

US Security Assistance and Human Rights Violations in the Americas (2000-2021)

By

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Photo courtesy of Latin American Working Group

<https://www.lawg.org/todos-somos-ayotzinapa-calls-for-justice-in-mexico-after-a-student-massacre/>

Table of Contents

- I. **Introduction** by Seth Donnelly and Angela Marino, p.3
- II. **In the Service of Neo-Colonial Terror: the US Connection with Security Forces in Haiti 2000– Present** by Seth Donnelly and Kiyoshi Taylor, pp. 5–9
- III. **Mexico in the 21st Century: Increased Flows of US Security Funding and Weapons, Deepening Human Rights Catastrophe** by Romeo Bienvenido Villanueva, pp.10–14
- IV. **Ecocide and Crimes against Humanity under the Bolsonaro Regime in Brazil** by Eliana Kim, pp.15–19
- V. **US interventions in Colombia: Imperial Continuity at the Expense of Human Rights** by Alexander Quiroz, pp. 20–23
- VI. **Killing with Impunity: the Role of US-Backed Security Forces in Colombia** during the 21st Century, pp.24–28

Introduction

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Throughout the 20th century, a strong, well-documented correlation existed between US funding and training of security forces in the Global South and gross human rights violations perpetrated by these forces. The greater the US funding and training, the greater the human rights abuses including torture and extrajudicial killings. Although US officials frequently denied the existence of this correlation, they did justify US support for repressive military regimes in the Global South during the Cold War as part of the imperative to “contain” the spread of “communism”. Extensive scholarship demonstrated that this Cold War justification was, in fact, a pretext for the US neo-colonial agenda of resource extraction and labor exploitation in the Global South. For example, in their path breaking book The Washington Connection to Third World Fascism: the Political Economy of Human Rights vol.I (1979), Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman effectively showed that the correlation was a **causation**; the US increased funding to repressive security forces in order to maintain the exclusion of the impoverished majority from meaningful, democratic power, thereby reproducing a “favorable investment climate” for US corporations.

Additionally, U.S. funding of foreign security forces, along with arms sales to these forces, is not a deterrent; it is an investment in a for-profit economy made up by U.S. businesses in arms sales, chemical manufacturing, as well as military, surveillance, and carceral technologies. While policy think tanks persuade politicians that there is a public good for ‘security interests,’ the entire premise of deterrence is false.

The “Militarism is Anti-Democratic” research team of UC Berkeley’s Democracy and Media Project sought to investigate whether or not this correlation holds true in the first two decades of the 21st Century. In particular, the team focused on US funding/ training of security forces in four countries in the Americas with proven records of contemporary, massive human rights violations such as extrajudicial executions: Haiti, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. In each country, covered in its own chapter below, the team’s research found that an ongoing correlation exists between high levels of US security “assistance” and gross human rights violations.

In these case studies, the correlation reveals the same **causal relationship** that Chomsky and Herman exposed. The U.S. government has increased funding and weaponization of security forces in these 4 countries, bolstering repressive regimes that have maintained a “favorable investment climate” for U.S. corporations while excluding the impoverished majority from meaningful, democratic power.

Undoubtedly, other countries in the Americas, such as Honduras following the US-backed coup in 2009 and Peru following the US-backed coup in 2022, yield the same essential findings. Given that these countries are not included here, it should be kept in mind that this report only begins to shed light on the correlation in the 21st century. Further research by others is needed to develop a comprehensive, hemispheric report, a task all the more relevant on this 200th anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine.

The U.S. strategy of increasing military aid and security force funding to enforce a set of global economic relationships is increasingly being challenged by a growing number of progressive governments in Latin America propelled to electoral victories by popular, Indigenous-led social movements. These governments-- through the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)-- are seeking to build a “zone of peace” based on respect for multipolarism, and for the sovereignty of peoples within and across nations. Such sovereignty affirms the values of “buen vivir”, mutual aid, community decision-making and control over resources, and genuine democracy. These values provide a path forward to move beyond the U.S.-imposed patterns of exploitation and violence detailed in this report.

In the Service of Neo-Colonial Terror: the US Connection with Security Forces in Haiti 2000 to the Present

By Seth Donnelly and Kiyoshi Taylor



Photo courtesy of the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#).

Background:

The United States has had a long history of involvement in Haiti, dating back to the early 20th century when the U.S. Marines occupied the country from 1915 to 1934. During this occupation, the US built, trained, and funded the Haitian army that became the backbone of the brutal Duvalier dictatorship between 1957– 1986. When a massive, non-violent grassroots democratic movement known as “Lavalas” (flood) successfully toppled the Duvalier dictatorship and uprooted the domination of the US-backed military, the conditions were established for Haiti’s first truly free and fair elections. In 1990, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overwhelmingly elected by the poor majority with the goal of completing the Haitian revolution and democratizing society on all levels. A mere 8 months into his Presidency, he was overthrown in a violent, US-backed coup that re-established the domination of the military.

During the following 3 years of military dictatorship, the US-funded Haitian military and US-funded paramilitary death squad known as FRAPH killed thousands of Haitians. Finally, the courageous resistance of the Haitian people, joined by intensive international solidarity, led to Aristide's return and the restoration of democratic, Lavalas governments between 1994 and 2004. A second US-backed coup in 2004 forced Aristide again into exile and placed Haiti under a foreign military occupation— authorized by the UN Security Council— that installed a series of repressive, neo-colonial regimes implicated in massacres and gross human rights violations perpetrated by US- funded and US/ UN trained security forces including the Haitian National Police (HNP).

The Data on US Support for Haitian Security Forces 2000 to Present:

An examination of US-funding of the Haitian police from 2000 to the present reveals a striking pattern: the US essentially terminated funding for the HNP in the years right before the 2004 coup, precisely when the US was funding paramilitary violence, led by the notorious Guy Philippe, to attack Haitians and destabilize the democratic Lavalas government. Following the 2004 coup, US funding and weaponization of the HNP skyrocketed, when the police were working with foreign military occupation forces to repress the mass movement calling for the restoration of democracy and the return of President Aristide. This repression involved horrific massacres in popular, pro-Lavalas neighborhoods such as Cite Soleil (Donnelly, 2005). During this period, the HNP was infiltrated and taken over by members of the former Haitian military and the FRAPH. Throughout the post-coup years of repression, the United States has provided significant assistance to the HNP, including training and equipment, through the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). Other countries, such as Canada and France— also implicated in the 2004 coup— have provided support to the HNP.

This pattern was documented in a 2005 [petition](#) to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights prepared by human rights attorneys with the National Lawyers Guild and the Chicago Conference of Black Lawyers, denouncing the US government for financing and equipping the HNP following the coup, thereby aiding and abetting gross human rights abuses in Haiti. As the petitioners stated:

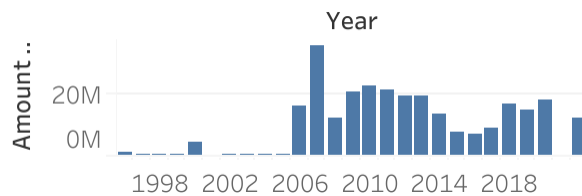
“Since the February 29 coup, the US government has provided the HNP with significant financial aid, weaponry, and other police equipment, such as vehicles, in violation of the US arms embargo and despite the clear record of HNP extrajudicial killings and massacres of the civilian population. Moreover, the US government has conducted training of the PNH, thereby facilitating the integration of former military and death squad elements into the command structure of the force. This arming and training of the HNP stands in stark contrast to the elimination of weapons, equipment, and training to the HNP during the second term of the Aristide government.

For example, the US State Department sanctioned the transfer of 2,636 weapons to the PNH in the summer of 2004. Additionally, the US government sent a weapons shipment worth \$7 million to Haiti in November 2004, and, later, in June 2005, \$2.6 million worth of police equipment...

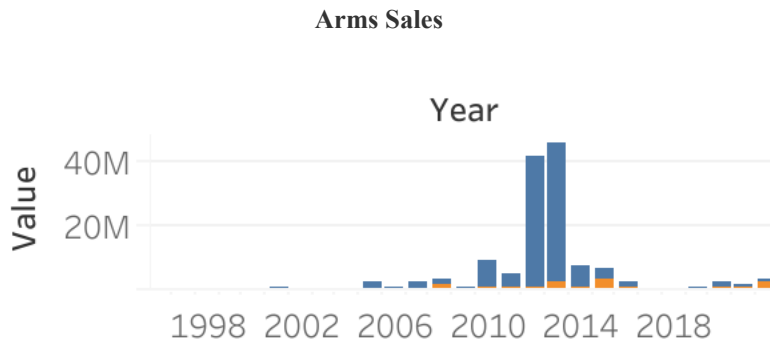
By arming, financing, training, and diplomatically supporting the HNP after the coup, the US government has directly participated in human rights violations and fostering the climate of impunity that prevails in Haiti today. The list of extrajudicial killings and massacres by the HNP detailed below is indissolubly connected to the intervention by the US government in the affairs of Haiti.”

The petition proceeds to detail some of the most egregious killings and massacres by the HNP during the first year-and-a-half of the coup/ occupation regime.”

The pattern of the US government starving the democratic Aristide government of security assistance while subsequently showering the repressive post-coup regimes with security assistance is also reflected in data provided by the Security Assistance Monitor of the Center for International Policy. As reflected in the chart below, US security assistance to Haiti was effectively terminated in the early 2000s and then dramatically increased following the 2004 coup.



A similar pattern is discernible when it comes to US arms sales to the Haitian government. Again using data from the Security Assistance Monitor, arms sales– including both those made directly by the US government and those made by private US companies authorized by the US government– were effectively terminated in the years immediately preceding the 2004 coup. Following the coup, they increase slightly during the early years of the US/ UN occupation, but then spike between 2011 and 2014– precisely the years when the US-installed PHTK regime, led by former FRAPH member Michel Martelly, was consolidating its grip on power and paramilitaries (“gangs”) working with the regime and the police were beginning to proliferate. Though arms sales have since declined, this massive spike significantly weaponized the HNP and the paramilitaries, from which the Haitian people continue to suffer today.



Despite this apparent decline in arms sales in recent years, US funding of the HNP continues to increase dramatically, despite the well-documented pattern of the HNP’s involvement in major massacres such as the [Lasalin massacre](#) in 2018 (Haiti Action Committee and National Lawyers Guild SF Bay Area, 2019). As noted by the White House in its “Fact Sheet: US Assistance to Haiti” (July 13, 2021), from “2010 to 2020, Washington [pumped](#) in \$312 million for weapons and [training](#) of the Haitian police. In 2021, the White House and State Department sent a combined \$20 million. In July 2022, the State Department [bolstered](#) the SWAT training program with a \$48 million package.” This funding by the Biden Administration, authorized by Congress, represents yet another increase from the immensely high level of funding by the Trump Administration. As noted in this detailed [report](#), “Since Trump took office, the US has nearly quadrupled its support to Haiti’s police — from \$2.8 million in 2016 to more than \$12.4 million last year [2019]. With the recent reallocation, the figure this year will likely be even higher. US funding for the Haitian police constitutes more than 10 percent of the institution’s overall budget” (Johnston, 2021).

Although the data provided by the Security Assistance Monitor on foreign training by the US of the HNP does not show a spike in recent years, correlating with the spike in overall US funding to the HNP, this US funding has made possible additional training of HNP officers and a 50% increase in its size. “As a direct result of support to the HNP School, trained officers increased from less than 10,000 in 2010 to nearly 15,000 officers today” (The White House, 2021).

Conclusion:

US funding, training, and otherwise support for security forces in Haiti, from the Haitian army to the FRAPH, from the HNP to paramilitaries, conforms to a clear pattern: the greater the

human rights abuses by the security forces, the greater the US support for them. When security forces serve neo-colonial regimes, from the Duvalier dictatorship to the current PHTK dictatorship— regimes that open up Haiti’s vast resource wealth and facilitate the exploitation of the Haitian people by a domestic elite in tandem with foreign corporations— the US showers the regime’s security forces. In contrast, when security forces are under the authority of a popular democratic government, such as that of Jean Bertrand-Aristide, the US government starves these security forces of essential funding.

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Increased Flows of US Arms Sales and Security Funding and Weapons to Mexico, Deeping the Human Rights Catastrophe from 2001– 2021

By Romeo Bienvenido Villanueva



Photo courtesy of *The Intercept*

<https://theintercept.com/2021/10/06/mexico-weapons-sale-biden-murder-kidnapping/>

March 30th, 2023

An examination of US foreign “aid” to Mexico during the 21st century reveals that large sums typically go to what has been labeled as “Government and Civil Society.” This category includes funding Mexican security forces and contributing to the militarization of Mexican society. Alongside this aid, the U.S. government has flooded Mexico with firearms through authorized sales to the Mexican army and police. As noted by scholar John Lindsay-Poland in “Key Facts on U.S.-Sourced Guns and Violence in Mexico”:

In Mexico, the Army is the sole authorized importer of firearms, and also the only legal seller of firearms. Nearly all of those imported from the U.S. are sold to state, local and federal police forces or are for military use... More than 8,200 receipts, also obtained from the Mexican military, show that the Army sold U.S.-exported weapons to police, including state and local police in Tamaulipas, Guerrero, Chihuahua, and other states with extensive documented records of state violence and corruption.

The majority of weapons— both “legal” and “illegal”— are U.S.-sourced. “At least 70% of firearms recovered in Mexico and submitted for tracing from 2014-2021 were U.S.-sourced, according to ATF data” (Poland). In 2019, Mexican President Obrador protested this situation, calling for the U.S. government to apply stronger controls over the export of weapons to his country.

While U.S. aid and weapon sales have steadily increased over the past two decades, the question arises: has there been a corresponding reduction in violence and human rights violations during this same timeframe? The answer that we found was that there was a marked increase in violence and repressive activity by the Mexican state leading up to the election of Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in 2018. This correlation leads us to report that USAID was counterproductive to its said goals and that more must be done to restore congressional oversight and discontinue the authorization of arms sales to Mexico.

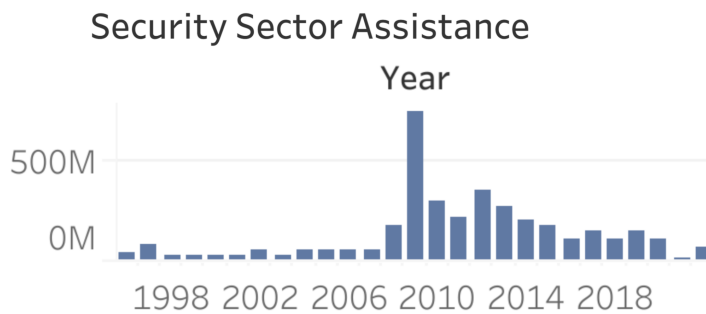
The data from the last two decades, from 2001 to 2021, reveals that the United States has sent a resounding average of \$35 million in foreign aid every year, peaking in 2014 at \$64 million [U.S. Foreign Assistance].



We can see that U.S. aid continued to climb and remain very high despite increasing human rights violations in Mexico, including the 2014 disappearance by the Mexican government of 43 students from Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College.

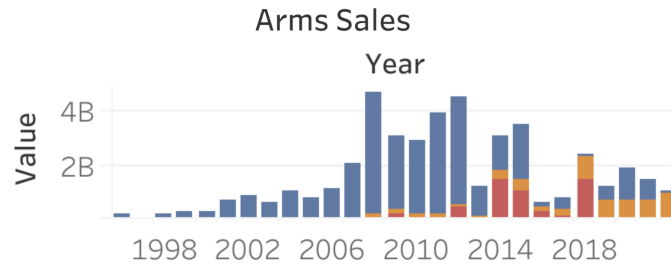
Not reflected in the data above, a 2022 recent Congressional Research Service report reveals that Congress appropriated **\$158.9 million for Mexico**, some of which goes to address security conditions. Similarly, a 2023 Congressional Research Service report identifies an additional \$141 million in US aid to Mexico, a significant portion going as security assistance. These additional infusions can be expected to offset, at least somewhat, the apparent decline in aid during the 2022-2023 as depicted in the above graph.

Below is a graph from the Security Assistance Monitor of the Center for International Policy which shows a trend of an increase in security sector assistance, peaking in 2009, but nonetheless demonstrating an overall increase during the first decades of the 21st century. It is quite likely that this graph also fails to incorporate the data of the recent infusions of security aid noted in the above Congressional Research Service reports.



This increase in funds also correlates with an increase in the number of firearms in the country that have come from the United States. This has been documented in a report titled “Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis over 2014-2018” done by the United States Government Accountability Office which follows U.S.-sourced gun trafficking from the United States to Mexico. The Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) conducted this report and found that 70% of firearms reported to have been recovered in Mexico from 2014-2018 and submitted for tracing were U.S. sourced. The report was conducted in an effort to gain more data on guns recovered by the Mexican government to help the United States better understand the facilitation of this illegal activity. The Mexican government estimates that **200,000 firearms** are smuggled from the United States into the country each year, which has been linked to the facilitation of organized crime and illegal drug trade and the high homicide rate in Mexico. Thus, it is important that the United States and Mexico work together to create more accurate data on gun trafficking and to stop the flow of illegal firearms into the country.

Despite this influx of illegal weapons, the US government has dramatically increased its sale of “authorized” weapons into Mexico. Below is a chart on United States arm sales to Mexico again provided by the Security Assistance Monitor of the Center for International Policy.



As United States security assistance increased, an analysis of the data shows that there was a corresponding increase in the level of violence and human rights violations experienced by the Mexican public. As Poland notes:

From 2010 through 2022, Mexico experienced more than 214,000 gun homicides... Over 111,000 people in Mexico have been forcibly disappeared, according to an official Mexican government registry. On average, six women are murdered with firearms every day in Mexico.

Moreover, as UNESCO documents in its 2023 “Observatory of Killed Journalists”, Mexico experienced a dramatic increase in the murder of journalists; between 2000 and 2022, there were at least 150 journalists who were killed, a rate far above the rest of Latin America.

Similarly, in the 2022 Congressional Research Service report cited above, it is acknowledged that:

“Femicides (targeted killing of women) and disappearances have increased in recent years. Mexico recorded over 940 femicides each year in 2019 and 2020, an increase of approximately 129% from 2015 levels.¹⁵ In November 2021, the U.N. Committee on Enforced Disappearances conducted a fact-finding mission in Mexico and announced that more than 95,000 people had been reported missing.¹⁶ Many people have been missing since former president Calderón launched a “drug war” in 2006.”

It is the task of further research to identify precisely what U.S. Congressional acts and Executive policies fueled this violence and repression in Mexico. Additionally, it will be crucial to investigate the reasons WHY the US has increased its “security assistance” and arms sales to Mexico in the face of the ever-escalating human rights catastrophe and WHY obvious indicators of growing violence and human rights violations were dismissed by U.S. officials. The reason publicly given by US officials that such assistance is necessary to combat the cartels obfuscates the vast, symbiotic connections between the Mexican security forces and the cartels, similarly to the connections between the “gangs” (paramilitaries) and the police today in Haiti. Moreover, the US justification of “fighting crime” likewise ignores the direct participation by the Mexican security forces in disappearances and extrajudicial killings, as the notorious “disappearance” of forty-three students in 2014 bears graphic witness (Lopez,

2022). In 2022, under President Obrador, this mass disappearance was finally confirmed by the Commission for Truth and Access to Justice in the Ayotzinapa Case.

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Ecocide and Crimes against Humanity under the Bolsonaro Regime in Brazil

By Eliana Kim



Photo courtesy of Midia Ninja/ MNI

<https://amazonwatch.org/news/2017/0503-historic-indigenous-mobilization-confronts-spiraling-threats-to-rights-and-resources-in-brazil>

March 30th, 2023

Indigenous activists and scholars, joined by human rights allies, have argued that the Presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023) engaged in deliberate acts of “ecocide” and gross human rights violations. During this escalating human rights crisis, what was the US role? In 2019, the Trump Administration designated Brazil a “Major Non-Nato Ally” (MNNA), subsequently showering the regime’s security forces with support, \$100 million worth of US military equipment and services in 2020 alone (Berg et al., 2022). There is a clear continuity of U.S. government support for an ecocidal regime guilty of gross human rights violations in Brazil,

from the military junta that came to power in a CIA-backed coup in 1964 to the current Bolsonaro regime.

Ecocide is a fairly new and developing concept of international crime, and thus there is no direct precedent, but academics and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alike have discussed how this may be implemented to address future environmental abuses. Specifically, the NGO AllRise filed a case against Bolsonaro claiming that he committed *crimes against humanity* by actively pursuing the destruction of the Amazon forest. The argument was that since the forest was home for many Indigenous groups, and especially those that remained largely untouched, “the land grabbed by developed countries and extractive industries... often result in the grabbing of indigenous land” and that this “should be regarded as the principal vector of genocide that is induced ecologically” (Alexandru, 2022). In this sense, Alexandru examines the potential implications of having ecocide as a crime, and introduces the idea of a *crime against humanity* specifically in an ecological sense.

The NGO’s advocacy efforts are certainly warranted by the alarming quantitative findings about the ongoing ruination of the Amazon. One scholar found that “deforestation in Indigenous territories in the state increased by 29%” from 2020 to 2021, “from 2,400 to 3,100 hectares (5,900 to 7,700 acres)” (Brown, 2022). Comprehensively, “243,000 hectares (600,500 acres) of the forest was cut down in the state in 2021” alone, which demonstrated a 20% increase from 202 (Brown, 2022). In this manner, it is very clear that Bolsonaro’s policies have caused damage to the environment and land defenders who live in it. To contextualize those numbers, that is almost two times the entire area of Los Angeles, and is around 20 times the area of San Francisco, which was deforested and destroyed in one year of Bolsonaro’s administration.

Beyond deforestation, “forest fires, alongside illegal gold mining, logging and wildlife trafficking pose a significant threat to more than 20 million people, including one million indigenous peoples” who live in the Amazon (Raftopoulos & Morley, 2020). Bolsonaro has been a culprit of planning and executing projects and governmental maneuvers that deliberately hurt the environment. For example, the Baron of Rio Branco Project is one example of an initiative spearheaded by the Bolsonaro administration for the exploitation of Amazonian resources in the name of economic benefit and industrial growth. It involves massive infrastructure projects for connecting the country by working on areas which house “twenty seven Indigenous territories and protected areas” mostly untouched previously (Raftopoulos & Morley, 2020). Furthermore, Bolsonaro worked to remove “funding for the implementation of Brazil’s National Climate Change Policy by 95 percent,” and put on hold “\$92 million of budget funding allocated for climate change mitigation” (Raftopoulos & Morley, 2020). The administration also attempted to remove the Ministry of Environment entirely, but failed, so instead “cut its discretionary budget by \$46.34 million (23 percent)...” (Raftopoulos & Morley, 2020). These, along with other

statistics demonstrate how Bolsonaro has cut funding, support, and essentially weakened the federal agencies responsible for environmental stewardship to perpetuate his agenda of exploiting the environment for economic gains—he does this with tangible projects, as well as with administrative, internal organization to disempower governmental bodies that work to protect the environment.

Bolsonaro’s negative impact on the environment stems not just from his actions, but also from his rhetoric. As reported by the Campo Grande News on April 22, 2015, Bolsonaro had this to say: “There is no Indigenous territory where there aren’t minerals. Gold, tin and magnesium are in these lands, especially in the Amazon, the richest area in the world. I’m not getting into this nonsense of defending land for Indians”. Furthermore, in a Facebook broadcast in January, 2020, Bolsonaro stated: “Indians are undoubtedly changing ... They are increasingly becoming human beings just like us.” (Phillips, 2020). This has been highly damaging and conducive to violence against the Indigenous peoples in Brazil (Raftopoulos & Morley, 2020). De Carvalho (2020) argues that Bolsonaro perpetrated “symbolic” and “legitimate” violence against Indigenous peoples, especially because his rhetoric legitimizes and empowers other people to commit violence against Indigenous peoples of Brazil for their own gain. In particular, rural farmers were encouraged to act violently to protect “their land” from the “Indigenous threat”—“Bolsonaro’s discourses prompted rural farmers in the north of the country to start a movement” to burn the forests on August 10, 2019, which resulted in a ghastly “2,500 km² of Amazonian jungle [destroyed] in a single month” (De Carvalho et al., 2020).

Such brutality and violence is evident in the skyrocketing of conflicts registered in recent years. Not only were nearly 14 thousand conflicts registered between 2010 to 2019, but also a high of 1,833 conflicts in 2019, which demonstrated a 23% rise compared to 2018 and certainly more than the average, reflecting a massive increase in attacks on Indigenous peoples in Brazil (Contarato, 2020). This evidence shows the violence that has been escalating since da Silva’s first presidency and also in Bolsonaro’s presidency—where he used inflammatory and violent policies and rhetoric—where it reached an all-time high. In a specific anecdote, five Indigenous leaders of the Guajajara ethnic group in Maranhão, were murdered. In April, leader Ari Uru-eu-wau-wau was killed with blows to the head in the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau, state of Rondônia” (Contarato, 2020). These are some of the many land defenders, of isolated Indigenous groups, that have been killed as a result of the conflict in territory. Their deaths are a testament to how Indigenous leaders and indigenous populations have been targeted by resource hungry criminal gangs, who are also empowered by the anti-Indigenous rhetoric of the government. As reported by *Reuters* on June 19th, 2022:

“Violence against indigenous Brazilians and illegal incursions on their land roughly doubled in the first two years of Bolsonaro's government from the two years prior, according to The Missionary Council for Indigenous Peoples (CIMI).

Murders of Brazil's indigenous land defenders jumped to 10 in both 2019 and 2020, compared to just five in the two prior years combined, according to human rights group Global Witness.

" 'Since he took office, President Bolsonaro has really begun supporting and protecting anyone who invades the indigenous territory, be they loggers, fishermen or miners, who now feel they are protected by the state,' said Sydney Possuelo, Brazil's leading expert on isolated tribes and a former Funai president."

Following these incidents of violence are a lack of convictions, let alone trials for criminal cases, which exacerbates already difficult conditions for Indigenous groups unrecognized by the state. In this manner, the government enables and empowers criminal activity by lacking punitive enforcement and anti-Indigenous rhetoric (Brown, 2022).

Similarly, the Bolsonaro regime facilitated a massive increase in extrajudicial killings throughout Brazil by security forces. As reported by *The Independent* on August 6th, 2019, Bolsonaro called for "criminals" to be killed in the streets "like cockroaches". Here it is worth quoting from the article more extensively:

A veteran activist and lawyer, Ariel de Castro Alves, said the president's comments were 'abhorrent'.

"We've had 414 killings committed by military police in São Paulo [in the first half of 2019] – that is the highest number since 2003," [he told The Guardian](#).

"He is encouraging police violence and ends up serving as a kind of instigator of brutality."

There has also been a sharp rise in police killings in [Rio de Janeiro](#), the country's next largest city... Security forces in Rio [killed 558 people in the first four months of 2019](#), the highest rate since the state started keeping records more than 20 years ago.

The governor of Rio state and close ally of Mr Bolsonaro, Wilson Witzel, has hailed the increase as responsible for the drop in the murder rate and has said police should be allowed to pre-emptively kill anyone seen carrying a rifle.

Activists warn the political climate was in fact providing cover for widespread [extrajudicial killings](#).

'Summary executions are being carried out in favelas and other peripheral areas,' said Renata Souza, a Rio state representative who has urged the United Nations and the Organisation of American States to investigate.

'It is a barbaric state policy that amounts to genocide.'"

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US interventions in Colombia: Imperial Continuity at the Expense of Human Rights

By Alexander Quiroz



Photo courtesy of Amazon Frontlines

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Colombia has had a long history of US intervention, from the US-backed separation of Panama from Colombia in 1903 to “Plan Colombia” and the deepening militarization of Colombian society imposed by the US. The historical record of U.S intervention in Colombia is clear: it has been for the benefit of U.S corporations and to the detriment of the Colombian people.

U.S intervention in Colombia has been frequently delivered through the vehicle of foreign aid, along with US loans to be paid back by the people of Colombia. Much of this foreign aid has gone to funding military and security forces, as well as supporting arms sales to these forces. The goal has been to consistently prop up right wing authoritarian governments that maintain a “favorable investment climate” for US corporations in Colombia. Any action taken by the people to retake their sovereignty over their lands and resources and to establish democratic governance is always labeled “leftist”.

The separation of Panama from Colombia was an important event that clearly demonstrated the motives behind US intervention in Colombia, motives that remain true for US intervention in recent times. In the 1850s, some U.S gold rushers established *The Panama Star*, a newspaper in Panama that reported on the discontent among the Panamanian people regarding the US presence like the Panama Railroad Co. (a U.S company). This US owned newspaper soon

began to run pamphlets advocating for the separation of Panama from Colombia; one of the big ones was a pamphlet titled “The independence of the Isthmus of Panama” by a local politician, Ramon M. Valdes. He later became the president of Panama. This pamphlet is largely credited with leading to the separation of Panama from Colombia. However, the main factor behind the separation was the U.S warships near the shores of Panama. Indeed, the events leading to the “independence” of Panama can all be linked to the involvement of U.S corporations, buttressed by US naval power. Following “independence”, the US colonizers succeeded where the Spanish and French colonizers had failed: the construction of the Panama Canal. This secured US dominance of commerce and naval power in the western hemisphere, facilitating US corporate and military expansion throughout the Americas. (The independence of the Isthmus of Panama) (Heller *The Star of Panama*)

Reflecting similar motives the 1960s, the Kennedy Administration launched a program for Latin America named “Alliance for Progress”, purportedly a humanitarian plan to raise the living standards for the people of Latin America. Some of the objectives of the Alliance of Progress program were “*accelerating the development of relatively less developed countries and granting them maximum priority in the distribution of resources and in international cooperation in general*”, “*achieve balanced diversification in national economic structures*”, and “*accelerate the process of rational industrialization... (via) private and public sectors, utilizing the natural resources of the country and providing productive and remunerative employment for unemployed or part-time workers.*” (Inter-American Economic and Social Council. *Punta del Este Alliance for progress : Official documents.*).

The aid often came in the form of loans, provided by U.S taxpayers, that were to be repaid with interest by the people of the Latin American countries involved. According to the Alliance for Progress document; “*The United States.. pledges its efforts to supply financial and technical cooperation.. (and) provide a major part of the minimum \$20billion... over the next 10 years..*” (Inter-American Economic and Social Council. *Punta del Este Alliance for progress : Official documents.*).

During the Alliance for Progress era in Colombia, Plan LAZO was implemented. This involved the creation of right-wing paramilitary groups, at the behest of the US, in order to counter popular communist groups like FARC, M-19, ELN, and others. Declassified U.S Southern Command documents show that from 1962 to 1964 guerrilla group populations dropped from 8500 to 2000 and this drop was attributed to Plan LAZO and its goals of “eliminating independent republics” and “destroying guerrillas” (*Colombia: Colmil historical perspectives U.S. southern command, Joint Intelligence Center, Briefing Paper, secret/NOFORN, pp.4*). Such paramilitary groups would often become heavily involved in drug trafficking, a problem that the U.S would later cite as reason to intervene yet again in Colombia via the war on drugs and the launching of “Plan Colombia” in 1999/2000.

Plan Colombia was initiated by President Clinton and then continued through the Bush and Obama Administrations. Though it clearly failed to achieve its declared War on Drugs' objective of stopping drug cultivation and distribution, the Plan expanded the US-backed militarization of Colombia while advancing US economic interests. Between 1996 and 2020, the Security Assistance Monitor of the Center for International Policy, documented that the US sent over \$11 billion to Colombia for security assistance, primarily during the years Plan Colombia was in effect (2000–2015). In the same period, the U.S has sold nearly \$10 billion worth of arms to Colombia, weapons used by the military and the paramilitaries to perpetrate massive, extensively documented atrocities against the people of Colombia. The amount of extra judicial killings in this 2000-2015 period are 7,044 civilians, while the amount of guerrillas killed were 13,249 (Colombiareports *Extrajudicial executions statistics: Colombia reports*).

In 2014, according to the Security Assistance Monitor of the Center for International Policy, the U.S spent about \$600million in combined arms sales and security training in Colombia, while at the same time Flint Michigan lost clean water. In 2017 the US spent about \$500 million in combined aid for Colombia, while at the same time the UN found that Alabama was in extreme poverty on par with some of the poorest counties in the world and is dealing with the reemergence of Hookworm. While the US is funding repressive security forces in countries such as Colombia to the tune of billions of dollars of U.S tax dollars, Puerto Rico goes without electricity for months, schools throughout the US go unfunded, the affordable housing crisis deepens, and thousands upon thousands of people– disproportionately Black, Brown, and Indigenous– die each year in the US from lack of access to adequate healthcare. US interventions abroad cause the destabilization of countries like Colombia, but they also cause destabilization domestically. When the U.S spends all its resources on securing the resources of other countries for corporate exploitation at the expense of socio-economic human rights at home, then the US also requires increasing levels of security funding domestically. We see this with the massive police budgets and horrible police abuses inside of the US. This is not just an issue of what goes on abroad; it is also an issue of what goes on at home.

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Killing with Impunity: the Role of US-Backed Security Forces in Colombia during the 21st Century

By Joaquin Min Antonio



Photo courtesy of Public Service International

<https://publicservices.international/resources/news/gufs-request-immediate-oas-and-un-interventions-to-stop-the-brutal-repression-of-protests-in-colombia?id=11783&lang=en>

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Colombia, like many of its Latin American neighbors, has faced years of civil unrest and war that corresponds with a particularly high level of US military and extractive industry trade in the region. Since the assassination of the popular left presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a period known as the La Violencia ensued and arguably continued under different phases until a mass movement for peace began in 2009. Wars between the Liberals and Conservatives became an almost habitual trend until the end of La Violencia in 1958 when the National Front between Liberals and Conservatives was formed. During the National Front's tenure, land dispossession among the peasantry along with economic liberalization increased. Peasants along with workers first took up arms through the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) because of their disillusionment with the government. FARC established a guerilla war in the 1960s that continues today and the Colombian government forces have since had a disastrous record of human rights abuses and atrocities. If we limit our focus to the 21st century, there are three realms of human rights atrocities in Colombia. The first is the extrajudicial killings by the military, the second is the extrajudicial killings and abuses by the police, and the last is violence by the paramilitaries.

The Colombian case is unique due to the recent election of Gustavo Petro, the country's first leftist president. Petro's platform contains a focus on peace and reconciliation between the FARC and the government. However, the Colombian case is still important for analysis due to its previous 22 years of right-wing rule and human rights atrocities.

There is no doubt that the Colombian Military has consistently acted recklessly and without regard for human rights throughout the civil war with the FARC. In fact, the US had been aware of deadly attitudes existing in the Colombian Military prior to the 2000s; US officials remarked in the 90s that the Colombian Military employed "body count syndrome" tactics and held "body count mentalities". Despite this knowledge of deadliness, the US went ahead with the implementation of Plan Colombia in 2000 to further aid the Colombian Military. Besides an increase in arm authorizations, Plan Colombia also initiated programs that gave bonuses to Colombian Military officials that reached increasingly higher guerilla kill counts. These economic incentives to kill took advantage of the Colombian Military's already bloodthirsty nature. These programs ultimately culminated in the "False Positives" scandal. From 2002 to 2008, the Colombian Military extrajudicially killed 6,402 people. These killings were initially believed to be guerilla fighters, but this claim has since been discredited as mere fabrications. Often, the military would kill civilians and later dress them up in guerilla identification and uniforms, solely to collect bonuses that Plan Colombia entitled to them (Evans, 2022).

The Colombian police have also been involved in human rights abuses. For example, Colombia's special riot police, the Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios (ESMAD), has a well-documented pattern of gross human rights violations and direct financial links to the United States through aid packages. The ESMAD was formed in 1999 and instantly became implicated in killings starting in 2001. Waves of killings also occurred in 2005 with six deaths, in 2013 with seven deaths, and in 2016 with 13 deaths. Lately and most horrifically, the ESMAD killed 44 people during the 2021 protests (Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz, 2022). ESMAD funding had never ceased after any such incidents and has actually increased as the right-wing governments of the past prepared for further protests against their governance.

Lastly, paramilitary violence against land defenders is widely prevalent in Colombia. Colombia has a long history of violence associated with capitalist extractive industries. Deforestation, oil, agriculture, and mining are industries that peasant and Indigenous communities worry about the most due to their encroachment on land. Part of this history is the collaboration between these industries and right-wing paramilitary forces like the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia or AUC and their successor groups. These paramilitary forces are usually responsible for killing trade union leaders, community activists, and notably Indigenous land defenders.

Examples of this violence are two massacres: the Alto de Naya Massacre in April 2001 and the Betoyes Massacre in May, 2003. In Alto de Naya, around 35 to 50 workers, many belonging to Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, were killed by the AUC paramilitary group. Many of the victims were brutally tortured and the perpetrators often forced young children to observe the atrocities. This involved dismemberment and hacking of bodies. A probable motive for the atrocity was to simply intimidate people from cooperating with guerillas and to extract information. An often overlooked impact of these massacres is the displacement of the community. Thousands of people fled the region and became refugees in their own country contributing to the millions of other Colombians who have been internally displaced. The second massacre in Betoyes again involved indigenous people and a similar disgusting trend of torture and dismemberment. There were also several cases of child rape involving girls as young as 11 years of age. Victims reported that the perpetrators were wearing AUC armbands, however, given that the Colombian Military has used AUC armbands as disguises in the past suggests that the military could have participated in the massacre.

For more contemporary figures, between 2012 and 2020, there have been 117 indigenous killings in the country (Latoyaabulu, 2022). Sadly, most perpetrators go free; Some paramilitary groups claim responsibility for numerous killings and massacres, but the groups hardly get punished by the Colombian state.

In fact, the Colombian state is not just guilty of negligence but guilty of its history of linkage to the same right-wing paramilitary groups that terrorize communities. The National Security Archive contains documents indicting many Colombian businesses and foreign corporations, including the US company Chiquita, of funding these right-wing paramilitary forces (Evans, 2007). Businesses and corporations were able to fund and transfer money to paramilitary groups through the Convivir program, a program heavily promoted by the Colombian government, including verbal praise from former president Alvaro Uribe. Besides allowing for funding to paramilitaries, the program also distributed surveillance information to paramilitary groups further depicting support from the government to the paramilitary death squads. The Colombian government and the US state department have made it clear through their implicit support of right-wing paramilitary groups that they do not care for the well-being and human rights of the Colombian people.

The Colombian case is a textbook example of US aid and its real impacts on the masses of a “third world” satellite state. US aid does not secure law and order - paramilitary forces still roam free and the police have become increasingly dangerous. Indeed, US aid has shown to only have two intentions: to accelerate capitalist extraction and to kill.

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