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**THE LONG ROAD TO PEACE IN COLOMBIA.  
COLOMBIA'S DIFFICULT RELATIONS WITH  
ITS NEIGHBOURS: VENEZUELA (PART 2).**

*Carlos Malamud*

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## The long road to peace in Colombia. Colombia's difficult relations with its neighbours: Venezuela (part 2).

Carlos Malamud \*

Of all Colombia's borders(1) with its neighbours, the one it shares with Venezuela is the most active and troublesome. Ample proof of this was provided in the last days of 2003 by the deaths of nine Venezuelan national guardsmen, following a series of clashes between the National Guard and Colombian paramilitaries (2). But as well as this recent escalation of tension, this 2,219 kilometre-long border has its daily ration of criminal activities, such as terrorist actions by paramilitary and guerrilla fighters, the comings and goings of drug traffickers and all kinds of rustlers and smugglers. The border is also a kind of privileged vantage point from which to witness the on-going deterioration of the Venezuelan economy, aggravated as it is by the evolution of the exchange rate between the dollar and the bolívar that has had a negative effect on cross-border trade (in one direction, at least).

In 2000, the border with Venezuela was the richest and most dynamic of the five Colombia shares with its neighbours. In Colombian territory, the departmental per capita GDP was slightly over 3,100,000 pesos, a much higher figure than that of the other border areas. Things have changed drastically, however, in the past few years, due mainly to the deterioration of the Venezuelan economy as a result of the bad economic policies of Hugo Chávez and the poor management of a succession of economics ministers. In 2003, Venezuela's GDP dropped by 9.3%, after a previous fall of 8.9% in 2002 (3). The high tension existing between the two neighbouring countries, especially in the border area, can be explained by taking into account not only these figures but also the bad relations between the governments of Caracas and Bogotá as a direct result of Hugo Chávez's apparent support for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). This is a worrying situation that, were it to continue to deteriorate, could re-start an arms race in the region and threaten seriously the stability of the whole of South America. The prospect becomes even grimmer if relations between the two governments and the US are taken into account. Whereas Colombia is the 'pet-child' of the Bush Administration in Latin America (Plan Colombia) (4), Venezuela is the exact opposite, with the reputation of the Chávez government decreasing in Washington as a result of Cuba's growing influence on its policies and programmes (5).

Notwithstanding the ideological stances of the leaders of the two countries, it is the attitude of Hugo Chávez's government that makes Colombia's border problems with Venezuela markedly different from those with its other neighbours and seriously aggravates the situation. To give an example: it would be unthinkable at the moment that something like the capture in Quito of Juvenal Ovidio Ricardo, alias *Simón Trinidad*, should have taken place in Caracas, given the degree of complicity between the governments and the armed and security forces of both countries that such an action requires (6). Despite the fact that both Venezuela and Colombia are members of the Andean Community (AC), a sub-regional organization striving to achieve consensus on policies for the fight against drug trafficking and other criminal activities (7), it has so far proved quite difficult to progress on any specific measure beyond the routine statements

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\* Senior Analyst, Latin America  
Real Instituto Elcano

issued from time to time that are big on rhetoric and good intentions but produce little in the way of concrete results.

Nevertheless, the guerrillas are not present along the whole length of the Colombia-Venezuela border and their strength varies from region to region. Whereas their presence is practically non-existent on the banks of the Orinoco River, it is overwhelming along the 150 kilometres of the Colombian bank of the Negro river, where government activity is either scarce or non-existent. According to the chief magistrate in San Felipe, it is the FARC that have been guarding the border since 1999; 'it is they who put back the boundary markers whenever the Venezuelan Guard move them in and they even insist that every Colombian ship should fly the national flag. Their mission is not aggressive'. In the Guainía and Vichada midlands the situation is even worse because their violent actions are felt on the other side of the border. These are the domains of the well-known *Negro Acacio*, the first Colombian guerrilla fighter whose extradition was requested by the US. Significantly, 80% of the laboratories producing Colombian cocaine are to be found in these two departments, as well as in the north of Guaviare and the south of Meta (8).

The situation has worsened as the fight against drug trafficking in Colombia has advanced. Stricter control over Colombia's Caribbean ports has meant that the embarkation points for the cocaine route to Europe have now been shifted to Venezuela, especially to Margarita Island (9). Bearing all this in mind and, in accordance with the premise postulated in the first part of this paper (this is a regional conflict requiring regional solutions), the main purpose of this second part is to focus on bilateral relations between Venezuela and Colombia with particular reference to matters related to the Colombian conflict (terrorism and drug-trafficking), in an attempt to establish how their evolution affects both the regional and the hemispheric picture.

### **Some precedents**

Notwithstanding the complexities of the present situation and its increasingly worrying tensions, it must be pointed out that relations between the two countries were never easy. It is essential to understand that the disagreements between present-day Colombia and Venezuela date back to colonial times. Caracas, headquarters of the Venezuelan military district, was never happy with its dependence on Bogotá, capital of the New Granada Vice-Royalty. Following independence and the Cúcuta Congress, old wounds were reopened. These were symbolically expressed both by the confrontation between the two great liberators, Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Paula Santander and by the final disappearance of the Great Colombia project which had been torpedoed by both sides. Later, the newly independent republics quarrelled about the drawing up of border lines. The proposals put forward by the Spanish Queen-Regent, María Cristina, in 1891 did not solve the dispute definitively, with the result that some border issues are still pending. However, in order to better comprehend what is happening now, it should be said that these historical wrangles have little to do with present-day disputes, whose dynamics are somewhat different.

Colombia is, according to Venezuela's defence community, the country's major challenge. According to Stratfor, Bogotá has gradually been increasing its defence budget since 1998, while Venezuela has frozen or is reducing its own. Colombia currently allocates 5% of GDP to defence expenditure (US financial aid excepted) and this could increase to 7% in the near future. Venezuela, on the other hand, spends only 0.7%, a figure which could decrease even further should the country's economic problems continue and should the emphasis on certain markedly populist social programmes prevail (something which would seem impossible to avoid given the forthcoming revocatory referendum). US financial aid, increased after the implementation of Plan Colombia, has further improved Colombia's military and strategic power (10).

The situation, however, has not always been thus. Between 1970 and 1990, for example, on the back of its oil revenue, Venezuela bought a large fleet of US F-16 planes, Russian helicopters, French tanks and Italian missile-carrying frigates, all of which probably confirmed its military superiority over Colombia. Nowadays, things have changed and the chaos that characterizes the Venezuelan government also applies to its Armed Forces, so that a large part of this sophisticated arsenal has become inoperative through lack of maintenance (11). Given this situation, one of the greatest fears of some Venezuelan defence experts is that the improvements in Colombian military power might eventually affect the border dispute between both countries in certain areas of the Gulf of Venezuela, known as the Coquivacoa Gulf in Colombia. For years, this was the major issue in the confrontation between both countries, although now the tension centres on other problems.

The border treaty with Venezuela was signed in 1941 and in 1952 the Colombian government challenged Venezuela's sovereignty over the Monjes Archipelago, a group of three small islets, which were the core of the border conflict, though they are not now at the centre of the current disagreements between the two governments. Possession of these islets would allow Colombia to extend its submarine platform over an area that is theoretically rich in oil (estimates about existing reserves put them in the region of 10 billion barrels). In 1987, tension between both countries mounted considerably as a result of an incident involving the Colombian corvette *Caldas* that almost degenerated into open warfare. Conflict, however, was averted and tension slackened after a few days. Two years later, things returned to normal and the Colombian-Venezuelan Neighbourhood Commission was set up.

Following this normalization in bilateral relations, the Combifron (Bi-National Frontier Commission) was created in 1994 to exchange intelligence. The project is currently frozen on the orders of President Chávez. During the presidency of Rafael Caldera, communications and coordination between the Armed Forces of the two countries improved considerably (12), to the point that the President himself authorized 'hot pursuits' (cross-border pursuit of criminals) on Venezuelan territory (13). This way of fighting against the guerrillas was promptly abandoned, as were so many other agreements between both administrations, after 1999. The doctrine applied by the Caracas government until then had rested on the proposition that the guerrilla violence originated in Colombia was a potential threat to both countries. That is why it is important to stress that the arrival of Hugo Chávez to the Venezuelan presidency altered a large number of the agreements and assumptions that, up until then, had contributed to shore up the trust between both governments. Nowadays, with the Venezuelan government's emphasis firmly on Bolivarian doctrine, there has been a radical shift in the perception of the problem, involving a fair degree of complicity with Colombia's insurgent movements (FARC and ELN) and, at the same time, a shift back to the old rhetoric that insurgency is strictly a Colombian problem.

#### *A Conflictive Frontier*

In the field of bilateral relations, one feels one is witnessing a dialogue of the deaf. The internal and international agendas of both governments are radically different and their proposals and aims for the region are equally contradictory. In any case, the concern in each other's internal affairs can easily be understood in the light of their respective influence on each other's international agendas (14). The Colombian government believes that things will remain as they are so long as the current Venezuelan administration stays in power and Chávez continues to think that greater benefits are to be gained (especially on the domestic front, but also internationally) from his policy of simultaneous confrontation with both Colombia and the US (15). A sharp change in the direction of bilateral relations would only be brought about if the Venezuelan government were to be persuaded that destabilization could result from an escalation of the conflict in its own

territory, or from an increase in drug-trafficking. In this sense, it is very important to follow the evolution in the near future of the coca growing areas of Venezuela (visibly increasing now in the Catatumbo region). Another element, which might influence the evolution of Venezuela's stance, is the attitude to the conflict taken by Colombia's neighbours and by the rest of South America, especially by Lula's Brazil, not to mention the huge political influence that Fidel Castro exerts over his fellow military commander, Hugo Chávez. At the moment, however, there are very few signs, if any, of room for improvement.

As has been already stated, the complex bilateral relations between Colombia and Venezuela deteriorated with the coming to power of Hugo Chávez. According to Elsa Cardozo, in the last twenty years successive Venezuelan governments have adopted three different attitudes to the Colombian conflict: they changed from initially regarding the guerrillas as an exclusively Colombian problem (1979-1984) to regarding them as a common problem/enemy (1989-1999). Now, Chávez considers them to be non-enemies and valid political interlocutors (16). His Bolivarian, messianic and Latin-Americanist views prompted him to mediate in the Colombian conflict which, in fact, meant his taking sides with the insurgents and distancing himself more and more from the legitimate, democratic authorities of Colombia. For him and his like-minded Bolivarian followers, neither the FARC nor the ELN are terrorist or narco-terrorist groups; they are simply considered to be part of a powerful social movement of left-wing, nationalist, Latin-Americanist and popular ideology, opposed to the 'traditional' oligarchy and having a 'liberating' or 'revolutionary' message. Hence his clear inclination to favour the insurgent movements, which he granted the status of belligerent parties at the beginning of his presidency (17) and hence, too, his stubborn refusal to declare them 'terrorists'. That is why Chávez once remarked: 'We are not the enemies of either the Colombian government or the guerrillas' and 'our position is neutral, without giving the guerrillas [the status of] belligerence. It has been the Colombian government itself and the policies of Andrés Pastrana, in the search for peace, who gave the guerrillas belligerent and political status'.

It was precisely during the Pastrana Administration, with the peace process in full flow, that bilateral relations reached an unprecedented degree of tension. This prompted Andrés Pastrana and Hugo Chávez to hold a series of presidential summits to try to keep the situation within manageable limits (18). After the coming to power of Álvaro Uribe, there has been a series of periodical meetings between him and Chávez, a clear indication that the confrontation is currently still very strong. The conflict is occasionally intensified by high-flown statements made by ministers of both countries, which add to the constant stream of accusation-swapping and mutual discredit by the authorities of both governments. The last summit between the current leaders took place in the border town of Puerto Ordaz, Venezuela, on 23 April 2003, and it ended, as did the previous ones, including the meeting of the Andean Community in Rionegro, with words of goodwill and grandiose projects together with doubts that such projects would ever be realized. Notwithstanding this common rhetoric, everything would seem to indicate that the distance between the two presidents is widening. This impression is further reinforced by the fact that in 2003 there were no follow-up summits, just multilateral encounters, despite the fact that several had been scheduled. One of them, for example, should have taken place in Medellín, in Colombia (19), in July.

### **Chávez's discourse and the border problem**

At the XVII Presidential Summit of the Rio Group, held in Cuzco in May 2003, there was a tense and bitter debate between Chilean President Ricardo Lagos and Chávez regarding a statement about Colombia urging the re-doubling of efforts to fight drug-trafficking and terrorism and requesting the mediation of the UN. Lagos (20) backed the proposal requesting the UN to urge the FARC to talk with the Colombian government and said that Latin America should take the lead in finding its own solutions to the Colombian conflict in

order to prevent the intervention of countries outside the area. Chávez thought this opened the way for multilateral intervention in Colombia and he became very tense. Venezuela was the only country of the Rio Group which refused to back the proposals of Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo and Ecuadorean President Lucio Gutiérrez in favour of Uribe's government and of finding a peaceful solution for Colombia (21). That is why commander Chávez hides behind the doctrine of non-intervention in the affairs of third countries to keep the governments of the Continent from interfering in his own governance of Venezuela. Fear of a US 'stage-managed incursion' in the region, encouraged by a possible 'small-scale war' between Venezuela and Colombia, is rife at all levels of the Venezuelan government, as was pointed out by Venezuelan Foreign Minister, Roy Chaderton, who blames existing anti-Venezuelan sectors in Colombia for the situation (22).

Chávez's discourse, with its anti-globalisation components, opposed to the US's unilateralism and strongly anti-American in flavour, was behind his head-on opposition to Plan Colombia. The public broadcasting of the Plan obviously made Colombian-Venezuelan bilateral relations deteriorate even further. Chávez initially shared the fears of Colombia's other neighbours, such as Brazil and Ecuador, that the reinforcement of the Colombian army to defeat drug-trafficking (or the guerrillas) might provoke further regional imbalance on the military front, something which ran counter to Venezuela's national interests. But Chávez not only holds a pro-guerrilla stance (both the FARC and the MVR, Movement for the Fifth Republic, which he himself leads, take part in the São Paulo Forum, and both are rich in Bolivarian rhetoric), he also firmly believes in the likelihood of US military intervention in Colombia, as a direct result of the Bush administration's greater involvement in the area, which would no doubt rapidly affect Venezuela very negatively.

Commander Chávez is not the only one to have such a belligerent discourse. His reasoning is permanently repeated, even amplified, by a group of followers and subordinates who insist on reciting the Bolivarian decalogue and listing the attacks they are subject to from abroad. In this chorus there are, however, some relevant voices with regard to relations with Colombia. Outstanding among these are those of Vice-President José Vicente Rangel, Foreign Minister Roy Chaderton and the parliamentary spokesman for Foreign Affairs, Tarek William Saab, a member of the semi-official Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR).

From the Venezuelan viewpoint, there is little they feel their government can do; rather they believe it is up to the Colombian authorities to act. According to Foreign Minister Chaderton, Venezuelan territory 'has been repeatedly violated by irregular military forces from Colombia and, occasionally, by regular soldiers, too. In February 2002, Colombian soldiers entered, were captured and sent back without any fuss. The guerrillas come in, the paramilitary, and all kinds of criminals. We have suffered the effect of the violence in Colombia for 50 years, and we now receive all manner of accusations. This is unfair and irresponsible. Nobody expresses sorrow for our deaths; we have had up to 500 people kidnapped in this period' (23). This is a constant discourse, repeated at all levels of the Venezuelan administration and can be summed up in the idea that 'this is Colombia's war and we have nothing to do with it'. Recently, Chávez again underlined all this by stating: 'We are plagued by a common underworld of subversion, counter-subversion, paramilitaries and drug-trafficking. All this comes from Colombia. It did not start here but it has had a deep effect on us' and he confirmed that his government would approve special regulations under the provisions of the Organic Law of Security and Defence to 'improve or recover security levels in some border areas which have been seriously weakened in the past months and years' (24).

For reasons of domestic politics, especially with regard to his virulent confrontation with the opposition, which will get stronger as the date for the revocatory referendum gets

closer, Chávez is fearful of an increase in the US presence in the region, which could have immediate effects on his country. To his way of thinking, Venezuela could become the next victim to fall prey to US preventive policies (25). The point of view of the Chávez government concerning this issue was clearly stated in point 17 of the Declaration of the XI São Paulo Forum, held in Guatemala: 'We reject Plan Colombia, constituting as it does a US domination strategy for the region, with its blatantly counter-insurgent aims and involving an extension of the network of US military bases which already encircle the whole of Colombian territory and is being extended to other countries, with the complicity of some governments and at the expense of their sovereignty' (26).

Chávez's views on the conflict tend to be contradictory, given his relations with the FARC and his constant wish to mediate between the Colombian guerrillas and the Colombian government. In statements at a forum held in Bogotá in mid-August 2003, President Uribe suggested that such attitudes were persistent: 'I told Chávez last week... President, stop worrying so much about Colombian security policy, tell the FARC that if they are bored with the situation, they can negotiate with me in five minutes flat' (27). According to Venezuela's Vice-President, José Vicente Rangel, Uribe's request to send a message to the FARC bestowed on Chávez 'an important role as a peace facilitator in Colombia' (28). This line of reasoning leads us back to the theory of mediation or support in peace negotiations. Uribe's spokesman, however, explained that these words did not amount to a request for Chávez to actually send a message to the FARC, but were meant to serve as a reminder of Uribe's willingness to negotiate on condition that terrorist acts were suspended (29).

Closely linked to this last point and to the question of Colombia's misgivings about the permissiveness of the Chávez government, there is the issue of the various attempts to export the 'Bolivarian revolution' beyond the borders of Venezuela. The presence of several Cuban advisors (doctors, teachers and other such specialists) in Venezuela is well known, as are Chávez's contacts with Evo Morales, leader of the Bolivian *cocaleros* (peasants who work on coca plantations) and with the Argentine *piqueteros* (unemployed protesters) (30). What is not so clear is whether or not the Venezuelan government is financing the activities of these and other groups, which at first glance would appear to be 'anti-system'. Evidence to prove all this may be difficult to come by, but there can be little doubt that part of the FARC's treasury surplus is spent in Colombia's neighbouring countries, essentially to grease the wheels of the border smuggling routes through which the insurgent group's weapons, ammunition and supplies all come in (31).

### **Venezuela's Arguments**

Outstanding among the panoply of reasons put forward by the Venezuelan government, as part of the customary whirlpool of mutual recriminations between the two governments, is the charge that Colombia is reneging on some of its commitments to border vigilance. The crossfire of reproaches between both sides can be summed up pretty simply: the Venezuelans accuse Colombia of neglecting the border, saying they have posted only 4,000 men (a totally inadequate number to successfully deal with such a daunting problem), as opposed to the 20,000 soldiers the Venezuelan FAN (National Armed Forces) claim to have along the whole length of the border area. A further 2,700 more troops (belonging to a special commando unit), as announced by Foreign Minister Chaderton in June 2003, should theoretically be added to this total, although there are no reliable official estimates on this (32). According to Caracas, the Colombian Army has only nine border units (including bases, brigades and battalions), whereas Venezuela has seventeen (33). The Venezuelan troops stationed there were further reinforced in face of the gravity of the events that occurred on the border, between La Guajira and Zulia, at the end of December 2003 (34).

Apart from this wrangling over of the number of forces each side may or may not have, the Colombian authorities demand to be allowed to carry out cross-border pursuits of criminals on Venezuelan soil. According to General Melvin López, Secretary of the Venezuelan National Defence Council (CDN), only President Chávez is authorized to take such a decision, although they themselves do try to settle individual security issues within the border area (35). But, as Foreign Minister Chaderton indicated, in an interview in one of FARC's publications, Venezuela is opposed to giving permission for these so-called 'hot pursuits': 'Imagine that we were to apply such a policy, which is totally unacceptable to the Venezuelan government, the other way round and started to apply Venezuelan law on Colombian soil. We have refrained from doing so despite the fact that there are many Venezuelans who remain kidnapped on the Colombian side of the border' (36).

The truth is that little is done beyond making these statements, reproaches and threats. This explains why the Venezuelan authorities have lately decided to turn a blind eye to the threats coming from the other side of the Colombian border, to avoid finding themselves involved in the conflict and to prevent their own territory being affected by the evils that cause their neighbours so much trouble (guerrilla violence, terrorism, drug-trafficking, etc). The theory was simple: it consisted in giving tacit support to one of the conflicting sides and, at the same time, closing down the border so as not to find themselves involved in the backlash of the conflict.

After S-11, however, it is not possible to maintain such a position without cost, even though bilateral relations are largely dominated by rhetoric. Hence the contradictory messages still coming out of Caracas, concerning the degree of their implication in the conflict. Proof of this lies in the fact that while progress is made in one direction there is back-peddalling in others and that while grandiose statements announcing spectacular measures continue to be made, they remain systematically unfulfilled. Notwithstanding this contradictory line of action, in the past few months there have been some joint actions (admittedly few and far between in the face of the magnitude of the existing violence) in which troops from both countries have frustrated guerrilla attacks hatched on Venezuelan territory. In March 2003, the Venezuelan Air Force also bombed columns of paramilitaries trespassing on Venezuelan territory. Nonetheless, there has been as yet no similar action taken against the FARC, nor is there likely to be in the short term.

The Venezuelan Vice-President, José Vicente Rangel, urged the Colombian authorities to reinforce security in the border area, after a Venezuelan soldier was wounded in a clash with the illegal self-defence groups operating there: 'I urge Colombia to take care of, to preserve its border. This situation of Colombian paramilitaries acting on Venezuelan soil cannot go on'. The clashes between Colombian irregulars and Venezuelan military forces in Táchira state, which resulted in a corporal being wounded in the leg was confirmed by General Carlos Acosta, commander of the 2nd Infantry Division of the San Cristóbal military garrison. According to Venezuelan intelligence sources, the movements of self-defence groups operating from Norte de Santander and Arauca over the border with Venezuela are constant, so much so that government of President Chávez considers the paramilitaries to be the real threat against national security, rather than FARC and ELN, who keep permanent bases on the Venezuelan side of the border and which they repeatedly use when seeking refuge from Colombian military forces.

This ensemble of interacting threats from a Colombian Army, which is by and large on the mend, combined with a greater US military presence in the region have led Venezuela to seriously consider rearming. There were serious allegations, later denied by Foreign Minister Chaderton, that the Venezuelan government was negotiating to buy 50 Russian MIG-29 fighter planes (37). If true, such a move would not only disturb the strategic bilateral balance, affecting relations between both countries at the same time as strengthening the FARC, but it would also result in a resumption of the regional arms



race. The region has other hot spots, too, such as the difficult relations between Peru and Chile, or Bolivia, with the uncertainties arising out of the resignation of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and the cancellation of the project to export gas via Chile (38).

### **Colombia's counter-arguments**

All these Venezuelan accusations are systematically denied by the Colombians, who claim to be increasing the number of troops in the whole of the border area and say that they need Venezuela's cooperation to make their presence more effective. They also maintain that Venezuela provides the only sanctuary left to the Colombian guerrillas, in view of the changes taking place along the southern border. President Uribe's repeated request (first formulated on August 7, 2002, shortly after his taking office) for Venezuela to authorize Colombian troops to continue their pursuits on Venezuelan soil is part of an attempt both to solve the problem and to sever the ties between the Venezuelan government and the FARC and the ELN, something that has so far been unsuccessful.

Evidence of the Colombian government's concern for everything that happens along its border with Venezuela is provided by the creation of the 1st Border Battalion, announced by President Uribe during his visit to the border town of Cúcuta in September 2003. Although this unit could operate on any of Colombia's five land borders, sources from the Defence Ministry have indicated that its greatest interest lies along the Venezuelan border. According to former Army Commander, General Carlos Alberto Ospina, its 'actions would initially be concentrated on this border, which has the highest number of kidnappings and incursions by illegal armed groups'. The unit, comprising 400 men, has been trained in counter-guerrilla warfare, as well as in assault operations, intelligence, anti-kidnapping and it will be engaged in the difficult task of permanently guarding Colombia's borders by the end of 2003. The creation of the unit was ordered directly by President Uribe himself and its mission will focus exclusively on the control of border areas. According to General Ospina, its objective 'is to offer greater security to the inhabitants of these regions and to those of neighbouring countries'.

Although the site for its headquarters has not yet been decided, the Army is considering the possibility of stationing the new Battalion in one of the towns of Arauca, where the FARC are strong and where they have repeatedly attacked oil and energy installations. But given the fact that it is a mobile unit, it should be ready to move anywhere along the border. The Marine river units will continue to operate with air support along the borders with Panama and Brazil, where arms trafficking is rife, whereas this new special unit is earmarked for the border with Venezuela, the real testing ground for the Colombian Armed Forces. Should it prove possible, the military high command intends to establish a similar battalion in the Amazon region, on the border with Peru and Ecuador, in 2004 (39). After the start of operations by the 1st Border Battalion was announced at the beginning of 2004, General Carlos Ospina, commander of the military forces, announced the creation of three more mobile brigades in the frontier area. For obvious reasons, their activity would concentrate on the Venezuelan border, and their headquarters would be located in Arauca, North of Santander (in the north-west), Guajira (in the north) and Guainia (in the south-east and bordering with Brazil) (40).

In February 2002, in an operation code-named *Gatonegro*, the Colombian army entered Barrancominas, the domain of *Negro Acacio* and one of the centres of FARC drug and arms trafficking in the middle of Vichada. This operation increased pressure on the insurgents and brought about significant changes in an area where the Brazilian trafficker Fernandinho Beira-Mar had already been captured. The guerrillas were forced to disperse downriver along the Guaviare, an area they defend intensely due to its strategic importance (it is a key area for the reception and distribution of most of the components needed for the manufacture of drugs). The military offensive has failed to prevent an

intensification of the pressure on, and harassment of, the civilian population, with murders, forced recruitments and the disappearance of dozens of young men, as denounced by the religious authorities in Infrida. Despite all this, the only military presence in the area prior to the creation of the 1st Border Battalion consisted of two river battalions, one in Infrida (576 men) and another in Carreña (653 men), which were in charge of the vigilance of almost 1,500 kilometres along the border rivers Meta, Arauca and Orinoco, without counting the interior tributaries (41).

As we have already pointed out, this increased State presence on the Colombian side of the border, together with greater military activity, has forced the guerrillas to move across to Venezuela, transferring some of their headquarters, warehouses and arsenals in the search for safer havens. The problem is that it is not only the FARC and the ELN that move; violence, the paramilitaries, drugs and kidnappings move with them. Several attacks in the region took place between March and April 2003, which some people attribute to the guerrillas, given their connivance with the Venezuelan government while others say they were the result of certain manoeuvres by the paramilitaries and local tradesmen and cattle farmers against President Chávez (42). The coordinator of the *Círculos Bolivarianos* in El Amparo (Venezuela), a border town with Arauca, has said that for the past 37 years Colombian guerrillas had always been in Venezuela, but that for the past two years the situation had become markedly more heated.

In September 2003, President Uribe repeated that he was determined to block the border with Venezuela to prevent outlawed Colombian groups from crossing into the neighbouring country to carry out kidnappings and other criminal activities. 'Such terrorists must be defeated here and they must not be allowed to cross there', Uribe stated adding that he was cooperating with the neighbouring country, however sporadically, to tackle the problem posed by guerrillas who were moving across the border into Venezuela to kidnap and extort. 'Many Colombians took part in the release of the ex-governor of Táchira and I received many calls in acknowledgement of this'. Sergio Omar Calderón, ex-governor and leader of the opposition party, Copei, was rescued in August on Venezuelan soil near the Colombian border and five kidnappers, among them some Colombian ELP guerrillas, were killed in the operation (43). During his visit to Cúcuta, President Uribe asked the Colombian military to redouble its efforts to prevent irregular forces from crossing into Venezuela. He also admitted feeling ashamed about the 46 Venezuelans who had been kidnapped in his country by Colombian groups (despite the fact that some have been released, the exact number of those still in captivity is unknown) (44).

In the middle of September 2003, the Colombian Air Force admitted for the first time that its helicopters had crossed the Venezuelan border. Stating that the incident had been unintentional, it was blamed on insufficient border sign posting or on cloudy or adverse weather conditions, so that it could not be considered to have been a deliberate violation of Venezuela's airspace or sovereignty. According to some versions (not all of which concur), 15 Black Hawk helicopters were involved (45). The Venezuelan Government said that they had overflown Los Bancos, an area near Guasualito, on the southwest Venezuelan border, 'without authorization'. General Julio Quintero, head of the Unified Command of the Venezuelan National Armed Forces said that they had overflown Venezuelan airspace for 15 to 20 minutes and that the Colombian pilots may have crossed to Venezuela to avoid being shot down by rebels on the Colombian side (46). Foreign Minister Chaderton expressed his displeasure with the Colombian government about this incident, saying that 'the country's airspace was violated', adding that the government was considering the possibility of issuing a formal protest against Bogotá after the relevant investigations had taken place: 'We are evaluating the events and, of course, wish and hope it has not been a deliberate provocation'. All the available information seems to indicate that a protest was never made, and that, as usual, the issue remained within the realms of pure rhetoric.

These types of events are fairly frequent on either side of the border and happen in both directions. The local authorities of both countries, however, seldom inform the press or their own superiors about them, a fact that greatly limits both the number of public accusations and knowledge of exactly what goes on. On the other hand, it is obvious that the more the Colombian army commits itself to expelling outlawed forces from the border areas, the more this type of incident, related to cross-border pursuits of such groups, will tend to multiply in the near future, with the consequent danger that it could result in open warfare unless there is a greater coordination between the governments involved, something which seems fairly unlikely at the moment.

### **The Venezuelan Opposition's Accusations and the Conspiracy Theory**

In order to give a fair assessment of the border problem, the very different situations of both countries and their Presidents must be borne in mind. One year after being elected, and despite the defeat he suffered in the October referendum, Álvaro Uribe was still accepted by over 70% of the population (47). There are several reasons for his popularity. First, there is the firmness with which government fought against terrorism and drug-trafficking. Then, during 2003, kidnappings were reduced by 34% (48); murders by 22% and cocaine crops were eradicated by fumigation (the total cultivated area was reduced by almost 30% in 2002). Overall, however, what most appeals to Colombians is the feeling that they are being governed, something that is important in any presidentialist country and especially relevant after the sense of paralysis experienced during the Samper and Pastrana administrations. Chávez, on the other hand, is facing strong internal opposition which culminated in the failed episode (resignation or coup?) (49) of April 11th and in the general strike of December 2002. All this translates into a fall in his popularity levels (they dipped from 84% in 1989 to 31% during the third term of 2003) (50). There has been a slight recovery in his popularity levels in the last few months, due mostly to the increase in social spending.

Notwithstanding the accusations railed at his government, the lack of unity among his political opponents, as well as their lack of organization and, frequently, of specific proposals have contributed to the survival of a regime whose original power base has been greatly eroded. Nevertheless, as a result of agreements reached with the opposition thanks to the mediation of César Gaviria and the Group of Friendly Countries the revocatory referendum was called. But it has been an extremely complicated issue and failure to comply with the agreements could still have very negative effects on the regional situation. Doubts concerning the calling of the referendum persist after the initial incidents and repeated postponements, a phenomenon that was accompanied by an increase in tension on the streets of Venezuela during the weeks prior to the *reafirmazo* (as the process, which allowed the collection of the signatures necessary to call a revocatory referendum, is known. It is still pending approval by the National Electoral Council –CNE).

For obvious propaganda reasons and in order to harm Hugo Chávez's international reputation, the opposition in Venezuela (or at least those parts of it most strongly linked to dissident military officers) frequently discloses the existence of documents or rumours which link the President, his government and the Bolivarian movement with Colombian terrorist organizations. They also use the Colombian conflict as a weapon against the government. Hence the constant accusations of connivance between Venezuela's National Armed Forces (FAN) and the Colombian guerrillas, and the repeated retorts from the government claiming that such accusations seek only to discredit it. The trouble with these accusations is that they frequently combine true information, some of it easily provable, with highly improbable rumours, some of them almost surreal, and this only serves to poison public opinion (51). This is why Chávez accuses the opposition of spending a large amount of money to portray him as a 'criminal'.

The very explosive and later refuted remarks made to the press by Lieutenant Boyer in 2003 must be viewed as part of this crossfire of accusations which, notwithstanding their origin (be they from the Venezuelan opposition or from Colombian intelligence sources), seem to be nothing but massive publicity stunts designed to distort. Boyer, supposedly one of Chávez's pilots, claimed to have flown Raúl Reyes, a top leader of the FARC who was suffering from cancer, from San Vicente del Caguán to San Antonio del Táchira. On the evidence of this, Boyer accused the Venezuelan government of complicity with the FARC. *El Espectador* echoed these accusations, which were later disproved. It was quite remarkable how, within the space of twelve hours, his criminal record was made public and his statements refuted. *El Espectador* recognized its mistake for having given credence to the accusations, but denied Vice-President Rangel's claims that the incident was part of a Colombian 'conspiracy' against Chávez. The information supplied by Boyer did allow General Myers to launch a tirade of accusations against Venezuela (52). The episode ended with Boyer's expulsion from Colombia, after the Foreign Ministry had refused him political asylum.

For Roberto Giusti, a Venezuelan journalist opposed to Chávez, 'the weakness of the initial accusations and the virulence of the response to them would seem to indicate that it was all a counter-information strategy aimed at giving the lie to otherwise palpable truths about an undeniably unholy alliance between the government and a subversive terrorist organization devoted, among other things, to drug-trafficking'. From his point of view, shared widely by Venezuela's opposition, the existence of FARC encampments on Venezuelan territory is irrefutable. In them, military instruction was allegedly given to members of the Bolivarian Circles and to the Bolivarian Forces of Liberation (FBL), the armed wing of the Chávez movement, whose existence is systematically denied by the Venezuelan government. The FBL were purportedly trained by the ELN and by former members of the EPL, and, according to certain sources, its activities are concentrated in the small border town of El Nula (53). Some graffiti in the border village of El Amparo seems to prove their existence. Village authorities estimate that about 5,000 men are operating on 16 fronts established along the Colombian border, under the leadership of a certain Jerónimo, (54) although all of this, together with the identity of whoever shelters and finances them, remains to be confirmed. The logistical support, pass facilities and impunity with which the FAN and the Venezuelan security forces allow the Colombian guerrillas to act must be added to all this.

The 'Colombianisation' of the border area has reached such a point, that some of these organizations have started to fight among themselves. The FBL, for instance, accuse the ELN, but not the FARC, of violating national sovereignty. According to Giusti, these groups are fighting among themselves, and with the paramilitaries, for control of the territory in a war without respite whose main victims are civilians. The conflict has led the Western Block of the FBL to warn publicly that it is the ELN and not they who are responsible for many of the kidnappings mistakenly attributed to them. They also allege that they have taken place with the connivance of some mayors and an opposition governor. This last claim, which in itself sounds rather absurd, has been denied by the accused. According to the same journalist, 'the existence of a paramilitary organization which is armed, financed and supported by the government of Hugo Chávez and aided by the Armed Forces is no invention, lie or exaggeration. It is a reality deliberately created by a regime willing to use this additional fire power should it become necessary' (55).

During a seminar held in Bogotá, Venezuela's former Interior Minister, Asdrúbal Aguiar, denounced the existence of a document called 'Border Project', reputedly an agreement signed between the Venezuelan government and the FARC. This document alleges that the FARC gave assurances not to operate militarily or politically on Venezuelan territory, not to train Venezuelan militants without the government's consent and not to carry out illegal activities on Venezuelan soil. In return, they would receive from the government

medical supplies, oil, special support, company registers and contracts, a cattle farming and agricultural development programme as well as asylum and transit for their members. As an example of the self-serving tone of his presentation, the former Minister claimed that these agreements had been recently ratified with a new condition: that the FARC help Chávez combat the opposition in its promotion of the so-called 'coup by signature' by which it was demanding the revocatory referendum. Aguiar considers that the friendly relations and militant stance in favour of the Colombian guerrillas shown by Chávez's government have never been a secret and he believes this connection to have been evident since 1998, when Chávez was a presidential candidate. At that time, intelligence sources reported that relations between the organizers of his political campaign and the FARC entrenched in the border region were active (56).

### **The attitude of the FARC and the ELN**

In order to have a more precise idea of the relations between the Colombian guerrillas and the Venezuelan government it would be useful to know the point of view of the insurgents, whilst recognizing that they, too, would formally deny the existence of any privileged dealings. In any case, it is easy to understand that, given the ideological coincidences that exist between the FARC, the ELN and the Chávez regime (they all define themselves as Bolivarian, nationalists, Latin-Americanists and revolutionaries), they are positive in their assessment of the Caracas government which they define as being part of a revolutionary and transforming process. Such coincidences are further confirmed by the aforementioned participation of the FARC and the MVR in the Sao Paulo Forum (57).

In some relatively recent statements made to the press, the guerrilla commander, Raúl Reyes, was not forthcoming about the close connections that, according to the Colombian government, the FARC have with the Venezuelan government. All he said was that he greatly admired President Hugo Chávez. 'We have very positive reports concerning Chávez, a Bolivarian, a patriot who fights for the dignity of his people' (58). Despite the brevity of these words, the praise of Chávez is more than an obvious sign of the harmony that exists between their attitudes, something that can also be detected in the following statement issued by the FARC: 'They insist that we are present in neighbouring countries in order to deliberately cause problems for their governments. The FARC –the army of the people– reaffirm... their border policy: We are respectful of the sovereignty, the territorial integrity and the self-determination of the people. We do not carry out military incursions or financial operations outside the national territory. We favour peaceful and mutually respectful relations in the border areas' (59).

The ELN is on a similar wavelength with the FARC as far as its enthusiasm for the work and achievements of Hugo Chávez's government is concerned. In a televised interview, Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, the leader of the ELN, made an impassioned defence of Chávez who, he said, had developed 'new forms of mobilizing people and of making his way of thinking coincide with that of the majority of the people when it came to taking decisions'. The head of the military wing of the ELN, Antonio García, also expressed himself in similar terms during the same programme. He denounced the reputed existence of a plot by the Colombian paramilitary against President Chávez, in order to 'destabilize the revolutionary process, the transforming project'. He added that the paramilitary were planning 'in this way to facilitate or enable US military intervention. Logically, what lie behind such actions, such movements are the views and support of the Colombian military' and concluded 'this is a threat to the Bolivarian project in Venezuela' (60).

This willingness to recognizing the other side works both ways. In the first issue of the *Revista Nueva Colombia*, published by the 'Bolivarian Movement for a New Colombia',

that is, by the FARC, an interview with Foreign Minister Chaderton is given great prominence (61). Among other things, Chaderton unearths the old theory of mediation (62), although without specifying exactly when the Colombian government had requested it (63). But the problem is not only limited to the support the insurgents get from the official state apparatus and the armed forces of Venezuela. There is backing for them, too, in other parts of Venezuelan society (64).

### **The FARC, the ELN and the Colombian paramilitary in Venezuela**

From the Colombian point of view, there is a constant stream of reports, based on military intelligence, which are conveniently filtered to the press, about the existence in Venezuela of ELN and FARC encampments. The reports also tacitly or openly accuse the Caracas government of tolerating (or propitiating) this situation. One of the most serious incidents involved the arrest in 2001 of José María Ballestas, a plane hijacker and an ELN member, who was released after being caught only to be imprisoned again following complaints from the Colombians. That same year, a FARC delegation attended a Plan Colombia forum in Caracas. The government was aware of their presence there and civil servants also attended the event. This brought serious protests from Bogotá and increased tension between the two governments. What is important about these events is that they are not isolated occurrences. Similar things happen all the time and their effect on bilateral relations is such that it requires the almost constant intervention of the two Presidents to de-activate the conflict. Colombian complaints over the aid which the FARC and the ELN find on the other side of the border are permanent. In a relatively recent interview with the Brazilian magazine *Veja*, Álvaro Uribe, when asked whether he was aware, as some Colombian sources had suggested, that Hugo Chávez was allowing guerrillas into Venezuela, replied with a curt 'That question should be put to President Chávez'.

The accusations about the presence of guerrillas on the other side of the border, with their bases and training camps, form a major part of the two countries' current bilateral relations. For some Colombians, such as Senator Enrique Gómez and General Carreño, it is a proven fact. But it provides Venezuela's opposition with ammunition with which to attack the Chávez government. The administration, meanwhile, talks of plots while firmly denying everything. According to the Venezuelan authorities, the terrorist presence in their territory is limited to mobile camps, set up when the insurgent groups, over which they claim to have no control, cross the border into Venezuela. Colombian intelligence, however, sees reality quite differently and that is why it refers to the 'Venezuelan sanctuary'. This has become a far more important issue following the breakdown of the peace process and the abandonment of the 42,000 km<sup>2</sup> that constituted the so-called 'clear zone'.

On the Colombian side of the frontier, the FARC have a very stable presence in the area, with five fronts in the seven departments. They are very strong in Arauca and significantly so in Vichada and Guanía. The ELN has five fronts, with *Domingo Laín*, set up in Arauca, being the axis of its military structure. The permeability of the border (geographically complex, without vigilance, an area of great dynamism and mobility of people and goods) makes the movement back and forth of guerrillas relatively easy. In an attempt to offset the strong presence of the guerrillas, paramilitary groups turned their attention to the region. They started to colonize some areas in La Guajira, Cesar and Catatumbo, where they are nowadays very strong, and have been operating in Arauca and the north of Vichada for two and a half years. In this area, armed groups and coca operate in parallel (65), with all that this implies in terms of destabilization.

A report by the Colombian Army, published by *El Tiempo*, suggests that the FARC have a permanent training school for more than 400 men in Venezuela and that the ELN have an encampment that functions as a base. The so-called School for Basics (ordinary

guerrillas), a FARC training camp directed by Freddy, is supposed to be sited in Zulia state. Up to 400 men, who arrive from all over Colombia and stay for four months, are said to be trained there. According to a military source: 'The FARC move along the Oro river (Catacumbo), using Cacigua, Machiques, La Fría and Orope, all in Venezuela, as their roaming area'. Frequent reports from Colombian intelligence speak of the presence in Venezuela of top commanders of the FARC, such as Manuel Marulanda, *Tirofijo*, the organization's top man, where they seek refuge, a resting place or a hospital to cure their wounds.

The three fronts of the ELN, that of the FARC and that of the ELP (Popular Liberation Army), together with a group of the AUC (Colombian United Self-Defence Groups, or paramilitaries), all in the border area, are financed by the production and commercialisation of the 30,000 hectares of coca produced in the Catatumbo area, as well as by the extortion and kidnapping of businessmen and cattle farmers from both countries. According to a military report, the ELN also has a permanent commission in the Orope sector (Venezuela), whose task is to obtain weapons, supplies and logistical material along the length of the border. The report says that the ELN's Carlos Germán Velasco Villamizar front has its encampment in the El Tarná natural park, 15 kilometres up the River Táchira in Venezuela. This is where they hide hostages and is the meeting point where they receive the extortion payments from cattle farmers and businessmen from both countries.

The leaders of this front, according to military intelligence, live in San Antonio, Ureña and San Cristóbal in Venezuela, where they plan the terrorist actions that they later carry out in Cúcuta. José Alberto Duran Garcia, Tyson, is supposed to belong to such a group. He was charged with exploding a car bomb in a Cúcuta shopping centre on 5 March 2003, which killed seven people and injured 70. According to the Army, proof that the border is used for guerrilla terrorist actions was also provided by the discovery of a truck loaded with 1,500 kilos of explosives in the rural area of La Victoria (Venezuela) during the first months of 2003, which was supposedly intended to blow up the José Antonio Castro international bridge, which connects Arauca with Apure. The guerrillas and 'paras' also transport provisions, weapons, uniforms and cattle stolen in the border town of La Guajira and Cesar. According to the DAS (Administrative Security Department) and the Colombian Army, both the FARC and the self-defence units cross from one country to the other over the foothills of the Perijá mountain range (66).

Since March 2003, numerous murders have been carried out by Colombian paramilitary groups among the civilian population of La Fria in Venezuela's Táchira region. This means that only an hour away from the important city of San Cristóbal where there are only a few detachments of the Venezuelan National Guard, those same fears that are entrenched in Colombia have started to take hold in the border area of Venezuela. It is the insurgent groups, and not the Venezuelan authorities, which impose their law in this area. The landowners have stopped visiting their properties for fear of kidnappings and extortions. According to the Association of Northern Cattle Farmers, one person is kidnapped in the area every ten days. In July 2003, 29 cattle farmers were being held hostage (67). According to the Colombian National Police there were 459 kidnappings on the Venezuelan border in 2002 (68). On the Arauca border, several Venezuelan cattle farmers have accused the guerrillas of demanding that they pay 'vaccines' (an amount levied in exchange for not being kidnapped), just as their Colombian counterparts have to do. The reactions to all of this are varied: some have stopped going to their farms, some pay protection money to the paramilitary groups and others end up paying the 'vaccines' demanded (69).

This situation has brought complaints from the Venezuelan cattle farmers about the extortions they have suffered at the hands of the FARC and the ELN given the alleged

existence of a non-aggression agreement between the Venezuelan government and Colombian terrorist groups (70). There are some newly formed Colombian criminal bands that kidnap Venezuelan cattle farmers in the border area and then sell them to the guerrillas, who take charge of negotiating the payment of the ransom money (71). According to the accusations, the kidnapers are Colombians who belong not only to the guerrillas, but also to the AUC, and they take some of their Venezuelan hostages to Colombia, where they are out of reach of the Venezuelan police and security forces (72).

Seven Venezuelan border guards were killed in either La Guajira (Colombia) or Zulia (Venezuela) between 16-20 December 2003. There are several contradictory, but complementary versions concerning this incident, which speak about an ever more active presence of Colombian paramilitary groups inside Venezuela. Some versions blame the deaths on the Colombian paramilitary from the north 'Wayúu Counter-insurgency' front, and other versions, put out by the Venezuelan government, blame them on the fuel smuggling from Venezuela to Colombia. The issue of which side of the border the guards were killed on is also under debate, because according to some eyewitnesses, in at least one of the cases, the Venezuelan National Guard had crossed into Colombian territory when pursuing a car stolen in their own country. The same versions refer to violations of Colombian airspace by Venezuelan helicopters and planes (73).

Both countries have accused each other of violations of sovereignty, but President Uribe prefers not to condemn what happened, although he does start from the premise that Venezuelan troops did cross the border. Instead, he would rather use the incident to back his view that the border is indeed a 'very lively' place and it is necessary to authorize the pursuit of criminals across the border in both directions. 'Suddenly the commanders on either side of the border will reach an agreement, since both have to fulfil their duty to curb delinquency, but I wish we had an institutional agreement of the highest order which has not been possible. One crosses from one side to the other with no clear idea of where the dividing line lies, and according to my reports, some people crossed to transgress the law and they were pursued. The dividing line may have been crossed during this pursuit, but... we have decided... to be very restrained in our handling of this issue. That is why we must not make a storm out of this'. The Venezuelan authorities, for their part, denied the events, and, being fond of conspiracy theories, they talked about a joint guerrilla-Colombian paramilitary strategy to generate friction between the two countries (this fits in with the ELN's accusations referred to previously). General Melvin López Hidalgo, Secretary of the Venezuelan National Defence Council, said there was competition between subversive groups, drug-traffickers and paramilitary groups to dominate the region (74). At the end of December 2003, an ELN fighter was killed by the Venezuelan police in San Antonio de Táchira, after a shoot-out with a group of 20 guerrillas (75).

### **The US and the Colombian-Venezuelan Frontier**

Things have reached such a point that the situation between Colombia and Venezuela has started to affect relations between the US and Venezuela. In this sense, we should note the opposing attitudes of both governments concerning not only Plan Colombia, but also international terrorism and the Iraq conflict. Whereas Álvaro Uribe defends the need to fight against terrorism, and supports Washington in the Iraq conflict, albeit without sending troops, Hugo Chávez has taken a much more critical stance against Bush and the US government. Added to this are the fears of the State Department of a consolidation of a Caracas-Havana axis, based on the excellent personal relations between Castro and Chávez.

More and more voices in the Bush administration speak openly about the Chávez government's cooperation with the Colombian guerrilla (76). In this sense, US aid to the Caracas government would have recently been almost blocked in a specific case, had



Chávez's support for the Colombian guerrilla been proved. The measure could have affected the funds for military, anti-narcotics and criminal cooperation, and, although an exact figure is not mentioned (the amount invested annually in Venezuela depends on the State Department and other agencies), it is estimated at around 25 million dollars. In 2003, Venezuela received five million dollars from the US in military aid for the anti-drug and anti-terrorist fight, as part of the 731 million dollars of the Andean Regional Initiative (IRA) agreed last July for Colombia and its neighbours (77).

To avoid this happening it was necessary to cancel an amendment introduced by the Senate in the 2004 version of the Budget Appropriations for Foreign Operations Bill. In the end, the amendment was dropped during negotiations in the Conciliatory Commission – which adjusts the differences existing between the House of Representatives and the Senate in their respective bills–. In spite of this, both Houses decided that the State Department should report on Venezuela's efforts to cooperate with Colombia in the fight against terrorism, evaluating whether Venezuela is indeed supporting Colombian groups, as was asserted by Otto Reich, the State Department's special advisor for Latin America (78). The importance of the issue is not so much because of the amount involved, which is quite meagre, but because of the high symbolic content of such a measure which, if passed, would have forced the Bush administration to take active steps against the government of Hugo Chávez.

As well as the three Colombian terrorist groups (FARC, ELN and the paramilitary groups), narco-trafficking gangs and smuggling networks also use the Colombian-Venezuelan border as their operations ground. Nor is the border the only problem; some reports speak of terrorist encampments on Margarita Island (79), an issue which Tarek William Saab, spokesman for the government party, said he would refuse to discuss at the National Assembly. He said he would not allow it to be said that 'Venezuela is a shelter for Colombian violence and terrorism'. He also pointed out that the Venezuelan government has cooperated in the talks between the insurgents and the Colombian government (80). In his visit to Bogotá in August 2003, Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, criticized Venezuela's permissiveness towards the Colombian guerrillas, to which the Chávez government replied harshly, Vice-President Rangel calling Myers 'irresponsible' and accusing him of handling false information (81).

### **The Bilateral Agenda and Cross-border Trade**

As we have seen in the preceding pages, the list of disagreements between both governments is vast, although it basically concerns the activities of the different terrorists groups and criminal bands (including narco-traffickers) operating on both sides of the border. The list would only amount to a series of more or less reasonable complaints were it not for Colombia's very serious accusations of Venezuelan complicity with the terrorists and Venezuela's accusations about Colombia's laxity in border vigilance to the detriment of the security of its own citizens. Bogotá has accused Caracas of sheltering leftist guerrillas, whilst the Venezuelan government says that the Colombian Army cooperates with paramilitary groups. The Venezuelan authorities blamed Colombian paramilitary groups for the death of a Disip agent in San Antonio del Táchira at the beginning of November 2003 (82). Foreign Minister Chaderton thinks it's time to reduce the tension between his country and Colombia and that some bi-national issues should be discussed privately. 'We are suffering from a bombardment of negative information aimed at making us quarrel, an alliance between Colombia's anti-Venezuelan extreme-right wing and Venezuela's anti-Colombian extreme-right wing, whose aim is to overthrow the government of President Hugo Chávez' (83).

Despite the problems, bilateral contacts are frequent, as is evident from the meetings between Foreign Ministers Carolina Barco, of Colombia, and Chaderton, of Venezuela.

Carolina Barco visited Caracas in mid- October 2003 and on that occasion she stressed her country's concern about the situation on the border. After meeting Chaderton, she pointed out that 'the better the information, the better the coordination between our different institutions, and the better will we be able to control things from the Colombian side'. In April that year, during one of their frequent contacts, the Colombian and Venezuelan Presidents had committed themselves to make efforts to prevent the guerrillas, paramilitaries and narco-traffickers using the common border for their own benefit. Once again, however, it all boiled down to rhetoric. On that occasion, Presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Álvaro Uribe of Colombia 'share very fluent relations' which had allowed bilateral projects to 'progress' and which, after the presidential meeting in April 'have greatly improved trade', while lately Colombian 'exports' to Venezuela 'have doubled' (84).

As part of their bilateral relations, ministers of the two countries hold a great number of meetings. The Agriculture Ministers of Venezuela and Colombia, for example, met in Caracas on October 30 and meetings between the Ministers of Trade and Energy 'are being scheduled'. Colombia's Defence Minister, Martha Lucía Ramírez (who has since resigned) and her Venezuelan counterpart, General José Luis Prieto, met at a Latin American Defence Ministers' Summit in Santiago de Chile to broach issues related to the common border (85).

The other major issue affecting bilateral relations is cross-border trade. According to Colombian figures, Colombian-Venezuelan trade fell abruptly by almost 70% (86) after the devaluation of the bolívar and the implementation of controlled currency sales in Venezuela. This figure, however, does not include contraband, especially the smuggling of oil. We must bear in mind that, after the US, Venezuela and Colombia are each other's second-best trading partner. In 2002, Colombian sales to Venezuela amounted to 1,123 million dollars while imports stood at 777 million dollars. Many Colombian border towns and villages depend on the demand from Venezuela, so that Venezuela's economic crisis is dragging down a considerable part of the border area with it. The cases of Cúcuta and Maicao are especially relevant (87). Although it is political relations that have suffered most from the situation created after Hugo Chávez's coming to power, economic relations have also been badly hit. In 2002, bilateral trade fell by over 600 million dollars, especially as a result of the brutal fall-off in the Venezuelan economy and the exchange rate controls introduced by the Caracas government. In 2003, trade between Venezuela and Colombia fell by 20% to reach a figure of around 1.65 billion dollars. This was mainly the result of the negative impact of the economic recession as well as restrictions in the exchange and circulation of currency (88).

The relation between the peso and the bolívar had been stable and predictable for quite a long time, although this stability has been lost in the last few years and the exchange rate collapse has dealt the border area a heavy blow. The devaluation of the bolívar placed it on a one-to-one basis with the Colombian peso, so that Venezuelan exports to Colombia have now become highly competitive. Furthermore, the Colombians do not want to sell their products to the Venezuelans because they do not know what to do with the bolívares they receive, as the Venezuelan currency is devalued by the hour. The problem affects all bilateral trade, not just border trade, because Chávez's government has just stiffened the requirements and terms to supply dollars to importers (89). Despite the dramatic situation of bilateral trade, in mid-2003, the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, Roy Chaderton, said there were some signs of recovery in the trade flows, basically affected by the rigid exchange control imposed by the government and by the poor economic situation. According to the Venezuelan-Colombian Economic Integration Chamber, there are about 600 Venezuelan companies who have outstanding debts of 300 million dollars with Colombian firms, although Foreign Minister Chaderton says that currency supplies have been increased to meet the payments of such a huge debt (90).

Arms smuggling across the border is a worrying issue. The north-western Venezuelan border provides arms traffickers with easy access to the Caribbean through the Venezuelan Gulf. Venezuela, like the rest of Colombia's South American neighbours, is a source of small weapon smuggling, as well as being a transit route for other caches. Some of the weapons coming to Colombia are earmarked for the Venezuelan National Armed Forces, whereas others come directly from the black market. As is the case with other issues dealt with in this paper, there are to-date no written documents to publicly testify the connections between the Venezuelan government and the Colombian guerrillas. But there are many versions asserting that the Venezuelan military supply Colombian terrorist groups with arms and ammunition, either out of sympathy with the FARC and the ELN, or for strictly mercantile reasons (or both). On the basis of some reports published by the Colombian press, Kim Cragin and Bruce Hoffman consider these contacts quite likely (91). There are several arms smuggling routes crossing Venezuela, most of them by land. Arms generally arrive at Paragaipoa port, on the Venezuelan Gulf, from where they are transported to the Colombian village of Maicao and from there to Villanueva to be distributed to the rest of Colombia. Arms also arrive at Tibú, in the Colombian Department of North Santander, and from there they go to Convención and Ocaña. From Ureña (in Táchira State) the arms continue on to Cúcuta, from where they go inland to Bucaramanga and eventually to Barranca Bermeja (92).

### **Oil Smuggling**

Oil is another sensitive key issue on the bilateral agenda for several reasons, starting with Venezuela's membership of OPEC and the importance of fuel exports for its balance of trade, but also for oil smuggling to Colombia. The Venezuelan government would be pleased should a common oil policy be agreed on, all the more so if it were to have a South American or, if possible, even a Latin American scope. The difficulties in making any progress on this issue, however, are yet another sign of the differences existing between the Venezuelan and the Colombian governments. In mid-July 2003, President Chávez, in his Bolivarian line of confrontation with the US, stated that there should be a unity of criteria in Latin America with regard to everything concerning oil, but that the attitude of Uribe was not very ambitious on this point. The Colombian reply, made by Luis Ernesto Mejía, Minister of Mines and Energy, was stern: it is impossible to have a common policy on oil, because whereas Venezuela, with its huge reserves, is capable of producing and exporting more than 3 million barrels a day, Colombia hardly produces 540,000 and only exports half of that amount. According to Chávez, 'a political decision is enough to create Petrosur, all we have to do is bring together Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Argentina, if it had a state oil company, which it could have' (93). As far as Colombia and Venezuela are concerned, however, the inequalities are immense. Colombia's oil reserves stand at only 1,623 million barrels, compared with Venezuela's 77,000 million barrels.

The crisis in border trade and the flow of smuggling into Colombia have been most strongly felt in the case of petrol, because its price on the other side of the border is only 10% that of Colombia's, making smuggling extremely lucrative. Uribe's government has had to face reality and announce a plan to organize the flow of oil towards Colombia by allowing it to be imported via Ecopetrol, by wholesale trading companies and even by cooperatives of *pimpineros*, people who carry petrol across the border in *pimpinas*, or plastic containers. An estimated 12,000 barrels of oil (over 11% of the total) cross the border daily in this way. Despite these measures, an average of more than 500,000 gallons are still smuggled daily, a business estimated to be worth 270 million dollars a year. This mainly affects tax revenue, as tax accounts for about half the price of petrol in Colombia. After Uribe's visit to Cúcuta, it was decided to introduce measures to confiscate automobiles and oil tankers used exclusively to buy Venezuelan petrol on the border (94).

Following the Colombian authority's attempts to normalize the situation of the *pimpineros*, the Ocaña municipality, in Norte de Santander, will start to sell Venezuelan petrol. The aim of this programme is to improve the standard of living of Norte de Santander *pimpineros*, and prevent the smuggling of fuel from Venezuela to Colombia by supplying the provinces of Ocaña and Pamplona, and the metropolitan area of Cúcuta with petrol imported from Venezuela (95).

The *Wayúu* indians living in La Guajira have an allowance, as natives, to purchase legally one *pimpina* of petrol (25 litres) for almost 4,000 pesos (this is the reason why they all adore President Chávez). This rises to 6,000 pesos the minute it crosses the border and fetches 10,000 pesos in Riohacha (about 6,000 families live off this lucrative business). In some cases, the paramilitary *Wayúu* Counter-insurgent Block charged a 6,000 pesos tax on the *pimpinas* brought in through the only authorized plant in the region (96).

La Guajira is a border area characterized by its intense smuggling activity, which takes place in both directions. All kinds of products cross the border at that point, including the men who cross from Colombia to Venezuela looking for a job and the oil transported from Venezuela to Colombia. In fact, along the whole length of the border between Venezuela and Colombia, oil has become a first class business that 'feeds families, nurtures war and is used for processing cocaine'. The price of a gallon of petrol in Venezuela does not reach one thousand pesos, whereas in Colombia it costs between 3,500 and 7,000. It is precisely this price difference that explains the thriving of smuggling along the length of the border. About 100,000 families live on this business in the border area, a business that brought 15,000 illegal barrels of oil and 3,000 barrels of ACPM into Colombia in 2002. Losses to the Colombian economy were around 90 million dollars.

In December 2002, the Colombian government regulated by decree the sale of foreign petrol in the border areas and ceded distribution to specific firms in each department, leaving them free to fix prices. It also set the individual quota when crossing the border at 20 gallons. Any amount over this is considered to constitute smuggling, which is punished by prison sentences of up to five years. Despite all this, neither the controls nor the regulations have succeeded in preventing the guerrillas and the paramilitary groups from controlling the business almost exclusively and in an almost mafia-like way, 'with a balanced geographical distribution'. The self-defence groups clearly dominate in La Guajira and Catatumbo. In the 335 kilometres along which the Arauca River is the border, an area difficult to control, fuel also flows. Years ago, when FARC control over the area was total, there used to be a hose that crossed the border river by Charo Island (Saravena) as a kind of homemade pipeline. The FARC still smuggle oil, but their methods are now less convenient (97).

The hundreds of caños (streams) connecting Vichada with Tomo and Guaviare, tributaries of the Orinoco river, form a basin of about 200,000 square kilometres, along which there travel barges, carrying 180 or more drums of oil, which can go into the Colombian jungles uncontrolled. A Pdvsa (Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.) report of the year 2000 stated that of the 5 million litres distributed in the State of Amazonas, 2.6 million ended up being used by the narco-trafficking industry. Most of this fuel came from San Fernando de Atabapo.

Given the connection between oil and narco-trafficking, the issue of fuel has become something of a taboo subject. Nobody speaks about it officially, let alone in Venezuela. In Colombia, the different parts of the administration involved in frontier control deny all responsibility, alleging lack of material and human resources. The Navy commander in Puerto Carreño says: 'I have 7 combat elements (28 Piraña gunboats) to guard 270 kilometres of the Meta river, 291 of the Orinoco and 335 of the Arauca river. We do our best'. For his part, the Police Chief in Casuarito (Vichada) says: 'It is impossible to control the smuggling of drug runners with only 30 men at my command. Besides, the engine of

the speedboat we used broke down in November 2001, when the FARC damaged it'; and the head of DIAN (Colombia's National Customs and Taxes Office) in Carreño explained: 'That theoretically falls under my jurisdiction, as it is related to smuggling. But... I have only three officers, and how are we going to get into Guaviare or High Vichada to control the smuggling of oil, when not even the Army goes there?' (98).

### **Narco-trafficking and other Forms of Organized Crime**

Narco-trafficking has become a growing problem for Venezuela and also for the Venezuelan authorities. Given the constant pressure against it on the Colombian side, cultivation and trafficking in Venezuela has increased. Some cocaine processing laboratories have also been gradually moved to Venezuela. For the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), Venezuela is the main centre of money laundering in the region. Furthermore, the bi-national Perijá mountain range has been an illegal crop area since the 1970s and a large amount of the materials necessary to process cocaine come into Colombia from Venezuela. In the last decade, over 2,000 Venezuelan drug shipments were captured in Europe and the US. According to DEA and other US government agencies, the attitude of the Chávez administration in the fight against narco-trafficking is not very credible (99), despite the fact that in 2002 the Venezuelan authorities launched 'Operation Orinoco', on the Colombian-Venezuelan border, during which a decent quantity of cocaine was confiscated.

Air squads of the Anti-narcotics Police are ready to begin spraying thousands of hectares of coca plantations in Catatumbo, an area bordering Venezuela, where the guerrillas and the paramilitary control the narco-trafficking business. 'We are going to use all our means to eradicate the coca cultivation area in Catatumbo', said General Teodoro Campo, Head of the National Police. He added that a fleet of seven planes (escorted by 11 combat helicopters and supported on land by Army troops and the National Police) will be used to spray glyphosphate and that military operations to neutralize the guerrillas and paramilitary groups controlling extensive crop areas had already begun. At least eight guerrillas and seven soldiers had been killed as a result of the clashes.

General Campo said the aim was to spray for 45 to 60 days, depending on the weather conditions, the 10,000 hectares that had been planted with coca in Catatumbo. Once this phase was over, the destruction of narcotic crops by fumigation would move on to Arauca, another conflictive area on the Venezuelan border where the guerrillas have been operating for the past 20 years. Campo said a record in the fumigation of coca crops had been set in 2003. 'We have sprayed 101,000 hectares and we hope to have sprayed 150,000 by the end of the year', he said. Should this goal be reached, the whole of the coca and opium poppy crops in Colombia would have been fumigated, including the new crops planted by peasants displaced by the police offensive. Besides the crop destruction, in 2003, the National Police confiscated 19 tons of cocaine plus eight more tons of coca leaf ready to be processed in clandestine laboratories (100). President Uribe decided to harden his illegal crop eradication policy in the region and said there would be air fumigation against narcotics crops in La Gabarra region from 11 September 2003. The objective is to eradicate around 20,000 hectares of coca and opium poppies near the border area. This might become a new source of tension for the two neighbouring countries, as has already happened in the case of Ecuador (101).

### **The Displaced**

The issue of the displaced people, which has affected Colombia negatively for the past few years, is becoming a growing concern for the Colombian authorities. There are however no reliable figures to determine the full scope of the problem, because together with the Colombians who have sought refuge on the other side of the border, escaping

from some sort of violence or other, there are also others who escape but later return when things quieten down.

For a long time, Venezuela was an attractive country for Colombian immigrants. There were almost 3 million Colombians living in Venezuela by the end of 1998 (102). The problem of displaced Colombians who are escaping both the guerrillas and the paramilitary groups is starting to affect Venezuela. There are more and more Colombians crossing the border looking for refuge from violence, although since 2003 the inner flow of displaced people has started to slacken. Given the fact that the border crosses land where demarcation is difficult, it is sometimes almost impossible to determine which side of the border one is on. This has been the case of some of the complaints made by displaced Colombians in El Salado, Táchira, who said that their homes and possessions had been destroyed by the Venezuelan military (103).

Until recently, the Venezuelan authorities did not take the refugee problem very seriously and many of the latter lived in shameful conditions. This has slowly started to change. Ureña is a Venezuelan village only a few metres away from the border, where almost 6,000 people, mostly Colombian refugees escaping the violence in their own country, live. Despite being in another country, they are still not safe, because the armed groups cross the border between both countries with perfect ease. At least 100 people have been murdered in Ureña in the last few months, sometimes by the guerrillas, at others by the paramilitaries. Living conditions in Ureña are very hard. There is no running water or tolerable sanitary conditions for the thousands of refugees sheltered there. Water is brought in trucks and stored in huge open plastic drums, so that diarrhoea and dengue are common. As in most other similar border villages there is no police and kidnapping, extortion and murders are frequent. Although most of the people living there are Colombian, the authorities are not and they therefore have little interest in spending money on areas mainly populated by foreigners.

Only 2,000 people have claimed political asylum in Venezuela, despite the fact that UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) tries to encourage refugees to do so. This is a very small amount compared with the total number of displaced people: most are too afraid of becoming conspicuous, some fear being deported and others being identified by Colombian terrorist groups. There are others still who simply do not know the administrative procedures. This also affects the local Venezuelan authorities, because the commission that must decide about these cases started working in August 2003 (104).

## **Conclusions**

Bilateral relations between Colombia and Venezuela are going through one of their most difficult moments. Added to the traditional problems between the two countries, related to the disputed borderline in the Gulf of Venezuela –or Coquivacoa–, with the future impact this may have on oil drilling rights, the present situation has been aggravated by the attitude of the government of Hugo Chávez to the FARC and the ELN, and by its opposition to Plan Colombia. Chávez has not only refused to acknowledge these groups as terrorists, but when he came to power he even attempted to grant them the status of belligerents in the Colombian conflict. President Uribe's policy of 'democratic security' has widened the gap between the two countries.

For the Venezuelan government, the Colombian conflict is precisely that: an internal conflict that affects the government and society of Colombia but which, it would seem, has nothing to do with Venezuela. The only link with the Colombian conflict as far as the Venezuelan government is concerned would seem to be its desire to spread the Bolivarian project throughout the rest of the continent and this, precisely, is another bone

of increasing contention between the two sides. There is, however, an attempt not to overstep the mark, with rhetoric and mutual accusations taking up most of the time for the leaders, their staff and the press of the two countries; the language used, especially in the case of the Venezuelan opposition, is sometimes highly self-serving. It might be wiser for the opponents of Chávez, in an attempt to show greater maturity, coherence, and the capacity to become a serious political alternative, if they were to limit their accusations to things they can prove and, no matter what the strength of their feelings, if they were to leave conspiracy theories to groups operating on the margins of the system.

Given this setting, we are unlikely to witness a change in Venezuelan policy towards Colombia and the Colombian conflict in the short and mid term. Furthermore, the more Colombian armed and security forces increase their presence throughout the national territory, the higher the chance of the conflict spilling over into Venezuela. For the time being, the Venezuelan authorities would rather talk about plots and prefer to turn a blind eye, while the Colombians keep banging the drum about the connivance of the Chávez government with the FARC and the ELN. In the present context it is therefore clear that the question of the continuity of Hugo Chávez's government is the factor that will best determine the future evolution of bilateral relations.

*Carlos Malamud*  
*Senior Analyst, Latin America*  
*Real Instituto Elcano*

#### **NOTES:**

(1) The first part of this paper ([www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documentos/66.asp](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documentos/66.asp)) introduced the general framework of the situation.

(2) A member of the Colombian ELN also died in the border area in these same days.

(3) The prospects for 2004, based on the price of oil, are for growth.

(4) After some years in which the Plan Colombia had been focused on a counter-narcotics strategy, the US government finally agreed to give the Colombian Armed Forces financial assistance for their fight against terrorism. In 2004, 120 million dollars will be allocated to this; *El Universal* (Caracas), 9/1/2004.

(5) Daniel Christman and John Heimann (co-chairs), *Andes 2020: A New Strategy for the Challenges of Colombia and the Region* (preliminary version), Independent Commission report, Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Preventive Action, 2004, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org). One of the problems of this report is that it insists on the condition of Colombia as a 'failed state' and it falls into excessive generalizations about the situation of the Andean region, without sufficiently qualifying the different national cases.

(6) Notwithstanding the conflict between the armed and security forces of Ecuador and Colombia over the capture of *Simón Trinidad*, one of the top FARC leaders, and despite the gap in the rhetoric of their political leaders, there is a high level of operative cooperation between both countries, similar to that existing between Peru and Colombia.

(7) *El Universo* (Guayaquil), 9/X/2003.

(8) 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.7.

(9) 'La gran marea blanca', *El País* (Madrid), 25/I/2004.

(10) On the effort carried out under the presidency of Uribe see Román Ortiz, 'Luces y sombras de la estrategia contrainsurgente del presidente Uribe', Real Instituto Elcano, 18/IX/2002, [www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/65.asp](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/65.asp).

(11) Stratfor, 24/VIII/2003.

(12) Richard Millet, 'Colombia's Conflicts: The Spillover Effects of a Wider War', US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), [www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm), X/2002, p.6. During those years Venezuela even strengthened agrarian colonization in the border area and increased the military presence on the Colombian border from 1,500 to 5,000 men.

(13) This happened in 1998, for example, after the occupation of the Venezuelan village of Ragonvalla by the ELN, when the Colombian Army could pursue them on Venezuelan soil, 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo* supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.5.

- (14) This can be seen in the attention the Colombian government pays to the issue of the revocatory referendum in Venezuela, *El Universal* (Caracas), 9/X/2003.
- (15) It is unlikely that Hugo Chávez's government will change its attitude, with the revocatory referendum in sight.
- (16) Elsa Cardozo de da Silva, 'Venezuela ante el conflicto colombiano', [www.visionvenezolana.com/\\_Ensayos/E03.pdf](http://www.visionvenezolana.com/_Ensayos/E03.pdf).
- (17) José Vicente Rangel, then Venezuelan Defence Minister and today Vice-President, publicly stated that his country had a right to speak with whoever was in power. In November 2000, a FARC delegation which included Olga Marín, Raul Reyes's wife (some unconfirmed versions claim she is the daughter of Manuel Marulanda, *Tirofijo*) was received in a Latin-American Parliament meeting at the National Assembly in Caracas. Judith Gentleman 'The Regional Security Crisis in the Andes: Patterns of State Response', VII/2001, p.13, US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), [www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm).
- (18) According to Guillermo Fernández de Soto, Colombian Foreign Minister in Andrés Pastrana's government, Chávez acknowledged his contacts with the FARC during a meeting between himself and Uribe at which Fidel Castro and Gabriel García Márquez were also present, *El Nuevo Herald*, 22/I/2004. Chávez denied this, but he did admit to having had contact with the FARC near the border. In recent statements to the press, Camilo Gómez, a former Colombian High Commissioner for Peace, specified that Chávez had met guerrilla representatives at least twice at President Pastrana's request. On one of the occasions he met Raúl Reyes, from FARC and, on the other, he met Antonio García, of the ELN, *El Tiempo*, 28/I/2004.
- (19) *El Universal*, 24/IV/2003.
- (20) The confrontation with Chávez has strengthened the relations between presidents Uribe and Lagos beyond their ideological differences. The tension between Venezuela and Chile reached its peak during the XIII Iberoamerican Summit, when Chávez indicated that 'Bolivia had a sea, and I dream with bathing on a Bolivian beach', which provoked the withdrawal of the Chilean Ambassador from Caracas. See Carlos Malamud and Tomás Mallo, 'La XIII Cumbre Iberoamericana de Santa Cruz de la Sierra: algunos pasos significativos en la consolidación del sistema iberoamericano', ARI N° 155/2003, Real Instituto Elcano, 31/XII/2003, [www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/390.asp](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/390.asp). Although Lagos had not gone to Bogotá for Uribe's swearing-in and they had not met previously, their relations were strengthened and Uribe asked Lagos to act as his representative to the US, the European Union and the international financial institutions so as to obtain support for his government, see *La Tercera* (Santiago), 14/XII/2003.
- (21) *El Comercio* (Quito), 25/V/2003.
- (22) EFE, 5/XI/2003. The usual references are to the Colombian oligarchy.
- (23) *El Tiempo*, 16/IX/2003.
- (24) *El Tiempo*, 8/I/2004.
- (25) Fidel Castro also shares this fear, despite the fact that both men seem to be competing to be the first to be invaded.
- (26) [www.ptmhirugarren.org/secdocpa.htm](http://www.ptmhirugarren.org/secdocpa.htm).
- (27) It is most likely that this dialogue took place in Asunción, Paraguay, on 15th August, when both leaders coincided at the swearing-in of Nicanor Duarte, the Paraguayan president.
- (28) *El Nacional*, Caracas, 21/VIII/2003 y [BBCMundo.com](http://BBCMundo.com), 21/VIII/2003. This reasoning leads us back to the theory of mediation or support in peace negotiations.
- (29) *El Nacional*, Caracas, 21/VIII/2003; *El Tiempo*, 20/VIII/2003 y [BBCMundo.com](http://BBCMundo.com), 21/VIII/2003.
- (30) On Hugo Chávez's attitude at the XIII Iberoamerican Summit at Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia) and his relation with Evo Morales, see Carlos Malamud and Tomás Mallo, 'La XIII Cumbre Iberoamericana de Santa Cruz de la Sierra: algunos pasos significativos en la consolidación del sistema iberoamericano', ARI N° 155/2003, Real Instituto Elcano, 31/XII/2003, [www.realinstitutoelcano.org](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org).
- (31) Kim Cragin and Bruce Hoffman, *Arms Trafficking and Colombia*, RAND, Santa Monica, Ca., 2003, [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).
- (32) In the words of deputy Tarek William Saab, the official party spokesman on international issues, whereas Venezuela has 20,000 armed men in the border area, in river commandos, air commandos, combat units, operation centres and border surveillance posts, the Colombian side of the border is completely unmanned, *El Universal* (Caracas), 12/III/2003.
- (33) 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.13.
- (34) *El Universal* (Caracas), 30/XII/2003. There are contradictions concerning this point between general López Hidalgo's words and those of the Cuban Commander, Julio Quintero Viloria.
- (35) *El Tiempo*, 29/XII/2003.
- (36) *Revista Nueva Colombia*, N° 1 (2003), [www.resistencia.org/social/503492942c1338d01.html](http://www.resistencia.org/social/503492942c1338d01.html).
- (37) Juan Manuel Santos, the former Colombian Treasury Minister made this allegation. The Venezuelan reaction was very harsh. While Chaderton accused him of being connected to Venezuelan coup plotters, the



Venezuelan ambassador in Bogotá, Carlos Santiago, called him a cynical and irresponsible liar, *El Tiempo*, 13/VII/2003.

(38) The Bolivian situation worries the US as much as it worries its neighbouring countries, especially Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. All the capital cities follow the events with enormous interest and everybody is very concerned with the arrival of Evo Morales into government, something considered to be a highly destabilizing event.

(39) *El Tiempo*, 4/IX/2003.

(40) *El Nuevo Herald*, 9/I/2004.

(41) En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.7.

(42) En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.10.

(43) *El Nuevo Herald*, 4/IX/2003.

(44) *El Pais* (Cali), 5/IX/2003.

(45) *El Universal* (Caracas), 14-15/IX/2003.

(46) *BBC Mundo.com*, 14/IX/2003.

(47) At the beginning of 2004, 76% of Colombians were satisfied with Uribe's government, according to a macro poll carried out by Gallup for *Semana* magazine,

<http://semana.terra.com.co/opencms/Semana/articulo.html?id=75588>. After the constitutional referendum of last October, *El Espectador*, 30/XI/2003, wrote: 'The trust of Colombians in president Uribe remains intact. Neither the defeat at the referendum nor the changes in the cabinet or the National Police scandals have dented the credibility of the Head of State. The polls are still in his favour. His style of government still has wide support.

(48) 900 fewer people were kidnapped in 2003 than in 2002.

(49) All the explanations that insist on describing the events of April 11 as a full-blown military coup are inconsistent when referring to its planning, coordination and execution. Everything suggests that there was a glut of events that led the Army to act in order to prevent worse things happening. One of the most objective explanations, which nonetheless is based on the conspiracy theory, is that of Teodoro Pekoff: *Hugo Chávez tal cual*, Caracas, La Catarata, 2002. See also Eleazar Díaz Rangel: *Todo Chávez: de Sabaneta al golpe de abril*, Caracas, Editorial Planeta, 2002.

(50) *El Universal* (Caracas), 26/X/2003.

(51) At the beginning of 2002 a video was broadcast showing Venezuelan military at a meeting with guerrillas on Colombian soil. It has lately been repeatedly asserted that the FARC and the ELN had training encampments in Venezuelan territory, which were reputedly frequented by members of the *Círculos Bolivarianos*. FARC high commanders, with Manuel Marulanda, *Tirofijo*, at their head, were also repeatedly said to be sheltering in Venezuela.

(52) *El Nacional* (Caracas), 27/VIII/2003.

(53) *BBC Mundo.com*, 14/IX/2003.

(54) En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.11.

(55) Roberto Giusti, 'Guerra fratricida', in *El Universal* (Caracas), 12/VIII/2003.

(56) [www.colombia.com](http://www.colombia.com), 13/II/2003.

(57) Favourable opinions about Chávez among terrorist groups are not exclusive to the FARC, or the ELN. The Spanish terrorist organization ETA, some of whose members are in hiding in Venezuela, also share a similar point of view. See Carlos Aznárez, *Los sueños de Bolívar en la Venezuela de hoy*, Ed. Txalaparta, Bilbao, 2002, with a prologue by an ETA leader.

(58) *El Tiempo*, 24/VIII/2003.

(59) FARC lecture, 'La perspectiva socialista en América Latina', at the seminar on 'Las alternativas populares y la perspectiva socialista en América Latina', Santiago de Chile, 7-10/IX/2003, [www.nodo50.org/americalibre/eventos/farcep0903.htm](http://www.nodo50.org/americalibre/eventos/farcep0903.htm).

(60) *El Nuevo Herald*, 26/I/2004.

(61) It is remarkable that the Foreign Minister of a Latin-American country, which is theoretically democratic, should give an interview to a publication of this nature.

(62) Chaderton said: 'Those of us who comprise the group of mediators avoid making qualifications as part of our political and practical premise. This helps us to preserve our potential as players in the Colombian peace process. We are not actors in this country's war; we are actors in so far as the Colombian authorities accept it, as we have proved all these years. When we combat within Colombia's political reality, we are interfering in another country's home affairs on the one hand, and on the other we are making a serious mistake which hinders our ability to be factors in Colombia's evolution towards peace. Venezuela is not the only country that avoids making qualifications. I wonder what some media have to gain in hiding the Venezuelan authorities' commitment. Are they trying to fuel a confrontation between the two countries?', [www.resistencia.org/social/503492942c1338d01.html](http://www.resistencia.org/social/503492942c1338d01.html).

- (63) It is true that Chávez met Andrés Pastrana and Fidel Castro after his coming to power in order to explore possible conversations between Colombia and the ELN, Richard Millet, 'Colombia's Conflicts: The Spillover Effects of a Wider War', US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), [www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm), X/2002, p.6, but this situation has radically changed with Uribe's coming to power in Colombia, something which the Venezuelans are perfectly aware of.
- (64) This could be the case of the NGO 'Renacer' of Venezuela, one of whose leaders was murdered, together with his son, by paramilitaries near the Colombian border. Foreign Minister Chaderton, however, denied such information, *Miami Herald*, 10/VI/2003.
- (65) 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.13.
- (66) *El Tiempo*, 11/III/03.
- (67) 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.9.
- (68) *El Colombiano*, 30/VII/2003.
- (69) *Chicago Tribune*, 26/VI/2003.
- (70) Richard Millet, 'Colombia's Conflicts: The Spillover Effects of a Wider War', US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), [www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm), X/2002, p.7. See Asdrúbal Aguiar's words, (former Venezuelan Interior Minister) declarations concerning a document called 'Proyecto Fronteras' on p. 20 of this paper.
- (71) Judith Gentleman, 'The Regional Security Crisis in the Andes: Patterns of State Response, VII/2001, US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), [www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm).p14.
- (72) At the beginning of July, policemen from the Colombian DAS (DAS) and from Venezuela's Disip (the political police) deactivated a necklace of explosives placed on a Venezuelan cattle farmer reputedly extorted by FARC terrorists in the Táchira State. The ransom demanded was of 300 million bolivars (around 187,500 dollars), *Miami Herald*, 2/VII/2003. The FARC, however, denied their participation in these events, *La Opinion*, (Bogotá), 4/VII/2003.
- (73) *El Tiempo*, 29/XII/2003, and *El Nacional* (Caracas), 30/XII/2003.
- (74) Servicio de Noticias del Estado – Presidencia de la República, [www.presidencia.gov.co/cne](http://www.presidencia.gov.co/cne), 29/XII/2003.
- (75) *El Tiempo*, 27/XII/2003.
- (76) John Walters, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy of the White House, expressed his concern because Venezuela is offering refuge both to terrorists and to drug traffickers, *El Universal* (Caracas), 10/X/2003. US criticism of Hugo Chávez's international policy also targets the reputed financing of Evo Morales, the leader of the Bolivian coca workers. In recent press declarations, both Morales and the Venezuelan Vice-President Jose Vicente Rangel demanded that the State Department prove its accusations. *La Razon* (La Paz), 7/I/2004. Morales's frequent visits to Caracas, and the close contacts with Bolivarian organizations, however, seem to support a belief in this type of accusations.
- (77) Colombia is the third receiver of military aid from the US, after Israel and Egypt.
- (78) *El Tiempo*, 4 and 13/XI/2003.
- (79) According to certain reports, Margarita Island is also a shelter for certain Islamic terrorists, *El Nuevo Herald*, 28/III/2003, and *El Panama America*, 22/XI/2003.
- (80) *El Universal* (Caracas), 12/III/2003.
- (81) *Las Vegas Sun*, 13/VIII/2003.
- (82) *El Nacional* (Caracas), 4/XI/2003.
- (83) *El Tiempo*, 16/IX/2003.
- (84) *BBC News*, 15/X/2003.
- (85) *El Espectador*, 7/X/2003.
- (86) *BBC News* 15/X/2003. Whereas the Colombians put it at 66%, according to Venezuelan estimates, the fall in trade in the first term of 2003 reached 70% (69.9 million dollars as opposed to 164.2 million dollars in the first quarter of 2002), *El Nacional* (Caracas), 24/VII/2003.
- (87) 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.13.
- (88) Restrictions in exchange, adopted in February, provoked a run on the bolívar and the fall of Venezuela's international reserves, which led to important reductions in imports and exports. The economy fell by 19% in the first half of 2003, in the country's worst economic crisis since Venezuela's Banco Central started to publish its results in 1950. [www.oxfordanalytica.org](http://www.oxfordanalytica.org), 'Venezuela: Record Contraction Expected by Year-End', 12/IX/2003. According to Colombian official statistics, the country's exports increased by 5.3% between November 2002 and November 2003, to reach 1,010 million dollars. Exports to the US, Colombia's main trade partner, were boosted by the renewed privileged treatment granted by the Washington government. This balanced out the acute fall of exports to Venezuela.
- (89) *El Tiempo*, 4/IX/2003.
- (90) *El Nacional* (Caracas), 24/VII/2003.

- (91) Kim Cragin and Bruce Hoffman, *Arms Trafficking and Colombia*, RAND, Santa Monica, Ca., 2003, [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org), pp. 27-29. In their paper they mention the Colombian Security Forces' finding of a shipment of 400 guns related to the Compañía Anónima Venezuela Industrial de Municiones (*El Espectador*, 27/VIII/2000); the arrest by Colombian authorities of José Eliseo Prieto, *Esteban*, responsible for FARC finances, while he was at a meeting with Venezuelan citizens and in possession of documents referring to a meeting between FARC members and the Venezuelan Technical Division of the Judicial Police (*Semana*, 11/VII/1999); and the capture by the AUC of a ELN member who informed on the Venezuelan Military's supplying of arms and munitions to the ELN (*El Tiempo*, 29/III/2001).
- (92) Kim Craig and Bruce Hoffman, *Arms Trafficking and Colombia*, RAND, Santa Monica, Ca., 2003. [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org), pp 32-33.
- (93) *La Nación*, 21/VIII/2003.
- (94) *El Tiempo*, 4/IX/2003.
- (95) *El Espectador*, 26/XI/2003.
- (96) 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.8.
- (97) 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.12.
- (98) 'En los confines de Colombia', *El Tiempo*, supplement, 10/VIII/2003, p.12.
- (99) Luz Nagle, 'Plan Colombia: Reality of the Colombian Crisis and Implications for Hemispheric Security', XII/2002, p.36, US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), [www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm).
- (100) *El Nuevo Herald*, 10/IX/2003.
- (101) 'Una frontera inflamable', *El Tiempo*, editorial, 4/IX/2003. See also *El Nacional* (Caracas), 3/IX/2003, and *BBC Mundo.com* ([www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk)) and *El Nuevo Herald*, 4/IX/2003.
- (102) Richard Millet, 'Colombia's Conflicts: The Spillover Effects of a Wider War', US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), [www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm), X/2002, p.6.
- (103) *BBC News*, 14/X/2003.
- (104) *BBC News*, 14/X/2003.