



## Militarization of the U.S. Drug Control Program

By Gina Amatangelo, Washington Office on Latin America

At a time when fledgling civilian governments in Latin America are struggling to keep security forces in check, the U.S. has enlisted the region's militaries as its pivotal partners in international drug control. This militarization, which begins at the U.S.-Mexico border, is undermining recent trends toward greater democratization and respect for human rights while doing little to stanch the flow of drugs into the United States.

Washington's militarization of its antidrug efforts is the product of a U.S. drug control strategy that has historically emphasized reducing the supply of illegal narcotics rather than addressing the U.S. demand for drugs. In 1971, three years after the first declared "war on drugs," President Richard Nixon took a crucial step toward militarization by proclaiming drug trafficking a national security threat. "Protecting the national security" has remained the rallying cry for providing more money and

firepower to wage the war on drugs. Since the 1970s, U.S. spending on the drug war has risen from less than \$1 billion to more than \$19.2 billion annually. According to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, between 1994 and 2001, spending on international efforts increased by 175% and spending on interdiction programs increased by 68%.

In the early 1980s, President Ronald Reagan raised the curtain on a rapid expansion of U.S. antidrug efforts that con-

tinues unabated today. Reagan justified the expansion, in part, by developing the narcoguerrilla theory, which bolstered the national security rationale by positing ties between Cuba, the Colombian drug cartels and leftist guerrillas, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Though this charge was largely fictitious in the 1980s, in Colombia today the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the armed forces are all involved with the drug cartels and are using drug money to help finance their wars.

The National Defense Authorization Act of 1989 designated the Pentagon as the "single lead agency" for the detection and monitoring of illicit drug shipments into the United States. Soon thereafter President George Bush announced his Andean Initiative, a \$2.2-billion, five-year plan to stop the cocaine trade at its source. Although U.S. military personnel had been involved in training, equipping, and transporting foreign antinar-

cotics personnel since the early 1980s, the Andean strategy opened the door to a dramatic expansion of this role and to a significant infusion of U.S. assistance to police and military forces in the region.

The Andean Initiative placed the spotlight on Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Yet the vast majority of the Pentagon's international drug spending still went into its detection and monitoring operation in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico transit zones, the cost of which, according to a September 1993 General Accounting Office report, eventually swelled "out of proportion to the benefits it provided."

In late 1993, President Clinton shifted the emphasis of military operations, at least in terms of strategy if not spending. The focus shifted from interdicting cocaine as it moved through the transit zones into the U.S. to dismantling the so-called "air bridge" that connects coca growers and coca paste manufacturers in Peru and Bolivia with Colombian refiners and distributors. As a result, drug traffickers quickly abandoned air routes in favor of the region's labyrinth of waterways. The Pentagon responded by supporting interdiction operations that targeted the waterways in both source countries and neighboring nations.

Coca cultivation in Colombia has risen sharply in response to recent declines in Peru and Bolivia, earning Colombia the dubious distinction of being the world's number one coca source. In 2000, the U.S. significantly escalated funding for militarized counternarcotics programs in the Andean region with a \$1.3 billion supplemental for Colombia and neighboring countries. Seventy-five percent of the funds allocated for Colombia went to security forces, and nearly 50% of the funds allocated for neighboring countries were directed toward military and police forces. The Bush administration has requested \$730 million in the FY 2002 budget to expand counterdrug, alternative development, and government reform programs in the Andean region.

Today, the vast majority of Washington's international antinarcotics spending goes to Latin America and the Caribbean, where thousands of U.S. troops are annually deployed in support of the drug war, operating ground-based radar, flying monitoring aircraft, providing operation and intelligence support, and training host-nation security forces. Despite this militarization and the massive funding for Washington's drug war, illegal drugs still flood the United States. In fact, illegal drugs are more readily available now, at a higher purity and lower cost, than they were when the drug war was launched.

### Key Points

- The U.S. has enlisted Latin America's militaries as its pivotal partners in international drug control.
- Protecting national security is used as the rationale behind the militarization of U.S. counternarcotics efforts—and is strengthened by campaigns labeling insurgents "narcoguerrillas."
- Militarization and increased funding for the war on drugs have failed to stem the flow of narcotics into the United States.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

---

Drug trafficking poses a serious threat to regional security and has a corrosive impact throughout the hemisphere, corrupting democratic institutions, skewing local economies, and increasing political violence. However, the U.S. should increase efforts to strengthen democratic institutions against such threats rather than fueling the flames of violence in the region by strengthening military power.

Washington's ambitious strategy to "attack narcotics trafficking in Colombia on all fronts" underscores the fundamental problem with the U.S. approach to international drug control. The plan is premised on the Pentagon forging closer ties to Colombia's military with the aim of building what Gen. Charles E. Wilhelm, commander of U.S. military forces in Latin America and the Caribbean, describes as "marriage for life."

U.S. policymakers apparently believe that local militaries are their most capable and reliable allies in the war on drugs. In several Latin American countries, the resources and training that Washington provides to local armed forces in order to support their new role in domestic drug control operations—often in circumvention of congressional restrictions and oversight—are eroding the efforts of civilian-elected governments to consolidate their power.

In most democracies, counternarcotics operations are a law enforcement function reserved for civilian police, but the U.S. government prefers to use foreign military forces. When Washington does recruit police, it provides them with heavy arms and combat training inappropriate for the domestic, civilian role that police should play, thereby continuing to fuel human rights abuses. During the 1970s, Congress halted police aid programs because of widespread human rights abuses by U.S.-trained police in Latin America. But in the 1980s these programs resumed in Central America and have since spread to many other countries.

The militarization of counternarcotics efforts in Latin America not only undermines efforts to promote human rights and democracy, it also threatens regional security. In Colombia, where the line between fighting drug trafficking and combating insurgents is blurred, Washington risks becoming mired in the hemisphere's longest-running guerrilla war. Citing the threat posed by Colombia's guerrillas, who earn much of their income by protecting coca and poppy fields and clandestine drug laboratories, the Pentagon expanded its operations in neighboring Andean nations. Colombia's neighbors have expressed concern about the spillover of refugees, violence, and drug production and trafficking that is occurring as a result of the maelstrom in southern Colombia.

Assistance to Latin American security forces stems from a tangled web of training and aid programs administered by a variety of government agencies. Despite efforts to increase the availability of information about the programs, it is still often difficult to ascertain the exact extent and nature of U.S. antidrug assistance and to determine whether Washington is complying with congressional oversight and human rights requirements.

The perils posed by the lack of adequate controls can be seen throughout the region. In 2000, after a heated congressional debate about the likelihood of the U.S. being

dragged into the Colombian counterinsurgency war, U.S. Black Hawk helicopters were used in combat to defend security forces from guerrillas in drug producing areas—despite tight congressional restrictions on the use of the equipment.

Even when programs are covered by restrictions, U.S. military personnel and administration officials are reluctant to enforce them. Units receiving U.S. training are supposed to be vetted to ensure that they include no one accused of human rights violations. But screening, when it occurs, is cursory. In 2000, President Clinton invoked a national security interest waiver in order to deliver aid to the Colombian military despite the fact that the Colombian government had failed to meet the majority of the human rights requirements stipulated by Congress, signaling that the U.S. is willing to turn a blind eye to abuse in the name of other objectives.

As a result of the lack of both oversight and restrictions regarding some aid programs and of ineffective implementation of regulations when they do exist, U.S. troops work side by side with accused human rights violators throughout the region. As Colombian sociologist Ricardo Vargas Meza, who has warned about the growing risk of "a dirty war" in his country, notes, "Washington lights one candle for God and another one for the devil."

Human rights violators are not the only devil Washington is collaborating with. Ironically, the U.S. decision to engage armed forces as its principal allies in the drug war has meant that the Pentagon is now providing counternarcotics assistance to militaries implicated in drug-related corruption, including those in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Mexico.

Even as the Department of Defense plans further expansion of its counternarcotics operations in Latin America, many within its ranks are reluctant recruits in these efforts and are vocal about their reticence. These critics, like their civilian counterparts, question the underlying rationale for the mission, its effectiveness, and its impact on the region's democratic institutions. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said in his confirmation hearing: "I am one who believes that the drug problem is probably overwhelmingly a demand problem...if demand persists, it's going to find ways to get what it wants, and if it isn't from Colombia, it will be from somewhere else." Department of Defense officials also question the strategies and tactics being used to carry out the mission, arguing that they undermine the desired result. The Pentagon, according to former drug policy coordinator Brian Sheridan, has been asked to address a "terrible social problem" with a "series of lousy policy options"—an untenable situation that has many military planners "looking for the exit doors on this issue."

---

## Key Problems

- Militarization of counternarcotics efforts in Latin America undermines recent trends toward democratization and greater respect for human rights while threatening regional security.
  - Resources and training provided to the region's armed forces to support their new role in domestic drug control operations often circumvent congressional oversight and human rights restrictions.
  - U.S. military personnel work side by side with armed forces, some of whom are implicated in human rights violations and drug trafficking.
-

# Toward a New Foreign Policy

The Bush administration should be developing a broad, clearly defined strategy for strengthening civilian governments and reducing the role of the armed forces in the region, but the opposite seems to be happening. The U.S. is interacting with nearly every military in the hemisphere, training more than 10,000 security personnel each year. A third of these training programs are financed through counternarcotics budgets.

## Key Recommendations

- The Bush administration must develop a broad, clearly defined strategy for strengthening civilian governments and reducing the role of the armed forces in Latin America.
- The U.S. should cease counternarcotics assistance to Latin American militaries and orient antidrug assistance for civilian police forces in order to strengthen their capacity to perform sound criminal investigations targeting drug traffickers.
- Though oversight of programs has improved in recent years, greater control needs to be exercised over the programs under which training, equipment, and financial assistance are provided to Latin American forces for antidrug operations.

Similarly, the U.S. Southern Command (Southcom), searching for a new *raison d'être*, was quick to fill the post-cold war policy void by enlisting Latin American militaries as part of its counternarcotics strategy. The U.S. has negotiated arrangements to upgrade and utilize existing airfields as "Forward Operating Locations" in Aruba, Curaçao, Ecuador, and El Salvador, which will be used for counternarcotics, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance flights. These bases are intended to replace Howard Air Force Base in Panama, which was closed in 1999 when the U.S. government's contract with the Panamanian government expired. In July 2000, Congress approved \$116.5 million for upgrades to the Forward

Operating Locations as part of the Colombia emergency aid package. The U.S. plans to use the bases for at least 10 years, allowing the Pentagon to establish stronger ties with local security forces. The bases have already generated controversy in some Latin American countries, most notably in Ecuador, where some sectors of the population consider the base to be a threat to national sovereignty that will drag Ecuador into Colombia's war.

Washington lawmakers are moving in the wrong direction. The U.S. must act to reduce (not merely redefine) the role of militaries within societies. Currently, Washington is providing the training, resources, and doctrinal rationale for armed forces to take on new tasks (building roads and schools, offering health services, protecting the environment, controlling drugs) rather than acting to limit their role to the defense of national borders. Given the problems and risks associated with the militarization of antinarcotics programs in Latin America, Washington should cease financial and political support for Latin American military involvement in drug control operations.

The U.S. should reevaluate its costly, militarized, supply-side drug control programs, which have failed to produce results for the past 15 years. Rather than counterbalancing by merely increasing funding for programs aimed at promoting democracy and human rights while pursuing a militarized strategy that puts democracy and regional security at risk, Washington should take its international drug control strategy back to the drawing board. The Bush administration has an opportunity to adopt a new approach to drug control and ensure that budget priorities reflect the administration's stated belief that the supply of drugs will continue as long as demand persists. The U.S. can still provide critical support to its Latin American neighbors in their efforts to curb the drug trade and the related violence that it causes. But rather than directing assistance to militaries throughout the region, assistance should be directed toward building the capacity of civilian institutions to investigate and prosecute crime, strengthening respect for human rights and the rule of law, and spurring economic development.

But in the current political atmosphere in Washington, where drug control policy is fueled by the fear of being labeled "soft" on drugs, it is unlikely that either the White House or Congress will act to reduce the counternarcotics roles played by U.S. and Latin American militaries, despite their ineffectiveness in combating drug trafficking. Though oversight of these programs has improved somewhat in recent years, at minimum Washington needs to exercise greater control over the programs under which it provides training, equipment, and financial assistance to Latin American forces for antidrug operations.

Since 1998, Congress has required the state and defense departments to annually compile a comprehensive foreign military training report listing all U.S. trainees worldwide. Human rights advocates have welcomed this effort as an important step toward congressional and public oversight of the training programs, but several problems should be addressed to increase the utility of these reports. The Latin America Working Group (LAWG) recommends the declassification of information about completed training exercises, clarification of course descriptions, and standardization of reporting across funding categories. LAWG also recommends that the Defense Department's Section 1004 authority, now one of the main sources for funding counternarcotics training programs for Latin American security forces, not be reauthorized. To increase transparency, these training programs should be funded through the State Department, which has more thorough reporting requirements.

*Gina Amatangelo <GAmatangelo@wola.org> is a Fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America, specializing in international drug control programs in the Andes region.*

*Foreign Policy in Focus* is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from foundations and churches. *In Focus* internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments. ISSN 1524-1939

**Editors**  
Tom Barry (IRC)  
Martha Honey (IPS)  
**Media Officer**  
Alec Dubro (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.org

**Website:** <http://www.fpif.org/>

# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

### Acción Andina

Bolivia  
Voice/Fax: 011-591-4-44-67-05  
Email: andina@albatros.cnb.net

### The Andean Information Network

Bolivia  
Voice/Fax: 011 (591) 422-4384  
Email: paz@albatros.cnb.net  
Website: <http://www.scbbs-bo.com/ain/>

### Center for International Policy

1755 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Ste. 312  
Washington, DC 20036  
Voice: (202) 232-3317  
Fax: (202) 232-3440  
Email: cip@ciponline.org  
Website: <http://www.ciponline.org/>  
Just the Facts website: <http://ciponline.org/facts/>

### Federation of American Scientists

Arms Sales Monitoring Project  
307 Massachusetts Ave. NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
Voice: (202) 675-1018  
Fax: (202) 675-1010  
Email: fas@fas.org  
Website: <http://www.fas.org/asmp/>

### Latin America Working Group

110 Maryland Ave. NE, Box 15, Ste. 203  
Washington, DC 20002  
Voice: (202) 546-7010  
Fax: (202) 543-7647  
Email: lawg@lawg.org  
Website: <http://www.lawg.org/>

### Transnational Institute

The Netherlands  
Voice: (3120) 662-6608  
Fax: (3120) 675-7176  
Email: tni@tni.org  
Website: <http://www.tni.org/>

### Washington Office on Latin America

1630 Connecticut Ave. NW, Second Floor  
Washington, DC 20009  
Voice (202) 797-2171  
Fax: (202) 797-2172  
Email: wola@wola.org  
Website: <http://www.wola.org/>

## Publications

*Colombia Human Rights Certification II*  
(Washington: Amnesty International USA,  
Washington Office on Latin America, Human  
Rights Watch, January 2001).

Martin Jelsma and Theo Rocken, eds.,  
*Democracias Bajo Fuego: Drogas y Poder en  
América Latina* (Montevideo, Uruguay: Ediciones  
de Brecha, 1998).

Joy Olson and Adam Isacson, *Just the Facts 2000-2001: A Civilian's Guide to Defense and Security Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington: Latin America Working Group, January 2001).

Peter Zirnite, *Reluctant Recruits: The U.S. Military and the War on Drugs* (Washington: Washington Office on Latin America, August 1997).

## Websites

### Drug Enforcement Administration

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

### Lindesmith Center—Drug Policy Foundation

<http://www.lindesmith.org/>

### Office of National Drug Control Policy

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

### U.S. Southern Command

<http://www.southcom.mil/home/>

## Subscribe:

Subscribe for a year for \$60 (50 issues). Individual copies of *In Focus* are \$2.50, postpaid; bulk orders of *In Focus* are \$12.00 for 10 copies of the same issue, postpaid; orders for delivery outside the U.S. are double the listed prices. (Subscriptions do not include back issues. Contact the IRC for a list of available back issues.) Make checks payable to the Interhemispheric Resource Center. We also accept VISA and MasterCard.

To subscribe to *Foreign Policy In Focus*,  
or to order back issues, contact the IRC:

PO Box 4506 ♦ Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506  
Phone: (505) 842-8288 ♦ Fax: (505) 246-1601  
Email: [irc@irc-online.org](mailto:irc@irc-online.org) ♦ Website: <http://www.fpif.org/>  
Secure, online order form:  
<https://secure.webb burner.net/fpif/briefs/subscribe.html>

Name

Email Address

Street Address

City, State, Zip Code

VISA/MasterCard Number

Expiration Date

Signature

## Special Focus:

## Colombia & Drugs

### Briefs:

- Militarization of the U.S. Drug Control Program, by Gina Amatangelo (May 2001)
- U.S. Drug Policy: Failure at Home, by Eric Sterling (May 2001)
- "Free Trade" and Medicines in the Americas, by Robert Weissman (April 2001)
- Free Trade Area of the Americas, by Karen Hansen-Kuhn (April 2001)
- Coca Eradication, by Phillip Coffin (March 2001)
- Drug Certification, by Bill Spencer with Gina Amatangelo (March 2001)
- Ugly American Problem in Colombia, by Frida Berrigan (Feb. 2001)
- Rules of the Game, by Winifred Tate (Feb. 2001)
- Bush's Foreign Policy in Latin America: Colombia and U.S. Drug Policy, by Coletta Youngers (Jan. 2001)
- Bolivia: Eradicating Democracy, by George Ann Potter and Linda Farthing (Oct. 2000)
- Into the Quagmire: Colombia and the War on Drugs, by Coletta Youngers (May 2000)
- Colombia in Crisis, by Carlos Salinas (March 2000)
- Colombia's Role in International Drug Industry, by Winifred Tate (Nov. 1999)
- Colombia, by Carlos Salinas (Nov. 1997)

### Citizen Agendas:

- Drug Policy Reform (March 2001)
- Halting U.S. Military Involvement in Colombia (March 2001)

Visit <http://www.fpif.org/colombia/> for more information.