

Britain's Blair government moves toward alliance with the FARC

by Gretchen Small

The British establishment drive for drug legalization is no local affair. Witness the two most recent moves in the so-called Colombian "peace process."

On March 28, John Battle, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) Minister of State with responsibility for Ibero-America, announced to the House of Commons that the Blair government has extended an invitation to Colombia's leading drug cartel and narco-terrorist force, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), to visit London. Praising the six-nation February European tour by FARC leaders and Colombian President Andrés Pastrana's Peace Commissioner, Víctor G. Ricardo, Battle said that he had just informed Ricardo that his government hopes "that there will be more talks and joint visits. We would welcome a mission to the United Kingdom."

Ricardo is in London to coordinate policy, Battle reported. He also said that Ricardo and the FARC "are working toward a common end."

Two days later, the FARC launched a new "peace" initiative: a call for the United States to legalize drugs, as key to peace in Colombia. Despite the rhetoric against "capitalism in its imperial stage" which allegedly forces "many people of important agrarian economies to opt for coca, poppy, and marijuana crops as the only alternative for survival," the FARC statement accused the United States of "forgetting their own free-market principles," when they fight drugs. Apparently impatient with the efforts of America Online founder Jim Kimsey to secure U.S. visas for FARC leaders to visit Washington, the FARC invited U.S. Congressmen to come visit them in their southern redoubt, to discuss the needed free-market solution: drug legalization.

The Commander of the Colombian Military Forces, Gen. Fernando Tapias, denounced the FARC's proposal as "absolutely nuts. . . . It cannot be proposed that crime be legalized; this is like proposing to legalize kidnapping, or to legalize extortion. The fact that a crime is profitable does not mean that it should be legalized."

Not so, said Colombian Vice President Gustavo Bell. Asked about the FARC proposal, Bell suggested only that further work must be done on the idea first. "The world is not ready for a proposal of this magnitude, since education must

first be done," he said. Peace Commissioner Ricardo, interviewed from his home base in the capital of FARC territory, San Vicente de Caguán, did not dismiss the proposal either, Colombian daily *El Espectador* reported.

London moves in

The "peace" process is now out in the open for what it has been from the beginning: an internationally orchestrated operation to force the nation of Colombia to finally capitulate to the drug trade, and thus establish the needed precedent for making narcotics, once again, just one more international "commodity" traded in the "free market." Given the British Empire's historic domination of the global drug trade into the 1920s, when it was finally banned, over London's protests, it should come as no surprise that London has now moved to put itself at the center of global policy toward Colombia.

Not since the House of Lords sent their support "by overnight express" to the Cali Cartel's bought-and-paid-for President, Ernesto Samper Pizano, after the Clinton administration decertified the Samper government as uncooperative in the fight against drugs, has Great Britain taken such a high-profile role in using Colombia to sink any international fight against the drug trade. President Pastrana has been invited to visit London for talks with Prime Minister Tony Blair on April 13, Battle informed the House of Commons during its March 28 debate on British policy toward Colombia. He also reported that he would be meeting the next day (March 29) with Jan Egeland, the United Nations Special Representative to Colombia, who just happened to be visiting London at the same time as Ricardo. Egeland set up the first FARC-Ricardo European tour, which Battle hopes will be followed by a second trip, this one to include London. (FARC financial expert "Raúl Reyes" considered the first trip a total success, because it won the FARC "de facto recognition of belligerent status." European governments "put us on the same level as the government," he said.)

The House of Commons debate, led by Labour Member of Parliament Desmond Browne of Kilmarnock and Loudon, smacked of a staged affair, set up with the FCO to play up Ricardo's visit. Ricardo was present in the Commons for the debate, along with Colombia's Ambassador Humberto de la

Calle. The FCO posted the transcript of the debate from the Hansard official record on its website, so that its discussions would get worldwide attention.

The ostensible subject of the debate, was how Britain should use its position as a potential donor of "Plan Colombia," the Pastrana government's putative global strategy to win peace and fight drugs, to determine Colombian policy. Widely believed to have been drafted by the politicians in the U.S. State Department (the first versions which appeared in Colombia were in English), Plan Colombia contains a bit of something for everyone's agenda: peace talks, human rights, austerity economics, along with U.S. aid for Colombia's military. The United States is to put up \$1.6 billion of the costs of the plan, and the European Union, Japan, and Canada are being asked to put up another \$3.5 billion among them. Final details of that funding is to be discussed at a donors meeting in July in Madrid, which is being coordinated by the FARC's notorious UN tour guide, Egeland.

Most of the MPs participating in the debate demanded the United Kingdom intervene to change Plan Colombia from its alleged over-emphasis on "militarization" and drugs, a focus blamed on the United States, to focus on "peace" and securing international monitoring of human rights in Colombia. The Labour speakers denounced the Colombian Army as a bunch of killers, citing legalizer George Soros's Human Rights Watch and British intelligence's Amnesty International. Browne, who led the debate, sounded every bit the spokesman for the FARC and the ELN (groups which he went so far as to lie began in the 1960s as organizations of about 30-40 farmers). Dr. Jenny Tonge, MP from Richmond Park, decried how the alleged army-paramilitary ties remind her of the situation in southern Sudan. (She is preparing for her first trip to Colombia, but knows all about it, because she reads the *Guardian*.)

Battle promised the MPs that the Blair government shares their focus. "It is important that Plan Colombia is not reduced to short-term crisis management strategies. It can be transformed into a vision, as this debate has shown. It can form a positive aid and judicial reform package," he said. "We are providing small but necessary sums to improve the administration of justice, but what Colombia really needs is a nationwide, inclusive, good governance program that addresses the complex causes of violence that have been mentioned this morning. As Human Rights Watch states, with proper development and conditionality, the plan could improve human rights in Colombia, so let us back it and add value to it."

Underlying the attack on U.S. policy toward Colombia in the debate, was various MPs' support for drug legalization, cautiously worded as supporting "discussion" of "harm reduction," the legalization lobby euphemism for its program. Tonge delivered a tirade against U.S. anti-drug measures in South America, the failures of crop fumigation, etc. Drugs, she said, "is simple economics. . . . When will we admit that zero tolerance is not working in the West? I am not suggesting

solutions, but we should seriously examine all aspects of drug supply and demand, in this country and internationally. Whether we do that through a royal commission or in another way, we must make it a prime subject of concern. . . . The matter must be discussed and explored. We must find out the results. We cannot go on as we are."

Battle interrupted, to reassure her that the government is, indeed, "focussing on drug supply and demand and on getting to grips with analyzing the economics of the drug market internationally. . . . I reassure the Honorable Lady that that wider analysis of the drug trade is firmly on the agenda."

Chairá pilot project for legalization

The legalization initiative launched by the FARC on March 30 contained more than generalities. Specifically, the FARC invited U.S. Congressmen to come to their demilitarized zone, from where the FARC would take them on a tour of one of the municipalities (an area similar to, if not larger than a U.S. county) which border the demilitarized zone (DMZ), named Cartagena del Chairá, to show them the "thousands of poor peasants" forced to become coca cultivators out of economic necessity, so they would understand that neither military measures nor fumigation will work. "We reiterate our proposal to turn the cited municipality into a laboratory for the substitution of coca crops," the statement read.

The FARC's Chairá pilot project is the heart of the UN-State Department-Foreign Office legalization gambit for Colombia. Nominally, the United Nations first proposed that a coca eradication pilot project be established. In April 1999, FARC chief "Manuel Marulanda" suggested that the FARC would lend its support to such a project—provided that it took place in Cartagena del Chairá, and on the condition that the municipality be "cleared" of national military and police, as the FARC's DMZ is, and that the international agencies channel funding for "alternative crops" through the FARC. Altogether, not a bad proposition for the FARC: the DMZ expands, and they get secure lines of credit for the three to five years minimum, which Marulanda said is required to "see" if crop substitution works.

Interestingly, even then, over a year ago, Marulanda assured the Colombian government that the FARC could line up financing from the European countries for the scheme.

A few days later, Pastrana, after a six-hour private meeting with Fidel Castro in Havana, told reporters that his government was studying the possibility of extending the "demilitarized" zone, from which government forces are prohibited, to Cartagena del Chairá, exactly as the FARC had demanded.

President Clinton's anti-drug policy adviser Gen. Barry McCaffrey (ret.), however, shot down any idea that the U.S. government, at least at that time, would go along with the crude ploy. McCaffrey's lieutenant, Thomas Umberg, stated emphatically during a May 1999 visit to Bogotá, that the United States "will give no aid where there is no effective presence of control by the state."