Colombia

In the first of three articles about Colombia, **Daniel Kovalik** looks at how the United States of America maintains its ‘false-positive’ nightmare.
Colombia continues to be ground zero for the US’s crimes against Latin America, and its continued quest to subjugate the region. Several recent events, virtually uncovered in the mainstream press, underscore this reality.

First, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report on 20th March 2014 detailing the grisly practices of paramilitary death squads in the port town of Buenaventura. These practices by the paramilitaries, which act with impunity and with the tacit support of the local police, include disappearances of hundreds of civilians; forced displacement; and the dismemberment of individuals, while they are still alive, in local ‘chop houses’. That the port town of Buenaventura was to be the model city of the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement is instructive as to what the wages of free trade truly are. Jose Vivanco of HRW called Buenaventura ‘the scandal’ of Colombia. Sadly, it is not Colombia’s only one.

Thus, during a weekend in early May 2014, the VI division of the Colombian army entered the peasant town of Alto Amarradero, Ipiales in the middle of the night, and, without warrant and in cold blood, gunned down four civilians, including a 15-year old boy. Those killed were Deivi López Ortega, José Antonio Acanamejoy, Brayan Yatacue Secue and José Yiner Esterilla – all members of the Fensuagro Acanamejoy, Brayan Yatacue Secue and José Yiner Esterilla. While the army then displayed the bodies of those murdered for all to see, and falsely claimed that they were the bodies of guerrillas killed in combat. These are the latest victims of the ongoing ‘false positive’ phenomenon in which nearly 6,000 civilians have been killed by the Colombian military and then falsely passed off as guerrillas in order to justify the continued counterinsurgency programme in Colombia and the US aid that funds it. As my Colombian friend, Father Francisco de Roux, SJ, stated at a peace conference in Washington DC, ‘if these “false positive” killings had happened anywhere else, they would have been a scandal!’ However, having happened in Colombia, the US’s closest ally in the Western hemisphere, the killings have elicited a collective yawn from the media and policy-makers.

A damning report released by the Fellowship of Reconciliation in May 2014 – a report which, in a just world, would have been covered on the front page of The New York Times – demonstrates how there is a direct correlation between US military funding and training, particularly at the School of the Americas (otherwise known as Whinsec) and the incidence of human rights abuses, including ‘false positive’ killings.

As to the latter issue, the report concluded that ‘[o]f the 23 Colombian Whinsec instructors and graduates for which any subsequent information was available, 12 of them – 48 per cent – had either been charged with a serious crime or commanded units whose members had reportedly committed multiple extrajudicial killings.’ Moreover, ‘[s]ome of the officers with the largest number of civilian killings committed under their command (Generals Lasprilla, Rodriguez Clavijo, and Montoya, and Colonel Mejia) received significantly more US training on average than other officers’ during the high water mark of the ‘false positive’ scandal.

How revealing, then, that, as reported by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the head of the US’s Southern Command, General John Kelly, recently explained to a Congressional hearing that the US is utilising Colombian military personnel to do military training in other Latin American countries in order to get around human rights restrictions which prevent the US from doing the training directly.

As Kelly explained, in a moment of candour: ‘The beauty of having a Colombia – they’re such good partners, particularly in the military realm, they’re such good partners with us. When we ask them to go somewhere else and train the Mexicans, the Hondurans, the Guatemalans, the Panamanians, they will do it almost without asking. And they’ll do it on their own. They’re so appreciative of what we did for them. And what we did for them was, really, to encourage them for 20 years and they’ve done such a magnificent job. . . . But that’s why it’s important for them to go, because I’m – at least on the military side – restricted from working with some of these countries because of limitations that are, that are really based on past sins. And I’ll let it go at that.’

In other words, the US is exporting the abysmal practices of the Colombian military – practices the US has trained them in to begin with – throughout the region. Sadly, the silence in response to this nightmare reality is deafening.