

Failing Grades: Evaluating the Results of Plan Colombia

BY ADAM ISACSON

On July 13, 2000, President Bill Clinton signed into law an emergency bill giving Colombia \$860 million “to seek peace, fight drugs, build the economy, and deepen democracy.”¹ The U.S. and Colombian governments sold the aid package as the U.S. contribution to Plan Colombia, a six-year, \$7.5 billion plan for “peace, prosperity and the strengthening of the state” in the conflict-ridden South American nation. Plan Colombia was supposed to employ \$4 billion in Colombian resources, with the remaining \$3.5 billion coming from foreign donors. The Bogotá government indicated that it expected 75 percent of that amount to go to non-military purposes. The U.S. contribution, however, was the inverse: 75 percent of the July 2000 appropriation went to Colombia’s military and police.² Proponents of the plan predicted it would reduce the flow of cocaine and heroin from Colombia to the United States, increase Colombia’s security by bringing a government presence to historically neglected zones, improve an appalling human rights situation, speed the pace of peace negotiations with rebel groups, and revive Colombia’s economy. Proponents also claimed that Plan Colombia would do all of this with a limited military commitment from a U.S. government bent on avoiding mission creep.

With these goals in mind, the United States has given Colombia nearly \$4 billion in aid over six years, amounting to about \$1.82 million per

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day, vastly more than all other donor contributions.³ About 80 percent of that aid (\$3.2 billion) has gone to Colombia's military or police with the remainder dispersed among smaller non-military programs. This aid package has not helped Colombia meet its goals. Cocaine and heroin are as cheap and pure as ever on U.S. streets, while initial drops in Colombian coca growing have leveled off. Improvements in security—largely resulting from the Colombian govern-

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ment's own efforts—do not extend to rural zones, and the areas most heavily targeted by U.S. military aid remain insecure. Efforts to retake territory have been solely military in nature, with barely a trickle of civilian government presence or assistance. And while human rights conditions have improved slightly, notorious human rights violators still operate with impunity. Instead of providing momentum to peace talks with guerrillas, Plan Colombia has been a factor in their demise. Meanwhile, the role and presence of U.S. military personnel and contractors is much greater than envisioned in 2000.

U.S. Aid to Colombia Since 2000

Various reasons explain the overwhelmingly military makeup of U.S. assistance to Colombia. There are certainly economic interests. Colombia has oil, coal, and other minerals, and U.S. corporations that provide defense services benefit from any large new commitment. There are strategic interests. Colombia is Latin America's third most populous country, with coastlines on two oceans and proximity to the Panama Canal and key trade routes. Colombia also has an ardently pro-U.S. president, Álvaro Uribe, whom some in the Bush administration view as an important counterbalance to the wave of populist leaders recently elected across Latin America. Most notable among these is President Hugo Chávez in neighboring Venezuela, whose relations with the United States are severely strained. Domestic politics is another critical factor. While some of the policy's strongest proponents in the U.S. undoubtedly care passionately about the human cost of drug use among Americans, they continue to choose the strategy that looks toughest, despite abundant evidence that other approaches—such as drug treatment and education—offer better results. The fear of appearing soft on drugs is often enough to guarantee a majority vote in Congress for a militarized policy.

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Counter narcotics has been the primary stated purpose of U.S. aid, and until 2002, it was the only official purpose. Some programs have succeeded in interdicting cocaine and heroin headed for U.S. shores, including a program to help Colombia's marines control river traffic in the country's vast roadless areas, and an aerial interdiction program through which the United States reports airplanes suspected of carrying drugs to the Colombian Air Force. The main thrust of anti-drug efforts, however, has been eradication of drug crops by spraying herbicides from aircraft. Between 2000 and 2004, the United States sprayed more than 2,000 square miles of Colombian territory, with most of the spraying on land occupied by poor peasants. One of Plan Colombia's main objectives in 2000 was to expand spraying to areas considered too dangerous for the police-contractor fumigation model, particularly the regions of Putumayo and Caquetá in Colombia's far south. In order to guarantee the security of expanded spraying, the United States funded the creation of a 2,300-person counter-narcotics brigade in Colombia's army, equipped with numerous advanced helicopters. The brigade, which began operations in 1999, was charged with clearing armed groups from areas to be sprayed. This marked the first time since the Cold War that the United States has funded military operations against Colombian guerrillas.

The Clinton administration worried about the growing strength of the guerrillas during the 1990s, but it was reluctant to go beyond the counter-narcotics mission in Colombia. "[U.S. government] assistance for fighting the guerrillas...raises too many human rights concerns and has been a searing experience for us in Central America," explained U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette in a 1997 cable.⁴ In late 2000 President Clinton's drug czar, General Barry McCaffrey, declared that, as a matter of policy, the United States would not support counterinsurgency efforts in Colombia.⁵ But with the inauguration of President George W. Bush in 2001, this policy began to change. Bush's advisors on Latin America included some of the principal architects of the Reagan administration's Central America policy, who were less wary of intervening in Latin American politics.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, placed terrorism at the heart of the U.S. security agenda and ushered in a major policy shift with regard to Colombia. By mid-2002 Congress had changed the law governing aid to Colombia, allowing all previous aid given for the drug war to be used in a "unified campaign" against Colombia's guerrillas

and paramilitaries, all of whom were already on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations. In 2002 Congress approved the first non-drug military assistance to Colombia, a \$100 million program to help Colombia's military protect an oil pipeline from guerrilla attacks. About 44 percent of the oil in the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline was owned by Occidental Petroleum, a Los Angeles-based company that for years had lobbied for more security assistance to Colombia.⁶ The pipeline runs through the conflict-ridden province of Arauca along the Venezuelan border, a longtime guerrilla-held zone that has seen a sharp increase in paramilitary activity since 2001. Human rights groups in Arauca charge that the U.S.-aided military units there have facilitated the operations of right-wing paramilitaries.⁷

The U.S. role in Colombia's conflict expanded again in early 2004 with the launch of Plan Patriota, an ambitious Colombian military offensive that continues today in a broad swath of the country's southern jungles and savannahs, a zone that had long been under the control of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Since the Colombian forces have little experience with such operations, U.S. military personnel and contractors are playing a key behind-the-lines role supporting Plan Patriota. Planning Assistance Teams are performing logistical tasks such as maintaining vehicles and keeping supply lines intact. Intelligence gatherers and analysts are using aerial and satellite imagery and signal intercepts. Advisors are helping Colombian commanders in their drive to retake territory.

When Plan Colombia was approved in 2000, Congress placed legal caps on the numbers of military personnel and civilian contractors who could be in Colombia at any given time. Four years later the military cap has been raised from 400 to 800, and the contractor cap has been raised from 400 to 600. Congress has also sought to limit the negative impact of U.S. assistance by imposing some conditions on its annual aid outlays. Twenty-five percent of each year's military aid is held up until the State Department certifies that Colombia's security forces are meeting several human rights criteria. Funding for new herbicides is frozen until the State Department certifies that the spraying is not causing health or environmental damage, owners of farms that are wrongly sprayed are being compensated, and alternative development opportunities exist in fumigation zones. These restrictions have proven weak tools in preventing major human rights violations and environmental degradation. However, the human rights conditions have at least proven to be a useful tool for pressur-

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ing the Colombian authorities into prosecuting high-profile abuses in a few benchmark cases.

Success or Failure?

"I believe we are at a tipping point in Colombia," Bobby Charles, until recently the assistant secretary of state for counter narcotics, told a congressional committee in November 2004. "Seizures and eradications are at record levels. Kidnappings, massacres, and murders are down significantly. People are now talking about peace as something that could really happen sooner rather than later. All of these success stories make a powerful case for more assistance to Colombia."⁸ The commander of the U.S. Southern command, General Batz Craddock, added, "The Colombian government continues to make tremendous progress in the battle against terrorism and the

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restoration of security for the strengthening of its democratic institutions. Fundamental to this policy has been the military component of the Colombian government's Plan Colombia—Plan Patriota."⁹ But U.S. officials' exuberant

assertions of success should be viewed with the same skepticism as celebrations of students who are allowed to grade their own exams. The grim reality is that, five years after its inception, Plan Colombia has fallen far short of its goals and may be dragging the United States into a military commitment that it can ill afford.

Plan Colombia expanded a U.S. counter-narcotics policy that was based on the belief that attacking the plants from which drugs are made is the best way to keep them off the streets. "Cocaine trafficking is a criminal industry that must be made unprofitable and broken by attacking its vulnerabilities," drug czar John Walters said in 2003. "Destroying this illegal product at its source is a highly effective way of breaking the drug market."¹⁰ Though coca-growing peasants are by far the poorest link in the drug production chain (the UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that growers net about \$199 per month for each hectare of coca, with landholdings averaging about 1.24 hectares), U.S. officials insist on fumigating them because coca plants are much easier to find than small amounts of drugs smuggled in planes, boats, or cargo containers.¹¹

The fumigation strategy, however, has utterly failed to affect the price, purity, or availability of Colombian cocaine and heroin on U.S. streets. The economics is simple: if drugs are scarcer, prices should rise. But that has not happened. In 1998 the U.S. government estimated that a gram of cocaine was selling on U.S. streets for an average of \$132.09, the lowest price recorded since such estimates began in 1981. By 2003, three years into Plan Colombia, the price had fallen to \$106.54 per gram.¹² U.S. officials charged with interdicting drugs say that they have seen no change in the amount of cocaine leaving Colombia.¹³ Why the street price dropped, instead of remaining steady, is unclear. Some hypothesize that the end of peace talks with the FARC in 2002, which brought greatly increased military activity to the southern Colombian coca-growing zones, may have prompted a sell-off. If that thesis is correct, the street price of cocaine should climb back to 1999-2000 levels in a year or two, which would bring the situation back to where it was when Plan Colombia began.

This lack of results persists despite U.S. satellite data showing a 16-percent drop in coca cultivation in Colombia between 2000 and 2003.¹⁴ However, this reduction halted in 2004 when, despite a record level of herbicide fumigation, the U.S. government found no change in coca growing. For two years in a row, coca growing has held steady at 114,000 hectares, which is 8,000 hectares less than in 1999, the year before Plan Colombia began.¹⁵ The cocaine trade is proving resilient in several ways. Decreases in Colombian coca cultivation are easily offset by increases in the other two principal coca-producing countries: Peru and Bolivia. Combining all three countries, the Andean region's total coca cultivation area decreased by only 6 percent from 2000 to 2003.¹⁶ This balloon effect—squeezing one part of a balloon, only to see it bulge out elsewhere—is also evident within Colombia, where the zones of greatest coca density tend to migrate in response to fumigation. The province of Guaviare in south-central Colombia was the epicenter of coca cultivation when massive spraying began in 1996. Spraying brought a sharp reduction in Guaviare coca for a time, and the bulk of spraying moved elsewhere. By 2002, however, Guaviare once again led all Colombian provinces in coca hectareage.¹⁷

Far from being deterred by spraying, coca growers are planting and replanting more than ever. Official estimates show that between 2000 and 2003, the total number of hectares planted with coca—adding eradicated coca plus coca left over after eradication—increased by 34 percent in Colombia and 33 percent in the Andean region to a stag-

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gering 328,000 hectares.¹⁸ Coca growers are also altering their methods. Plot sizes shrank by about 40 percent between 2000 and 2003 in an effort to avoid detection by satellites and fumigation planes.¹⁹ Plants are being sown closer together and even in the shade. Growers are turning to new varieties of coca whose leaves can be harvested quickly, yield more cocaine, and are thought to be more resistant to herbicide spraying.

Government fumigation has little permanent effect because coca growers have few options besides growing coca. Places like Guaviare, Putumayo, and Caquetá suffer from a severe lack of roads, land titles, courts, banks, and security. The cost of bringing fertilizers, pesticides,

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and seeds to these isolated zones exceeds most legal products' market price. Alternative development programs reach only a small fraction of rural families. The only profitable product is unrefined coca

paste, which is easily made from coca leaves, easily transported in roadless zones, and fetches a decent market price. When fumigation planes eradicate this one economic option and leave nothing in its place except a proliferation of health complaints from contact with the herbicide, rural Colombians become even less trustful of their government. This makes it even harder to win their support for any effort to retake territory from armed illegal groups.

Growing U.S. Involvement in the Conflict

The U.S. participation in Plan Patriota and the doubling of the troop cap are only the latest installments in a long story of steadily increasing U.S. involvement in Colombia's conflict. In the late 1990s, a police-aid mission limited to narcotics developed into a military-aid mission, and in 2002, the mission expanded to include counterterrorism, which, given the nature of Colombia's conflict, essentially qualifies as counterinsurgency.

If the policy's lack of progress against drugs continues and if security in Colombia further deteriorates, pressure for increased U.S. involvement will mount. It is difficult to imagine a radical loosening of current regulations restricting U.S. personnel from being present in situations where combat is likely. Instead, Colombia risks becoming

a much larger, more complex version of the Reagan administration's adventure in El Salvador: a long, costly war of attrition by proxy.

There is a potential brake on U.S. mission creep today that did not exist in 2000, however. The war in Iraq is draining enormous amounts of defense resources from second-tier theaters like Colombia. While aid has held steady, war-on-terror priorities have caused Colombia to drop from being the world's number-three recipient of military assistance in 2003 (behind Israel and Egypt) to number seven in 2005 (behind Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Egypt, Pakistan, and Jordan).

In fact, U.S. defense planners are finding it more difficult to portray Colombia—or Latin America in general—as an important theater for the global war on terror. In March 2005 General Craddock, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, told Congress, “At this time, we have not detected Islamic terrorist cells in the SOUTHCOM [area of operations] that are preparing to conduct attacks against the United States,” though he noted that some radical Islamic fundraising activities do go on in some parts of the hemisphere. Though the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) are on the State Department's terrorist list, they have shown no inclination to attack U.S. targets outside of Colombia. With the region hardly registering on U.S. anti-terror planners' radar screens, resources that may have gone to increased military aid for Colombia are instead going to the Middle East.

Washington's attention to Latin America is also being grabbed by Venezuela, Colombia's eastern neighbor. The Bush administration decided in late 2004 to take a more aggressive approach with respect to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, seeking to contain his radical populist influence in the region.²⁰ In January 2005, when the Colombian government admitted it had funded the kidnapping of a FARC operative who had been living in Caracas, the U.S. government sided with Colombia despite the fact that the capture was technically illegal under international law. U.S. Ambassador to Colombia William Wood demanded that President Chávez show “clarity” regarding his relationship with the guerrillas, adding to a steady stream of rumors that the Venezuelan leader supports or tolerates the FARC. While the guerrillas certainly enjoy much freedom of movement on the Venezuelan side of the common border, this is also the case in Ecuador, Panama, Brazil, and Peru. While no hard evidence has emerged of Venezuelan government support for guerrillas, Venezuela's announced

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purchase of 100,000 AK-47 rifles from Russia has caused many observers to speculate that Colombia is the ultimate destination for these guns.

Even if these allegations are false, the net result is that U.S. security planners, who pay little attention to the Western Hemisphere, are at least as concerned today about Venezuela as Colombia. This may serve as another brake on increased military assistance to Colombia. A possible response to tight budgets and assets might be an even greater reliance on relatively low-cost U.S. contractors to carry out much of the training, intelligence, and other tasks that soldiers normally perform. The proliferation of contractors in Colombia is already a controversial issue because it raises questions of how these private individuals will be held accountable, and because of the risky nature of many of the missions that private contractors carry out. For example, the FARC has held three U.S. contractors hostage for more than two years.

Lack of Human Rights Results

At every opportunity, the Colombian government cites the significant reduction in several measures of violence during the Uribe administration. Since 2002 there have indeed been significant drops in kidnappings, deaths, and forced displacements. "This is the principal and greatest achievement in the promotion and defense of human rights and international humanitarian law that a government can hope to present," said Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos in March 2004.²¹

The Uribe government hails these statistical findings at every opportunity. Indeed, the picture is impressive. Comparing 2004 to the last twelve months before Uribe assumed office, kidnappings dropped by 57 percent, massacres dropped by 71 percent, murders dropped by 31 percent, and attacks on towns dropped by 69 percent.²² Some statistics are strongly disputed. The Colombian human rights group Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), which has monitored forced internal displacement for many years, found a 38-percent increase in displacement between 2003 and 2004, while the government's statistics indicated a decrease of 37 percent.²³ Other statistics simply do not make sense, such as the government's claim that it captured, killed, or demobilized 39,335 guerrillas and paramilitaries—more than most estimates of all groups' combined

strength—during the Uribe administration's first twenty-eight months in power.²⁴ Nonetheless, an overall improvement in the security situation has clearly taken place, at least in urban areas and along main roads, where nearly three-quarters of Colombians live. Moreover, those improvements are enough to increase such measures of public confidence as the country's stock market index, foreign investment flows, and President Uribe's approval rating.

While U.S. proponents of Plan Colombia hail the reduced violence as a direct result of U.S. policy, they would do well to recall four points. First, nearly all U.S. military and police aid has funded efforts that have little to do with protecting Colombian citizens from violence. U.S. priorities have focused instead on a drug eradication and interdiction program that has failed to reduce drug supplies and on a pipeline-protection program that has failed to substantially reduce pipeline bombings. Instead, much of the drop in violence can be attributed to two low-cost measures that President Uribe implemented shortly after taking office: redeploying troops and police in population centers and along main roads, and getting the paramilitaries to agree to a cease-fire as a precondition for negotiations. The first measure has greatly improved security where most Colombians live even if security conditions in remote areas have grown more difficult. The second measure has brought a dramatic reduction in paramilitary abuses. Even though the AUC routinely violates the cease-fire, current abuses represent a fraction of pre-2003 levels.

The drop in violence is not due to the sort of institutional changes that represent sustained human rights improvements. The judicial system is still unable to investigate and prosecute most cases of human rights abuse. Those who denounce abuses, whether whistleblowers within the system or human rights NGOs outside of it, do so at great risk to their security. Whistleblowers routinely sacrifice their careers, while human rights activists are publicly reviled as unpatriotic, obstructionist, or sympathetic to guerrillas. Impunity, which is perhaps the most severe problem in Colombia, is as widespread as ever and has worsened in the last five years. Since Plan Colombia's inception, Colombia's attorney general has demonstrated markedly less will to prosecute cases of human rights abuse by the military. The State Department's last human rights certification memo named only thirty-one military personnel—twenty-one enlisted men and ten officers, including just two above the rank of major—currently under indictment for human rights abuses or support of

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paramilitaries.²⁵ This impunity undercuts much of the well-publicized improvements that the Colombian armed forces have made to their human rights training. If a soldier knows he stands almost no chance of punishment for committing an abuse, will the mere knowledge that the crime is wrong consistently prevent him from committing it?

The problem of impunity goes beyond human rights. Government malfeasance is almost never prosecuted successfully if the defendant is wealthy, powerful, or notoriously ruthless. The inability to punish corruption or fraud creates significant drags on economic growth. Theft from public finances cripples infrastructure and social services and increases incentives to avoid taxation. Inability to enforce land

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titles or contracts hinders investment, forcing foreign investors either to spend resources on due diligence and monitoring or to avoid Colombia entirely. The likelihood that state officials, including the security forces, may seek

bribes erodes their authority and reduces their ability to enforce the law and resolve disputes. The World Bank conservatively estimates that corruption costs Colombia \$2.6 billion per year, about 3 percent of GDP.²⁶

Some human rights indicators are going in the wrong direction. According to a database maintained by several Colombian human rights groups, the share of abuses committed by the Colombian security forces rose to 7.8 percent in 2003, after dropping below 5 percent during the late 1990s.²⁷ Killings and disappearances of human rights activists increased to thirty-three during the first two years of Uribe's term, up from twenty-nine in the previous two years.²⁸ At least 340 people were tortured between July 2002 and June 2003, a significant increase over the 242 recorded during the previous twelve months.²⁹ As discussed above, forced displacement may have increased substantially in 2004. Other worsening human rights measures are the result of the Uribe government's hard-line security policies. The last three years have seen a huge jump in arbitrary arrests of civilians on charges of collaborating with guerrillas. The Colombian Commission of Jurists counted 4,362 cases of people rounded up between July 2002 and June 2003, 50 percent more than the previous six years combined (the vast majority have since been released for lack of evidence).³⁰

President Uribe has alleged publicly that much of Colombia's already-threatened human rights community is in league with or partial to guerrilla groups.

It is doubtful that the Uribe government will be able to reduce violence indicators any further. The main obstacle is money. The Colombian government does not have the resources to increase its reach much further. With a central government deficit, excluding profits from state-owned corporations, projected to reach 6.6 percent of GDP this year, the Colombian state is severely limited.³¹ In a country the size of Colombia, additional U.S. military aid would make little difference. The entire aid package to Colombia—both military and economic—adds up to only 0.8 percent of Colombia's GDP. To make matters worse, the security forces may find themselves increasingly challenged by guerrillas this year. Recently, the FARC announced a return to offensive operations in early 2005 and has begun launching attacks against vulnerable military targets in remote areas.

Lack of Results in Pursuit of Peace

When Plan Colombia began in 2000, the government of former Colombian President Andrés Pastrana was in the midst of difficult negotiations with both the FARC and the ELN. While neither peace process made significant gains, the talks with the FARC reached their high-water mark at the beginning of 2000. At that time, FARC leaders hinted that they might entertain the idea of a cease-fire. However, news that the United States was about to multiply its military assistance to Colombia destroyed a year of efforts to overcome mutual mistrust. Plan Colombia strengthened the hands of hardliners on both sides who were skeptical of the talks from the very beginning. Guerrilla leaders saw Plan Colombia, correctly or not, as evidence that the Colombian government had another agenda.³² They responded with a string of kidnappings of public officials that ultimately led to the breakdown of the talks. Colombian government hawks, meanwhile, saw the infusion of U.S. arms and training as a strong reason to refrain from making any further concessions. While the Colombian government's guiding Plan Colombia document, issued in late 1999, maintained that the new policy would strengthen the peace talks, the Pastrana government's dialogues with the FARC in fact came to a halt just nineteen months after the U.S. aid package was signed into law.

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Today, the possibility of renewed talks with guerrillas is remote. Instead, the Uribe government has entered into negotiations with right-wing paramilitary groups. This process, which has gone on for more than two years, holds some promise of removing some combatants

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from the conflict, and for that reason the Bush administration is leaning toward offering some financial support to the negotiations. However, many observers worry that the paramilitary talks might not result in the dismantlement of the

AUC, leaving behind a mafia-like structure that is tied to narcotraffickers and Colombia's extreme right. "Paramilitarism seeks to accumulate political power and economic wealth through the use of arms. This effort has not been demobilized at all," explained Senator Rafael Pardo, a former defense minister who has proposed legislation with much stricter dismantlement measures than the Uribe government favors.³³

Lack of Results in Conflict Zone Governance

The Colombian government's 1999 blueprint for Plan Colombia recognized that the state's weakness in much of the country has led to a lack of order and security, and an economy that is failing to incorporate a large part of the national population.³⁴ Since Plan Colombia's inception, there has been some effort to increase the state's presence in long-neglected zones where drug crops and armed groups thrive, but that effort has been solely military in nature.

While the Colombian government has managed to hold its non-military spending steady as a percentage of GDP during the past few years, this investment has almost entirely gone to urban areas and other zones already under solid government control. This investment has not funded the entry of judges, road-builders, doctors, teachers, or local government officials into rural areas. The result has been a frustrating pattern in which a military offensive clears out armed groups but the civilian government fails to establish itself. When the military withdraws—which is inevitable, since 360,000 troops and police cannot administer all of a territory more than twice the size of California—the illegal armed groups simply reenter the zone, filling the security vacuum and restoring the status quo. This disappointing

result illustrates the difference between occupying territory militarily and actually governing it. So far, the Plan Patriota offensive appears destined to repeat this pattern on a larger scale. After more than a year of military efforts to retake territory, accounts of conditions in the vast zone where the offensive is taking place still frequently note the lack of non-military government presence.³⁵

There appears to be some realization among Colombian policymakers that the civilian state's entry into reconquered zones must be more of a priority. The Uribe government's guiding Democratic Security document speaks of a "consolidation phase" to follow military operations in retaken territories, in which priorities will include "reestablishing the normal operation of the justice system, strengthening local democracy, meeting the most urgent needs of the population, broadening state services, and initiating medium- to long-term projects aimed at creating sustainable development."³⁶ This realization has yet to be reflected in significant non-military investment, though the Colombian government has recently created a new structure, the Coordination Center for Integrated Action (CCIA), to coordinate non-military agencies' entry into zones retaken from armed groups. Though promising, the CCIA has so far received only \$30 million in Colombian government funds, an amount that will barely make a dent in the needs of these zones' populations.³⁷

Policy Alternatives

A U.S. policy that seeks a lasting resolution of Colombia's crises of drugs, violence, and governance would look very different from Plan Colombia and Plan Patriota. It would aim to overcome the chronic weakness of the entire Colombian state and would make ending impunity a central priority, which is perhaps the chief obstacle both to security and economic development.

The United States is home to a community of non-governmental organizations that has monitored and critiqued U.S. policy toward Colombia for decades. This community lays out its vision of an alternative policy in a consensus document published in March 2005.³⁸ The *Blueprint for a New Colombia Policy* includes ten recommendations, five that carry no economic cost and five that could be funded by shifting resources from the military-aid budget.

The blueprint recommends cuts in military aid, ideally combined with

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an overall increase in resources for Colombia. This aid would finance increased support for institutions charged with fighting impunity, such as Colombia's beleaguered judicial system, oversight bodies, and independent human rights NGOs. Alternative development efforts must be expanded dramatically in neglected rural areas where drug crops and armed groups proliferate, but these programs must be part of a comprehensive rural development strategy and must be accompanied by an end to aerial spraying. Funds are desperately needed to support the arrival of non-military institutions in zones recently reconquered by military operations, and to support civil society-based

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peace and development programs that combine development projects with local conflict resolution. The millions of internally displaced persons in the country receive only a fraction of the humanitarian assistance

and state protection that they urgently need. At home, the U.S. government must dramatically expand the scope of drug treatment programs, which studies indicate are a far more effective tool to fight the war on drugs.

No-cost steps to address this problem include vigorously employing U.S. diplomatic leverage to support human rights and viewing conditions in existing law as a tool for institutional improvements instead of as an obstacle to the flow of military assistance. Similarly, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights's list of recommendations for Colombia's government offers an excellent framework to guide U.S. priorities in Colombia. The U.S. government should support a demobilization process with paramilitaries only if it includes provisions for the complete dismantlement of paramilitary structures, as well as a measure of justice, truth, and reparations for victims. With the same caveats, the United States should actively support any opportunity to renew negotiations with guerrillas in the near term rather than years from now when the conflict will have claimed thousands more lives. Finally, the U.S. government must encourage Colombia's elite to use more of their own resources to improve governance. This conflict is clearly Colombia's to win, and the bulk of resources must come from the wealthiest tier of Colombians.

Most of all, U.S. officials and Colombia's political elite must not be satisfied merely with reducing problems to "manageable" levels. Their

policies will not be successful if coca growing drops below 100,000 hectares, cocaine prices go back to \$130 per gram, the FARC shrinks to fewer than 10,000 members, the paramilitaries transition into Guatemala-style mafia-death squads, or the murder rate drops below 40 per 100,000 residents. Success will ultimately be defined not by the manageability of existing problems, but by the resolution of these problems through real improvements in civilian governance and demonstrable decreases in impunity. As long as these urgent needs go unaddressed, the United States will find itself condemned to escalate the same failed strategies. ■

NOTES

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