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Colombia

Operation without anaesthetic

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It amounts to much more than a confrontation between "two political-military states" (the one governed by president Andrés Pastrana, and the other being built by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-Army of The People - henceforth FARC). It is a warlike escalation, supported by the United States. On Wednesday August 23, US President Clinton approved an advance payment of \$1,319 million for Plan Colombia. In reality, he signed a declaration of war and a commitment from imperialism to finance, arm and command that war. The US decision to relaunch a militarist strategy threatens to set the region on fire.

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Vietnam, El Salvador, the Balkans... Sierra Leona. They are not simple metaphors. In Colombia there is a war and any hypothesis comes within the field of the probable. The victims (dead, wounded, kidnapped, disappeared) are counted in the tens of thousands, the "displaced" (in the majority peasants) at almost a million; the country fears one of the worst economic crises of the past century with an unemployment rate of over 20% and with capital fleeing in fright. The human rights organisations denounce a systematic massacre and a paramilitary operation of "social cleansing" on a huge scale. Plan Colombia "Vietnamises", definitively, a conflict that has already lasted forty years. During his visit to the city of Cartagena, Bill Clinton said, "Colombia is not Vietnam, and this is not imperialism". Then what is it?

Model

A number of analysts and diplomats have begun to give an approximate answer: the model being applied is that of Central America in the 1980s and 1990s. In particular El Salvador, where the United States did not send troops but organised the counterinsurgency to defeat the revolutionary process led by the Frente Farabundo Martí- para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). The Salvadoran civil war ended with the peace accord signed between the FMLN and the rightist government of Alfredo Cristiani in January 1992.

However, Colombia is not El Salvador. In that small Central American country, there was an army of 60,000 well-trained soldiers and the FMLN was without strategic backup after the Sandinistas had lost power in Nicaragua. In Colombia, the army (130,000 soldiers, of whom less than 25,000 are deployed in the fight against the guerrillas) faces a powerful enemy made up of more than 20,000 combatants distributed across 70 military fronts that can count on an organised social base of 60,000 people. Simultaneously, both the FARC - and to a lesser extent the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) - maintain extensive liberated zones.

Total autonomy

In addition, they finance themselves from sources that allow them millionaire incomes and total political and military autonomy: taxes collected from narcotics traffickers to protect the cocaine cultures, taxes on the oil companies, and the takings from the kidnapping industry. Moreover, the country covers some 1.2 million square kilometres, has three mountain ranges and borders with Panama, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil. The Amazonian forest is no-man's land and there the guerrillas can count on a logistic rearguard.

For Eduardo Pizarro, Colombian specialist in military subjects, "If the Colombian war becomes serious, we will finish neither like El Salvador nor like Vietnam but like Sierra Leona, a struggle of all against all". (Clarín, Buenos Aires, September 3, 2000). Involving thousands of "armed actors", the paramilitaries, guerrillas and narcotics traffickers.

Gabriel Marcella, a Colombian strategist who teaches in the Military School of the United States foresees, for his part, the "possible Balkanisation" of the Andean region if the intervention is not reversed. Even the Pentagon fears that Colombia is a war that cannot be won.

Negotiating card

In any case US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering insists that Plan Colombia, in its military component, is a negotiating card with the FARC. That is, to force the main armed organisation to enter the labyrinth of reciprocal concessions. Nevertheless, in an official communiqué on August 23, the command of the FARC said: "As Plan Colombia is also an attempt of US dissuasion directed at the insurgency, we can guarantee that the FARC, supported by the people, is ready to withstand any ultimatum".

It was presented on October 20, 1999 by Republican senators DeWine, Grassley and Coverdell, before session 106 of the Committee of Foreign Relations of the US Congress. Under the name of "Plan for peace, prosperity, and the strengthening of the state", the original title of draft law S1758 Alliance Act, or Plan Colombia... as it is known in this neck of the woods.

Objective: to associate the internal war of Colombia and the drug trafficking networks of the Andean region as a threat to the United States. How much does it cost? A provisional estimate: \$7,500 million, with 80% of the first payment (\$1,300 million) consisting of military equipment, co-operation in intelligence, training of two new anti-drug battalions and two helicopters, Blackhawk and Huey.

"The Plan aims to intervene in three geographic areas: most important would be the department of the Putumayo, the most conflictual border zone with Ecuador. It is assumed that operating here, in combination with the army, are the paramilitary, extreme right-wing "self-defence" groups, part of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and Bloque 48 of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

Supply

Also, "the border province of Sucumbã-os (Ecuador) is seen as the region that supplies all these forces. The rest of the military operations would concentrate in the center and the southwest of the country. But in the geopolitical approach of the Pentagon the port of Manta (province of Manabã-), located on the Ecuadorian Pacific coast, is the key component of Plan Colombia.

As invasion by land is ruled out for the time being, the tendency is to carry out the intervention by air and sea, as in the last Balkan war. There is then the threat that the base at Manta is something more than "a point of logistical support". And in fact, Plan Colombia has assigned a role to it similar to that enjoyed by the military base at Palmerola (Honduras) in the war against Nicaragua and El Salvador. (Jose Steinsleger, articles in the Quito newspaper Hoy)

In a hearing before the Senate, general Charles Wilhelm, head of the Southern Command, explained that the United

States sees Manta as "... the suitable site to replace the capacities lost after leaving the Howard airbase (the Panama Canal)". According to Wilhelm, "the importance of Manta is that it is the only site that will give us the operating range we need to cover all Colombia, all Peru and the cocaine-cultivating areas of Bolivia".

Crisis

On the other hand, the economic and political crisis in Ecuador, with more than 80% of the population mired in poverty, means that any economic aid from outside is seen as manna from heaven. In this sense, of the cheque for \$1,300 million that Clinton presented to the Colombian president Andrés Pastrana, \$47 million is for the "functions of intelligence and monitoring of Ecuador".

Plan Colombia seeks the isolation of the guerrillas in those zones of the southwest where it is possible to detect them by means of the modern apparatuses of intelligence and to destroy them without need of a land invasion... the agricultural imports of Colombia have increased by 90%, which represents a dramatic blow for employment in the rural areas, where the war is centred. And the exodus has begun of the Colombians who live in the zone towards Ecuador, where day by day hundreds of people are arriving. " (ibid)

For Heinz Dieterich Steffan, the level of military intervention by the United States in Colombia is equivalent already, "to that of its intervention in South Vietnam in 1963, in Nicaragua in 1983 and El Salvador in 1984" ("La Telaraña del Imperio" El Siglo, Santiago, December 18, 1999). And the country has become the third largest recipient of US military aid, behind Israel and Egypt.

Colombian specialists agree that the approval of the aid package of aid threatens to break the fragile equilibrium of the peace process. They insist that the Colombian government lacks the administrative and institutional capacity to handle the two million dollars that it will receive every day, and that it is very probable that the drug trafficking will not end, but move to other regions of the country.

Of Marxist origin, the FARC has experienced an impressive growth in recent years. Its military infrastructure has transformed it into a truly mobile army. From "hit and run" operations they have acquired an operational capacity enabling them to maintain prolonged fighting, take towns, resist and strike back hard at the official army. This has given them an effective presence and real power in more than half of the country and led them to define themselves as a "state within a state".

Demilitarised zone

That status was reinforced when, during the peace negotiations with the government of Pastrana, the FARC was able to impose a demilitarised zone (November 1999) of 44,000 square kilometres in the south of the country. There, the FARC constructs its "national project". This is an experience without many antecedents in Latin America.

They have attained something similar to sovereignty, if we define this as absolute authority over a territory. They dictate laws, they administer justice, they assure services, they organise the educational system, and they give support to thousands of coca farmers, who they protect from the anti-drug units of the army and the Drugs Enforcement Agency.

The FARC has constructed something very similar to a state. They have a system of independent government, a flourishing economy and a control over the population, although conflicts with the social movements take place.

It is not surprising then that it does not wish to abandon all this in order to integrate itself into a political system and a State that is falling apart and whose legitimacy is at rock bottom. On the other hand, the insurgent organisations maintain the fresh memory of how the integration of the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19) and the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL) after the previous peace accords ended up: the murder of their main leaders and thousands of militants... and the co-option of a few of them to supervise the massacre.

In the strategic horizon of the FARC "the conquest of the power for the construction of socialism" remains. If the government of Pastrana wants peace, it will have "to abandon the neo-liberal model", to repudiate the external debt and to create a more redistributive economic framework. Such demands are a blow for the oligarchy and difficult to contemplate.

Obviously, the armed revolutionary movement is the political expression of a radical proposal. That it raises the destruction of the bourgeois State. The FARC never lost sight of that objective, and they pursue it through negotiations or by "military means". Peace, then, based on mutual recognition and the balance of powers is impossible. Unless the creation of a virtual "South Colombia" governed by the FARC is accepted. Faced with this dilemma, the belligerents look to create an asymmetry in the correlation of forces: the government of Pastrana by means of the foreign intervention, the FARC by accumulating social and territorial bases, arms and combatants.

Contagion

Fearing the danger of contagion and the consequences for business, the Argentine foreign minister, Adalberto Rodríguez Giavarini could not be more eloquent: "the Colombian conflict complicates the region " (Clarín, Buenos Aires 27/8/2000). In particular because "the crisis drives away investors".

The summit of 12 South American presidents which began on August 30 in Brasilia dealt with the themes of regional integration, free trade, relations between the MERCOSUR and the Andean Community of Nations (CAN) and the future of the American Free Trade Area that so much concerns the United States. Agreements and, mainly, declarations of good faith were signed. However, the background was provided by the Colombian crisis, the "democratic fragility" in countries like Ecuador, Peru, and the lorry load of uncertainty that is Plan Colombia.

Brazil has sealed its 1,600 kilometre border with Colombia to prevent possible incursions of guerrillas, paramilitary and narcotics traffickers. In addition, its diplomacy has adopted a critical position towards "foreign interference" in the business of state. The empire, meanwhile, presses forward. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright travelled with urgency to Brasilia, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Lima and Quito.

She looks for support and commitments. However, the governments have their doubts. Things are already complicated enough for these rulers: recessions, anti-neo-liberal campaigns, plebiscites against the foreign debt, strikes and popular mobilisations at various levels that threaten their legitimacy. And they do not want the disorder of the "neo-liberal order" to be combined with a new wave of anti-imperialism.

Different reactions

Anyway, the reactions are different. Nicaragua has taken advantage of the context to insist on its claim to the archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia, currently under Colombian sovereignty, but where there are continuous secessionist yearnings; Panama, having recovered "sovereignty" over its Canal, does not forget that the De Concini amendment incorporated to the Treaty of Bilateral Neutrality (attached to the Torrijos-Carter treaty) allows Washington "to act against any threat directed against the Canal or the Pacific transit of ships".

That is, the United States can claim the right to a direct intervention in Colombia; Ecuador, in the middle of a pre-insurrectionary climate and a crisis of domination, strengthened its bonds with the United States. It accepted Plan Colombia in exchange for 81.3 million dollars (fight against drugs, improvement of the radar system at the Eloy Alfaro airport) and ceded the base of Manta. Peru for its part intensified the militarisation of its border and is associated with the idea of creating a cordon sanitaire around Colombia; Bolivia, which will receive 110 million dollars from Plan Colombia, supports the United States.

Venezuela also has strengthened its borders in a complex situation. Where complex frictions and recurrent incidents coexist they have to do with old quarrels (in the Gulf of Venezuela), recent separatist manifestations in Colombian departments like Norte de Santander and Vichada, and the invasion of hundreds of people fleeing the horrors of the war, taking refuge in Venezuelan localities. At the same time there is a "Bolivarian spirit" between Venezuelan President Chávez and the FARC.

In the more distant areas the panorama does not appear too consistent either. Some islands of the Caribbean are aligned with Washington, and stand to gain 43.9 million dollars for the modernisation of systems of espionage in Aruba and Curacao under Plan Colombia; Cuba plays a discreet role: Fidel Castro has promoted an attitude of dialogue in the ELN, but he has little authority over the FARC.

Mexico oscillates between support and distancing itself. It has sought to distance itself from Colombia and thus appear before Washington as an ally in the matter of drugs and insurgency (and with the war in Chiapas as a potential factor of instability). As for the South Cone (Chile, Argentina and Uruguay), there are still no clear signals.

Whatever, when in the next months Plan Colombia begins to be implemented in full, one will see if the governments possess a real autonomy or are subordinate to the dictates of US imperialism.

The parties of the Sao Paulo Forum, through their Working Group, have already announced their total rejection of Plan Colombia and solidarity with the Colombian people, its social organisations and the insurgent movement.

Time bomb

Diverse NGOs, social and religious movements, have said that the Plan will escalate the armed conflict still more, running the risk of inaugurating another Vietnam, and campaigns and networks of solidarity with the Colombian popular movement are mobilised in their respective countries and developing. Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of Human Rights Watch has called Plan Colombia a "time bomb" for human rights. (El Pais, Madrid 7-7-2000).

Amnesty International, which participated in the "Alternative Table" organised in Madrid in July, has called for a campaign against Plan Colombia, denouncing the use of paramilitarism as a state strategy, and the internal consequences that "will aggravate alarmingly the present humanitarian crisis". (Amnesty International No 44, Spanish edition, August-September 2000)

Jose Vicente Rangel, Venezuelan foreign minister says that the Plan "aims if not at the Vietnamisation, at least the Colombianisation of the region." (Ansa Agency, 7/7/2000)

Meanwhile, the powerful Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) rejected Plan Colombia and in a public declaration, it affirmed his opposition, "especially when it seems that there will be a direct participation of Ecuadorian forces, without concern for the violence of which the civil population will be victim, fundamentally the indigenous peoples and nationalities."

Renovation

The background is the renovation of a counterinsurgent strategy of intervention. Like in the Dominican Republic in 1965, Chile in 1973, Nicaragua in 1981-90. The only difference is that Plan Colombia (as in Grenada and Panama) will not happen through a concealed operation. They seek, as James Petras says " to destroy dialogue and the movements that dare to defy the imperial monolith'. (Plan Colombia and its critics, Agency ALAI, 17/7/00)

But in a situation where the dominant classes are shaken by a deep political crisis, of legitimacy, this is accelerated by the brutal effects of the recolonising offensive of multinational capital, Plan Colombia reemphasises the importance of anti-imperialist struggle. In a Latin America where broad and radical social resistances are articulating emancipatory alternatives which, albeit still from a defensive perspective, begin to sketch a new political scenario.