

THE BLACK ALLIANCE FOR PEACE

A People(s)-Centered Human Rights Project Against War, Repression and Imperialism

SOUTHCOM FACT SHEET

WHAT IS SOUTHCOM?

The United States Department of Defense has carved up the map of the earth into eleven unified combatant commands. The **U.S. SOUTHERN COMMAND, or SOUTHCOM**, is one of these combatant commands. Incorporating the Caribbean and South and Central America, SOUTHCOM claims to be protecting human rights in the region as a long-term responsibility through the development of “regional militaries,” controlled and facilitated by the U.S. Its mission includes contingency planning, operations (including disaster response and “crisis action), and security cooperation, “the force protection” of U.S. military resources in the region, and “ensuring the defense” of the Panama Canal, a critical geographic node for U.S. commerce and security across both the Atlantic and the Pacific.

THE HISTORY OF SOUTHCOM

SOUTHCOM is viewed as a “descendant” of the U.S. military units that supported Panama’s secession from Colombia in 1903, that were installed to defend U.S. sovereignty in the Canal Zone, and that were deployed to Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras at various times in the early twentieth century as part of the United States’ Caribbean security strategy. SOUTHCOM’s initial formal organization came during World War II with the establishment of the U.S. Caribbean Defense Command. Based in Panama, it trained local militaries, distributed weapons and military equipment, and opened service schools for the region’s military personnel. About half of the 135, 000 U.S. military personnel stationed in the region during this period reported to the U.S. Caribbean Defense Command. Following the war, it was renamed the U.S. Caribbean Command, or CARIBCOM. CARIBCOM’s responsibilities included defending the Panama Canal as part of a broader strategy of inter-American security cooperation.

With the dawn of the Cold War, the Caribbean basin was absorbed by the U.S. Atlantic command as it was seen as a strategic location for defense against a

potential Soviet attack on the U.S.. Since CARIBCOM covered Central and South America and not the Caribbean, its name was changed to U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) on June 11, 1963. SOUTHCOM's mission included defending the Panama Canal, administering military assistance programs, planning for Cold War military engagements, and offering developmental assistance via the Alliance for Progress to counter the communist influence. Under the shadow of SOUTHCOM U.S. troops occupied the Dominican Republic in 1965, neutralizing progressive forces. During this time, SOUTHCOM's military increasingly focused on counterinsurgency instead of conventional warfare.

Following the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, military planners wanted to scale back its operations. SOUTHCOM survived for political reasons. SOUTHCOM was revitalized under the Reagan administration during the 1980s because of claims of "communist insurgents" operating in Nicaragua and El Salvador – but also because of the new, alleged threat of drug cartels and narcotrafficking.

In the post-Cold War era, counter-drug operations, often masquerading as counter-terrorism operations became SOUTHCOM's focus. So too did counterinsurgency operations. SOUTHCOM was not involved in 1983's Operation Urgent Fury, the U.S. intervention in Grenada (that was under LANTCOM). But it did land troops in Honduras in 1987. In 1989, through "Operation Just Cause" the U.S. attacked Panama, removing their one-time ally President Manuel Noriega from power and incarcerating him on drug trafficking charges. In 1997, SOUTHCOM headquarters were moved to Miami, Florida due to stipulations of the 1977 Panama Treaty which gave the Canal Zone to Panama.

In 1997, SOUTHCOM entered into a new phase by establishing the **Human Rights Initiative (HRI)** in order to frame its efforts as humanitarian assistance and concern for human rights. In reality, this effort supported the U.S. military to expand its work with military and security forces of 34 of the countries in the region as well as academics and NGOs.

SOUTHCOM NOW

From 2000 to 2015, through **Operation [Plan Colombia](#)**, the United States rapidly increased intelligence, logistics, and training in Colombia. Over the 15 years, this program resulted in \$9.9B in U.S. aid (71 percent of which went to security forces). During this period, government security forces killed an estimated 4,300 civilians, and over 4 million Colombians have been internally [displaced](#). The brunt of this violence has been borne by Black and Indigenous Colombians.

In 2004, SOUTHCOM began hosting HRI conferences to exert influence over the military forces of regional countries and to build relationships between human rights groups and militaries. As of 2016, nearly 200 HRI events were hosted in 19 countries and 11 countries committed to formal participation in HRI—despite neglecting to address human rights abuses sponsored by U.S. allies in the region.

In 2007, Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, authorized the reorganization of SOUTHCOM into a more interagency-oriented organization. The reorganization was implemented the following year, which led to the increased use of “soft power,” though it remains a combatant command. In 2012, the **United States-Colombia Action Plan** was established to “synchronize” multinational military forces trained by U.S. forces. Subsequent military interventions occurred in Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic

Since 2013, SOUTHCOM has established “**Regional Emergency Operations Centers**” in Peru and Paraguay.

Beginning in 2017, the U.S. established a new **Theater Strategy (2017-27)** to further enhance “military-to-military” partnerships and conduct joint exercises throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean, as well as counter perceived Chinese and Russian influence in the region. An example of this is “**Operation Trade Winds**,” an annual Caribbean security-focused, multi-dimensional exercise conducted in the ground, air, sea, and cyber domains. This 2021 iteration of the multinational exercise occurred June 13 – 25, 2021 in Guyana. U.S. forces joined other participating nations to conduct joint, combined, and interagency training focused on increasing regional cooperation in complex multinational security operations

SOUTHCOM also operates **Joint Task Force Guantánamo**, where it conducts some detention and interrogation operations in support of U.S. so-called counterterrorism operations, as well as prepares support for mass migration operations

BAP AGAINST SOUTHCOM

SOUTHCOM works to extend U.S. military influence throughout the Americas and to promote militarism in line with U.S. interests relying on spurious claims of “humanitarian assistance/disaster relief” and counter-narcotics operations to increase U.S. control over the region. Every year, SOUTHCOM uses “humanitarian assistance exercises” and disaster response efforts as military training platforms.

The Black Alliance for Peace stands against the growing influence and power of SOUTHCOM, and the ever-increasing militarization of the region. We call for an international “Zone of Peace” in the Americas. Informed by the Black radical peace tradition, we understand that peace is not the absence of conflict, but the achievement, by popular struggle and self-defense, of a world liberated from nuclear armament and proliferation, unjust war, and global white supremacy.