

Colombia in Crisis

By Carlos Salinas

Colombia, an oil exporter and leading producer of coffee, is rich in resources and has a moderate population density. But it is also plagued by violence, leads the world in the production of cocaine entering the U.S., and is an important source of heroin. Although violence is often blamed on Colombia's large-scale drug trade, dating from the mid-1970s, politically motivated killings predate this considerably. Nor is violence the result of competition over scarce resources. Instead, violence stems from desperate conditions and a political culture that has no tolerance for dissent.

Colombia has been ruled for decades by two political parties, Liberal and Conservative, whose struggles have led to civil wars and regional conflicts. During their last conflict, *La Violencia* (from 1948 to 1953), 145,000 people were killed. For years following, the two parties collaborated in a power sharing arrangement that excluded other political views. However, the hegemony enjoyed by these two parties exacerbated Colombia's inequitable distribution of wealth: the bottom third of the population now has an income share of less than

10% while the top third has an income share of close to 70%. With an economic crisis including a 20% unemployment rate in 1999, drug trafficking and political struggle are attractive options. A fierce counterinsurgency war, stemming from *La Violencia*, pits the Colombian state forces and their paramilitary allies against two major guerrilla forces, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Despite demobilization of other groups, hope for the

transition of guerrillas into unarmed parties has been undermined by the killings of more than 2,500 members of the Patriotic Union party, created in 1985 out of supporters of FARC and other left-wing political groups.

One thousand combat-related deaths were reported in 1999, with FARC increasing its attacks in recent years. However, the brunt of the killings—3,000 in 1999—is borne by the civilian population. The Colombian military seeks to reduce the guerrillas' countryside support. In practice, this strategy entails indiscriminate and illegal killings of civilians by the armed forces and by

paramilitary groups that operate in heavily militarized areas and coordinate their operations with the Army.

Since 1987 more than 35,000 noncombatant civilians have been murdered or made to "disappear," mostly by the security forces and their paramilitary allies. In recent years, the proportion of abuses directly attributable to the armed forces has declined, while abuses by their paramilitary allies have escalated dramatically. These abuses have resulted in massive internal displacement and refugee flows into Panama and Venezuela. Guerrilla forces have also contributed to internal displacement. More than 1.5 million people were displaced over the past fifteen years, with possibly 300,000 in 1999.

In addition to those living in areas of guerrilla activity, victims include perceived or actual government opponents: human rights defenders, lawyers, judges, peasant activists, trade unionists, teachers, and students. For their part, the guerrillas target those suspected of collaborating with the armed forces or the paramilitaries, and they fund their insurgency by taking hundreds of hostages for ransom—about 600 in 1999.

In urban areas, guerrilla-linked militias and police-linked death squads target political activists and those labeled socially undesirable. Drug traffickers have also targeted those who oppose their operations. With their wealth, drug traffickers have become large landowners and have come into direct conflict with guerrillas and peasants. Thus, these drug traffickers have collaborated with the armed forces in creating and financing paramilitary death squads.

Shortly before taking office in 1998, Colombian President Andres Pastrana met with Manuel Marulanda, the head of FARC and initiated the latest round of peace attempts. Prior to that, the ELN convened Colombian civil society representatives in Germany. As a gesture to FARC, the government removed its troops from more than 16,000 square miles in south-central Colombia. Substantive talks between the government and FARC started, following a brief cease fire at the end of 1999. A similar effort seems to be under way with the ELN.

In 1999, the Pastrana Administration unveiled its multidimensional proposal "Plan Colombia," contingent upon the provision of aid from the U.S. and European countries. With the conflict intensifying even as peace talks proceed, the Clinton Administration responded in January 2000 with an aid package heavily weighted toward security assistance.

Key Points

- Violence and warfare in Colombia are often blamed on the drug trade, but the roots run much deeper.
- The overwhelming majority of victims are noncombatant civilians. Since 1987, more than 35,000 noncombatant civilians have been murdered or have "disappeared."
- Despite rich natural resources, Colombia's wealth is unevenly distributed, with some sectors of the population in deep misery.

Problems With Current U.S. Policy

President Clinton declared in his 2000 State of the Union address that his Colombia aid package was to help Colombia “win this fight.” Yet what “this fight” is all about is not so clear. According to the State Department’s Congressional Presentation Document for Foreign Operations FY2000, “the fight against drugs remains the principal U.S. national interest in Colombia.” Yet for the Colombian Army, the principal fight is against leftist guerrillas. In recent years, the misleading but politically expedient term, “narcoguerrilla” has been coined to merge these two fights.

The current counterdrug program continues the history of U.S. support for Colombia’s security forces. At least since the 1960s, the U.S. has supported Colombia’s counterinsurgency operations in the name of fighting communism, offering training at the U.S. Army School of the Americas and the Special Warfare Center, in-country training through advisers and Special Operations Forces, and International Military Education and Training (see In Focus: *Military Training for Latin America*). In addition, the U.S. has supplied Colombia’s security forces with arms, munitions, and equipment.

Since 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell and then-President Bush declared drug trafficking a national security threat, Colombia has been the number one recipient of U.S. military aid in the Americas, ostensibly for counterdrug operations. Until recently, the Colombian Army did not deny that its priority was fighting guerrillas, not drug traffickers.

In 1994 and 1995, the U.S. Congress required a certification from the State Department that U.S. aid was “primarily” for counterdrug operations and not counterinsurgency. At this time, aid to the Colombian Army through the Foreign Operations Appropriations channel was effectively frozen. Congress then began directing the bulk of U.S. aid to the Colombian National Police’s Directorate of Anti-Narcotics Operations (DANTI), leading to bitter feuds between Congress and the Administration. Although DANTI’s human rights record is devoid of recent credible reports of violations, the human rights community has cautioned that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

In 1996 the U.S. Congress passed and the Administration embraced the Leahy Law prohibiting many forms of U.S. aid from going to security force units implicated in human rights violations. U.S. government documents obtained in 1996 proved that the U.S. had indeed given aid to Colombian Army units implicated in such violations, contradicting Administration officials who had assured Congress to the contrary in 1994. Although the Leahy Law blocked some aid, in 1998 it also provided justification for releasing aid to the Colombian Army that had been frozen since 1994, since the administration determined that there were no credible reports linking recipient Colombian Army units to violations.

To address U.S. concerns about Colombia’s military’s focus on counterinsurgency rather than counternarcotics operations, the Colombian military created a special counternarcotics battalion in 1999. Trained by

the U.S. Special Operations Forces, this unit is ostensibly dedicated to supporting counternarcotics operations.

Since the 1980s, Administration officials have promoted the concept of the narcoguerrilla, in part to allay congressional concern about involvement in another counterinsurgency conflict. Colombian army officials have also advanced the concept that drug traffickers and guerrillas are the same. But this is essentially a false argument. Drug traffickers and guerrillas have separate identities and goals. (See In Focus: *Colombia’s Role in International Drug Trafficking*.)

Drug traffickers and guerrillas often operate in the same regions and have some converging interests. Many guerrilla fronts tax and help protect drug cultivation, just as they do any business in areas they control. Yet the Army’s allies, paramilitary leaders, are identified as narcotraffickers in their own right, and even Washington contends that former President Samper received financial support from narcotraffickers. Moreover, in January 2000, the wife of the U.S. military group commander in Bogotá pleaded guilty to heroin trafficking. The reality is that drug traffickers work with anyone willing to advance their interests.

U.S. officials describe their policy of escalation as supporting Plan Colombia, embracing the peace process and the development option, as well as the counternarcotics imperative. However U.S.-supported counternarcotics operations have resulted in the defoliation of large tracts of forest and farmland with chemical agents and the indiscriminate spraying of fields, livestock, and people.

President Clinton’s January 2000 proposal consists of an additional package of \$1.3 billion for the Andean region, in large part for the Colombian security forces. This package will be divided into two parts: an emergency supplemental appropriation request and the foreign operations appropriation for FY2001.

The emergency supplemental appropriation consists of \$954 million, including \$512 million for training and equipping two additional counternarcotics battalions and for 30 Blackhawk and 33 Huey helicopters, as well as for assistance for those “who will be displaced during this push into southern Colombia.” It also contains \$238 million for drug trafficking interdiction, airplane and airfield upgrades, and provisions of intelligence to regional police and military. Another \$68 million is earmarked for the Colombian National Police. The House of Representatives passed the emergency supplemental, which includes the Colombia aid, on March 30. But the Senate has not passed it as the Senate Majority Leader, Trent Lott (R-MS) opposes passing the supplemental because it is too bloated.

Key Problems

- U.S. policy is contradictory. On the one hand, it presses for human rights action; on the other, it bolsters those implicated in violations.
 - U.S. military aid is ostensibly for counternarcotics operations but will more than likely support counterinsurgency and result in violations.
 - The narcoguerrilla thesis was a necessary argument for supporting aid to the Colombian Army when the U.S. Congress wanted nothing to do with counterinsurgency.
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

Support the peace process

Although no one is arguing that the peace process is proceeding smoothly, most observers in Colombia agree that it is moving forward and deserves strong support. To escalate U.S. military involvement even as the parties engage in negotiations is a contradiction.

Washington should increase its public support for the process, ensuring that adequate resources are made available.

Key Recommendations

- U.S. should fully support Colombia's peace process and evaluate any proposal in terms of its effect on the process, discarding those that will jeopardize it.
- End-use monitoring of security assistance and human rights vetting and monitoring need to be fully staffed and resourced.
- Washington should eliminate any policy proposals that contradict human rights protection and could negatively impact the local population.

Continue implementation of the Leahy Law

U.S. security assistance should continue to be closely scrutinized to ensure that no units of the Colombian security forces—armed forces, intelligence units, and police forces—implicated in violations receive any U.S. aid. Instead, Washington should assist Colombian efforts to prosecute those responsible for violations. Appropriate

resources should be made available to ensure the best human rights vetting and end-use monitoring possible. Furthermore, Washington should publicly disclose the security force units slated to receive U.S. aid (including units being considered) to ensure full public discussion.

Dismantle paramilitary groups

Washington should press for effective steps to dismantle paramilitary groups, such as suspending any active-duty officer charged by the Colombian Attorney General's office with paramilitary collaboration or human rights violations; executing the Attorney General's detention orders of paramilitary members; prosecuting in civilian courts any officers charged with paramilitary involvement or human rights violations; and fully implementing the often-announced but still not in force (since 1989) Bloque de Busqueda, designed to find and detain paramilitary members.

Reevaluate 'source country' antinarcotics strategy

As long as cocaine commands high prices on the world market and alternative economic opportunities and infrastructure are limited, peasants are going to grow coca and are going to participate in this lucrative trade. The U.S. government should work closely with the Colombian government and local authorities to ensure that alternative development programs and infrastructure investment reach and serve the local communities. Aerial spraying in Colombia needs to cease, pending a

public evaluation of the environmental, economic, and human impacts. In addition, Washington needs to open a broad, public, and rational discussion—devoid of finger pointing and political labeling—to evaluate the merits of other forms of dealing with the drug problem. This discussion should fully explore the public health dimensions of the drug problem.

Promote and support the rule of law

Even if the conflict in Colombia were to end overnight, human rights problems would not disappear. There is a real dimension of human rights problems that is not related to the war, such as so-called social cleansing killings that target (among others) street children. Resources should be made available to strengthen the Colombian judiciary and to protect its members from attack, both in its field investigations and in its day-to-day operations. Any intelligence personnel implicated in violations should be turned over to Colombian civilian authorities for prosecution.

Support civil society

Human rights defenders and other sectors of civil society striving to support the peace process, human rights, and the rule of law should be defended. U.S. assistance should support efforts by the Colombian state to implement agreements to protect civil society groups at risk of attack. Specifically, Washington should ask for periodic and public progress reports on the implementation of the Colombian government's commitment to investigate attacks against human rights defenders, to install security infrastructure for groups at risk, and to prosecute those implicated in such attacks.

Eliminate proposals contradictory to human rights

The fact that the Administration's proposal acknowledges that its "push into southern Colombia" will create more displaced populations is a clear sign that the Clinton proposal has a fatal flaw. All programs should be evaluated in light of their impact on the local population. Those proposals deemed harmful should be discarded. Clear, periodic, and public reporting requirements involving concrete details should be added, and more resources should be made available for end-use monitoring and human rights compliance. Clear conditions need to be added to ensure that the Colombian government adheres to its international human rights obligations. And no new counternarcotics battalion should be created until the first battalion's operations can be fully and publicly evaluated.

Carlos Salinas is Amnesty International USA's Advocacy Director for Latin America and the Caribbean. This paper goes well beyond Amnesty's mandate.

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Editors
Tom Barry (IRC)
Martha Honey (IPS)

Communications Directors
Tim McGivern (IRC)
Erik Leaver (IPS)

Project Administrator
Nancy Stockdale (IRC)

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506
Voice: (505) 842-8288
Fax: (505) 246-1601
Email: infocus@irc-online.org

Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor
Voice: (505) 388-0208
Fax: (505) 388-0619
Email: tom@irc-online.org

IPS Editor
Voice: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232
Fax: (202) 387-7915
Email: ipsps@igc.apc.org

Website: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/>

Sources for More Information

Organizations

Amnesty International USA
Colombian Coordinator
c/o AIUSA Washington Office
304 Pennsylvania Ave. SE
Washington, DC 20003-1130
Contact: Paul Paz y Miño
Voice: (510) 986-0885
Email: ppaz@igc.org
Website: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/colombia/>

Colombia Desk
Western Hemisphere Affairs Bureau
Department of State
2201 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20520
Voice: (202) 647-3338
Fax: (202) 647-2628

Colombia Human Rights Committee
Box 3130
Washington, DC 20010
Voice: (202) 232-8148
Fax: (202) 462-4724
Email: colhrc@igc.org

Colombia Program
International Narcotics and Law Enforcement
Affairs Bureau
Department of State
2201 C St. NW, Room 7334
Washington, DC 20520
Voice: (202) 647-8727
Fax: (202) 647-8269
Website: http://www.state.gov/www/global/narcotics_law/fs_colombia.html

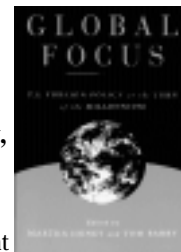
Human Rights Watch
1630 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20009
Voice: (202) 612-4321
Fax: (202) 612-4333
Email: hrwdc@hrw.org
Website: <http://www.hrw.org/>

US/Colombia Coordinating Office
1630 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Suite 200
Washington, DC 20009
Voice: (202) 232-8090
Fax: (202) 232-8092
Email: agiffen@igc.org
Website: <http://www.igc.org/colhrcnet/>

Washington Office on Latin America
1630 Connecticut Ave. NW, 2nd Floor
Washington, DC 20009
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