

Colombia Quagmire: Time for U.S. Policy Overhaul

By Virginia M. Bouvier | September 2003

A three-year long peace process initiated by Colombia's former President Andrés Pastrana failed last year, and a war-weary public elected Alvaro Uribe in August 2002 with a mandate to address Colombia's grave security concerns. Despite the sunny portrait projected by some U.S. media, however, storm clouds are looming. After Uribe's first year in office, violence continues unabated in Colombia, and security has deteriorated for much of the civilian population. Political space for legitimate dissent and the defense of basic human rights is being undermined, dire human needs continue to go unaddressed, and the "democratic security" policies of the Uribe government are intensifying an already severe humanitarian crisis.¹ More than two million of Colombia's 44 million people have been internally displaced by the conflict. The U.S. Department of State reported that the number of internally displaced persons grew by more than 400,000 in 2002 alone, as selective assassinations, massacres, and armed confrontations drove entire communities off their lands.

Recent signs indicate that violence is becoming increasingly entrenched in Colombia. The conflict now claims the lives of some 19 civilians each day—up from 12 lives per day in 2000. The government and the largest guerrilla organization, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC, by its Spanish initials), are at a standoff, following the February 2002 breakdown of three years of negotiations.

The war has expanded to virtually all areas of the country. Paramilitary units have increased their presence in areas previously controlled by the FARC, such as Putumayo, while they have also consolidated their control in major urban areas such as Medellín and Barrancabermeja. As the country's irregular armed forces are showing increased strength, violence against the civilian population has intensified, triggering new displacements of 90,000 Colombians in the first three months of 2003 alone.² Arbitrary detentions, especially of peasants and human rights defenders, are also on the rise, as are complaints of human rights abuses by government security forces in the government-designated "rehabilitation zones" in the departments of Bolívar, Sucre, and Arauca.³ Yet there is no credible prosecution of high military and government officials accused of human rights crimes. Complicity between elements of the military and paramilitary groups shows no sign of diminishing, and Colombian authorities have failed to pursue some 3,000

Key Points

- As foreign aid, drug money, and corruption bolster the armed forces, guerrillas, and paramilitaries, the armed conflict in Colombia continues to intensify in scope and brutality.
- The recent announcement of a peace agreement between the Colombian government and the paramilitaries is a welcome initiative but is fraught with difficulties.
- The U.S. antiterrorism campaign has further blurred the line separating the war on drugs and Colombia's counterinsurgency war.

outstanding orders of detention for paramilitary members and guerrillas.⁴

A Dubious Peace Process

The Colombian conflict has been simmering for some five decades. Fed by political and socioeconomic inequities and poverty rates that today hover at 67%, this gruesome death dance features heavily armed actors that include guerrilla groups, paramilitary organizations, the public security forces of the state, organized crime rings and cartels, drug traffickers, and common crimi-



nals. Three of these groups—the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)—have been classified by the U.S. State Department as terrorist organizations.

The announcement in July 2003 of an agreement between the government of Colombia and the AUC (on the eve of debate over a new package of U.S. aid) offers a flicker of hope that a key group of armed actors may be removed from the conflict. U.S. authorities in Bogotá have been supportive of the Uribe government's overtures toward the paramilitaries and have offered to provide up to \$5 million in incentives in the form of training, education, land, and other initiatives to those paramilitary members who agree to demobilize. The AUC, which claims to have some 10,000-15,000 members and is said to control at least 40% of the drug trade in Colombia and to receive 80% of its funding from drug profits, wields considerable power on the Colombian political and military scene.⁵

To suggest that these talks will lead to peace, however, may be premature due to several complicating factors. First, the agreement is conditioned on the paramilitary groups respecting a cease-fire, disarming, and ending drug production. Second, there are serious internal divisions within the AUC, which split last year into at least five identifiable groups. Numerous paramilitary leaders and groups both within and outside the AUC—representing about half of the total paramilitary forces operating in Colombia—have refused to join the discussions, and others have withdrawn from the dialogue. Third, some sectors that back or finance the paramilitaries—including high-level military authorities, small mining company officials, merchants, and ranchers—reportedly oppose the cease-fire.

Finally, there are widespread concerns that paramilitary leaders will exploit “peace talks” both to secure their own impunity and to protect their drug-trafficking profits and illegally acquired goods and lands. Two of the top paramilitary “negotiators,” Carlos Castaño and Salvatore Mancuso, are wanted in the U.S. on charges that they shipped 17 tons of cocaine to the U.S. and Europe between 1997 and 2002. Mancuso has invited State Department officials to send a commission to Bogotá to settle these matters, and Castaño has suggested that if the extradition requests are not withdrawn, all deals may be off.

U.S. Involvement

U.S. involvement in Colombia is deepening rapidly and with relatively little public debate. With more than 2,000 personnel from 32 U.S. agencies, the embassy in Bogotá now surpasses that in Cairo as the largest U.S. embassy in the world.⁶ The U.S. now has more troops and civilian contractors on the ground in Colombia than ever before. As of July 2003, 358 U.S. troops were in Colombia. This represents a tripling of the 117 U.S. troops stationed in Colombia in November 2001, although it remains beneath the congressionally mandated cap of 400. Five U.S. citizens employed as contractors were killed in Colombia this year, and 21 U.S. government-titled aircraft have been downed there since 1998.⁷

Colombia, which produces 90% of the world's cocaine and supplies 70% of the U.S. heroin market, is the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid after Israel and Egypt. From 1999-2002, the U.S. gave Colombia over \$2 billion in aid, mostly aimed at counternarcotics efforts; more than four-fifths of that amount went to Colombia's military and police. In February 2003, Congress approved an omnibus bill for FY2003 that included \$700 million for the Andean Regional Initiative. Over half was destined for Colombia's counternarcotics program, and \$93 million went toward funding a pipeline protection brigade that trains Colombian military to protect the oil pipeline in the guerrilla-dominated Arauca region. In April 2003, at least partially in recognition of Uribe's support for the U.S. intervention in Iraq, Colombia was granted a further \$105 million—mostly military assistance—under the emergency supplemental bill for the Iraq war. This brought Colombia's total to a record \$3.1 billion in U.S. aid over the past four years.

Nonetheless, there has been relatively little public discussion of U.S. policies toward Colombia. In late July 2003, Rep. Ike Skelton (D-MO), ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, and Rep. James McGovern (D-MA) cosponsored an amendment to reduce by \$75 million the military portion of the FY2004 aid package under consideration for Colombia. The amendment led to a heated debate on the House floor.⁸ Those favoring continued increases in military aid, such as Congressmen Jim Kolbe (R-AZ), chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, and Dan Mica (R-FL), argued that Plan Colombia has been successful on numerous fronts. They cited a 15% reduction in coca production in Colombia during 2002, praised Uribe's anticorruption efforts and cooperation in extraditing drug traffickers,⁹ and cited improvements in

counterinsurgency strategies that led to an increase in Uribe's first ten months in insurgents killed in action, captured, and deserting as well as a decline in terrorist acts, murders, and attacks on infrastructure.

Critics of the current policy noted that despite the drop last year, coca production in Colombia still exceeds its level in 2000, when Plan Colombia began. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), moreover, the reduction in coca in FY2002 in the Putumayo area—the focus of U.S. eradication policies—was due to manual eradication done by farmers in alternative development programs rather than to U.S.-favored aerial fumigation efforts.¹⁰ Some congressional representatives also noted that the recent decline in coca production has been offset by increases in production in Bolivia and Peru, suggesting that the problem has not been resolved but has merely shifted geographic location.

Human rights concerns have figured prominently in the congressional debates, and have prompted Congress to develop the current certification process that conditions one-fourth of U.S. military aid to Colombia on specific criteria—including demonstrable progress by the Colombian government in protecting human rights, severing the ties between the Colombian military and the paramilitary groups, prosecuting human rights violators, and restoring human rights and government authority over areas under paramilitary or guerrilla control. In July 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell certified for the fifth time in three years that Colombia had met the human rights requirements necessary to release a portion of U.S. military aid. However, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Washington Office on Latin America opposed the certification, charging that the Colombian government had not met the required conditions.¹¹

In the foreign aid debate, several congressional representatives expressed concern that bolstering the military might undermine democratic institutions and practices in Colombia. Representative McGovern stressed that his

amendment to cut some military aid would “send a powerful message that Congress believes respect for human rights is essential, that impunity for high-ranking military officers who commit human rights abuses must end, and that Congress requires a more defined U.S. plan and exit strategy in Colombia.”¹² The amendment was defeated, largely along party lines, by a vote of 226 to 195, and on July 23, 2003, the foreign aid bill was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, which appropriated the full request of \$574 million for the final phase of the five-year Plan Colombia. Barring unforeseen circumstances, the Senate is likely to approve the package this fall with-

out debate. The Colombian government has also indicated its intention to request within the next few months substantive increases in U.S. aid to fund a second Plan Colombia for 2006 and beyond.

Both the nature and the level of U.S. involvement in Colombia have been changing, as previous congressional limits aimed at keeping the U.S. from entering openly into Colombia's civil war have been removed. In the wake of heightened concerns about global terrorism, Congress in 2002 authorized the use of lethal U.S. assistance—previously limited to counternarcotics operations—for counterterrorism efforts in Colombia and determined that previously approved counternarcotics

resources could now be used “to defeat” the FARC, ELN, and paramilitary groups.¹³ Early this year, the United States thus began to engage openly in counterinsurgency warfare, training Colombian soldiers in the oil-rich Arauca province to attack guerrillas to protect an oil pipeline used and partially owned by Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum.

In the wake of August 2003 visits to Colombia by high-level U.S. government and military authorities, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers, the U.S. and Colombia resumed antinarcotics reconnaissance missions. Those missions had been terminated in 2001 after the Peruvian Air Force, acting on information from a CIA surveillance

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plane flown by private contractors, mistakenly shot down a plane carrying a U.S. missionary and her infant daughter.

Besides giving the green light to greater U.S. involvement in Colombia's decades-long counterinsurgency effort, the new U.S. strategy has greatly increased the role of private contractors. Hired companies are now directly involved in training and advising the counterinsurgency forces as well as providing mechanics, search-and-rescue teams, and pilots for spray planes and helicopter gunships on fumigation missions.

This strategy diverts the risk from official government employees, circumvents congressional oversight and restrictions, and avoids public awareness of and accountability for U.S. actions overseas. The number of U.S. private contractors in Colombia grew from 220 in November 2001 to 308 in July 2003, after Congress raised earlier limits on private U.S. military contractors from 300 to 400.¹⁴ Foreign nationals hired by U.S. companies do not count toward the mandated cap.¹⁵ For the period from April 2002-April 2003, the U.S. State Department granted eight contracts and the Department of Defense granted an additional 23 contracts (up from a total of 20 con-

tracts the previous year) to private companies for work in Colombia. The lion's share of these recent contracts, worth over \$150 million, went to DynCorp, Lockheed-Martin, Northrop Grumman, ARINC, and TRW.¹⁶

The price tag for continued aid to Colombia is not clear. Rep. Nita M. Lowey (D-NY) has noted that Washington will need to spend more than \$230 million annually just to maintain the helicopters the U.S. has given to Colombia.¹⁷ Between 1999-2002, the United States donated 80 helicopters (20 Black Hawk and 60 Hueys and Super-Hueys) worth more than \$400 million to the Colombian police and Army and spent a further \$3 million to bring 65 Colombian pilots to the United States for up to four years of training.¹⁸

A high percentage of both instructors and trainees—in one case more than half of a class of 22 trained instructors—are reportedly leaving the armed forces to accept jobs with contractors such as DynCorp at more than double their former salaries.¹⁹ This has led to a scenario in which U.S. dollars are effectively subsidizing training costs for private contracting companies, and the helicopters are grounded for lack of pilots.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Washington relies heavily on the Colombian military for implementation of U.S. foreign policy in Colombia. The Colombian military—called in a recent Senate conference report “a particularly weak link in the fight against terrorism and narcotics”—is rife with problems.²⁰ These include a long tradition of human rights abuses, collaboration with paramilitary vigilantes, lack of accountability before civilian authorities, and a history of involvement in corruption and drug trafficking.

Even when corruption and human rights abuses are blatant and committed by high-level military authorities, the perpetrators enjoy virtual impunity. Nonetheless, in some drug trafficking cases, the U.S. has had a few important successes in securing the resignation or extradition of key authorities. In November 2002, Marine Infantry Admiral Rodrigo Quiñones was stripped of his U.S. visa and pressured into early retirement amid charges that he engaged in drug trafficking activities while he was head of Navy intelligence.

In June 2003 General Gabriel Díaz Ortiz was relieved of his duties as commander of the 2nd Brigade in Barranquilla, accused by U.S. authorities of human rights

Key Problems

- The U.S. approach relies heavily and disproportionately on military solutions, which are likely to prolong rather than curtail the violence and to undermine democratic practices and the rule of law in Colombia.
- Washington's strategy overlooks the multiple causes of violence in Colombia, including the basic conditions that gave rise to the conflict and that ensure its perpetuation.
- Deepening U.S. engagement in Colombia appears to have no measurable objectives, no evaluation criteria, and no exit strategy.

violations during anti-guerrilla operations in Putumayo as well as links with paramilitary drug and arms traffickers operating there.²¹ His involvement in a drug-related scandal involving the loss of two tons of confiscated cocaine and the death of the alleged informants prompted the U.S. to briefly block disbursement of \$37 million in aid, which has since been released. In another highly publicized case, Colombian Army officials were discovered to have stolen millions of U.S. dollars (unconfirmed estimates go as high as \$14 million) that they found while searching

for mass graves in the southern jungles of guerrilla-controlled San Vicente del Caguán.²² Not one of these cases has been brought to trial.

Relying on the Colombian military to pursue both guerrillas and paramilitaries may be unrealistic. U.S. policy-makers have recently come to view the paramilitaries as part of the problem, placing the AUC on the list of foreign terrorist organizations on September 10, 2001. But this perception is not widely shared by the Colombian military. Unless the civilian government begins to prosecute guerrillas and paramilitaries alike for their crimes, military attitudes are unlikely to change. Until then, U.S. policies that support the Colombian military may in fact be enabling paramilitary units to continue their abuses.

The Colombian conflict is not likely to be “winnable” by military means alone. In fact, such an approach is likely to escalate and even prolong the conflict. The harsh terrain and complex geography of Colombia’s landscape—characterized by vast expanses of jungle and rugged mountain terrain—make a military victory by government security forces unlikely. The geographic isolation of much of the countryside provides guerrillas and paramilitary groups alike with tremendous staying power. If Washington has been unable to rescue the three American contractors kidnapped in February in the jungles of Caquetá, how can it expect to achieve victory in a longstanding conflict where well-financed and heavily armed irregular forces control large swatches of territory, provide basic social services, and govern localities whose populations have been largely ignored by federal authorities? The guerrillas are more than just a handful of insurgents; the FARC and the ELN respectively claim 18,000 and 5,000 members.

The U.S. approach gives insufficient priority to protecting Colombia’s democratic institutions, to addressing the basic conditions that gave rise to the conflict and that ensure its perpetuation, and to seeking conditions by which a negotiated settlement might be reached. A U.S. alliance with political and economic elites that fails to

address adequately Colombia’s severe social inequities, widespread poverty, and acute humanitarian crisis is shortsighted at best. Such an alliance is also inimical to long-term U.S. interests for peace and stability in Colombia.

The current U.S. emphasis on counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and oil industry infrastructure fails to address the broader dimensions of basic human security—including access to water, food, clothing, shelter, and jobs. It also fails to provide alternative development options to coca and poppy cultivators.

In some cases, U.S.-supported counternarcotics programs are exacerbating already desperate conditions. Fumigation policies pursued by the U.S. and Colombian governments have destroyed food crops, displaced large numbers of small farmers, contaminated the water, and impacted the health of humans and animals dwelling in the regions that are sprayed with toxic herbicides. Such health and environmental concerns prompted a class-action suit that resulted in a ruling by a Cundinamarca court in June

2003 that ordered the temporary suspension of aerial spraying of glyphosate on coca and poppy plants. The Uribe government has appealed the ruling to the Council of State, Colombia’s highest court, and spraying will continue until that court emits a new ruling.

Alternative crop eradication strategies with fewer harmful consequences are severely underfunded, although they have shown greater long-term success and drawn less criticism. The National Unity of Coffee Growers in Antioquia, hard hit by low coffee prices on the world market, has denounced the impact of glyphosate on the quality of coffee and other legal crops. Meanwhile, the Catholic Conference of Colombian Bishops has called for manual eradication procedures as a way to avoid the glyphosate fumigation problems. Furthermore, Ecuadoran Foreign Minister Nina Pacari has argued that the Colombian government violated a prior agreement that limited border sprayings to 10 kilometers or more from the border and that Colombian herbicidal spraying

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is damaging the health and farmlands of Ecuadoran peasants. Ecuador has asked for compensation from Colombia for damages incurred.

Aerial fumigation also far outpaces safer alternative development programs. The Colombian development agency PLANTE reported that from 1997-2001, alternative development took place on 28,485 hectares, while fumigation covered 108,800 hectares in 2001 alone.²³ USAID reported that in 2002 the U.S. sprayed 122,000 hectares of land. However, in the period between January 2001 and April 2003, USAID supported development for only 24,549 hectares of legal crops.²⁴ Furthermore, the Defensoría del Pueblo, the Colombian government's ombudsman's office, reported that in some cases the "lack of coordination between alternative development projects and the chemical aerial fumigation program" was such that "some of the alternative development projects have been subject to fumigation."²⁵

Toward A New Policy

Washington now has higher stakes and greater leverage in Colombia than at any other time in its history. U.S. policymakers should recognize that the Colombian conflict is not a fight against terrorists that will be won by tilting the military balance in favor of one side. It is instead a complex internal armed conflict that requires a broad range of diplomatic initiatives designed to create an outcome that will be acceptable to all sides and will pave the way toward a stable peace. Thus far, Washington has invested heavily and disproportionately in a military solution and has failed to put its diplomatic weight behind a negotiated settlement that might lead to peace.

U.S. policies that overlook Colombia's serious human rights record in order to support President Uribe's war effort may erode the chances for long-term reconciliation of Colombian society. Democracy and human rights must not be sacrificed for security. The protection of human rights and the strengthening of the rule of law represent the surest way to generate the ideas and support the experiments that will ultimately lead to the resolution of the armed conflict.

Ninety-seven percent of the crimes in Colombia go unpunished, and Colombia's judicial system is virtually paralyzed with a backlog of 3 million cases.²⁸ U.S. support for local ombudsmen, public defenders, an early warning system to protect the civilian population from imminent threats, witness protection programs, and

U.S. policies toward Colombia encompass a daunting agenda relating to "drugs, security, democracy, human rights, development, [and] economic revival."²⁶ It is perhaps this multiplicity of sometimes-conflicting agendas that makes it difficult to clarify coherent policy goals, objectives, or evaluation mechanisms. A recent General Accounting Office report critiqued the Bush administration for a lack of planning and noted its failure to develop projections for future costs, define the future U.S. role in Colombia, or identify and map out an exit strategy.²⁷ Conference reports from both the House and Senate on the foreign aid bill for FY2004 have stipulated new reporting requirements for the Secretary of State regarding budgetary projections as well as strategic plans for transferring management and implementation of programs from U.S. personnel and contractors to the Colombian government.

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should reorient its support for the counterinsurgency war toward initiatives that will lead to a just and equitable peace.
- The U.S. must redefine its security objectives more broadly to include consideration of socioeconomic needs, democratization, respect for human rights, and support for the rule of law.
- Policymakers must clearly analyze U.S. goals and objectives, develop evaluation criteria, and ensure that their policies are not injurious to Colombia's population.

bodyguards for threatened judicial magistrates and human rights and labor leaders is crucial to establishing the rule of law. These programs should be continued, monitored, and improved. Establishing the rule of law, creating some sense of confidence in the judicial system, and demonstrating that crimes will be punished are essential steps toward peace and stability.

Washington must insist that Bogotá not cast aside human rights and due process in its dealings with irregular armed groups. Thus far, the U.S. has refused to withdraw pending extradition requests for leading drug traffickers who control the AUC. The U.S. should also remain firm in its insistence that impunity is not an option for

those who engaged in gross violations of human rights. Such a stance by Washington would lessen the likelihood that Colombia's paramilitaries would return to violence when the foreign aid money runs out. A process that institutes accountability before the law is also the best way to protect the security of those who choose to demobilize and may be the only way to secure the nation's stability.

Throughout the country, unarmed communities are engaging in dialogues and reaching agreements with paramilitary and guerrilla forces in an effort to decrease the levels of violence that threaten their communities. These communities are demanding accountability from both the unofficial armed actors and the official armed forces that occupy their regions. Within the last year the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) supported the creation of Redprodepaz, a network of 15 development and peace programs with a presence in 28 provinces and more than 300 municipalities. Despite security risks, economic difficulties, and government indifference or hostility, these programs are offering new paths to peace based on a broader definition of human security, of which basic human needs are an integral part.

Such grassroots efforts to establish peace communities or zones of nonviolence are precarious and little-known outside Colombia, even though they may provide the best hope for creating the conditions for a long-term peace at the national level and could well provide the basis for confidence-building that could lead to region-wide or even countrywide cease-fires or negotiations. These efforts should be supported, as they form the basis for beginning to address Colombia's longstanding, deeply rooted problems.

Churches, nongovernmental groups, and local and regional authorities have taken the lead in designing and implementing comprehensive development programs that offer alternatives to violence and address the root causes of poverty and injustice at the local level. Communities are organizing to build schools, feed children, provide employment, and create economic alternatives to illegal drug crops. Many of these efforts are funded by Europeans, the United Nations, and, in some cases, USAID. Such local and regional initiatives offer evidence that development can and must be undertaken even as the conflict rages on.

Development must not wait until after security has been established; it should be seen as an integral part of establishing security. Priority should be given to working with local populations to identify safe alternatives to harmful spraying and coercion that will enable small farmers to cultivate legal crops and will assist those populations that have been displaced because of misguided U.S. counternarcotics policies.

Increased development assistance that offers real alternatives for survival will have a greater chance of ensuring that farmers do not simply relocate to continue production of illicit crops, that disadvantaged youths do not turn to coca and poppy production or armed groups, and that those paramilitary and guerrilla forces who choose to disarm and demobilize will have other ways to secure their livelihoods.

As Plan Colombia enters its final phase, U.S. policy is at a crossroads. Before policymakers commit the U.S. to further engagement in Colombia, they should conduct a thorough analysis to ensure that U.S. policies are not supporting a corrupt or abusive military, contributing to the deterioration of democratic institutions, or endangering the health of Colombia's environment and people. Washington must use its leverage responsibly to work with those in Colombia who seek an end to the war, to create a climate that will be conducive to a negotiated settlement to the conflict, and to provide security guarantees for those who agree to demobilize.

The U.S. must work with the Colombian government to end impunity for those who violate international standards of human rights and to develop and marshal the necessary resources for a plan that addresses the vast humanitarian crisis of Colombia's internally displaced and refugee populations. To do otherwise is to ensure the continuation of a conflict rooted in desperate poverty, severe economic inequities, and exclusionary political institutions.

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Sources for More Information

ORGANIZATIONS

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Colombian Ombudsman Office

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<http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/ar/colombia/websites.htm>
<http://usembassy.state.gov/posts/co1/www/main.html>

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