



## Colombia's Role in International Drug Industry

By Winifred Tate, New York University

What is called “drug trafficking” in the U.S. is in fact a major, multifaceted, and global industry. Colombia’s role in this industry has evolved over the past decades. In the 1970s, a boom in marijuana cultivation along Colombia’s Atlantic Coast created a class of newly rich traffickers supplying the U.S. market. In the late 1970s, Colombia’s new cartels, first in Medellín and then in Cali, expanded from marijuana to the processing and export of cocaine. Led by a small number of powerful drug kingpins, these family-based empires came to control a billion-dollar cocaine industry that processed coca grown primarily in Bolivia and Peru.

The power and violence of the drug industry came to permeate all facets of Colombian society, as signified by the saying “*plata o plomo*”—silver or lead—meaning “take the bribe or take a bullet.” Drug lords achieved unprecedented political influence through threats, bribery, and political contributions. Drug violence also undermined Colombia’s formal but deeply exclusionary democracy, particularly during the 1980s, when the Medellín Cartel waged war on the Colombian government, killing hundreds of judges, police investigators, journalists, and public figures.

In addition to these targeted killings, paramilitary organizations—supported by drug traffickers—have carried out more generalized violence in rural areas against the civilian population. Since the early 1980s, drug traffickers, together with landowners and local military commanders, have formed paramilitary organizations to “clean” their territory of guerrillas and alleged guerrilla sympathizers and to protect land, cattle, and cocaine laboratories and strategic shipping routes. During the 1990s, ties between illicit drug operations and

paramilitary organizations solidified, with several paramilitary chiefs becoming high-level traffickers. For instance, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has labeled paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño a “major drug trafficker.” Castaño is the public face of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), an umbrella group of regional paramilitary forces. Over the past several years, the AUC has orchestrated hundreds of massacres and selective assassinations throughout

Colombia, in many cases with the support of local Colombian security forces. The U.S. State Department estimates that paramilitary forces are responsible for more than 70% of Colombia’s human rights abuses.

Beginning in 1989 with the “Andean Strategy,” U.S. funds, equipment, logistical support, and personnel from the DEA, the CIA, and other agencies have played a leading role in counternarcotics operations in Colombia. U.S.-assisted operations resulted in the killing of Pablo Escobar in 1993 and the jailing of the heads of the Cali Cartel in 1994. However, the breakup of the two largest cartels did not lead to a long-term decline in Colombian drug trafficking. These drug syndicates have since been replaced by smaller, more vertically integrated trafficking organizations whose nimble, independent traffickers are much more difficult to detect and infiltrate. These traffickers employ new and constantly changing shipping routes through Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean for moving cocaine and, increasingly, heroin.

In recent years, cultivation of both coca and poppies (used to make heroin) has expanded enormously in Colombia. Unlike in Peru and Bolivia, where peasants have for centuries grown and chewed the coca leaf (a mild stimulant, compared with the processed form, cocaine), in Colombia this practice was limited to a very few, small indigenous groups. While coca cultivation has recently declined in Peru and Bolivia due to U.S.-financed eradication programs, cultivation in Colombia increased 54% from 1996 to 1998, leaving overall Andean coca production constant.

Guerrilla groups active in areas of increasing coca cultivation, primarily the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), have increasingly financed their activities by taxing coca crops and by protecting drug processing labs and other illicit installations. The dramatic increase in coca cultivation in southern Colombia, a FARC stronghold since the 1960s, coincided with the organization’s strategic effort to increase its military capabilities in the mid-1990s. U.S. State Department officials have used arrests of individuals allegedly linked with FARC in Mexico and Brazil to bolster their claims that FARC members are “narcoguerrillas” and to imply a complete integration of Colombia’s drug cartels and guerrillas. However, these arrests involve trading of weapons for illicit drugs, and there is no evidence that FARC and other insurgent groups are seriously involved in the illicit industry’s most lucrative stages: transshipment and sale of drugs on the international market.

### Key Points

- Colombia’s role in the international drug trade has shifted from a grower/exporter of marijuana in the 1970s to a processor/shipper of cocaine in the 1980s to a major grower/processor/transshipper of coca and heroin today.
- Colombia, a formal but deeply exclusionary democracy, has been wracked by drug violence and corruption.
- Profits from the illicit economy finance all sides of the armed conflict in Colombia: drug traffickers, paramilitary groups, the security forces, and guerrilla groups.

## Problems with Current U.S. Policy

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In 1989, President Bush, Sr. declared that the “gravest domestic threat facing our nation today is drugs,” and he announced the “Andean Strategy” to reduce the amount of illicit narcotics entering the United States. Over the last decade, this strategy has expanded and intensified “source country” counternarcotics operations. Although President Andrés Pastrana’s original 1998 Plan Colombia presented a four-pronged strategy to support efforts for peace, development, political reform, and citizen security, U.S. assistance is massively skewed toward militarized counternarcotics operations. President Clinton’s \$1.3 billion “emergency” counternarcotics package—approved in the summer of 2000—made Colombia the third-largest recipient of U.S. security assistance in the world. This money equips and trains three Colombian army battalions to provide ground support for aerial herbicide campaigns. Funding for Plan Colombia also included \$458.7 million (35% of the total) for neighboring countries, including the construction of U.S. military bases in Ecuador and the Caribbean.

In April 2001, President George W. Bush announced a new “Andean Counterdrug Initiative,” including \$731 million funded through the State Department’s International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) account and an estimated \$107 million more through the Defense Department. While the majority (57%) of the aid still goes to Colombia, the Bush package includes an enormous increase for security assistance to other countries in the region, ranging from a 345% increase for Brazil to a 20% increase for Bolivia. It also includes an increase in alternative development assistance.

U.S. programs in Colombia have been two-pronged: extensive herbicide spraying, primarily of coca fields in southern Colombia, and hundreds of millions of dollars in military hardware and training for Colombian security forces involved in counternarcotics operations. Fumigation has failed to achieve its objectives. (see Foreign Policy In Focus “Coca Eradication” by Phillip Coffin and Jeremy Bigwood) Fumigation campaigns targeting peasant growers actually work to the guerrilla’s advantage by further exacerbating social tensions. In addition, a lack of regional development programs and the failure of the Colombian government to provide basic services have also worsened social tensions. This climate of discontent has helped swell the ranks of FARC and has cast the guerrilla organization as the defender of small peasant farmers.

The fumigation campaigns have generated significant controversy. The governors of the six states most impacted by the fumigation have campaigned against aerial spraying, and a report by the Colombian National Human Rights Ombudsman demanded a halt to “indiscriminate” fumigation of legal food crops, indigenous reservations, alternative development projects, and the lands of peasants participating in manual eradication programs. Environmental advocates note that the U.S.-sponsored operations violate EPA and Monsanto (the manufacturer of Glyphosate) recommendations for the chemical’s safe use.

The second major thrust of U.S. counternarcotics policy—bolstering Colombia’s security forces—has meant increased support for army and police counterinsurgency campaigns. Since 1989, the Colombian National Police (CNP) has received the vast majority of U.S. counternarcotics assistance in the form of military

hardware and training. However, U.S. support for Plan Colombia shifts the bulk of counternarcotics assistance to the Colombian Army. At the heart of the proposal is \$600 million to support Colombian Army operations in the FARC stronghold in southern Colombia. This funding will train and equip new Colombian Army counternarcotics battalions, providing them with helicopters, transport, and intelligence assistance. Although defined as counternarcotics assistance, many supporters of the package acknowledge that funds will be used by the Colombian government against the guerrillas.

U.S. contractors and two existing Colombian Army battalions began operations in December 2000, just as right-wing paramilitary groups took over much of the southern state of Putumayo from FARC. In the first four months, U.S. officials claim to have sprayed more than 30,000 hectares of coca in Putumayo with a mixture of Glyphosate and unknown chemicals. With army battalions providing ground support for the spray planes, these fumigation operations have been attacked sporadically, in part because the area is now controlled by paramilitary groups linked to the Colombian Army.

European governments, rather than matching the U.S. contribution to Plan Colombia, have been highly critical of U.S. strategy. On February 1, 2001, the European Parliament passed a resolution 474-1 supporting the peace process in Colombia, noting that “stepping up military involvement in the fight against drugs involves the risk of sparking off an escalation of the conflict in the region, and that military solutions cannot bring about lasting peace.” The resolution urged the European Union to “pursue its own, non-military strategy combining neutrality, transparency, the participation of civil society and undertakings from the parties involved in the negotiations.”

In the United States, even some congressional supporters of the U.S. strategy have criticized its overwhelming military focus, noting that the package was sold as a balanced approach. These members are urging an increase in economic and social assistance while maintaining the military aspects. So far, in Colombia, military operations have been a clear priority; six months after fumigation began, almost none of the alternative development, human rights, or judicial aid has been delivered. Religious, human rights, development, and refugee organizations are focused on the increased tensions between the Andean governments and the rise in political violence, refugees, and the “spill-over” of illicit drug production and conflict into other parts of Colombia and neighboring countries. Within the Defense Department, which spearheaded the effort to amplify U.S. relations with the Colombian military, there are deep concerns about being drawn into a conflict that is complex and does not lend itself to a military solution, with little clarity about objectives and no “exit plan.”

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### Key Problems

- The U.S. is escalating its funding for ineffective “war on drugs” programs, centered primarily in Colombia but expanding throughout neighboring countries.
  - Discontent in Colombia is fueling peasant support for the guerrillas.
  - The U.S. is escalating support for abusive security forces and is now directly supporting counterinsurgency operations in Colombia.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

The U.S. should recognize that its war on drugs against Colombia and other "source countries" has been a failure and that it must refocus on demand-reduction at home through education and treatment. Although overseas efforts will not solve America's domestic drug problems, the U.S. does have a range of policy options that could support Colombian efforts to confront drug trafficking and the violence and corruption caused by that country's drug trade.

## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should lend its full support to a negotiated settlement of Colombia's internal conflict.
- Washington should suspend all aid to the Colombian security forces until effective measures have been taken to reduce paramilitary violence conducted with the complicity of the Colombian military.
- U.S. drug control assistance should shift toward strengthening sound investigative capabilities of civilian judicial institutions and stimulating sustainable development activities for farmers currently involved in illicit crop production.

Any significant advance against drug trafficking is unlikely as long as Colombia's civil war continues. The opening of peace talks between FARC and the administration of President Andrés Pastrana (who took office in August 1998), the first attempt at negotiations in seven years, offers a precious opportunity for peace. The people of Colombia desperately want peace. On October 24, 1999, upwards of 10 million Colombians marched for peace in Bogotá and other cities, the largest public demonstration ever in the country's history.

U.S. officials have publicly committed support to the peace

process and human rights in Colombia. This verbal commitment has not, however, been translated into decisive and comprehensive support for peace and alternative development programs. In fact, Washington's counternarcotics policy is escalating Colombia's conflict and continues to present obstacles to the fragile negotiation process.

The U.S. should stop its counternarcotics programs in Colombia and switch to encouraging economic development to redirect illicit crop producers. In 1998, Congress, for the first time, allocated money for alternative development in Colombia—\$15 million over three years. But skepticism could easily give way to cynicism regarding this effort because military operations have proceeded while alternative development and judicial reform programs have not.

To improve human rights, the U.S. should dedicate significant economic resources toward strengthening and reforming Colombia's civilian democratic institutions, particularly local judiciaries. The Colombian Attorney General's Office, specifically the Human Rights Unit,

has carried out a number of important investigations of human rights cases. Yet the Colombian military rarely cooperates with these investigations and has successfully blocked some probes. Because of death threats, many prosecutors have been forced to leave the Attorney General's Office; several have fled the country. The U.S. Congress has expressed its support for these human rights investigations but has failed to provide significant assistance.

Congress and the Bush administration should publicly encourage the Colombian government to take immediate measures to combat paramilitary groups, including (1) purging members of the armed forces who maintain ties to paramilitary groups or who tolerate their activities, and (2) enforcing the hundreds of outstanding arrest warrants for paramilitary leaders. The U.S. should deny visas to Colombian military officers implicated in human rights violations and support of paramilitary activities. Given the persistent pattern of human rights abuses by Colombia's security forces and their support for the vigilante violence of the paramilitary groups, the U.S. should terminate all assistance to Colombia's security forces.

Washington must ensure transparency and accountability in all overseas military operations, including counternarcotics efforts. There are some 300 U.S. advisers on the ground in Colombia from an array of agencies, including the Pentagon, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Drug Enforcement Agency. The current level of military assistance and number of advisers in Colombia on any given day has now reached levels comparable to U.S. involvement in El Salvador in the 1980s. Some government and military officials as well as members of Congress have raised the concern that the U.S.—by sharply increasing its hardware, training, and intelligence support for the Colombian Army (despite eschewing direct intervention)—is being drawn, once again, into an unwinnable and costly Latin American civil conflict. Due to the secrecy surrounding many of these operations, particularly those by the DEA, the CIA, and other intelligence agencies, the exact dimensions of U.S. aid to Colombia are impossible to determine.

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# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

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### Human Rights Watch

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Website: <http://www.igc.org/colhynet/>

### Washington Office on Latin America

1630 Connecticut Ave. NW, 2nd Floor  
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Email: wola@wola.org  
Website: <http://www.wola.org/>

### Office of National Drug Control Policy

<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/>

### Peace Brigades International

<http://www.igc.apc.org/pbi/colombia.html>

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## Websites

### Drug Enforcement Administration

<http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/>

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