



WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

Celebrating 30 years of promoting democracy, human rights and social justice in Latin America.

August 7, 2009

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

On behalf of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), I am writing to convey our serious concerns regarding the pending agreement between the United States and the government of Colombia over the U.S. military's expanded use of military facilities in that country.

As you know, the expiring decade-long bilateral Manta agreement with Ecuador was specifically limited to counter-drug operations.¹ By contrast, the Administration's Defense Department FY 2010 Budget Request Summary Justification requesting funds for the Palanquero Cooperative Security Location (CSL) describes the Department's wide and open-ended objective to "*develop an array of access arrangements for contingency operations, logistics, and training in Central/ South America, and [the Department] is currently discussing possible arrangements for increased access in several countries in the region.*" (p. 30)

The U.S. Air Force's Air Mobility Command White Paper on Global En Route Strategy also envisions a broader mission. "Recently," according to the White Paper, "*USSOUTHCOM has become interested in establishing a location on the South American continent that could be used both for counter-narcotics operations and as a location from which mobility operations could be executed... Until such time that USSOUTHCOM establishes a more robust theater engagement plan, the strategy to place a CSL at Palanquero should be sufficient for air mobility reach on the South American continent.*" (pp. 21-22)

The prospect of "mission creep" under the broad and vague descriptions of the Defense Department's intentions for Palanquero is undeniable, and many governments in the region are reacting predictably and justifiably with fear and distrust.

At a time when the United States should be making every diplomatic effort to repair the damage that has been done to U.S.-Latin American relations over the past several years, the pursuit of a new, broadly-construed U.S. military mission and presence in the region is extremely provocative, and risks exacerbating the already significant tensions in Latin America.

¹ WOLA has long-standing concerns over U.S. drug control policy in Latin America. However, those concerns are not the subject of this letter.

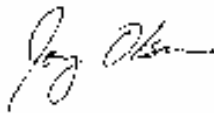
The pending base agreement must be seen in the context of other, recent U.S. military actions in Latin America, such as last year's re-establishment of the U.S. Navy's 4th Fleet, which was regarded quite negatively throughout the region. Taken together, the perception that the United States is returning to an aggressive military posture in the region – with uncomfortable echoes of “gunboat diplomacy” – becomes difficult to refute.

Predictably, these actions stoke the suspicions of those who accuse the United States of pursuing a belligerent foreign policy. For example, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez points to these actions to bolster his claim that his country is under threat of U.S. invasion. Such volatility, which risks sparking a dangerous new arms race in the region, requires careful diplomacy, not increased U.S. military presence. President Chávez is hardly alone among leaders in the region in expressing unease over an expanded military presence in the region. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, among others, has publicly stated his concerns.

The Administration has made a compelling case for the primacy of diplomacy in addressing key challenges in global affairs. This emphasis on diplomacy and partnership, which was very much welcomed in Latin America, is called into question by pursuit of a wider U.S. military role in the region.

I hope you will reconsider your view of the need for this new U.S. military presence in the region.

Sincerely,



Joy Olson
Executive Director

cc:

Thomas Shannon, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, State Department
William McIlhenny, Director of Policy Planning, Western Hemisphere Affairs, State Department

Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense
Frank Mora, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere, Defense Department
General Douglas Fraser, Commander, U.S. Southern Command

General James Jones (Ret.), National Security Adviser, National Security Council
Dan Restrepo, Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, National Security Council