

**Trip Report**  
**Senate Foreign Relations Committee**  
**Minority Staff Delegation to Colombia**  
**May 27-31, 2002**

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee minority staff delegation traveled to Colombia May 27-31, 2002, to assess the current state of the conflict and the effectiveness of the United States role. Staff met with numerous military and police officials, as well as with President-Elect Alvaro Uribe and Vice President-Elect Francisco Santos. The delegation also toured the Tres Esquinas and Larandia military bases in the department of Caqueta and the Cano-Limon oil pipeline in the department of Arauca.

**BACKGROUND**

The collapse of Colombian peace talks in February 2002 and the subsequent resounding first-round election of law-and-order presidential candidate Alvaro Uribe Velez mark a crucial turning point in that country's four-decade-old conflict. Coming against the backdrop of a radically changed international environment since September 11, they also provide an unprecedented opportunity for a reassessment of United States policy towards a war-torn ally.

To date, United States policy towards Colombia has been circumscribed by an array of restrictions that limit the extent of United States involvement there. However, recent events conspire to challenge the sustainability of such an approach, namely:

- The collapse of peace talks between the Andres Pastrana government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which demonstrates that it is not possible to negotiate with Colombia's illegal armed groups except from a position of overwhelming strength.
- The fusion between drug traffickers and illegal armed groups, which makes it is no longer possible to credibly distinguish between the two. Ret. United States Army General Barry McCaffrey, former head of the United States Southern Command and "drug czar" in the Clinton Administration, best articulated the difficulty of maintaining such a distinction:

There was always an artificiality to this policy that endorsed helping a democratically elected Colombian government against drug criminals but refused to help them when they are threatened by people who are blowing up oil pipelines, murdering mayors, and kidnaping politicians. It was almost an out-of-body experience going through these mental contortions, deciding what intelligence we could share with Colombians whose lives were often in danger. Sometimes I

wanted to ask, What was Washington thinking? We're willing to send troops to the ends of the earth in the Balkans, or Afghanistan, or East Africa, all to protect our national interests and values. Why shouldn't we stand beside a Western-style democracy in very deep trouble — largely not of its making — that is only a three-hour flight from Miami?<sup>1</sup>

- The post-9/11 world of international coalitions against terrorism and a heightened security consciousness, which gives the United States a significantly smaller margin for error in tolerating instability and an environment of lawlessness near its borders.

## **OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Below are the delegation's principal observations and recommendations in the areas of narcotics eradication and interdiction, critical infrastructure protection, urban terror, and Plan Colombia/general policy.

### **II. NARCOTICS ERADICATION & INTERDICTION**

#### **Observations:**

- United States drug eradication and alternative development programs will continue to face nearly insurmountable obstacles as long as the FARC, ELN, and the paramilitaries continue to contest the territory involved. To be effective, aerial spraying of the coca fields must be pervasive, sustained, and repetitive, within its target areas, so that growers are permanently deterred. This is extremely difficult without control of the territory. Likewise, alternative development programs are placing in dangerous situations those peasants we are trying to wean away from the coca economy, who are understandably reluctant to participate if they face immediate retaliation from illegal groups.<sup>2</sup> These realities are only being marginally addressed by current United States assistance to solely counter-narcotics battalions.
- Allegations of the detrimental environmental effects of United States herbicides in the drug eradication program appear to be overstated.<sup>3</sup> Glyphosate, the principal chemical used on

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<sup>1</sup>As quoted in the *National Journal*, June 1, 2002.

<sup>2</sup>The General Accounting Office also reported in February 2002 that peasants signing agreements to stop planting coca are in fact replanting it because they do not believe the government will return to enforce the agreement.

<sup>3</sup>Drug traffickers employ a variety of schemes to try and discredit the spraying campaign, often interspersing licit crops with coca in order to promote accusations of overspraying by the government. Staff were

spray missions, is actually the common household garden weed-killer *Round Up*.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, glyphosate has widespread use in Colombia, with less than 10 percent of the national total employed for coca eradication. In fact, there is more glyphosate sprayed in California every year than in all of Colombia.

- Narcotraffickers are by far the biggest source of environmental damage in Colombia. The industry uses highly toxic herbicides and chemicals in dangerously high doses, many of which are banned in the United States, and most of which are dumped directly into water sources after use. Overall, it has been estimated that at the very least, 2.4 million hectares of Andean tropical forest have been destroyed by the narcotrafficking industry — an area roughly the size of El Salvador.
- Colombia is now surpassing Asia as the major supplier of heroin to the United States. Interdiction of heroin is much more difficult than that of cocaine because there are few chemical precursors used in heroin production and it is usually transported in relatively small amounts.

### **Recommendations:**

- Drug eradication efforts should be increased and should also target industrial-sized plots and HCL labs.<sup>5</sup>
- Drug eradication efforts should be expanded to opium poppy. There is an estimated 5,000 hectares of poppy, a relatively small amount that can be destroyed using United States-provided assets to manage those higher-altitude regions and increased risk of enemy fire.
- The Air Bridge Denial program should be reinstated as soon as the United States training is completed.<sup>6</sup> Narco-terrorists have free reign in southern Colombia to transport drugs across the borders. President-Elect Uribe has specifically mentioned reinstatement of the air interdiction

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shown photographs of a drug lab that had been surrounded with planted banana trees, so that if spraying had occurred, photographs could be made of the damaged trees and then disseminated in the United States. It should be noted as well that with respect to the peasants' participation in the crop substitute program, as long as 10 percent of community families pledge their participation, Colombian policy proscribes any spraying of all coca fields in that community, regardless of the intentions of the 90 percent who choose not to participate.

<sup>4</sup>During the trip, staff toured the Larandia military base, staging point for the coca eradication missions. Staff inspected the glyphosate storage facilities and spray planes and were briefed in detail on the eradication process.

<sup>5</sup>During peace talks, outgoing President Andres Pastrana avoided most of the FARC-controlled industrial-sized plots of coca, so as not upset potential progress at the negotiating table.

<sup>6</sup>The air interdiction program was temporarily suspended after the April 2001 shutdown of an American missionary plane in Peru.

program as central to Colombia's counter-narcotics efforts.

#### IV. CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION

##### Observations:

- Since the collapse of peace talks, the FARC has waged a devastating bombing campaign targeting critical economic infrastructure in order to damage Colombia's fragile economy and force the military to redirect limited resources away from combat zones.
- The impunity with which guerrillas and the paramilitaries operate in the countryside is staggering. In many areas, they have set up their own administrative and legal systems — in the FARC and ELN's cases, often after annihilating the police presence. In Arauca, the porous border with Venezuela, the lack of state presence, and flat terrain make it ideal for drug and weapons trafficking and terrorist operations.<sup>7</sup>



*OIL SPILL: An attack on the Cano-Limon pipeline results in oil runoff into a nearby stream. Although the pipeline is several feet underground (located at center, running diagonally), Arauca's flat terrain makes it an easy target for terrorists.*

- The FARC and ELN's bombing campaign is causing incalculable environmental devastation. In Arauca, from 1986 until October 2001, guerrillas bombed the Cano-Limon pipeline 856 times, spilling 2.6 million barrels of oil — 11 times more than the oil spilled by the Exxon Valdes in 1986.

- By far, the biggest beneficiaries of the United States proposal to train a Colombian military brigade in infrastructure protection will be the Colombian people. Eighty-five cents of every dollar produced by the Cano-Limon pipeline — a joint venture between Colombia and Occidental Petroleum that is to be protected first — never leaves Colombia. In fact, more money is set aside

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<sup>7</sup>In one instance, staff was shown an aerial videotape of a FARC guerrilla casually operating a construction backhoe to dig a hole for an explosive under the pipeline.

for royalties benefitting the communities along the pipeline than ends up as profits for Occidental. Last year, in what the *New York Times* called, “a terror campaign that has destroyed farms and crippled local governments that depend on oil royalties to bankroll schools, hospitals, and road repairs,”<sup>8</sup> the Colombian economy lost \$500 million in oil revenues.

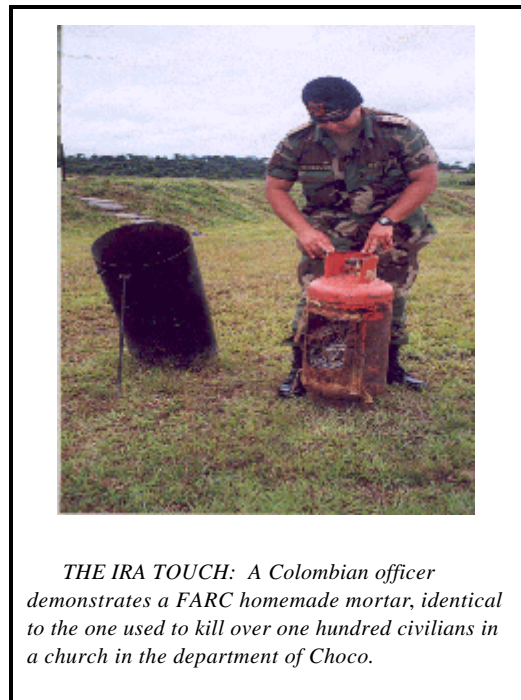
**Recommendation:**

- To shore up Colombia’s war-damaged economy, Congress should approve the Bush Administration request to train and equip two Colombian brigades in critical infrastructure protection for the initial purpose of protecting the Cano-Limon pipeline.<sup>9</sup>
- Congress should resist the legally untenable requirement in the Senate version of the emergency spending bill that Occidental Petroleum reimburse the United States government for their share of the cost of the infrastructure protection program.

**III. URBAN TERROR**

**Observations:**

- An intense and indiscriminate urban bombing campaign appears to be a direct result of foreign terrorist involvement in Colombia.<sup>10</sup> An average of 2.8 bombs go off every day,



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<sup>8</sup>“Pipeline Goes ‘Boom!,’ Local Economies Go Bust,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2001.

<sup>9</sup>There is confusion that this includes training of Colombia’s 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which has been accused of human rights violations. However, the plan is to first train the 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and then eventually the 5<sup>th</sup> *Mobile* Brigade, a completely separate entity.

<sup>10</sup>For further discussion, see the April 2002, House International Relations Committee report, “*Investigative Findings on the Activities of the Irish Republican Army [IRA] in Colombia.*”)

while bomb squads deactivate five more.<sup>11</sup> Due to the sophisticated nature of many of the car bombs — techniques heretofore unseen in Colombia — the state is ill-equipped to meet this escalating threat.<sup>12</sup>

- The booming kidnaping industry continues to terrify the middle and upper classes in Colombia. Since 1998, an average of 3,250 Colombians have been kidnaped every year — a rate that is by far the highest in the world.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Congress should earmark FY'03 funds for bomb squad training and equipment beyond Bogota. FY'02 funds have made it possible for bomb squads in Bogota to purchase state-of-the-art equipment (robots, bomb suits, radio frequency blockers), which will arrive this summer. Yet bomb techs in other major cities continue to operate at tremendous risk.
- Congress should approve the Administration's request in the FY'02 Supplemental for \$25 million in assistance to elite Colombian anti-kidnaping units.

### **III. PLAN COLOMBIA/GENERAL POLICY**

#### **Observations:**

- Colombia is confronting a security problem that has quantitatively and qualitatively changed due to an expansion in cocaine and heroin production and the importation of new terrorist methods into the conflict.
- The scale of human suffering in Colombia is comparable to the world's worst conflict zones. Between 1.5 and 2 million people have been forced to leave their homes — the third largest internal refugee crisis in the world. Murder and kidnaping rates are the highest in the world. Between 1,500 and 2,500 Colombians were massacred in contested rural areas in 2001. Another 2,000 were victims of conflict-related killings, including labor leaders, businessmen and women, human rights activists, judicial investigators, and journalists. The FARC also has forced nearly 6,000 Colombian children into their ranks as combatants.

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<sup>11</sup>While staff was visiting Bogota on May 28, 2002, a car bomb injured five people. In an earlier instance, an unexploded bomb was discovered outside a building housing the USAID mission in Colombia, forcing United States personnel to work out of the overcrowded United States embassy compound.

<sup>12</sup>To make matters worse, on April 9, 2002, the top bomb squad technician, Captain German Arturo Ruiz, and another experienced bomb tech, Lieutenant Juan Carlos Diaz Medina, were killed attempting to disarm a remote-controlled car bomb that *directly targeted the technicians themselves*.

- The Colombian state's historical inability to govern effectively and ensure public security throughout the whole of its territory prevents any sustained success in its war against illegal armed groups and narcotics. Some estimates place more than 40 percent of the national territory as outside the control of the state.
- Much still needs to be done to help the Colombian military and police forces achieve the size and capabilities necessary to fundamentally alter the present balance of power. For example, much of the army is tied down to static defense duty, meaning forces are less available to actively combat the FARC, ELN, and paramilitaries. Areas in which an increase in proficiency is needed: use of intelligence in operations, quick-reaction capability, logistics, close quarter and night combat, joint operations, mobility, medical evacuation, and relations with the civilian population.



- Larger and better equipped professional security forces, schooled in the principles of proper conduct and working together for the same goals, are the best defense against human rights violations by either the narco-guerillas or the paramilitary forces. Under such improved conditions, uniformed personnel would have no reason to collude with illegal forces. And people will not turn to security alternatives if the state provides it.

#### **Recommendations:**

- To continue expanding, modernizing, and professionalizing Colombian security forces, the United States should encourage the incoming Uribe administration to increase defense expenditures and mobilize Colombia's political establishment to provide the necessary resources for a coherent national strategy to re-establish state authority throughout the national territory.
- The United States should provide Colombia a larger package of military equipment, skilled political and military advisors — not United States combat troops — and intelligence support, including advice on how to develop counterterrorist strategy, conduct joint operations, and organize and maintain logistics.

- Congress should approve the Bush Administration request for authorization to use United States-provided military equipment to Colombia for counter-terrorism purposes, in addition to the counter-narcotics mission.
- Congress should resist imposing further conditions on the incoming Uribe Administration. For example, in the Senate version of the FY02 Emergency Supplemental bill, *before* the Uribe government can receive United States assistance, the Secretary of State must first certify that it has formulated a comprehensive counter-narcotics plan; reestablished government authority and the protection of human rights over the whole of its territory; and made fundamental reforms in the armed forces. While these are certainly necessary goals, imposing them on the incoming President as certification requirements appears paternalistic and will be counter-productive.
- The Bush Administration should consult with Congress on whether the United States mission is being served by the restrictions on the number of United States personnel in Colombia. Currently, the United States presence is limited to 400 military and 400 civilian personnel. The President should have the flexibility of having all options open to him in planning and implementing U.S. policy in Colombia.
- Human rights vetting of Colombian military units undergoing United States training should continue. The United States must maintain a zero-tolerance policy with those Colombian officers and troops credibly found to be consorting with paramilitary vigilantes. This aspect of United States policy is critical to winning the hearts and minds of the rural population; a military associated with the United States must not even appear to be out to terrorize and harm the civilian population.
- The Bush Administration should make Colombia an important component in its effort to improve its worldwide intelligence capabilities to combat international terrorism. Specifically the United States needs to target overseas bank accounts used by the guerrillas, especially the FARC, to launder drug money. Similarly, United States intelligence should increase its activities to disrupt the arms trafficking networks that supply the illegal groups' war machines.
- The Bush Administration should launch a diplomatic initiative insisting on greater European involvement and expenditures under Plan Colombia. Resolving the conflict in Colombia is the responsibility of all governments whose citizens buy illegal drugs and whose law enforcement authorities have failed to stem their flow.

## **THE STAKES**

Today, Colombia competes with Pakistan as the third largest recipient of United States foreign



assistance, behind Israel and Egypt. The United States thus has an immense stake in the outcome of the multifaceted crisis there. It is up to the Bush Administration to invest the political capital in a public diplomacy campaign — with the Congress, the American people, and the Colombians — to develop a consensus on changing United States policy to adapt to the new circumstances.

To be sure, the best thing the United States could do for Colombia is reduce the domestic demand for cocaine and heroin. Short of that, it should provide Colombia the means and the expertise to fight its own battles. Indeed, the main responsibility for success in winning back their country lies with the Colombian people themselves, but targeted United States assistance can make a tremendous difference.

Without a change of course in both capitals, Colombia will continue to bleed; illegal drugs will continue to flow worldwide; and the criminal syndicates will continue to coerce, corrupt, and kill. The security of the entire region will deteriorate further, and the resulting human tragedy will deeply damage the credibility of United States power and influence. Indeed, at stake are the significant and positive developments in Latin America during the 1990s: democratization, growth through freer markets, and economic integration through free trade agreements.

Clearly, there are no quick fixes or easy solutions. A solution to the crisis will likely take years and demand changes not seen in Colombia's 170 years as a democracy. Yet there is no alternative. The security of our hemisphere hangs in the balance.

Jose R. Cardenas, Senior Professional Staff Member  
Brian Fox, Professional Staff Member

## Staff Delegation Meetings

Tuesday, May 28    Bogota

- Country Team Brief at United States Embassy
- Meeting with Armed Forces Commander General Fernando Tapias
- Meeting with National Police Director General Luis Ernesto Gilibert
- Briefing by CNP Anti-Narcotics Director/Formmer Anti-Kidnapping (Gaula) Director
- Tour of Colombian National Police Hospital
- Briefing/Tour Guaymaral, Anti-Narcotics Police Helicopter Facilities
- Tour of CNP Intelligence Center in Suba
- Meeting with President-Elect Alvaro Uribe and VP-Elect Francisco Santos

Wednesday, May 29    Tres Esquinas/Larandia

- Briefing Joint Task Force South (JTFS) Commander General Roberto Pizarro
- Tour of JTFS Radio Station
- Tour of Model Coca Base Lab
- Colombian Marine Riverine Tour
- Walk-Thru of Radar Facilities
- Blackhawk Transport to Larandia
- Tour Larandia Helo Pad/Briefing OV-10 Spray Plane
- Briefing Construction Upgrade/Tour Glyphosate Storage Facility
- Tour new CNP Fixed Wing Hangar at Catam Airbase (Bogota)
- Dinner Meeting Former CNP Commander General Serrano

Thursday, May 30    Arauca

- Brief by 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade Brigadier General Lemus
- Brief by Oxy VP at Cano-Limon Production Facility
- Pipeline Security Brief and Video Presentation
- Pipeline Overflight en route to Saravena Military Base
- Tour Saravena/Brief by Base Commander LTC Fabricio Cabrera