

# Countering Threats to Security and Stability in a Failing State

## Lessons from Colombia

A Report of the CSIS Americas Program

### AUTHORS

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Johanna Mendelson  
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### FOREWORD

John J. Hamre

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# FOREWORD

John J. Hamre

Events of the last decade have taught us that the United States cannot ignore states that appear to be on the verge of failure. Nations that cannot control their own territory run the risk of succumbing to the threat of armed insurgents and international criminal gangs as well as offering a safe haven to terrorists. Weak states under pressure from such challenges imperil their neighbors as problems migrate over porous borders.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the United States and its NATO partners became engaged in a struggle to eliminate the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and to build a state capable of governing its national territory. By the time we were fighting against terrorism in Afghanistan, however, the United States was already involved in an effort to promote stability in a weak state much closer to home. Colombia, a democratic nation and long-standing U.S. friend, was in deep trouble. Beleaguered by well-armed insurgents bent on overthrowing the state and by paramilitary forces whose presence gravely undermined legitimate authority—all financed by illegal narcotics—Colombia teetered on the brink of disorder.

The story of how Colombia was able to reverse this decline by taking control of previously ungoverned areas of the country and providing security to a far larger portion of its citizens may offer important lessons for other imperiled states. U.S. policymakers also should take note of the Colombian experience. Since 2000, the United States has supplied Colombia with nearly \$7 billion in assistance, making it the largest recipient of U.S. aid in the Americas. Although this assistance to Colombia has stimulated considerable debate and some controversy, the bottom line has been irrefutable gains in security and stability.

This report by the CSIS Americas Program assesses Colombia's record in strengthening legitimate state authority and extracts lessons learned from that experience. It analyzes key variables related to improvements in the capability of the national armed forces and police, shifts in strategy and tactics in countering the insurgents, efforts to neutralize paramilitary forces, and the outcome of counter-drug initiatives. The report underscores the centrality of an effective state presence as a precursor to the consolidation of security and development, as well as the salience of the rule of law to solidifying democratic governance. It builds on earlier work by the Americas Program to provide policymakers in Colombia, the United States, and third countries with a balanced, practical vision of what worked in the Colombia context and what did not.

The report also carefully examines U.S. support for Colombia. Focusing unduly on the difficult challenges that still confront Colombia makes it all too easy to overlook the progress achieved by the Colombian people and the relevance of U.S. assistance to that effort. Countering narcotics was the driving force behind the United States' initial engagement with Colombia. This gave way to a

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John J. Hamre has been the president and CEO of CSIS since January 2000.

more nuanced approach that recognized the role of narcotics in fueling internal conflict and at the same time focused on the consolidation of state control. Colombian and U.S. strategies are now in tighter synchronization, aimed at addressing the root causes of the conflict in Colombia through a transitional approach to consolidating security, lowering the profile of the drug industry, and promoting development and poverty alleviation. The Colombia experience also demonstrated the degree to which the outcomes of U.S. foreign assistance can be multiplied when working in tandem with a nation whose leaders and citizens show political will in dealing with their own security problems.

In April 2009 at the Summit of the Americas, President Obama stressed that “as neighbors, we have a responsibility to each other and to our citizens . . . to advance prosperity, security, and liberty.” As the administration implements its policy of partnership with the Americas, the legacy of Colombia should be a key point of reference. The United States’ friendship with Colombia, based on bipartisan support in Congress and sustained, longer-term assistance, has been an important factor in helping to advance security and stability. Important lessons can be derived from that relationship, as well as from the efforts of the Colombians themselves.

Looking ahead, the conclusions drawn in this report should help orient both U.S. and Colombian policymakers as they formulate responses to the challenges of consolidating Colombia’s hard-won gains. The FARC insurgency, however diminished militarily, remains active. Drug production and trafficking still work to undermine the rule of law and, if not carefully controlled, have the potential to fuel the rebirth of more powerful organized crime gangs. Human rights concerns persist, as does the need for improved administration of justice. Underlying these problems are deeper challenges of poverty and inequality that must be addressed.

The variables affecting Colombia are by no means unique, and the lessons derived from that country should not be lost on policymakers dealing with other states facing similar problems, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. From the U.S. perspective, our response to Colombia produced many positive results. We should learn from this experience as we confront the challenges that weak states imply for global security.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colombia in the mid-1990s was in deep trouble. Long a conflictive and violence-prone society, it was beset by a confluence of negative factors exacerbating traditional weaknesses and setting the country on a downward spiral that gravely threatened stability and democracy.

The reversal of this decline, which took place over the course of a decade, has brought Colombia to a point where its national security is no longer threatened by illegal armed groups or criminal elements. The challenge facing the country now is to bring about a transition to a society where legitimate state presence is fortified by effective civilian governance, above all the consolidation of the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the creation of an environment conducive to economic development and poverty reduction.

Colombia's central weakness throughout its history has been the inability of the government to exercise authority over much of the national territory. This sovereignty gap, always a factor in thwarting Colombia's development, catapulted to prominence with the coca boom in the 1990s when previously neglected regions suddenly became the domain of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Army of National Liberation (ELN) guerrillas, who used them as bastions from which to launch attacks against urban areas. Drug production highlighted the traditional problems caused by Colombia's difficult geography and vast ungoverned spaces. Under the combination of a weak central government, an army incapable of standing up to the insurgents, a police force unable to effectively maintain order, even in many urban environments, and the ability of the insurgents and paramilitaries to access supplies and weapons from abroad, legitimate state authority imploded. Levels of violence and human rights abuses—the product of a near-total absence of the rule of law—multiplied many times over.

Recovery from this deep decline began even as the crisis continued to worsen during the administration of President Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002). Pastrana's failed peace process with the FARC underscored that the insurgents were intent on overthrowing the state and had no interest in demobilizing. "Plan Colombia," as designed by Pastrana in 1999 with U.S. input, envisioned a broad-based approach to security and development, correctly highlighting the links between drugs and violence and underscoring the need to improve governance. Although Plan Colombia was an important step in marshalling resources to address Colombia's crisis and in establishing a closer bilateral relationship with the United States, still greater focus needed to be given to the heart of the problem. President Álvaro Uribe (2002–present) understood that the root of the crisis lay in a weak state unable to assert the rule of law in its territory and during his administration channeled political will and resources to meet that challenge.

From the time it took office in 2002, the Uribe administration conducted what is in essence a counterinsurgency campaign. Its civilian and military planners arrived at a strategy based on taking and holding territory, protecting local populations, controlling key geographic corridors

essential to drug trafficking and supply and mobility for the insurgents, and demobilizing paramilitary groups. From the beginning, Uribe understood that this counterinsurgency campaign would be protracted and expensive and that Colombian security forces needed to be much larger and better equipped for the task. Accordingly, he increased the size and capability of both the armed forces and the police. The acquisition of a large and well-maintained helicopter fleet provided crucial air mobility to both. Great advances were made in force training, logistics, supply, and administration with impressive gains in intelligence and communications capability.

One of Uribe's great accomplishments has been to finance security initiatives through special taxes on Colombia's elite. While the size of military budgets grew substantially during Uribe's administration in dollar terms, the proportion of security spending to GDP increased relatively little, and the government dedicated considerably more money to social spending than to security during the entire period.

Improvements in the armed forces and the police, coupled with effective strategic planning and progressively better tactical execution, have rolled back the power of the insurgents since 2002, pushing them away from cities and towns, cutting their mobility corridors, greatly reducing the ranks of their fighters, disrupting their command and control, and cutting them off from their financial base. However, while the FARC has been neutralized militarily and has no hope of defeating the armed forces, it still controls territory, can launch small-scale operations, and shows no sign of seeking to enter into peace talks.

Uribe's success in strengthening legitimate state authority played a large role in bringing about the demobilization of the paramilitary forces. Even though this process has been controversial and remains incomplete, the disarming of tens of thousands of fighters has helped improve the overall security environment in Colombia. The emergence of new criminal gangs, some of which are led and staffed by ex-paramilitaries, is an ongoing challenge for authorities but is a law enforcement problem, not a challenge to the security of the national state.

While weak state sovereignty, not narcotics, has been the central problem of Colombia, drugs have played a highly negative role in ratcheting up pressure against legitimate authority. Concentrated counter-drug efforts by Colombia, with U.S. support, have had a positive cumulative effect that was further enhanced by the demobilization of paramilitaries and by the success of the armed forces in denying territory, mobility, and resources to the insurgents.

The key improvements in the counter-drug area since the advent of Plan Colombia have been the reduction of the profile of narcotics in relation to Colombia's legitimate economy, the dramatic reduction in the flow of drug profits to the FARC, and the removal of the threat—once seen as palpable—that Colombia would become a “narco-state.” Beyond these essential gains, it is likely that overall coca cultivation has fallen as a result of eradication efforts and that cocaine production has also decreased—perhaps substantially. Accurate measures of these variables is difficult at best, but evidence points to a very considerable underestimation of the amount of coca under cultivation at what appeared to have been the apex in 2000–2001 and a positive trend since then.

The drug problem remains a serious one, however—only its scope has been reduced. Narcotics are still the key financial mainstay of the insurgents—albeit at much lower levels—and fuel the “emerging” criminal bands. Corruption from the drug business remains a serious threat to the effectiveness of the state at both the national and local levels and leads to higher rates of crime and continued human rights abuses. As long as demand from the United States and Europe remains high, drugs will continue to be grown, produced, and trafficked in Colombia.

The United States has provided more than \$6.8 billion in assistance to Colombia since the approval of the emergency supplemental in support of Plan Colombia in July 2000. The bulk of these funds were destined for counternarcotics efforts. In 2002, when Congress broadened authorizations to allow U.S. funds to be used for counter-guerrilla as well as counter-drug activities, the greater flexibility enhanced the value of U.S. assistance.

U.S. aid to Colombia has had many positive effects. The very large investment in counter-drug activities played an important role in what appears to be the decline in overall coca and cocaine production that has occurred since 2000 and in rolling back the presence of narcotics as an economic and political force in the country. On the security side, U.S. assistance helped train and equip Colombia's armed forces and police, contributing to their effectiveness and to the success of their initiatives. Several important accomplishments stand out: the acquisition of helicopters; provision of fuel and supplies; pilot training and the development of maintenance capabilities; improvements in the quality of non-commissioned officer training and intelligence and communications capabilities; and greater observance of human rights by the Colombian armed forces and police, although human rights problems still persist.

U.S. assistance provided strong support to Colombia's limited but still important gains in improving the rule of law as well as in efforts to promote human rights and respond to the needs of displaced persons. The results of USAID projects in support of rural and economic development are more difficult to measure, as they often do not produce short-term gains. Efforts at alternative development, however, call into question the value of the concept of replacing illegal drug cultivation with legal crops in areas where the state does not exercise effective control. The Colombian experience points to the need for a holistic approach to development rather than a limited effort to substitute legal crops for coca cultivation.

The United States successfully injected substantial amounts of assistance into Colombia without leaving a large footprint. This blunted both domestic and international criticism of the U.S. role and allowed even controversial policy initiatives, such as aerial spraying, to proceed. Such policies as congressional limitations on the number of U.S. military and civilian personnel in the country at any one time, not assigning U.S. military "advisers" to battalions and brigades, limiting military training largely to Colombian bases, prohibiting U.S. soldiers from engaging in combat, and an early focus on preparing Colombians to take up critical training and maintenance functions all had positive results.

U.S. assistance over time has diminished and will continue to do so as programs and assets are "nationalized." Although such assistance has never been the deciding factor in Colombia's success, it has played an important role—on the security side it provided perhaps 10 percent of the country's total expenditures on security. Had the Colombian people not demonstrated the political will to confront their country's problems, however, no amount of U.S. aid would have turned the tide.

That notwithstanding, U.S. aid remains important to Colombia and it is essential that the two countries work together to develop a practical timetable for the drawdown of support. As this takes place, it is likely that U.S. assistance will be increasingly dedicated to governance efforts, such as the rule of law, which are tightly linked to security, human rights, and social and economic development.

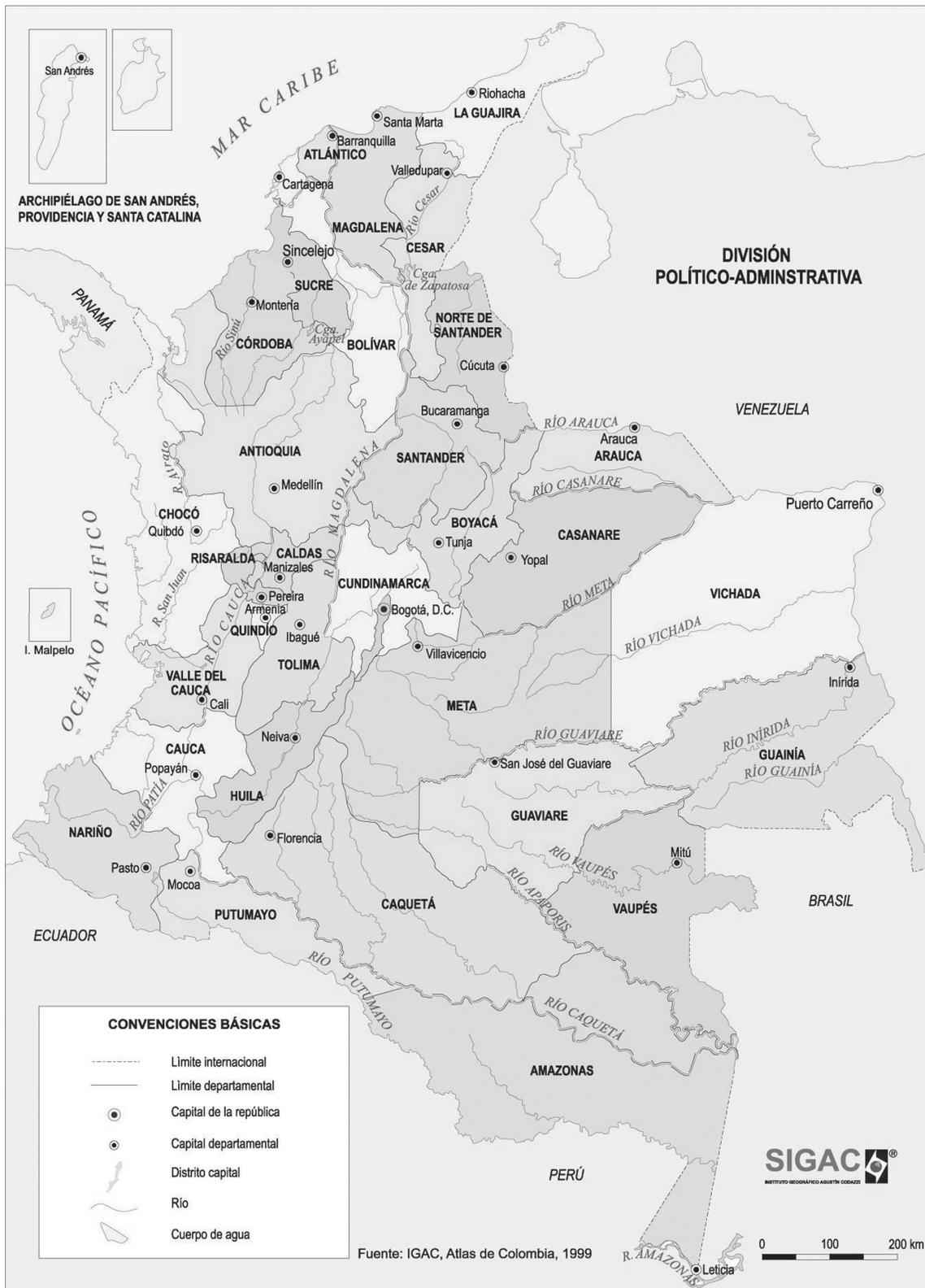
But Colombia's gains, although impressive, are not irreversible. Backsliding can and will take place if political will to advance is lost. Given what has been accomplished, however, there is cause for guarded optimism.

Colombia's experience in dealing with its grave security crisis provides some important lessons that have relevance to future policymaking regarding Colombia, both domestically and in the United States, and to dealing with threats to stability and security in other parts of the world:

- Colombia's security crisis stemmed from a weak state incapable of exercising legitimate state authority over extended parts of national territory—a “sovereignty gap” of large proportion.
- Because state sovereignty was the central problem in Colombia, the solution to the crisis needed to be based on strengthening the state's control of legitimate force and undercutting the ability of non-state actors to use force.
- Illegal narcotics broke the tenuous equilibrium that had previously existed between the weak Colombian state and the illegal armed groups, creating an asymmetric resource relationship that challenged the state's capacity to respond to internal threats.
- Top civilian and military leadership in Colombia—President Uribe above all—understood the nature of the country's crisis and, in a manner very different from past Colombian efforts at dealing with the insurgency and illegal armed groups, moved to reassert legitimate state authority.
- Colombian planners developed a strategy aimed at countering and then rolling back the power of illegal armed groups by wresting from them key areas of the country, protecting populations and key strategic corridors on which the insurgents depended for supplies and resources, and undercutting the resource base of the FARC and ELN. This strategy (the “Democratic Security Policy”) was adjusted and refined over time but in principle guided the efforts of the Colombian government on a continuous basis, providing coherence to its efforts and a useful mechanism for leveraging U.S. assistance.
- Colombian planners understood that implementing the Democratic Security Policy would be a long and expensive process and accordingly imposed special taxes on Colombia's elite to pay for increased budgets for the armed forces and police. This had the further benefit of strengthening the political will of Colombian society to support the government's security campaign.
- To carry out this policy, it was necessary to substantially enlarge the size of the Colombian armed forces and police and improve their professional capability.
- The Colombian army was rebuilt as an effective counterinsurgent force, with well-trained and equipped combat units staffed by professional soldiers at the core while using draftees, especially a home guard, to control small towns and rural areas.
- Mobility was key to the success of the armed forces' efforts to deny territory to the FARC and establish a state security presence. The core element in this equation was helicopters.
- Beyond combat and security use, military and police helicopters have been essential in promoting a greater presence of civilian (i.e., non-military) state authority in isolated rural areas.
- The buildup of the Colombian police in size and professional capability has been essential in broadening legitimate state authority. The police force, however, is still undersized for the task at hand. As the conflict moves increasingly out of the military and into the law-enforcement sphere, fewer troops and more local police will be needed.
- Colombia's experience with the paramilitary phenomenon underscores the importance of preventing the rise of illegal armed groups serving as proxies to legitimate state authority.

- Governance and human rights indicators in Colombia have improved as a result of a weakening of the insurgents, the paramilitary demobilization, and the consolidation of a larger presence by the state. Security and government effectiveness are closely linked to overall observation of human rights in Colombia.
- As government forces consolidate control of more territory and police take over the task of protecting citizens, it is essential that the state presence be reflected in respect for the rule of law and by more effective governance.
- An improved capability for the administration of justice not only will help guarantee security and rights of citizens; it will serve as a sustained symbol of state presence. The rule of law remains Colombia's weakest element of state authority and the one requiring the most attention by the government.
- Other government services need to be extended to more areas of the country, following up on military advances. The state's presence needs to be institutionalized in the form of state and private entities that provide education, health care, transportation and communications infrastructure, and credit and technical support for development.
- Aerial spraying of narcotics without effective state presence—such as in the Department of Putumayo in 2000–2002—eradicated many coca fields but had little effect on reducing the power of the FARC in those regions or on sustaining the gains realized. Gains did not come until the military established a sustained presence in the region. Spraying did disrupt the drug market and force coca growers to move production elsewhere, however.
- In areas where there has been a large reduction in coca cultivation, such as the Catatumbo and Macarena regions, the gains have come from a combination of aerial and manual eradication combined with a sustained state presence that breaks the control of the FARC over local populations and over access to prime growing areas. If the insurgents or drug gangs have the capability of forcing or cajoling *campesinos* (subsistence farmers) into growing coca, chances for the cultivation of legitimate crops will be poor.
- Alternative development initiatives are likely to fail unless they are carried out in an environment of reasonable state presence and control. They should also be economically feasible, responding to available or potential markets and carried out by people who have the desire to be farmers.
- Colombia will continue to suffer from the effects of illegal drug production and trafficking as long as demand for drugs exists in the United States and Europe.
- The U.S. experience in Colombia has demonstrated that robust but not massive amounts of assistance, if applied in a timely and sustainable fashion and linked to U.S. national security interests, can have a positive effect on promoting improved security and stability in another country.

# Political Administrative Departments of Colombia



Source: Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi (IGAC), *Atlas de Colombia* (Bogotá: IGAC, 1999), [www.igac.gov.co](http://www.igac.gov.co).

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

On July 2, 2008, two Russian-made helicopters touched down outside a camp of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) located in Colombia's remote Guaviare department. Fifteen FARC hostages, including the guerrilla group's highest-profile political prizes, the French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt and three U.S. citizen contractors, were loaded onto the helicopters, ostensibly to be transferred to another FARC location. In fact, the "international aid workers" in charge of the transfer were Colombian military commandos and the operation an elaborate ruse to trick the FARC into handing over its prized assets without a shot being fired.

"Operación Jaque," as it was code named, was a brilliant success for the government of President Alvaro Uribe that highlighted how much progress Colombia had made in reversing the steep decline of state power vis-à-vis illegal armed groups over the past decade. Ten years earlier, the FARC had appeared capable of defeating the Colombian military in pitched battles, and, combined with the Army of National Liberation (ELN) insurgents and rapidly growing paramilitary armies, controlled vast areas of the country. A confluence of negative variables, including a rapid expansion in the cultivation and trafficking of narcotics, pointed to potential state failure.

By 2008, however, the tables had been turned. *Operación Jaque* revealed for a global audience how weakened FARC command and control had become and the extent to which the operational and intelligence sophistication of the Colombian armed forces had developed. Behind this operation lay years of progress by the Colombian government in expanding legitimate state control over national space, population, and infrastructure and in countering threats to security and stability posed by extra-state actors.

This report examines developments in Colombia since the late 1990s to arrive at conclusions and an assessment of lessons learned from that country's return from the brink of implosion. It focuses primarily on the area of national security, with special attention to the expanded capacity of the state to close the very large sovereignty gap at the core of Colombia's vulnerability. The report analyzes why Colombia was on the road to possible state failure in the 1990s, how the process was reversed, and the variables that will be needed to sustain future progress. The role played by illegal drugs in fueling Colombia's downward cycle and the continued challenge posed by narcotics constitute an important factor in this assessment.

Colombia has been the largest recipient of U.S. aid in the Americas since the late 1990s. This report will also assess the effect of U.S. assistance, a topic that has received considerable attention and remains controversial.

The goal of this report is to derive from the case study of Colombia some practical lessons related to countering challenges to security and stability in a weakened state. Many of the variables associated with Colombia—inadequate state presence and control of national territory, large un-governed spaces, weak rule of law, an active insurgency, the presence of non-state actors exercising

local control, a large-scale narcotics economy undermining legitimate state authority and empowering illegal armed groups, and the destabilizing effects of poverty and inequality—are present in varying degrees in other parts of the developing world. The lessons from Colombia may, therefore, have relevance in addressing challenges in those countries and regions, especially at a time when the United States has shifted its security focus to addressing weak and failing states.

Colombia's lessons from the past must, of course, guide future policymaking regarding that country itself. While Colombia has made major strides in strengthening security and reducing the threat posed by illegal armed groups, the consolidation of legitimate state authority in many parts of the country, including the challenge of arriving at a peace process with the FARC and ELN insurgencies, is still in play. Moreover, the gains in security have not been matched by advances in the rule of law, and protection of human rights remains a concern, although there is growing recognition that these factors are essential to the consolidation of legitimate state authority. Further progress is not inevitable unless the right policies are pursued and national political will to address key problems is maintained.

U.S. assistance over the past decade has been a very positive factor in promoting an improved security situation in Colombia. Policymakers in the United States will have important decisions to make regarding the bilateral relationship with Colombia, including the orientation and levels of assistance. The conclusions and lessons learned from this report are also intended as a potential resource in that decisionmaking process. Colombia is the lynchpin of the Andean region, where relations with the United States are tense and democracy is under threat. The outcome of U.S. policy decisions will have large relevance to Colombia and as well as to U.S. national interest in Latin America, which is closely linked to the success of the Colombian people in strengthening stability, security, and the rule of law in their country.

As the United States moves to a new relationship with Latin America, the context of the bilateral U.S.-Colombia friendship can help address the broader issue of the threats that a weakened state can pose to itself and its neighbors. Another key issue relevant to the Colombia experience is the global scourge of narcotics, where a more nuanced discussion is needed to address the connection between supply and demand in an international market. The kind of relationship that has evolved between Colombia and the United States can aid both countries in confronting these and other global challenges.

## 2

## TOWARD STATE FAILURE

### COLOMBIA IN THE 1990S

### The Downward Spiral

Colombia's history has long been marked by violence. The bloody civil war ("The War of a Thousand Days") between supporters of the Liberal and Conservative parties between 1899 and 1902 and a renewed version of this armed conflict during "*La Violencia*" from 1948 into the mid-1950s left hundreds of thousands of casualties and deep social and political scars. The violence was driven by many factors: political loyalties and rivalries, control of land and economic resources, clashes over the role of religion, and personal vendettas. The Colombian state traditionally exercised minimal authority outside of major cities and provincial capitals, opening the door to local strongmen controlling small-town and rural society and widespread banditry. A rare period of military rule (1953–1957) helped extinguish *La Violencia*, and a subsequent pact between the Liberals and Conservatives called the "National Front" allowed them to alternate control of the presidency between 1958 and 1974 and return the country to a greater degree of internal peace.<sup>1</sup>

In subsequent decades, the authority of Colombia's national government was further challenged by a number of groups outside the law. Leftist guerrilla organizations began to take shape during the 1960s, the largest and most successful over time being the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or FARC, founded in 1964 and dedicated to rural insurgency. Other Marxist-oriented groups sprouted up, the Cuban-inspired Army of National Liberation, or ELN, surviving to the present while several others were eventually dismantled by authorities or disbanded. The Colombian armed forces and state security apparatus proved capable of countering the early threats posed by the Marxist insurgents. Guerrilla activities in the cities received very little public support, limited to university students and pockets of labor union activists. The FARC was held in check by the Colombian army and was confined to more isolated rural areas, where state authority traditionally had seldom or, in some cases, never been exercised. In its early days, the FARC sustained itself in rural areas through criminal activities such as extortion, cattle rustling, and kidnapping for ransom. This led to the creation by rural landowners and local communities of "self-defense" organizations—precursors of the paramilitary armies of the 1990s.

During the 1980s, the variable of drug trafficking began to exert an increasingly large influence over national security in Colombia. The precipitous rise of the Medellín drug cartel seriously challenged legitimate state authority across the board. Based on its growing control over trafficking of cocaine from Peru and Bolivia and to a lesser extent locally produced heroin into the United States, the Medellín cartel acquired enormous economic leverage and, increasingly, political clout.

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1. Peter DeShazo, Tanya Primiani, and Phillip McLean, *Back From the Brink: Evaluating Progress in Colombia, 1999–2007* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2007), 3–6.

The rise of the narcotics economy in Colombia produced a confluence of negative factors. The emergence of the cartel fostered a parallel growth in paramilitary organizations in key regions of the country that contested the FARC and other guerrilla groups for control. A new insurgent group—the M-19—catapulted to national prominence during the 1980s through a series of dramatic attacks against the Colombian government, the most notorious being the bloody takeover of the Supreme Court in Bogotá in 1985.

By the late 1980s, Colombia was enveloped in a cycle of extraordinary violence, with the Medellín cartel waging war against the Colombian government, guerillas and paramilitaries fighting over territory and—increasingly—over drug routes, and the Colombian armed forces pitted against the leftist insurgents. Assisted by the United States, the government eventually broke the power of the Medellín cartel and its successor, the Cali cartel, although their illegal businesses were carried on by a series of decentralized criminal gangs. The M-19 eventually laid down its arms after it reached an amnesty deal with the Colombian government, but periodic negotiations with the FARC failed to produce a peace agreement. Instead, drug cartel and paramilitary gunmen decimated the ranks of the Patriotic Union, the FARC’s urban political ally.

The pace of Colombia’s deterioration accelerated dramatically during the 1990s, with many factors contributing.<sup>2</sup> Colombia evolved from a processing and transshipment point for cocaine to the world’s largest producer of coca leaf. This development was prompted by successful eradication efforts in Peru and Bolivia that cut deeply into coca cultivation, the air bridge denial program that effectively intercepted air shipments of cocaine from Peru to Colombia, and the subsequent decision of Colombian traffickers to maximize profits and control over raw material supply by planting coca leaf in Colombia itself, where heretofore it had been practically unknown. Coca cultivation rose dramatically, from some 51,000 hectares in 1995 to more than 101,000 in 1998 and then to 122,000 in 1999, according to U.S. government estimates at the time, which in hindsight were almost certainly well below actual levels.<sup>3</sup> By 1999, Colombia supplied some 80 percent of global cocaine production and 90 percent of all cocaine consumed in the United States—an annual production of around 520 metric tons. Heroin produced from Colombian-grown opium poppies began entering the U.S. market during the 1990s and by 2001 Colombia supplied some 75 percent of consumption on the East Coast of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

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2. For general accounts of Colombia in the 1990s, see: Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 2001); DeShazo, Primiani, and McLean, *Back From the Brink: Evaluating Progress in Colombia, 1999–2007*; Nina M. Serafino, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, February 12, 2001); Bruce Bagley, “Drug Trafficking, Political Violence and U.S. Policy in Colombia in the 1990s” (working paper, “Colombia in Context” series, Center for Latin American Studies, University of California, Berkeley, February 7, 2001); Román D. Ortiz and Nicolás Urrutia, “A Long Road to Victory: Developing Counterinsurgency Strategy in Colombia,” in *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, vol. 3, *Lessons Learned from the Fight against Terrorism*, ed. James Forest (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2007); David Passage, *The United States and Colombia: Untying the Gordian Knot* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2000), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub30.pdf>; Gabriel Marcella and Donald Schulz, *Colombia’s Three Wars: U.S. Strategy at the Crossroads* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, March 5, 1999), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB34.pdf>; Thomas A. Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, January 2002), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB18.pdf>.

3. Serafino, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options*; Bagley, “Drug Trafficking, Political Violence and U.S. Policy in Colombia in the 1990s.”

4. Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*, 11; Serafino, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options*, 3.

The explosion of the drug business in Colombia had the effect of further weakening legitimate state authority while supercharging the insurgents, paramilitaries, and drug gangs. According to U.S. government estimates, which are by their nature uncertain, illegal drugs may have generated income of around \$4 billion in Colombia in 1998, equivalent to 5 percent of GDP at the time, with the FARC receiving in the range of hundreds of millions of dollars in income from its involvement in the drug business.<sup>5</sup> The exponential rise in the narcotics economy helped fuel a renaissance in the power of the FARC, eventually tipping the balance of power in favor of the guerrillas and against the Colombian state.

## The Guerrilla Threat

By the early 1990s the FARC had existed for some 30 years, protected by the country's difficult geography and vast, uncontrolled rural areas from which to operate. During the 1970s, efforts by the Colombian army to contain and to an extent roll back the area of operation of the FARC had some success—establishing an equilibrium that would last for more than a decade. For its part, the FARC responded to army pressure by fading deeper into the countryside, deriving most of its income from the proceeds of extortion, theft, and kidnapping. While the upper echelons of FARC leadership espoused a Marxist ideological outlook, the vast majority of FARC fighters were peasants, some of whom were (and continue to be) pressed involuntarily into service.

In May 1982, at its seventh party conference, the FARC outlined a strategy for building a military force that could defeat the Colombian army in open warfare.<sup>6</sup> This strategy would be adjusted over time as the organization grew in strength and numbers, following the classic outlines of a “people’s war” that had propelled the insurgencies in Vietnam and El Salvador.<sup>7</sup> By the 1970s the FARC had already acquired a coherent structure based on “fronts” operating more or less independently in given areas and combat “columns” consisting of several companies, along with part-time fighters who would take up arms as needed and *milicias*, or unarmed support staff living in local communities who helped keep the FARC supplied with provisions, logistics assistance, and intelligence.

Taking advantage of growing opportunities provided by protecting and taxing drug production and trafficking, the FARC grew substantially in number—from 8 fronts in 1979 to perhaps 2,000 fighters in 15 fronts at the time of the party conference in 1982, to 3,600 in 32 fronts in 1986, to 7,000 in 60 fronts in 1995, and to an estimated 10,000 fighters in 1998.<sup>8</sup> At its high-water mark during the 2001–2002 period, the FARC could count on perhaps 17,000 order of battle fighters.<sup>9</sup> It is no coincidence that the FARC’s resurgence took place in areas where drug cultivation and trafficking was centered—especially in the departments east and south of the Eastern Cordillera (Putumayo, Caquetá, Meta), in the Sierra de Santa Marta along the Caribbean coast, into the Chocó, Bolívar, and Vichada departments, and the Catatumbo region in the Norte de Santander department along the Venezuelan border.<sup>10</sup>

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5. *Ibid.*, 12.

6. *Ibid.*, 39; Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 4.

7. Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*, 40; interviews with senior Colombian military officials.

8. Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 7; James F. Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 99; DeShazo, Primiani, and McLean, *Back From the Brink*, 5.

9. Interview with a senior Colombian government official.

10. Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America*, 99; interview with a U.S. nongovernment expert.

Like the FARC, the ELN reached its nadir at the end of the 1970s, but for different reasons. The ELN developed an ideology that mixed orthodox Marxism, Cuban revolutionary zeal, and an appeal to Christian liberation theology in the hope of a broader support base.<sup>11</sup> Dedicated to the armed struggle against the state, its operations were concentrated across a swath of central Colombian departments: Antioquia, Córdoba, Santander, and Norte de Santander. Its military tactics proved no match for the Colombian army, however, and it equally failed to establish an urban support base.

On the brink of annihilation, the ELN reinvented itself during the mid-1980s with a major change in strategy—to concentrate its efforts in a few key areas and attack vital economic infrastructure. It moved into the banana-producing region of Urabá (Antioquia), into the oil patch of the Magdalena Medio region (Santander), into key agricultural areas in Cauca and other departments, and into Arauca department, where it perpetually sabotaged the 780-kilometer long Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline that carried oil from eastern fields to the port of Coveñas on the Caribbean. This strategy shift bore fruit as the organization's coffers bulged with income derived from extortion, kidnapping, and theft, and the size of the ELN grew from some 600 in 1986 to 3,000 in 1995 to a peak of about 4,500 by 2000.<sup>12</sup>

## The Rise of the Paramilitaries

The paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia has both reflected and been a direct consequence of weak state authority and has constituted a major factor in undermining democratic governance and respect for human rights. Paramilitarism has deep roots in Colombia's history, arising from the ability of local strongmen to exercise authority in lieu of the state in rural areas of the country. Early manifestations of paramilitarism stemmed from civil defense laws and decrees in the 1960s that allowed civilians to support military counterinsurgency efforts and to create forces to defend property against guerilla incursions.<sup>13</sup> Both private landowners and drug traffickers formed such "self-defense" groups, with links to the narcotics mafias and the Medellín cartel as that criminal organization took shape. The creation of the shadowy "Death to Kidnappers" organization in 1981 by big landowners and narco-traffickers to counter the wave of kidnappings by the FARC and the ELN underscored this trend. In light of the clear linkage between self-defense groups and criminal activity, the Colombian government outlawed self-defense forces in 1987, but this failed to stem the growing influence of the paramilitaries.

Like the FARC and the ELN, the paramilitary movement increased rapidly in numbers and strength during the 1990s. By one estimate, there were some 2,000 full-time paramilitary fighters in the field in 1989 and as many as 8,000–10,000 by the end of the decade.<sup>14</sup> Paramilitary units sprouted up in areas of strong insurgent activity: the Magdalena Medio oil patch, the Urabá region

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11. Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America*, 103.

12. Ibid., 105; Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*, 30.

13. For the early development of paramilitaries, see: Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*, 53–58; Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America*, 106–109; Bagley, "Drug Trafficking, Political Violence and U.S. Policy in Colombia in the 1990s," 8; Serafino, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options*, 12; DeShazo, Primiani, and McLean, *Back From the Brink*, 6–9; International Crisis Group, "Colombia's Elusive Quest for Peace," *Latin America Report*, no. 1 (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 26, 2002), 4–5.

14. Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America*, 108; Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*, 54; Serafino, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options*, 13.

of Antioquia, the Department of Córdoba, and later in the eastern lowland regions. The earliest of the paramilitary organizations to pronounce itself as such was the “Campesino Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá” founded in 1994. In 1997 Carlos Castaño, a former Medellín cartel operative, announced the formation of the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) in an attempt to bring central coordination to paramilitary activities nationwide.

Paramilitarism in Colombia had many dimensions. The original “self-defense” aspect of the movement, which aimed at countering the influence of the FARC and the ELN, was an important driving force but by no means the only one. From the founding of the AUC until the demobilization of most paramilitaries beginning in 2005, paramilitary units frequently clashed with insurgent fighters, and AUC leaders extolled their supposed “patriotism” in countering subversion, even though the Colombian state never requested their assistance. On the other hand, there were many instances of collusion and cooperation between paramilitaries and the insurgents, depending on local factors. The AUC also attempted to portray itself as an alternative to legitimate state authority—in the terms of a 1998 declaration, “filling in for society the gaps and inconsistencies of the State”—although it did not call for the overthrow of the state.<sup>15</sup>

The instigators of the paramilitaries definitely saw themselves in political terms, with aspirations to legitimate political power and bourgeois economic status. The former they accomplished by bribing and coercing local authorities where they exercised control or simply by running areas of the country where the state had no effective presence. One weapon that the paramilitaries used with abandon was violence, directed on a grand scale against their adversaries or those they accused of supporting them. Many of the worst human rights abuses committed at the time were the handiwork of the paramilitaries, in some instances with military acquiescence. On the economic side, the paramilitaries grew rich from drug trafficking and protecting drug routes, by stealing state resources, and by extortion of legitimate businesses. Finally, the paramilitaries counted on supporters within Colombia’s political establishment as well as in the armed forces and police.

## The Decline of State Authority

The process of marked decline in Colombia that accelerated rapidly in the 1990s had begun during the 1980s. There were many reasons for that decline. After years of sustained economic growth and positive trends in reducing inequality and social exclusion during the 1960s and 1970s, the country entered into a period of far slower economic growth during the so-called lost decade of the 1980s. Combined with the parallel rise of the illegal narcotics economy and the growing power of the insurgencies and drug cartels, pressure began to mount on Colombia’s weak institutions of governance.

Traditional politics in Colombia, dominated by the Liberal and Conservative parties, excluded many sectors of society to the point of dangerous alienation.<sup>16</sup> A resurgence in political violence fomented by the FARC, the ELN, paramilitaries, and drug mafias slowly chipped away at Colombia’s already debilitated law enforcement and judicial capability and sapped the power of potential reform movements within the Liberal Party and on the political Left. The spread of guerrilla and paramilitary activity into more isolated areas of the country underscored the absence of state

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15. Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America*, 146.

16. See Phillip McLean, “Colombia: Failed, Failing, or Just Weak?” *Washington Quarterly* (2002): 123–134; Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America*, 111.

presence in those areas, resulting in a widening gap between elite urban Colombia and vast areas dominated by elements outside the law.

Several attempts were made during the 1980s to reach agreement with the FARC, the ELN, and other insurgent groups on a peace process. President Belisario Betancur (1982–1986) sought to engage the guerrillas with dialogue and social programs, but the effort failed under the stress of rising violence. His successors, Virgilio Barco (1986–1990) and César Gaviria (1990–1994), used the offer of a new constitution with reforms to obtain the demobilization of the M-19 and several smaller insurgent groups. The resulting Constitution of 1991 injected some new life into the political process and improved public access to the justice system, but it also played into the hands of the paramilitaries and insurgents by providing—under the terms of decentralization of government—large amounts of fiscal resources to local jurisdictions where the state had little or no authority, funds that were captured by illegal armed groups. The FARC and the ELN, meanwhile, took advantage of periodic peace offers and cease-fires to consolidate their strength but in the end reached no deal with the government.

The deterioration of the Colombian state went into high gear during the tenure of President Ernesto Samper (1994–1998). Samper's legitimacy and effectiveness were undermined at the very start of his administration by revelations of narco-contributions to his campaign, which poisoned his relationship with the United States and led to Colombia being decertified for U.S. aid in 1996–1997.<sup>17</sup> It became increasingly clear that the balance of power in Colombia had shifted dangerously away from the state and toward the insurgents and paramilitaries. Beginning in 1996, the FARC opened up a new phase in its attack on the Colombian government, aimed at expanding its theater of operations to the entire national territory, controlling strategic corridors that would allow different fronts to link up and facilitate the movement of drugs, supplies, and weapons, gradually encircle Bogotá and other major cities, and finally realize its goal of overthrowing the state or forcing it into a power-sharing arrangement.<sup>18</sup>

FARC units began to engage the Colombian army and police in ever larger numbers, capturing police stations and military bases and even threatening major towns in remote areas. In August 1996, the FARC launched a surprise attack on and overran the Colombian military base at Las Delicias (Putumayo), killing and capturing more than 100 soldiers. Other stinging defeats for the Colombian army and police took place at Puerres (Nariño) and Miraflores (Guaviare). In March 1998, the government was shocked by the annihilation of the 52nd Counter-Guerrilla Battalion of what was considered one of Colombia's elite combat brigades by a far larger force of FARC fighters at El Billar in Caquetá. Later that year, the FARC captured and briefly held the town of Mitú, a provincial capital near the border with Brazil. The intensity of the FARC attacks in 1997 and 1998 was unprecedented, revealing a vastly more professional guerrilla combat force capable of going on the offensive and defeating the Colombian army in pitched battle.

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17. Serafino, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options*; Bagley, "Drug Trafficking, Political Violence and U.S. Policy in Colombia in the 1990s"; Jennifer S. Holmes et al., "Drugs, Violence, and Development in Colombia: A Department-Level Analysis," *Latin American Politics and Society* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2006); Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*; Michael Shifter, "Colombia on the Brink," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (July/August 1999); DeShazo, Primiani, and McLean, *Back From the Brink*, 4.

18. Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*, 42–43; Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America*, 132–133.

Other disturbing variables signaled the disintegration of state authority and the unraveling of Colombian society. The national government's traditionally low presence in much of the country was in fact rolled back considerably during the 1990s. In 1995, with the salad days of the insurgency still ahead, 58 percent of Colombia's municipalities (*municipios*) contained a guerrilla presence, compared with 17 percent ten years earlier, and a full quarter of municipalities had no police presence whatsoever.<sup>19</sup> In many rural areas and small town, the insurgents killed or expelled political leaders who opposed them and co-opted many others. In 1997, for example, guerrillas killed 200 candidates for office and forced some 2,000 more to withdraw from their races in an attempt to disrupt the elections that year.<sup>20</sup> By one estimate, in 1997 some 13 percent of mayors had direct links to the insurgents.<sup>21</sup>

The rule of law in Colombia, highly challenged in any case, imploded under pressure from the insurgents, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers. As the guerrillas tipped the scales against the Colombian army, increasingly powerful paramilitary units entered into the breach, attacking the FARC and the ELN but also slaughtering unarmed civilians in an attempt to deny support to the insurgents and control territory and the drug business. Paramilitaries were responsible for the large-scale massacres in Mapiripán (Meta), La Gabarra (Norte de Santander), and Barrancabermeja (Santander) in the late 1990s. Evidence of collusion between paramilitaries and the Colombian armed forces increased during this period. The insurgents as well employed widespread violence and terror against the civilian population, notably through their devastating use of cylinder bombs that produced broad collateral damage when attacking police stations.

In this environment, crime and human rights abuses reached unheard-of levels. The murder rate averaged 62 per 100,000 during 1995–1999, and in 1999 some 50 percent more murders occurred in Colombia than in the United States, with a population 6.5 times larger.<sup>22</sup> Some 3,200 kidnappings took place in 1999, and in 1997 a huge spike in the number of massacres commenced, which would eventually peak in 2001.<sup>23</sup> By the end of 1999, some 1.8 million people were displaced in Colombia, largely because of the violence perpetrated by the paramilitaries and insurgents.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, in the countryside, a process of reverse agrarian reform was taking place, with paramilitaries and drug traffickers taking possession of millions of hectares of land. Colombia's weak justice system, understaffed and frequently corrupted or intimidated by the illegal armed groups and drug traffickers, imploded under the pressure of the crime wave.

The ELN attacked Colombia's economic infrastructure by bombing electricity towers and sabotaging oil pipelines. Between 1986 and 1997, it caused the loss of some 79 million barrels of crude from the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline, costing the economy \$1.5 billion in revenue and damage while creating an environmental disaster.<sup>25</sup> The FARC, meanwhile, cut roads throughout Colombia, including highways between major cities. Colombia's economy slumped under the weight of the turmoil, with GDP in 1999 falling 4.2 percent, the worst year the economy had experienced since the Great Depression. Unemployment topped 18 percent in 1999, poverty levels spiked by

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19. *Ibid.*, 50; Andres Solimano, ed., *Colombia: Essays on Conflict, Peace, and Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, December 2000), 14.

20. Marcella and Schulz, *Colombia's Three Wars*, 10.

21. Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 23.

22. DeShazo, Primiani, and McLean, *Back From the Brink*, 7.

23. *Ibid.*, 7, 20.

24. Serafín, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options*, 7.

25. Marcella and Schulz, *Colombia's Three Wars*, 11.

some seven points to 57.5 percent between 1995 and 1999, and the country's foreign debt rose by seven points.<sup>26</sup>

Colombia's downward spiral was reflected in a growing sense of desperation among its citizens. In July 1999, nearly two-thirds of respondents to a Gallup poll answered affirmatively to the question: "Do you think it is possible that one day the Colombian guerrillas will take power by force?"<sup>27</sup> Other Colombians simply left the country in the face of the violence—some 800,000 between 1995 and 1999, many of them well educated.

## Colombia: A Failed State?

At its deepest crisis point, which occurred at some moment during the 1998–2001 period, Colombia was a very weak state, perhaps on the road to state failure but not there yet.<sup>28</sup> Its internal conflict in some ways resembled past outbreaks of extreme violence—the War of a Thousand Days and *La Violencia*—but with the difference that those earlier conflicts were framed in the traditional Liberal-Conservative rivalry. The threat to state authority by guerrillas, paramilitaries, and criminal drug gangs that reached fullest fruition at the end of the 1990s, like the earlier conflicts, drew strength from Colombia's difficult geography, vast ungoverned spaces, elite-dominated political system, widespread poverty, and the large disparities in income that characterized Colombian society.

As it lost control over the use of force and with impunity for crimes and human rights abuses the norm, the state experienced a severe decline in legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. On the other hand, the conflict of the 1990s that threatened democracy and stability in Colombia was not a civil war, as the drug traffickers, insurgents, and paramilitaries and their supporters represented only small percentages of the population.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the military strength of the insurgents and paramilitaries remained disproportionately larger than their support base throughout. But all three groups by the mid-1990s were turbocharged from their access to large amounts of financing—mainly through drug trafficking but also by other illicit means such as extortion, kidnapping, and theft of state resources. This economic bonanza opened the door to their spectacular rise and pushed the Colombian state closer to the threshold of disintegration.

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26. DeShazo, Primiani, and McLean, *Back From the Brink*, 8–9.

27. Invamer Gallup Colombia, "Gallup Poll 57," Medellín, February 2007, 100.

28. McLean, "Colombia: Failed, Failing, or Just Weak?"

29. See Phillip McLean, "Colombia: Thinking Clearly about the Conflict," *Policy Papers on the Americas* 13, study 7 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2002).

# 3

## THE PASTRANA ADMINISTRATION, 1998–2002 COLOMBIA IN TRANSITION

### A Multitrack Approach

Andrés Pastrana was elected president of Colombia in a second-round runoff election in June 1998 with just above 50 percent of the vote at the head of a coalition of Conservatives, dissident Liberals, and independents. During the runoff vote against the Liberal candidate Horacio Serpa, Pastrana based his platform on initiating a peace process with the FARC, an appeal that found favor with voters anxious to address rising levels of violence and insecurity.<sup>1</sup> During nearly all of his administration, Pastrana pursued this elusive and ultimately unattainable goal. At the same time, his administration undertook a sweeping reform of the armed forces—led by a small group of top army generals—that resulted in considerable improvements in force strength, morale, and capability by the end of his time in office. Pastrana’s point of focus throughout the period was the peace negotiations and, while he permitted military operations to go forward, his central objective was to pressure the FARC to engage in talks, without elaborating a military plan to bring that about.

Finally, Pastrana rebuilt Colombia’s weakened relationship with the United States and with extensive consultations with Washington fashioned a comprehensive initiative announced in September 1999 called “Plan Colombia” to address the crisis facing the country. During his time in office, Colombia reached the nadir of its downward slide in terms of overall strength of the insurgents and paramilitaries, levels of crime, violence and human rights abuses, and the size and substance of the narcotics economy. On the other hand, the Pastrana years definitely marked the beginning of a turnaround in terms of the exercise of legitimate state authority and many positive steps were undertaken whose results would be manifested only years later.

### The Peace Process

In hindsight, Pastrana is best known for his effort to make peace with the FARC and for launching Plan Colombia. Although on separate tracks, the two initiatives were to a degree interrelated, with the failure of the first highlighting the overall wisdom of the second.

Very soon after taking office, Pastrana entered into discussions with the FARC over a peace process that would be facilitated by the creation of a 42,000-square-kilometer demilitarized area known as the “*Zona de Despeje*” from which Colombian soldiers would be withdrawn and to which the FARC allowed free access. The area chosen—four *municipios* in the Department of Meta (Mesetas, Vista Hermosa, La Uribe, La Macarena) and one in Caquetá (San Vicente del Caguán)—

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1. International Crisis Group, “Colombia’s Elusive Quest for Peace,” 20.

were traditional FARC strongholds where, except for a Ranger battalion stationed in San Vicente del Caguán, there had in the past been minimal state presence. This was a large piece of the country, often compared in size with Switzerland but with a population of only 80,000–90,000.<sup>2</sup> The *Despeje* was established in November 1998, originally for a 90-day period that was extended 11 times over the next 28-months.<sup>3</sup>

Talks between the FARC and the Government of Colombia began in January 1999 only to be suspended by the FARC two weeks later, resumed in April, suspended in July, and then continued in a stop-and-go pattern for another year and a half. It soon became clear that the FARC used the *Despeje* as a command and control center for operations elsewhere in Colombia and for stationing thousands of troops, as well as for industrial-scale coca production and as a holding point for kidnapping victims.<sup>4</sup> Pastrana's first minister of defense, a civilian, resigned in protest over the free hand given the FARC in the *Despeje*, and there was widespread dissatisfaction within the armed forces as well. Eventually, the FARC's continued military action against the Colombian government around the country, the frequency of its kidnappings, assassinations, and attacks on civilians, and the lack of meaningful progress in the peace talks turned public opinion against the *Despeje* and Pastrana's poll ratings plummeted. Exasperated, Pastrana finally declared an end to the peace process on February 20, 2002, and ordered Colombian forces into the *Despeje*, although most areas within the five municipalities would remain under FARC control for years more.

The failure of the peace process was probably predestined. The FARC judged that it had the military and political advantage over the government and in fact had no intention of demobilizing under any circumstances. Furthermore, the FARC appears to have attempted to use the talks to increase its international standing. In early 2000, FARC and government representatives traveled together to Europe as a confidence-building measure. Ironically, however, the failed peace process soured Colombian public opinion even further against the FARC, facilitated the election of security hard-liner Álvaro Uribe as president of Colombia in June 2002, and helped build popular support for a vastly enhanced military campaign against the insurgents and paramilitaries.

## Military Reform

A significant reform movement took place within the Colombian armed forces during the Pastrana presidency, to a very large extent motivated and driven from within the army itself. This process resulted in major changes in the structure, size, and capability of the army, above all, and some early successes in slowing and then reversing the deterioration in Colombia's overall security situation. Although some criticize Pastrana for not being more engaged in this modernization process, the results were nonetheless essential for the country. As a result, President Uribe inherited a

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2. To understand the scale of the *Despeje* as a proportion of Colombia, the area can be compared with the total land area of all of New England, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware in proportion to the United States.

3. For an excellent discussion of the *Despeje* and the peace process, see: International Crisis Group, "Colombia's Elusive Quest for Peace."

4. Ibid., 20; Thomas A. Marks, *Sustainability of Colombian Military/Strategic Support for "Democratic Security"* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, July 2005), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB610.pdf>, 1; interview with a Colombian nongovernment expert.

more capable armed forces upon which to build his democratic security strategy in 2002 than had existed when Pastrana took office in 1998.

The Colombian armed forces—with the army predominating as by far the largest and most important service branch—occupied a difficult position in society. Colombian political elites throughout the twentieth century feared the rise of a politicized army and were careful to curtail its power. Colombia subsequently avoided the cycle of military coups and de facto governments that characterized much of Latin America, with the brief regime of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957) the exception. Following the restoration of democracy in 1957, Colombia's civilian presidents pursued an overall guideline for governing by which the military was excluded from decisionmaking on issues of national policy but was given wide leeway in the conduct of external defense and internal security.<sup>5</sup> This led to a bifurcated approach toward counterinsurgency from the 1960s onward, by which the army executed military strategy with no synchronized coordination from civilian leadership on political and social policy measures.

Pursuit of this doctrine, combined with the failure of the Colombian armed forces to coordinate their plans and actions on a national scale, contributed to the security crisis of the 1990s, during which the military capabilities of illegal armed groups grew dramatically. A massive infusion of drug money increased the economic base of the insurgents and the paramilitaries many times over, while Colombian defense budgets (including funding for the police) rose at a very modest rate during the 1990s, averaging only 3.2 percent of GDP.<sup>6</sup> As late as 2000, spending on the military alone was only 1.89 percent of GDP, a woefully inadequate figure for a large nation facing a major internal war.<sup>7</sup> In 1998, the Colombian army contained only 103,000 soldiers and officers, too small a force for the task at hand compounded by the fact that a mere 21,156 of those were professional soldiers—the rest were poorly trained conscripts (47,000) serving an 18-month stint, mainly on guard duty, and high-school graduates (*soldados bachilleres*) (35,000 strong) who were prevented by law from entering combat.<sup>8</sup> These numbers put the army at a crucial disadvantage in terms of confronting the insurgents and establishing a state presence.

The small size of the Colombian military was only one of its weaknesses. During the 1990s, prevailing doctrine and lack of interest by the elites in the deteriorating security environment meant that the Colombian army basically was on its own in countering the insurgency.<sup>9</sup> Over many years of stop-and-go efforts against the guerillas, the Colombian army had been stuck in a garrison mode, pursuing a policy of maintaining public order along with the Colombian police and broadly dispersed, with undersized battalions the largest combat units in action. As late as 1998, the army had only some 20 helicopters available for combat-related duty, although the police had many more at their disposal—provided in past years by the United States but most restricted to counter-drug use.<sup>10</sup> Morale was low and soldiers feared combat in isolated areas because medical evacuation capability was so poor that many treatable wounds proved fatal.

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5. Ortíz and Urrutia, "A Long Road to Victory," 315.

6. Calculated from Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*, 105.

7. Gabriel Marcella, *The United States and Colombia: The Journey from Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, May 2003), 44.

8. Ejército Nacional de Colombia, *Logros de la Reestructuración* (Bogotá: COLAR, 2002), 20.

9. Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 11; interviews with senior Colombian officers and nongovernment U.S. expert.

10. Marcella, *The United States and Colombia*, 44.

The defeats of the 1997–1998 period at the hands of the FARC, especially the disaster at El Bil-lar, had a strong affect on the army and a reform process began as Pastrana came into office. Key to this reform was an important change at the top of the military hierarchy. At the urging of the United States, Pastrana appointed General Fernando Tapias of the army as commander in chief of the armed forces. General Jorge Enrique Mora took over as army chief. These two officers, along with General Carlos Ospina, who took charge of the key Fourth Division headquartered in Meta (and who later became chief of the army and then commander in chief), formed an exceptionally qualified trio that drove and then sustained the reform process over time. All three had combat command experience at the battalion and brigade levels and had received considerable training in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

General Mora took command of the army with the intention of undertaking a major restructuring to increase its institutional capabilities. The key ingredient was a phased plan to replace 30,000 *soldados bachilleres* with an equal number of professional soldiers within a three-year period, increasing the size of the professional contingent by 150 percent. At the same time, the number of regular soldiers (draftees) would be increased by 10,000 and their training improved so they could be assigned to guard key energy and infrastructure installations, thereby freeing up thousands of more professional soldiers to combat the insurgencies.<sup>12</sup> This goal was accomplished. By December 2001, the number of combat-limited *bachilleres* was reduced from 35,000 three years earlier to 2,900, the number of professionals increased from 21,000 to 53,000, and the number of regular draftees increased from 47,000 to 61,000. Although the total size of the army grew by only 13,000—to 117,000—the quality of the force improved substantially.

Mora used the larger number of professionals to improve the capability of recruits, especially by strengthening the size and training of the corps of noncommissioned officers (NCOs), assigning them as platoon leaders, and creating a new grade of corporal for draftees to encourage them to become career NCOs. The Office of the Army Chief of Staff was restructured, a special Air Brigade was created as air cavalry, four Ranger battalions were reconstituted as a new “rapid response force” (FUDRA) for special combat operations, four new “Mobile Brigades” were brought on line for counterinsurgency missions, new tactical units were created to guard highways, oil pipelines, and electricity infrastructure, a specialized battalion was created for high-altitude operations, military police capabilities were improved, and new Special Forces battalions were created. Considerable attention was paid to improving intelligence, logistics, cartography, communications, administration of supplies, and public affairs.

In this environment, the Colombian army moved into a more offensive mode. Officers who were unwilling to adjust were replaced with combat-oriented officers. Shifts in strategy and tactics accompanied these changes, with emphasis on mobility, control of key strategic corridors used by the FARC and the ELN, and the establishment of state presence (although the traditional and unfortunate measurement of progress—the body count of FARC killed—remained ingrained in service mentality). In essence, the reforms of 1998–2002 enabled the Colombian government to employ a reorganized force in a more effective manner.

As the Colombian military’s professional capability grew, its public image improved. According to a 1998 Gallup poll, 42 percent of Colombians surveyed viewed the armed forces favorably. That figure increased to 79 percent by July 2002.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Interviews with senior Colombian and U.S. officials.

12. Ejército Nacional de Colombia, *Logros de la Reestructuración*, 18-20.

13. *Ibid.*, 112.

## Plan Colombia

In September 1999, President Pastrana announced a “Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State,” which became commonly referred to as “Plan Colombia.”<sup>14</sup> The plan laid out comprehensive, strategic objectives to be accomplished over a six-year period, including an overarching goal to reduce the cultivation, processing, and distribution of narcotics by 50 percent. Key objectives included counter-drug efforts, with a special focus on coca eradication in the Caquetá and Putumayo region; strengthening the judiciary and fighting corruption; neutralizing the drug economy; strengthening the armed forces and police; protecting citizens from violence and promoting human rights; providing alternative development opportunities to coca cultivation; bolstering the economy; and improving governance. The price tag for Plan Colombia was \$7.5 billion, \$4 billion to be provided by Colombia and \$3.5 billion requested from foreign assistance, including from the United States.

Opinions differ considerably regarding the genesis of Plan Colombia, the development of the U.S. package in support of it, and the purpose and ultimate results of the initiative.<sup>15</sup> From the beginning, the plan was often mischaracterized and controversial in Colombia, the United States, and internationally. It has been criticized as being overly concentrated on counternarcotics and aerial eradication of coca; of both supporting surreptitiously and failing to provide funding for counterinsurgency; of providing too much and too little for the Colombia police vis-à-vis the armed forces; of not providing enough support for “soft-side” programs such as alternative development, human rights, and justice reform and of overwhelming the capacity of those sectors to adequately use funds. Critics of Plan Colombia at the time predicted, erroneously, that it would promote civil war in Colombia, ruin the peace process, result in a human rights catastrophe, feed Colombia’s cycle of violence, destroy the environment, and lead the United States down the slippery slope of involvement in a counter-guerrilla war similar to Vietnam.

In hindsight, Plan Colombia proved to be a positive factor in reversing Colombia’s steep decline and helping restore the effectiveness and credibility of the state. It also promoted a closer and more positive relationship between the United States and Colombia. Different initiatives within the Plan Colombia framework proved more successful than others—as described in this report—but the importance of the plan as a whole would not become fully apparent until several years later, when it was strengthened by the efforts of President Álvaro Uribe.

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14. For an English version, see: Presidency of the Republic, Colombia, “Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State,” Bogotá, 1999, in U.S. Institute of Peace, Peace Agreements Digital Collection, [http://www.usip.org/files/file/resources/collections/peace\\_agreements/plan\\_colombia\\_101999.pdf](http://www.usip.org/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/plan_colombia_101999.pdf).

15. This consideration of Plan Colombia is based on a broad base of interviews with key Colombian and U.S. government and military officials and nongovernment experts. Also see: Serafino, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options*; Public Law 106–246, July 13, 2000; Gabriel Marcella, *Plan Colombia: The Strategic and Operational Imperatives* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, April 2001), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB29.pdf>; Independent Task Force, *Toward Greater Peace and Security in Colombia: Forging a Constructive U.S. Policy*, sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Inter-American Dialogue (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000), [http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Colombia\\_TF.pdf](http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Colombia_TF.pdf); Nina M. Serafino, *Colombia: Plan Colombia Legislation and Assistance (FY2000–FY2001)* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 5, 2001); International Crisis Group, “Colombia’s Elusive Quest for Peace.”

The U.S. relationship with Colombia had been dominated by the narcotics issue for nearly two decades before Pastrana came to office.<sup>16</sup> Decertification of Colombia on narcotics cooperation during the Samper government drove a wedge between the two countries, and the strong predilection of some U.S. congressional leadership and staff for the Colombian police and their leader, General Rosso José Serrano, led to disproportionate support for that institution at the expense of the Colombian armed forces. The end of the Samper administration and Pastrana's election put the bilateral relationship on a far better footing, further improved by Pastrana's decision to resume extradition of Colombian drug kingpins to the United States. In 1999, the United States considerably increased its funding to Colombia to \$375 million, including funds by which the Defense Department helped establish and train a counternarcotics battalion of the Colombian army that would support ongoing eradication efforts.<sup>17</sup>

By mid-1998, the catastrophe at El Billar and other military setbacks by the FARC had provoked considerable concern in Washington that disorder in Colombia was growing rapidly. During that year, high-ranking officials on the National Security Council and in the Office of National Drug Control Policy and the State Department began work on a major U.S. support package for Colombia, and in early 1999 they consulted with the Colombian government on an action plan. U.S. officials made clear that they could not generate funding from Congress without a plan. For the Pastrana government, the task was to fuse what the United States needed with the more economic and social-oriented initiative it was already developing. The combined effort resulted in Plan Colombia, released as a Colombian document in September of that year. In January 2000 the Clinton administration presented its proposal for a supplemental FY 2000 funding package for Colombia of some \$954 million plus \$318 million in FY 2001 funds. Because funding for Plan Colombia was an emergency supplemental and not taken out of any agency's budget, the initiative had an easier time garnering inter-agency support.

After debate and revision, the \$1.3 billion emergency supplemental package, which was attached to a military construction appropriations bill, was approved by Congress in July and quickly signed into law. The Plan Colombia funding included \$860 million specifically for Colombia—the largest amount being some \$403 million for a massive counternarcotics effort in the Caquetá and Putumayo departments in southern Colombia, including standing up two more counternarcotics battalions equipped with 16 UH-60 Black Hawk and 30 UH-1H Huey helicopters (more helicopters than the combined fleet of the Colombian army and air force at that time). The package included \$115.6 million for the Colombian police, \$58.5 million for economic aid and for alternative development projects (in association with the Putumayo counter-drug effort), \$47.5 million to assist displaced persons, \$53.5 million for human rights, \$65.5 million for the administration of justice and governance, and \$3 million to support the peace process. An additional \$248 million was provided for regional counter-drug efforts and \$93 million more for development projects in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador to address the so-called balloon effect.

Reflecting the concerns of different congressional groups, the Plan Colombia supplemental contained language restricting the number of U.S. military personnel in country in support of Plan Colombia to 500 and civilian contractors to 300 as well as capping DOD funds that could be used for counter-drug initiatives and limiting helicopter use. The “Leahy Amendment” prohibiting the United States from providing support to any Colombian military or security unit against which

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16. See Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs: U.S. Policy Toward Colombia* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

17. Serafino, *Colombia: Plan Colombia Legislation and Assistance (FY2000–FY2001)*, 2.

there is credible evidence of having committed a gross human rights violation had been in effect since 1997. A prohibition against U.S. personnel becoming involved in combat, the strong human rights conditions, and the cap on overall numbers contributed to transparency and addressed some of the concerns of Congress and human rights NGOs.

Given the circumstances under which it was developed and approved, the Plan Colombia supplemental was an effort by the Clinton administration to keep Colombia from imploding. It was developed as a counter-drug initiative because both the U.S. executive branch and the Congress understood the connection between drugs and violence in Colombia, although with different emphases. While many in Congress insisted that the counter-drug effort in Colombia should be the centerpiece of U.S. policy and funding, others feared U.S. involvement in a counterinsurgency campaign and were suspicious that the FARC's presence in coca-growing regions would lead to anti-guerrilla activity disguised as counter-drug efforts. In the end, it is unlikely that the supplemental could have been approved in another form. To solidify bipartisan support, top U.S. officials stressed repeatedly that Plan Colombia was a counter-drug and not an anti-guerrilla initiative, an often clumsy and difficult dichotomy. The counter-drug-counter-insurgency distinction was relaxed after congressional authorizations were revised in 2002, but while in place it had the positive effect of encouraging the Colombians to shoulder the financial burden for their counterinsurgency campaign.

By December 2000, the second of three U.S.-trained battalions of the Counter-Drug (CD) Brigade had been activated as part of the "Push to the South" aimed at large-scale aerial eradication in the Putumayo and Caquetá departments. The third battalion came on line in 2001, bringing the CD Brigade's force to some 2,800. Together with other Colombian units, the brigade formed the first of Colombia's joint forces—the Joint Task Force South, aimed at disrupting drug production and trafficking by the FARC and criminal bands. The army did not favor the Push to the South, which it viewed as U.S.-dictated and not directed against the insurgency, but it was ordered by Pastrana to cooperate.<sup>18</sup> During a three-month spraying season in 2000–2001, some 25,000 hectares were aurally fumigated in these two departments, with some 84,000 hectares sprayed country-wide. With new spray aircraft brought on line, this figure increased to nearly 123,000 hectares in 2002, the first year, according to U.S. government figures, that total coca cultivation in Colombia began to decline, from a peak of 169,800 hectares in 2001 to 144,450 in 2002.<sup>19</sup>

Alternative development programs sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) began in the Putumayo even before the approval of the Plan Colombia supplemental, but over the course of several years failed to promote sustainable alternatives to coca production. This was owing to a variety of factors, including lack of effective state presence, lack of a coherent national strategy harnessing the Colombian government's efforts in this initiative (particularly in the area of security), pressure for short-term gains at the expense of more appropriate longer-term contributions such as road-building, lack of markets for products, little local buy-in, and tactics that resulted in a number of white-elephant projects.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Marks, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, 24; interviews with senior Colombian officials.

19. U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, March 2003), Colombia, Section IV, 20.

20. Interviews with nongovernment experts and senior U.S. officials.

## 4

# THE URIBE ADMINISTRATION, 2002– ADVANCES IN SECURITY AND STABILITY

## Democratic Security Policy

Álvaro Uribe was not an obvious presidential frontrunner, despite having been mayor of Medellín, senator, and governor of Antioquia department as a member of the Liberal Party. Seen as a dark horse at the start of his campaign, he won 53 percent of the vote in the May 2002 election at the head of a coalition of independents, Conservatives, and dissident Liberals. With his absolute majority, he became the first candidate since the 1991 Constitution took effect to win the presidency outright in the first round of voting. Although his campaign also focused on social and economic issues, Uribe's pledge to take a "firm hand" against the insurgents and bring order to the country was the deciding factor in his victory.

Immediately after his inauguration, which was marked by FARC mortar attacks that killed 17 and wounded scores more, Uribe took energetic steps to begin addressing security concerns. He declared a "state of internal commotion" in the country, which provided him with additional, short-term executive powers that he used along with presidential decrees to strengthen the power of the security forces until it was overturned by the Constitutional Court. He put together a cabinet of experienced technocrats; and he obtained rapid approval by the Congress of a one-time "democratic security tax" on liquid assets of individuals and companies valued at more than \$50,000 that would eventually raise about \$800 million to be applied to defense budgets over a four-year period.<sup>1</sup> Uribe also began putting in place plans for new military units and ordered stepped-up operations against the FARC and the ELN.

The initiatives taken by Uribe in his first months in office were early steps in applying what in June 2003 would be announced as the "Defense and Democratic Security Policy." Uribe and others used the term "democratic security" almost from the start, but they outlined the policy in considerable detail in a document developed in the Ministry of Defense and released jointly with the presidency. The Uribe administration defined the policy as "a framework document by which the National State outlines the basic tenets of democratic security to protect the rights of Colombians and strengthen, with the solidarity of the citizenry, the rule of law and democratic authority which is under threat."<sup>2</sup>

The key objective of the policy was to "reinforce and guarantee the rule of law in all (national) territory," noting that "the rights of Colombians are threatened fundamentally by the historic

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1. See International Crisis Group, "Colombia: ¿Durará la Luna de Miel de Uribe?" *Latin America Report*, (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 19, 2002), 5-6; International Crisis Group, "Colombia: President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy," *Latin America Report*, no. 6 (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, November 13, 2003), 5.

2. Presidencia de la República y Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, "Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática," Bogotá, 2003, 12.

incapacity of Colombian democracy to affirm the authority of its institutions over the entire country and to protect citizens...from the threat... of illegal armed organizations.”<sup>3</sup>

The document defined the threats to democracy, including the role played by crime and drugs; outlined the strategic objectives of consolidating state control, protecting the population, combating drugs and narco-trafficking, and improving governance; and then stipulated a series of measures to achieve these various goals, ranging from strengthening the armed forces and police to border control, counter-drug operations, improving protection of human rights, anti-crime measures, and international cooperation. Some of the proposals were left vague, while others were quite explicit, such as the creation of a network of paid informants to provide the police and armed forces with information to thwart terrorism or illegal armed groups. The policy also stated that the government would adjust future budgets and taxes to obtain the funding necessary to carry out these initiatives.

With its policy of democratic security, the Uribe administration established that its attention would be focused on expanding state control over national territory and protecting citizens against the effects of illegal armed groups and criminals. This was a key factor that galvanized Plan Colombia’s “whole-of-government” approach. Importantly, it also underscored the need for cooperation between the government and citizens and the sacrifices that would have to be borne by the elite in the form of additional taxes. From the 53 percent support rating he received in the May 2002 election, Uribe’s popularity rating rose to 75 percent by the end of 2002.<sup>4</sup>

## The Security Buildup

Uribe moved quickly to initiate what proved to be a sustained effort to expand the size and capability of the armed forces and police and to deploy those forces in a more strategic manner. He elevated Pastrana’s army head, General Jorge Enrique Mora, to be commander in chief of the armed forces until his retirement in December 2003 (parallel to the resignation of Defense Minister Marta Lucía Ramírez), and named General Carlos Ospina as army chief and as then as Mora’s substitute as commander in chief. Ospina was the chief architect of military strategy under Uribe, building on Mora’s earlier reforms to build a larger and more capable armed forces with the mobility to place quality troops when and where they were needed. The goal was control of space, population, and resources and—conversely—to deny those same factors to the insurgents and paramilitaries.<sup>5</sup> With Uribe’s encouragement, the armed forces took the war to the FARC—but in a manner aimed at undermining the FARC’s fighting capability by cutting its strategic supply and communications corridors, denying it access to populations and economic resources, hindering recruitment, and encouraging desertion. Ospina sought better civil-military relations and better coordination between the military and the police, a task greatly facilitated by parallel efforts to strengthen the Ministry of Defense.

To accomplish these tasks, Uribe and his advisers understood that the counterinsurgency campaign would have to be sustained over time and that it would be expensive. The 2002 special

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3. Ibid., 14.

4. International Crisis Group, “Colombia: ¿Durará la Luna de Miel de Uribe?” 1.

5. Interviews with senior Colombian and U.S. officials; Marks, *Sustainability of Colombian Military/Strategic Support for “Democratic Security,”* 10–12.

security tax played an important part in this effort. Although government budgets for the security sector as a percentage of a growing GDP remained relatively constant in the range of 5.2 to 5.1 percent during Uribe's first term, spending in dollar terms nonetheless rose considerably during this period—from \$4.6 billion in 2003 to \$6.9 billion in 2006 due to the special tax and to Colombia's stronger economy.<sup>6</sup> At the start of his second administration, Uribe ramped up security spending considerably, with a second wealth tax in support of the defense sector expected to raise some \$3.7 billion during the 2007–2011 budget cycles and an increase of 27 percent in the 2008 security budget over 2007.<sup>7</sup>

Over the course of his administrations, Uribe built up the size of the armed forces (army, navy [including marines], and air force) and police, increasing the former by almost 39 percent between 2002 and 2009 and the latter by about 32 percent. (See Figure 1.) This buildup proceeded at a relatively steady pace except for a large (18 percent) increase in the size of the armed forces from 2002 to 2003. Importantly, he increased the number of professional soldiers in the army (a number already more than doubled under Pastrana) from 55,000 in 2002 to 86,000 in 2009, a gain of 56 percent. These officers, NCOs, and soldiers constituted the heart of the army's combat capability. The increase in the volunteer professional corps obviously required a larger expenditure than the draftee-based army of the past.

In terms of the armed forces order of battle, among the first changes made under Uribe in 2002 were the creation of one new army division, (with a second to follow in 2005), one new fixed territory brigade, and two new mobile brigades with 10 “counter-guerrilla” battalions that were assigned to the Fourth Division in Villavicencio (Meta) and the Fifth Division in Bogotá.<sup>8</sup> The army's mobile brigades constituted the heart of the army's counterinsurgency effort. Between 2002 and 2008, 15 such units were stood up, three each year between 2004 and 2006. Each mobile brigade is typically composed of 4 counter-guerrilla battalions, 60 of which were constituted during the same period. To further consolidate the expanding state security presence, eight new “territorial brigades” were created under Uribe, covering larger areas of the country. The army added five new “high-mountain” battalions of 1,200 soldiers each to control key mountain passes during 2002–2005, a special battalion to protect energy infrastructure, and in 2002 seven companies assigned to patrol roadways.

Another key development initiated in 2002 was the creation of local home guard units called *soldados campesinos* (“peasant soldiers”) at first but soon after by the more acceptable name of *Soldados de mi Pueblo* (“my hometown soldiers”). These home guards were draftees organized in special platoons of 40 men and based largely in rural towns—some 600 locations across the

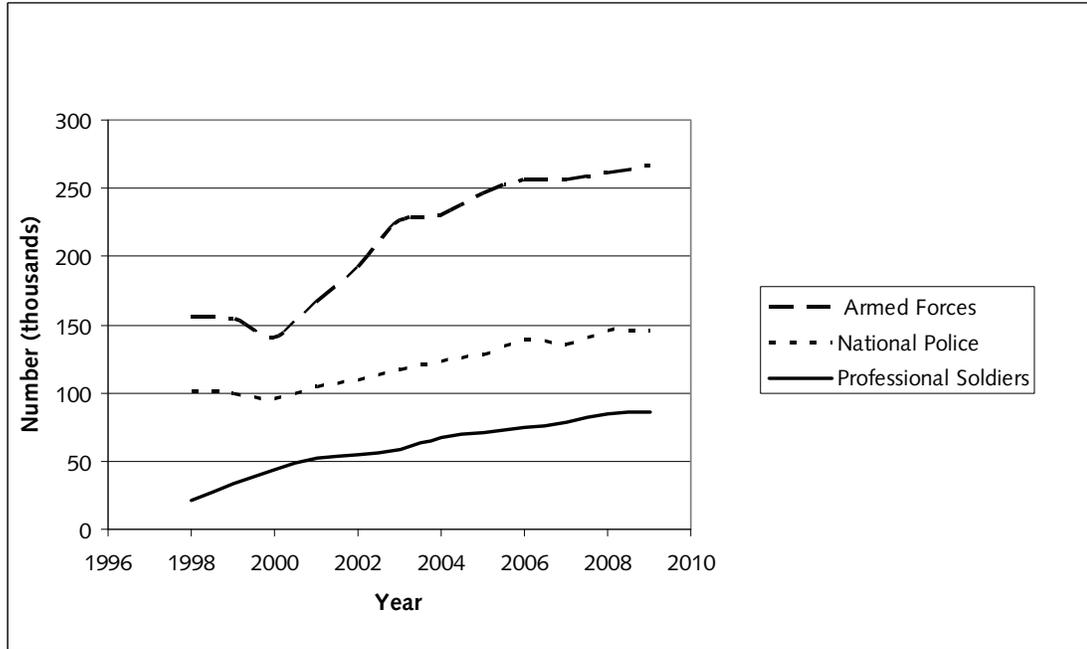
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6. Ministerio de Defensa, “Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática,” Bogotá, September 2007, 67; Ministerio de Defensa, “Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática,” Bogotá, April 2009, 90; Andrés Villamizar and Germán Espejo, “El Gasto en Seguridad y Defensa en Colombia: De la Contención a la Ofensiva,” *Documentos Ocasionales* (Bogotá: Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, November 2004), <http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org/docs/pdf/instituciones/EnsayoPresupuesto.pdf>.

7. DeShazo, Primiani, and McLean, *Back From the Brink: Evaluating Progress in Colombia, 1999–2007*, 16; Ministerio de Defensa, “Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática,” 2009, 89; U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Colombia,” May 2009, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35754.htm>, 6.

8. Ministerio de Defensa, “Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática,” 2009, 75.

**Figure 1. Size of Colombian Security Forces, 1998–2009**



Source of data: Ejército Nacional de Colombia, *Logros de la Reestructuración* (Bogotá: COLAR, undated), 20; Ministerio de Defensa, *Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática*, April 2009, 80–84; Ministerio de Defensa, *Logros y Retos de la Política de Defensa y de Seguridad Democrática*, March 2006; September 2007, 75–81; November 2007, 75–81.

country—officially as part of the local army battalions stationed in each area.<sup>9</sup> The *Soldados de mi Pueblo* received the training and equipment of regular soldiers but were allowed to serve close to their homes, largely as a force to hold down territory, disrupt insurgent strategic corridors, show a modest state presence, and free up other troops for combat operations. By 2004, these units contained some 22,000 soldiers.<sup>10</sup>

A number of special and elite units were also created—an army force of 10 “Special Forces Urban Anti-Terrorist” units in 2002, a *Lanceros* Special Forces unit in 2003, and sniper and “special operations” units that were intended to strike against FARC leadership.<sup>11</sup> Particular attention went to improving logistics support and intelligence capabilities. In 2003, the government created four new military intelligence and counter-intelligence centers and two new intelligence units in support of operations. Just as the services worked together in the joint task force arrangement, the intelligence arms of the various forces were coordinated to perform more effectively.

The result of these changes has been the creation of a considerably more effective army. Jane’s *World Armies 2009* report assesses Colombia’s professional army core units (mobile brigades, counterinsurgency battalions, counter-drug battalions, Special Forces units, high-mountain battalions) as “quality troops made even more impressive by their combat experience.”<sup>12</sup>

9. Marks, *Sustainability of Colombian Military/Strategic Support for “Democratic Security,”* 12.

10. Villamizar and Espejo, “El Gasto en Seguridad y Defensa en Colombia: De la Contención a la Ofensiva,” 7.

11. Ministerio de Defensa, “Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática,” 2009, 76; interviews with senior Colombian and U.S. officials.

12. Jane’s, *World Armies, Colombia*, March 13, 2009, available online by subscription, 2.

The Colombian Navy's role in counterinsurgency has been especially significant in riverine operations in the eastern lowlands of the country, and its capabilities have been gradually increased since Uribe took office. From 2003 to 2007, 10 "mobile fluvial support stations" were created and additional patrol craft, armored troop transport boats, and six Colombian-designed and -built river craft called the "*nodriza*" (literally "nursemaid") were activated. The *nodriza*, a heavily armored and armed riverine attack craft that can transport a helicopter and up to 72 marines and with the capability of operating deep in hostile territory, has been a large success against isolated FARC strongholds and in expanding state presence.<sup>13</sup>

Over the course of the Uribe administration, the size of the National Police was expanded at a consistent pace and its reach extended to include many areas of the country that had never had a police presence or from which the police had been driven. Since 2002, 168 new police stations and 146 substations have been created, often in the wake of efforts by the armed forces to consolidate security control over areas recovered from the insurgents. The existing force of rural police (*Carabineros*) was expanded to about 7,400 officers and agents organized in 70 units, including newly created special "mobile squadrons" of more heavily armed units with light infantry training to serve in conflictive rural areas and in support of narcotics eradication.<sup>14</sup> Improved cooperation between the military and police has been an important goal of senior Colombian leadership in past years—with an important degree of success.<sup>15</sup>

A decisive factor in Colombian efforts at counterinsurgency and in establishing state authority in more remote parts of the country has been air mobility, with helicopters as the key ingredient.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of the Pastrana administration, Colombia's rotary airlift capability was very small—estimated at around 20 functioning helicopters in the hands of the armed forces. Plan Colombia's injection of UH-60L Black Hawk and UH-1N Huey helicopters in support of the Counter-Drug Brigade more than doubled the number in country, but their utility was restricted to anti-narcotics work. Starting in 2002, however, the Colombian government embarked on a course of acquiring large numbers of helicopters for the army and air force, with particular focus on building up its fleet of UH-60L and AH-60L Black Hawks, the latter configured by the Colombians with its "arpia" rocket system. By 2008, Colombia operated the third-largest Black Hawk fleet in the world, with some 61 units, and with 15 more to be delivered in 2009.<sup>17</sup> While numbers vary according to calculations, the Colombian armed forces and police had an inventory of some 195 helicopters as of late 2008, not including the fleet of 60 helicopters used by the Colombian army and police but still listed in the Plan Colombia or U.S. Narcotics Assistance Section (NAS) inventory—a total of some 255 units in country, with more on order.<sup>18</sup> These assets, combined with vastly improved pilot and maintenance capabilities, gave the Colombian armed forces a huge advantage in terms of counterinsurgency efforts, one that it had not enjoyed at the start of the decade. The acquisition of 25 Embraer 314 "Super Tucano" light attack aircraft from Brazil added another important dimension to the counterinsurgency effort. The Colombians also used the AC-47 cargo plane to great effect as a gunship against the guerrillas.<sup>19</sup>

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13. Interviews with senior U.S. and Colombian officials.

14. Interview with senior Colombian official.

15. Interviews with senior U.S. and Colombian officials.

16. Interviews with senior U.S. and Colombian officials overwhelmingly confirm this observation.

17. Sikorsky Aerospace news release, November 4, 2008; United States Southern Command, "COLMIL/PONAL R/W Asset Distribution," October 8, 2008.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Interview with senior U.S. official.

Many other factors relating to force recruitment, structure, training, communications, night combat capability, and intelligence improvements have been addressed since 2002, often profiting from U.S. support. The term of compulsory military service was increased from 18 months to two years, allowing for more training and development. Military education in general has improved, with special attention to the professionalization of the noncommissioned officer corps. The establishment of a Joint Intelligence Center in the Tres Esquinas base (Caquetá) in 2000 and the creation of a National Council for Intelligence under the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Ministry of Defense have promoted more coordinated and effective intelligence gathering and use.

## Counterinsurgency Operations

Colombian forces began stepping up operations against the FARC and the ELN immediately after Uribe took office. In late 2002, the armed forces carried out a series of military operations against the FARC's few urban strongholds in slum areas of Medellín, Cali, and Bogotá.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the armed forces increased operations against the FARC and ELN in many other parts of the country.

In 2003, the government mounted *Plan Patriota*, whose first phase was *Libertad I*—a concerted and very successful effort to break the stranglehold that a confluence of FARC fronts had exercised on Bogotá by controlling the surrounding countryside and road access.<sup>21</sup> By one estimate, Colombian forces stepped up their operations against the FARC and ELN by some 55 percent during the first half of 2003 compared with the same period in 2002, with many FARC units beginning to withdraw to areas that were more isolated.<sup>22</sup>

A second phase of *Plan Patriota*, aimed at reducing the FARC in its heartland of Meta, Caquetá, and Huila departments in 2004, was entrusted to the newly created Joint Task Force Omega, an 18,000-strong force under the direct command of General Ospina. Results at the early stages were mixed—with few guerillas captured—but over time Omega has worn down key FARC fronts in the area and driven them deeper into the hinterland.

As the armed forces grew in size, mobility, and effectiveness, the offensive capability of the FARC and ELN began to dissipate. According to the Ministry of Defense, armed attacks by the FARC and ELN dropped by half between 2003 and 2004 and continued falling thereafter.<sup>23</sup> Desertion rates among FARC fighters doubled between 2006 and 2008—to 3,000 fighters—including an increasingly larger number of veteran cadres, a clear sign of low morale and military deterioration.<sup>24</sup>

Entire FARC fronts crumbled while others faded still deeper into remote areas, increasingly resorting to the use of land mines and booby traps to defend their dwindling turf.<sup>25</sup> Once-powerful FARC fronts operating in Meta such as the 27th and 43rd had been hit so hard by Task Force

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20. Marcella, *The United States and Colombia*, 31.

21. Interviews with senior U.S. and Colombian officials.

22. International Crisis Group, "Colombia: President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy," 8.

23. Ministerio de Defensa, "Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática," 2009, 34, 52. The capture by the armed forces and police of FARC and ELN fighters peaked in 2003 at about 7,300 and remained high during the next three years but then dropped considerably in 2007.

24. *Ibid.*, 50.

25. See Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Maiming the People: Guerrilla Use of Antipersonnel Landmines and Other Indiscriminate Weapons in Colombia* 19, no. 1(B) (New York: HRW, July 2007).

Omega that they could no longer operate at larger than a squad level.<sup>26</sup> According to one careful study of the armed conflict during the 2002–2008 period, the FARC’s offensive capability has been reduced by 70 percent, concentrated in a much smaller area, and limited to small-scale ambushes and incursions.<sup>27</sup> Another study estimated that 60 percent of FARC fronts were not operational during 2008.<sup>28</sup> An important international organization observed that the military offensive of the government against the FARC had produced “devastating results.”<sup>29</sup> The ELN, always far smaller and weaker than the FARC, could mount only 5 small-scale attacks in 2008 and saw its income from kidnapping and extortion dry up almost entirely since its better days of 2000–2002.<sup>30</sup>

The Colombian government gave special priority to strikes directly against the top FARC leadership. Initial efforts were often poorly executed during the early years of the Uribe administration but gradually improved, so that by 2007–2008 there were signs that FARC command and control structure was collapsing and that the government’s intelligence capability was taking a severe toll on the guerrillas. The death by natural causes of the FARC commander “Manuel Marulanda” in March 2008 and the killing by Colombian forces of Secretariat member “Raúl Reyes” in Ecuador that same month were severe blows to the FARC, as were the loss of military leaders “Iván Ríos” and “Karina,” the commander of the FARC 47th Front in May of that year.

The government’s spectacularly successful *Operación Jaque* on July 2, 2008, that freed the FARC’s most important political prisoners, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three U.S. contractors, provided another stinging blow to the FARC and could not have been undertaken by the earlier Colombian army.

Current measurements place the FARC’s order-of-battle strength in the range of 7,000–10,000, half or less than at the peak reached around 2000–2001.<sup>31</sup> Increasingly cut off from settled areas, supplies, reinforcements, and access to its *milicia* support cadres, the FARC has become more dependent on drug trafficking for its income and the need to maintain a presence in areas along the Pacific coast and along the borders with Ecuador and Venezuela to keep trafficking and supply routes open as well as the need to establish more permanent camps in those countries.

Although the FARC has suffered stiff reverses and its ruling Secretariat has lost tactical control over the various fronts, the insurgency still maintains its strategic goal of overthrowing the state despite the near impossibility of that occurring. While, according to one leading Colombian strategist, the government now controls much of the national space, the FARC still considers time to be its ally, and the government must take more control over that variable through development projects that reduce poverty and inequality.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the FARC has demonstrated an ability to recover if given a chance.

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26. Interview with senior Colombian official.

27. Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, *El Debilitamiento de los Grupos Irregulares en Colombia 2002–2008* (Bogotá: Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, March 2, 2009), <http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org/docs/pdf/especiales/informeEspecial23-2.pdf>, 5.

28. Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, *Balace de la Confrontación Armada en Colombia 2002–2008* (Bogotá: Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, December 18, 2008), <http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org/docs/pdf/conflictoArmado/balaceconfrontacion09.pdf>.

29. International Crisis Group, “Ending Colombia’s FARC Conflict: Dealing the Right Card,” *Latin America Report*, no. 30 (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 26, 2009).

30. Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, *El Debilitamiento de los Grupos Irregulares en Colombia 2002–2008*, 8.

31. International Crisis Group, “Ending Colombia’s FARC Conflict,” 7.

32. Interview with senior Colombian official.

## Border Areas: A Difficult Challenge

Except for a few heavily urbanized areas along the Venezuela frontier, most of the region on either side of the 6,000-kilometer long border Colombia shares with its neighbors (Panama, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela) is isolated, very lightly populated tropical lowland. Long neglected by Bogotá, legitimate state presence on the Colombian side has been minimal, with a similar situation along much of the bordering region of Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, these remote, unpopulated border areas have long provided an attractive environment for Colombia's illegal armed groups, the FARC and the ELN above all, but also paramilitaries.

While the insurgents have traditionally used remote border areas in Venezuela and Ecuador to rest and refit fighting units and as support areas for narcotics production and drug and arms trafficking, the importance of these areas to the FARC and ELN became enhanced as Colombian security forces ramped up counterinsurgency operations, above all in the departments of Nariño, Putumayo, Arauca, and Norte de Santander after 2003. Advances in Colombia's ability to target high-value FARC leaders in subsequent years resulted in more of them operating from what appeared to be safe havens outside the country. The attack by Colombian forces on a FARC camp just across the border with Ecuador on March 1 2008, that resulted in the death of FARC Secretariat member "Raúl Reyes" and led Ecuador to break relations with Colombia, underscored this long-standing FARC tactic.<sup>34</sup> At present, according to a senior Colombian official, five of the seven members of the FARC Secretariat reside in Venezuela or Ecuador.<sup>35</sup>

Colombia's border areas—above all with Ecuador and Venezuela—remain an overall weakness in an increasingly positive security picture. Although Ecuador has taken steps to try to secure its border region with Colombia despite its very limited resources, continued advances by Colombia against the FARC in the Putumayo will put even more pressure on the border region. Ecuador remains a key drug transiting point for both Colombian and Peruvian cocaine as well as a source of precursor chemicals and is still attractive to FARC units for rest and resupply.<sup>36</sup> Without a concerted effort by both Colombia and Ecuador, the border area will continue to be a source of regional instability and a challenge to state authority in both countries.

The situation in Venezuela is similar to that of Ecuador in terms of the long-standing use of its border regions by the FARC as a safe haven, source of drug precursors, and a major drug trafficking corridor. However, while Ecuadoran regimes since 2000 have vacillated between a hands-off approach and limited action by Ecuadoran security forces against the FARC, the Hugo Chávez government in Venezuela adopted a much more benign view of the insurgents. In January 2008, Chávez called on the European Union to remove the FARC from its list of terrorist organizations, and the Venezuelan legislative assembly passed legislation favorable to the insurgency by calling for the FARC and ELN to be granted belligerent status. According to a recent GAO report, "Venezuelan government officials provide material support, primarily to the FARC, which has helped

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33. See International Crisis Group, "Colombia's Borders: The Weak Link in Uribe's Security Policy," *Latin America Report*, no. 9 (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, September 23, 2004).

34. See Gabriel Marcella, *War Without Borders: The Colombia-Ecuador Crisis of 2008* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, December 2008).

35. Interview with senior Colombian official.

36. International Crisis Group, "Latin American Drugs I: Losing the Fight," *Latin America Report*, no. 25 (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 14, 2008), 9; Marcella, *War Without Borders*.

sustain the Colombian insurgency.”<sup>37</sup> Although Chávez subsequently called on the FARC to lay down its arms, the environment for effective Colombian-Venezuelan border cooperation to blunt the power of the insurgents and control drugs remains discouraging.

Increasing vigilance on the part of Peru and Brazil appears to have kept those border areas under more control.

## Consolidation of State Control

In early 2007, the Colombian Ministry of Defense made public a “Policy of Consolidation of Democratic Security” meant to be a four-year follow-up plan to Democratic Security to be applied during Uribe’s second term in office. Developed by civilian and military leaders within the ministry, it outlined the need to consolidate state authority beyond a mere military presence in areas taken from the insurgents, bringing other state and private-sector resources to bear in the consolidation process.<sup>38</sup> The policy called for a “doctrine of integral action,” envisaging a coordinated effort to improve citizen security, eliminate the drug economy, replace it with legitimate economic activity, and consolidate the rule of law. The policy explicitly underscored the original goal of Democratic Security of extending state control over territory and implicitly recognized that, although the FARC and ELN had been rolled back and the paramilitaries demobilized, the consolidation of state authority was far from achieved in many parts of the country.

Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos announced in March 2009 what he called a “Strategic Leap” but is now called the “National Consolidation Plan” aimed at concentrating military and civilian efforts at building an effective state presence in highest-priority areas seen as strategic to the FARC—including the Macarena, the Montes de María area on the north coast, the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander, Bajo Cauca in Antioquia, the Nariño-Chocó-Valle de Cauca region along the Pacific coast, and parts of the tropical southeast. These steps and announcements taken by the Colombian government since 2007 share the same perception about the need to build a meaningful state presence, and all in one way or another are restatements of the Democratic Security idea that has been the driving force of the Uribe administration.

In line with the “consolidation” policy, the Colombian government—with support from USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) and the government of the Netherlands—launched a program entitled *Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena* (Plan for Integral Consolidation of the Macarena, or PCIM) in mid-2007. PCIM called for a “sequenced” series of steps to bring about effective state authority and economic development in an area of six municipalities in Meta department that had previously been a FARC stronghold. While coordination of the plan would be in the hands of *Acción Social*, the presidential entity responsible for social spending and development, the impetus for PCIM again came from the Ministry of Defense, with the support of the U.S. military and USAID, as a mechanism to lend greater coherence to the process of consolidating state authority.<sup>39</sup> A central purpose, only partially achieved to date, was to harness the energy

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37. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Drug Control: U.S. Counternarcotics Cooperation with Venezuela Has Declined,” GAO-09-806, July 20, 2009, 12, available at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-806>.

38. See Ministerio de Defensa, República de Colombia, “Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática,” Bogotá, 2007.

39. See the PCIM case study on pages 27–33.

of Colombian civilian agencies and groups to this national priority. U.S. support to PCIM and in other areas identified by the National Consolidation Plan is now called the “Colombia Strategic Development Initiative,” which seeks to focus U.S. programs on those areas.

### *Case Study*

## **PCIM: A New Approach to Security and Development**

The creation of the *Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena* (PCIM) embodies what appears to be an important shift in the Government of Colombia’s hitherto not fully coordinated approach to establishing effective state presence in areas formerly controlled by illegal armed groups.<sup>1</sup> It also reflects the most fundamental thinking in recent approaches to managing counterinsurgency operations— that support of any population is either achieved or lost through engagement.<sup>2</sup> Unless Colombians living in these former conflictive zones see that the government is concerned with their security and well-being, progress in advancing any type of development will not be sustainable. As a strategy for consolidation of sustained state authority, the PCIM’s emphasis on rapid and sequenced action coordinated on an interagency basis has considerable potential for success not only in the Macarena but also as a pilot project for use in other areas of Colombia.

### *Specifics of the Plan*

The Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena is being implemented in six municipalities of the Department of Meta through its Center for Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI), under the Office of the Presidency of Colombia.<sup>3</sup> It was organized in August 2007 and operates under the authority of Acción Social, which is responsible for execution of the

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1. The Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena was conceived to address closely related efforts (security, counter-drug, development) that had previously been carried out along separate tracks. Earlier experience in the Macarena region and in other areas of the country— the Putumayo is a frequently mentioned example—highlighted the need for a coordinated and sequenced effort by military, police, and civilian authorities to convince citizens in the affected areas that the transition to legitimate state presence was permanent.

2. See U.S. Army, “Tactics in Counterinsurgency,” *Field Manual 3-24.2*, April 21, 2009. The U.S. Army Field Manual developed to address this problem clearly states that “military units alone cannot defeat an insurgency. Most of the work involves discovering and solving the population’s underlying issues. . . the root causes of their dissatisfaction . . . such as land reform, unemployment, oppressive leadership” and a need to coordinate “with non-military agencies and other nations [to] restore basic services, . . . to orchestrate political deals, and the word on the street.”

3. The Center for Coordinated Integral Action (CCAI), an interagency group, was established in 2004 under the authority of the Office of the Presidency of Colombia, with input from the U.S. government. CCAI brings together 15 Colombian government ministries and other agencies for the purpose of coordinating the government’s efforts to introduce state presence in priority areas of the country where it had not existed or was weak. CCAI has no legal standing and is a coordinating, not an implementing, agency with no funding of its own. Its coordinator is a senior presidential adviser and also a delegate of the presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation (*Acción Social*), the Colombian entity charged with coordinating a broad array of social development programs, the manual eradication of coca crops, and international cooperation for programs of the government of Colombia. Key PCIM civilian initiatives come under the supervision of *Acción Social*.

plan. The PCIM project is supported with funds from the Colombian government and from international donors, specifically the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Office of Transition Initiatives of USAID.<sup>4</sup>

The PCIM envisages a sequenced approach to consolidation, starting with the securing of municipal urban centers by the Colombian military followed by the establishment of a police presence, freeing the military for further security consolidation in outlying rural areas. Once a sufficient degree of security is established, the eradication of coca production, either voluntarily or forced, takes place, facilitating the expansion of state presence and the rise of a legal economy. This approach requires greater civil-military cooperation than has prevailed in the past. A “fusion center,” established at a location within the Macarena region, is intended to facilitate coordination of the work of different government entities.

Beyond the consolidation of security and coca eradication, PCIM activities are concentrated in six areas: institutional development; citizenship and governability; property rights and territorial order; infrastructure and connectivity; access to public goods and social services; and economic/business development. A transitional approach to alternative development, the goal is to demonstrate state presence beyond the military, police, and narcotics eradication at the earliest possible moment through an injection of timely resources, even if on a modest scale. These quick-impact projects are supplemented by two other nationwide government programs, *Familias en Acción* and *Familias Guardabosque*, both of which are designed to provide conditional cash transfers to least-advantaged groups.

### *The Macarena Region*

The choice of the Macarena region was not coincidental in the development of the PCIM. The region, historically the central operations area of the FARC and a major coca cultivation and cocaine production and trafficking zone, has long eluded meaningful state control. Only in the past few years has the Colombian military made significant inroads in wresting control of the Macarena from the FARC. Today, there is a strong military presence in much of the region. This has opened the door to a growing police presence and to progress in coca eradication. With the PCIM, a civilian presence is following in the wake of the military.

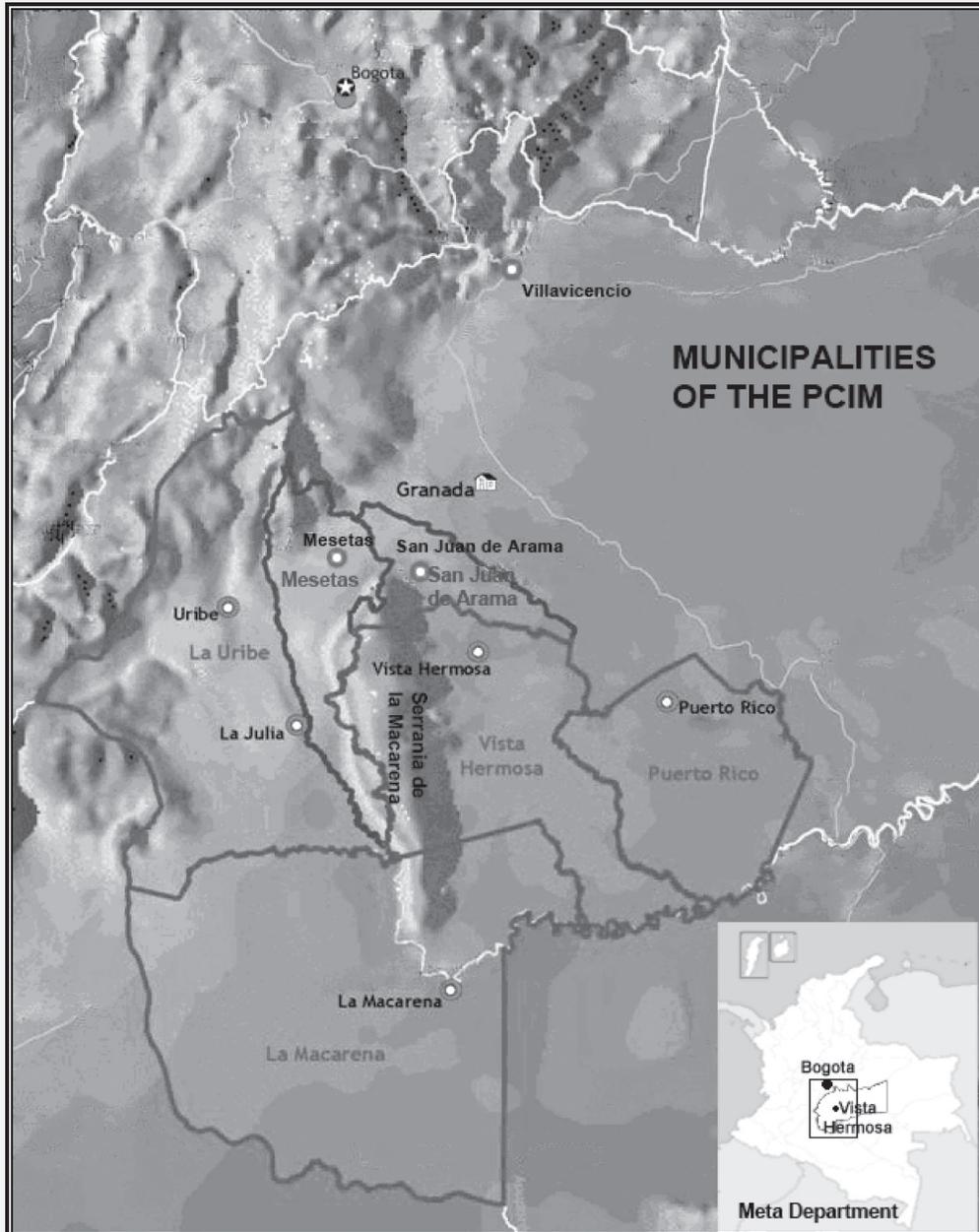
The PCIM area of operation encompasses 6 of the 29 municipalities of the Department of Meta: Macarena, Mesetas, Puerto Rico, San Juan de Arama, La Uribe, and Vista Hermosa.<sup>5</sup> The area takes its name from the *Serranía de la Macarena*, a mountain range

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4. The Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) of USAID Colombia provided early assistance to *Acción Social* and to CCAI for the PCIM. An OTI grant was used to hire the civilian coordinator for PCIM in August 2007, and OTI integrated the activities of its *Colombia Responde* (for municipal and community development, education, health, infrastructure, technical training) and *Progreso* (agricultural development) projects into PCIM, as well as providing logistics and transport support for PCIM staff. In FY 2008, OTI's support to PCIM totaled \$8.6 million. The government of the Netherlands also contributed or pledged upwards of \$3.3 million in economic development and transition projects related to PCIM in 2008 and 2009.

5. PCIM coordinators divide the region into three categories according to levels of security consolidation: “secure,” “in transition,” and “not secure.” Five of the six municipal urban centers are secure.

## Map of the Macarena Region



Source: Created by the authors.

about 120 kilometers long and 30 kilometers at its widest point that extends southeast from the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes. Approximately 25 percent of the population reside in the six “urban centers” of the municipalities, the town of Vista Hermosa with some 6,300 residents being the largest, with the bulk of the population residing either in very small towns or in rural areas.

The economy of the Macarena region is in an early transition from coca and cocaine production to legitimate activity. During the *Despeje*, small farmers were lured into the PCIM region to provide the FARC with profitable narcotics to export and food to support its fighters.

Aside from the intergovernmental orientation to planning and coordination of activities, the PCIM moves the locus of activity away from Bogotá and even the capital of Meta, Villavicencio, to the region itself. Under the PCIM, as soon as areas are considered safe enough, civilian employees enter the areas for preliminary contact with local populations to engage in rounds of discussions (*consultas*) on the kinds of projects and activities most needed in each community. Programs carried out by *Colombia Responde* and *Progreso* require the signing of letter-of-reference agreements with local communities to obtain “local buy-in” of projects, cosigned by municipal mayors and representatives of *Acción Social*. The establishment of a fusion center in the urban area of Vista Hermosa is intended for on-site coordination of PCIM activities. The fusion center has both symbolic and practical value and has been the site of several meetings since its establishment early in 2009.

### *Security*

The PCIM is not a post-conflict program.<sup>6</sup> It integrates security and development activities designed to bring an end to an ongoing conflict. The six Macarena municipalities are provided security by the Joint Task Force Omega, headquartered at the Larandia Base in Caquetá. The Fourth Division based in Villavicencio gives support. Once home to the 27th and 43rd FARC fronts, among the biggest and best-armed in Colombia, large areas of the Macarena region are now free from the threat of incursion by large FARC units.

According to senior Omega officers and Ministry of Defense officials, the FARC presence in the Macarena region should continue to wane under pressure from Task Force Omega. Morale in the FARC ranks is low, desertions have increased, and the economic base of the FARC, predicated on drugs, has sharply deteriorated. FARC units are on the defensive and have increasingly come to rely on the use of landmines and booby traps to defend their turf. Morale on the Colombian military side is by all reports high, and the Omega force is said to enjoy considerable support from citizens in the Macarena zone. However, the military sees its mission as departing secured zones as soon as possible and turning security control over to the police. The Colombian military, from the Ministry of Defense on down, appear to be giving strong support to the PCIM concept, saying they understand the value of establishing a government presence “that does not wear a uniform.”

Police presence in the Macarena region is growing. According to several sources, Colombian police stationed in the Macarena area are not as well regarded by local citizenry as the military. This may be due in part to their relatively recent arrival, which has not allowed them to gain the confidence of people unaccustomed to their presence. Their work requires them to be more involved with the local populace in places where they have little back-up from judicial institutions. New police stations are due to be established in additional small

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6. This assessment of the PCIM is derived from Peter DeShazo, Phillip McLean, and Johanna Mendelson Forman, *Colombia's Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena: An Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2009).

towns in the area in 2009 Carabinero units (light infantry-trained rural police units) are assigned to towns in transition to help patrol rural areas.

### *Counternarcotics*

The economy of the Macarena region is in an early transition from coca and cocaine production to legitimate activity. During the *Despeje*, small farmers were lured into the PCIM region to provide the FARC with profitable narcotics to export and food to support its fighters. According to UN estimates, Vista Hermosa and Puerto Rico were the municipalities with the fourth- and seventh-largest coca crops, respectively, in Colombia in 2007. However, figures for 2008 from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime show that cultivation figures fell sharply that year to an estimated 2,000–6,000 hectares.<sup>7</sup> Replanting levels appear to be down, but authorities declined to estimate by how much, with lower levels of overall cocaine production and drug trafficking. There are said to be few drug labs capable of processing cocaine due to the larger military presence and the weakening of the FARC in the region.

Authorities are confident from aerial observation and evidence in the towns that the FARC's income from coca grown in the region has been sharply disrupted. This in turn has resulted in the out-migration of much of the floating population, including the *raspachines* (day laborers) who had come to harvest the coca crops. Once local residents realize coca will not return, the chances of transiting to legitimate crops and licit economic activity will improve.

### *Agriculture*

With improved security, larger areas of the Macarena region are likely to become zones for significant agricultural development. The soil and climate will likely permit cultivation of sugar cane, yucca, tropical fruits like bananas, African palm, rubber, cacao, rice, and vegetables, as well as cattle raising and milk production. Land around the town of Vista Hermosa is now worth 10 times what it was five years ago. Bogotá is just 210 kilometers from there, though over a high mountain pass.

Private investment in the Macarena region seems feasible, judging by the large-scale planting of African palm and other cash crops around the growing town of Granada, to the northeast of San Juan de Arama. Yet in the short term, encompassing the timing of PCIM project goals, the challenge is to advance the empowerment and welfare of the small farmers in the region and those likely to arrive soon.

Five key problems stand out: (1) the need for tertiary roads to get cash crops into the market economy; (2) access to farm machinery (tractors, plows, harvesters) at affordable prices; (3) access to credit— a problem exacerbated by the fact that only a small percentage of farmers in the region have title to their lands to use as a loan guarantee; (4) the need for more technical assistance; and (5) land titling, historically controversial across all regions of Colombia and exacerbated in the Macarena by the presence of large extensions of national parks that limit or prohibit private land holding. There are also long-term obstacles to developing the agricultural potential of the region. Most of the cash crops under cultivation, such as cacao,

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7. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Colombia, Coca Cultivation Survey for 2008*, Government of Colombia, June 2009, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia\\_coca\\_survey\\_2008.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia_coca_survey_2008.pdf), 11, 13.

will take at least three years to deliver returns on investment. In the meantime, other types of plantings of food crops will continue to be essential to support the communities.

### *Infrastructure*

The lack of tertiary roads is an impediment to the development of rural areas of the Macarena region across the board. Where roads exist, they are unusable by large trucks and are impassable for extended periods during the region's eight-month rainy season. PCIM programs help local populations to maintain or repair tertiary roads— a useful and job-creating activity. The absence of a good network of roads is a considerable barrier to enabling agriculturalists to get their product to market. A lack of utilities—electricity, water, and sewage service—is also evident in this region, reflecting a wider problem in rural areas of Colombia.<sup>8</sup> Several PCIM projects are oriented toward rural electricity, but many more focus on improving water and sewage service in the zone. In general, rural areas are vastly underserved by utilities.

### *Human Development*

An array of PCIM initiatives are intended to provide short-term economic and social support to populations in the Macarena region ahead of the establishment of more permanent public institutions. In some transitional areas, PCIM projects provide food assistance and cash subsidies for the neediest women and children, intended to last from four to six months until longer-term projects kick in.<sup>9</sup>

Medical care in the Macarena region is rudimentary. Education is better developed in the Macarena in terms of coverage. Technical training in a number of useful areas has been available, including agriculture, fish farming, formation of cooperatives, information technology, and clothing manufacture.

### *Governance*

All six municipalities in the region have elected mayors, in itself an accomplishment given the region's long history of no state presence. Municipal government is in its incipient stages and has almost no tax base and few resources to apply to local needs. The access of local citizens to Colombia's judicial system is very poor. Each municipality has a *juez promiscuo municipal*, the lowest-ranking authority in the national judicial system, but these officials cannot handle any criminal or complex cases and are confined to basic dispute resolution. State prosecutors (*fiscales*) are only occasionally present in the region. There is no jail in the Macarena area.

### *Conclusions*

The PCIM has made progress in consolidating security over large areas of the Macarena region, and a transition from a military presence to security provided by police is beginning

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8. Five of the six municipal population centers (La Macarena excluded) have electricity, but many of the rural areas are not connected to the grid.

9. *Familias en Acción*, the nationwide program of conditional cash subsidies, comes into play when families can show they are fulfilling the children's health and educational criteria of the program, but to do so requires access to the kind of facilities existing elsewhere in the country.

to happen in the urban centers of the region. Anti-narcotics efforts have produced positive results but the sequencing of eradication and development assistance needs improvement. The key factors in terms of consolidated state authority will be civilian state presence and a foundation for economic development.

How long the transition window of opportunity in the Macarena region will remain open is unclear, and that uncertainty drives the need for urgency in moving the PCIM forward. With the PCIM slated to end October 2010, it is essential that these transitional efforts be handed off to the government of Colombia and that progress achieved by the PCIM be enhanced by considerably higher levels of government investment.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, the next 12 months may prove critical to the sustainability and ultimate success of the transition process in the Macarena region.

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10. The outcome of this program will depend on considerably more commitment from civilian agencies and senior levels of the government. In this regard, the Presidential Directive signed by President Uribe on March 20, 2009 instructing GOC entities to fully cooperate in carrying out transitional efforts in key areas of the country is a positive step.

## Prospects for Peace with the Insurgents

While the military threat to national security posed by the FARC and the ELN has been greatly reduced by the successful counterinsurgency campaign of the past eight years, the FARC especially is still present in many parts of the country and shows no sign of giving up its armed struggle. In the end, there will be no military victory over the FARC, only a progressive weakening of its increasingly isolated and ineffective units that could lead it to engage in peace talks with the government.

Uribe surprised the public on the eve of his election when he declared that peace talks with the insurgents would be a high priority of his administration. In practice, however, he gave far greater emphasis to building up strength to fight the FARC, while seeking a deal with the ELN and the paramilitaries. Uribe appointed a High Commissioner for Peace, Luis Carlos Restrepo, who was strongly committed to initiating talks with the paramilitaries but nonetheless met with the ELN on four different occasions in Havana in 2002 until the ELN broke off talks at the end of that year. Talks later resumed with the support of the Mexican government as a facilitator, but that arrangement was rejected by the FARC in 2005.<sup>40</sup> More meetings later took place, but no further progress was reached.

Different initiatives were taken over the course of the Uribe administration to bring about a “humanitarian exchange” of captured FARC fighters held by the Colombian government and FARC hostage victims. A “Group of Friends” composed of Spain, Switzerland, and France pursued this effort until the FARC demanded another *Despeje*-like arrangement where talks could take place, something Uribe rejected. Further efforts at brokering a deal by intermediaries friendly

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40. Andrés Valencia, “The Peace Process in Colombia with the ELN: The Role of Mexico,” *Latin American Program Special Report* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, March 2006), 17.

to the FARC—Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and Colombian senator Piedad Córdoba—also failed to produce results, and the success of *Operación Jaque* in rescuing French/Colombian national Ingrid Betancourt removed the pressure from France for a hostage exchange. Backed by public opinion in Colombia, Uribe is adamantly against an M-19 style amnesty, which the FARC would undoubtedly seek in any peace negotiation, and he would insist on applying the Justice and Peace Law used to demobilize the paramilitaries, a non-starter for the FARC. There is little likelihood that the FARC will agree to any meaningful talks with the government while Uribe remains president. Instead, it will likely hunker down and hope for a better negotiating environment when Uribe departs the presidency.

## Paramilitary Demobilization and the Justice and Peace Law

The paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia has constituted a grave threat to the country's stability and security, but it differed in substantial ways from the challenge posed by the FARC and ELN. The paramilitaries saw themselves as playing the role of the state in areas where government presence was minimal. Although seeking political influence, they did not aspire to overthrow or co-govern with the state, as did the insurgents. Especially at the beginning, the paramilitary groups considered themselves to be a legitimate support mechanism for the armed forces against a common enemy, and they aspired—by corrupting local-level and national-level politicians—to influence politics from the inside, while the guerrillas operated from the outside. The paramilitaries exploited links to the Colombian armed forces that the insurgents never had and, to a limited degree, were encouraged by some elements in the army, who saw them as more effective against the FARC than their own weak and demoralized units.<sup>41</sup>

The influence of the AUC and its components rose and fell in parallel with the FARC and ELN, growing rapidly in the late 1990s, reaching an apex in 2000–2002, and then declining. Unlike the FARC, the major paramilitary groups had always been engaged in the narcotics business and dependent on income from drugs. In 2001, AUC leader Carlos Castaño claimed that 70 percent of the financing of paramilitary units was derived from narcotics.<sup>42</sup> Paramilitary clashes with guerrillas and the terrible massacres and human rights abuses that resulted from these confrontations often grew out of the struggle to control drug trafficking corridors and coca growing regions. Levels of massacres, murders, and kidnappings peaked during the 2000–2002 period when conflict between the illegal armed groups reached its zenith.

Paramilitarism placed the Colombian government in a very difficult situation. It was caught between its own inability to control national territory, the growing military threat of the FARC, and the terrible human and institutional cost resulting from paramilitary violence and drug trafficking. As the strength and morale of the armed forces grew, however, the state took a stronger position against the paramilitaries. Under Pastrana, the government stepped up its military efforts to push back against the AUC while Pastrana himself relieved a number of army generals suspected of ties with paramilitaries.<sup>43</sup> The move by the United States to designate the AUC as a Foreign

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41. David Spencer, *Colombia's Paramilitaries: Criminals or Political Force?* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, December 2001), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub19.pdf>, 14–16.

42. *Ibid.*, 10.

43. Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombia Labyrinth*, 58; Serafino, *Colombia: Conditions and U.S. Policy Options*, 22.

Terrorist Organization on September 10, 2001—a day before the terrorist attacks in the United States—further encouraged such steps.

Uribe came to power with a two-pronged approach to the paramilitaries: increased military pressure against them combined with an early interest in initiating talks about demobilization. From the government's point of view, a disbandment of paramilitary structures would potentially eliminate a major source of violence and human rights abuses, disrupt criminal activity, and undercut the drug industry, while achieving a major political victory for Uribe. The paramilitaries, on the other hand, enjoyed a position of strength but one unlikely to last, given Uribe's aggressive plan to increase the size and capability of the security apparatus and recover legitimate authority for the state. A negotiated deal while they still enjoyed power made more sense for those paramilitaries hopeful of preserving as much of their power, political influence, and economic advantage as possible. In December 2002, the AUC declared a unilateral cease-fire to facilitate talks—although over time the cease-fire was constantly violated. Talks with the government began in mid-2003 and in August Uribe submitted an “alternative sentencing law” to Congress governing the terms of demobilization. This law provoked an immediate outcry in domestic and international circles for its leniency and lack of transparency and the administration quickly pulled it back.

Continued violence and drug trafficking on the part of the AUC, despite the cease-fire, prompted President Uribe in August 2004 to threaten to break off talks and move militarily against the AUC unless the group agreed to be concentrated in a 142-square-mile zone in Córdoba department where they would demobilize under the verification of a mission organized by the Organization of American States.<sup>44</sup> In fact, during the course of 2004, Colombian forces killed and captured more paramilitary fighters than in any year, an indication both that the truce was not effective and that Uribe was serious about prodding the AUC into demobilizing.<sup>45</sup> The AUC agreed to Uribe's terms and in late 2004 a contingent of smaller paramilitary units totaling some 2,500 fighters turned in their weapons.

In July 2005, having debated the text of a new paramilitary demobilization law for almost a year, Congress passed the “Justice and Peace Law” (JPL). This legislation was controversial from the start. It intended to strike a balance between rapid demobilization of dangerous armed fighters and providing punishment for grave crimes and offenses they had committed. The law reflected the many political currents at play. Although still armed and well-financed, the paramilitaries could see little hope of standing up to the ever-stronger Colombian armed forces who were amply demonstrating their capabilities as they hit the FARC. In Colombia, as in international circles, there was little support for offering the paramilitaries anything like the amnesty deal that had been granted the M-19 to encourage its demobilization a dozen years earlier. Elements in Congress, later shown by the *parapolítica* scandal to be linked to the paramilitaries, attempted to soften the terms of the law while others stood fast in favor of credible punishment.

The JPL, unlike any mechanism employed in Latin America to demobilize armed fighters, was not an amnesty but instead stipulated criminal penalties with reduced sentences for those who

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44. See: International Crisis Group, “Colombia: Towards Peace and Justice?” *Latin America Report*, no. 16 (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 14, 2006), appendix B; William B. Wood, “The Peace Process with the AUC in Colombia” (presentation at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., June 28, 2004); International Crisis Group, “Demobilizing the Paramilitaries in Colombia: An Achievable Goal?” *Latin America Report*, no. 8 (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, August 5, 2004), 4.

45. Ministerio de Defensa, “Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática,” 2009, 54-55.

admitted to having committed grave crimes. It did not take effect until a year later when it was approved by the Constitutional Court, which strengthened the terms of the law by stipulating that the benefits of the JPL would apply only to paramilitary leaders who fully confessed to their crimes and made assets available for the reparation of victims. The changes to the JPL ordered by the court made it far less palatable to the top paramilitary leadership, who railed against its terms and felt deceived by the government but were powerless to reverse the process.

During the course of 2005 and 2006, some 32,000 paramilitary fighters demobilized in stages, turning in their weapons.<sup>46</sup> In many ways, this was the easiest part of the process and the least controversial. The most difficult challenge has been the application of the JPL and the “reinsertion” process for ex-paramilitaries. Most attention has been paid to the treatment given top paramilitary leaders whose testimony has resulted in a flood of information regarding past crimes and the need for broad-scale follow-up investigations, including locating assets that can be used to compensate victims. A special Justice and Peace Unit of the Attorney General’s Office charged with conducting the investigation and prosecution under the law struggles under the huge caseload, which turned out to be far larger than planners had envisioned. As paramilitary leaders came to the understanding that they would in fact spend time in prison, they encouraged many rank-and-file fighters to provide unneeded testimony to the Justice and Peace Unit in the hope of freezing up and halting the process.<sup>47</sup> The Uribe administration eventually extradited 17 top paramilitary leaders to the United States on drug-related charges when they refused to live up to their commitments under the JPL to cooperate—provoking an outcry from the human rights community that shipping them to the United States would end any hope of obtaining further information or compensation from them.<sup>48</sup> However, the paramilitary demobilization took thousands of well-armed fighters off the books and had an important effect on lowering levels of crime, violence, and human rights abuses.

A further challenge to the government under the JPL is the difficult process of returning paramilitary “soldiers” to normal life. To do so, the government created the office of High Commissioner for Economic Social and Economic Reintegration of Armed Groups (ACR), headed by a dynamic business executive. The ACR tracks and monitors some 95 percent of demobilized persons in the reintegration program and provides a health or educational benefit, although the prospects for ex-paramilitaries of future employment in the licit economy are very poor, given the stigma attached to their past associations.

The JPL also created a National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR) to track progress in investigating paramilitary abuses and to monitor efforts at recovery of assets and reparation to victims. At present, some 180,000 victims have registered with the CNRR, with some reparation payments due as the first judicial cases are resolved over the course of 2009 and 2010.<sup>49</sup> Many of these victims will receive “administrative reparations” from the government in the meanwhile, an indemnity payment spread out over a 10-year period that is not linked to reparations paid under the JPL.

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46. For the chronicle of demobilization, see: International Crisis Group, “Colombia, Towards Peace and Justice?” appendix B.

47. Interview with senior U.S. government official.

48. See Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Breaking the Grip* (New York: HRW, November 17, 2008); see also Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Smoke and Mirrors: Colombia’s Demobilization of Paramilitary Groups* 17, no. 3(B) (New York: HRW, August 2005).

49. Interview with senior U.S. government official.

The government's ability to effectively carry out the JPL remains a major challenge not only to its credibility standing with the tens of thousands of victims of paramilitary violence but also in terms of future security and stability in Colombia. The reinsertion into society of the paramilitary rank and file, preventing them from returning to a life of crime or joining up with ex-comrades in the emerging drug gangs, is an important objective that will require patience and a long-term investment of resources by the government.

As paramilitary groups demobilized, top AUC bosses held back a number of mid-level leaders to continue to run their drug businesses. When it became clear that their former chiefs would not return from prison or were being extradited to the United States, these *mandos medios* began to head up their own criminal gangs, which according to some estimates may now contain as many as 5,000 members.<sup>50</sup> The "Aguilas Negras," "Rastrojos," "Cuchillo" gang, "Traquetos," and other such groups include AUC units that never demobilized, former paramilitaries who later returned to crime, or—apparently the majority—new recruits with no paramilitary background. Most are engaged in criminal, especially drug-related, activity and strive for control of trafficking routes and territory in areas where the paramilitaries had formerly been strong: the Atlantic Coast, Norte de Santander, the Cesar, parts of Antioquia, the eastern lowlands, and Nariño and the Chocó, where they traffic in drugs through the Pacific corridor. Less cohesive and powerful than their paramilitary predecessors, they nonetheless constitute a major challenge to Colombian law enforcement and must be contained from spreading and rolled back.

The so-called *parapolítica* investigations that have shaken Colombia's political establishment are further evidence of the threat to Colombia's security posed by the paramilitary issue. Accusations of links between former paramilitaries and mainly pro-Uribe members of Congress and some important figures in Uribe's administration began to surface in 2005. A year earlier, AUC leader Salvatore Mancuso claimed that paramilitaries controlled more than 30 percent of the members of Colombia's Congress. Since the *parapolítica* scandal broke, some 92 deputies and senators have been investigated, among whom 36 were arrested and 11 convicted of dealings with the paramilitaries.<sup>51</sup>

Many other public officials around the country have also been linked to the paramilitaries, most of them members of pro-Uribe parties. Although Uribe himself has not been implicated or accused, the scope of the *parapolítica* scandal underscores the degree to which the paramilitary movement gained political influence at the national and local levels and the potential threat its corrupting power posed to Colombian democracy. The investigation and prosecution of these cases also speaks well to the independence of the Colombian judiciary and the attorney general's office.

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50. For accounts of these so-called *grupos emergentes*, see: Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, "Disidentes, rearmados y emergentes: ¿bandas criminales o tercera generación paramilitar?" *Área de Desmovilización, Desarme y Reintegración* (Bogotá: Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, August 2007); International Crisis Group, "Colombia's New Armed Groups," *Latin America Report*, no. 20 (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 10, 2007); Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, Colombia's New Armed Group, *Informe Especial* (Bogotá: Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, 2008).

51. See Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ), "Parapolíticos con partido al 21 de mayo 2009," May 21, 2009; Center for International Policy (CIP), "Para-Politics in Colombia's Congress: updated count," *Plan Colombia and Beyond*, September 4, 2008, <http://www.cipcol.org/?p=663>.

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## CITIZEN SECURITY HUMAN RIGHTS, VIOLENCE, AND GOVERNANCE

Colombia has made extraordinary progress during the years of the Uribe presidency in reducing levels of violence and crime while improving the overall human rights situation. These variables are organically linked to the exercise of legitimate state authority, including control over national territory, and the rule of law.

### Violence

Although violence has been a perennial factor throughout Colombia's history, fueled since the 1980s by drug mafias and the growing strength of the insurgency, the process kicked into overdrive during the mid-1990s when state power rapidly eroded in the face of paramilitaries and guerrillas capable of controlling large areas of the country. Rates of massacres, homicides, kidnappings, forced displacement of persons, extortion, and many other crimes and abuses skyrocketed as illegally armed groups fought the state and each other for dominance over territory, population, and the narcotics business.

By the late 1990s, Colombia was known as the kidnapping capital of the world, and national homicide rates had climbed to more than 60 per 100,000. Most measurements of violence and human rights abuses peaked during the 2000–2002 period, years also marked by the existence of the FARC *Despeje* and, certainly not unrelated, of what may well have been the zenith of coca leaf production in Colombia. Crimes and abuses reached their peak years as follows:<sup>1</sup>

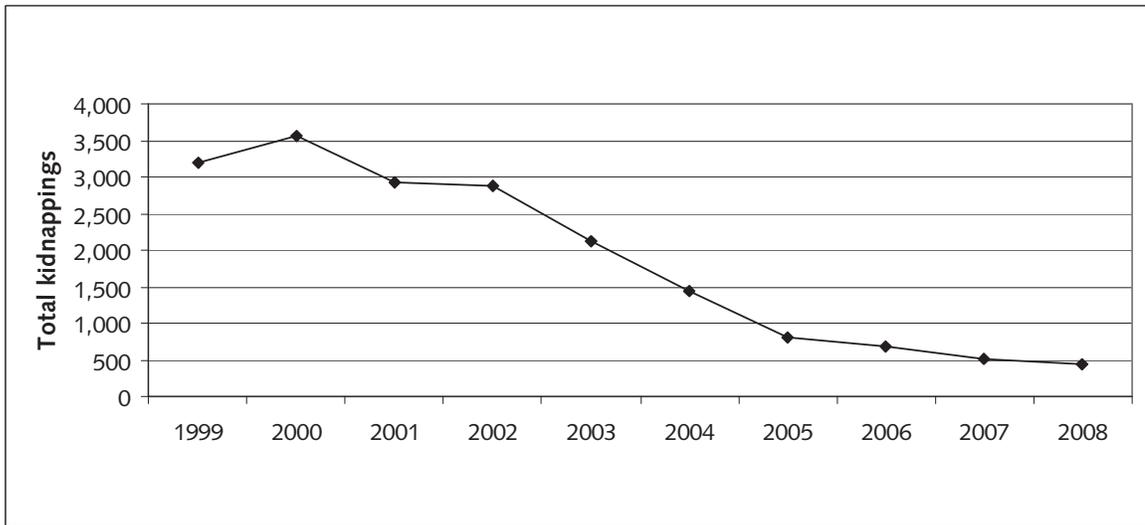
- 2000: kidnappings
- 2001: massacres; homicide of labor union members
- 2002: overall homicide; forced displacements; “terrorist acts”; automobile theft; bank and financial institution robbery; illegal roadblocks
- 2003: land piracy
- 2004: extortions

The decline in the occurrence of these variables proved to be even more dramatic than the ramp-up of the 1990s. Kidnappings fell between 2000 and 2001 (perhaps as the rate of murders and massacres picked up), briefly stabilized, and then plummeted during Uribe's first term by

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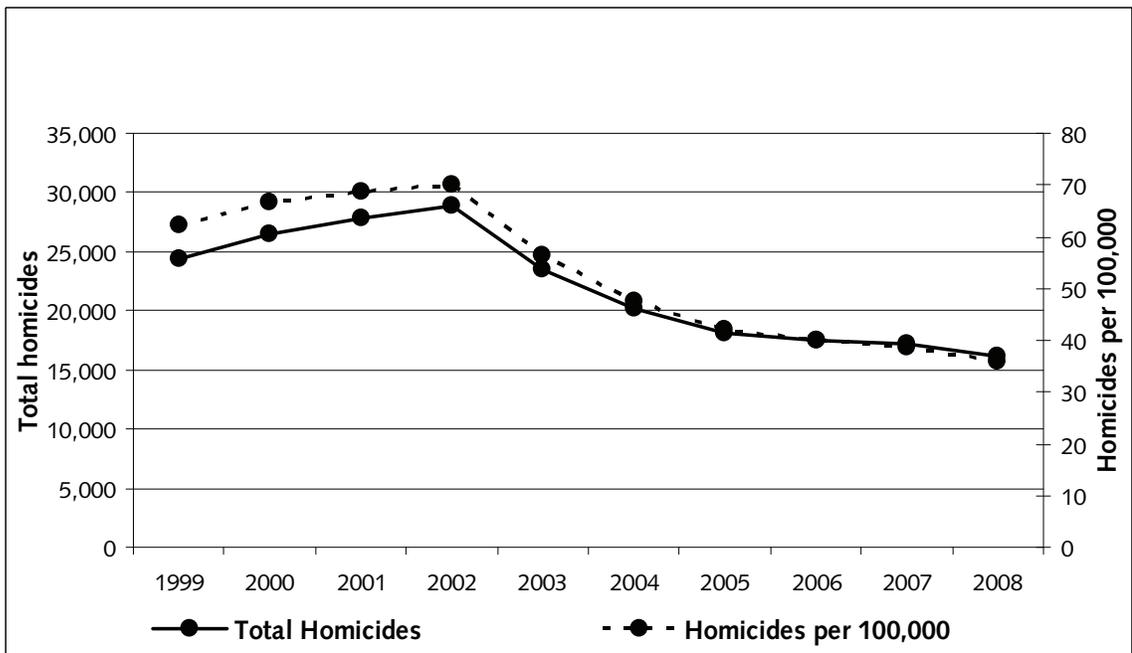
1. For details, see Ministerio de Defensa, “Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática”, 2009, 17, 20, 28, 29. See also Lisa Haugaard, Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, Adam Isacson, John Walsh, and Robert Guitteau, *A Compass for Colombia Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Center for International Policy, Latin America Working Group Education Fund, U.S. Office on Colombia, and Washington Office on Latin America, 2008), chart on p. 7.

**Figure 2: Kidnappings in Colombia, 1999–2008**



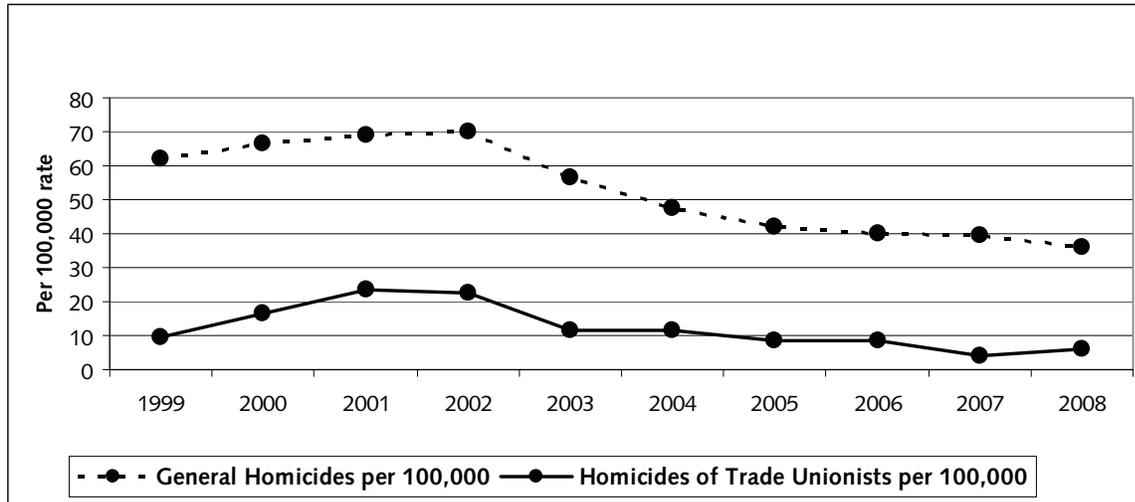
Source of data: Ministerio de Defensa, *Fondelibertad*.

**Figure 3: Total Homicides and Rate of Homicides in Colombia, 1999–2008**



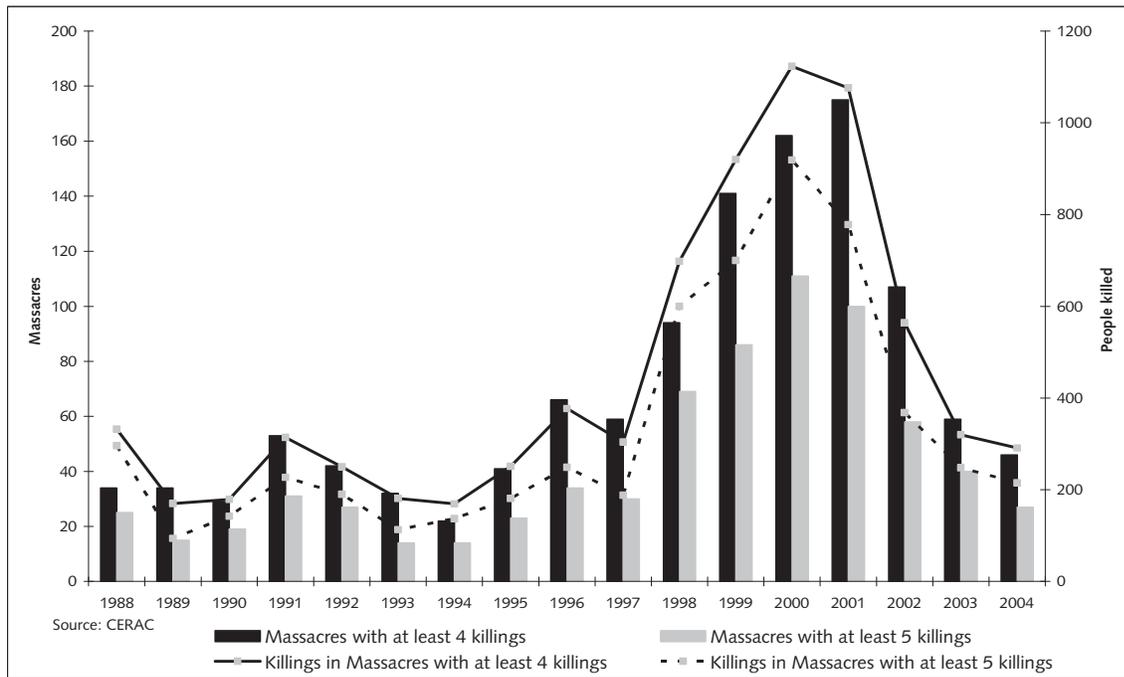
Source of data: Policía Nacional de Colombia; Homicides per 100,000 calculated using U.S. Census Bureau population statistics.

**Figure 4: Homicide Rates of General Population and of Trade Unionists in Colombia, 1999–2008**



Source of data: General homicide statistics from the Policía Nacional de Colombia. Statistics of homicides of Trade Unionists from the Escuela Nacional Sindical and USLEAP: Murders of Trade Unionists and Impunity Under Uribe, 2002–2008 as of March 2009. General homicides per 100,000 calculated using population statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau. Homicides of Trade Unionists per 100,000 calculated using constant figure of 831,000 total Trade Unionists in Colombia as reported by Amnesty International citing the Escuela Nacional Sindical on July 3, 2007.

**Figure 5: Massacres in Colombia: Number of People Killed, 1988–2004**



Source of data: Centro de Recursos para el Análisis de Conflictos (CERAC).

more than 80 percent. (See Figure 2.) National murder rates fell from more than 70 per 100,000 at the peak in 2002 to about 40 per 100,000 in 2005, where they subsequently leveled off. (See Figure 3.)

International labor and human rights organizations point to the homicides of trade union members in Colombia as a significant issue. Murder rates for union members, although much lower than the general homicide rates, also fell substantially after 2002 in parallel with national trends (See Figure 4.) In 2008, a Colombian pro-labor NGO reported that 49 labor union members had been victims of homicide, a rate of 8 per 100,000 as compared with the murder rate of 31 per 100,000 in Washington, D.C., the same year.<sup>2</sup>

The occurrence of massacres dropped by about 80 percent between 2001 and 2004—a factor closely related to the partial paramilitary ceasefire in 2002 and the eventual demobilization of many units of the AUC. (See Figure 5.) The growing size and presence of the armed forces and police since 2002 played a central role in reducing levels of violence, crime, and human rights abuses, as did the consequent decline of the FARC and ELN offensive capability and the paramilitary demobilization. Other rates of crime, particularly theft and residential break-ins, rose after 2002 while homicide rates stayed at reduced but still unacceptably high levels. Trends in these statistics indicate the very large role played by illegal armed groups in fomenting violence as well as the persistently high base-levels of crime in Colombia—a factor that will improve only as the rule of law is further extended and underlying social factors, such as poverty and unemployment, can be ameliorated. In essence, therefore, violence has been reduced and citizen security enhanced because of the government’s success in rolling back the presence and strength of guerrillas and paramilitaries, but the more structural crime problem remains. Public opinion in Colombia is, however, well-aware of the improvements in levels of crime and violence. According to the 2008 *Latinobarómetro* survey, among all Latin Americans, Colombians were the fifth least-likely to signal crime as the key national problem.<sup>3</sup>

## Human Rights

Colombia’s human rights situation has followed a positive trend line, with some important improvements since the late 1990s, but nonetheless remains difficult. Reports from a wide variety of sources concur that grave problems persist, among them extrajudicial killings by the Colombian Army, kidnappings and hostage-taking, recruitment of child soldiers by the FARC, forced disappearances, incidents of torture, involuntary displacement, overcrowded prisons, and widespread suffering caused by land mines. These reports frequently preface their analysis of the human rights situation in Colombia with a discussion of the internal armed conflict, underscoring the link between paramilitaries, guerrillas, and resurgent criminal bands with a high occurrence of human rights abuses.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Calculated from homicide statistics from Escuela Nacional Sindical and labor union membership from Amnesty International citing the Escuela Nacional Sindical on July 3, 2007, with Washington, D.C., statistics from the Metropolitan Police and the U.S. Census Bureau.

3. Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe 2008*, November 2008, Santiago de Chile, [http://www.latinobarometro.org/docs/INFORME\\_LATINOBAROMETRO\\_2008.pdf](http://www.latinobarometro.org/docs/INFORME_LATINOBAROMETRO_2008.pdf), 24.

4. For latest reporting, see: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), “Human Rights Developments in the Region,” *IACHR Annual Report 2008* (Washington, D.C.: IACHR, 2008), <http://www.cidh.org/annualrep/2008eng/Chap4eng.htm>; United Nations Human Rights Council, *Annual Report of the*

Since the mid-1980s, an estimated 4.3 million people have been internally displaced in Colombia, most of them residents of rural areas and small towns caught up in the internal armed conflict and, increasingly, under pressure from drug trafficking gangs formed by ex-paramilitaries.<sup>5</sup> According to government figures, 353,657 persons registered as displaced during 2008. The government and international organizations have provided important levels of assistance to displaced communities but resources remain inadequate to the task.

Also during 2008, public opinion was shook by the so-called *falsos positivos* cases of extrajudicial killings reported in various areas of the country—in which young men allegedly were killed by military forces and then reported as guerrilla combat deaths. The scandal resulted in the dismissal of some 80 officers of the armed forces and legal charges filed against others. The *falsos positivos* cases also reflected the continued presence within the armed forces of a group of officers driven by a “body count” measurement of success and willing to pervert rules of engagement to tolerate grave human rights abuses.<sup>6</sup> The government, however, has not condoned these practices and, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has “demonstrated goodwill and made significant efforts” against such abuses.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the *falsos positivos* cases demonstrate a disturbing and unacceptable current within the Colombian armed forces that must be dealt with by the full force of the law.

## Governance

The ability of the Colombian government to impose its legitimate authority over national territory is rooted in strengthening the rule of law. Colombia’s police and legal system were overwhelmed by the surge in criminal and political violence during the 1990s. Laboring under a traditional inquisitorial procedure for criminal cases, Colombia’s underfunded and understaffed courts carried over more than 1 million criminal cases from year to year without resolution, resulting in judicial gridlock and widespread impunity for crimes.<sup>8</sup> This situation has improved dramatically because of strongly increased funding by the government since 2003, combined with support from the United States and other international funders, and a basic reform of criminal justice procedure in 2004 that established an accusatorial system with oral, public trials and with the Attorney General’s Office (*Fiscalía General*) responsible for prosecuting cases. As a result, the time for resolving

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*United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Reports of the Office on the High Commissioner and of the Secretary-General*, draft (New York: United Nations General Assembly, December 2008), [http://www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/informes/altocomisionado/Informe2008\\_eng.pdf](http://www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/informes/altocomisionado/Informe2008_eng.pdf); U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “2008 Human Rights Reports: Colombia,” *2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, February 25, 2009); Amnesty International, “Colombia,” *The State of the World’s Human Rights: Amnesty International Report 2008* (London: Amnesty International, May 2008), <http://archive.amnesty.org/report2008/document/101.pdf>.

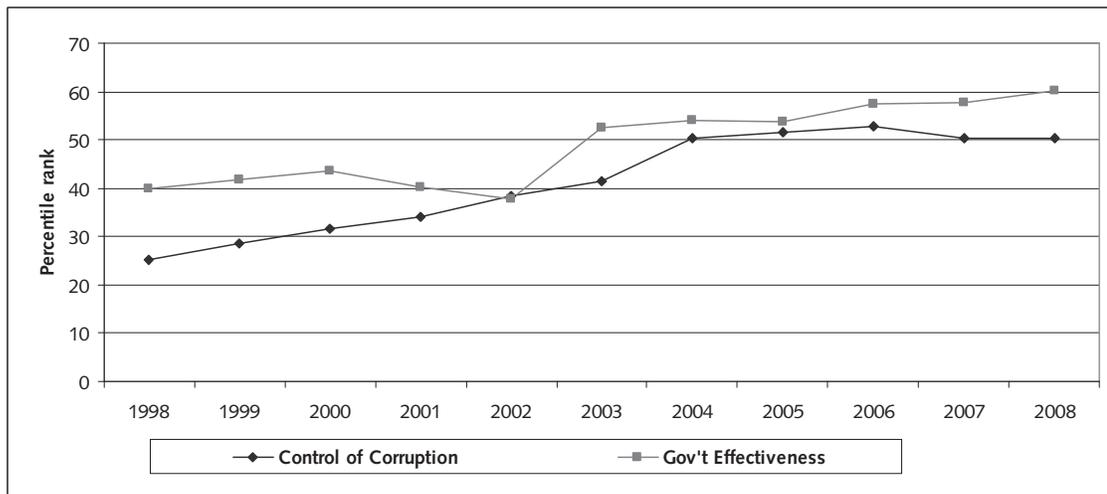
5. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “2008 Human Rights Reports: Colombia”; United Nations Human Rights Council, *Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, 21.

6. Interviews with senior Colombian officials.

7. United Nations Human Rights Council, *Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, 2.

8. Alfredo Fuentes, “Reforma Judicial en Colombia: Progreso en 15 años,” in Peter DeShazo and Juan Enrique Vargas, “Judicial Reform in Latin America: Lessons Learned,” *Policy Papers on the Americas* 18, study 2 (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2006).

**Figure 6: Governance Indicators for Colombia**



Source of data: World Bank, *Governance Matters 2008: Worldwide Governance Indicators 1996-2008*, [http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/mc\\_chart.asp](http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/mc_chart.asp).

new criminal cases has been reduced by about 75–80 percent,<sup>9</sup> and the conviction rate has risen to some 60 percent, compared with a 3 percent conviction rate under the old system.<sup>10</sup>

The UN High Commission for Human Rights asserts that the Colombian government “has made great efforts to strengthen the rule of law.”<sup>11</sup> But given the strain under which the judiciary operates, including the resurgence of criminal drug bands, the continued high rates of crime, and the still considerable presence of the FARC in many areas of the country, much more effort is needed. As the government proceeds with plans for transitional initiatives in especially conflictive zones of the country, such as the Macarena, Catatumbo, Magdalena Medio, Bajo Cauca, Montes de María, and Pacific Coast regions, the presence of a functioning judicial system alongside stronger law enforcement will be essential—not only for providing a key government service but for serving as a symbol that the national government will have a lasting presence in the region.

Increased control over more areas of national territory has also strengthened Colombia’s political system and allowed increasing numbers of citizens to participate in elections. In October 2007, in the last round of local elections in Colombia, mayors were elected in all municipalities of the country, as opposed to 2003 when many local jurisdictions were still in FARC hands. The number of candidates inscribed to run in 2007 was 12 percent higher than in 2003, and 3.6 million

9. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “2008 Human Rights Reports: Colombia”; U.S. Department of Justice, “Assistance Program in Colombia: Justice Sector Reform Program,” fact sheet, 2007.

10. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “2008 Human Rights Reports: Colombia”; Fuentes, “Reforma Judicial en Colombia: Progreso en 15 años.”

11. United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Colombia* (New York: United Nations, December 31, 2008).

new voters registered to participate.<sup>12</sup> And although the FARC murdered 26 candidates in the run-up to the elections of 2007, that number was far lower than in previous years.<sup>13</sup>

Other aspects of governance have improved since 2002. According to the World Bank's Government Effectiveness Index (0 being lowest and 100 highest), Colombia's score rose from 40 in 2002 to 58 in 2008.<sup>14</sup> (See Figure 6.) Corruption has long been a problem in Colombia, compounded since the 1980s by the rise of the drug cartels and the sheer weight of narcotics as a factor in society. According to international indicators, however, the country has made progress in improving transparency and blunting corruption since the start of the Pastrana administration. By World Bank measurements, Colombia's score on "control of corruption" improved from 25 in 1998 to nearly 40 by 2002 and rose to 50 in 2008.<sup>15</sup>

Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (1.0 being most corrupt, 10.0 least corrupt) listed Colombia at 2.9 in 1999, eleventh overall among Latin America nations; by 2008, Colombia's score had risen to 3.8, fifth-best in Latin America.<sup>16</sup> In the 2008 *Latinobarómetro* poll, 59 percent of Colombians responded that the country has achieved "much or some" progress in countering corruption, the highest score in Latin America.<sup>17</sup> In a country that continues to face a severe challenge to the consolidation of legitimate state authority, continued progress on these and other key governance variables is essential.

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12. María Isabel Nieto, "Las Elecciones Municipales Octubre 2007: Seguridad, Partidos Políticos y Concejos Municipales" (paper presented at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., September 27, 2007).

13. Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, *Elecciones Presidenciales 2006: Las Menos Violentas De Los Últimos 20 Años* (Bogotá: Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, October 2007), [http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org/docs/pdf/conflictoArmado/Elecciones\\_menos\\_violentas.pdf](http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org/docs/pdf/conflictoArmado/Elecciones_menos_violentas.pdf), 2.

14. World Bank, *Governance Matters 2007: Worldwide Governance Indicators*, 1998, 2000, 2002–2006, 2008, [http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/sc\\_chart.asp](http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/sc_chart.asp).

15. *Ibid.*

16. Transparency International, *Corruption Perception Index*, surveys for 1999 and 2008, [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/previous\\_cpi/](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/previous_cpi/).

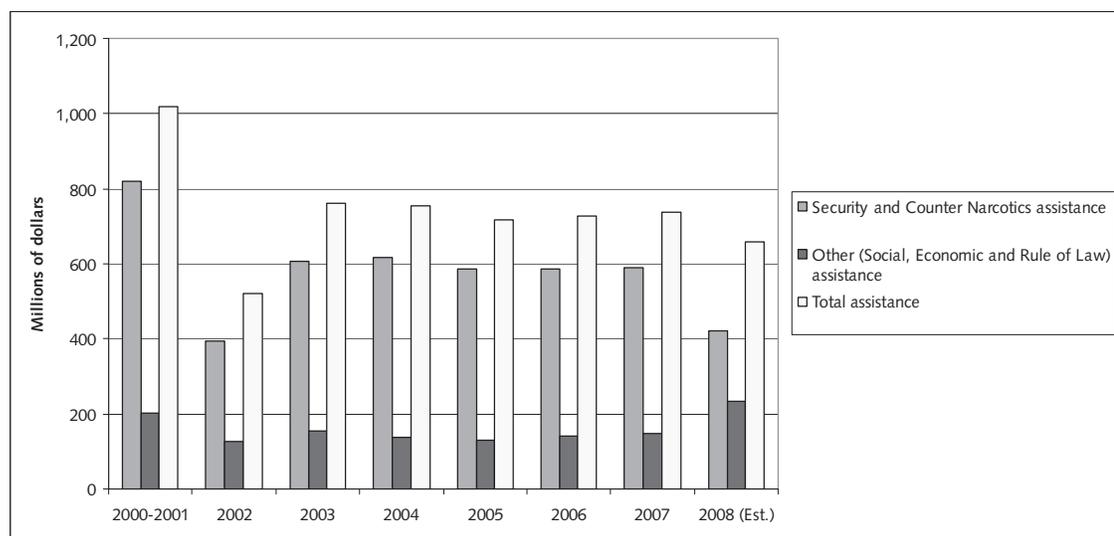
17. Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe 2008*, 47.

# 6

## U.S. SUPPORT HOW IMPORTANT? HOW SUCCESSFUL?

Since the approval of the Plan Colombia supplemental package in 2000, the United States has provided some \$6.8 billion in assistance to Colombia, making it by far the leading recipient of U.S. aid in Latin America and one of the leading recipients of U.S. aid in the world.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of this assistance—some 79 percent of total assistance between FY 2000 and FY 2008—has gone to counternarcotics and security objectives.<sup>2</sup> The remaining 21 percent was dedicated to promoting the rule of law and to social and economic objectives. (See Figure 7.)

**Figure 7: U.S. Assistance to Colombia, 2000–2008**



Source: U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Plans for Reducing Assistance,” GAO-09-71, October 6, 2008.

The original emergency supplemental in support of Plan Colombia approved in July 2000 was a counternarcotics assistance package, with nearly one-third of the total \$1.3 billion earmarked for the procurement of UH-1H Huey II and Black Hawk helicopters for the Colombian army’s counter-

1. United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Plans for Reducing Assistance,” GAO-09-71, October 6, 2008), 15, available at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-71>.

2. Ibid.

drug brigade and for the police.<sup>3</sup> The majority of FY 2000 and 2001 U.S. government spending from the Plan Colombia supplemental was channeled through the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), with other State Department bureaus and the Department of Defense receiving appropriations. USAID and Department of Justice activities in support of Plan Colombia objectives were also funded through the State Department appropriation. Early U.S. efforts using Plan Colombia funding were concentrated on the "Push to the South" counter-drug initiative in the Putumayo, where the army's counter-drug brigade (2,800 troops at peak), with its growing air capability as more Plan Colombia helicopters came into service starting in mid-2001, would support a massive aerial spraying effort, the takedown of drug labs, and interdiction efforts. Parallel efforts at alternative development were undertaken in the Putumayo, as well as other initiatives aimed at improving the administration of justice, human rights observation, and governance-related actions. A total of \$42.5 million under the State Department allocation in the supplemental was provided to USAID for alternative development activity, including support for the voluntary eradication of coca, related to the "Push to the South."<sup>4</sup>

With the election of Uribe and his immediate focus on the establishment of state control of territory as a highest-priority goal, in theory the United States' nearly exclusive orientation toward counternarcotics would be at odds with Colombia's counterinsurgency orientation. In fact, the limited authorities for the use of U.S. assistance during the first two years of the Plan Colombia package did constitute something of a disconnect with the realities of Colombia. Colombia's military planners were not enthusiastic about the Caquetá-Putumayo campaign, as they thought that other objectives were more significant, and the narcotics-only limitations on the use of the new Huey II and Black Hawk helicopters in the Plan Colombia supplemental were a cause of resentment and frustration on both sides.<sup>5</sup> The counter-drug brigade was intended by U.S. planners to be a model for other Colombian units—highly trained, equipped with air mobility, and vetted for human rights violators—and yet in essence it was destined for law enforcement work and, from the viewpoint of the Colombian side, was of limited use. Moreover, other parts of the Colombian government did not give high priority to the Putumayo, further underscoring the strategic disconnect that existed between the United States and Colombia on the Caquetá-Putumayo campaign. Uribe saw the need to move as swiftly as possible to build up the capacity of his armed forces independently of U.S. support and initiated his special security tax to that end.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, triggered an important shift in the ability of the U.S. government to support Colombia. A change in legislation approved in August 2002 broadened the authorities for the use of Defense Department and State Department INCLE (international narcotics control) funds to support Colombia's "unified campaign against narcotics trafficking . . . and against activities by organizations designated as terrorist organizations," specifically listing the FARC, ELN and AUC in this category.<sup>6</sup> In practice, there were certain limiting modifications to how assistance could be used and the law itself stated clearly that no U.S. military or civilian personnel or contractors could engage in combat operations in Colombia. Yet the broadening of Plan Colombia authorities was highly significant because it allowed the U.S. government

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3. Public Law 106-246, July 13, 2000, Chapter 2, [http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/sf3/disasters/lisound/pl\\_106\\_246.pdf](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/sf3/disasters/lisound/pl_106_246.pdf).

4. Serafino, *Colombia: Plan Colombia Legislation and Assistance (FY2000-FY2001)*, 21.

5. Interviews with senior U.S. and Colombian officials.

6. Public Law 017-206, August 2, 2002, Section 305, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ206/content-detail.html>.

to adopt a more comprehensive approach to addressing Colombia's essential need to control its national territory. Over time, use of Plan Colombia inventoried helicopters became more flexible and counter-drug activities more closely coordinated with overall security policy. In Colombian terms, "counterterrorism" meant "counterinsurgency," as well as efforts against the AUC, and the change in authorizations gave the United States a green light to support Colombian efforts but with the very important restrictions on participating in or conducting such operations.<sup>7</sup>

U.S. assistance to Colombia since 2000 has produced many positive results. On the security side, it has contributed to the vastly improved professionalism and capability of the Colombian armed forces and police, helping bring about impressive gains in extending legitimate state authority to more areas of the country, reducing levels of violence and human rights abuses, countering the influence of the insurgents and paramilitaries, and promoting the rule of law. In terms of specific contributions, the largest single portion of the nearly \$4.9 billion in U.S. assistance to the military and police during the 2000–2008 period was the \$844 million provided to army aviation. The bulk of these funds were destined for the purchase of helicopters, the training of pilots, and the development of repair and supply facilities. The result was impressive, contributing, along with Colombia's own purchases, to the formation of the third-largest Black Hawk fleet in the world, with a large inventory of other military units, a well-trained corps of professional pilots, excellent training facilities now run by Colombians where pilots of other countries train, and, according to U.S. senior officials, a depot-level maintenance capability for the UH-60 fleet.<sup>8</sup> Rotary-wing air mobility has been essential to the implementation of Colombia's security strategy.

More than \$100 million of U.S. assistance has been provided in support of the Colombian army's ground capability, including for training and equipment. The United States Southern Command and other entities played a key role in this effort, which expanded considerably after the broadening of authorities.<sup>9</sup> The establishment of the noncommissioned officer training academy at the Tolomaida army base was very important—Colombian NCOs, once a weakness in the armed services, have reached high levels of professionalism and responsibility. U.S. trainers contributed to the professional development of the mobile brigades and Colombia's Special Forces. Special emphasis was placed on the training of trainers, providing the basis for the Colombians to nationalize much of these efforts. Training by U.S. personnel took place at bases or in urban areas—not in the field. There were no "advisers" assigned to brigades or battalions as there had been in Vietnam and El Salvador; rather, advisers were placed at division level or above. Congress limited the number of U.S. military personnel allowed in country at any one time to 500 until 2005 and to 800 afterward, but the caps on military presence had no negative bearing on completion of mission. The footprint of U.S. training and the overall U.S. military presence in Colombia was remarkably small for its effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

A total of some \$115 million of U.S. assistance has been allocated to preventing attacks on key economic infrastructure, particularly the Caño-Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline running 477 miles from the Department of Arauca to the Caribbean coast. Beginning in 2002, the United States provided helicopters and training by U.S. Special Forces to the Colombian army's 18th Brigade to defend the first 110 miles of the pipeline from bombings by the ELN. Oil transported across

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7. See Marcella, *The United States and Colombia: The Journey from Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity*, 57–60.

8. Interviews with senior U.S. officials.

9. Interviews with senior U.S. official and nongovernment expert.

10. Interviews, with senior U.S. and Colombian officials.

the pipeline was a key generator of royalties for the national government and for the departments in which it is located, and the ELN attacks took a heavy toll. In 2001, the Caño-Limón-Coveñas pipeline was attacked 170 times, resulting in it being shut down for 200 days, a loss of some \$500 million in revenue, and an ecological nightmare as 7,000 barrels of oil spilled across a wide area.<sup>11</sup> With the U.S.-trained pipeline security unit in place, attacks decreased to 17 by 2004.

Some \$92 million of U.S. support since 2000 has gone to the strengthening, equipping, and light-infantry training of Carabiniero units. These units have proved extremely valuable in extending state presence to rural areas and small towns formerly dominated by insurgents and paramilitaries and in providing a transitional force to bridge the gap between a military and a traditional police presence.

U.S. support had an especially positive effect on other critical security areas. U.S. assistance helped make Colombia's armed forces highly effective at nocturnal operations, especially with the use of night-vision goggles. Operational capability was also improved with the extended use of GPS equipment and much better communications technology.<sup>12</sup> Colombia's intelligence capabilities have significantly improved since 2000, in part due to U.S. support.

Other U.S.-inspired advances included reforms in Colombia's military education and justice systems and considerably more attention to the issue of human rights.<sup>13</sup> The insistence of the U.S. Congress on vetting units receiving U.S. assistance for gross human rights violators and the emphasis on human rights practices in U.S. doctrine and training had a positive effect on the Colombian armed forces and police, in spite of the extrajudicial killings problem underscored by the *falsos positivos* cases. Finally, the U.S. model helped promote "jointness" as a doctrine in Colombian security strategy, leading to improvements in operational capability and better relations between the branches of the armed forces, the police, and civilian authority.

U.S. programs outside of the security/counter-drug area have provided approximately \$1.3 billion in assistance from 2000 to 2008. The bulk of that support—some \$500 million—has gone to the category of "alternative development" (the term applied since the FY 2004 State Department/INL Congressional Justification referred to as "alternative development and institution building"; that phrase implies a direct linkage to counter-drug initiatives, in keeping with the original justification and authorities of the Plan Colombia supplemental of 2000 and, according to the State Department's 2001 budget presentation, "aims to achieve a fully sustainable array of counternarcotics activities").<sup>14</sup>

A series of projects intended to promote agricultural and other economic development to compete with the drug economy accompanied the U.S. government's effort at drug eradication in the Putumayo in 2000--2002. These initiatives produced few positive results in the early years due to the lack of security and state presence, poor soil, limited local buy-in, and the persistent strength of the drug economy.<sup>15</sup> This led to a reassessment by U.S. officials of alternative develop-

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11. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Security Assistance: Efforts to Secure Colombia's Caño Limón-Coveñas Oil Pipeline Have Reduced Attacks, but Challenges Remain," GAO-05-971, September 6, 2005, 7, available at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-05-971>.

12. Interviews with senior U.S. officials and senior nongovernment expert.

13. A widely held viewpoint among senior Colombian and U.S. officials interviewed.

14. U. S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Fiscal Year 2001 Congressional Presentation* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, April 2000).

15. Interviews with senior nongovernment experts and a senior U.S. official; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 2002), Colombia, Section IV, 21; U.S. Department of State,

ment and a shift away from a direct linkage between narcotics eradication and rural development, with a parallel reorientation away from southern Colombia in USAID's focus on rural development.

Increasingly, USAID efforts shifted toward improving infrastructure, developing markets, improved education and health services, access to water and sewage services, and job generation. But in a country as large and as developed as Colombia, small-scale investments by USAID have little bearing on macroeconomic conditions and statistics unless they are part of a much larger effort by the Colombian government. Looking ahead, USAID's development efforts will be aimed at strategic areas where legitimate state authority is being consolidated, such as the Macarena (Meta), Montes de María (Sucre), Catatumbo (Norte de Santander), and other zones of the country, as a means of coordinating resources with an integrated security/counter-drug/development approach.

Other areas of U.S. non-military assistance produce shorter-term results that are easier to measure. Democracy support funding of more than \$150 million since 2000 has helped promote and defend human rights in Colombia, including funding for protection of vulnerable populations, for improved governance, and for an "early warning system" to prevent massacres and acts of violence. USAID programs have trained thousands of public defenders and established 50 "Casas de Justicia" around the country that provide legal services gratis to economically disadvantaged populations.<sup>16</sup> U.S. funding to promote judicial reform and improvements in the rule of law—about \$239 million since 2000—have likewise played a positive role in Colombia's efforts to improve its delivery of legal services, end impunity for crimes, investigate past human rights abuses, promote the professionalization of the attorney general's office, and carry out the terms of the Justice and Peace Law. Another \$200 million has been dedicated to helping alleviate the suffering of internally displaced persons and to improving the capability of Colombian organizations to deliver social services to the country's least-advantaged populations.

U.S. assistance to Colombia in general terms has had a positive effect, although some investments proved far more effective than others. Large inputs from the United States certainly helped promote improvements in Colombia's overall security situation. Funding for rotary-wing airlift, military training, and specific technical support (e.g., communications, intelligence, maintenance) had a major role. In the end, however, U.S. security assistance was dwarfed by the amounts invested by Colombians themselves. The \$4.8 billion in U.S. security assistance provided to Colombia from 2000 through 2008 was approximately equal to Colombia's domestic spending on security in 2003. Nonetheless, the concentration of U.S. support in critical areas and the timeliness of the Plan Colombia supplemental increased the impact of that assistance. Furthermore, the announcement of the U.S. supplemental and sustained additional support to Colombia provided a morale boost to the Pastrana and Uribe governments and to the Colombian people—an indication that they were not alone in their struggle against the illegally armed groups that sought to undermine stability and democracy in their country.

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Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Fiscal Year 2003 Budget Congressional Justification* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, n.d.), 32; U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Drug Control: U.S. Nonmilitary Assistance to Colombia Is Beginning to Show Intended Results, but Programs Are Not Readily Sustainable," GAO-04-726, July 2004, available at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04726.pdf>.

16. Interview with senior U.S. official. Thirteen more *Casas de Justicia* are on line to be opened by December 2009.

The results of U.S. assistance in counternarcotics efforts, which account for a very large portion of the overall U.S. security package, have been mixed, but are certainly more positive than is typically believed. The nature and effect of such assistance are analyzed in the next section of this report.

Assistance in non-security areas, such as economic development, administration of justice, human rights and governance, and support for displaced persons has had important and positive consequences, especially when it filled a special niche or provided a stimulus to other, larger-scale efforts by the Colombian government itself. Improvements on the security side—above all, those related to the ability of the government to control territory and impose the rule of law—have been fundamental to furthering other objectives such as economic development, protection of human rights, and improved governance. In the end, Colombia's predicament in the late 1990s emanated from weak government, exacerbated by drugs, a history of violence, low-quality governance, poverty, and social exclusion. These factors were interrelated, so that progress in one area—but especially in the extension of state authority—paves the way to improvements in the others.

## 7

## COUNTERNARCOTICS POLICY A FAILURE?

From the rise of the Medellín cartel in the late 1970s until the advent of Plan Colombia in 1999, narcotics constituted the overwhelmingly dominant factor in the United States' relationship with Colombia. U.S. policy emerged from the international "war on drugs" first declared by President Richard Nixon in 1973 and carried on by subsequent administrations. Increased attention was paid to the Andean region in general and Colombia specifically as that country became the centerpiece of world cocaine trafficking and then production and as domestic consumption of cocaine powder and crack cocaine surged in the United States. Colombia's internal armed conflict and the weakening of legitimate state authority took a back seat to the narcotics issue in terms of U.S. interest until the late 1990s.

That outlook began to change among Colombia watchers at the U.S. State Department and the Defense Department as the Colombian government appeared to be on the brink of implosion in the face of the military gains of the FARC and ELN and a surge in the strength of the paramilitaries, all fed by the rapid expansion of the narcotics business. By 1998, it was clear to an increasing number of key policymakers within the executive branch that even though narcotics played a central role in Colombia's downward spiral, the underlying factor was the weak sovereign presence of the Colombian government and its inability to enforce the rule of law.

In response, the United States worked with President Andrés Pastrana to design Plan Colombia and to prepare an assistance package to support it. However, although the Plan Colombia document released by Pastrana in 1999 contained 10 points, only one of which dealt specifically with narcotics, U.S. legislation providing emergency supplemental support to Colombia was overwhelmingly focused on counter-drug efforts. Despite a subsequent reorientation of U.S. assistance toward support for broader security initiatives in Colombia, including counterinsurgency, Plan Colombia in the eyes of the U.S. public was synonymous with the "war on drugs," and the success or failure of U.S. assistance to Colombia would be judged by the outcome of that "war."

Many consider that outcome to have been a failure, citing production figures for coca leaf and cocaine, while others link counter-drug efforts to what they consider worsened human rights and social conditions in the country.<sup>1</sup> Critics of U.S. policy point to the far larger share of bilateral assistance to Colombia in the security and counter-drug areas compared to spending on economic development, governance, or humanitarian assistance as misguided and ineffective. Another frequently held view is that while U.S. assistance has helped improve the overall security situation in Colombia, U.S. counter-drug support has not achieved a positive outcome.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See for example, Haugaard, Sánchez-Garzoli, Isacson, Walsh, and Guitteau, *A Compass for Colombia Policy*, 3.

2. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Plan Colombia: Drug Reductions Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance" (see note 1, page 45).

The actual results of Colombian and U.S. counternarcotics efforts are far more nuanced than these assertions would indicate. It is, in fact, quite reasonable to assert that Plan Colombia has produced a net gain overall in terms of counternarcotics objectives. Given the tight linkage between illegal armed groups, violence and human rights abuses, the absence of state sovereignty, and the narcotics business in Colombia, progress in the area of security and public safety would have been highly unlikely without gains in the counter-drug area, and vice-versa. A closer examination of several major variables reveals a different picture of Plan Colombia's counter-drug performance than is often portrayed, with important policy implications.

## Eradication

President Pastrana's Plan Colombia document stipulated the goal of reducing Colombia's coca and opium poppy cultivation and cocaine and heroin processing and distribution by 50 percent within six years.<sup>3</sup> Looking back, those involved in the drafting of the plan and those working on a U.S. response now agree that 50 percent was an arbitrary number.<sup>4</sup> Colombians, who had seen a surge of coca and poppy growing in the previous five years, claimed they doubted that the goal could be achieved but understood that the anti-narcotics aim of the program had to be convincing or else it would not receive support from the U.S. Congress, especially from the Republican majority.<sup>5</sup> In a similar way, U.S. policymakers knew drug control had to be an essential part of any plan to help Colombia and they chose a ramped-up version of then-ongoing eradication operations. The 50 percent reduction in coca production therefore loomed large as a basic measure of Plan Colombia's success.

U.S. policymakers reached the conclusion that the only feasible means of achieving that goal was through aerial eradication of coca and poppy fields. Since 1984, at the urging of the United States, the Colombians had used the herbicide glyphosate with considerable success to spray marijuana crops in mountainous areas in the northern part of the country and in the 1990s tested glyphosate against coca. Although the herbicide killed only the leaves of the coca bush and not the plant itself, experts decided that aerial spraying would disrupt the coca business by discouraging replanting and denying profits to the growers and traffickers.

In 2000, before U.S. Plan Colombia assistance had taken effect, Colombian police with U.S. support sprayed some 47,000 hectares of coca. That figure would increase by a factor of nearly three within two years and continue to grow until reaching its peak of 172,000 hectares in 2006. (See Figure 8) A centerpiece of U.S. Plan Colombia support was the "Push to the South" focused on the departments of Caquetá and Putumayo, with increasingly larger-scale efforts at aerial eradication against the industrial-sized coca fields in that region. In subsequent years, aerial eradication took place in nearly every significant coca-growing area of Colombia.

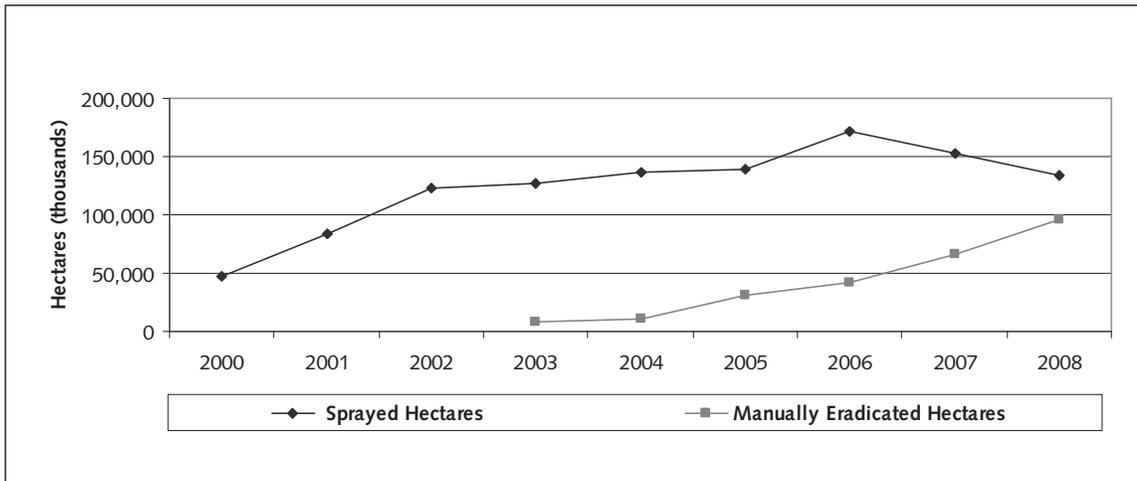
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3. Presidency of the Republic, Colombia, "Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State," Bogotá, 1999, in U.S. Institute of Peace, *Peace Agreements Digitization Collection*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Institute of Peace, [http://www.usip.org/files/file/resources/collections/peace\\_agreements/plan\\_colombia\\_101999.pdf](http://www.usip.org/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/plan_colombia_101999.pdf).

4. Interviews with senior U.S. and Colombian officials.

5. The Colombians had the opposite problem with European countries. A premise of Plan Colombia's hoped-for aid package was that while the United States would contribute disproportionately to the "hard-side" police and military aid, Europe would help with the "soft side." In the end, although they contributed little under the Plan Colombia rubric, the Europeans did give aid in amounts near those targeted in the plan but through a variety of bilateral, EU, and government support and private organization channels.

**Figure 8: Eradication of Coca in Colombia, 2000–2008**



Source of data: U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, years 2000–2008, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/index.htm>.

Measuring the effect of aerial eradication—key to determining the impact of this large-scale and very expensive undertaking—has been challenging and controversial, leading to what appears to be an important misinterpretation of the scope of the narcotics problem in Colombia. Drug production numbers in Colombia are generated by different entities using separate methodologies whose results are sometimes contradictory. The survey with the longest history is prepared by the CIA’s Crime and Narcotics Center (CNC). Done once a year, the CNC study uses high-resolution aerial imagery of known or suspected drug-growing areas to produce an estimate of total coca cultivation.<sup>6</sup> These estimates showed coca cultivation rising from 1999 to a peak of some 170,000 hectares in 2001 and then falling precipitously over the next three years to 114,000 in 2004.<sup>7</sup> Cultivation then rose substantially to 144,000 in 2005 despite the heavy spraying campaign and continued to rise, to 167,000 hectares at the time of the last measurement in 2008. (See Figure 9.)

Although on paper this trend would indicate no progress in reducing coca cultivation, in fact the scope of the areas of Colombia surveyed by the U.S. government was enlarged by 81 percent in 2005 because of a change in CNC methodology that year.<sup>8</sup> Also in 2005, the persistent cloud cover over the high-coca-density Nariño region was uncharacteristically light, revealing substantially more cultivation than had been visible in the past. The figures resulting from the survey’s change in scope in 2005 indicate that the amount of coca cultivation in Colombia had been seriously underestimated in previous years—“chronic underestimation,” according to a U.S. embassy report in 2002, amounting to perhaps half of the total amount of coca actually under cultivation.<sup>9</sup> A careful analysis by an independent researcher in the coca-rich Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander

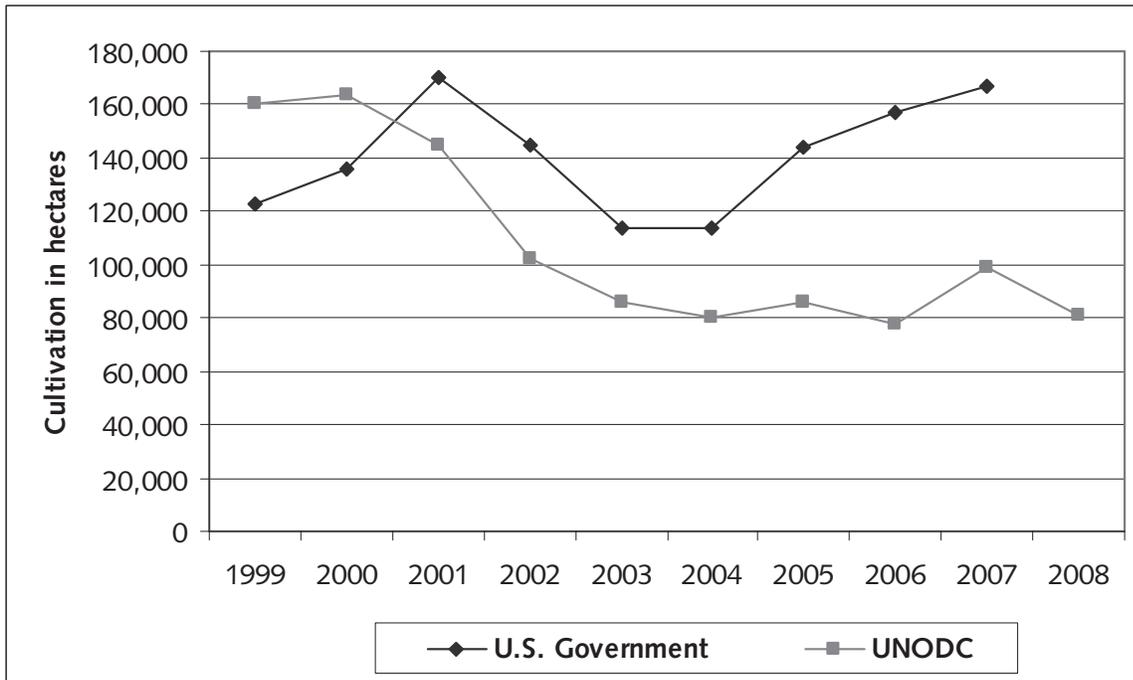
6. U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), “Drug Control: Coca Estimates and Eradication Estimates in Colombia,” GAO-03-319R, January 8, 2003, available at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03319r.pdf>.

7. See Figure 9.

8. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 2006); interviews with senior U.S. officials.

9. GAO, “Drug Control: Coca Estimates,” 4; interview with senior U.S. government official.

**Figure 9: Estimated Year-end Coca Cultivation in Colombia, 1999–2008**



Source of data: Estimated coca cultivation data from Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Strategy Report*, 2009; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Colombia Coca Cultivation Survey*, Government of Colombia, Bogotá, June 2009.

reached the conclusion that all estimates of coca production in the zone were low by a factor of at least 2.5.<sup>10</sup> The International Crisis Group in 2004 claimed that coca cultivation in the Catatumbo was nine times higher than the official survey figures at the time.<sup>11</sup> The benchmark figure of 170,000 hectares for the zenith of coca production around 2001 appears, therefore, to have been far too low, undermining arguments that there is more coca under cultivation in Colombia now than at that time. It may well be that cultivation of coca has fallen—perhaps substantially—since 2001.

The other measurement of coca cultivation in Colombia is provided by SIMCI (Integrated Crops Monitoring System), a joint program of the Colombian government and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). SIMCI prides itself on looking at the entire country and being able to conduct extensive “ground truth” visits to coca plantations. Surprisingly, as shown in Figure 9, this seemingly wider coverage has consistently produced lower cultivation estimates. According to the UNODC, net coca cultivation in Colombia peaked at just over 160,000 hectares in 2000, fell by more than 50 percent to 80,000 hectares in 2004, spiked to 100,000 hectares in 2007, and then fell back again to around 80,000 hectares in 2008.<sup>12</sup> By that measurement, Plan Colombia’s goal of a 50 percent reduction in cultivation was achieved. Although U.S. officials believe that the SIMCI

10. Interview with senior nongovernment expert.

11. International Crisis Group, “Colombia’s Borders: The Weak Link in Uribe’s Security Policy,” 12.

12. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Colombia: Coca Cultivation Survey for 2008*, June 2009, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia\\_coca\\_survey\\_2008.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia_coca_survey_2008.pdf), 10.

methodology underestimates coca production, both the U.S. and the SIMCI measurements show a decline in coca cultivation between 2000 and 2004, the only comparable years for the U.S. figures before the change in the scope of the survey.

Cocaine was not the only narcotic being produced in Colombia. In the late 1990s, Colombia became the principal supplier of heroin into the United States east of the Mississippi. Following persistent eradication campaigns against the small, scattered poppy fields found most often in the cloud-covered mountains of southeastern Colombia, the estimated area of poppy cultivation has dropped precipitously—perhaps by as much as 90 percent since 2003—with potential production of heroin also falling substantially.<sup>13</sup>

As the national government has increased its control over conflicted areas around the country, manual eradication is becoming the preferred method for destroying illicit crops. This is carried out principally by the Colombian government, with only modest U.S. assistance. From 2003 to 2008, the amount of coca eradicated manually increased by a factor of more than eight, to a record 96,000 hectares.<sup>14</sup> The advantages of manual eradication are several. This method removes the coca bush by the root, while spraying mainly kills or damages the leaves, with the bush usually remaining productive. Manual eradication also avoids the negative images of airplanes spraying chemicals on the plots of farmers, and its results can be measured with greater certainty. The presence of manual eradicators indicates on-the-ground authority of the government and often is concurrent with social and development aid to local communities. When integrated into a comprehensive plan of transition to legitimate state presence, such as the PCIM project in the Macarena region of Meta, manual eradication becomes an even more potent tool in reducing drug production. On the downside, manual eradication is often dangerous, owing to the attacks on police and eradicators by the FARC and narco-traffickers, often by using land mines and booby traps. In 2008, 26 manual eradicators and security personnel were killed versus none in the aerial eradication program.

## Other Measurements of Progress or Failure

According to UNODC/SIMCI and U.S. government estimates, eradication efforts have reduced the yield of the coca harvests and, as a consequence, total Colombian cocaine output. Herbicide spraying stunts the productivity of some coca shrubs and eliminates others. In the latter case, determined farmers must plant new bushes. The net result has been lower leaf yields, a 24 percent decline between 2001 and 2007 according to U.S. calculations and, according to the UNODC, a 59 percent decline in the Meta-Guaviare area and a 33 percent decline in Putumayo-Caquetá from 2005 to 2008.<sup>15</sup>

As a consequence of these lower yields and reduction in areas under cultivation, cocaine production in Colombia is declining—from an estimated 640 metric tons in 2004 to 430 in 2008, according to the UNODC, and by nearly one-quarter between 2001 and 2007, to 535 metric tons, according to the U.S. government.<sup>16</sup>

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13. Ibid., 57.

14. U.S. Embassy Bogotá, Narcotics Affairs Section, “Colombia Sets New Eradication Record in 2008, But Reduces Goals for 2009,” March 2009.

15. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 2009); UNODC, *Colombia, Coca Cultivation Survey for 2008*, 7.

16. Ibid., 48.

Another highly significant positive indicator over time has been the decline in the estimated overall size of the narcotics economy. The 2009 UNODC report claimed that the “farm-gate” value of coca leaf and its derivatives (cocaine) amount to \$517 million, equivalent to about 0.3 percent of Colombia’s GDP and 3 percent of the GDP derived from the agricultural sector.<sup>17</sup> Other calculations using other methodologies assert in that in the late 1990s drugs accounted for an amount equivalent to as much as 3 percent of Colombia’s GDP, dropping to some 0.5 percent in 2005.<sup>18</sup>

The demographics of drug production have been fluid, prompted by eradication campaigns and large-scale relocation of production and replanting. Since the advent of Plan Colombia, production in the Putumayo has been reduced considerably, with the biggest drop occurring during the years 2000–2003, although some of the original gains were lost after the large-scale spraying campaigns ended.<sup>19</sup> That department went from producing some 35 percent of the coca produced in Colombia in its heyday to only 12 percent of the total in 2008. Major reductions also took place in the lowland departments of Guaviare, Caquetá, and especially Meta, reflecting the security gains achieved by Joint Task Force Omega since 2004. An exception is Nariño, on the Pacific coast, which has evolved into a bastion of coca cultivation, producing some 24 percent of the country’s total, according to the UNODC; this is due, among other factors, to migration out from the Putumayo during the Push to the South and easy access to out-shipment points. But the size of the average coca field has shrunk precipitously since 2001—from 2.05 hectares to .66 in 2008, as farmers struggle to hide their fields from detection and avoid eradication.<sup>20</sup>

According to many sources, government efforts to control national territory and eradicate coca have cut deeply into the FARC’s source of revenue. The International Crisis Group estimates that FARC income from narcotics fell by 50 percent during 2003–2007 to about \$500 million.<sup>21</sup> Although the Push to the South between 2000 and 2002 failed to break the power of the key FARC fronts in the region, the widespread disruption of coca production caused by aerial spraying cut deeply into the FARC’s source of income, a phenomenon that occurred on a wider scale as the Colombian armed forces broadened their anti-insurgency campaign in subsequent years.<sup>22</sup> Increased government control of key geographic corridors and much higher-quality interdiction capability also cut off the FARC from its supply of precursor chemicals for drug production and disrupted illegal financial activities. Economic pressure of this kind has been highly effective in rolling back FARC control over key coca-producing areas. For example, in the Catatumbo region (Norte de Santander) along the border with Venezuela, the FARC had dominated the very rich coca-planting corridor between the towns of Tibú and La Gabarra, facilitated by cheap precursors from Venezuela and a climate and soil capable of producing six harvests of coca per year. A combination of spraying and manual eradication, military pressure, and cutting off economic inputs has left the FARC without sufficient working capital in the zone to pay coca growers in anything but worthless

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17. Ibid., 7.

18. Ricardo Rocha, *Narcotráfico en Colombia: Economía y Violencia*, Alfredo Rangel, ed. (Bogotá: Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, 2005).

19. UNODC, *Colombia, Coca Cultivation Survey for 2008*.

20. Ibid., 11.

21. International Crisis Group, “Ending Colombia’s FARC Conflict: Dealing the Right Card,” 12.

22. Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, *Putumayo: del protagonismo del Plan Colombia al olvido del Plan Patriota* (Bogotá: Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, 2005), <http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org/docs/pdf/conflictoArmado/Situaci%C3%B3nSeguridadPutumayo.pdf>, 2; Barnett R. Rubin and Alexandra Guáqueta, “Fighting Drugs and Building Peace,” *Dialogue on Globalization Occasional Papers*, no. 37 (New York: Dialogue on Globalization, November 2007), 9.

script.<sup>23</sup> Under these circumstances, the area of FARC influence has shrunk to a fraction of what it had been in 2001, and the organization has been deprived of one of its richest income-producing properties.

## Bottom Line: A Net Gain on Drugs

Success or failure of counter-drug efforts in Colombia must be evaluated in the context of that country's security and stability. The linkage between narcotics and Colombia's illegal armed groups helped fuel the disintegration of already weak state authority during the 1990s, bringing the country to the brink of meltdown. The state's inability to exercise meaningful sovereign control over large areas of national territory lay at the heart of the problem, but the insurgent and criminal elements that sought to replace the state or fill the void left by lack of legitimate government presence were empowered by drugs.

While President Pastrana recognized the importance of countering the effects of narcotics in the original Plan Colombia document of 1999, Alvaro Uribe saw the problem of drug criminality as much more central to Colombia's overall security. Under both presidents, elite and general public opinion in Colombia moved from earlier notions that the narcotics problem in Colombia was largely a response to U.S. demand for drugs, that counternarcotics efforts would alienate Colombian *campesinos* and drive them into the arms of the insurgents, and that the only effective approach to drugs would be alternative development programs aimed at convincing farmers to give up illicit crops. For those who developed Plan Colombia in 1999, such approaches did not seem to address Colombia's immediate crisis. Consequently, U.S. and Colombian counter-drug efforts focused on the coercive side of eradication to convince farmers to give up their illicit but very lucrative crops. Uribe's Democratic Security Policy instilled in the public mind the link between drugs, insurgency ("narco-terrorists"), violence, and crime and the need to attack them in a holistic fashion.<sup>24</sup> Although the United States was the driving force in financing and coordinating aerial eradication, the execution required close bilateral cooperation, and the Colombian government (with essential U.S. intelligence support) managed key interdiction efforts, including the "air bridge denial" program under the Colombian Air Force that plays an important role in suppressing drug flights in national air space.

Over time, Colombian governments have come to prefer manual as opposed to aerial eradication of coca, given the great public aversion to spraying and the changing security reality on the ground that makes manual eradication more feasible. Images of spraying coca are powerfully negative. The United States and Colombian governments stuck with aerial eradication, however, despite widespread international criticism that it destroyed legitimate crops, alienated farmers, promoted internal displacements, and had harmful health and environmental effects. The charges of health and environmental damage have been shown to be unfounded, and spraying has weakened, not strengthened, the FARC. Still, there is a clear acknowledgement that aerial eradication is not an effective state presence and, by itself, will not promote a transition to legitimate government control over an area.<sup>25</sup>

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23. Interview with senior nongovernment expert.

24. Interviews with Colombian and U.S. officials.

25. For an analysis of the health and environmental affects of spraying in Colombia see: Keith R. Solomon et al., *Environmental and Human Health Assessment of the Aerial Spray Program of Coca and Poppy*

Alternative development was and still is part of the anti-drug campaign, despite the doubts of those who witnessed past efforts. From 2000 to 2008, the United States spent more than half a billion dollars on what it classifies as alternative development programs in Colombia. Many considered the early projects in this effort as having failed, blaming the lack of security and connectivity to markets in the zones of activity. After 2002, USAID began working farther away from the growing areas. In its 2008 report on Plan Colombia, the U.S. Government Accountability Office praised USAID for helping many thousands of poor Colombians but noted that such efforts do not measure how these projects contributed to the goal of reducing narcotics production.<sup>26</sup> This conclusion appears based on the dubious assumption that cultivators can in fact be convinced to give up coca and poppy cultivation simply by giving them sufficient incentives to grow legal crops. Experience indicates, however, that alternative development will be successful only in areas where eradication has been combined with an effective state security presence and where opportunities for legitimate agriculture exist—such as the Macarena area of Meta and the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander.<sup>27</sup> The presence of the FARC or other non-state actors capable of intimidating or enticing *campesinos* into growing coca eliminates alternative development as an economic option.

Another general criticism of Plan Colombia has been that it “militarizes” the anti-drug fight, thus increasing the role of the military in society and moving it into a sphere that should belong to law enforcement authorities. This was precisely one of the United States’ goals. Leaders of the Colombian armed forces had long voiced reluctance to get involved in drug control, fearing, they said, the corruptive influence of narcotics, although not being involved did not free them from drug-related corruption. Believing that the Colombian army would be an essential part of a comprehensive anti-narcotics strategy, U.S. officials attempted several times to induce its cooperation. Those efforts failed. So instead, from the 1980s the United States poured resources into development of the Colombian police, including helicopters and training for military-like units, which resulted in a situation in which the National Police strayed from its civil law and order function but at the same time could not stand up to the FARC onslaught in either urban or rural theatres.

To get a different result with Plan Colombia, the United States dedicated the lion’s share of its counter-drug resources from the emergency supplemental to stand up a counter-drug brigade whose stated purpose was to provide security to an expanded eradication program. An assumption was that the brigade would also prove to be a model and a training unit for the modernization of the Colombian army as a whole.<sup>28</sup> The accomplishments of the brigade in counter-drug activities were quite modest, but they did help support the momentum toward reform already taking place within the Colombian armed forces. All members of the counter-drug brigade and similar dedicated units in the navy and air force were individually vetted to try to identify possible human rights violators, and, as required by U.S. law, helicopters and other aircraft provided under Plan Colombia were lent—not signed over—to the Colombian armed forces to make certain that they would be used for counter-drug activities. Initially, use of the helicopters had to be cleared by the U.S. ambassador. Military commanders chafed but end-use performance improved. Once the U.S. Congress broadened the authorities on the use of Plan Colombia funding to support both counter-

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*Control in Colombia* (Washington, D.C.: Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission [CICAD] of the OAS, March 31, 2005).

26. GAO, “Plan Colombia: Drug Reductions Goals Were Not Fully Met, But Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance,” 6 (see note 1, page 45).

27. See the PCIM case study in this report on pages 27–33; interview with nongovernment expert; interview with senior third country official.

28. Interviews with senior U.S. government officials.

drug and counterinsurgency efforts, U.S. assistance fit more closely with Uribe's concept that the two elements posed an integrated threat to the exercise of legitimate state control.

In the end, Colombia's security and stability have been enhanced by the counter-drug activities carried out under Plan Colombia and the Democratic Security Policy. Key accomplishments include reducing the size of the share of GDP generated by narcotics, lowering the profile of the narcotics economy as a factor in national life, and denying large amounts of income to insurgents and paramilitaries. By available measurements, cocaine production and most likely coca cultivation have also been reduced. Had aerial eradication not taken place, the large plantations, linked to the wealth and power of illegal armed groups, would have continued to expand.

By any measurement, however, drugs remain a serious problem in Colombia. The country is still the world's largest producer of coca and cocaine, and the profits from drugs continue to fuel the FARC and emerging drug gangs. Narcotics money continues to have a corrupting effect, and drugs play a key role in Colombia's persistently high levels of violent crime. Progressively, however, drugs have become less of a national security threat and are moving more into the realm of a traditional law enforcement problem. This is due to the efforts by Colombia, with U.S. support, to roll back the size of the narcotics economy and weaken the illegal armed groups that depended on it.

# 8

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM COLOMBIA

Colombia's experience in dealing with its grave security crisis offers some important lessons that have relevance to future policymaking regarding Colombia, both domestically and in the United States. The experience is also relevant to policymakers who are considering how to respond to threats to stability and security in other parts of the world. While the case of Colombia reflects a confluence of variables specific to that country, many of the individual factors (difficult geography, weak state, insurgencies, non-state military proxies, high levels of violence, porous borders) are to one degree or another present in other countries whose systems are under severe strain. These lessons, therefore, while specific to Colombia, may have applicability in other conflictive areas—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan, to name a few.

### Defining the Problem

Colombia's decline began during the 1980s when leftist insurgencies began to reassert their presence and the narcotics industry grew to prominence. Colombian elites reacted slowly to these threats, increasingly relying on proxies to legitimate state authority—"self-defense" groups and paramilitaries—to fill the voids left by the ineffective armed forces and police. When coca production shifted from Peru and Bolivia to Colombia during the 1990s, the role of narcotics in the overall economy exploded, along with it the power of the insurgents and paramilitaries, both fed by income from drugs. Drug production further highlighted the traditional problems caused by Colombia's difficult geography and vast ungoverned spaces as national attention focused on hitherto neglected areas in the tropical lowlands of the south and east. Under the combination of a weak central government, an army incapable of standing up to the insurgents, a police force unable to effectively maintain order even in many urban environments, and the ability of the insurgents and paramilitaries to access supplies and weapons from abroad, legitimate state authority imploded. Levels of violence and human rights abuses—the product of a near-total absence of the rule of law—multiplied many times over.

Recovery from this debacle began even as the crisis continued to worsen during the administration of Andrés Pastrana, whose failed peace process with the FARC exposed the stark reality that the insurgents were intent on overthrowing the state and had no interest in demobilizing. That helped galvanize support among Colombia's demoralized population for an energetic state response to the crisis, opening the door to President Alvaro Uribe's Democratic Security policy.

### Lessons Learned:

- A Colombia-specific response was required to address the crisis that came to a head in Colombia during the 1990s and not a formulaic approach derived from other cases or models. The conflict in Colombia was not a civil war, a drug war, or a classical insurgency.

- The root of Colombia's security crisis stemmed from a weak state incapable of exercising legitimate state authority over large parts of national territory—a sovereignty gap of large proportion.
- Because state sovereignty was the underlying problem in Colombia, the solution to the crisis needed to be based on strengthening the state's control of legitimate force and undercutting the ability of non-state actors to use force.
- Illegal narcotics broke the tenuous equilibrium that previously existed between the weak Colombian state and the illegal armed groups, creating an asymmetric resource relationship that challenged the state's capacity to respond to internal threats.
- Top civilian and military leadership in Colombia—President Uribe above all— understood the nature of the country's crisis and—in a manner very different from past Colombian efforts at dealing with the insurgency and illegal armed groups—moved to assert state authority.
- Colombian efforts underscored the concept of security as a public good—a shared responsibility that could be returned to citizen control. The focus on security and the government's ability to deliver substantially higher levels of state authority became the central accomplishment of the Uribe administration.
- Progress in delivering an enhanced state security presence generated strong popular support among Colombians. Colombia's counter-guerrilla campaign subsequently never became a “war against its own people.”
- The Colombian government established targets and goals for its security agenda under both Plan Colombia and Democratic Security that were specific and transparent. This facilitated public monitoring of progress and helped build citizen confidence and support for the government's initiatives.

## Security

From the time it took office in 2002, the Uribe administration conducted what is in essence a counterinsurgency strategy based on taking and holding territory, protecting local populations, controlling key geographic corridors essential to drug trafficking and supply and mobility for the insurgents, and demobilizing paramilitary groups. Uribe and his strategists understood that this counterinsurgency campaign would be protracted and expensive and that Colombian security forces needed to be much larger and better equipped for the task. Accordingly, he embarked on a concentrated effort, building on the important reforms of the Colombian army undertaken during the Pastrana administration, to increase the size and capability of the armed forces. The goal was to be able to deploy quality troops when and where they were needed in counter-guerrilla operations while at the same time protecting key economic and transportation infrastructure and larger amounts of territory.

Over time, the size of the professional armed forces was increased substantially, many new counter-guerrilla and elite units created, and a home guard force recruited to control rural areas. The National Police was increased in size, training, and capability. The acquisition of a large and well-maintained helicopter fleet provided crucial air mobility to the armed forces and police. Great advances were made in force training, pay, logistics, supply, and administration, with impressive gains in intelligence and communications capability. Inter-service rivalries have been largely over-

come, with a new spirit of “jointness” in terms of coordinated structures and operations, as well as a large improvement in civil-military relations centered in an effective Ministry of Defense. In a relatively short time, the Colombian armed forces were transformed from an ineffective, garrison-bound outfit to a far more professional force.

One of Uribe’s accomplishments has been to finance security initiatives in part through special taxes on Colombia’s elite—the wealthiest individuals and businesses. While the size of military budgets grew substantially in dollar terms during Uribe’s administrations, most of the increased spending was derived from these special taxes and from a growing economy, so that the proportion of security spending to GDP increased relatively little. Remarkably, Uribe’s administrations dedicated considerably more money to social spending than to security during the entire period.

Improvements in the armed forces and police, coupled with effective strategic planning and progressively better tactical execution, have rolled back the power of the insurgents since 2002, pushing them deeper into the hinterland, cutting their mobility corridors, greatly reducing the ranks of their order-of-battle fighters and support militias, disrupting their command and control, and cutting them off from their financial base. The FARC has been neutralized militarily. It has no hope of defeating the armed forces or realizing its goal of overthrowing or replacing the state. That said, it still controls territory, can launch small-scale operations, and shows no sign of seeking to enter into peace talks. The ELN is even more debilitated and should be ripe for peace negotiations.

Uribe’s success in strengthening legitimate state authority played a large role in bringing about the paramilitary demobilization. While this process has been controversial and remains incomplete—especially in terms of bringing to trial those guilty of gross crimes, providing indemnities to victims, and reintegrating ex-fighters into society—demobilizing tens of thousands of armed fighters has proved very positive. However, it is essential that the justice side of the demobilization process reach the same level of public good that the security gains have achieved. The emergence of new criminal gangs, some of which are led and staffed by ex-paramilitaries, is an ongoing challenge for authorities but is a law enforcement problem, not a national security problem.

Lack of effective control of border regions with Ecuador and Venezuela provides the FARC and criminal organizations with access to those two countries for rest and refitting units, safe haven, arms supply, and income from drug trafficking. Colombian efforts to roll back the insurgency and control the narcotics business are undermined by poor regional cooperation in addressing these problems.

## **Lessons Learned:**

- Colombian leaders thought strategically but remained flexible in tactics. Uribe revealed the contours of his Democratic Security Policy soon after taking office and stuck to its basic tenets throughout his administration. Although the strategy has been adjusted and refined over time, the overall continuity of Uribe’s strategic orientation provided coherence to Colombian efforts and a useful mechanism for leveraging U.S. assistance.
- Colombia’s security strategy from the start included counter-drug and economic development aspects, but these became more integrated and more effective components only over time—in part because they were dependant on the state first making gains in control of national territory and protection of citizen security.

- Colombian planners understood early on that a successful security strategy required sustained political will and resources, which became linked in a synergistic relationship. They accordingly imposed special taxes on Colombia's elite to help pay for security improvements and increased budgets for security initiatives.
- The Colombian army had to be reconfigured as a counterinsurgency force to be successful in addressing the threat. Although the army had undergone important reforms under President Pastrana, it was still far too small for the task at hand in 2002. The expansion in size and professional capability of Colombia's military and police force was an essential precondition for increasing state control over more areas of the country. Military and civilian planners rebuilt the army with well-trained and well-equipped combat units staffed by professional soldiers at the core while using draftees, especially the home guard units, to control small towns and rural areas.
- Mobility was crucial to the success of the armed forces' efforts to deny territory to the FARC and establish a state security presence. The core element in this equation was helicopters.
- Beyond combat and security use, military and police helicopters have been essential in promoting a greater state civilian presence in isolated rural areas.
- Air mobility enhanced the morale of combat troops in Colombia by allowing for rapid evacuation of wounded soldiers.
- Effective use of helicopters would not have been possible without the large-scale investments needed to train pilots and develop maintenance capability. U.S. support in this regard was essential. Looking forward, building on this capability will be a key challenge to the Colombian government and to U.S. planners as "nationalization" of U.S. rotary-wing assets takes place.
- Professionalization of noncommissioned officers through extensive training, including the establishment of an NCO academy, injected a dynamic leadership element into the Colombian military that did not exist before. U.S. support for this effort was very positive.
- Improvements in the coordination among Colombia's armed services ("jointness"), above all in the combined joint task forces, and between the armed services and the police have substantially improved their overall effectiveness.
- The emergence of the Ministry of Defense as one of Colombia's best-organized and best-run government entities has been a crucial factor in improving security in the country. Civil-military cooperation within the ministry has improved, with civilian planners taking the lead in the design of key strategic initiatives under the Uribe government.
- The government's increased ability to take down high-value FARC targets, including Secretariat members and top leadership cadres, has been central in undermining the strength and morale of the insurgents. That capability has resulted from the creation of counterterrorism, anti-kidnapping, and special operations units within the armed forces and police—often with U.S. training—and from improved intelligence capabilities.
- The Colombian armed forces now operate very effectively at night, giving them a distinct advantage in both counterinsurgency and the pursuit of high-value targets.
- The vastly improved intelligence capability of Colombia's armed forces and police—with very valuable inputs from the United States—has been an essential component in the security gains realized. An important factor in this equation was better coordination of intelligence within

the armed forces and with the police. Effective debriefing of the increasingly large number of FARC and ELN deserters has also been a very effective intelligence tool.

- As the internal conflict moves increasingly out of the military into the law enforcement sphere, fewer troops and more police will be needed. The buildup of the Colombian police in terms of size and professional capability has been essential in broadening legitimate state authority. The police forces, however, are still undersized for the task at hand.
- Increasingly, police units in Colombia must transition from the mentality of garrison forces, substituting for the military, into the role of community police protecting citizen security and human rights and supporting the rule of law.
- Progress in rolling back the insurgency has been accomplished in many increments, rather than through major pitched battles, because security strategy has focused on controlling space and populations rather than on engaging the FARC in combat. This has helped keep casualties relatively low on both sides, with government gains measured more in the rising tide of desertions of FARC fighters.
- The government's increasing control of territory and population has greatly weakened the FARC's capability to sustain its military apparatus, cutting off its supplies, disrupting its narcotics business, and isolating order-of-battle troops from their civilian *milicia* support base.
- The Uribe government has assiduously denied urban space to the insurgents, reacting energetically to any evidence of active FARC presence in the cities. This has served to shore up public confidence in the government and in the armed forces.
- Control of territory and more effective state presence has also led to a sharp reduction in crime and violence, especially kidnappings, murders, and massacres. This has been an essential factor in generating high approval ratings for the government and enhancing support for its democratic security strategy.
- Likewise, extended government control over key transportation, energy, and communications infrastructure, above all roadways, has enhanced citizen confidence in the government and aided economic development.
- As a spillover effect from the reduction of its operational space in Colombia, the FARC has become increasingly dependent on access to areas in neighboring countries, Venezuela and Ecuador above all, especially as a refuge for its top leadership. This adds a further international dimension to the crisis and underscores the need for regional cooperation.
- Government public affairs campaigns have been effective in keeping citizen support for security initiatives high. The government has consistently maintained a strong support base among the population, while the FARC remains vastly unpopular.
- The demobilization of the paramilitaries led to a drastic reduction in violence and human rights abuses and allowed more troops and police to be deployed against the insurgents.
- Colombia's experience with the paramilitary phenomenon underscores the importance of preventing the rise of illegal armed groups serving as proxies to legitimate state authority.
- Any future government of Colombia must sustain the progress achieved and move forward. Colombia's gains in security, although impressive, are not irreversible. Backsliding can and will take place without the political will to advance.

## Governance and Human Rights

Colombia must consolidate the security gains achieved to date and build on them in different areas of the country to bring about a sustained transition to effective state sovereignty. Efforts are already under way in areas that were former guerrilla strongholds, such as the Macarena region in Meta, the Catatumbo, Montes de María, Bajo Cauca, and others. The success of Colombian efforts to promote the rule of law, citizen security, and economic development in areas such as the Macarena will be a litmus test for progress elsewhere.

A number of key variables need priority attention. One is how effectively military-based security will give way to civilian policing. Beyond police, the Colombian people want to see evidence that the rule of law will be applied, with prosecutors, judges, public defenders, effective judicial procedures, and an end to impunity for crimes. This is perhaps the single most important factor in consolidating the security gains of the past 10 years. With the security situation improving, standards of democratic governance and the observance of human rights must be enhanced. The state must also address rising demand for services: education, access to health care, availability of credit for rural development, and improved physical infrastructure, especially roads. As security concerns recede, economic and social issues are increasingly taking precedence in public opinion. That is a good sign but also a challenge. At the same time, Colombians must develop a Colombian plan for ending the conflict with the FARC and the ELN, both of which remain armed.

### Lessons Learned:

- Improvements in governance and respect for human rights have been closely linked to the extension of legitimate state authority over larger areas of the country.
- The widespread human rights abuses in the midst of the violence of the 1990s and up until about 2003 not only generated human suffering but also overwhelmed Colombia's traditionally weak judicial sector.
- As government forces consolidate control of more territory and police take over the task of protecting citizens, it is essential that the state presence be reflected in respect for the rule of law and by more effective governance, including the creation of an environment conducive to economic development and poverty reduction.
- The process of removing human rights violators and collaborators with paramilitaries from within its ranks has made the armed forces more effective and improved morale.
- The *falsos positivos* cases, however, demonstrate that this process remains incomplete and that the Colombian armed forces must take more energetic steps to eliminate a lingering culture of tolerance for human rights abuses among its officers and soldiers and to bring those guilty of violations to trial.
- The Colombian government underestimated the scope of the task involved in carrying out the terms of the Justice and Peace Law. Its efforts to date have been insufficient in reducing the huge backlog of cases resulting from the paramilitary demobilization and in providing compensation to victims of paramilitary crimes. Because the legal process will be slow, the government should make certain that administrative compensation and other types of economic redress for victims are not delayed.

- The rule of law remains Colombia's weakest element and the one requiring the most enhanced attention by the government. An improved administration of justice capability not only will help guarantee the security and rights of citizens; it will serve as a sustained symbol of state presence.
- The future of effective and sustained state control will depend on the government devoting to the justice sector the same level of attention it has given to consolidating security.
- Spending on the judiciary has been insufficient. Colombia's new accusatorial penal procedure is an improved vehicle for providing justice but it requires considerably more investment to make it work. Increasingly, citizen security will depend not on the armed forces but on a functioning justice system.
- The state presence must be institutionalized in areas of transition from insurgent to government control in the form of civilian entities that provide education, health care, transportation and communications infrastructure, credit, and development support.

## Narcotics

Weak state sovereignty, not narcotics, is the underlying problem of Colombia. But drugs have played a highly negative role in ratcheting up pressure against legitimate authority. Colombia's internal conflict is resource-driven, fueled by drug money. Both Pastrana and Uribe recognized the importance of rolling back the influence of the drug industry, but Uribe articulated more clearly the tight linkage between narcotics, the insurgency, and threats to the rule of law. By the time of the Uribe presidency, public opinion in Colombia had come around to a position much more supportive of counternarcotics efforts and to an appreciation of drugs as a shared problem with the United States and not merely a demand-driven phenomenon. Consequently, Uribe dedicated considerable resources and effort to eradication of coca and poppy and still more to interdiction of narcotics and to other law enforcement efforts. Combined with the success of the armed forces in denying territory, mobility, and supply corridors to the FARC and the demobilization of the paramilitaries, these counter-drug efforts had a positive cumulative effect.

The key improvement in the counter-drug area since the advent of Plan Colombia has been the reduced profile of narcotics in relation to Colombia's legitimate economy, the dramatic reduction in the flow of drug profits to the FARC, and the removal of the threat—once palpable in the mid-1990s—that Colombia would become a “narco-state” in which drug traffickers in league with illegal armed groups could dominate the government. Beyond these essential gains, it is likely that, as a result of eradication efforts, overall coca cultivation has fallen since a high point in 2000–2001 and that cocaine production has also decreased—perhaps substantially. Accurate measurement of these variables is difficult at best, but evidence points to considerable underestimation of the amount of coca under cultivation at what appeared to have been the apex in 2000–2001.

The drug problem remains serious, however—only its scope has been reduced. Narcotics are still the key financial mainstay of the insurgents—albeit at much lower levels—and fuel the “emerging” criminal bands formed in part from ex-paramilitary cohorts. Corruption from the drug business remains a serious threat to the effectiveness of the state at both the national and local levels and leads to higher rates of crime and continued human rights abuses. As long as demand from the United States and Europe remains high, drugs will continue to be grown, produced, and trafficked in Colombia. The short-term to mid-term goal is to contain the drug indus-

try at a level at which it does not again become a factor that threatens state security or overshadows the legitimate economy. Longer-term gains will require international cooperation that deals with demand-side issues.

## Lessons Learned:

- Experience in Colombia demonstrated that effective counter-drug efforts depended on the confluence of several factors, none more important than legitimate state presence on the ground. Counter-drug efforts cannot be successful or be sustained without that presence.
- Colombian policymakers came to understand the role played by illegal drugs in fueling the security crisis confronting the country and made counter-drug efforts an important component of a strategy to extend legitimate state control.
- Whatever gains Colombia has achieved in the counternarcotics area—and there have been real gains—are due to the improved security environment and the capability of the Colombian armed forces and police to enforce the law. The sustainability of these gains will depend on the quality of the rule of law and increased legitimate economic opportunity.
- The Colombia experience underscored the need for a multifaceted counter-drug campaign, with access to a full range of assets, both military and civilian, balancing eradication with the establishment of on-the-ground security and development.
- There appears to have been a sizeable underestimation of coca cultivation on the eve of Plan Colombia. Many conclusions have been drawn regarding the outcome of counter-drug policies in Colombia using questionable baseline figures.
- Aerial spraying has been a central ingredient in Colombia's counter-drug effort, especially during the 1999–2003 period when the army and police lacked the size and capability to establish a meaningful state presence in areas controlled by insurgents. Under such circumstances, spraying was the only viable option for disrupting coca cultivation.
- However, without effective state presence, such as in the Putumayo/Caquetá push to the south in 2000–2002, aerial spraying could only disrupt the drug market and force growers to move production elsewhere. Sustainable reduction of cultivation and an effective rollback of the power of the FARC in those regions came only in later years with a sustained military presence.
- In areas where there has been a large reduction in coca cultivation, such as the Catatumbo and Macarena regions, the gains have come from a mix of aerial and manual eradication combined with a sustained state presence that breaks the control of the FARC over local populations and access to prime growing areas.
- If insurgents or drug gangs have the capability of forcing or cajoling farmers into growing coca, the chances for cultivation of legitimate crops will be poor.
- The threat of forced eradication is necessary to wean farmers from coca. Appeals to them to grow substitute crops when coca remains an option are not effective.
- “Alternative development” initiatives are likely to fail unless they are carried out in an environment of reasonable state presence and control. They must also be economically feasible, responding to available or potential markets and carried out by people who have the desire to be agriculturalists.

- Colombia will continue to suffer from the effects of illegal drug production and trafficking as long as demand for illegal drugs exists in the United States and Europe. The power of the global drug economy supercharged the Colombian crisis. Although the crisis has been tamed, drugs will continue to play an unfortunately prominent role in Colombia until greater international effort is made to address the problem.

## Colombia and the United States

The United States provided more than \$6.8 billion in assistance to Colombia since the approval of the emergency supplemental in support of Plan Colombia in July 2000. The bulk of these funds were destined for counternarcotics efforts, especially, at the beginning, for the formation and equipping of a counter-drug brigade of the Colombian army in support of a massive aerial spraying campaign in the Putumayo. When Congress later broadened authorizations to allow U.S. funds to be used for counter-guerrilla as well as counter-drug activities, the greater flexibility enhanced the value of U.S. assistance.

U.S. aid to Colombia has had many positive effects. On the counter-drug side, the large U.S. investment played an important role in what appears to be the decline in overall coca and cocaine production that has occurred since 2000 and in rolling back narcotics as an economic and political force in the country. Interagency efforts by the United States enhanced Colombia's capacity to interdict drugs through support of such initiatives as the air bridge denial program. Critics of U.S. counter-drug initiatives in Colombia are quick to point out that drugs continue to be a significant problem. The scope of the narcotics variable, however, has without doubt been reduced and the potential of drugs to feed the insurgency diminished.

In the security area, U.S. assistance to Colombia helped train and equip Colombia's armed forces and police, contributing to their effectiveness and the success of their initiatives. Several key accomplishments stand out: the acquisition of helicopters, provision of fuel and supplies, pilot training, the development of maintenance capabilities, and improvements in the quality of noncommissioned officer training through the NCO academy, which also helped break the class barriers in the army that had undermined morale. Other key steps include the standing up of an effective force in Arauca to protect the Caño-Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline; essential improvements in the intelligence and communications capabilities of the Colombian armed forces; encouraging the formation of joint task forces; and improved cooperation among the branches of the armed forces and police.

Finally, and importantly, U.S. engagement helped improve the human rights record of the Colombian armed forces, both by conducting a rigorous vetting process to ensure that U.S. support did not go to units that contained persons who had committed gross human rights violations and by promoting U.S. military culture through training and education. One very senior Colombian official claimed that insistence on human rights standards was the "best gift" the United States gave Colombia.

U.S. assistance can also claim positive results on the economic and social sides. Colombia's limited but still important gains in improving the rule of law received strong U.S. support, as have efforts to promote human rights, protect human rights workers and other vulnerable groups, and help respond to the needs of displaced persons. The results of USAID projects in support of rural and economic development are more difficult to measure, as they often do not produce short-term

gains. Efforts at alternative development, however, call into question the value of replacing illegal drug cultivation with legal crops. The concept, rather, should be one of integral development—basing development activities on a region’s overall economic potential, including its prospects for agriculture.

The United States successfully injected large amounts of assistance into Colombia without leaving a large footprint. This factor blunted both domestic and international criticism of the U.S. role and allowed initiatives to proceed, including the highly controversial aerial spraying campaign. The image of the United States in Colombia is quite positive overall. The small U.S. presence was due to several factors: Congressional limitations on the number of military and civilian personnel in country at any one time; not assigning U.S. military “advisers” to battalions and brigades; limiting military training largely to Colombian bases; prohibiting U.S. soldiers from engaging in combat; and focusing from the start on preparing Colombians to take up critical training and maintenance functions.

U.S. assistance to Colombia has diminished over time and will continue to do so as programs and assets are “nationalized.” Since the advent of Plan Colombia, such assistance has never been the deciding factor in Colombia’s success, but it has played an important role—providing perhaps 10 percent of the total expended on security. Had Colombians themselves not demonstrated the political will to confront their country’s problems, however, no amount of U.S. aid would have turned the tide.

This notwithstanding, U.S. aid remains important to Colombia and it is essential that the two countries work together to develop a working timetable for the drawdown of U.S. support. As this takes place, it is likely that U.S. assistance will increasingly be dedicated to governance efforts, such as the rule of law, protection of human rights, and social and economic development, all of which are tightly linked to Colombia’s overall security.

## Lessons Learned:

- The United States’ experience in Colombia has demonstrated that robust but not massive amounts of assistance, if applied in a timely and sustainable fashion and linked to U.S. national security interests, can have a positive effect in promoting improved security and stability in another country.
- The Colombia experience also demonstrated that the United States can apply relatively large amounts of assistance and on-the-ground support without a large footprint. The small U.S. presence in Colombia proved to be an asset rather than a liability in almost every case.
- The timing of the U.S. emergency supplemental of \$1.3 billion in July 2000 and the alacrity with which it was approved by Congress added to its positive impact. U.S. support came at a key moment, when Colombia was in particularly great need of assistance and enjoyed very little international support. Thus, the supplemental became a strong statement of U.S. commitment to Colombia.
- Bipartisan support for the Plan Colombia supplemental was essential in obtaining its approval and allowing U.S. support for Colombia to move forward despite considerable criticism from U.S. and international civil society. While there were always different currents of thought on Colombia within Congress, sustained U.S. support for Colombia during the entire 2000–2009 period played an important role in improving security and stability.

- The tight focus of U.S. assistance under the supplemental on counternarcotics had both negative and positive effects:
  - It limited the productivity of the assistance by concentrating support on a counter-drug brigade that would be underutilized and on an aerial eradication campaign in the Putumayo whose effects would not be sustained until years later when an effective military presence was in place. The Colombian military chafed at the limited authorities of the Plan Colombia support package and the resources showered on the counter-drug brigade, creating a strategic disconnect with the United States.
  - However, it also opened the door to improving Colombian operational capabilities and to a closer training relationship with the U.S. military, while prompting the Uribe government not to rely on the United States for the bulk of its security upgrades but instead to raise revenues for the purchase of helicopters and equipment.
- Limitations governing the supplemental also helped improve the climate for the respect of human rights within the Colombian armed forces and promoted a small but effective U.S. footprint in Colombia related to training and support for the armed forces, police, and government.
- When the broadening of authorizations took effect during 2003, the United States adopted a more balanced and effective approach to its assistance, avoiding to a large degree the confusing and sometimes counterproductive separation of the counter-drug and counter-insurgency variables when the two were closely linked but at the same time preserving the small U.S. profile in Colombia and ruling out any combat role for U.S. forces.
- Strict rules of engagement for the U.S. military, prohibiting them from entering into combat and governing their movement even in the cities, went a long way toward minimizing the possibility that force protection concerns would lead to greater U.S. involvement.
- U.S. training of the Colombian military was tightly focused on critical strategic needs—doctrine, logistics, rotary air capacity, communications, NCO professionalization, special operations, intelligence, and human rights—and on improving military culture by easing class distinctions among the ranks.
- U.S. training was intended to produce sustainable results—increasingly focused on “training the trainers” and with an eye toward the eventual handoff of equipment and facilities to the Colombians. The results have been highly positive.
- The United States’ role in improving the intelligence capabilities of the Colombian armed forces, police, and civilian authorities and promoting greater cooperation among those entities was one of the most important overall U.S. accomplishments.
- Over time, the orientation of U.S. support did not seek to reshape the Colombian armed forces in the U.S. image, but rather to build on its own strengths and to try to alleviate weaknesses. The result is a Colombian force, not a U.S. clone, but one with close ties to the U.S. military and with important inputs of U.S. military doctrine and considerable respect between the two armed forces.
- Coordination of support between U.S. agencies improved over time. It was less effective at the beginning, but increasingly counter-purposeful action was eliminated and a more holistic front

presented to Colombians. In general, however, there was considerable interagency agreement on overall goals and strategy.

- The amount of aid provided by the United States for rural and economic development will have little or no effect in an economy as large as Colombia's unless it is very highly targeted and coordinated with Colombian efforts. USAID's decision over time to increasingly concentrate its rural development resources in areas where an effective transition to state authority is taking place will allow it to better leverage those resources.
- U.S. funding in support of the rule of law in Colombia and in improved governance has played a useful role and should become a centerpiece of overall U.S. assistance to Colombia. While there are inherent difficulties in supporting judicial structures in a foreign country, the effort must be made.

## APPENDIX

# PERSONS INTERVIEWED

**Arnson, Cynthia**

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and Re-integration, USAID, U.S. Embassy  
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*Mayor, Vista Hermosa, Department of Meta  
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Jim McGovern, U.S. House of Representatives  
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**Ramírez Ocampo, Augusto**

*Minister of Development (2000–2002)*  
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**Rangel, Alfredo**

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**Johanna Mendelson Forman** is a senior associate with the CSIS Americas Program and the William E. Simon Chair of Political Economy at CSIS. A former codirector of the CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project and a fellow of the Association of the U.S. Army's program on the Role of American Military Power, she has written extensively on current issues related to the security and economic dimensions of failing states and their reconstruction. In 2003 she participated in the first civilian review of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq as part of a CSIS team. Her work in Latin America has focused on civil-military relations, with a special focus on disarmament and demobilization of former combatants in the region, from Guatemala and El Salvador to Haiti. In recent years she has also developed programs on energy security in the Americas with a focus on the Caribbean and Central America. Before coming to CSIS she was director of peace, security, and human rights at the United Nations Foundation. She has also held senior positions at the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development in the Office of Transition Initiatives, and the Democracy Office in the Bureau for Latin America. She has been a guest scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace and has held faculty appointments at the American University, Georgetown University, and the School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University. She holds a doctorate in history from Washington University in St. Louis and a JD from the American University in Washington, D.C. She is on the board of RESDAL, the Latin American Security Network, and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

**Phillip McLean** is a senior associate in the Americas Program at CSIS. Before joining CSIS, he had a 33-year-long career in the U.S. Foreign Service, with overseas assignments in Latin America and Europe. After retirement from government service in 1994, he was appointed assistant secretary for administration at the Organization of American States (OAS) and served as an adviser to OAS secretary Cesar Gaviria until 1997. McLean's early Foreign Service postings were to the new capital Brasilia and the old capital Edinburgh. For a time, he specialized in Panama Canal negotiations and served in the U.S. embassy in Panama. Subsequently, he was involved in U.S. economic relations with Europe (coordinating approaches to trade, agriculture, and poorer countries) and later was consul in Milan. His experience with the Andean countries began in Bolivia in the mid-1970s. In the mid-1980s, he led the Department of State's Office of Andean Affairs and was involved with the development of the U.S. response to narcotics trafficking originating in the region. He later served in the U.S. embassy in Bogotá and from 1990 through 1993 as deputy assistant secretary of state with responsibility for South America during a period of democratic and economic reform in the region. He has taught as an adjunct professor at the Elliott School of the George Washington University. McLean is a graduate of the National War College, holds a master's degree in Latin American studies from Indiana University, and is a graduate of the Foreign Service Institute's intensive economics program.

