

August 12, 2009

Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton
Department of State
2201 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary of State Clinton:

We write to you with urgent concern about the recently disclosed negotiations for U.S. military access to seven military bases in Colombia, and their impacts on quickly deteriorating relations in the Andean region between those nations and with the United States. We also write with fundamental concerns about the effects of the proposed agreement on drug policy objectives and on promoting respect for human rights that are central to our values.

We affirm what President Obama told hemispheric leaders in April, that, "if our only interaction with many of these countries is drug interdiction -- if our only interaction is military -- then we may not be developing the connections that can over time increase our influence and have a beneficial effect." Yet establishing military installations in the area with broad and ambiguous mandates is an investment in military responses to everything from poverty to bilateral tensions.

A hastily negotiated agreement for access to military sites in Colombia presents enormous dangers for the entire hemisphere. Leaders from Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua have responded critically and publicly to the proposed installations, with measures ranging from suspending diplomatic relations, to suggesting blocking trade.

The potential consequences of aggravated tensions in the region are wide and deep. In the context of the coup in Honduras, the sense of instability in Latin America is acute. Furthermore, Venezuela is Colombia's second largest trading partner, sharing over \$7 billion annually in trade. Even a temporary suspension of bilateral trade will create substantial hardships for many ordinary people. Should relations between Colombia and Venezuela deteriorate further, the U.S. military presence could lend itself to use by Colombia as a cover for acts that escalate conflict, knowing that the United States will act to protect its assets. This would have a particularly troublesome effect on the half million Colombian refugees in neighboring countries, most of them in Ecuador and Venezuela, whose protection would be negatively affected by militarization of border regions that is a likely result of increased U.S. military presence.

In the current context, it is rational for regional leaders to see the installation of several U.S. military sites in Colombia as a potential threat to their security. The basis for this perception includes the following:

- The illegal cross-border attack by Colombian forces on a FARC camp in Ecuadorean territory in March 2008, precipitating a rupture in diplomatic relations between Colombia and Ecuador, which have still not been restored. President Obama indicated at the time that he supported this attack.
- The Colombian government has accused high-level officials of Venezuela and Ecuador of assisting the FARC, based on evidence that is disputed by those governments, giving an international dimension to the counter-terrorism mission of armed forces in Colombia.

- Although the Manta agreement was exclusively for aerial counter-drug monitoring and interdiction, U.S. forces in Manta carried out operations to arrest undocumented Ecuadorans on boats in Ecuadoran waters. Although the proposed access agreement for Colombia presumably would prohibit cross-border operations without permission of the third country, violations of the agreement for use of the Manta site raise legitimate doubts for leaders of neighboring countries.
- The Defense Department says that it seeks “an array of access arrangements for contingency operations, logistics, and training in Central/South America.”
- USSOUTHCOM aims to establish a base with “air mobility reach on the South American continent” through the year 2025, according to the Air Mobility Command.
- Establishing an expanded U.S. military presence in Colombia evokes the long and painful history of U.S. military interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean.

We are also concerned that the bases agreement represents a back-door means for continuing to support the Colombian military, despite reports in the last year that the military murdered more than 1,000 civilians and alleged they were guerrillas killed in combat, in order to increase their body count. Colombian Defense Ministry sources have said that Colombia is attempting to obtain increases in U.S. military aid as part of the base negotiations. The Palanquero base itself, which houses a Colombian Air Force unit, was banned from receiving U.S. aid for five years because of its role in a 1998 attack that killed 17 civilians, including six children.

A review of policy in Colombia is needed that addresses the serious human rights issues present in the Colombian Armed Forces and State, including: the practice of civilian killings reportedly committed by the Colombian Army since 2002, which the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights called “widespread and systematic,” with a 98% rate of impunity; the persistence and growth of massive forced displacement of rural Colombians from their lands, with 380,000 people forced to flee their homes last year; illegal surveillance, unfounded accusations, and covert operations against human rights defenders, journalists, Supreme Court justices, and opposition party leaders by the presidential security agency and (in some cases) by military intelligence units. In light of these revelations, the Administration should reconsider centering its strategies in the region on an alliance with the Colombian military. To broaden relationships with South America and value respect for human rights, the United States should not create a fortress in Colombia in concert with the region’s worst rights violators, the Colombian military.

In addition, the Administration has not yet conducted a review of U.S. drug policy in the Andean region that accounts for the failure of supply-side policies to have any measurable, long-term impact on the price, purity and availability of cocaine in the United States. In any case, the international nature of drug trafficking requires a regional approach that builds consensus among the nations involved. The Administration should use the closing of the Manta base as an opportunity to re-direct resources toward drug treatment and prevention programs that actually work in reducing demand for illegal narcotics.

For all these reasons, we urge you to take the following steps:

- Suspend negotiations for expanded U.S. military access or operations in Colombia, and initiate dialogue with South American leaders to address common security concerns in the region, including those related to trafficking in narcotics.

- Initiate a review of Colombia policy that puts a negotiated solution to the armed conflict and promotion of respect for human rights at the center of U.S. objectives.
- Urge President Obama to task ONDCP Director Gil Kerlikowske to conduct a review of U.S. drug policy that seeks to translate into concrete budget priorities his call for drugs to be viewed as “a public health crisis” rather than a “drug war.”

We look forward to your response to these concerns and requests.

Sincerely,

Faith Organizations and Leaders

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Peace and Social Concerns Committee
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School of the Americas Watch

September 11th Families for Peaceful
Tomorrows

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Community Action on Latin America
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IRTF: InterReligious Task Force on Central
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