



Colombia in Crisis

By Andrew Miller

Colombia, an oil exporter and leading producer of coffee, is rich in natural and cultural resources. Unfortunately, it is also a country plagued by violence, is the world leader in the production of cocaine entering the U.S., and is a major source of heroin. Although violence is often blamed on Colombia's large-scale drug trade dating from the mid-1970s, politically motivated killings and peasant massacres significantly predate the drug era. The violence has historic roots in the concentration of resources in the hands of Colombia's powerful political and economic elite, desperate conditions among the poor, 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 the last period of inter-party conflict known as *La Violencia* (from 1948 to 1953) some 145,000 people were killed. For years following, the two parties collaborated in a power sharing arrangement that excluded other political views. The hegemony enjoyed by these two parties exacerbated Colombia's inequitable distribution of wealth.

With the current economic crisis—including a nearly 20% rate of unemployment—drug trafficking and political struggle are attractive options. Today, a fierce counterinsurgency war 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). The FARC and ELN control significant portions of the countryside. They remain wary of any negotiated peace process that would disarm the guerrillas without also disarming the paramilitaries, reining in the armed forces, and creating conditions for rule of law and economic, social, and political transformation. In the mid-1980s, after former FARC militants and other left-wing groups joined the Patriotic Union political party, more than 2,500 of their members, candidates, and elected officials were systematically assassinated.

The Colombian military's drive to reduce the guerrillas' support in the countryside has included indiscriminate killings and massacres of civilians. In the last ten years, more than 35,000 noncombatants have been murdered

or "disappeared," overwhelmingly by the security forces and their paramilitary allies. Increasingly, these missions have been outsourced to paramilitary groups that operate in heavily militarized areas and coordinate their operations with the army. The proportion of abuses directly attributable to the armed forces has declined in recent years, while abuses by their paramilitary allies have escalated dramatically.

These abuses have resulted in massive internal displacement and refugee flows into Panama, Venezuela, and Ecuador. Guerrilla forces—which carry out mass abductions, forced recruitment of minors, indiscriminate attacks, selective killings, and massacres—have also contributed to internal displacement. More than 1.5 million people have fled their lands over the past 15 years, with an estimated 300,000 displaced in 2000 alone. Since 1996, another one million, mainly wealthy and educated Colombians, have gone into exile—nearly half to the United States. In addition to peasants and others living in areas of guerrilla activity, victims include perceived or actual government opponents: lawyers, judges, peasant activists, trade unionists, teachers, and students. Human rights defenders are under fire, with at least 30 being killed or "disappeared" in the last four years. For their part, the guerrillas target those suspected of collaborating with the armed forces or the paramilitaries, and they fund their insurgency in part by taking hostages for ransom. Guerrilla and paramilitary groups seized about 1,500 hostages in 2000. 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. These drug traffickers have historically 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. 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. Similar efforts are under way with the ELN but have been met with strong resistance. 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 proceeded in 2000, the Clinton administration and U.S. Congress responded with an aid package heavily weighted toward security assistance—a focus that has continued into the Bush administration.

Key Points

- Violence and warfare in Colombia are often blamed on the drug trade, but their roots run much deeper and go back well over five decades.
- The overwhelming majority of victims are noncombatant civilians. In the last 10 years, more than 35,000 unarmed civilians have been murdered or "disappeared."
- Despite rich natural resources, Colombia's wealth is unevenly distributed, with large sectors of the population in deep misery.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

According to the State Department, “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. While Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has expressed misgivings about using the military to fight drugs, arguing that illicit drug use is “overwhelmingly a demand problem,” the Bush administration has asked for additional military appropriations for counternarcotics operations under the rubric of Plan Colombia.

The current counterdrug program continues the history of U.S. support for Colombia’s security forces. Since at least the 1960s, Washington has provided assistance for Colombia’s anti-guerrilla operations, first in the name of fighting communism and later to fight drugs. Colombian armed forces have received U.S. training at the Army School of the Americas and the Special Warfare Center, as well as in-country training by U.S. military advisers and Special Operations Forces. (see FPIF, Military Training for Latin America). In addition, the U.S. has supplied Colombia’s security forces with arms, munitions, helicopters, and other equipment.

Since 1989, when the cold war ended and then-President George Bush declared drug trafficking to be a national security threat, Colombia has been the number one recipient of U.S. military aid in the Americas. In 1994 and 1995, Congress began to direct the bulk of U.S. aid to the Colombian National Police’s Directorate of Anti-Narcotics Operations (DANTI), in part due to the Colombian military’s abysmal human rights record. Although there have been no documented reports of recent human rights abuses by DANTI operatives, the human rights community has cautioned that it is too early to give DANTI a clean bill of health.

A marked deterioration of Colombia’s armed conflict has gone hand in hand with increased U.S. military aid. In 1996, Congress passed the Leahy Law prohibiting many forms of U.S. aid from going to security force units (both military and police) implicated in human rights violations. This law passed after government documents obtained by human rights groups proved that the U.S. had given aid to Colombian army units implicated in rights violations. Although the Leahy Law blocked some aid, ironically it was also used in 1998 to justify the release of military aid frozen since 1994 because the administration concluded that there were no credible reports linking recipient Colombian army units to violations.

To help address congressional and public concerns that U.S. aid is supporting counterinsurgency operations, the Colombian military created a special counternarcotics brigade which is being trained by U.S. special forces. The brigade will eventually consist of three battalions, each with 600 to 950 soldiers.

Despite such attempts to erect a firewall between antidrug and anti-guerrilla operations, some officials in Washington and Colombia have, since the 1980s, promoted the concept of the narcoguerrilla. While it is increasingly true in recent years some FARC and ELN forces have profited from drug trafficking, the simplistic narcoguerrilla notion

obscures the separate identities and goals of drug traffickers and guerrillas—as well as the reality that parts of Colombia’s armed forces, paramilitaries, and political elite are also tied to the drug cartels.

Drug traffickers and guerrillas often operate in the same regions and have some converging interests. Many guerrilla units tax and help protect drug cultivation, just as they do other businesses in areas under their control. Drug traffickers are equal-opportunity corrupters: they try to work with anyone who will to advance their interests. Some paramilitary leaders, including the Castaño brothers, have also been identified as narcotraffickers. Amnesty International USA filed suit against the CIA in mid-2000 in an effort to obtain information about suspected ties between the U.S. government and the Castaño family, which has been involved in paramilitary violence and narcotics trafficking. Former President Samper allegedly received \$6 million from narcotraffickers for his presidential campaign. In January 2000, the wife of Colonel Hiett, the U.S. military group commander in Bogotá, pleaded guilty to heroin trafficking.

Officials in Washington describe increased U.S. support for Plan Colombia as embracing the peace process and the development option while pursuing the counternarcotics imperative. However, U.S. assistance is overwhelmingly military, and is likely to undermine peace efforts by reassuring hard-line elements in Colombia that they can defeat the guerrillas. In July 2000, President Clinton signed a \$1.3 billion emergency counterdrug package, earmarking roughly \$860 million in aid for Colombia. This special package, together with already appropriated funds, meant the Clinton administration authorized an extraordinary \$1.2 billion in counternarcotics aid to Colombia during 2000 and 2001. Roughly 80% of this aid was designated for military equipment and training.

In April 2001, the Bush administration proposed an additional \$800 million in counternarcotics assistance for the Andean region. This request includes \$399 million for Colombia through the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) program, of which \$252.5 million is proposed for interdiction and \$146.5 million for alternative development and institution building. This does not include additional funding from the Pentagon and other agencies. In the past several years, the Pentagon has supplied roughly \$150 million annually in direct military aid to Colombia, above and beyond the INL monies.

Meanwhile, the human rights situation continues to deteriorate, with some Colombian analysts describing the situation as genocide. In January 2001 alone, 27 massacres were carried out by army-backed paramilitaries, resulting in several hundred deaths. At this rate, 2001 will be the bloodiest year for Colombia in recent history.

Key Problems

- U.S. policy presses for control of human rights abuses, yet it bolsters a military implicated in violations.
 - U.S. military aid is officially for counternarcotics operations but in practice it is used for counterinsurgency operations.
 - The narcoguerrilla thesis was devised as an argument to support 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

In April 2001, over 100 Latin Americans—former heads of state, cabinet ministers, legislators, prominent authors, intellectuals, and civic leaders—called on President Bush to go back to the drawing board with his military-oriented support for Plan Colombia. In a letter, they charged that the U.S.-backed antidrug campaign is

fueling a bloody war, poisoning food crops and the environment, and forcing tens of thousands of poor farmers off their land. President Bush would do well to heed their advice, incorporating the following principles.

Key Recommendations

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

Support the peace process

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

Washington should increase political support for the process and ensure that adequate financial resources are available.

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. 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.

Vigorously pressure for concrete action against 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 undeployed (since 1989) Bloque de Búsqueda, designed to find and detain paramilitary members.

Promote and support the rule of law

Even if the conflict in Colombia were to end overnight, human rights problems would not disappear. Human rights abuses are not all linked to the war. The so-called

social cleansing killings, for instance, are targeting street children, among others. Resources should be made available to strengthen the Colombian judiciary and to protect its members from attack. Any intelligence personnel implicated in violations should be turned over to Colombian civilian authorities for prosecution.

Support civil society

Human rights advocates and other sectors of civil society striving to support the peace process, human rights, and the rule of law need to be defended. U.S. assistance should support Colombian government efforts 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 advocates, to install security infrastructure for groups at risk, and to prosecute those implicated in such attacks.

Eliminate proposals contradictory to human rights

Washington's acknowledgement that its support for Plan Colombia with its "push into southern Colombia" will create more displaced populations is a clear sign that the U.S. aid package 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, detailed, and public reporting requirements should be added, and more resources made available for end-use monitoring and human rights compliance.

Reevaluate counternarcotics strategies for Colombia and other source countries

As long as cocaine commands high prices on the world market and factors like undeveloped infrastructure limit alternative economic opportunities, peasants are going to grow coca and are going to participate in the lucrative drug 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 and a public evaluation commence as to its 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 expanding demand-side programs, including public education and treatment in the United States.

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