

Destabilising Venezuela

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United States measures for re-sisting progressive changes in Latin America have included funding for right-wing opposition groups, military deployment throughout the region, and the reactivating of the US Navy Fourth Fleet for monitoring the continent.

This year, seven new bases have been announced for Colombia, as well as one in Peru and two in Panama.

Efforts to destabilise Venezuela's progressive government have been part of the mix. Assets include the Venezuelan elite and Colombian military force.

The failed coup to remove President Hugo Chavez and the attempted shutdown of the state oil company seven years ago were early signs. Since then, Colombian paramilitary formations, in league with Colombia's US puppet government and right-wing elements in Venezuela, have embarked upon mayhem.

First-hand testimony suggests paramilitaries plotted to assassinate President Hugo Chavez.

The Miami *El Nuevo Herald* recently published a prison interview with ex-Colombian paramilitary fighter Geovanny Velasquez Zam-brano. He said he attended two meetings almost 10 years ago at which Manuel Rosales, then mayor of Maracaibo in the Venezuelan state of Zulia, offered US\$25 million for killing Chavez.

Rosales hinted at US sources.

Velasquez said paramilitary chieftain Jorge Ivan Laverde, known as "el Iguano", accepted the offer: "I have the guys to kill this gentleman."

The plotters established a training camp in Catatumbo in Colombia to prepare for forays into Venezuela. Velasquez's own group entered Venezuela in 2000.

El Nuevo Herald said Laverde, also a prisoner, accused high Colombian Army officers of orchestrating paramilitary ventures.

From 2000 to 2008, Rosales governed Zulia. In 2006 he was the right-wing opposition's candidate in a losing bid for the presidency and that year allegedly met Colombian paramilitaries again in a border town.

In April, Rosales escaped to Peru to avoid corruption charges.

In late September, a video of Velasquez' testimony before Colombian prosecutors appeared on the Al Jazeera website, along with US-Venezuela lawyer Eva Golinger's commentary.

Interviewed by Latin American TV station TeleSur, Golinger characterised paramilitary intrusion into Venezuela as "part of what the United States classifies as irregular war [using] military groups to promote violent actions".

She raised the 2004 assassination of Venezuelan chief prosecutor Danilo Anderson, who was leading the investigation into those who organised the failed 2002 coup against Chavez, as one example.

Citing a US Southern Command document dated April 13, 2003, Golinger accused Washington of creating a new "United Self Defence Forces of Venezuela" organised by paramilitaries of the United Self Defence Forces of Colombia.

Golinger raised the arrest in 2004 of more than 100 Colombian paramilitaries lodged at a farm near Caracas who were preparing to assassinate Chavez. She estimated 3000 Colombian paramilitaries are active in Venezuela now.

Acting upon Velasquez's revelations, Venezuela's Attorney-General Luisa Ortega began an investigation of paramilitary threats against Chavez.

Such reports are not new.

In media interviews in 2003, 2006 and September 3 this year (2009), former Colombian intelligence official Rafael Garcia, jailed for bribery, claimed Colombian government officials conspired with paramilitary chiefs to create turmoil in Venezuela and assassinate Venezuelan leaders, including Chavez.

Garcia said: "It was all a conspiracy against the Venezuelan government in which the DAS (his own intelligence agency) and factions of the Northern Bloc [of paramilitaries] participated."

Dissident Venezuelan military officers were involved.

An imprisoned Colombian Army officer, interviewed by *El Nuevo Herald*, corroborated the claims.

Mauricio Llorente, a graduate of the US-run military school, the School of the Americas, who was convicted of allowing paramilitary massacres in Catatumbo in 1999, said a "professional soldier" under his command, Jose Misael Valero Santa (aka "Lucas"), was preparing to kill Chavez.

Llorente told the interviewer Lucas still commanded 1000 paramilitaries.

In Miami, right-wing Cuban and Venezuelan exiles have maintained a joint anti-Chavez project. Like Cuban-American counterpart groups, the so-called Venezuelan Patriotic Union carries out training exercises in the Everglades.

Retired Miami-area FBI head Hector Pesquera attended a meeting in 2003 in Panama where, according to *El Nuevo Herald*, the assassination of Danilo Anderson was planned.

Closely allied with Cuban-American honchos in Miami, Pesquera headed the FBI investigation leading to the conviction and skewed sentencing of the Cuban Five political prisoners. The Cuban Five are five Cuban men jailed for anti-terrorist activities aimed at protecting Cuba from Miami-based right-wing groups.

Golinger described the purpose of a seminar organised jointly last May by the conservative Cato Institute in Washington and a US-funded non-government organisation in Caracas as "training youth in the tactics of 'gradual coup' and subversion".

Destabilisation and whittling away at governance are traditional US tools for maintaining hegemony.

Under Operation Mongoose in the 1960s, US operatives bedevilled Cuba with assassination attempts, guerrilla insurgency, wholesale sabotage and terrorism.

A decade later in Chile, before the Pinochet takeover and death of Allende, the US, in the words of then-president Richard Nixon, "made the economy scream" through destabilisation tactics and carried out selective killings. □□□