

Chavez-Santos Summit in Colombia: UNASUR-brokered peace breaks out

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The already bad relations between Venezuela and Colombia took a turn for the worse after the accusations made by the outgoing Uribe government's OAS representative, Luis Hoyos, who charged the Venezuelan government with harbouring Colombian guerrillas (1,500) and allowing guerrilla camps (85) inside its territory. The "evidence" - which has been pretty discredited [1] - for this batch of accusations -as with previous ones- also came from the eight 'magical laptops' seized by Colombian military forces in an illegal military attack in March 1, 2009.

Chavez reacted by breaking off relations with Colombia, leading to a further worsening of the relations between the two nations, but sent his foreign minister to attend Santos' inauguration anyway. Uribe's response was to announce that his government was lodging a formal accusation against Venezuela in the Inter-American Committee of Human Rights and another formal charge against President Chavez personally to the International Criminal Court, one day before Juan Manuel Santos inauguration. Furthermore, Uribe, reportedly, announced he would be prepared to testify to the ICC against Hugo Chavez.

However, after intense diplomatic activity undertaken by UNASUR, Nicolas Maduro, Venezuela's Foreign Relations Minister, Nestor Kirchner, UNASUR's President, and Brazil's President, Lula, the latter two very publicly meeting with both Hugo Chavez and Juan Manuel Santos at various separate meetings, managed, in a matter of few days, to turn what looked like an inexorable slide to disaster, into one of the most extraordinary political turnarounds from the brink in recent Latin American history.

At his inauguration, Juan Manuel Santos stunned the world by announcing that his administration would be seeking to repair and normalise Colombia's relations with Venezuela and Ecuador as a matter of priority. And in stark contrast to the prevailing attitude under Uribe, Santos declared "The word war is not in my dictionary when I think about Colombia's relations with its neighbours" (a far cry from Uribe's warmongering). Furthermore, Santos had previously indicated his willingness, under certain conditions, to even talk to the Colombian guerrillas. More surprises were to follow: Santos ordered the handing over of Raul Reyes' 'magical laptops' to the government of Ecuador.

Some in the British media such as *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, the BBC and, of course, the ubiquitous Human Rights Watch, enthusiastically accepted the evidence publicised by the Colombian authorities at the time. The attitude of the US corporate media was significantly worse. As is well known, but not widely publicised by the corporate media, Ronald Coy, Head of Colombia's technical police, admitted to an official investigation both that the data in the laptops had been manipulated before it was subjected to judicial review and that no emails had been found in them [2] (this did not prevent *The Guardian's* Latin American correspondent, Rory Carroll, from reading several emails from the magical laptops, as he reported at the time).

We shall very soon see how much of Mr Hoyos' "evidence" to the OAS is left standing after Ecuador's expert analysis of the 'magical laptops' takes place. The Venezuelan government has consistently denied any such charges and to this day, apart from regular media repetition of Uribista

“false positives”, no serious evidence of any kind has been produced to substantiate the allegations that Venezuela harbours guerrillas and guerrilla camps in its territory or that it gives them resources and weapons.

Venezuela and Colombia share a 1,375-mile of very porous border. Colombia’s internal conflict has the unfortunate dynamic of spilling over into other countries in the form of guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug traffickers, refugees, and immigrants escaping from the conflict (about 5 million Colombians reside permanently in Venezuela). It is estimated that overall, Colombia’s military have over 300,000 soldiers -proportionately one of the largest in the region, and seven times larger than the armed forces of Venezuela - and have benefited from US\$7 bn in military aid -the second largest in the world- which are nevertheless incapable to controlling their own domestic terrain in which there are about 8,000 armed guerrilla fighters, many thousands of active illegal paramilitary forces and a great deal of drug trafficking. Most of the cocaine in the world is produced in Colombia, and most of cocaine production takes place in Colombia- according to UNODOC about 50%. Furthermore, Venezuela finds itself geographically sandwiched between the largest producer and the largest consumer of cocaine in the world, Colombia and the United States respectively.

After Santos’ inauguration, events have developed at neck-breaking speed. Assisted by Nestor Kirchner, the Foreign Ministers of Colombia and Venezuela met last Sunday in Bogota, and they announced that Presidents Santos and Chavez would be meeting at a special summit on Tuesday 10 August in Colombia. Chavez immediately seized the opportunity offered by his Colombian counterpart and called upon the guerrillas to seek a political solution [3]: “The Colombian guerrillas do not have a future by way of arms... moreover, they have become an excuse for the [US] empire to intervene in Colombia and threaten Venezuela from there” he said on Sunday. He also called upon them to show their commitment to a peace accord through “decisive demonstrations, for example, that they liberate all those they have kidnapped.”

It is clear that Santos wanted to repair relations with Venezuela and Ecuador and that he was willing to accept UNASUR’s good offices to facilitate his meeting with President Chavez. However, the most significant aspects of this development is that Santos was determined to seek the improvement of Colombia’s relations with Venezuela and Ecuador, partly because it wanted to end Colombia’s regional isolation, but also because the almost complete cessation of trade with Venezuela was making Colombia’s economy scream (their mutual trade had declined by 73.7%). It is also clear that Uribe knew this and all his last-minute rabid attacks on Venezuela seemed to have been aimed more at Santos than Chavez. Uribe desperately tried to torpedo the Colombo-Venezuelan rapprochement because he knew it was in the offing.

Uribe’s desperate efforts mirror the actions of powerful forces in Washington which have been vigorously lobbying to declare Venezuela a “state that sponsors terrorism”, “a narco-state” (view which is specially strong in SOUTHCOM and the US Congress - and which, therefore, seem to favour a ‘military’ solution to the US ‘Venezuelan problem’). SOUTHCOM has been busily installing US military bases everywhere in the region and has even resuscitated the IV Fleet (which was decommissioned in 1950). The US has deployed 20,000 soldiers in Haiti after the earthquake and has also stationed massive military forces in Costa Rica (7,000 soldiers, 200 helicopters and 46 warships until the end of December 2010). Thus, labeling Venezuela a ‘sponsor of terrorism’ is not just right-wing rhetoric, it may have very serious military consequences. Regional leaders are very alarmed about these developments and have expressed serious concern.

A normally omitted dimension of Colombo-Venezuelan relations is the attitude of Venezuela’s right wing. In every Venezuela-Colombia spat under Uribe’s two presidential mandates, they have sided enthusiastically with Uribe. They did so again this time but were unwittingly wrong-footed by Santos’ announcement. When it comes to opposing President Chavez Venezuela’s right wing seem to

have no sense of proportion, thus, for instance, the governor of the state of Táchira, Cesar Perez Vivas, a member of COPEI, went as far as to appeal to Chavez not to make the US military bases in that country a precondition for the normalisation of relations with Colombia. Venezuelan TV broadcaster, Alberto Nolla, suggested that during the crisis unleashed by the Uribe's actions, the Venezuelan right wing media was more strident in their support for Uribe than the Colombian media had been during the same period. Any cursory look at the main right wing newspapers such as *El Universal* and *El Nacional* and TV channels such as Globovision confirm this conclusively.

What is totally unprecedented is the fact that the US administration was de facto reduced to the role of spectator (specialists confirm this). The U.S. were supportive of the accusations against Chavez at the OAS (...“our concerns about the links between Venezuela and the FARC that we have not certified Venezuela in recent years as fully cooperating with the United States and others in terms of these antiterrorism efforts,” stated U.S. ambassador to OAS) but were clearly sidelined by UNASUR's brinkmanship which managed to bring the rapprochement between Colombia and Venezuela. It is Santos, Chavez and UNASUR (especially Brazil) who have been doing the running (“Brazil's government has made it clear that it would like the matter to be taken up within UNASUR, without the influence of the United States. It proclaimed South America a “region of peace” and affirmed that problems between countries should be first dealt with bilaterally.) This reality shows first the growing assertiveness and independence of the region from U.S. influence, but secondly, it shows that underlying this political reality there is the growing independence of the region from traditional economic centres and a steady distancing from the U.S. The Tectonic plates have dramatically shifted and most Latin American leaders feel they have averted an almost certain Uribe-US driven war.

It remains to be seen how far this summit takes the two countries. They have decided to fully restore their relations in every field and the two presidents have established five commissions within the framework of a statement of principles signed by them. They include a commission for debt; another for the economic collaboration between the two countries; one for the development of a plan of investment in their common border; another for the joint undertaking of infrastructural works; and a security commission. Both heads of state undertook a commitment to collaborate in the struggle against drug trafficking, paramilitary and illegal armed activity. Colombia has sent the President of Colombia's Congress, Armando Benedetti, to assist the process of full restoration of relations between the two countries. The OAS reacted by applauding the diplomacy of Santos and Chavez. There has been popular rejoice in both countries. Not all the issues pending between the two nations were, however, addressed, such as the U.S. military bases in Colombia, the urgent need for a peace process in Colombia, and the charges levelled by Uribe against Venezuela to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights and against President Chavez personally to the International Criminal Court.

The dogs of war have been kept at bay, at least temporarily. Peace has broken out. The full restoration of relations between Venezuela and Colombia is indeed very positive. However, the array of forces set against the implementation of such a broad peaceful agenda is also pretty formidable. For start it is led by the U.S. and it also involves powerful economic groups in most countries in the region, such as the separatists in the Eastern of Bolivia, that nearly overthrew Morales' government in 2009; the Venezuelan right which managed to actually oust Chavez in 2002 -but who the people returned to power-; the Colombian oligarchy itself; the extremely wealthy and powerful Chilean Pinochetista bourgeoisie; the right in Argentina; the very wealthy Guayaquil entrepreneurs; and so forth. All of whom in one way or another favour the US militarisation of the region as a solution of last resort in the face of radical social movements and progressive governments in the continent. In the meantime the U.S. militarisation of the region continues apace.

It is in the interest of Latin America, very well represented on this historic occasion by UNASUR, to

help the Colombian oligarchy to loosen the too uncomfortable US embrace in which Uribe got them into. On the other hand there are the U.S. hegemonic interests in the region and its growing oil dependency from fiercely nationalist governments which are asserting their independence collectively. Washington's political and military strategists must be stunned by the extraordinary rapprochement between Santos and Chavez.

Uribe's insane efforts to bring about a war with Venezuela, underscores the 'predicament' the U.S. finds itself in: faced with the rebellion of its Southern neighbours, unable to win politically, and incapable of offering anything such as development, progress, investment or even the American Way of life (which is crushingly coming to an end in the United States itself), has decided to resort to war to maintain its backyard under subjection. Latin America has opted for democracy, social progress, national sovereignty and peace. On this occasion even the staunchest pro U.S. Colombian oligarchy have sided with the South, not the North. We shall see who beats the other in the historic arm-wrestling underway.

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P.S.

* From Venezuela Solidarity Campaign:

http://left-click.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=751&Itemid=30

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [Colombia's Magic Laptops](#)

[2] See on ESSF: [Colombia: Police investigator admits manipulating Reyes' files](#)

[3] <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/5557>