

Colombia: Unveiling U.S. Policy

By Lesley Gill

As the drumbeat in the “war against terror” becomes louder in Washington, the Bush administration is prepared to involve the U.S. more directly in Colombia’s 40-year civil war. President Bush now advocates the use of U.S. advisers and equipment in a campaign against guerrillas who want to overthrow the Colombian government. Although the U.S. has already been tacitly supporting counterinsurgency operations in Colombia, Bush’s initiative would up the policy ante by openly committing the U.S. to the defeat of the guerrillas and eliminating the distinction between counter narcotics and counterinsurgency operations.

The September 11th tragedy provides the administration with the rationale to directly target guerrilla insurgents, whom it labels “terrorists” and blames for the recent collapse of peace talks. As I discovered on a recent fact finding trip to the coca-growing region of southern Colombia, however, the aims of U.S. policy have been evident to peasants there for some time. It is here that indiscriminate aerial spraying of coca fields serves less to promote alternative development than to displace peasants from an area controlled by the FARC, Colombia’s oldest and largest guerrilla organization.

In the department of Putumayo, over half of the 350,000 inhabitants depend on coca for a livelihood. It is the only crop that can be marketed in a region where stable roads do not exist, and it provides some families with a modest living that would be unobtainable by other means. But coca—the basis of cocaine—also exposes them to intense levels of violence, as profits from its cultivation are sustained by the illegal drug traffic. Families are therefore eager to adopt viable alternatives.

Yet alternative development has always been subordinate to a repressive military and fumigation strategy. The U.S. seems less interested in assist-

ing peasants to find substitutes for coca than in reducing the area under cultivation by almost any means necessary. The U.S. government now states that it will no longer promote alternative crops to peasants whose coca fields are eradicated in U.S.-financed fumigation operations. Only \$145 million of Plan Colombia—a \$1.3 billion, mostly military aid package approved in mid-2000 by President Clinton—is dedicated to crop substitution programs, and a coercive system of social pacts, designed to channel aid to peasants who agree to manually eradicate coca, has little credibility with local people.

In the southern department of Putumayo, where most of Colombian coca is produced, some 37,000 growers consented in 2000 to destroy their coca within six months after the arrival of financial assistance or face the fumigation of their fields with herbicide. Peasants soon discovered that financial assistance was either slow to arrive or never came, and by the end of 2001, the U.S. Agency for International Development had spent only 10% of what it had allocated for alternative development. To make matters worse, adhering to the terms of the government’s pacts turned out to be no guarantee against fumigation.

The first round of aerial fumigation took place between December 24, 2000, and January 7, 2001, and, according to the U.S. embassy, it destroyed 30,000 hectares in the municipalities of Orito, San Miguel, and Valle de Guamuez. The Catholic Church, however, stated that coca represented only 15,000 hectares; the rest of the area was planted in food crops. In November 2001, spraying began again in San Miguel and Valle de Guamuez, even though little or no U.S. government aid had reached pact signers who remained in compliance with the eradication agreements.

The experience of one peasant whom I met in Putumayo reflected those of many others. This

individual signed a pact along with 70 members of his community, but, because he never received the promised development aid, the man borrowed \$12,000 to plant black pepper and offset the imminent loss of his coca. Then he stuck a white flag in the field to signal that the black pepper crop was legal. When the spray planes returned on November 24, 2001, they destroyed the entire pepper field as well as fruit trees, coffee bushes, cassava, corn, and pasture. All of this raises disturbing questions both about Washington's commitment to alternative development and about the real aims of its fumigation program in guerrilla strongholds.

A U.S. embassy official who requested anonymity told me that reducing the total area under coca cultivation—not alternative development—is the cornerstone of U.S. policy in Colombia. “It may be best that people simply abandon the area or make their own decisions about how to survive,” he said. “People need to understand that the [U.S.] government absolutely will not tolerate coca cultivation.” Yet since the fumigation operations began, coca cultivation has increased rather than decreased. In addition, a U.S.-trained counternarcotics force has been unable to dislodge the FARC from rural areas of Putumayo.

When confronted with evidence of food crop destruction, embassy officials explain that, although aerial spraying is supposed to be done from 30 feet up, the presence of guerrillas in Putumayo forces planes to 90 feet, which causes the herbicide to drift onto neighboring fields. But though drift may explain some of the damage, it does not account completely for the level of destruction in Putumayo. Independent Colombian and U.S. observers have reported the devasta-

tion of food crops that are far from coca fields. In these cases, one Colombian expert on alternative development notes, “the only explanation is that [fumigation] was intentional,” calculated to destroy peasant morale in areas under FARC control and displace them to other areas of the country. In fact, analysts and peasants alike conclude that displacement has long been a strategy, not an effect, of Colombia's civil war. The fumigation campaign has unfolded in a context in which the Colombian government cannot defeat the guerrillas militarily and peace talks have collapsed.

Guerrillas control nearly half of the national territory, and last year alone, they repeatedly attacked an oil pipeline operated by Occidental Petroleum. For the U.S., protecting the supply of Colombian oil is especially important as conflicts in the Middle East worsen, and President Bush recently requested \$98 million to train and equip Colombian counterinsurgency battalions who guard the pipeline. In addition, the administration's \$882 million “Andean Regional Initiative,” which was approved last December, earmarked 63% of the Colombia funding for military uses.

The portrayal of the FARC as international terrorist “evil doers” is simply the latest in a series of Washington's label shifts. During the cold war, Washington defined the FARC as “communist subversives,” but this label became obsolete with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the expansion of the drug war in the 1990s, when U.S. propagandists deployed the more politically expedient term “narcoguerrilla” to delegitimize the rebels. Although today both the FARC and the other main guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), benefit from coca production and processing, they do not

control the major national and international drug trafficking networks.

Moreover, the narcoguerrilla concept blurs the social and political differences that distinguish the two guerrilla groups from the drug traffickers and from each other. It also obscures the involvement of the paramilitaries, sectors of the military, and members of the political establishment in the drug traffic. Since September 11th, new portrayals of the FARC as an international terrorist organization have not been supported by evidence. Although guerrilla tactics against Colombian citizens and select foreigners working in Colombia expose the insurgents to charges of terrorism, the FARC's military operations beyond Colombian borders are restricted to occasional forays into the sparsely populated border regions of neighboring countries.

Equating the FARC with international terrorism creates a double standard with respect to other armed actors in the Colombian conflict. Washington policymakers say relatively little about the Auto Defensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), a federated organization of local paramilitary groups allied with the U.S.-backed Colombian security forces. Although the State Department lists the AUC, along with the FARC and ELN, as a terrorist organization and agrees with human rights groups who blame paramilitaries for 70% of Colombia's human rights violations, U.S. policies largely ignore the AUC's links to the Colombian military, which uses the organization as an ally in the battle against leftists. The AUC is therefore relatively free to expand its power and to murder ordinary Colombians, as Bush's war on terror targets the FARC.

The U.S. should stop using the threat of terrorism to justify its involvement

in counterinsurgency operations in Colombia. Colombia is in the middle of a complex civil war, and the Bush administration needs to recognize the differences between this 40-year-old domestic conflict and global terrorism.

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