

# Colombia's Magic Laptops

Tuesday 24 August 2010, by [DENVIR Daniel](#) (Date first published: 3 November 2008).

In September, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced that it was designating one former and two current high-ranking Venezuelan government officials as collaborators with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Hugo Carvajal, in charge of Venezuela's Military Intelligence Directorate, and Henry de Jesús Rangel Silva, head of the Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services (DISIP), were both said to have aided the FARC's drug-trafficking operations, while Ramón Rodríguez, former minister of interior and justice, was accused of being "the Venezuelan government's main weapons contact for the FARC" and trying "to facilitate a \$250 million loan from the Venezuelan government to the FARC in late 2007."

These assertions came a day after Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez announced that he was expelling the U.S. ambassador in solidarity with Bolivia's Evo Morales, who had done the same a day earlier. While OFAC did not specify its sources, an anonymous Bush administration official told The New York Times that the allegations were partly based on evidence from laptops recovered from a FARC camp in Ecuadoran territory bombed and raided by the Colombian military on March 1.

Raúl Reyes works on his "magic laptop" at a jungle camp in a photo taken eight months before the attack in Ecuador. (By Garry Leech/ ColombiaJournal.org)

This sequence of events was a familiar one: the expulsion of an ambassador, closely followed by charges of FARC collaboration based on evidence from the laptops. On March 2, Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa expelled the Colombian ambassador, charging that Colombia had knowingly violated Ecuador's sovereignty, despite the doublespeak coming from Colombian officials, including President Álvaro Uribe, that Colombia had bombed Ecuador without violating its airspace. Hours later, Uribe's press secretary told reporters that computers belonging to Raúl Reyes, the FARC's second in command who was killed in the raid, had been recovered and that they revealed disturbing links between the Correa government and the FARC. Colombian National Police general Óscar Naranjo then held a press conference in which he accused Ecuadoran security minister Gustavo Larrea of having met Reyes in January and agreeing to place Ecuadoran military units less hostile to the FARC along the border. Larrea denied this but did say he met with Reyes, the FARC's de facto ambassador, as part of approved hostage negotiations that were known to the Colombian government.

Colombia claimed to have found eight "computer exhibits"—consisting of three laptops, two external hard disks, and three USB thumb drives—that luckily survived the bombing, which killed 25 people. At first, Colombia variously claimed that the laptops contained 10,000 or 16,000 documents (as reported by The New York Times and The Washington Post, respectively). An Interpol report on the computer exhibits released in May found that they collectively contained almost 38,000 written documents (like Word files and PDFs), more than 10,000 sound and video files, and almost 211,000 images. Despite the massive volume of files—equivalent to almost 40 million pages in a Microsoft Word file, according to Interpol—the Colombians claimed to have culled from them specific, strategic information on the Correa and Chávez administrations within 24 hours.

These "magic laptops," which seem to supply evidence of FARC collaboration at opportune moments for the Colombian and U.S. governments, have formed the centerpiece of a propaganda campaign launched by the Colombian government and security forces, abetted by the media in Colombia, the

United States, and Spain. This campaign follows a well-established technique: Allegations of FARC ties have long been used in Colombia to defame human rights activists and dissident politicians, often leading to death threats or assassinations by the army or paramilitary forces. The laptop-based allegations have been made through press conferences and intelligence leaks, as new charges have been rolled out to counter Ecuador's consistent diplomatic victories at the Organization of American States (OAS) and other international bodies. It has also served to distract attention at home from a growing scandal connecting the Uribe administration to narco-paramilitaries, as well as to justify the government's policy of total war against the FARC.

The media campaign was launched as countries around the region—including Argentina, Chile, and Brazil—announced their support for Ecuador's position, criticizing the violation of the country's national sovereignty. The Colombian government, seeing its diplomatic fortunes wane, made more accusations, not just at Ecuador but increasingly at Venezuela, which also broke diplomatic relations with Colombia and deployed tanks to its border. Especially in the United States, the accusations against Venezuela soon eclipsed those against Ecuador.

The most serious accusation against the Venezuelan government was that it had promised the FARC a \$300 million payment or loan and that Chávez had maintained a financial relationship with the FARC since 1992. It was first reported as a payment that had already been made, perhaps in exchange for the FARC's February hostage release mediated by Chávez. But on March 30, The New York Times, relying on information leaked by the Colombian government, claimed that there was evidence of a \$250 million loan "to be paid when we take power." Mirroring Ecuador's appeal to international law, Colombia announced that it would take its charges of FARC ties to the OAS, and Uribe threatened to bring charges against Chávez before the UN International Criminal Court for "aiding genocide."

On March 4, the Colombian vice president also said the Reyes computers revealed that the FARC was seeking to acquire uranium in order to construct a "dirty bomb." But this claim was soon discredited—uranium, which is weakly radioactive, would be a poor choice for such a bomb, according to the Federation of American Scientists. Moreover, the e-mail message the accusation was based on, published in a Colombian magazine, seems to indicate only that the FARC was interested in acquiring and then selling the material for profit.

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Media outlets, particularly in Colombia, the United States, and Spain, were complicit in the Colombian propaganda campaign, embedding themselves in a perceived fight against the FARC and its supposed allies in the Ecuadoran and Venezuelan governments. As an unnamed U.S. intelligence official told the Los Angeles Times in March: "I think you have to take at face value what the Colombians are saying." The mainstream media have done just that—particularly in Colombia. For example, on March 3, the website of the Colombian daily El Tiempo published a gallery of 26 photos, purportedly from the laptops, leaked to the paper by an unidentified Colombian intelligence official. The low-quality, surveillance-style photos center on people attending the international conference of the Continental Bolivarian Coordinating Committee (CCB), a small left-wing organization with chapters throughout Latin America, - held the week before in Quito.

Purportedly taken clandestinely by the FARC, the photos were said to demonstrate contacts between Venezuelan Communist Party secretary general Óscar Figuera—a distant ally of Chávez—and the FARC, as well as members of Batasuna, the political wing of the armed Basque separatist group ETA. The paper ran a March 7 story based on the photos, as well as documents provided by the same intelligence source, titled "Trace of ETA in Reyes' PC."

Photo from inside the CCB conference. The three bearded men from left to right: Walter Wendelin, Askapena representative; Iñaki Gil, Batasuna's representative to Latin America; and Carlos Casanueva, member of the Partido Comunista de Chile's Central Committee and a CCB leader. (Photo from ElTiempo.com)

Besides Figueroa, the people photographed included two Basque separatists, a member of the Chilean Communist Party's Central Committee, a visiting Mexican student (four other Mexican students were killed in the attack), a member of the Chilean Communist Youth (who, along with another Chilean, visited the FARC camp just before it was bombed), an unnamed Italian CCB delegate, and at least five other unidentified people. (NACLA identified the people in the photographs through comparisons with other publicly available photos and interviews with CCB members.) All of the people photographed were ostensible FARC allies, leading this reporter to ask himself: Why would the FARC spy on its friends? Spying on friends is not unheard of among nations, but all the same, the photos seemed more likely to have been taken by Colombian intelligence or allied intelligence or police agency.

The photos remained online for about a week until they were abruptly taken down without notice. Contacted over the phone by NACLA, El Tiempo reporters said the photos were from the FARC laptops but were unsure why they were removed from the website. Later, Jhon Torres, the paper's Justice section editor, said they were taken down because of credible doubts that the photos were not in fact from the laptop. A retraction had been issued, he said, but there seemed to be no such thing in any of El Tiempo's online archives.

Torres maintained that the intelligence source insists the photos were genuine, and that all of the people captured in the CCB photos were also in photos found on Reyes's laptops, but this could not be confirmed. Although Torres agreed that the photos appeared to have been taken by foreign intelligence operatives, he played down the notion that the Colombian government purposely leaked false information, speculating that the photos' arrival at the El Tiempo offices was an accidental "infection" of the laptop evidence with material from Colombian intelligence. He characterized his intelligence source as acting alone rather than as part of an orchestrated campaign. During a second interview, Torres confirmed that El Tiempo had in fact not issued any retractions regarding the photos.

"Perhaps we could have done a better job clarifying our opinions of the photos," he said.

Surveillance photo of the Continental Bolivarian Coordinating Committee (CCB) in Quito a week before the bombing of the FARC camp. (Photo from ElTiempo.com)

A more high-profile misrepresentation came on March 17, when El Tiempo published a photo in its print edition of Reyes together with a man it claimed to be Ecuadoran security minister Larrea, which would fortify the Colombian government's claim of Ecuador-FARC links. The man in question turned out to be Patricio Echegaray, secretary-general of the Argentine Communist Party. El Tiempo claimed that Colombian government sources provided the photo, saying that it was from the laptop. The photo was released the same day that Ecuador conducted a tour of its Colombian border for the international press, in an attempt to rebut a March 12 report in Spain's El País. The report cited evidence from the laptops and testimony from former FARC members indicating that Ecuador was home to at least eight FARC camps. The FARC's access to Ecuadoran territory, the paper asserted, was due to "networks of corruption tied to local and military authorities." This allegation, now relying on the statements of former FARC members in Colombian government custody, have resurfaced in recent media coverage.

Such accusations often seemed perfectly timed to Ecuador's successful regional diplomacy. As early

as March 5, four days after the Colombian incursion, the OAS resolved that Colombia had violated Ecuador's sovereignty and affirmed that the attack violated the OAS charter (although the regional body stopped short of condemning Colombia). The Rio Group Summit, held March 7, began with denunciations of the Colombian attack on all sides and ended with what the media widely considered a success—hugs. Colombia apologized, and pundits prematurely declared an end to the crisis. Uribe ceased threatening to take Chávez to the ICC, but Colombia had never planned on stopping its allegations.

The same day as the summit, The Washington Post published an article titled "Colombian Rebels' Ties to Chávez Come Into Focus: Computer Files Found in Raid Detail Efforts to Gain Arms, Money." The article was based on "30 documents, provided on two CDs to the Post by senior government officials," including FARC e-mails, some of them addressed to Chávez, about relationships with the Venezuelan government. They supposedly revealed Venezuelan financial support for the FARC along with a money-laundering scheme involving selling Venezuelan oil in Colombia. The next day, the OAS again disapproved of the attack at a meeting of the region's foreign ministers; a week later, at a Jacksonville, Florida speech, President Bush repeated the charges against Venezuela.

"Recently when Colombian forces killed one of the FARC's most senior leaders," Bush said, "they discovered computer files that suggest even closer ties between Venezuela's regime and FARC terrorists than we previously knew. Colombia officials are investigating the ties, but this much should be clear: The United States strongly supports, strongly stands with Colombia in its fight against the terrorists and drug lords." He added that ratifying the Colombia Free Trade Agreement would be "the way to help [Colombia] develop more momentum toward peace."

Two unidentified men leaving the CCB conference. El Tiempo published at least one other photo of the man on the right. (Photo from ElTiempo.com)

On March 30, The New York Times ran an article on 20 files provided by Colombian officials that allegedly demonstrated Venezuela's efforts to arm the FARC as well as contributions from the guerrillas to Correa's 2006 presidential campaign. "If verified," the Times noted, "the files would offer rare insight into the cloak-and-dagger nature of Latin America's longest-running guerrilla conflict." The files "contained touches that suggested authenticity," the Times reported, like "revolutionary jargon, passages in numerical code, missives about American policy in Latin America and even brief personal reflections like one by a senior rebel commander on the joy of becoming a grandfather."

In the same article, the Times twice quoted the files used to accuse Venezuela's Carvajal of having helped the FARC acquire weapons. Both quotations included references to Carvajal by name, for example: "Today I met with General Hugo Carvajal." This is not language one would expect from a "cloak and dagger" message, which would presumably have used codenames. Investigative journalist Greg Palast made this point early on after reading the e-mail message that formed the basis for the accusation of a \$300 million Venezuela-FARC financing scheme. The note, which was mostly about hostage negotiations, made only one reference to a "300": "With relation to the 300, which from now on we will call 'dossier,' efforts are now going forward at the instructions of the boss to the cripple, which I will explain in a separate note. Let's call the boss Ángel, and the cripple Ernesto."

Not only was it unclear what the "300" actually referred to, but the Colombians claimed that the "Ángel" referred to in the note was a codename for Chávez. Yet the next sentence in the note refers to the Venezuelan president by name. "No one would begin an important letter by identifying someone in relation to his or her pseudonym," Forrest Hylton, author of *Evil Hour in Colombia* (Verso, 2006), told Venezuelanalysis.com. "That is not how clandestine organization works."

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As the Colombian government soon realized, the public credibility of its hastily made accusations required at least the appearance of independent corroboration. On March 4, after most of the accusations had been made public, Colombia contacted Interpol, the international police agency, and requested an investigation of its evidence. But Interpol's report on the matter, issued in May, explicitly stated that verifying the authenticity of the laptop user files was outside its purview. Rather, Interpol sought to determine if any of the computers' user files had been "created, modified or deleted" on or after March 1, and it found "no evidence" of this.

Interpol secretary-general Ronald Noble announced the findings in Bogotá, but his comments about the computer files' provenance went far beyond the actual findings of the report. "No one can ever question whether or not the Colombian government tampered with the seized FARC computers," he was quoted as saying in *The Washington Post*. "We are absolutely certain that the computer exhibits that our experts examined came from a FARC terrorist camp." Yet the Interpol report made no such claims. Even in Noble's officially drafted press statement (available on Interpol's website), he said Interpol did not "evaluate the accuracy or the source of the exhibits' content." Moreover, "to find no evidence of something is not the same as saying that it absolutely did not happen, or that 'no one can ever question' whether it happened," as an open letter to Noble, signed by 14 U.S. academics (including members of NACLA's editorial committee), stated. To date, Interpol has not replied to the letter.

Noble said Colombians had "reason to be proud of the manner in which their police handled the evidence"—even though the report notes that between March 1 and March 3, Colombian authorities "did not conform to internationally recognized principles for handling electronic evidence." Instead of making write-protected copies of the hard drives, which can be performed without turning the computers on, the Colombians viewed and downloaded the computers' contents. This was registered by hundreds of alterations in the computers' system files, which is a normal occurrence when computers are turned on and off, according to Interpol.

Despite its limitations, the Interpol report became another salvo in the Colombian disinformation campaign, as headlines trumpeted a checkmate for the Uribe administration: "FARC Computer Files Are Authentic, Interpol Probe Finds" (*The Washington Post*, May 15), a May 25 *Times* editorial said that Interpol had confirmed "Mr. Chávez's Unsavory Friends," and *El País* ran with "Interpol Confirms Ecuador and Chávez's Relationship to FARC." Meanwhile, the very day after the Interpol report received so much news coverage, the website of the Colombian magazine *Semana* reported that hard drives and mobile-phone SIM cards belonging to high-level paramilitary leaders extradited to the United States on drug-trafficking charges, had been lost. Hardware belonging to three paramilitary leaders disappeared and was never recovered. Information taken from the laptop of one of the paramilitary bosses, Rodrigo Tovar Pupo a.k.a. Jorge 40, sparked the so-called paramilitary-political scandal in spring 2006, eventually leading to the jailing of more than 30 of Uribe's parliamentary allies, including Mario Uribe, his cousin, on charges of colluding with narco-paramilitaries. The disappearance of these computers—possibly containing evidence of connections between the paramilitaries and the Uribe administration that could have been entered into court records in the United States—received scant attention in the United States, even though they caused a scandal in Colombia.

But it was the spectacular July 2 rescue of former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, held hostage by the FARC since 2002, that served as the Colombian media campaign's ultimate coup de grâce. Carried off without a single shot, the rescue was a media masterpiece, with news stories featuring photos of a smiling Betancourt hugging the triumphant Uribe. The operation reinforced Uribe's political dominance at home, consolidated his policy of "military victory" against

the FARC, and undermined the positions of his regional rivals—most significantly Chávez, who had successfully brokered the release of four hostages in February.

Meanwhile, the laptops are the gift that keeps on giving. In May, Colombian prosecutor-general Mario Iguarán announced that he was formally investigating several people, including Liberal Party senator Piedad Córdoba, U.S. development consultant Jim Jones, and Telesur reporter William Parra, of FARC ties. The following month, Peruvian intelligence was provided copies of e-mails supposedly exchanged between Peruvians and the FARC. During a June visit to El Salvador, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte said he found allegations of FMLN ties to the FARC “very troubling,” allegations that surfaced in May based on laptop e-mails. Uribe’s war on terror, and that of his allies, shows no signs of letting up, and the use of unverified electronic evidence to prosecute that war seems likely to continue.

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