

DRUG TRAFFICKING, POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND U.S. POLICY IN COLOMBIA IN THE 1990s

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Introduction

This essay examines the impact of U.S. and Colombian government drug control policies on the evolution of drug cultivation, drug trafficking, and political violence in Colombia during the 1990s. Its central thesis is that the Washington/Bogota-backed war on drugs in Colombia over the decade did not merely fail to curb the growth of the Colombian drug trade and attendant corruption, but actually proved counterproductive. Among the most important unintended consequences were the explosion of drug cultivation and production activities, the dispersion and proliferation of organized crime, and the expansion and intensification of political violence and guerrilla warfare in the country. As a result, Colombia at the outset of 2000 faced more serious threats to its national security and political stability than it had in 1990. The essay concludes that the massive escalation of the flawed anti-drug strategies of the past decade proposed by the Clinton administration in January 2000 is more likely to worsen Colombia's ongoing problems of spiraling violence and insecurity than to resolve them.

Drug Cultivation and Production in Colombia

Despite the U.S. Government's provision of almost one billion dollars in counternarcotics aid to Colombia over the decade of the 1990s, by 1999 Colombia had become the premier coca-cultivating country in the world, producing more coca leaf than both Peru and Bolivia combined.¹ Between 1989 and 1998, Colombian coca leaf production increased by 140 percent, from 33,900 to 81,400 metric tons. Even more remarkable, 1999 coca leaf production levels more than doubled the 1998 totals, reaching an estimated 220 tons. These dramatic increases in overall production reflected the fact that between 1996 and 1999, the total number of hectares of coca leaf under cultivation in Colombia rose by almost 100 percent, from 68,280 to 120,000 hectares. This explosive expansion occurred in spite of a permanent Colombian National Police eradication program that sprayed a record 65,000 hectares of coca in 1998 alone (approximately 50 percent more than the total for 1997). This year – 2000-- the total area under cultivation

¹ GAO, Drug Control: Narcotics Threat From Colombia Continues to Grow. Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office (GAO), June 1999, GAO/NSIAD-99-136, pp. 4-5.

is projected to rise to 200,000 hectares and could reach 500,000 hectares by 2002, if current rates of expansion continue over the next few years.²

Concomitantly, Colombia also maintained its status as the world's principal cocaine-refining nation, supplying some 80 percent (220 metric tons) of the total cocaine imports (approximately 300 metric tons) smuggled into the United States in 1999. In 2000 Colombia is expected to produce between 330 and 440 metric tons of pure cocaine from both domestically grown coca and from coca base smuggled in from Peru and Bolivia.

During the 1990s Colombian production of opium poppy (the raw material for heroin) also skyrocketed from zero in 1989 to 61 metric tons in 1998. While these production totals meant that Colombia still ranked as only a relatively minor player in the world heroin market (less than 2 percent of total global supply), they did enable it to become the major heroin supplier to the eastern part of the United States by the end of the decade, exporting an estimated six metric tons of pure heroin yearly.

With approximately 5,000 hectares under cultivation, Colombia also continued to be an important producer of marijuana over the decade. In both 1998 and 1999 Colombia supplied about 40 percent (4,000 metric tons) of total annual cannabis imports into the U.S. market.

A study by Colombia's National Association of Financial Institutions (ANIF) reported that worldwide street sales of Colombian cocaine, heroin and marijuana totaled US\$ 46 billion in 1999. Based on the assumption that less than 10 percent of total sales are repatriated to Colombia each year, ANIF estimated that the country's total earnings from the illicit drug trade amounted to approximately US\$ 3.5 billion in 1999. This figure placed drug earnings close to the US\$ 3.75 billion made from oil – the country's top export – and more than two and one half times earnings from coffee exports in 1999.³

Drug Cultivation and Production in the Andes

These dismaying statistics notwithstanding, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the U.S.-sponsored "War on Drugs" in the Andean region as a whole was a total failure during the 1990s. In contrast to the Colombian situation, in Peru coca cultivation decreased by 27 percent between 1996 and 1997 alone, dropping from 96,000 hectares to 70,000 hectares. In 1999, fewer than 50,000 hectares of coca were cultivated in Peru. As a direct result, total Peruvian cocaine production also declined precipitously over the 1990s, from a high point of 606 metric tons in 1992 to 264 tons in 1998. In 2000, Peru

² The statistics on cultivation and production levels through 1998 were drawn from State Department, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999. The data for 1999 and projected for 2000 and beyond is reported in Semana, "Cultivos Ilicitos: La Ola Verde," Revista Semana, Edicion 903, Agosto 23, 1999; Associated Press, "DEA, Cocaine Production Grows," The New York Times, January 18, 2000; and Tim Johnson, "Colombian Coca Fields Flourishing, CIA Reports," The Miami Herald, January 21, 2000.

³ Asociacion Nacional de Institutos Financieros, La economia de la cocaína: La clave para entender Colombia. Bogota: ANIF, 2000.

was projected to produce just 192 metric tons. Since March 1998, however, resurgence in the price of Peruvian coca leaf has threatened to rekindle the growth of cultivation in that country.⁴

Like Peru, Bolivia also registered substantial declines in coca cultivation during the decade, dropping from 48,800 hectares in 1996 to 46,000 in 1997, and down to 38,000 hectares in 1998, while total cocaine production declined from 248 metric tons in 1992 to 77 tons in 1999. In 2000, Bolivian production was expected to drop further to just 55 metric tons.⁵

Much of the success of the U.S.-backed coca eradication and alternative development programs in Peru and Bolivia in the late 1990s is attributable to the disruption of the “air bridge” that had permitted Colombian trafficking organizations earlier in the decade to transport coca paste or “base” from these two central Andean countries into Colombia, where it was subsequently refined into cocaine and then smuggled into the United States. The air bridge effectively collapsed in late 1995 after the Peruvian air force, under orders from President Alberto Fujimori, began to shoot down suspected trafficker airplanes flying between Peru and Colombia. Indeed, during 1995 the Peruvians shot down 25 planes and forced many other suspect aircraft to land for inspection. As a result, between April and August 1995 demand for coca leaf in Peru plummeted and leaf prices dropped by more than 60 percent. Combined with the more aggressive eradication efforts undertaken by both the Peruvian and Bolivian governments (with U.S. financial backing) in 1996 and subsequent years, alternative development programs began to enjoy considerable success among the coca cultivating peasants in both countries. With the air bridge down, however, the Colombian traffickers rapidly expanded coca cultivation in Colombia, thus leading to Colombia’s progressive displacement of Peru and Bolivia as the major coca cultivating country in the world during the late 1990s.⁶

In 1999 the continued success of Peru’s highly lauded coca eradication program was in serious jeopardy as the price of coca leaf in the country shot back up over the year to two thirds of its previous 1995 high, thereby stimulating renewed peasant cultivation. Several factors appear to account for this reactivation of coca growing in Peru. First, Peruvian traffickers gradually found ways to reopen some air routes to Colombia and to replace others with road, river and sea routes, thus raising international demand for Peru’s coca crop and making coca cultivation in the country more profitable. The decision by the U.S. government in May 1998 to suspend Awac and P-3 Orion surveillance flights over Peru in order to increase aerial spying over Colombia as trafficking activities increased there clearly reduced the Peruvians capacity to intercept

⁴ See State Department, op cit; Clifford Krauss, “Peru’s Drug Success Erode as Trafficker Adapt,” The New York Times, August 19, 1999.

⁵ State Department, op cit; Adalid Cabrera Lemuz, “Bolivia Erradica una Cifra Record de Coca,” El Nuevo Herald, 19 de diciembre de 1999.

⁶ Clifford Krauss, op cit.; The Economist, “Andean Coca Wars: Special: A Crop that Refuses to Die,” The Economist, March 4, 2000.

drug flights over their national territory. The ability of the Peruvian police to carry out interdiction operations was further diminished when El Nino hit Peru in early 1998 and obliged the country's security forces to transfer helicopters and planes normally used in antidrug operations to the flooded Pacific coast for emergency aid duty. Similarly, a renewed outbreak of tensions between Peru and Ecuador in 1998 led the Peruvian military to send some planes to the border area temporarily, thereby reducing the availability of aircraft for interdiction activities. In late August 1999 the Clinton administration once again agreed to resume surveillance flights over Peru to help the Peruvian air force intercept smuggling planes.⁷

Second, more Peruvian traffickers began processing coca paste into refined cocaine within their own country, thereby increasing domestic demand for coca leaf in Peru. Third, cocaine consumption in Peru's major urban centers rose substantially in the late 1990s (as it did in major urban centers throughout the region over the decade), thereby increasing the profitability of the local market and overall demand for coca leaf in Peru. Finally, the continued decline of coca leaf availability in Bolivia placed an additional premium on coca cultivation in Peru (and Colombia), especially in light of rising demand for cocaine in Europe, where street prices often ran twice as high as those current in the United States.⁸

Interdiction of Drug Trafficking Routes

Some 13 million U.S. drug users spent approximately US\$ 67 billion on illicit drugs in 1999, making the U.S. market the most lucrative one in the world for Colombian traffickers. Washington spent roughly two-thirds of its US\$ 17.8 billion 1999 anti-drug budget on interdiction and related activities to curb the flow of illicit drugs from Colombia and elsewhere in the hemisphere into the United States. Indeed, throughout the 1990s the U.S. government placed heavy emphasis on interdiction activities as a key tactic in its overall strategy in the war on drugs.⁹

During most of the 1980s the Medellin cartel dominated the Colombian drug trade and its principal trafficking routes passed through (or over) the Caribbean into the United States via south Florida and elsewhere along the U.S. Atlantic seaboard. As these "traditional" smuggling routes came under increasing pressure from U.S. drug enforcement over the second half of the decade, a gradual shift away from the Caribbean routes to new ones passing through Central America and Mexico and across the U.S. southwest border took place. By the early 1990s 70 to 80 percent of the cocaine smuggled

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Office of National Drug Control Policy, The National Drug Control Strategy, 1998: A Ten Year Plan. Washington DC: The White House, 1998, pp. 42-52; GAO, Drug Control: Assets DOD Contributes to Reducing the Illegal Drug Supply Have Declined. Washington DC: United States General Accounting Office, December 1999, GAO/NSIAD-00-9.

out of Colombia entered the United States from Mexico while only 20 to 30 percent continued to come in via the Caribbean.¹⁰

This dramatic shift in contraband routes was undoubtedly bought about by the heightened interdiction efforts of U.S. law enforcement agencies, reinforced by the growing involvement of the U.S. military (especially the Navy and Air Force). U.S. “success” on this front in the war on drugs did not, however, result in a reduction in the availability of cocaine (or heroin) in the U.S. market, much less a rise in street prices, over the 1990s. In practice, the Medellin and Cali traffickers proved highly adaptable, quickly establishing new contraband routes to replace the older and riskier ones. Rather than curtailing drug trafficking from Colombia into the United States, increased interdiction in the Caribbean merely “ballooned” Colombian smuggling activities into Central America and Mexico, along with the attendant corruption and violence that typically accompanies large-scale drug trafficking activities.¹¹

Initially, the Colombian drug cartels arranged for existing Mexican drug organizations to smuggle their “product” across the U.S.-Mexican border on a simple fee-for-service basis. By the mid-1990s, however, as first the Medellin and then the Cali trafficking rings were partially dismantled by U.S. and Colombian law enforcement authorities, the Mexican drug Mafiosi began to demand drugs rather than cash in return for their services. Commonly, they received as much as 40 to 50 percent of any shipments they handled. The Mexican’s expanded role in the Colombian cocaine trade over the 1990s increased their illicit profits exponentially and led to the consolidation of several Mexican cartels (e.g., the Juarez cartel, the Tijuana cartel and the Gulf cartel) that soon rivaled the Colombian organizations in size, profitability and violence. Indeed, during the second half of the decade the emergence of these powerful new Mexican criminal organizations unleashed an unprecedented wave of drug-related violence and corruption in Mexico that seriously threatened the country’s fledgling process of democratization.¹²

Over the decade Washington responded to the increase in drug trafficking activity along the U.S.-Mexican border by bolstering U.S. drug enforcement throughout the southwest and by pressuring Mexico City to cooperate more fully with U.S. authorities in joint drug control operations on the border and in Mexico. Although only partially successful in enlisting Mexican collaboration because of the extensive drug-related corruption in that country, by the end of the 1990s enhanced U.S.-Mexican border interdiction had begun to make significant progress in reducing the flow of Colombian

¹⁰ GAO, Customs Service: Drug Interdiction Efforts. Washington DC: United States General Accounting Office, Sept. 1996, GAO/GGD-96-189BR; Office of National Drug Control Policy, The National Drug Control Strategy, 1997. Washington DC: The White House, February 1997, 49-62.

¹¹ Tim Golden, “Mexico and Drugs: Was U.S. Napping?” The New York Times, July 11, 1997; Peter Lupsha, “Transnational Narco-corruption and Narco Investment: A Focus on Mexico,” Transnational Organized Crime Journal (spring 1995).

¹² Sam Dillon, “Trial of a Drug Czar Tests Mexico’s New Democracy,” The New York Times, August 22, 1997; Tim Golden, “Mexican Tale of Absolute Corruption,” The New York Times, January 9, 2000; J. Michael Waller, “The Narcostate Next Door,” Insight Magazine. (www.insightmag.com/archive/199912048.shtml).

cocaine and heroin across the border. U.S. and Mexican drug control efforts were given a real boost by the rift that opened up in the late 1990s between Colombian and Mexican trafficking organizations over the exorbitant size of the Mexican share of the cocaine trade. The outbreak of internecine violence among rival Mexican Mafia families, especially after the death of Juarez drug lord Amado Carrillo Fuentes (a.k.a. “El Señor de los Cielos”) in 1997, also contributed to declining Colombian use of Mexican routes and, thus, to greater U.S. drug enforcement success along the border.¹³

Once again, however, this U.S. interdiction “success” was more apparent than real. At the end of the decade there was clear evidence that the Colombian traffickers had begun to shift back to smuggling routes in the Caribbean. Increasingly, reports surfaced indicating that Colombian cocaine and heroin were transiting through the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba and Puerto Rico into the United States. There was also mounting evidence of increased use of shipboard containers for cocaine smuggling into U.S. east coast ports and of a reversion to “swallowers” or “mules” traveling on commercial air transportation and cruise ships for the transport of heroin. As of late 1999 perhaps as much as 50 percent of the Colombian cocaine trade and 80 to 90 percent of the heroin traffic was routed across the Caribbean rather through Mexico. Topping the list of the most heavily used Caribbean transit countries were the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Cuba. This return to the more traditional routes was made possible, in part, by Washington’s decision earlier in the decade to transfer some U.S. Custom’s personnel from South Florida to the southwestern border, leaving the Caribbean/South Florida routes exposed once again. The severe recessions suffered by many Caribbean island economies over the latter half of the decade unquestionably made them more vulnerable to drug smuggling and related corruption as well.¹⁴

The May 1999 closure of Howard Air Base in Panama in fulfillment of Washington’s 1977 treaty obligations to return control of the Panama Canal Zone to Panama by the end of the century further reduced U.S. air surveillance capabilities over Colombian drug smuggling activity. Throughout the 1990s, the U.S. Air Force had used Howard as a base of AWAC operations to monitor the gaps not covered by the three U.S.-run ground radar stations located in southern Colombia. With the loss of Howard, drug contraband flights, especially along Colombia’s pacific coast, began to surge in late 1999. Requests from the Miami-based U.S. Southern Command to the Pentagon for surveillance flights over Central and South America and the Caribbean were satisfied only 43 percent of the time during 1999. The U.S. government negotiated rights to upgrade an air base in Manta, Ecuador, to replace Howard in 1999, but as of early February 2000 construction of the new facilities had not yet begun.¹⁵

¹³ Michael Riley, “Mexico Claims Greater Success in War on Drugs,” [Houston Chronicle.com](#), January 26, 2000; Ricardo Sandoval, “Albright Hails Mexican Role on Drugs,” [The Miami Herald](#), January 17, 2000.

¹⁴ Larry Rohter, “Haiti Paralysis Brings a Boom in Drug Trade,” [The New York Times](#), Oct. 27, 1998; Reuters, “Traffickers Moving Back to Caribbean—US Drug Czar,” [The New York Times](#), February 10, 2000; The Associated Press, “Jamaican Fishermen’s Tainted Boom: Rising Trade in Cocaine,” [The New York Times](#), February 11, 2000; David Kidwell, “Haiti Now a Major Route for Cocaine Entering U.S.,” [The Miami Herald](#), February 13, 2000.

¹⁵ Tim Johnson, “Radar Gap Helps Colombian Drug Smugglers,” [The Miami Herald](#), February 5, 2000.

Starting in 1998, the Colombian Air Force, like its Peruvian counterpart, began to force or shoot down suspected drug smuggling aircraft. In 1998/99, 36 planes were intercepted. Six were shot down and another 30 were destroyed after landing. In early February 2000 Colombian Defense Minister Luis Fernando Ramirez announced that the Pastrana government intended to step up its air interdiction activities over 2000 with the help of the new equipment to be provided by the Clinton administration.¹⁶

The Decline of the Colombian Cartels

In Colombia, although cultivation and smuggling expanded exponentially over the decade, the combined efforts of the U.S. and Colombian governments did succeed in partially disrupting the drug trafficking activities of the country's two most notorious drug trafficking rings – the Medellin and Cali cartels -- during the 1990s. In the early 1990s, following the August 1989 assassination of the leading Liberal party presidential candidate-- Luis Carlos Galan-- by hitmen (*sicarios*) on the payroll of the Medellin drug lord Pablo Escobar, first the government of President Virgilio Barco Vargas (1986-1990) and then of Cesar Gaviria Trujillo (1990-1994) mounted concerted attacks against the Medellin cartel. By 1994, after the 1993 death of Pablo Escobar in a rooftop gun battle in Medellin, the Medellin cartel had been largely dismantled. Similarly, in 1995-1996 the government of Ernesto Samper Pizano (1994-98) went after and effectively dismantled most of the Cali cartel.¹⁷

Although remnants of both organizations continued to operate at lower levels of activity (sometimes from jail) during the late 1990s, the dismemberment of these two powerful and violent transnational drug trafficking organizations over the early and mid-1990s constituted important achievements for U.S. and Colombian drug enforcement authorities. In the halcyon days of the 1980s and early 1990s, the ruthless Medellin cartel had bribed, intimidated and murdered scores of Colombian government officials at all levels to protect its drug operations. After President Belisario Betancur (1982-86) began to extradite Colombian drug traffickers to the United States in the wake of the 1984 Medellin-ordered assassination of Attorney General Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, the Medellin capos launched a systematic narco-terrorist campaign against the Colombian state designed to force the government to halt further extradition. Their campaign ultimately proved successful when in 1987 a thoroughly intimidated Colombian Supreme Court finally ruled the U.S.- Colombian extradition treaty to be unconstitutional. In short, by the mid-1980s the Medellin Cartel had grown so rich and powerful that it was able to mount a direct threat to Colombian state security. Hence, the decimation of the Medellin cartel and, subsequently, of the equally dangerous Cali cartel should be recognized as major victories in the war on drugs in Colombia, for their demise effectively stymied the emergence of a “narco-state” in the country.¹⁸

¹⁶ Tim Johnson, “Colombia’s War on Drugs Goes Airborne,” *The Miami Herald*, February 11, 2000.

¹⁷ Bruce Michael Bagley, “Dateline Drug Wars: Colombia: The Wrong Strategy,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 77 (winter 1989-90): 154-171; Patrick L. Clawson and R. W. Lee III, *The Andean Cocaine Industry*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998, pp. 37-61.

¹⁸ Bruce Michael Bagley, “The New Hundred Years War? U.S. National Security and the War on Drugs in Latin America,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 30, no. 1 (1988): 71-92; John P. Sweeny, “Colombia’s Narco-Democracy Threatens Hemispheric Security.” Backgrounder # 1028 The

The undeniable significance of the Colombian government's successful assaults on the Medellin and Cali cartels over the decade should not, however, obscure the underlying reality of the ongoing explosion of drug cultivation and drug trafficking in Colombia over the second half of the 1990s. Nor should it distract attention from the accelerating political corrosion that flowed from the country's still-flourishing illicit drug trade. In practice, rather than curbing the nation's booming drug traffic, the deaths, extradition or incarcerations of the two principal cartels' "bosses" created only temporary and relatively minor disruptions in the contraband flow of drugs from Colombia to the U.S. and European markets. Indeed, the vacuum left by partial demise of the Medellin and Cali cartels was quickly filled by the rise and proliferation of scores of smaller, less notorious (but equally violent) trafficking organizations or "cartelitos" throughout Colombia that engaged in both cocaine trafficking and the even more lucrative and rapidly expanding heroin trade. Unlike the Medellin and Cali cartels, however, these new, smaller trafficking groups have maintained relatively lower profiles, often operating from bases located in Colombia's many "intermediate" or secondary cities and small towns where they could bribe and intimidate local officials to gain "protection" for their activities in relative anonymity.¹⁹

While unlikely to pose direct challenges to Colombian national security similar to those mounted by the Medellin and Cali cartels in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the advent of these new "boutique" cartels in the wake of Medellin and Cali presented both Colombian and U.S. drug enforcement officials with major new challenges that they have not been able to overcome effectively. Despite some recent, highly publicized "coups" against the traffickers, such as the capture of drug lord Alejandro Bernal (a.k.a. "Juvenal") -- the successor of Pablo Escobar and his Medellin organization -- during "Operation Milenio" in October 1999, the drug trade in Colombia continued to flourish at the outset of 2000. Its violent and corrosive effects continue to permeate Colombia's political and judicial institutions virtually unabated, severely undermining possibilities for effective democratic reform in the country.²⁰

Political corruption in Colombia certainly pre-dated the advent of large-scale drug trafficking in the country. In fact, it is deeply rooted in the country's colonial heritage and patterns of elitist politics, patrimonial rule and patron-client relations over the almost two centuries since independence. Drug trafficking and the attendant phenomena of criminal violence and political corruption that it spawns first emerged in Colombia in the late 1960s and 1970s in a context of a weakly institutionalized state already rife with political corruption and patronage politics. The rise and expansion of powerful transnational criminal organizations involved in the international drug trade during the 1970s and

Heritage Foundation, March 21, 1995; Michael Shifter, "Colombia on the Brink," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 78, no. 4 (July/August 1999): 14-20.

¹⁹ Presidencia de la Republica, La lucha contra las drogas ilegítimas. 1996, un año de grandes progresos. Bogota: Presidencia de la Republica, 1997, pp. 24-25; Semana, "Narcotráfico: Cuentas Pendientes," Revista Semana, Edición 913 (Nov. 1 de 1999); Adam Thomson, "Colombia: 'Mafia Links' Boost Cocaine Exports," The Financial Times, November 29, 1999.

²⁰ Semana, "Narcotráfico: El Imperio de 'Juvenal'," Revista Semana, Edición 912 (Oct. 25 de 1999); Kirk Semple, "Major Arrests Sabotage Colombian Drug Network," The Washington Post, October 14, 1999.

1980s were a result of, and subsequently greatly exacerbated, the underlying institutional weaknesses of the Colombian political system. In the 1980s and early 1990s the huge profits earned by Colombia's cartels from the illicit drug trade enabled them to organize and equip their own private armies (paramilitary groups) and to bribe and intimidate Colombian politicians and government officials at all levels. As a result, Colombia's system of justice virtually collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, key elements of the police and the military were routinely bought off, and an estimated 60 percent of the Colombian Congress received illicit campaign contributions to guarantee their cooperation on critical issues like extradition.²¹

The country's business elite or private sector also proved vulnerable and complicitous, often accepting payments in cash, facilitating money laundering operations through legitimate businesses, selling properties at exorbitant prices and so forth. Indeed, during the 1990s clear distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate private sector activities were often virtually impossible to make. Illustrating the depths of the problem, a February 2000 report of the so-called "Truth Commission" (composed of investigators from various state agencies) on corruption in the state banking sector revealed that over the last ten years some 7.2 billion pesos had been systematically siphoned off from six different state-owned banks. As a result of this huge financial scandal, more than 1,200 criminal proceedings against bankers, businessmen, labor leaders, congressmen, former ministers and high-level bureaucrats have recently been launched. In the words of Colombia's current Attorney General, Alfonso Gomez, such public/private sector corruption "... is even more dangerous [for the country] than the armed groups operating outside the law."²² Indeed, according to Transparency International, in 1999 Colombia ranked as one of the most corrupt countries on the planet.

Over the 1990s, under considerable pressure from the United States, Bogota did manage to rein in, at least partially, the rampant corruption and escalating criminal violence emanating from the Medellin and Cali cartels. Nonetheless, Colombia's relatively successful campaigns against these two major criminal organizations did not by any means extirpate drug-related corruption in the country. According to recent U.S. government reports, "...widespread corruption within all sectors of the Colombian government was a major factor affecting counternarcotics operations" and "... drug-

²¹ For analyses of the problems of institutional corruption in Colombia see Fernando Cepeda Ulloa, "Seguimiento y evolucion de la lucha contra la corrupcion," in Beatriz Franco-Cuervo, compilador, La corrupcion y la lucha contra la corrupcion. Bogota: Funcacion Konrad Adenauer y el Goethe-Institut, Febrero de 1997, pp. 99-116; David Roll, "La corrupcion politica en Colombia, de subrealismo a la realidad virtual," in B. Franco-Cuervo, compilador, Ibid., 117-134; Fernando Cepeda Ulloa, Coordinador, La corrupcion administrativa en Colombia: Diagnostico y recomendaciones para combatirla. Bogota: Tercer Mundo Editores, Contraloria General de la Republica y Fedesarrollo, 1994; Fernando Cepeda Ulloa, "El Congreso Colombiano ante la Crisis," in Francisco Leal Buitrago, ed., Tras las huellas de la crisis politica. Bogota: Tercer Mundo Editores, FESCOL, IEPRI (UN), 1996; and Fernando Cepeda Ulloa, "Virtudes y vicios del proceso descentralizador," in Jaime Jaramillo Vallejo, ed., El reto de la descentralizacion. Bogota: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, CEJA y Fundacion Konrad Adenauer, 1996.

²² Semana, "Corrupcion," Semana, Edicion 928, Febrero 28, 2000.

related corruption in all branches of the government continued to undermine Colombia's counternarcotics effectiveness."²³

The FARC and the Colombian Drug Trade

The problems faced by drug enforcement agents working in Colombia were compounded over the decade by the growing involvement of Colombia's principal guerrilla organization – the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or FARC-- in drug cultivation and drug trafficking activities. The eclipse of the major cartels opened up greater opportunities for FARC's 20,000 man-strong guerrilla army to profit from the country's booming drug industry. They did so mainly by taxing peasant growers in their zones of influence and by contracting out their services to the trafficker organizations to protect crops, processing laboratories and landing strips.²⁴ In the late 1990s admittedly spotty evidence hinted that some FARC "fronts" may even have begun to operate their own processing facilities in remote areas of the country. There was, however, no indication that FARC personnel engaged in international drug smuggling activities outside of Colombia.²⁵ The top FARC leadership continued to deny accusations that the organization is involved in Colombia's drug trade: "The truth is that we do not depend on coca."²⁶ But General Fernando Tapias, Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces, insisted that the opposite was the case: "I do not believe that anyone in Colombia or the world can doubt the links between drug trafficking and the rebel groups..."²⁷

By the end of the decade, Colombian government estimates placed the FARC's total earnings from the drug trade as high as 400 million dollars per year. Added to the estimated US\$ 500 million per year that the FARC were believed to earn from their more "traditional" guerrilla activities (e.g., collection of revolutionary "taxes" on landowners, kidnapping, extortion, robbery, "commissions" collected from local governments and businesses, and their own business investments), FARC's total annual income in 1999 may have amounted to as much as US\$ 900 million.²⁸

²³ GAO, Drug Control. Washington DC: United States Government Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-99-136, June 22, 1999; and GAO, Drug Control: U.S. Efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean. Washington DC: United States Government Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-00-90R, February 18, 2000. p. 7.

²⁴ Semana, "Informe Especial: Los Negocios de las FARC," Revista Semana, Edicion 879 (Marzo 8 de 1999).

²⁵ Steven Ambrus and Joe Contreras, "Fighting the Enemy Within: The 'FARC Republic': A New Outlaw State in the Heart of South America," Newsweek International, November 29, 1999; Reuters, "Colombia's Pastrana Plays down FARC's Drug Links," The Miami Herald, July 29, 1999.

²⁶ Cesar Garcia, "Tirofijo: Si Me Muero, Hay Mil que Me Reemplacen," El Nuevo Herald, 30 de enero de 2000.

²⁷ Associate Press, "Comandante colombiano rebate declaraciones de lider guerrillero," El Nuevo Herald, 30 de enero de 2000.

²⁸ Accurate information on FARC's drug-related earnings is exceedingly difficult to obtain, hence estimates vary widely from a low of US \$100 million to a high of \$600 million annually. The figures presented here are based on interviews with knowledgeable informants conducted by the author in Colombia in November 1999. For discussions of FARC's income sources see Semana, "Informe Especial: Los Negocios de las FARC," Revista Semana, Edicion 879, Marzo 8 de 1999; Douglas Farah, "Drug Sales Change Colombia's Power Balance," The Washington Post, Nov. 4, 1999; and Agencia EFE, "La guerrilla obtuvo \$3.121 millones en ocho anos," El Nuevo Herald, 12 de mayo de 1999.

While income from the drug trade has certainly bolstered the FARC financially, it would be a mistake to conclude that drug money was in the past, or is now, essential to the continuation of the FARC's war against the Colombian government. In the first place, there are a number of FARC "fronts" which have never depended on either coca or opium poppy "rents" to sustain their activities. Second, declines in income from drug sources could, and in all likelihood would, be made up by increasing earnings from kidnappings, extortion and revolutionary "taxes" on peasants, landowners, businessmen and foreign multinationals. Hence, elimination of the underground drug economy in Colombia, if it were ever to occur, would not automatically nor inevitably end the country's forty-year old guerrilla war, which has claimed some 35,000 lives over the last decade alone.²⁹

Nonetheless, fueled in no small part by drug-related earnings, the FARC grew steadily in numbers and firepower over the 1990s. By the second half of the decade, they frequently proved able to defeat or severely punish the Colombia armed forces in combat. The Clinton administration's 1996 and 1997 decisions to "decertify" Colombia (mainly because of President Samper's alleged acceptance of US\$ 6.1 million in campaign contributions from the Cali cartel during his 1994 presidential race) led to a substantial reduction in U.S. aid to Colombia. Predictably, these reductions contributed to the Colombian military's deteriorating capacity to fight the FARC effectively. The growing size and strength of the FARC was, in turn, a key factor behind President Andres Pastrana's (1998-2002) decision to sponsor an ambitious new peace initiative toward the FARC shortly after his inauguration in August 1998.

Pastrana's Peace Process and the Zona de Despeje

While progress in these peace negotiations proved excruciatingly slow during the first 18 months of his administration, President Pastrana and FARC guerrilla chieftain Manuel Marulanda Velez (a.k.a. "Tirofijo") did agree in November 1998 to establish a 42,000 square kilometer demilitarized zone (zona de despeje) in the southeastern Department of Caqueta. In effect, the accord obliged the government's security forces to withdraw completely from this Switzerland-sized territory in the country's eastern plains (llanos orientales) region and banned them from conducting military operations or even gathering intelligence in the area. The rationale behind the Pastrana government's creation of the zona de despeje was to demonstrate Bogota's peaceful intentions and to facilitate peace talks with the FARC by creating an area of "distension" in which the negotiations could physically take place.³⁰

²⁹ See Alejandro Reyes Posada, "Investigacion sobre geografia de la violencia," El Tiempo, 17 de octubre de 1999.

³⁰ For his original statement of intentions in regard to the peace process see Andres Pastrana, "Una politica de paz para el cambio." Bogota: 8 de junio de 1998, mimeo, 17p. For an overview of peace initiatives in Colombia during the last two decades see Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, "Colombia en guerra: las diplomacias por la paz," Desarrollo Economico—Revista de Ciencias Sociales (Buenos Aires), vol. 39, no. 155, oct.-dic. 1999 (pp. 339-360).

In practice, the zona quickly became a kind of sanctuary for the FARC. Some 5,000 FARC troops are permanently stationed there and have become the de facto government in the area. Pastrana's growing legion of critics both inside and outside Colombia (including many in the U.S. Congress) have repeatedly denounced the creation of the zona de despeje as a sign that Pastrana is "surrendering" the country to the FARC while permitting the consolidation of a "narco-guerrilla" state within Colombian national territory. During the last year and a half FARC forces operating in the zone have been frequently accused of violating both the letter and spirit of the accord by carrying out selective assassinations, harboring kidnap victims, threatening local mayors and judges, conducting illegal searches and seizures, detaining innocent civilians, improperly re-routing public moneys, forcibly recruiting children into their ranks, training new troops and terrorist commandos, and constructing anti-aircraft batteries and other military fortifications to strengthen their defenses. They have also been accused of exploiting some 35,000 hectares of coca within the zone, of buying up coca leaf from peasant farmers in surrounding departments (e.g. Meta, Guaviare, Caqueta, Putumayo) and selling it directly to the drug cartels, and of utilizing the 37 landing strips at their disposal inside the demilitarized zone to fly processed cocaine to virtually any part of the country.³¹

Colombian and U.S. intelligence sources also believe that the FARC have utilized the zona de despeje and their coca and other illicit earnings to undertake a major rearmament program during the last 18 months. In mid-January 2000 General Tapias estimated that over the last year and a half the FARC had acquired more than 20,000 East German assault rifles along with grenade launchers, mortars, SAM-12 surface-to-air missiles, sophisticated electronic communications equipment, and their own small but growing air force. Since 1997 three American pilots flying drug-interdiction missions over southern Colombia for DynCorp, a private U.S. military contractor, have been killed in plane crashes. In mid-1999 a U.S. Army DeHavilland RC-7 plane packed with sophisticated intelligence equipment for the interception of radio and mobile-phone communications went down in the jungles of southern Colombia while officially on a routine anti-narcotics patrol; the five U.S. military personnel aboard were all killed in the crash. There is no evidence indicating that the FARC were responsible for shooting down these planes. It is, however, widely reported that the FARC have acquired the firepower to do so in the future. During January 2000 alone FARC guerrillas in southeast Colombia fired RPG-7 missiles at aircraft eight times, although no hits were reported.³²

The Paramilitaries, Human Rights and the Drug Trade

Like their leftist FARC rivals, Colombia's approximately 7,000 rightist paramilitary forces (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia—AUC) also finance themselves

³¹ Ambrus and Contreras, op. cit.

³² Agence France Presse, "Aseguran que las FARC Poseen un Poderoso Arsenal de Guerra," El Nuevo Herald, 21 de enero de 2000; "Colombian Rebels Tap E. Europe for Arms," The Washington Post, Nov. 4, 1999; Semana, "Los misiles de las FARC," Revista Semana, Edicion 905, Septiembre 6 de 1999; J. Hammer and M. Isikoff, "Fighting the Rebels: A Mysterious Plane Crash Highlights Covert U.S. Operations," Newsweek, June 1999; Semana, "Proceso de Paz: La Paz Armada," Revista Semana, Edicion 873, enero 25 de 1999.

at least in part by taxing the drug trade in the areas they control. In a televised interview conducted with national paramilitary chief Carlos Castano Gil in early January 2000, Castano openly admitted for the first time that his “self-defense” forces based in northwest Colombia routinely charged a 40 percent tax on peasants who produce coca. Indeed, the bloodiest conflicts between Colombia’s guerrillas and paramilitaries during the last decade have taken place in regions rich in natural resources (e.g., oil, gold or emeralds) or drug crops.³³

Supported by many large landowners, drug traffickers and segments of the army, the virulently anti-Communist paramilitaries have been primarily responsible for the waves of civilian massacres that have swept Colombia in the last decade. Between 1998 and 1999 alone the incidence of massacres increased by 44 percent, leaving more than 2,000 Colombian civilians dead in 1999.³⁴ Their systematic attacks on suspected civilian “sympathizers”, rather than on the guerrillas themselves, provoked the displacement of almost two million Colombians during the 1990s. Despite the “paras” brutality, fear of the leftist rebels has become so widespread that 60 percent of Colombians surveyed in a 1999 poll declared that they did not favor disbanding the self-defense groups. Moreover, a majority interviewed in the same poll stated that they wanted U.S. troops to intervene because their own government was incapable of protecting them.³⁵

The FARC, along with most human rights groups in and outside of Colombia, have repeatedly denounced instances of collusion between the self-defense groups and government security forces over the last decade. According to FARC’s Marulanda: “The paramilitary groups are an official expression of state policy.”³⁶ When the paramilitaries enter a zone, army units in the area routinely overlook their activities. On multiple occasions, the army has reportedly provided communications and logistical support for paramilitary operations. In mid-1999, when FARC rebels attacked and surrounded the headquarters of AUC leader Carlos Castano, army troops actually rushed to his rescue. To refute the high command’s contention that there are no close ties between the “paras” and the army, in 1999 the FARC distributed lists of paramilitary base locations, radio frequencies used to communicate with army units and the names of army officers who act as go-betweens.³⁷

Such military-paramilitary linkages unquestionably constitute major impediments to any future progress in Bogota’s current peace negotiations with the FARC. Cognizant of this, in 1999 President Pastrana removed four generals from active military service for

³³ The Associated Press, “Colombian Militias Tax Drug Trade,” The New York Times, January 10, 2000; Semana, “Narco-Castano?” Revista Semana, Edicion 886, abril 26 de 1999.

³⁴ On the links between the paramilitaries and the Colombian army see Human Right Watch, The Ties that Bind: Colombia and Military-Paramilitary Links. New York: Human Rights Watch, Vol. 12, No. 1, February 2000.

³⁵ Linda Robinson, “Where Angels Fear to Tread: Colombia and Latin America’s Tier of Turmoil,” World Policy Journal, winter 1999/2000, p 64.

³⁶ ³⁷ Ibid. pp. 64-65; Human Rights Watch, Colombia’s Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States. Washington DC: Human Rights Watch Publications, November 1996; Cambio, “Carlos Castano, jefe de las autodefensas,” Revista Cambio, 29 de nov. al 06 de dic., 1999.

their links to the paramilitaries and put one of them on trial. He also completed the disbanding of the infamous Brigada XX (Intelligence Brigade) that had been closely connected to rightist paramilitary bands for years and began the process of reorganizing and modernizing military intelligence units with U.S. assistance. Nonetheless, the linkages persist and army-paramilitary confrontations remained extremely rare.³⁸

In recognition of the paramilitaries growing involvement in the drug trade and their record as the worst human rights abusers in Colombia, in mid-January 2000 U.S. government officials called upon the Pastrana administration to move more forcefully to suppress paramilitary activities throughout the country. According to Washington's public statements, the elimination of these self-defense groups remains an essential step along the path towards peace and the reestablishment of law and order in the country.³⁹ For his part, Castano maintains that the Colombian government will ultimately have to grant his men amnesty and include the AUC in the peace negotiations or the peace process will fail.⁴⁰

The ELN, the EPL the ERP and the Quest for Peace

The Pastrana administration's quest for a negotiated peace settlement has been further complicated by the presence of three additional, leftist armed insurgent movements in Colombia. These include the National Liberation Army (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional –ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (Ejercito Popular de Liberacion—EPL), and the People's Revolutionary Army (Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo-- ERP). With some 5,000 combatants, the Castroite ELN is the second largest leftist rebel group in the country. Like the FARC, it operates through out the national territory. Unlike the FARC, however, the ELN does not appear to have engaged systematically in drug trafficking activities during the 1990s.⁴¹ Instead, it has financed its operations mainly by extorting money from multinational companies operating Colombia's oil fields and by blowing up (50 to 100 times a year) the 900-kilometer

³⁸ Reuters, "Pastrana destituye a generales acusados de nexos paramilitares," El Nuevo Herald, 9 de abril de 1999; Margarita Martinez, "Colombia Sergeants Convicted," The Washinton Post, December 20, 1999.

³⁹ Agence France Presse, "Guerra total a paramilitares," El Nuevo Herald, 15 de enero de 2000. In an early March 2000 visit to Washington to lobby U.S. lawmakers on the Clinton aid package, Colombian Vice President Gustavo Bell declared that seven top military commanders had recently been dismissed by the Pastrana administration for collaborating with rightist paramilitary groups. He also announced that seven paramilitary members had been killed and 42 captured by government forces in the first two months of 2000. George Gedda, "Colombia Breaking Paramilitary Ties," The Washington Post, March 8, 2000.

⁴⁰ El Tiempo, "Castano se ve en la mesa de negociaciones," El Tiempo, 2 de marzo de 2000. In this article Castano boasted that his AUC forces numbered 11,200 as of March 2000, a figure considerably larger than the 7,000 estimated by most independent analysts.

⁴¹ Until May 1999 the ELN controlled roughly 30 thousand hectares of coca in Catatumbo, Norte de Santander, but then lost control of this area to AUC paramilitaries. Because of the ELN's official position not to finance its activities from drug trafficking and its comparatively smaller size, it is of less concern to Washington than the FARC. Diana Lozada, Unidad de Paz, "Diez obstaculos con el ELN," El Tiempo, 26 de marzo de 2000.

pipeline that transports crude from fields along the Venezuelan border to port facilities on the north coast. It has also relied heavily on ransoms from kidnappings.⁴²

. From the outset of Pastrana's negotiations with the FARC, the ELN sought to participate in the peace process on an equal footing. Rather than including the ELN in the government's dialogue with the FARC, however, President Pastrana -- at the FARC's request -- opted to deal with the ELN separately in a parallel set of peace talks. While these negotiations proceeded fitfully over the first 18 months of the Pastrana government, no substantive progress was achieved. Moreover, Pastrana consistently refused to concede to the ELN's demand for the creation of a zona de despeje in northern Colombia (in the Department of Bolivar) similar to, albeit smaller than, that he had granted to the FARC in southern Colombia.⁴³

In mid-January 2000, the ELN launched a weeklong series of attacks that destroyed 28 electrical pylons in the northwestern Departments of Antioquia and Choco and left the country's power grid on the verge of collapse. In a radio interview held on January 19, 2000, Nicolas Rodriguez -- the top ELN commander -- declared that his group had "lost patience" with the government's peace strategy and vowed that his forces would continue their high-profile kidnappings and sabotage operations in protest. "The ruling class listens only to the voice of dynamite and rifles."⁴⁴ Colombian military spokesmen frankly admitted that it would be virtually impossible for the armed forces to protect the 15,000 electrical transmission towers spread throughout the nation. In 1999 alone leftist rebels had dynamited 169 towers, inflicting damages valued at US\$ 13.2 million on the national economy.⁴⁵

In the wake of these damaging bombing attacks, the Pastrana government reopened negotiations with the ELN and accepted, in principal, the ELN's demand for the creation of a zona de despeje in southern Bolivar where the ELN could hold its national convention and begin peace talks with the government. Adamantly opposed to this concession to the ELN and determined to control the profitable coca and gold mining activities in the area, in mid-February 2000 the AUC paramilitaries carried out a series of brutal massacres in ELN-linked peasant communities designed to prevent the consolidation of an ELN zona de despeje in the region. The intensity and extreme cruelty of the recent AUC military campaign in southern Bolivar reflect both the depths and bitterness of their rivalry with the ELN and the high economic stakes that underlie the guerrilla-paramilitary struggle in the region. In the short run, at least, there appeared to be

⁴²Semana, "El ELN y los alemanes," Revista Semana, Edicion 893, junio 14 de 1999; Semana, "La bofetada," Revista Semana, Edicion 894, junio 21 de 1999; Semana, "Si estamos cobrando," Revista Semana, Edicion 918, Dic. 20, 1999.

⁴³ El Tiempo, "Eln si pide despeje en el sur de Bolivar," El Tiempo, 8 de enero de 2000; El Espectador, "Coca, nudo para el despeje," El Espectador, 8 de febrero de 2000.

⁴⁴ The Associated Press, "Colombian Rebels Vow More Sabotage," The New York Times, January 20, 2000.

⁴⁵ Javier Baena, "Medellin bajo racionamiento electrico tras un grave atentado de la guerrilla," El Nuevo Herald, 19 de enero de 2000; El Tiempo, "El pais, al borde del racionamiento por atentados del Eln," El Tiempo, 23 de enero de 2000; Luis Jaime Acosta, "Colombia sufre perdidas incalculables por los atentados," El Nuevo Herald, 22 de enero de 2000.

little likelihood that the complicated situation on the ground would permit the Pastrana administration to move ahead quickly with plans to create a new zona in southern Bolivar. Even in the midst of the carnage, however, government-ELN talks continued in Venezuela and most observers believed that a demilitarized zone would ultimately be conceded to the ELN.⁴⁶

The EPL, with fewer than 500 combatants, was far smaller than either the FARC or the ELN at the end of the 1990s. Its principal bases of operation are located in the northeastern departments of Cesar, Santander and Norte de Santander near the Venezuela border. Like the ELN, the EPL appears to have stayed out of the drug trade, concentrating instead on extortion, kidnapping and assassination activities to finance itself. In the 1980s the EPL gradually abandoned its radical Maoist ideology and, in the early 1990s, negotiated a peace settlement with Bogota that led the bulk of its members (almost 3000) to lay down their arms and reenter civil society. The remaining splinter elements of the EPL, led by Hugo Carvajal (a.k.a. “El Nene”), steadfastly refused to enter into peace negotiations with the Pastrana government. With the death of Carvajal on January 12, 2000, a result of wounds received in a firefight with Colombian army troops on December 31, 1999, what role, if any, the EPL may play in the current Colombian peace process remains unclear.⁴⁷

With only 150 combatants, the ERP was the smallest and least well known of the four guerrilla groups still active in Colombia at the outset of 2000. Its origin lies in a split within the ELN that occurred in August 1996 during the ELN’s Third Ideological Congress. Its principal base of operations was located in northern Colombia in the border areas of the Departments of Antioquia, Sucre and Bolivar. Under constant siege from Carlos Castano and his AUC paramilitary forces, especially in southern Bolivar, in 1998 the ERP guerrillas, with the backing of Frente 37 of the FARC, sought refuge in the remote Montes de Maria region in central Bolivar Department along the Sucre border. Given its small size and inability to hold its territory against AUC pressure, the ERP has not been a significant factor in drug cultivation or trafficking.⁴⁸

After a prolonged period of quiescence, the ERP resurfaced in late 1999 – taking advantage of the Christmas truce between the Pastrana government and the FARC – when it launched a highly publicized series of “pescas milagrosas” (random kidnappings) along the Sucre-Bolivar border. In mid-February 2000, the AUC renewed their attacks on the ERP with assaults on various small rural communities (corregimientos) near Ovejas, Sucre, in which some seventy people died. In late February

⁴⁶ Since mid-February, paramilitary units have killed more than 60 people believed to be sympathetic to the ELN. The Associated Press, “Groups Kill 11 in Colombia,” The New York Times, March 13, 2000. Semana, “La caldera del diablo,” Revista Semana, Edicion 930, Febrero 28, 2000; Javier Baena, “Pastrana acusa a Venezuela de ‘irresponsabilidad’”, El Nuevo Herald, 10 de marzo de 2000.

⁴⁷ Agencia France Presse, “Ataques recuerdan que la guerra continua en Colombia,” El Nuevo Herald, 2 de enero de 2000; Reuters, “Cae en combate el lider del tercer grupo guerrillero colombiano,” El Nuevo Herald, 29 de enero de 2000. On March 7, 2000, a recently released EPL kidnap victim announced to the press that the EPL had decided to enter into peace talks with the Pastrana government. El Tiempo, “Sucesos del dia,” El Tiempo, 7 de marzo de 2000.

⁴⁸ Semana, “La suerte de ERP,” Revista Semana, Edicion 930, February 28, 2000.

reports of intense fighting between AUC and ERP forces in the Montes de Maria region indicated that the AUC offensive continued to escalate. Like the EPL, the ERP did not participate in peace negotiations with the government during the first eighteen months of the Pastrana administration, but its recent setbacks in combat against the AUC may well force it to consider entry into the peace process in coming months or face annihilation.⁴⁹

Kidnappings for ransom unquestionably became one of the main sources of financing for all four guerrilla groups over the 1990s. At the start of 2000, the FARC held 850 kidnapping victims hostage. The ELN had another 702, the EPL 200 and the ERP a few dozen. During 1999 the AUC paramilitary groups kidnapped 120 people, reflecting a six-fold increase in their kidnapping activity over the previous year. In 1999, the total number of abductions reported in Colombia rose to 2,945 cases, compared to 2,216 the year before (a 33 percent increase over 1998 levels), breaking Colombia's own kidnapping world record.⁵⁰

This rising wave of kidnappings not only complicated Pastrana's peace efforts, but also contributed to a growing exodus of professional upper middle and upper class Colombians fleeing from their troubled country to the United States. According to Colombian government estimates, 800,000 people – 2 percent of Colombia's total population of 40 million -- left Colombia in the last four years. In 1999 alone, 366,423 Colombians applied for nonimmigrant visas to the United States, up from 150,514 in 1997. About three-quarters of the nonimmigrant and just over half of the 11,345 immigrant applications were granted in 1999. In addition, while still small in absolute terms (only 334 over the 12 months stretching from the last quarter of 1998 through the first three quarters of 1999), political asylum requests from Colombians have also begun to rise substantially (396 in the last quarter of 1999). The U.S. approval rate for asylum requests has also risen, from 19 percent in 1998 to 46 percent by the end of 1999.⁵¹

Currently, there are, at least, 60 to 80,000 Colombians living and working illegally in the United States who have petitioned the Clinton administration to grant them temporary protected status to remain in the country legally for up to 18 months.⁵² Both Clinton and Pastrana have publicly opposed any such change in U.S. immigration law on the grounds that, were it to be approved, it would spark an even greater exodus from Colombia and, thereby, exacerbate the nation's already serious problems of "brain drain" and capital flight. Pastrana has exhorted his fellow citizens to stay in Colombia and to support his peace initiative rather than leave. He needs them to work and invest in Colombia and to pay their taxes for his government to have any chance of reactivating the nation's recessed economy and reestablishing political stability. Nevertheless, escalating violence and insecurity in both rural and urban areas are leading growing numbers to opt for immigration. The country's budding "peace movement", which on

⁴⁹ Semana, *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ The Associated Press, "Colombia Breaks Kidnap World Record," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2000; Reuters, "Former Cycling Champ Kidnapped in Colombia," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2000.

⁵¹ Larry Rohter, "Driven by Fear, Colombians Leave in Drove," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2000.

⁵² Maria Traviero, "Representantes federales abogan por los inmigrantes colombianos," *El Nuevo Herald*, 20 de enero de 2000.

several occasions in recent years has mobilized millions of Colombians to march or demonstrate in favor of peace, to date has had little practical impact on either the pace of the peace negotiations or the escalating armed violence and kidnapping convulsing the nation.⁵³

Violence, Internal Migration and Social Catastrophe

In the 15 years between 1985 and 2000 Colombia's internal wars displaced some 1.7 million Colombians from their places of origin. In 1999 alone at least 225,000 people were driven from their homes, communities and livelihoods by political and drug-related violence. Of these, approximately 53 percent were women and children. In contrast to the privileged few from the wealthier strata of Colombian society that have managed to immigrate to the United States, the vast impoverished majority of displaced Colombians have found themselves condemned to roam the country as internal migrants in search of work, food, shelter and safety. In mid-1999 the United Nations reported that current aid and other efforts by the Colombian government to help the displaced "have proven absolutely insufficient, causing a deplorable situation of human suffering."⁵⁴

A 1999 study of Colombia's displaced population found that paramilitary groups were responsible for 47 percent of all forced displacements in recent years. The guerrillas -- especially the FARC and the ELN -- were held responsible for 35 percent. State security forces accounted for 8 percent, unknown criminal groups for 7 percent and drug traffickers for 1 percent.⁵⁵

Most of the displaced have been forced to flee their villages as a result of incursions, massacres, death threats or land seizures carried out by the right-wing militias or by the leftist guerrillas. Indeed, many observers contend that both the right-wing groups and the Marxist insurgents alike employ strategies of systematic regional "cleansing" to rid areas of people who do not support them and then turn over the abandoned lands to their followers or family members. Colombian air force anti-guerrilla bombings and army raids have, nonetheless, also been significant complicating factors in many rural areas as has the U.S.-backed anti-drug campaign -- particularly aerial spraying of the coca and opium poppy crops -- carried out by the Colombian government.⁵⁶

⁵³ On March 11, 2000, Francisco Santos, a journalist with the Bogota daily newspaper *El Tiempo* and a leader of the Pais Libre peace movement that organized the October 1999 peace marches in which some 12 million Colombians participated, was forced into exile in the United States after the discovery of a FARC-inspired plot to murder him. In all, nine Colombian journalists have been assassinated in Colombia by various armed groups in the last 15 months, more than three hundred have received death threats, and at least 11 besides Santos have gone into exile. Agence France Press. "Existe un complot para matarme," *El Nuevo Herald*, 13 de marzo de 2000; The Associated Press, "Peace Protests Planned in Colombia," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2000; Henry Orrego, "Salida de figuras publicas muestra dimension de la violencia en Colombia," *El Nuevo Herald*, 14 de marzo de 2000.

⁵⁴ Sergio F. Kovaleski, "Thousands Roam Colombia to Escape Brutal Rural War," *The Washington Post*, August 11, 1999, p. A01; Reuters, "Se han desplazado un million 700 mil colombianos por la guerra," *La Jornada*, November 25, 1999.

⁵⁵ Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES), *Crisis humanitaria y catastrofe social*. Bogota: Codhes, November 1999.

⁵⁶ Kovaleski, op cit.

Some of the displaced manage to find refuge with relatives in nearby communities, but with constantly escalating violence this “solution” has often left them exposed to the risk of being uprooted a second or even third time within weeks or months. The few government-established refuge camps available are typically overcrowded and frequently vulnerable to violent reprisals from one side or the other in the on-going conflicts convulsing the nation’s rural areas. Tens of thousands have been left no alternative but to swell the ranks of rural migrant laborers working in the illicit coca or opium fields as “raspachines” or “scrapers” harvesting coca leaves or collecting opium gum from poppy flowers—the only gainful employment remaining in many violence-torn rural areas.⁵⁷

Hundreds of thousands of others have migrated from the countryside to Colombia’s urban areas where housing, schooling, health care and jobs are scarce, especially given the country’s deep economic recession in the late 1990s.⁵⁸ Consequently, begging, prostitution and violent crime in Colombia’s urban centers skyrocketed over the 1990s. Medellin, for example, following the demise of the Medellin drug cartel in the early 1990s, witnessed the proliferation of criminal youth gangs – some 138 according to recent reports—often affiliated with major criminal organizations.⁵⁹ Bogota, Cali, and other major cities have all suffered similar dramatic increases in migration, delinquency and common criminality over the last decade.⁶⁰

The spiraling violence and massive population displacements in the countryside have also driven thousands of dispossessed peasants into the ranks of either the guerrillas or the paramilitaries. Although all sides deny that they pay their troops regular wages, they do admit to payments of irregular stipends to impoverished rural youths (or their families) as part of their efforts to recruit new combatants into their organizations. Children as young as 8 to 10 years of age are often used as spies or scouts and teenagers (both boys and girls) are routinely trained and deployed as fighters. Some are simply kidnapped and others are taken, often against their will, in lieu of payment of “taxes” or repayment of family debts. But many of Colombia’s displaced youth find joining up with one side or the other to be their only viable life-option.⁶¹

The Marxist guerrillas often stage “consciousness-raising” political sessions in the peasant communities where they hold sway to attract new adherents to their groups and they routinely furnish food, shelter, uniforms, weapons and even basic education to the young people who enlist. Marxist ideological indoctrination is an integral part of the training for new arrivals. The paramilitaries espouse anti-Communist doctrines but are typically less concerned with ideology than the rebels. They rely primarily on material incentives and desires for revenge against the guerrillas to attract recruits. Interviews with

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ El Tiempo, “El ‘boom’ de las invasiones,” *El Tiempo*, 8 de marzo de 2000.

⁵⁹ Tim Johnson, “Colombia’s Child Soldiers,” *The Miami Herald*, January 23, 2000.

⁶⁰ Larry Rohter, “Crisis in Colombia as Civil Strife Uproots Peasants,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 1999; Semana, “Violencia joven,” *Revista Semana*, Edición 932, Marzo 27, 2000; Semana, “Los acuerdos de paz,” *Revista Semana*, Edición 932, Marzo 27, 2000.

⁶¹ Tim Johnson, op cit.

former rebels who have been captured by the army or have deserted reveal that few teenagers express firm Marxist ideological convictions and that many speak of changing sides – either signing up with the paramilitaries or a criminal gang -- once they are released from custody. In short, for many displaced youths the decision to join the guerrillas or the militias is a “rational economic choice” dictated by which group dominates in a particular area or region rather than an ideological commitment. The lack of adequate governmental programs and resources to deal with the displaced masses literally leaves many with no realistic economic alternative. If and when Colombia’s internal conflicts finally give way to formal peace, crime rates will almost certainly continue to soar among the uneducated, unemployed and maladapted youths and young adults who have been forcibly uprooted from their homes and families and irreparably traumatized by the violence that have endured.⁶²

Colombia’s Internal Conflicts and Regional Security

President Pastrana’s peace initiative has also been hindered by the growing spillover from the nation’s internal conflicts into surrounding countries. Colombian guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug traffickers now routinely cross over into the neighboring territories of Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador for safe haven, supplies, arms trafficking and drug smuggling. Incidents of cross-border kidnappings and assassinations have also risen dramatically in recent years. And thousands of Colombia’s displaced peasants have sought refuge across the borders in Venezuela and Panama.

After President Hugo Chavez assumed the presidency in Venezuela in February 1999, Colombo-Venezuelan relations deteriorated rapidly. Chavez immediately accused Colombia of failing to control its borders properly and then announced that he might open negotiations with the FARC directly rather than await results from Pastrana’s flagging peace process. Given his populist, anti-establishment and vaguely “revolutionary” rhetoric, some observers in Colombia feared that he might provide clandestine support for the FARC or even grant them “belligerent status”. While in practice Chavez did none of these things during 1999, bilateral relations between the two neighbors remained tense and uneasy at the outset of 2000.⁶³

Although less public, similar tensions have also cropped up in Colombia’s bilateral relations with Brazil, Peru and Ecuador over the last year and a half. During 1999, all three countries sent substantial military reinforcements to their borders with Colombia to strengthen their defenses against cross-border incursions. As the primary route for gunrunning and drug smuggling in and out of Colombia and a key zone of conflict between the FARC and the AUC paramilitaries, however, the Panama-Colombian border was by far the most contentious of Colombia’s bilateral relations in

⁶² Ibid; Rafael Prieto Sanjuan, “Conflicto Armado en Colombia y Desplazamiento Forzado: Que Proteccion?” *Revista IIDH*, No. 28, (Julio-Diciembre 1998) pp. 39-68.

⁶³ *Semana*, “Trafico de armas: La conexion venezolana,” *Revista Semana*, Edicion 898, Julio 19 de 1999; Servicios de *El Nuevo Herald*, “Chavez no tratara directamente con la guerrilla colombiana,” *El Nuevo Herald*, 17 de agosto de 1999; Gerardo Reyes, “Advertencia para Chavez: Manos Fuera de Colombia!,” *El Nuevo Herald*, 2 de octubre de 1999.

1999. The departure of U.S. troops from the Canal Zone at the end of the year and the limited military capacity of Panama's National Police raised serious questions about the future security of the canal itself.⁶⁴

From the U.S. perspective, the Colombia's inability to secure its own borders or to curb cross-border drug trafficking and guerrilla incursions effectively converted the country into a serious threat to regional security in northern South America. Over 1999 the Clinton administration worked to "contain" the Colombian "threat" by pressing Colombia's neighbors to form a "Group of Friends" to intervene diplomatically (and perhaps even militarily) in the Colombian crisis. The reluctance of the neighboring country-governments to commit to this U.S. initiative was apparent from the outset and Washington's diplomatic efforts produced no meaningful collective response vis a vis Colombia. This failure, along with growing U.S. concern over Colombia's internal stability, ultimately prompted Washington in late 1999 to propose major unilateral increases in U.S. assistance to Colombia designed to bolster the Pastrana administration's capacity to deal with the country's mounting problems.⁶⁵

Drug Trafficking, Guerrilla Warfare and U.S.-Colombian Relations

Already deeply troubled by skyrocketing drug production and trafficking, escalating guerrilla and paramilitary violence, and deteriorating political and economic conditions in Colombia, as early as March 1, 1998, Washington opted once again to "certify" Colombia as "fully cooperating" with the U.S.-led war on drugs for the first time since 1994. In 1995, the Samper administration had been "decertified", but was granted a "national security waiver" by the Clinton administration that permitted a continuation of U.S. aid to Colombia. In 1996 and 1997, the Samper government was decertified outright and the flow of U.S. aid was severely curtailed (except to the National Police). Although Clinton did not ultimately impose trade sanctions on Colombia as the U.S. legislation authorizes in cases of decertification, Washington's use of "coercive" diplomacy or diplomatic "blackmail" during this period did exert a profoundly chilling effect on overall business activity and foreign investment inflows from 1996 onward.⁶⁶

Combined with the global economic slowdown, deepening recessions in neighboring Brazil, Venezuela and Ecuador, and Samper's own populist and clientelistic economic mismanagement during his term, U.S. decertification helped to send the Colombian economy into a tailspin in 1997-8 from which it has yet to recover. Indeed, in

⁶⁴ Bruce Bagley, "Panama-Colombia Border Conflicts could Threaten the Canal." Special to CNN Interactive (<http://cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/panama.canal/stories/border/>) December 1999.

⁶⁵ Although top U.S. officials fueled Colombian expectations of a major new U.S. aid package throughout the second half of 1999, partisan bickering and intense disputes over budgetary priorities between congressional Republicans and Democrats led to the tabling of Clinton's initial aid request in the U.S. Congress in late 1999. See Michael Shifter, "The United States and Colombia: Partners in Ambiguity," *Current History*, February 2000, p. 51.

⁶⁶ Bruce Bagley, "Hablando Duro: La politica internacional antinarcoicos de los Estados Unidos en los anos noventa," in Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, compilador, *Colombia y Estados Unidos: Problemas y Perspectivas*. Bogota: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1998, pp. 103-118

1999 Colombia experienced its worst economic recession in 70 years as the economy contracted by almost 6 percent while unemployment levels topped 18 percent.⁶⁷ The severity of Colombia's present economic crisis and the widespread popular discontent caused by it have greatly compounded the problems of common criminality and governability faced by President Pastrana during his first year and a half in office while simultaneously fueling and emboldening the country's guerrillas. The guerrillas' actions – kidnappings, infrastructural sabotage, escalation of armed conflict – have in turn exacerbated and prolonged the country's current economic downturn.⁶⁸

By early 1998 the deteriorating situation in Colombia had become so worrisome to U.S. authorities that, despite the fact that President Samper's tarnished four-year term was not scheduled to end until August 1998, Washington proceeded to recertify Colombia on March 1 anyway. This decision cleared the way for the Clinton administration to provide US\$ 289 million in counternarcotics aid to Colombia in Fiscal Year (FY) 1999, a sum which immediately catapulted Colombia into the position of the third-ranking recipient of U.S. foreign aid world-wide, behind only Israel and Egypt. Because the U.S. fiscal year does not begin until October 1 of each calendar year, the new U.S. aid funds began to flow into Colombia only in late 1998 (well after President Pastrana took office on August 7). This timing assured that the tainted Samper government received no direct benefits from the FY 1999 increase in U.S. assistance.⁶⁹

Once Pastrana took office, U.S.-Colombian bilateral relations warmed rapidly. In October 1998 President Clinton hosted President Pastrana in a state visit to Washington, clearly underscoring the contrast with former President Samper who had been officially denied a visa to travel to the United States in 1996. Although skeptical, the Clinton administration publicly endorsed President Pastrana's peace overtures toward the FARC guerrillas in late 1998. In fact, at the request of President Pastrana, the Clinton administration even agreed to send emissaries to meet secretly with representatives of the FARC in Costa Rica in December 1998 to discuss the FARC's willingness to undertake drug eradication programs as part of the peace process. Once publicly revealed to the Republican majority in the U.S. Congress, however, these secret talks proved so

⁶⁷ Henry Orrego, "Saldo en rojo muestra la economica de Colombia," El Nuevo Herald, 7 de agosto de 1999, p. 5B; Semana, "Economia y Negocios: En tierra de ciego..." Revista Semana, Edicion 879, Marzo 8 de 1999; Semana, "Economica y Negocios: El Chorro," Revista Semana, Edicion 913, Noviembre 1 de 1999.

⁶⁸ Semana, "Luz al final de tunel," Revista Semana, Edicion 924, Enero 17, 2000; Semana, "Como nos ven en Wall Street?" Revista Semana, Edicion 931, Marzo 6, 2000.

⁶⁹ The US\$ 289 million was three times the amount of aid that Colombia had received from the United States in FY 1998 during the last full year of the Samper government. Under Samper, virtually all of the reduced flow of U.S. counter-narcotics aid to Colombia was channeled through the National Police headed by General Jose Rosso Serrano rather than the military, which was viewed by U.S. authorities to be corrupt and deeply involved in human rights abuses. GAO, Drug Control: U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts in Colombia Face Continuing Challenges. Washington DC: United States General Accounting Office, Feb 12, 1998, GAO/NSIAD-98-60; GAO, Drug Control: Narcotics Threat From Colombia Continues to Grow. Washington DC: United States General Accounting Office, June 1999, GAO/NSIAD-99-136.

controversial in Washington that the Clinton administration was forced to disavow them and pledge to refrain from any future discussions with FARC “terrorists”.⁷⁰

The Clinton administration continued to back Pastrana’s peace initiative throughout 1999 in its public diplomacy. Yet, as the negotiation process bogged down month after month, key U.S. policy makers clearly reached the conclusion that the FARC would never negotiate seriously unless compelled to do so by defeat on the battlefield. Indicating an important shift, in March 1999 Washington agreed to begin sharing U.S. intelligence on drug trafficking and guerrilla activity with Pastrana government and the Colombian military, including data obtained from satellite observation of the zona de despeje⁷¹

By mid-1999 more than 300 American personnel were stationed in Colombia: 200 U.S. military trainers and advisors and more than 100 Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives. Drug control remained the stated U.S. policy priority in Colombia. The primary U.S. mission was to train and equip a new, 950-man mobile anti-narcotics battalion within the Colombian army.⁷²

But stalemate in the peace process and setbacks suffered by the military in combat against the FARC over 1998-99, combined with mounting evidence of FARC’s deepening involvement in the drug trade, forced Washington to accept that the war on drugs could no longer be neatly distinguished from the guerrilla war. At the urging of Washington, in September 1999 the Pastrana government released a document entitled “Plan Colombia” in which it set out its general strategy for dealing with the multiple ills besetting the country from drug trafficking and political violence through humanitarian crisis and economic stagnation to institutional corruption. The price tag attached to the plan was US\$ 7.5 billion over a three-year period of which Colombia promised to foot US\$ 4 billion. It was hoped that Washington would provide US\$ 1.5 to 2 billion and that the remainder would come from the multilateral financial institutions (e.g., IMF, World Bank, and IDB) and the European Union.⁷³

After failing to push an earlier request through the U.S. Congress in late 1999, on January 11, 2000, the Clinton administration submitted a new bill to the U.S. Congress for a US\$ 1.28 billion emergency aid program for Colombia. Intended to help Bogota fight the country’s mushrooming narcotics trade and to prop up its democracy over the next two years, about half of the money was included as a supplemental budget request

⁷⁰ El Nuevo Herald, “Estados Unidos y guerrilla de Colombia hablan de paz,” El Nuevo Herald, 4 de enero de 1999. The murders by FARC guerrillas of three American human rights workers in March 1999 made any renewal of contacts between U.S. diplomats and the FARC politically unthinkable.

⁷¹ Madeleine Albright, “Colombia’s Struggles and How We Can Help,” The New York Times, August 10, 1999; Reuters, “High-level Visit Signal U.S. Alarm Over Colombia,” The Washington Post, August 11, 1999, p A15; Personal interviews conducted by the author with U.S. government officials during 1999.

⁷² Semana, “El Cheque de Tio Sam,” Revista Semana, Edición 924, Enero 17, 2000.

⁷³ Presidencia de la Republica, Plan Colombia. Bogota: Presidencia de la Republica, Septiembre de 1999. Clearly indicating that it was intended primarily to convince the United States to support the Pastrana government, Plan Colombia was initially written in English and first circulated in Washington before it was made available in Spanish to the Colombian Congress in Bogota.

for FY 2000. The other half was incorporated in Clinton's budget proposal to Congress for FY 2001 presented on February 7, 2000. Added to the US\$ 300 million previously appropriated for Colombia in the FY 2000 budget, total U.S. assistance to Colombia in the next two years, if approved by congress, will reach almost US\$ 1.58 billion, nearly doubling the amount provided over the entire decade of the 1990s.⁷⁴

In effect, with this new aid proposal the Clinton administration unveiled a dramatic shift in U.S. strategy toward Colombia. In 1999, as in previous years, virtually all of Washington's anti-narcotics aid had been channeled through the National Police rather than the military. The new package in, contrast, assigned the bulk of future U.S. assistance to the Colombian armed forces (army, air force, and navy) while substantially reducing aid flows to the police. Of the total US\$ 1.573 billion to be provided over the next two years, almost two-thirds - US\$ 940 million - will go to the military, versus US\$ 96 million for the police. To underwrite training, equipment and the purchase of 30 Black Hawk and 33 Huey helicopters for two new anti-narcotics battalions, the army is slated to receive US\$ 599 million (US\$ 512 million in FY 2000 and 88 million in 2001). For interdiction activities, the air force and the navy will get US\$ 341 million (US\$ 238 in FY 2000 and 103 million in 2001).⁷⁵

While White House National Security Advisor for Latin America Arturo Valenzuela claimed that the new U.S. aid had "nothing to do" with the anti-guerrilla struggle, U.S. Drug Czar Barry McCaffery more forthrightly admitted that the money would make an "important" contribution to the Colombian army's fight against the guerrillas. In practice, Washington's continuing rhetorical efforts to maintain a strict division between U.S. anti-narcotics aid and the Colombian military's anti-guerrilla operations are both disingenuous and futile. Current Colombian reality simply does not lend itself to such facile distinctions. Indeed, during his late January 2000 trip to Washington to shore up U.S. congressional support for President Clinton's aid package for Colombia, President Pastrana openly recognized that to the extent that the FARC are "in the business", U.S. anti-narcotics funds and equipment would be used against the guerrillas.⁷⁶

Implications of the Shift in U.S. Policy Priorities toward Colombia

At bottom, the Clinton administration has become progressively more concerned about the stability of Colombian democracy and the regional security implications of a potential state collapse in Colombia than it is about drug control per se, although the two obviously remain closely intertwined. Indeed, in mid-January 2000 Secretary of State Madeleine Albright explicitly singled out Colombia, along with three other countries (Nigeria, Indonesia and Ukraine) for special attention, because "[e]ach can be a major

⁷⁴ Secretary of State Madelaine K. Albright, "Statement on U.S. Assistance to Colombia." Washington DC: Office of the Spokesman U.S. Department of State, January 11, 2000; The White House, "Fact Sheet: Colombia Assistance Package." Grand Canyon, Arizona: Office of the Press Spokesman, The White House, January 11, 2000.

⁷⁵ Sergio Gomez Maseri, "Clinton le apuesta a Colombia," El Tiempo, 12 de enero de 2000.

⁷⁶ Luis Torres de la Llosa, "La Ayuda de Estados Unidos ira contra las FARC si trafican droga," El Nuevo Herald, 27de enero de 2000.

force for stability and progress in its region, and each is at a critical point along the democratic path.”⁷⁷ De facto, Colombia is now viewed in Washington as the “problem” country in the Western Hemisphere and, as such, has emerged as one of the main focal points of U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America in 2000.

While such heightened attention from Washington is often accompanied by sorely needed resources, past experience indicates that it also typically implies greater U.S. “conditionality” and increased U.S. involvement in the domestic affairs of the country in question. The Colombian case will be no exception. In the first place, Washington has stipulated that the greatest part of U.S. assistance be used for drug control operations in the south of the country where two-thirds of the coca crop is grown and where the FARC is most active in protecting fields, processing laboratories and landing strips. Intensification of government conflict with FARC forces would appear to be an inevitable outcome of the U.S. mandate given to Bogota.

Second, the Clinton administration is keenly aware of past Colombian military involvement in human rights abuses and has tied increased U.S. aid directly to permanent monitoring of the activities of the new anti-narcotics battalions and to U.S. certification that no police or military involvement with paramilitary groups occurs. In fact, US\$ 93 million are explicitly earmarked in the new budget proposal for strengthening human rights, the administration of justice and democracy in Colombia (US\$ 45 million in FY 2000 and 48 million in 2001). Conscious of the likelihood of heightened scrutiny of the human rights record of his embattled armed forces, during a trip to Washington (his fourth in the first 18 months of his presidency) in late January 2000, Pastrana explicitly asked that American aid not be tied to human rights. “We know that we still have a lot of problems ... [but] I don’t think it will be good for the aid to try to put all kinds of conditions on it.”⁷⁸ Despite Pastrana’s preferences, however, Congressional Democrats like Senator Patrick J. Leahy (Vermont) appeared determined to press for such conditions. “I don’t want us to make the mistake in the drug war that we made in the cold war, where we gave money ... regardless of their human rights records as long as they were anti-Communist.”⁷⁹

Third, Washington has, somewhat contradictorily, stipulated that all operations of Colombia’s new, U.S.-financed anti-narcotics units must relate directly to drug control missions rather than general anti-guerrilla actions. This distinction will unquestionably be hard to make in the field. Yet non-compliance will almost certainly provoke intense political debate within the U.S. Congress and could potentially lead to denial of future U.S. assistance. The quantum leap in total U.S. aid in 2000 and the accompanying conditionality, in effect, convert Colombian military performance into a high-profile

⁷⁷ Reuters, “Albright Declares ‘New Relationship’ with Colombia,” The New York Times, January 25, 2000; Steven Dudley, “Albright Discusses Anti-Drug Aid in Colombia,” The Washington Post, January 15, 2000, A20.

⁷⁸ Tim Golden, “Colombian Asks Congress for Aid Not Tied to Human Rights,” The New York Times, January 26, 2000.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*; The Associated Press, “Doubts over US-Colombia Policy,” The New York Times, February 15, 2000.

“intermestic” (both international and domestic) issue within the American political system to an even greater extent than it has been in the past.⁸⁰

Finally, U.S. officials have also urged that Colombia step up its coca and opium poppy eradication efforts. In compliance, on January 21, 2000, the Colombian National Police pledged to expand their aerial herbicidal spraying campaign from the 40,000 hectares targeted in 1999 to 80,000 in 2000. A total of US\$ 145 million is earmarked in the new aid package for alternative development projects over the next two years (US\$ 92 million in FY 2000 and 53 million in 2001). If fulfilled, however, these ambitious fumigation goals are likely to displace tens of thousands of coca growing peasants in FARC-dominated regions in the south, inflict considerable human suffering in the process, and fuel massive civic protests against the Pastrana government. Although the intent of this policy is clearly to weaken the FARC by reducing its income from coca cultivation, the unintended outcome may well be to strengthen the guerrilla movement by driving thousands of embittered and poverty-stricken peasants into its ranks.⁸¹

The numbers of U.S. military trainers and advisors, DEA agents, CIA operatives, and Agency for International Development (AID) personnel in Colombia may also rise substantially along with the upsurge in U.S. aid flows over the next few years. In light of past bitter experiences in Vietnam, there is virtually zero probability that Washington will send American combat troops to fight in Colombia anytime in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, the shift in U.S. strategy currently underway signals unmistakably that Washington is no longer targeting Colombia’s drug cartels so much as it is the country’s surging “narco-guerrilla.” The possibility that some U.S. military and/or civilian personnel could be killed as the fighting heats up is quite real and would surely drag Colombia even deeper into U.S. domestic political debates.⁸²

Underscoring this possibility, in late February 2000 a senior FARC commander, Raul Reyes, stated that his organization viewed the U.S. aid package as nothing more than a thinly disguised declaration of war by Washington on the FARC. He, in turn, declared “war” on the United States and vowed that the FARC would fight against foreign intervention in Colombia.⁸³ To avoid exposing U.S. military personnel and risking the U.S. domestic outcry that would inevitably ensue, Washington may opt

⁸⁰ *Semana*, “Guerra de dos mundos,” *Revista Semana*, Edición 930, Febrero 28, 2000; Michael Radu, “Aid to Colombia: A Study in Muddled Arguments.” Distributed by e-mail by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, PA [mailto:fpri@fpri.org] pp.1-4.

⁸¹ On the counterproductive effects of coca eradication programs in Colombia see Coletta Youngers, “Coca Eradication Efforts in Colombia,” in WOLA, ed., *WOLA Briefing Series: Issues in International Drug Policy*. Washington DC: WOLA, June 2, 1997; Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, *Estados Unidos y la Fumigación de Cultivos Ilícitos en Colombia: La Funesta Rutinización de una Estrategia Desacertada*. Mimeo, Buenos Aires Argentina, Febrero 2000.

⁸² John P. Sweeney, “Tread Cautiously in Colombia’s Civil War.” Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation, Background No. 1264, March 25, 1999; Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, “Colombian Catastrophe,” *The World Today*, Vol. 56, No. 1, January 2000, pp. 13-15; Gabriel Marcella and Donald Schultz, “Colombia’s Three Wars: U.S. Strategy at the Crossroads,” *Strategic Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 (winter 2000): pp. 3-22.

⁸³ Reuters, “Colombia Rebels ‘Declare War’ on United States,” *The New York Times*, February 29, 2000; The Associated Press, “Colombia Rebel Rips Pastrana Plan,” *The Washington Post*, February 29, 2000.

instead for the well-established private business practice known as “outsourcing.” This strategy would involve hiring civilian contractors (many of whom are highly qualified former U.S. service members) to support its aid program rather than sharply increasing levels of U.S. military staffing. While perhaps expedient from Washington’s viewpoint, human rights organizations such as Amnesty International warn that such a strategy raises serious questions of accountability: “The Defense Department itself, in its training, has to comply with certain human-rights guidelines because they are mandated by law to do so. But it is unclear how far that mandate extends when one is talking about essentially private actors.”⁸⁴

Both Bogota and Washington would certainly prefer that the FARC react by accelerating the pace of peace negotiations and by ending their links to the drug trade. According to a recent poll sponsored by the El Tiempo news organization in Bogota, 70 percent of all Colombians favor the planned increases in U.S. assistance to their country. But fewer than half believes that the aid will help to reduce levels of armed conflict. The more likely scenario, according to most respondents, is one of escalating conflict between the FARC and the Colombian military, at least for the foreseeable future. Indeed, most analysts believe that it is likely that the FARC will respond with a major new offensive that will include intensified infrastructural sabotage, increased kidnappings and assassinations, and mass peasant mobilizations to protest stepped up coca and poppy eradication programs.⁸⁵

Conclusions

The implicit logic of the new U.S. strategy is to force the FARC to negotiate seriously with the Pastrana government by demonstrating to them on the battlefield that they have more to gain from a peace settlement than from a continuation of the war. Whether this strategy will work at all is very much open to doubt. What should not be doubted is that the new U.S. aid package sets the stage for an even more violent and bloody phase in Colombia’s ongoing internal conflicts over the next few years. Moreover, it would be nothing short of delusional to believe that Clinton’s present two-year aid proposal will be enough to turn the tide. If the strategy has any chance of working at all, Washington will have to sustain its heightened levels of funding for Bogota for the better part of the next decade and additional donors will have to be found (most likely in Europe) to supplement U.S. commitments.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Matthew Brigs, “Contractors Playing Increasing Role in U.S. Drug War,” Dallas Morning News, February 27, 2000.

⁸⁵ El Tiempo, “Buenos ojos a la ayuda de E.U.,” El Tiempo, 23 de enero de 2000.

⁸⁶ When pressed by skeptical congressmen during his testimony on the Clinton aid package before the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees foreign aid, the Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, General Barry McCaffrey, responded: “I personally think we have to think of it as a five-year effort.” By then, he claimed, there would be “substantial reductions of drug production.” Some of his critics on the subcommittee expressed fears that the proposal might lead the United States into another open-ended, “Vietnam-like” intervention and other argued that the funds could be better spent at home to control the demand for drugs in America. Alan Fram, “US: Colombia Drug War to Take Five Years,” The

Even assuming sustained inflows of U.S. and European assistance many critics remain skeptical about the prospects for ending political violence and drug trafficking in Colombia with the strategy currently embraced by Bogota and Washington. In broad strokes, the critics can be divided into two basic groups or camps. On the one hand, there is a “hard-line” that claims that the FARC is now so deeply involved in (and well financed by) the drug trade and other illegal activities that it will never agree to a peace settlement that obliges it to lay down its arms and give up its illicit sources of income. The logic of this camp leads to the conclusion that the FARC will first have to be defeated militarily in a protracted counter-insurgency war before peace may be reestablished or drug cultivation curbed in Colombia. Washington should recognize this reality, the hard-liners claim, “. . . first, by declaring the absolute primacy of the war against the communists, rather than the war on drugs.”⁸⁷

From this perspective, Washington’s insistence on distinguishing between anti-drug and anti-guerrilla operations (and funding only the former) is considered artificial and self-defeating. Moreover, tying U.S. aid to respect for human rights and the elimination of military and police links to paramilitary groups will only hamstring Colombia’s security forces while leaving the guerrillas free to operate unfettered by such constraints. In the final analysis, the hard-liners’ skepticism stems from their belief that the Colombian Armed Forces will not be able to defeat the guerrillas, even with U.S. aid, if Washington insists on micro managing the war effort.⁸⁸

Among the hard-liners there are important differences in emphasis that should not be overlooked. Some doubt that even with U.S.-backing that the Colombian elite actually possesses the will to fight. “Why should a single U.S. dollar, to say nothing of a U.S. soldier, be sent to prop up a military in which no Colombian with a high school diploma is required to serve?” “Does the Colombian government—feckless, corrupt and inconstant—deserve our help to survive?”⁸⁹ The basic point of this line of argument is that – as Vietnam revealed -- no amount of U.S. aid will save a regime unable to save itself. It may serve only to prolong the “gruesome” status quo. “The unwanted result of our aid may be to strengthen the current system just enough to preserve all of its worst characteristics, maintaining the balance of evils.”⁹⁰

Such doubts do not necessarily lead hard-liners to reject the need for the current Clinton aid package. Indeed, even the most wary believe that the aid should be sent to provide the Pastrana government a “last” chance to demonstrate its will and capacity to “rescue” Colombia from terrorists and narco-guerrillas of all stripes. If Bogota responds effectively, well and good. However, if it does not, most caution that the United States

Washington Post, February 29, 2000. On the difficulties in obtaining resources from the European Union see Hernando Corral G., “Sin Censura: Dinero, Paz y Union Europea,” El Tiempo, 7 de marzo de 2000.

⁸⁷ Radu, op cit. p. 3.

⁸⁸ Ibid. pp. 2-3.

⁸⁹ Ralph Peters, “The U.S. Is Setting a Trap for Itself in Colombia,” The Washington Post, March 5, 2000, p. B01.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. B01

should not deploy American combat troops to fight Colombia's battles. "We must be aware of the 'Saudi syndrome' in which utterly undeserving foreign regimes manipulate us into doing their fighting for them."⁹¹ "If Bogota refuses to fund its own defense, Washington should not pick up the slack."⁹² In such a scenario, the better alternative, some –although certainly not all-- believe, would be to allow the current corrupt, oligarchical and morally bankrupt regime to collapse rather than to postpone its death throes indefinitely at the cost of American lives. In the wake of such a collapse, they admit, the United States might end up having to fight in Colombia to protect its strategic interests anyway. But, they claim, Washington could do so as part of a regional consensus on the need for intervention and as a member of a coalition fighting in support of a "worthy" new regime rather than artificially propping up "unworthy" incumbents.⁹³

On the other hand, there is a "reformist-line" that contends that the country's ongoing internal conflicts will never be permanently resolved unless Bogota first undertakes major socio-economic and political reforms designed to address the glaring inequities in Colombian society and to democratize its corrupt, elitist and exclusionary political system. From this perspective, current U.S. strategy reflects neither a realistic plan to fight drugs nor a viable long-term program for the restoration of peace and stability. "Washington should have learned long ago that partnership with an abusive and ineffective Latin American military rarely produces positive results and often undermines democracy in the region."⁹⁴

U.S. rhetoric aside, the reformers believe that Washington's aid package is far too heavily skewed toward military solutions and devotes far too few resources to "institution building" and structural economic reform. Reform advocates do not ignore the need to reorganize and strengthen the Colombian armed forces. Indeed, they view this task as an essential component of institution building. But they underscore the crucial importance of strict observance of human rights by the military and of severing ties between government forces and the paramilitaries, rather than equipping them to fight a protracted counterinsurgency war. They also emphasize the fundamental need to end military impunity by subordinating military personnel to civilian judicial scrutiny and sanctions. This, in turn, will require Washington and Bogota to assign higher priority and more funds to the reform of the debilitated Colombian judicial system. According to this logic, the US \$45 million in 2000 (\$48 million in 2001) earmarked for strengthening human rights, the administration of justice and democracy is woefully inadequate and provides a revealing indicator of the misplaced priorities contained in the Clinton administration's current aid proposal.

Equally revealing are the comparatively low levels of funding (US \$145 million over the next two years) designated for alternative development programs. If carried out, Colombia's pledge to destroy 80,000 hectares of coca in 2000 alone will inevitably displace tens of thousands of peasants from the coca growing zones in the south of the

⁹¹ Ibid., p. B01

⁹² Radu, op cit., p. 4

⁹³ Peter, op cit., p. B01

⁹⁴ The New York Times, "Dangerous Plans for Colombia," The New York Times, February 13, 2000.

country. The aid resources contemplated in the current budget proposal before the U.S. Congress will simply not be enough to deal with the newly displaced population, much less to address the problems of the almost two million Colombians who have been previously dislocated during the last fifteen years of conflict. Moreover, the priority given to the Colombian military leaves little or nothing for desperately needed crop substitution and alternative development programs or infrastructural investments in roads, bridges, schools and public health facilities. Rather than weaning the Colombian peasantry from coca cultivation, the present strategy is much more likely to “balloon” coca production farther out onto the vast agricultural frontier of Colombia’s eastern plains, into its Amazon region and deeper into Brazil and other neighboring countries. At the same time, at least some of Colombia’s increasingly desperate peasant population is likely to be driven into the FARC, other guerrilla bands or the paramilitaries.

While generally embracing a more “development-oriented” U.S. policy approach towards Colombia, some reformers also place heavy emphasis on the need for Washington to spend more money on reducing U.S. demand. Such critics maintain that the U.S. has consistently underfunded prevention, education, treatment and rehabilitation programs at home. “Just compare the \$1.6 billion request for Colombia during an 18-month period with the \$2 billion for all prevention and treatment in the proposed 2001 budget....”⁹⁵ “Frankly, it will be much more valuable to America’s health over the long haul to spend money domestically than on Blackhawk helicopters....”⁹⁶

Clearly, Washington’s current strategy towards Colombia fully satisfies neither the hard-liners nor the reformers. In effect, it seeks to straddle the line between them. The drug war remains the formal priority and human rights monitoring a condition of U.S. aid. Yet the bulk of U.S. assistance will be channeled into the Colombian military rather than into socio-economic and institutional reforms. This “two track” strategy may well prove capable of propping up the Colombian political regime at least for the next few years, but it is unlikely to foster either lasting peace or enduring political stability in the coming decade.

⁹⁵ Seattle Post-Intelligencer Editorial Board, “Spraying Coca Crop is a Misplaced Priority,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, March 9, 2000.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

