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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 B0G0TA 003863

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TAGS: PREL PTER MARR MASS VE CO GOV
SUBJECT: COLOMBIA COPES WITH CHAVEZ

REF: A. SECSTATE 43965
¶B. B0G0TA 555
¶C. B0G0TA 1531

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) This cable responds to Ref A taskings regarding Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's activities and Colombian responses.

¶2. (S) Summary: Border incidents, Venezuela's harboring of the FARC and ELN FT0s, and a potential arms race have done much to mobilize opinion leaders against Chavez. President Uribe has remained steady in the face of these events, yet has not hesitated to pursue Colombian FT0s in Venezuela. Trade, development projects, and some bi-national commissions have resumed, after resolution of a contretemps over the arrest of FARC "FM" Rodrigo Granda. At least one "Bolivarian group" exists in Colombia, but neo-Bolivarian revolutionary ideology remains muted. End Summary.

Harboring the FARC

¶3. (S) It is well known in Colombia that FARC and ELN FT0s maintain camps in Venezuela. The GOC has presented specific and correct -- though not complete -- information to the GOV regarding FARC camps and activities in Venezuela on more than one occasion, including by MFA Americas Director Mauricio Baquero in person during the Granda crisis (paras 10 and 11). FARC guerrillas captured in Catatumbo, Norte de Santander Department report, for example, transport in GOV military aircraft, for refuge, rest, and recuperation in Venezuela. The GOV has declined to acknowledge the existence of the Colombian Guerrillas in Venezuela. In the wake of the massacre of six Venezuelans in September 2004, apparently by the FARC, Chavez denied harboring any Colombian illegal armed actors. These denials continue.

Bolivarian Group Comes Out

¶4. (C) The GOV and Venezuelan Embassy have been silent regarding the application of "Bolivarian" revolutionary ideology to Colombia. The only group to make itself public -- after four years of clandestine existence -- is a "Bolivarian Circle" in Cucuta, capital of Norte de Santander Department, perhaps emboldened by the Uribe-Chavez-Lula-Zapatero summit in Venezuela the previous week (March 29). Bogota's El Tiempo reported the group to be composed of leftist intellectuals, lawyers, and labor leaders. Group members claimed that the Colombian border was Chavez country, and that no one identified with President Uribe. They also expressed fear of violent reprisal. Their first public (though not avowedly Bolivarian) activity was a 2003 screening of a film celebrating the failure of the 2002 anti-Chavez coup. None of the 250 invited local politicians and public figures showed up. One circle-member acknowledged corruption and militarization of the GOV as weaknesses of the Chavez regime, despite his Bolivarian loyalty.

¶5. (C) The GOC has made no formal comment regarding the Cucuta or any other Bolivarian group. The MFA's Baquero (protect) noted that the Venezuela-Colombia Border had its own culture and that many residents carried identification cards from both countries. He commented that just as Colombian illegal armed groups operated in Venezuela, it was understandable that Bolivarian circles would cross the border into Colombia. He speculated that other Bolivarian groups existed in Colombia farther from Venezuela, but said that he had no specific knowledge. Del Rosario University political scientist Vicente Torrijos told poloff that Bolivarian organizations were incipient in Colombia and that an academic research unit was needed to put forward a non-leftist Bolivarian ideology.

Uribe Takes the High Road

¶6. (C) The GOC has been consistently calm and measured in its public comments on Chavez. FM Barco noted privately that Chavez is consolidating his power and acknowledged his close ties to Fidel Castro, but intimated that since he is in place, the GOC must deal with him. Under press questioning, she acknowledged Fidel Castro's part in overcoming the impasse generated by the Granda affair.

¶7. (C) Incursions: On March 20, 2005 Venezuelan soldiers from the Hunter Battalion based in La Fria, Tachira State, allegedly entered Guaramito, Norte de Santander, searching for contraband gasoline. Colombian National Police (CNP) Commander Jose Henao was quoted that the operation was unauthorized and now in the hands of the MFA. MFA Sovereignty Director Mauricio Gonzalez noted that gasoline costs ten times as much in Colombia and that some smuggling is to be expected. He dismissed the helicopter overflight, but said that the MFA and MINDEF were in contact with Venezuelan counterparts and were investigating the alleged incursion. Gonzalez noted that rivers dry and change course,

leading to land and sovereignty disputes, which he characterized as frequently inadvertent, and stressed that "mechanisms" were in place to handle border complaints.

¶8. (C) The GOC responded calmly to the arrest in May 2004 of some 90 purported Colombian paramilitaries near Caracas. President Uribe called for a complete investigation, and welcomed the actions of neighboring countries to prevent illegal activities of Colombians abroad. FM Carolina Barco met with Chavez in Caracas, who subsequently calmed down, though he continued to blame then Colombian Army Commander General Martin Carreno, who is from Cucuta where many of the arrested Colombians were hired. Uribe retired Carreno in November 2004. The GOC handled earlier Venezuelan military incursions into La Guajira Department in a similarly measured manner.

But Goes After the Guerrillas in Venezuela

¶9. (S/NF) The DATT reports that the Colombian army quietly maintains a 100-man counter-guerrilla company in Zulia State, Venezuela across from Colombia's La Guajira Department searching for FARC Secretariat member alias Ivan Marquez. Colombia Military Intelligence is running covert operations inside Venezuela and has arranged with Venezuelan police and military for the capture and delivery of more than 30 FARC and ELN members operating in Venezuela.

¶10. (SBU) The Granda Case (Ref B): The GOC announced on December 14 the arrest of FARC international liaison chief Rodrigo Granda in the border city of Cucuta. Granda stated that he had been detained in Caracas and spirited out of Venezuela. A FARC communique in late December and relentless investigation by Bogota daily newspaper El Tiempo, published in January 2005, forced the GOC to acknowledge a Venezuela component to the operation. A crescendo of GOV complaints culminated in Chavez's recalling his ambassador from Bogota, suspending bi-lateral development projects (most notably the Venezuela-Colombia-Pacific pipeline), impeding cross-border commerce, and demanding an apology and a one-on-one meeting with Uribe.

¶11. (C) Uribe consistently euphemized the situation -- "The problem is not with Venezuela; it's with the FARC" -- and called upon regional leaders to resolve the impasse. The dust had largely settled by the time the two presidents met in Venezuela on February 15. In that meeting Uribe got a statement against terrorism, reactivation of bi-national commissions, and full resumption of commerce and joint development projects. Chavez got Uribe to visit and to express admiration for Simon Bolivar as an inspiration for peaceful coexistence in the region.

¶12. (S/NF) The arrest of FARC leader Juan Jose Martinez, aka "El Chiguiro" (a species of rodent), in Venezuela is another case in point. According to the DATT, El Chiguiro's arrest resulted from a GOC operation, oiled by a 20 million peso (USD 8,500) payoff to GOV authorities. (It was not, as presented in the press, a collateral result of a GOV investigation into the kidnapping of U.S. major league

baseball player Urgueth Urbina's mother.)

Commercial Ties and Joint Economic Development

¶13. (S) Venezuela is Colombia's second trade partner after the United States. In 2004 Colombian exports (mostly manufactured goods) to Venezuela doubled, and Venezuela went from a slight export surplus (mostly raw materials) to a major trade deficit with Colombia. Contraband commerce includes weapons, AK-47 ammunition (as reported by DATT), and gasoline from Venezuela; drugs and rustled cattle from Colombia.

¶14. (C) In their November 2004 meeting in Cartagena, Presidents Uribe and Chavez heralded progress in negotiations for a pipeline to provide Colombian gas to Maracaibo and subsequently Venezuelan gas to Colombia. They also proposed a "poliducto" to bring Venezuelan oil to Colombia's Pacific Coast (for possible export to China). At the time politicians close to Uribe told us, surprisingly, that the personal relationship between Uribe and Chavez was strong. Cartagena meeting press conference banter appeared to reflect this rapport. The Cartagena joint declaration followed September and November 2004 Transport Minister meetings and called for bridge, water, and road development.

¶15. (C) Deputy FM Camilo Reyes enthused (Ref C) over the resumption of bi-national commissions in support of such initiatives (as agreed upon by Uribe and Chavez in their February 15 meeting). Sub-committees of the fifteen-year-old Presidential Commission for Frontier Integration (COPIAF) had been meeting regularly to discuss economic, commercial, environmental, educational, and communications affairs. The full plenary will meet in Venezuela in May after a two-year hiatus. Normally FMs lead the delegations. The MFA's Gonzalez said that private sector commercial participants will outnumber government officials and academics.

¶16. (C) Bi-national plans for pipelines, roads, and electricity-sharing have been underway for some time, and they are back on track after settlement of the Granda affair. The MFA's Baquero noted, however, that Chavez's wholesale replacement of personnel in various ministries has impeded progress on joint development projects such as pipeline design. He declined to label the Bolivarian replacements as incompetent, noting rather that the new personnel would have to catch up.

Media, Opinion Leaders Close Ranks with Uribe

¶17. (C) Border incidents, Venezuela's harboring of the FARC and ELN FTOs, and a potential arms race have done much to mobilize opinion leaders against Chavez. The right is openly critical, and the left has not been willing to make public statements in his favor. Independent Democratic Pole (PDI) Congressman Gustavo Petro claimed the firm U.S. stance on Chavez revealed a bias against regional economic and infrastructural integration, and asserted that the Granda

affair was an Uribe reelection ploy. These comments garnered no public support, even from Bogota Mayor (and PDI founder) Luis Eduardo Garzon, who, when asked about Chavez, said that military politicians, right or left, were not to his liking. In private meetings with poloffs, Garzon has been critical of Chavez.

¶18. (U) Javierana University historian Martha Marquez views Chavez as a classic populist for his direct relation with the lower classes and nationalization of resources. She felt the jury was out on Chavez's rejection of "savage neoliberalism."

Visas and Migration

¶19. (U) The GOC does not require visas of entering Venezuelan citizens unless they plan to work, nor do initial business visits require a visa. Immigration for Latin-Americans requires one year's residence under a formal resident visa. Far more Colombians reside in Venezuela than Venezuelans in Colombia. Movement across the border has traditionally been fluid, notably among Wayuu indigenous, whose territory transcends the border between Colombia's La Guajira Department and Venezuela.

Border Security

¶20. (S/NF) Military relations have been gradually worsening, though bi-national police cooperation is somewhat better. The last Bi-national Frontier Commission meeting (COMBIFRON) took place in March 2001. Chavez canceled the September 2001 meeting after a dozen years of relatively successful military and police cooperation. Venezuela is the only bordering nation with which Colombia has no COMBIFRON. Subsequent cross-border military communication has varied by region and commander. General Matamoros, Commander of the COLMIL 18th Brigade, engaged in a harsh verbal exchange with his Venezuelan counterpart following an exchange of small arms fire between their troops (no casualties reported) in Arauca Department some six months ago. COLMIL First Division General Mario Montoya, whose area of responsibility includes the border Departments of La Guajira and Cesar, has had staff talks with his Venezuelan counterparts.

¶21. (C) In a December meeting in Venezuela, GOC MOD Jorge Uribe and GOV MOD General Jorge Luis Garcia agreed to semiannual meetings to combat narco-terrorism and drug trafficking and to "correct errors." No date has been set for the next MOD meeting, but it is to take place in Colombia. Despite Uribe's apparent satisfaction with the outcome of the March 29 summit, Chavez remained unwilling to resume the COMBIFRONS.

Venezuelan Arms Buildup

¶22. (C) Uribe, Chavez, and later Spanish President Rodriguez

Zapatero have put the best face on Venezeulan arms purchases (Russian helicopters, assault rifles, and possibly Migs; Brazilian attack aircraft and possibly radar; Spanish military transport aircraft and corvettes; and maybe even some North Korean missiles). The presidents say the weapons will promote internal security, narcotics interdiction, and border control -- and deny that the arms race posited by the press will ensue.

¶23. (S/NF) The DATT reports that the COLMIL already feels out-gunned along the Venezuelan border, however, and is gradually moving up armored vehicles. The Russian rifles use the same ammunition for which the FARC now pays top dollar, and their use by Venezuelan forces makes for a potential increase in supply and decrease in cost on the Venezuelan black market.

¶24. (C) The GOC has expressed interest in buying 155 mm howitzers, and Israeli Spike anti-armor missiles. (Venezuela has AMX 30 tanks; Spain under Rodriguez Zapatero canceled an AMX tank sale to GOC based on an offer by the previous Aznar government.) The COLMIL wants to get its M113 armored personnel carriers back on the road and mount machine guns and or missiles on them.

¶25. (C) Colombian Senate President Humberto Gomez Gallo publicly criticized Spain's billion dollar arms sale to the GOV during President Rodriguez Zapatero's visit. Editorial comment characterized Rodriguez Zapatero's participation in the four-president summit in Venezuela as a cover for the billion dollar arms sale. The MFA's Baquero (protect) allowed that Chavez's arms purchases bore watching, but rejected the possibility of a Venezuelan invasion.

Ideology and Diplomacy

¶26. (C) The March 29 summit pitted Uribe's center-right ideology against Chavez and two other leftists. Uribe wanted the declaration to say that terrorism causes poverty. The others wanted a statement that poverty causes terrorism, which Uribe rejected as justifying the actions of the illegal armed groups operating in Colombia. The compromise document noted that poverty caused a variety of social ills including violence, and that terrorism, in Colombia, caused poverty (by inhibiting investment, etc.).

WOOD

=====CABLE ENDS=====