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Colombia and its neighbours

## On the warpath

BOGOTÁ, CARACAS AND QUITO

Colombia is moving closer to breaking the FARC—unless Venezuela stops it

ON FEW, if any, other occasions has a head of state issued detailed orders for military mobilisation as jauntily as if he were ordering pizza, and on live television. That is what Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's president, did on March 2nd, after Colombian forces bombed a camp just inside Ecuador, killing Raul Reyes, a senior commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas.

"Minister of defence!" bellowed Mr Chavez, on "Aid Presidente" ("Hello President"), his weekly radio and television programme. "Send me ten battalions to the border, including tanks." He also ordered the forward deployment of his new Russian fighter-bombers, threatening that if Colombia's president, Alvaro Uribe, tried a similar raid on Venezuelan soil he would "send over the Sukhois". The next day he broke diplomatic ties with Colombia.

Venezuelan troops (pictured above) and tanks duly moved to the more populated points of the long border between the two countries. Customs officials halted Colombian trucks at the busiest crossing point, between Cúcuta and San Cristóbal.

What made this performance odd was that it was Ecuador, not Venezuela, whose sovereignty had been violated. True, Colombia has often accused Venezuela of harbouring guerrilla leaders and tolerating camps near the border similar to the one bombed in Ecuador. But did Venezuela's president have a guilty conscience?

"Maybe he knew what was coming," wrote Teodoro Petkoff, a guerrilla leader in the 1960s who now edits an opposition newspaper in Caracas. Mr Chavez's apparent over-reaction was a pre-emptive attempt to "throw a veil over the revelations he suspected might come from Raul Reyes' computer," suggested Mr Petkoff.

With Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, following Mr Chavez's lead, this week's events sent Latin America's diplomats scurrying to prevent war enveloping the neighbourhood. But they also laid bare that Colombia's government is coming close to breaking the back of the FARC, and in the process threatening to shine light on its murky relations with neighbouring governments.

When Mr Uribe took office in 2002, the guerrillas were rampant. His predecessor had just halted peace negotiations because the FARC had used a "demilitarised" zone created to host the talks as a base for recruitment and for kidnapping (many of the politicians it has held hostage were seized during the talks). The guerrillas had some 17,000 troops; they blocked main roads and bombarded small towns, kidnapping and killing almost at will. To make matters worse, the state's inability to provide security had spawned murderous right-wing paramilitary groups.

Mr Uribe's "democratic security" policy has achieved a dramatic change. By expanding the security forces, he has driven

the FARC from populated areas, while persuading most of the paramilitaries to demobilise. Officials reckon they have reduced the FARC'S ranks to fewer than 11,000. But the guerrillas withdrew to the vast tropical lowlands, to areas they have controlled for 40 years. There they resisted a two-year offensive by 18,000 troops. The army could not get near the FARC'S seven-man governing secretariat, of which Mr Reyes (the *nom de guerre* of Luis Edgar Devia) was a member.

### Seeking the secretariat

Thwarted, the security forces refined their strategy. They put more effort into seeking the FARC'S leaders using information from guerrilla deserters and infiltrators, and from sophisticated bugging equipment provided by the United States. Over the past year, this has started to pay off. Two FARC regional commanders have been killed and one captured. In January and February alone, the army claims to have killed 247 guerrillas and captured 226, with another 360 deserting. This pressure has pushed FARC units to the borders with Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama.



Last month the government received a tip-off that Mr Reyes was in a camp less than two kilometres (1.2 miles) inside Ecuador. Mr Uribe authorised a bombing raid by Brazilian-made Super Tucano aircraft, which killed at least 21 guerrillas. Colombian troops then crossed the border to recover Mr Reyes's corpse—and his laptop computers. (They left three wounded women guerrillas unattended.)

Most Colombians were jubilant that the government had struck at the very top of the FARC at last. Mr Reyes handled the guerrillas' relations with the outside world; he was one of three deputies to Manuel Marmola, the FARC'S elderly leader. For the first time the security forces have shown that they are capable of infiltrating and defeating the guerrillas through systematic strikes, said Roman Ortiz of Fundacion Ideas para la Paz, a Bogotá think-tank.

Mr Uribe doubtless thought that Mr Correa could be mollified over the cross-border raid. But spurred on by Mr Chavez, Ecuador's president sent 3,200 troops to the border and cut diplomatic ties. He demanded an emergency meeting of the Organisation of American States (OAS) to condemn Colombia, and set off on a tour of regional capitals seeking support.

### The laptop lode

Almost as important as the killing of Mr Reyes may be the capture of his laptops. Apart from inside information on the FARC, according to Colombian officials, they contain documents which—if true—are embarrassing to Mr Correa but highly damaging to Mr Chavez. As the FARC'S top negotiator, Mr Reyes appears to have met representatives of many governments. According to one e-mail, he met Gustavo Larrea, Mr Correa's security minister last month. Mr Larrea is alleged to have proposed a formal meeting in Quito to discuss securing the border and negotiating the release of some of the FARC'S yoo-odd hostages. Mr Larrea said that Colombian officials knew of his meeting, which was purely to talk about the hostages.

Ecuadorean officials have long swapped complaints with their Colombian counterparts about their mutual inability to prevent the FARC from crossing the border. Ecuador claims to spend \$160m a year containing the spillover. It is also angry about Colombia spraying coca fields on the border with weedkiller, which it says drifts south on to other crops.

Nevertheless, Ecuador has given some help to Colombia. Mr Correa claimed that last year his forces dismantled 47 FARC camps inside Ecuador and on three occasions carried out joint operations with Colombian troops. American surveillance aircraft still patrol over Colombia from an air base in Ecuador, although Mr Correa has promised not to renew the lease for



Reyes: a trafficker in hostages

this when it expires in 2009.

By contrast, Mr Chavez has recently been unambiguous in his support for the FARC. He fell out with Mr Uribe last year over his attempt to act as a mediator for the hostages. Since then he has cast aside his previous stance as an honest broker seeking a peaceful solution to Colombia's internal conflict. When the FARC turned over two hostages to him in January, Mr Chavez hailed the guerrillas as a "true army" whose status as belligerents should be recognised. No other government in the region, not even Cuba's, echoed this call. On "A16 Presidents" Mr Chavez held a minute's silence in honour of Mr Reyes, whom he said he had met three times over the years. He declared that Colombia needed to be "liberated" from its "subservience" to the United States.

Another document allegedly on Mr Reyes's computer showed that Mr Chavez paid (or planned to pay) the FARC \$300m. An (unrelated) e-mail to Mr Reyes suggested that the FARC were trying to obtain uranium for a "dirty bomb". All this prompted some far-fetched exchanges. Mr Uribe said that he would denounce Mr Chavez for "financing genocide"; in return, Venezuela accused Colombia's police chief, who revealed the contents of Mr Reyes's laptop, of being a "drug trafficker".

"This is...a microphone war," said General Raul Salazar, a former defence minister. Like many other Venezuelans, he doubts that it will become a real one. That is not least because many army officers do not want war with Colombia and find Mr Chavez's actions an "embarrassment", said another former defence minister, General Raul Baduel, who is now a prominent opponent of the president.

So what is Mr Chavez's game? One possible answer is his obsessive search for an external enemy to shore up his waning popularity at home. In December, his po-

litical blueprint for a socialist Venezuela, with indefinite presidential re-election, was defeated in a referendum. This came only a year after he won a second six-year term with 63% of the vote, and was the first time he had lost a national vote.

In November Venezuelans are due to vote for mayors and state governors. They are increasingly discontented about crime, an inflation rate that has surged to 25% and shortages of basic goods, including food and cooking gas. Because of Mr Chavez's mismanagement of agriculture, Venezuela imports much of its food from Colombia. Any lasting interruption of trade would hurt both countries (see chart). Reputable pollsters say that Mr Chavez's popularity has fallen well below 50%. Visible faction fights have broken out in his newly formed Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Picking a fight with Colombia and supporting the FARC are unlikely to win him friends. One poll, by Hinterlaces, showed 89% opposed to a war and 87% opposed to the FARC. So the reason for his military mobilisation may be to deter Colombia from moving against the FARC camps in Venezuela where some Colombian officials believe that Mr Marmola is based. A more worrying, though improbable, hypothesis is that Mr Chavez, a former army officer, is throwing off all pretence at being a civilian democrat and, fearing that he may not remain in power for long, wants to launch an assault on what he sees as American imperialism and its regional stooge, Mr Uribe.

Although George Bush gave public support to Mr Uribe, other governments in the region, led by Brazil, tried to drive a wedge between Mr Correa and Mr Chavez. There were signs that this might work. On March 9th Ecuador agreed to an OAS resolution criticising but not formally condemning Colombia. The OAS also agreed to investigate the bombing. Once the region's diplomats have patched things up between these two countries they face another, more intractable problem: Mr Chavez, still with oil money but politically on the defensive, may have thrown in his lot with an outlaw army of drug-traffickers. •

