

# Other blood on their hands

**W**hile apologists for Bush's and Blair's murderous adventure in Iraq see a "silver lining" in pseudo-events in the Middle East, real events in Colombia illuminate the universal nature of their "mission". The latest tells a horrific story that, had it qualified as news, probably would have been reported as a tragedy whose victims "paid the price of cocaine paid with blood". That was how the London Observer on 13 February represented the suffering of Colombia, which is typical of most of the American and European press, with a Foreign Office minister assuring us that Colombia's woes all could be blamed on drugs; and that the "Oxford-educated" president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe, was "trying to rein rogue elements of the army"; moreover, the British government was helping him in his noble cause. As for America's colossal military involvement in Colombia, known as "Plan Colombia", whose expenditure rates just behind the billions spent in Iraq and Israel, this was merely "controversial" and "aimed at eradicating the [drugs] trade...". As for Bill Rammell, the junior Foreign Office minister responsible, it seems, for most of the planet, the Observer reported that he had identified a moral issue in Colombia. For the English caring classes, said Busy Bill, snorting cocaine "should be as socially taboo as was drinking a bottle of South African wine during apartheid".

Busy Bill was in Pyongyang not long ago, telling the North Koreans it was just not right for them to have nuclear weapons. That his own government was armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons was, of course, irrelevant. Prior to that, Busy Bill was telling me, in an interview at the Foreign Office, that the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean, whose entire population had been brutally and illegally expelled from their homeland by British governments, could not possibly return because they would be at mortal risk from the "rising sea". When the tsunami struck on Boxing Day, it spared the Chagos – as the Americans knew it would: that is why they colluded with the British to kick the inhabitants out and build a

## **JOHN PILGER** | OTHER BLOOD ON THEIR HANDS

vast military base in what the US Navy calls “the superb, secure and outstanding environmental conditions” on Diego Garcia, the principal island.

Let’s leave Busy Bill for a moment and return to Colombia. On 21 February, according to witnesses, soldiers of the 17th Brigade of the Colombian Army entered the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado, in the northwest of the country. The community has no political alliance and is internationally renowned and “protected” by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. According to witness statements, the soldiers abducted and murdered eight civilians, including three young children and a teenage girl, who were hacked to death with machetes. Among them were Luis Eduardo Guerra, the community leader, his partner Bellanira and son Deiner; Guerra was admired as a remarkable humanitarian and conciliator. Since 1997, his people have suffered more than 130 murders; there have been no convictions.

The United Nations has called for an investigation; the United States has called for an investigation; and so has the Foreign Office. If the past is a guide, the latter two will be confident that this latest horror will blow away and Colombia’s facade can be erected again. For just as Bush and Blair are soaked with blood in Iraq, so they are in Colombia.

The Colombia military and police have the worst human rights record in the Western hemisphere. That the government of “Oxford-educated” Uribe is any better than his predecessors and that drugs alone are the cause of more than 20,000 murders every year is a fiction promoted in Washington and London. No one doubts that FARC, the peasant-based guerrilla group, has trafficked in cocaine, but the overwhelming majority of the drugs trade and the violence in Colombia are the responsibility of the state, its military and paramilitaries, funded and trained, directly and indirectly, by the American and British governments. Moreover, the issue of cocaine is a distraction: the fuel of the conflict, not the cause. The victims are the likes of Luis Eduardo Guerra and his family, and trade union activists, teachers, land-reformers, indigenous and peasant leaders who work to promote social and economic justice and human rights. In his study of British foreign policy, *Unpeople*, the historian Mark Curtis wrote: “The war in Colombia is essentially over the control of resources in a deeply unequal society: the elite, especially the large landowners, control most of the wealth while the majority of the population lives in poverty. The basic role of the state is to marginalise the popular forces and ensure that Colombia’s resources – notably oil – remain in the correct hands. [US and British] strategy is to support this... The ‘war on drugs’ is a cover.”

## **JOHN PILGER** | OTHER BLOOD ON THEIR HANDS

Death squads linked to Colombian governments have been so successful in driving people off their farms that 76 per cent of the land is now controlled by an elite of less than three per cent of the population. Given the close links between the military and the paramilitaries, says Douglas Stokes, at Aberystwyth University, "US military aid is going directly to the major terrorist networks throughout Colombia, who traffic cocaine into US markets to fund their activities."

The Blair government, in common with other European governments pressured by the United States, refuses to say exactly where most of their tax payers' millions of pounds of "drugs related assistance" to Colombia end up. "We do not give details of all the support," says Bill Rammell, "nor of specific units to whom we provide assistance, as to do so could reduce its effectiveness and potentially endanger the UK personnel involved." We get his drift. His predecessor, Keith Vaz, was less shy. "We should give as much support as possible to the government of President Pastrana," he said in January 2000. Read Amnesty's reports on the murderous connections of the Pastrana regime and you certainly get his drift. As for Uribe, the Blair government's propaganda is that he has an "impressive" record of "containing crime and violence". They mean that he has allowed the Colombian police, military and paramilitaries to "pacify" the cities and make sections of the Colombian middle-class feel safer. No one sees what they do outside the suburbs. In Uribe's first year as president, there were nearly 7,000 political killings and "disappearances", worse than the average during the four years of Pastrana.

Reflecting the American-inspired European Union line, Rammell has been promoting the Uribe regime, and his omissions are many, such as the fact that the chemicals used in turning coca into cocaine all come from the US and Europe, and that significant British oil investments and human rights violations are two sides of the same coin, with BP is protected by the Colombian military, and the pipeline company, in which it is a major shareholder, investigated for its reported links with a notorious army brigade. Such is the state-sponsored menace in Colombia that British non-government organisations, together with their Colombian counterparts, are at constant risk. "We regularly urge the Colombian government," says Busy Bill, "to support and protect their work...".

The murderers of Luis Eduardo Guerra and seven others, including children, must be quaking.