

Bush to Ask Congress for More U.S. Troops in Colombia

March 22, 2004

By Paul Basken

March 22 (Bloomberg) -- The Bush administration plans to ask Congress to let it increase by 75 percent the number of U.S. troops and contractors in Colombia, citing the need to bolster its fight against drug traffickers and rebel fighters.

The Bush administration wants Congress to raise the cap on U.S. soldiers and advisers to 800 from 400 and to increase the limit on civilian contractors to 600 from 400, U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said in Washington.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, beginning a three-day visit to Washington today, has said he backs the move. The U.S. has provided Colombia with more than \$3 billion in aid during the last four years.

"The Uribe administration has been dealing severe blows on the narco-terrorists, and this increase in the number of military and civilian contractors is needed to help them sustain the current high tempo of operations," Boucher said.

Companies with U.S. government contracts for work in Colombia include Lockheed Martin Corp., Northrop Grumman Corp. and the DynCorp unit of Computer Sciences Corp., according to an April 2003 State Department report to Congress.

"It seems that the Bush administration's solution to dealing with the world is to deploy more U.S. soldiers and guns for hire, while refusing to seek real, lasting solutions," said Representative Jan Schakowsky, a Democrat of Illinois, who has led efforts to block U.S. military involvement in Colombia. "It's time for a new direction in U.S. international policy and diplomacy," she said.

21 Percent Decline

The Bush administration today also said that cultivation of coca, the plant from which cocaine is derived, declined 21 percent last year in Colombia, the world's leading cocaine producer.

Net coca cultivation in Colombia fell to 440 square miles in 2003 from 558 square miles in 2002 and 656 square miles in the peak growing year of 2001, according to the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Along with previously released U.S. government estimates for Peru and Bolivia, the Colombian

cultivation represents a total production for the region of 655 metric tons, its lowest level since estimates began in 1986, the drug office said.

Uribe plans during a meeting tomorrow with President George W. Bush to seek an expansion of U.S. military efforts, Uribe's office said. The U.S. has spent about \$3.15 billion in Colombia since 2000, including about \$2.5 billion in military and police assistance, said Adam Isacson, director of the Colombia program at the Center for International Policy, a Washington-based policy study group.

'Don't be Hysterical'

"We were told in 2000, don't be hysterical" about the possibility of an expanded U.S. military role, Isacson said. "Now, four years later, not only have they broadened the mission and they are putting U.S. troops in roles we hadn't imagined back in 2000, but now they're up against the cap and they need more," he said.

Those additional roles include protecting an oil pipeline partly owned by the Occidental Petroleum Corp., helping the Colombian military create a unit to eliminate guerilla leaders, and providing logistical data to help the military recapture rebel-held territory, he said.

While no U.S. troops have died in Colombia since a 1999 plane crash, 11 U.S. contractors have been killed since 1998, including six last year, Isacson said. Another three have been held hostage since February by the rebel Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC, he said.