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Our Terrorists in Colombia: Death Squads as “Freedom Fighters”

By Dan Kovalik
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A recent article in *The New York Times* entitled, “The Secret History of Colombia’s Paramilitaries & The U.S. War on Drugs,” contains useful clues as to the U.S.’s true views towards the Colombian death squads and their massive war crimes and human rights abuses. [1] In short, it reveals a high-level of tolerance of, and condonation by, U.S. policy-makers for the suffering of the Colombian people at the hands of our long-time friends and allies, the right-wing paramilitaries.

The gist of the *NYT* story is that, beginning in 2008, the U.S. has extradited “several dozen” top paramilitary leaders, thereby helping them to evade a transitional justice process which would have held them accountable for their war crimes and crimes against humanity. They have been brought to the U.S. where they have been tried for drug-related offenses only and given cushy sentences of 10 years in prison on average. And, even more incredibly, “for some, there is a special dividend at the end of their incarceration. Though wanted by Colombian authorities, two have won permission to stay in the United States, and their families have joined them. There are more seeking the same haven, and still others are expected to follow suit.”

That these paramilitaries – 40 in all that the *NYT* investigated — are being given such preferential treatment is shocking given the magnitude of their crimes. For example, paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso, “who the government said ‘may well be one of the most prolific cocaine traffickers ever prosecuted in a United States District Court,’” has been found by Colombian courts to be “responsible for the death or disappearance of more than 1,000 people.” Yet, as a result of his cooperation with U.S. authorities Mr. Mancuso “will spend little more than 12 years behind bars in the U.S.”

Another paramilitary, the one the article focuses on most, is Hernan Giraldo Serna, and he committed “1800 serious human rights violations with over 4,000 victims . . .” Mr. Giraldo was known as “The Drill” because of his penchant for raping young girls, some as young as 9 years old. Indeed, he has been “labeled . . . ‘the biggest sexual predator of paramilitarism.’” While being prosecuted in the U.S. for drug-related crimes only, Mr. Giraldo too is being shielded by the U.S. from prosecution back in Colombia for his most atrocious crimes.

And so, what is going on here? The *NYT* gives a couple reasons for why the U.S. would protect such “designated terrorists responsible for massacres, forced disappearances and the displacement of entire villages,” and give them “relatively lenient treatment.”

First, it correctly explains that former President Alvaro Uribe, the most prominent and outspoken opponent of the peace deal between the Colombian government and the FARC guerillas, asked the U.S. to extradite these paramilitary leaders because, back home in Colombia, they had begun “confessing not only their war crimes but also their ties to his allies and relatives.” The *NYT* also writes off the U.S. treatment of these paramilitaries as the U.S. giving priority to its war on drugs “over Colombia’s efforts to confront crimes against humanity that had scarred a generation.”

Unfortunately, these explanations let the U.S. off the hook too easily, for they do not tell the whole story behind the U.S.’s relationship with Colombia and its death squads.

First of all, let’s start with former President Alvaro Uribe who the *NYT* states has a “‘shared ideology’” with these paramilitaries and their leaders. This is of course true. But what does this say about the United States which gave billions of dollars of military assistance to Colombia when Uribe was President, all the while knowing that he had a long history of paramilitary ties and drug trafficking and that his military was working alongside the paramilitaries in carrying out abuses on a massive scale? And, how about the fact that Uribe was also awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George W. Bush who considered Uribe his best friend in the region?

The answer is that the U.S. also shares an ideology with both Uribe and his paramilitary friends, and that it has wanted to prevent the paramilitaries from not only confessing to their links with Uribe, but also from confessing their links to the U.S. military, intelligence and corporations.

The *NYT*, while ultimately pulling its punches here, at least touches upon this issue when it states that “the paramilitaries, while opponents in the war on drugs, were technically on the same side as the Colombian and American governments in the civil war.” But “technically” is not *le mot juste*; rather, it is an imprecise and mushy term used to understate the true relationship of the paramilitaries with the U.S. The paramilitaries have not just been “technically” on the side of the U.S. and Colombian governments; rather, they have been objectively and subjectively on their side, and indeed an integral part of the U.S./Colombia counter-insurgency program in Colombia for decades.

Indeed, the paramilitaries were the invention of the United States back in 1962, even before the FARC itself was formed (in 1964) and before the civil war there began in earnest. Thus, as Noam Chomsky explains:

The president of the Colombian Permanent Committee for Human Rights, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Alfredo Vasquez Carrizosa, writes that it is “poverty and insufficient land reform” that “have made Colombia one of the most tragic countries of Latin America,” though as elsewhere, “violence has been exacerbated by external factors,” primarily the initiatives of the Kennedy Administration, which “took great pains to transform our regular armies into counterinsurgency brigades,” ushering in “what is known in Latin America as the National Security Doctrine,” which is not concerned with “defense against an external enemy” but rather “the internal enemy.” The new “strategy of the death squads” accords the military “the right to fight and to exterminate social workers, trade unionists, men and women who are not supportive of the establishment, and who are assumed to be communist extremists.”

As part of its strategy of converting the Latin American military from “hemispheric defense” to “internal security” — meaning war against the domestic population — Kennedy dispatched a military mission to Colombia in 1962 headed by Special Forces General William Yarborough. He proposed “reforms” to enable the security forces to “as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents” — the “communist extremists” to whom Vasquez Carrizosa alludes. [2]

While the paramilitaries have been ever-evolving, taking different forms over the years and receiving legal imprimatur at some times and not at others, they have remained until this day, carrying out the same essential functions enumerated by Chomsky above while giving plausible deniability to both the U.S. and Colombian governments.

The potential confession of paramilitary leaders to their links with the U.S. and Colombia, as well as to U.S. multinationals, was as much of a threat to the U.S. as there confessions were to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe. And that is why the U.S. extradited the top paramilitary leaders and treated them with kid gloves.

As just one example, paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso told investigators nearly 10 years ago that it was not only Chiquita that provided financial support to the paramilitaries (this is already known because Chiquita pled guilty to such conduct and received a small, \$25 million fine for doing so), but also companies like Del Monte and Dole. [3] However, given that Mancuso was never put on trial (the *NYT* notes that none of the paramilitary leaders have) but instead was given a light sentence based upon a plea deal, such statements have never gone on the court record, were never pursued by authorities and have largely been forgotten.

That there is more to the story than the *NYT* is telling us is revealed by the inherent contradictions of its story. Thus, the *NYT* at one point states that “[t]his is a crime story tangled up in geopolitics. Colombia is the United States’ closest ally and largest aid recipient in the region, and the partnership has focused on combating narcotics, guerillas and terrorism.”

Of course, it is quite true that the U.S. and Colombia have partnered together to fight both the guerillas as well as peaceful activists for social change. As just one example, Colombian President Santos just admitted and apologized for the Colombian government’s role in aiding and abetting the paramilitaries in murdering thousands of candidates and activists of the left-wing Patriotic Union party (UP) back in the 1980’s [4] – repression which scuttled the peace agreement with the FARC reached back then.

However, the other two listed goals of the partnership appear to be mere pretexts.

Let’s start with the claim, unchallenged in this story, that the U.S./Colombia partnership has been focused on combating terrorism. How could this possibly be given that the U.S. has in fact extradited the worst “designated terrorists” from Colombia – indeed, the *NYT* at one point acknowledges in the story that the paramilitaries have been the worst human rights violators in Colombia — and ensured that they will never answer for their acts of terrorism?

And, as for combating drugs, the *NYT* also points out elsewhere in the same story what many of us have been pointing out for years – that in spite of the U.S. dumping around \$10 billion in military aid into Colombia since 2000, “[c]oca cultivation has been soaring in Colombia, with a significant increase over the last couple of years in acreage dedicated to drug crops.”

This leads us back to the more plausible claim that the U.S./Colombia partnership has in fact been all about instigating and supporting terror – that is, terror against the Colombian population in order to destroy any movement (whether armed or non-violent) for social change. That is why both the Colombian and U.S. governments are content to hold the paramilitaries harmless for their war crimes, for, after all, it was their job to commit such crimes and it was a job well-done. Indeed, the *NYT* quotes U.S. lawyers, a retired U.S. prosecutor and the U.S. Judge who gave a light sentence to vicious paramilitary leader Rodrigo Tovar-Pupo (alias, “Jorge 40”) for the proposition that these paramilitaries are viewed as “freedom fighters” whose role in the Colombian civil war is actually a “mitigating rather than aggravating factor in their cases.”

The paramilitaries in Colombia, and the role of the U.S. and Colombian governments in supporting them, should not be viewed as merely an academic matter for the history books. The paramilitaries are still very much alive in Colombia, and are still carrying out massive abuses

such as the targeted killings of social leaders; mass displacements of peasants, Afro-Colombians and indigenous; disappearances; and torture. [5] And, the U.S. and Colombian governments, in order to continue to be able to shield themselves from any blame for the conduct of these paramilitaries, now simply deny that they exist at all. It is therefore more critical than ever that the truth about these paramilitaries, and their high-level backers in both the U.S. and Colombia, is exposed and their misdeeds denounced and punished.

Notes.

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/world/americas/colombia-cocaine-human-rights.html?_r=0

[2] <http://colombiasupport.net/archive/200004/znet-chomsky-0424.html>

[3] [http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/5/19/336518/-](http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/5/19/336518/)

[4] <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/colombia-santos-apology-death-squads-1.3765044>

[5] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr23/4814/2016/en/>