

# WebMemo



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## Strengthening U.S. Anti-Narcotics Efforts in Colombia

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To preserve and strengthen U.S. counter-drug capacity, the Obama Administration is negotiating for the right to use air and naval facilities in Colombia. If these negotiations are successful, the U.S. forward operating location (FOL) in the battle against cocaine-traffickers and guerrillas in the Andean-Pacific region would transfer from Manta in Ecuador to Colombia. Such a move would signal strong U.S. support for Colombia's fight against drugs and guerrillas. It would also demonstrate that America will not be intimidated by the anti-U.S. rhetoric and threats of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

**From Ecuador to Colombia.** Between 1999 and 2009, the U.S. operated an FOL in Ecuador. Similar FOLs are located in El Salvador and Aruba/Curacao. An FOL allows U.S. aircraft to use preexisting facilities on a regular basis. Because the U.S. acts more as tenant than proprietor, the Department of Defense does not consider FOLs to be military bases.

However, the U.S. still invested \$70 million in improvements to the runway and facilities at Manta. Intelligence collected there was shared with Ecuador and also sent to Joint Inter-Agency Task Force South at Key West, the hub for anti-drug and anti-terror coordination on America's southern flank. U.S. officials credited aircraft operating from Manta with assisting in 60 percent of successful drug interdictions in the eastern Pacific.

Leftist President (and Chávez ally) Rafael Correa of Ecuador claimed that the U.S. presence at Manta endangered national sovereignty and, consequently, refused to renew the lease that expires later this year. The last surveillance flight from Manta took place in July, and the U.S. is now packing up and preparing to leave.

Since July, U.S. negotiations with Colombia have intensified, and a 10-year agreement on a new FOL appears close. Palenquero air base, about 60 miles northwest of Bogota, will be a central site for the FOL. The U.S. Congress has already earmarked \$46 million for runway and hangar improvements. The new agreement may also allow access to as many as six other Colombian military/naval facilities.

Again, the emphasis is on leasing, access, and cooperation—not permanent bases. While an agreement will allow unarmed surveillance flights by E-AWACS and P-3 Orions, negotiators say there will be no increase in the number of U.S. personnel stationed in Colombia, currently capped at 800 uniformed military and 600 civilian contractors. Flights originating in Colombia will not enter neighboring nations' airspace. The FOL-based flights will, however, support Plan Colombia operations against drug traffickers, guerrillas, and paramilitaries involved in the drug trade.

**Continuity in the Drug Fight.** In the area of counter-narcotics and security strategy in the Western Hemisphere, the Obama Administration's policies mirror those of the Bush Administration. For example, it has embraced the 2007 Merida Initiative designed to augment counter-drug assistance in Mexico and bolster anti-drug activity in Central America and Hispaniola through a three-year, \$1.4

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billion program. Furthermore, a new Caribbean Security Initiative will channel an estimated \$40 million in assistance to smaller, vulnerable island states. Concern continues to mount, however, that as cartels are defeated in Mexico, Central America will increasingly become a focal transit point for cocaine trafficking in the Western Hemisphere. The Obama Administration hopes to limit the impact of this “balloon effect.”

**Chávez and UNASUR.** A chorus of Latin American voices have objected to the U.S.–Colombia negotiations. The loudest thus far has been Chávez and his allies within the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) alliance. Other members of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), such as Brazil’s President Lula da Silva and Chile’s Michelle Bachelet, have also signaled concern about the transfer of the FOL to Colombia. They want further U.S. consultations and explanations.

With apocalyptic distortions, Chávez claims that the U.S. presence in Colombia threatens Venezuela’s national security and increases the chance for war in the region. Chávez has also stated that the U.S. aims to control Venezuela’s oil and exert control over the Amazon.

Chávez comments are an attempt to distract international attention from recent revelations regarding the transfer of Swedish-made anti-tank weapons—sold to the Venezuelan military in the 1980s—to narco-terrorists of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), most likely in late 2007 or early 2008. Likewise, such remarks seek to mask Venezuela’s growing ineffectiveness in the fight against drugs: The amount of cocaine transiting Venezuela, for example, rose from 50 metric tons in 2002 to 250 tons in 2008.

Chávez is also using the FOL issue and continued hostility to “U.S. imperialism” to justify expanding ties with Russia, Belarus, and Iran. He recently announced a September visit to Russia and Belarus and promises to enlarge his military arsenal, most likely with the purchase of Russian-made armor.

In addition to his usual bombastic rhetoric, Chávez seeks to punish Colombia economically for its cooperation with the U.S. Retaliatory measures being implemented by Venezuela include the cancellation of an auto deal that would have purchased 10,000 Colombian-made automobiles, a reduced

energy supply to Colombia, and agricultural deals with Argentina aimed at reducing the \$6 billion trade from Colombia to Venezuela.

Members of UNASUR will meet in Bariloche, Argentina, on August 28 to formulate an official position on the FOLs. Colombian President Alvaro Uribe does not want to see his country scapegoated for its decision to work with the U.S. Accordingly, he has called for a review of all issues influencing hemispheric security, including drug trafficking, support for insurgent groups, and military ties with countries like Iran and Russia as well as the U.S.

**Taking Action.** In light of the need to preserve and strengthen U.S. counter-drug capacity, Congress and the Administration should take the following steps:

- **Strengthen America’s commitment to fight the drug trade.** Congress should provide adequate funding for the FOL agreement and operations and link this to ongoing efforts in the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico.
- **Pursue regional security diplomacy.** Once FOL negotiations are completed, the Administration must brief key allies in the region like Brazil, counter Chávez’s propaganda, and urge comprehensive backing for tough anti-drug, anti-terror actions.
- **Pass the Colombia Free Trade Agreement.** The FOL negotiations indicate the critical importance of Colombia and its commitment to the drug fight despite economic intimidation by Chávez. Congress can help counter Chávez’s economic blackmail by promptly passing the Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

**An American Response.** In Colombia, Honduras, and elsewhere, the Obama Administration faces the persistent, propagandistic opposition of Chávez and the ALBA alliance. Their commitment to an anti-American strategy of deceit and non-cooperation on security issues vital to the Western Hemisphere opens doors for the expansion of criminality, drug trafficking, and terrorism throughout the Americas. As a result, their actions cannot go unchecked.

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