisation, something to which all the people of different political, military, religious, ethnic sectors can join, without any distinction because it exists to defend the heritage of the Colombians, their wealth, dignity, mother country and national sovereignty. This Bolivarian Movement can go beyond the borders of Colombia and is inspired by the liberating conception of Simon Bolivar and people like San Martin, MartÃ- and so many others that have left us a way for fight for definitive emancipation. The Bolivarian Movement has a big future. It is an alternative that will stop being clandestine once we have managed to unite millions of Colombians to change the destiny of this country and to undertake the construction of the New Colombia, of a Colombia on the road to socialism.

How is the relation with the population in the zones under the control of the FARC?

As the FARC is a revolutionary political movement with the commitment to fight for the power to rule Colombia, they have taken care to address the problems of people. There are many problems of the people that the government does not address, because in many regions of Colombia the state has no presence except for the army or the police. There is no role for the state except repression, violence, intimidation. The presence of the State should guarantee the protection of the human rights of its inhabitants from cradle to grave. There are no political rights. For that reason we have a long list of Colombians, who are dead, disappeared, dislocated, in exile. The FARC, where it is present, takes on the task of addressing the problems of the people. Thus the people approach the guerrillas and request help in solving problems that are not addressed by the mayors or the governors or the inspectors of police or the politicians, like for example the improvement of the roads, the bridges, the highways, the schools, the health positions or the debts owed to the governmental institutions or the municipal administrations.

The presence of so many young men and women in the FARC is impressive.

The guerrilla of the FARC is a young guerrilla, the old ones are its national leadership but the guerrillera, from the commandantes at the front down, are people under 30. The Central General Staff of the FARC, that is its highest body, is under 50. Every day they arrive in the ranks of the FARC - more youth, more women from the countryside, students from the universities, everywhere. And the percentage of women increases. Today in the FARC we are 40 percent women.

The average age of the members of FARC is 25. Most of them joined the guerrilla organisation between the age of 13 and 15. In Colombia boys begin to work in the field at 7, and five years later they are already considered as men, can marry and have children. For those who want to escape a destiny of certain poverty, the arrival in town of a column of the FARC, with his combatants who are well fed, literate, armed and above all respected, exerts an incredible fascination. Joining the guerrillas is an option for those who have nothing.

Clad in his impeccable camouflage uniform, a black youth who they call " el negro ", 22 years old and ten years a guerrilla, says in a firm voice: "My life is the FARC. Outside, Colombian youth has no future. The only thing that they have left is to work from dawn to dusk, to get drunk in a bar at weekends and get women pregnant. Here if you want you never stop learning and I want to learn to be a revolutionary like Che".