

Plan Colombia's "Ground Zero"

A Report from CIP's trip to Putumayo, Colombia, March 9-12, 2001

By Adam Isacson and Ingrid Vaicius

Ask longtime residents what Putumayo was like more than twenty years ago, before coca entered the picture, and they describe a place that sounds too good to be true. A place with endless tracts of jungle teeming with monkeys and butterflies. Rivers full of fish and rare pink freshwater dolphins. Parrots and macaws flying above the treetops in the mornings and evenings, in flocks so large they resembled colorful clouds.

The department (province) of Putumayo, in Colombia's far south bordering Ecuador and Peru, is a sliver of land about the size of the state of Maryland. Its topography and climate vary from the cool Andean foothills in the northwest (known as "upper Putumayo"), to a central plateau of plains and savannah ("middle Putumayo"), to the lush, steamy lowlands in the south and southeast ("lower Putumayo"). Following the course of the department's many rivers from the highlands to the lowlands, the locals use "up" and "down" instead of compass points when giving directions. Though the muddy, chocolate-brown Putumayo River begins only a couple of hundred miles from the Pacific Ocean, a boat put in the water here can drift downstream along the borders with Ecuador and Peru, into the Amazon river and, eventually, into the Atlantic.

We saw many remnants of the old Putumayo during CIP's March 9-12 trip there. It is still a beautiful place, overwhelming the eye with vivid green. But we also saw forests knocked down to grow illegal crops, armed groups operating freely, fields

devastated by herbicides, and widespread poverty and fear. We were strongly dismayed by the United States' role there, as Putumayo is the main destination of Washington's controversial plan to fumigate drug crops, supported by hundreds of millions of dollars in mostly military aid.

We had come to Putumayo to evaluate this program in the wake of its first phase, an eight-week blitz of aerial herbicide spraying that had ended one month earlier. The policy's supporters call the U.S.-sponsored effort a "balanced approach." But so far it has been purely military, with not a dime spent yet on economic assistance programs that might prevent farmers from moving and replanting coca, the plant used to make cocaine. We found that the zone where fumigations occurred is dominated



Two months after U.S.-funded fumigations, nothing grows in a field where farmers had planted coca amid their bananas.

not by so-called “industrial” coca plantations, but by families who are now running out of food. We found truth behind claims that the spraying had negative health effects and destroyed legal crops, including alternative development projects. We were disturbed by evidence that the fumigations proceeded more smoothly because of a paramilitary offensive in the zone to be sprayed. We found that the people of Putumayo want to stop growing coca, and that they have clear proposals for how U.S. assistance can help them make a living legally.

Colombia’s coca capital

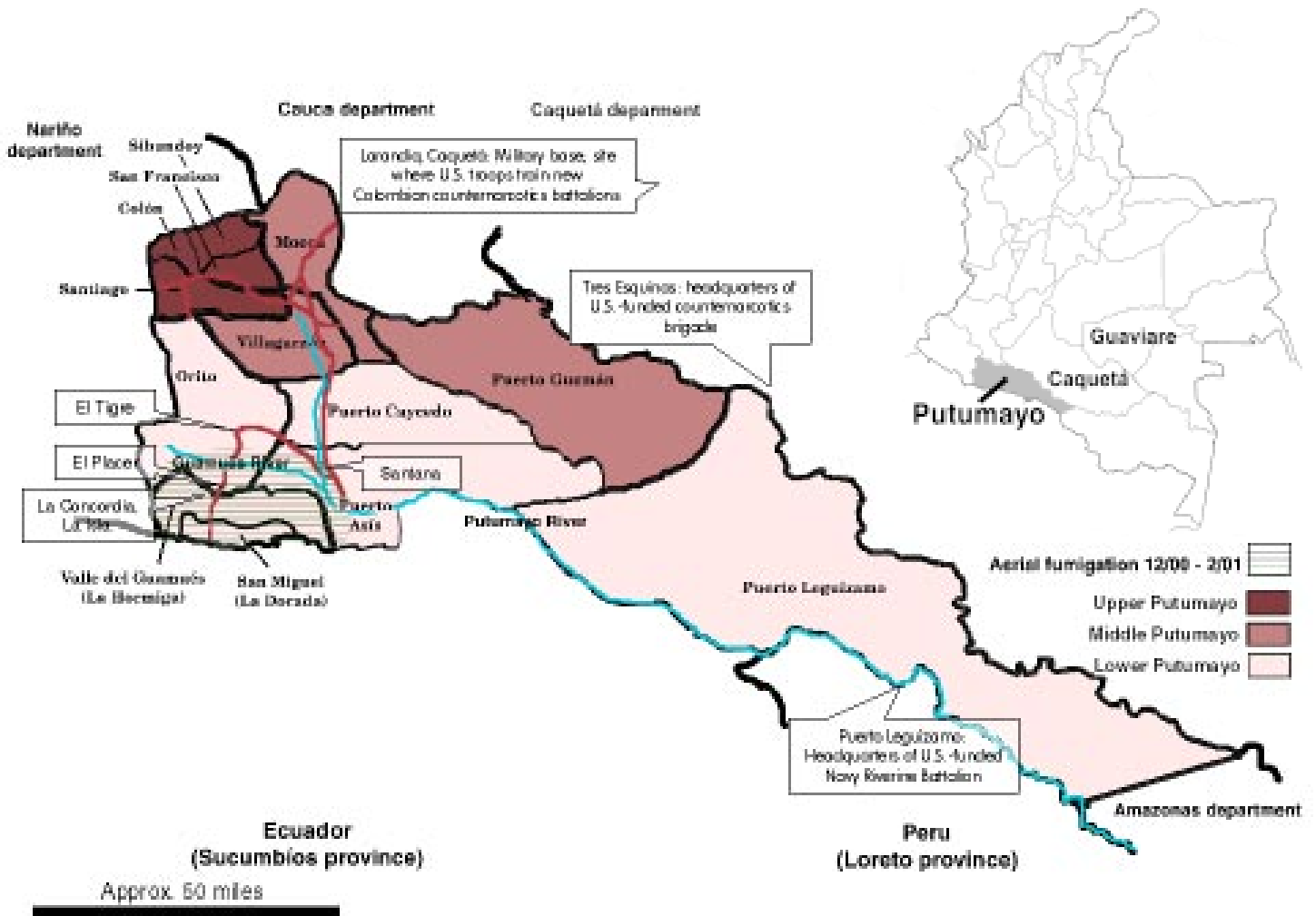
Putumayo began its downhill slide around 1979, when coca first appeared. Back then the department had perhaps a third of the 300,000-plus people it has today.

Though a large indigenous population has deep roots, most Putumayo residents are first or second-generation arrivals from somewhere else in Colombia. Thousands have migrated over the past forty years from Colombia’s historic population centers in the Andes and the coast, pushed out by violence, attracted by the promise of land for the taking, or even brought in by abortive govern-

ment-run “directed colonization” programs. Short-lived “bonanzas” based on a single product, especially a rubber-tree boom in the 1960s and an oil boom in the 1970s, brought in floods of job-seekers until markets collapsed or productive capacities were met. (Putumayo has significant oil reserves, though production today is far from its late-1960s peak.)

Despite Putumayo’s population explosion, the Bogotá government did little to make its presence felt. Police, judges, hospitals, schools, banks, and decent roads are very rare. Where they exist, electricity and running water are very recent arrivals. Government neglect not only brought a lawless “wild west” atmosphere, it also made it virtually impossible to make a living legally once the “bonanzas” faded away. With no credit, no roads, and no integration into national markets, agricultural products cost too much to produce, and none yielded any profit. That is still the case today. “The corn we grow on a hectare (2.5 acres) costs 300,000 pesos (about US\$150) to produce and get to market,” a peasant leader told us. “We can’t sell it for that much.”

A new “bonanza” began when enterprising narcotraffickers, taking advantage of the late-1970s U.S.



appetite for cocaine, encouraged some local farmers to grow coca. The illegal crop caught on quickly. It grows like a weed in the otherwise poor soils of lower Putumayo, allowing farmers to harvest its leaves four or five times per year. Through a process involving gasoline, cement, and a few other chemicals, producers create a white “paste” from the leaves in their “laboratories” – really just sheds with a concrete floor and a few 55-gallon drums. Leaves harvested from a hectare of coca plants yield roughly two kilograms (4.4 pounds) of paste. This compact load is easy to transport in an area whose few roads are difficult enough for four-wheel-drive vehicles, much less cargo trucks, to negotiate. “For any peasant, a backpack full of coca paste is better than a truckload of

potatoes,” a local leader explained. Plus, a market for the coca paste is guaranteed. *Comisionistas*, or middlemen, pay a decent price in cash – about 2 million pesos (US\$1,000) per kilogram – an amount that rises after government eradication efforts temporarily reduce supply.

While no business or crop approaches coca’s profitability in Putumayo, the farmer who grows it is the poorest link in a very long chain. The kilogram of coca paste that nets farmers \$1,000 will eventually be turned into cocaine sold for over \$100,000 on the streets of the United States or Europe. But the farmer’s \$1,000 is not even pure profit. From that must be taken the cost of

Putumayo: the latest stop for South America’s wandering coca trade

Though Putumayo has known coca since 1979, it was not a significant coca-growing location until very recently. In fact, until the mid-1990s Colombia itself was a distant third, behind Peru and Bolivia, among the world’s main coca producers.

Colombia’s Medellín and Cali drug cartels did not encourage much coca growing on Colombian soil. Their networks bought coca grown in Peru and Bolivia, then processed the coca base in Colombia and smuggled out the finished product. This system had broken down by the mid-nineties, though. The cartels had been smashed, the United States and Peru were disrupting the aerial routes between growing areas and Colombian processing sites, and some alternative development programs were successfully weaning Peruvian and Bolivian peasants off of illegal crops.

Colombia’s narcotraffickers, now split among a multitude of smaller micro-cartels, did not give up. They started buying Colombian-grown coca, spurring a rapid expansion in Colombian coca cultivation that began around 1994-1995. But Putumayo, while a significant source, did not become Colombia’s cocaine capital until a few years after that.

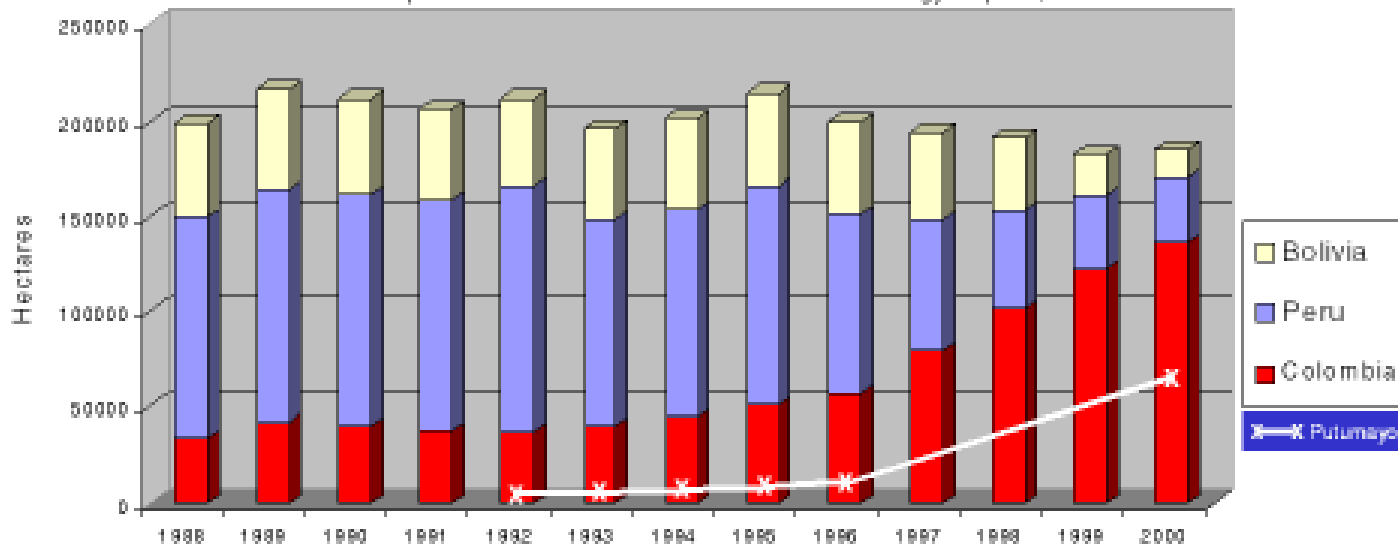
Colombia’s mid-1990s center of coca production was in the departments of Guaviare and Caquetá to the north of Putumayo, several hundred miles closer to Bogotá (see map on facing page). In 1996, these two departments combined for 60,400 of Colombia’s 69,200 hectares of coca, with only 7,000 planted in Putumayo.

Since late 1995 the U.S. government and the Colombian National Police have run a fumigation program in Guaviare and Caquetá, with aircraft on regular spray missions raining the chemical glyphosate (the active ingredient in the herbicide “Round-up”) on the coca fields. These fumigations went on for years without any U.S. assistance for the affected peasants, such as efforts to ease a transition to legal crops. The logical and foreseeable result was that coca growers simply relocated out of the spray planes’ range – and new coca fields sprung up all over Putumayo in the late 1990s.

By 2000, Colombia’s government estimated, over 55,000 hectares in Putumayo were planted with coca – an eightfold growth in four years. (In January 2001 the U.S. embassy said that this figure “could be as high as 90,000 hectares.”)

Andean Coca Cultivation

Source: State Department International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports, 1996-2000



seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, processing, and “taxes” charged by the FARC guerrillas or right-wing paramilitaries (who often buy the coca paste directly at artificially low prices). What is left for a farmer with one or two hectares of coca is little more than Colombia’s legal minimum wage of 286,000 pesos (about US\$140) per month.

This fits the living conditions of the coca-growing peasants we visited in Putumayo. Families with one or two hectares generally lived in one-room tin-roof wooden sheds – they could hardly be called houses – without plumbing, electricity or nearby transportation. Those with four or five hectares (an amount that, local authorities told us, very few exceeded) appeared to be approaching middle class. They had small houses made of painted cinder blocks, with a motor scooter (one sees few cars on Putumayo’s roads), perhaps a TV and VCR, and a refrigerator.

The mayor of Puerto Asís, Putumayo’s largest city, Manuel Alzate is an able politician whose skill with sound bites would take him far in Washington. Mayor Alzate heaped scorn on the myth that Putumayo’s peasants are getting wealthy from the coca trade. “If that were true you would have seen at least some improvement after

Putumayo is now overrun with coca, and nowhere more heavily than in the Guamués River valley in the department’s southwest corner. On the road from Puerto Asís to La Hormiga, the valley’s largest town, the coca fields are hidden from view until southern Orito municipality (county), when they become visible from the road. In what had been dense jungle, neat rows of bright green bushes now grow amid the fallen trunks of old-growth trees. Further south in the Guamués valley, the coca bushes

“Life in Putumayo is not worth 75 cents.”

grow right up to the edge of the road.

About 90 percent of the farmers in this zone grow coca. Though the crop is officially illegal, it is now part of the local culture. Coca has given them, along with an army of young migrant leaf-pickers, or *raspachines*, a guaranteed income in a country where official unemployment exceeds 20 percent. Middlemen and traffickers further up the production chain have grown far wealthier. But many leaders complained to us that with the easy money has come a “degenerate culture.” Coca has brought a weak work ethic, and none see education as necessary for social mobility.



A coca field in the Guamués valley. We took this photo from the road.

twenty years of growing coca here. But the peasants’ houses look as miserable as they did twenty years ago – *son igualitas*.” Indeed, Colombia’s planning ministry has found that 77 percent of Putumayo’s households cannot meet their basic needs.

Violence is at the core of this culture, and signs of it are everywhere in Putumayo today. “Life in Putumayo is not worth 1,500 pesos (75 U.S. cents),” a peasant association leader told us. (Mayor Alzate said the same thing, except 100 pesos.) In La Hormiga, we were told that bodies by the roadside are a common early-morning sight. The road into town is lined with bars where the region’s coca-pickers come to drink, with curtains instead of doors and teenage prostitutes called *sardinitas* loitering outside. Occasionally a patrol from the nearby army battalion – three or four scared-looking eighteen-year-olds carrying automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades – walks down the main streets. A sign at the front desk of our hotel read, “For your safety and ours, we pull down the front

gate at 11:00 PM. No exceptions.” We spent a tense Saturday night behind that gate, sleeping lightly amid the din of competing *vallenato* tunes from La Hormiga’s many bars, the roar of motorcycles, and occasional gunfire.



A recently blown-up pipeline.

The guerrillas

On the road outside Villagarzón, we stopped at a roadblock that the local army battalion had set up just outside its base (and only two or three miles beyond the roadblock that the counternarcotics police had set up outside *their* base). A friendly soldier looked through our bags, and asked where we had come from. “La Hormiga,” we told him; about a hundred miles and five hours away. The soldier smiled and asked, “You didn’t see any guerrillas, did you?”

We did not see any of the FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces) guerrillas on our trip, but while on the road we saw ample evidence of their presence, and of the freedom of operation they obviously enjoy in rural Putumayo. Our truck fishtailed through crude oil from guerrilla bombings of the roadside pipeline leading out of Ecuador. Remnants of pipeline bombings are a frequent roadside sight in Putumayo; we passed through dozens of circular spots, usually about fifty feet in diameter, in which everything – the road, the ground, plants and trees – had been coated with a uniform black by the spilled oil and flames. Puddles of crude formed by the roadside, or fouled nearby ponds and streams. We drove through one spot that had been bombed so recently that some of the oil on the ground was still smoking.

We saw the burned remains of cars and buses that tried to defy the FARC’s restrictions on road travel. We passed cargo trucks bearing slogans (including “Plan Colombia = plan for war”) that the guerrillas spray-paint at roadblocks, warning the truck drivers against removing them. Passing through a forested area, a fellow passenger asked our driver, “this is the zone where they’ve been holding people up, isn’t it?” “Yes, just about every day,” he replied. Nobody travels on Putumayo’s roads between 6 PM and 6 AM.

The FARC established a permanent presence in Putumayo during the early 1980s. It was not the first guerrilla group to operate in the area; the leftist M-19 and Maoist EPL had been active in Putumayo during the late

1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, but both had vacated the zone by the time the FARC’s 32nd Front arrived. Another front, the 48th, was created in Putumayo in the early 1990s, and several fronts from neighboring departments also pass through frequently.

Until very recently, the FARC were the undisputed masters of Putumayo, and though they have lost town centers to the paramilitaries, the guerrillas clearly continue to dominate rural areas. FARC fronts forcibly recruit new members, including teenagers, in Putumayo’s villages. The guerrillas force still others to undergo military training, then threaten harm to their families if they leave the area.

The FARC also has a close relationship to Putumayo’s coca trade. They charge “taxes” on coca production, as they do with all economic activity in the areas that they control. Local producers told us that they have also begun to go further than mere taxation, buying the coca paste themselves at fixed prices.

In 1996, after the U.S.-supported fumigation program began in Guaviare and Caquetá to the north, the FARC organized massive peasant protests throughout southern Colombia, including Putumayo. Weeks of marches, with some violence, ended when the Bogotá government agreed to carry out infrastructure projects, crop substitution programs, and development assistance. The government never came close to following through on its commitments, though, and the 1996 marches are generally regarded as a failure. The local peasants, who lost income because the protests took them away from their land, directed their anger and mistrust not just at Bogotá, but also at the FARC.

The marches, the forced recruitments, and the increasing levies on the coca trade have deeply eroded the FARC’s base of support. Some whom we interviewed



Puerto Asís.

spoke in almost nostalgic terms about the guerrilla leaders who had run Putumayo during the 1980s and early 1990s, describing them as fair and understanding of the local peasants. But “coca changed the FARC,” they said. As the FARC’s Southern Bloc became wealthier and militarily successful, its leaders in Putumayo – including Joaquín Gómez, now a member of the top leadership – occupied themselves less with their support base and more with the coca trade’s contributions to their war chest.

The paramilitaries

In many of Putumayo’s towns one sees the very open presence of another illegal armed group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), the country’s main right-wing paramilitary organization. In the coca zones of lower Putumayo, entering a populated area – whether a small city or a crossroads town – can feel almost like entering another country. This is paramilitary territory, where dozens of the men the locals call “power rangers” operate in plain sight, usually dressed in civilian clothes.

La Dorada, a town in the southern Guamués valley very close to the Ecuador border, has a beautiful central park that the municipal government completed in the middle of 2000, after much persuading of the FARC guerrillas who then dominated the town. The park was almost completely empty when we visited La Dorada – no children on the brightly painted jungle gym, nobody walking on the manicured lawn, and nobody sitting on the new benches. In fact, the whole town center was empty, except for groups of young men, many of them obviously well armed.

The paramilitaries forced the FARC out of La Dorada with a massive incursion that started on September 21,

2000. It did not take them long to install themselves permanently. As elsewhere, they did it not by defeating the FARC militarily – though firefights in the middle of town were a near-daily occurrence for months – but by killing and displacing civilians they considered to be guerrilla collaborators. Paramilitary fighters also carried out what they call “cleansing” of suspect civilians in the rural villages surrounding La Dorada. While the full extent of their rampage is unknown, by early October more than 800 displaced people from the surrounding countryside had arrived in La Dorada. Many more went elsewhere, including Ecuador.

After speaking with local officials, including the government human rights ombudsman (who has been unable to leave this small town since last August), we hurried out of La Dorada before the guerrilla restrictions on road travel began. By the roadside at the entrance to the town were two armed paramilitary guards in civilian clothes, one talking into a field radio. About half a mile further, perhaps fifteen minutes from the La Hormiga army base, we came upon a column of about ten men in camouflage fatigues with “AUC” stenciled in white letters on the back, carrying Galil rifles and walking down the middle of the main road. We proceeded slowly and they let us pass, staring at us. While we didn’t stare back, we couldn’t help noticing that most of them appeared well over thirty years old, quite different from the young conscripts the army sends on patrol or the child soldiers the guerrillas recruit. Perhaps they had prior experience in other military organizations.

While La Dorada is one of the AUC’s latest conquests, the paramilitaries themselves are recent arrivals in Putumayo. The group, founded in northern Colombia and funded by landowners and narcotraffickers, was unheard of in Putumayo until after the 1996 anti-fumigation protests, when their leader, Carlos Castaño, announced the formation of a bloc of “southern self-defense groups.” They swept into the region in late 1997 and early 1998 with a series of horrific massacres and selective killings. Since then they have moved quickly. By 1999 paramilitaries had gained control of Puerto Asís, and by early 2000 they controlled La Hormiga, Orito, and the roadside village of El Placer, where they maintain a base of operations. They took La Dorada in September 2000 and in December, in an operation that local leaders say has since killed 120 people, they established themselves in Puerto Caicedo.

A few towns in the southwestern Putumayo coca zone still remain under FARC control. One is El Tigre, along the main road in Orito municipality.



Driving down Putumayo’s bumpy main road.

While the AUC does not control El Tigre, its residents remember when they first appeared on January 9, 1999, a few days after the government began peace talks with the FARC. A column of 150 paramilitaries swept through, killing twenty-six people in the main square and disappearing fourteen more. Locals told us that after the massacre, the first vehicles allowed to proceed into town had to swerve to avoid hitting dead bodies in the road. Others told of people being hacked to death with machetes and thrown into the nearby river. The paramilitaries may be back again soon. Driving through the town, we saw a chilling message in fresh graffiti painted on a house: “AUC – we’re here to stay. El Tigre will be erased from the map.”

While they mainly dominate town centers, the paramilitaries are active in rural areas around the towns they control, killing hundreds and displacing thousands. They maintain roadblocks and tightly control access to and from the towns. Indigenous leaders told us that it is unsafe for them to travel alone on the rivers because the AUC stops them and questions them about their business. The paramilitaries also “tax” coca production, and many analysts speculate that their offensive in Putumayo has more to do with increasing their coca income than with carrying out an anti-guerrilla crusade.

On condition of anonymity, many whom we interviewed insisted that the paramilitaries’ success in Putumayo was made possible by the local military forces’ collaboration and toleration. Paramilitaries operate openly and unmolested in Putumayo – as we saw for ourselves – and combat between the Army and the AUC is exceedingly rare. Some sources told us of joint actions, and of paramilitaries being present at military bases. A reporter played us a tape of a recent interview with the head of the 24th Brigade (based in the capital, Mocoa) in which the colonel acknowledged that the Brigade’s 59th Battalion was replacing the 31st Battalion at the La Hormiga base

Excerpt from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’ 2000 report

(Published February 8, 2001 and released in March 2001)

At the entrance to the village of El Placer, a notorious paramilitary roadblock exists just fifteen minutes from La Hormiga, where an army battalion belonging to the 24th Brigade is based. Eight months after the [High Commissioner’s] Office reported observing this directly, the roadblock was still in operation. The military authorities denied in writing that this paramilitary position exists. The Office also observed that at the hacienda “Villa Sandra,” between Puerto Asís and Santana, the paramilitaries are still operating only a few minutes from the 24th Brigade’s installations. Afterward we were informed of two searches of the site carried out by the security forces, which apparently found nothing. However, the existence and maintenance of this paramilitary position is a matter of full public knowledge, so much that it was visited several times by international journalists, who published their interviews with the paramilitary commander there. Testimonies received by the Office have even included accounts of meetings between members of the security forces and paramilitaries at “Villa Sandra.” At the end of July [2000], the Office alerted the authorities to an imminent paramilitary incursion in the town center of La Dorada, in San Miguel municipality [county], which indeed happened on September 21. The paramilitaries remain there, even though the town is only a few minutes from the army base at La Hormiga.

because the latter faced widespread allegations of collaboration with the AUC.

In October 2000, a bold police officer denounced military-paramilitary cooperation in Puerto Asís to local civilian authorities. According to the Bogotá daily *El Tiempo*, the policeman reported that the paramilitaries blatantly identify themselves with insignia and move easily in clearly marked vehicles. The policeman said he did not understand “the abilities and skills that they use to make a mockery of the Army’s roadblocks, and to station themselves right in front of them.” He added that he had heard numerous charges that the local army command meets regularly with paramilitary leaders at a well-known compound called Villa Sandra. The site, in the town of Santana just north of Puerto Asís, is only a few hundred yards from an Army base currently occupied by a brand-new U.S.-funded counternarcotics battalion. (We did not see any people on the grounds of Villa Sandra on the two occasions that we passed the site.)

In its mid-March 2001 report, the United Nations High



The Putumayo River.

Commissioner for Human Rights cites a permanent paramilitary roadblock in El Placer, the continued existence of the Villa Sandra paramilitary base, including its use as a site for military-paramilitary meetings, and the prolonged AUC takeover of La Dorada despite the proximity of an army base in nearby La Hormiga.

Another factor in the paramilitaries' takeover was the local population's growing disenchantment with the guerrillas. While this goes back to the failed 1996 peasant marches, the FARC has made things worse for itself with its heavy-handed response to the paramilitary offensive. The guerrillas have consistently chosen to retaliate in ways that inflict more harm on the civilian population than on the paramilitaries, such as killing unfamiliar people and setting off car bombs in town centers.

After the paramilitary takeover of La Dorada, the FARC shed even more goodwill by mounting an "armed stoppage" aimed at isolating the paramilitaries in the towns. For over eighty days starting in late September 2000, the guerrillas banned all travel on Putumayo's roads, setting fire to any vehicles they found. (The roadsides remain littered with oxidized heaps of twisted metal that vaguely resemble car and bus chassis.) Townspeople were prisoners in their towns, while much of the countryside was brought to the brink of famine.

Residents of La Dorada told us of the trauma of living through the bloody paramilitary takeover followed by the armed stoppage. After the FARC lifted the vehicle ban in mid-December there was about a seven-day pause when "people even felt safe to use the park." Then, on December 19, the fumigations began.

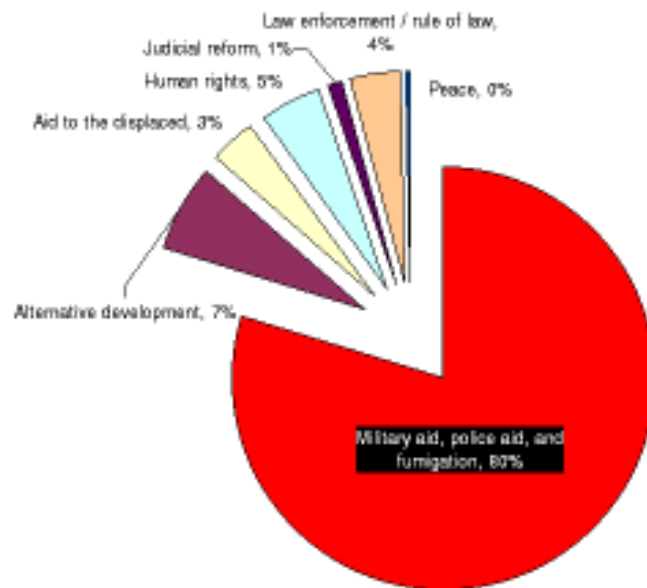
Fumigation and the U.S. aid package

Between December 19 and early February, a U.S.-funded Colombian military and police operation sprayed glyphosate on 25,000 to 29,000 hectares (62,500 to 72,500 acres), nearly all of it in the Guamués River valley. It was the first U.S.-supported spray operation ever in Putumayo, and the first visible result of a two-year, \$1.3 billion aid package for Colombia and its neighbors that President Clinton signed into law in July 2000.

The aid package was billed as a contribution to "Plan Colombia," a \$7.5 billion Colombian government program aimed at

All aid to Colombia, 2000-2001

(Total: \$1.165 billion)



fighting drugs and strengthening Bogotá's ability to govern. Colombian government officials insist that their program is only 25 percent military and police aid, with the other 75 percent going to social and economic programs. With \$860 million coming from last July's aid package, the United States is providing Colombia \$1.165 billion during 2000 and 2001. Of this amount, \$929 million – 80 percent – is aid for Colombia's military, police, and fumigation program, most of it focused on Putumayo.

The centerpiece of this program is "the push into southern Colombia" – a military offensive designed to make fumigation possible in Putumayo. U.S. policymakers decided against duplicating the fumigation model used for



Fumigated coca bushes outside La Hormiga.

years in Guaviare and Caquetá departments to the north, where U.S. contractor pilots fly spray missions accompanied by police escort helicopters. Because of the heavy presence of armed groups who shoot back at the spray planes, fumigating Putumayo was considered too dangerous without a large military effort. As a result, last year's aid package included funds to create three new battalions in the Colombian Army, which are to receive dozens of Blackhawk and upgraded Huey helicopters.

The battalions' mission is to make Putumayo safe for fumigation by fighting off any armed groups in the zones to be sprayed. As former U.S. Southern Command chief Gen. Charles Wilhelm told a Senate committee, with the 2,300 men in the three battalions "Colombia can achieve a 'one-two punch' with the armed forces preceding the police into narcotics cultivation and production areas and setting the security conditions that are mandatory for safe and productive execution of eradication and other counterdrug operations by the CNP [Colombian National Police]." Critics worry that "setting the security conditions" may require U.S.-aided units to engage in regular combat with insurgent and paramilitary groups, bringing Washington closer than ever before to Colombia's civil war.

The military money is being spent in a hurry. Two of the three battalions are ready for action, and the third will complete training in May 2001. Though the State Department originally scheduled to deliver the first helicopters in October 2002, congressional hard-liners' bitter complaints moved the delivery date up to July 2001. In December 2000, with two battalions ready and thirty "temporary" 1970s-vintage helicopters delivered, the United States gave the green light to fumigation in Putumayo.

With the battalions and the police operating on the ground, a fleet of Turbo Thrush spray aircraft accompanied by Colombian Police and Army helicopters flew daily missions over the Guamués valley. They sprayed "Round-Up Ultra," a combination of glyphosate and two additives (known as Cosmo Flux-411f and Cosmo-iN-D) that help the poison stick to the coca leaves and keep the spray nozzles from getting clogged.

U.S. government officials are telling Congress and the media that this first phase of spraying was a huge success. "Overall, operations in southern Colombia have gone much better than expected with only minimal local opposition, few logistical problems, and no major increase in displaced persons," Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics Affairs Rand Beers told a congressional subcommittee in late February.

The spray planes and battalions encountered surprisingly little resistance. In the first seven weeks of the eight-

week effort, eight spray planes and escort helicopters were hit by ground fire, with no injuries or serious damage. This is far safer than Guaviare and Caquetá, where in 2000 the planes were hit fifty-six times while spraying 47,000 hectares – four times as often per hectare sprayed. Colombian forces "setting the security conditions" were involved in only five minor combat incidents, three with the FARC, one with the paramilitaries, and one with an unknown assailant who fired a rocket-propelled grenade at a fuel plane (some speculated that it was a firework). The spray operation took place in conditions so safe that eradication could almost have been performed manually.

We asked a wide range of people why the fumigation met so little resistance. Some argued that the Colombian Army, including the new battalions, did indeed manage to create the necessary security conditions. Gonzalo de Francisco, the Colombian government official in charge of anti-drug activities in Putumayo, said that the lack of resistance owed to good coordination between the army and the police and the local population's confidence in upcoming crop-substitution programs.

This rationale does not explain, however, how the fumigations proceeded in a FARC stronghold with so few combat incidents. The answer to that lies in the State Department's explanation that "the original spray area was an area dominated, for the most part, by the AUC paramilitary institution."

This is true, though the fumigation zones became "paramilitary dominated" only very shortly before the spray planes arrived. Much of the area where fumigation occurred between December 2000 and February 2001 – La Dorada, La Hormiga and surrounding San Miguel and Valle del Guamués municipalities – was subject to a paramilitary campaign of murders and forced displacement that greatly reduced the presence of guerrillas in the months leading up to the spraying. With the FARC cleared

The fumigations between December 2000 and February 2001 were eased by the paramilitaries' brutal activities

out, the paramilitaries who took over allowed the fumigation program to operate unhindered. A paramilitary leader in Putumayo named "Enrique" told the Miami Herald's Juan Tamayo in January that "his men are under orders not to shoot at the planes, saying in an interview that while he 'taxes' area coca dealers to finance AUC operations, 'we are 100 percent in favor of eradication.'"

Some people we spoke with in Putumayo wondered whether any connection exists between the late 2000 para-

military offensive and the December 2000 onset of fumigation. Though we found overwhelming evidence of military-paramilitary collaboration in the area, we found no evidence of a conscious strategy to employ paramilitaries specifically to ease the first phase of fumigations.

We are nonetheless convinced that U.S.-aided Colombian units do not get all the credit for the lack of resistance to the spray aircraft. The fumigations between December 2000 and February 2001 were eased – security conditions were established – by the paramilitaries’ often brutal activities in the fumigation zone in the months preceding the spraying.

The “industrial” coca-growing zone

As we drove into the Guamués valley, the lush green of Putumayo rather suddenly gave way to yellow and brown. We had entered the zone the spray planes had flown over several weeks earlier. The herbicides clearly did their job; walking through the coca fields, it was even possible to tell which way the wind was blowing when the planes came. But they killed everything else, too. The barren landscape was punctuated with dead underbrush and severely damaged old-growth trees. In a field of plantains rotting on dried-out trees, we watched a troop of monkeys foraging for food.

U.S. officials had told Congress and the public since mid-2000 that the Guamués valley would be the target area for the first fumigations. They characterized the area as a zone of “industrial” coca-growing, with large plantations run by distant drug lords. The vast majority of the population, they said, was a “floating population” of young male migrant workers and *raspachines*.

On March 12, 2001, while we were still in Putumayo, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Bill Brownfield explained this position to reporters at a briefing in Washington. “For the most part, most of those who were sprayed, most of the land that was sprayed in the December/January/February timeframe in Putumayo ... were, by our estimation, what we call industrial-sized coca plantations or coca-cultivated areas. Industrial size, meaning too large to be managed by a single *campesino* [peasant] or *campesino* family as part of a long-term, multi-generational presence on a specific piece of land. These were fairly large in size.”

Though it is still bustling, locals told us that La Hormiga is a ghost town compared to a few months ago, before the spraying started. It is certain that, as the U.S. aid program foresaw, much of the zone’s “floating population” did indeed float away. But they left behind thousands of peasant families, small landholders whom the fumigations have left with no way to support themselves.

In aerial surveillance and satellite photos, many of

“We spend the day here with our arms crossed, wondering what to do.”

the Guamués valley’s coca fields may resemble “industrial” plantations. The reality on the ground is quite different. We walked through coca fields that seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see, but from the ground it was obvious that these were small parcels of individually owned land adjoining each other. Several people told us that individual plots rarely exceed four hectares, with the largest few reaching seven or eight. San Miguel municipality, in the heart of the zone, has 18,000 hectares of coca divided among a rural population of 20,000.

Because of the belief that this is an “industrial” zone, the U.S. government has allocated nothing for humanitarian aid or alternative development assistance in the area sprayed in December, January and February. The many families in the zone, who have lost both their coca and their food crops, fall outside the focus of the meager economic component of the U.S.-funded program in Putumayo. Though officials in Bogotá say that some aid has been delivered with Colombian government funds, we spoke with nobody who had received any.

We stopped in the roadside town of La Concordia, north of La Hormiga, where the planes sprayed everything – food crops, people’s houses, the school, the soccer field,



Children in the town of La Isla in the “industrial” coca-growing zone.

the road itself. A farmer named Rigoberto showed us his destroyed fields. There was no doubt that he had planted his food crops alongside his coca. The fumigation planes did not violate procedure when they destroyed all of his crops, legal and illegal. The result, however, is that he and his family are left with nothing to eat.

We asked Rigoberto what he and his neighbors are doing – were they planting food, how were they feeding themselves. He said that many in La Concordia were now “*aguantando hambre*” – suffering from hunger. Since everybody expected the fumigation planes to come back soon, they were not planting anything, legal or illegal. “We spend the day here with our arms crossed, wondering what to do.” Even though La Concordia is on the main road – no need to hike into the backcountry – no humanitarian aid had reached its residents.

The State Department’s Brownfield explained that no aid will be forthcoming for families like Rigoberto’s who planted both coca and food crops on the same plot of land in the “industrial” zone. “The *campesino* who is intentionally hiding, concealing or trying to protect illicit cultivation of coca or opium poppy isn’t going to get a tremendous amount of support or concern or commiseration if he is sprayed,” he told the March 12 briefing.



These coca plants, cut back just after fumigation, are quickly growing back.

La Isla, a village not far from La Concordia, was one of the first towns to be fumigated. The locals said the planes came on December 22. The planes passed over the town itself, misting Round-up Ultra through their shacks’ glassless windows. The herbicides killed all of the residents’ food crops, and destroyed two nearby development projects designed to create legal economic alternatives. One was a former coca-paste lab that had been turned into a chicken coop with funding from PLANTE, the Colombian government alternative development agency. The other was an aquaculture project. Both the chicken coop and the man-made pond were empty; La Isla residents told us that the chickens and the fish were dead within a few days of the spraying.

Though glyphosate is a water-soluble herbicide that is supposed to break down within a few days, farmers in La Isla told us that they still cannot get anything to grow. “The seeds germinate, grow for a few days, then die,” one resident said. In fact, the only crop that seems to be doing well is the coca itself. Local growers have found that when they cut the coca bush back to its main stem before or shortly after the spraying, it grows back rapidly and yields more leaves than before. We walked through several fields where bright-green knee-high coca plants grew among dead banana trees and brown underbrush.

U.S. officials have categorically denied that the fumigations could be the cause of any health problems among the affected population. In a meeting with the head of the U.S. embassy’s narcotics section, Mayor Alzate was told that glyphosate is so safe that one could drink a water glass full of it. (The official declined Alzate’s request that he do so.)



Destroyed alternative development projects in La Isla: a chicken coop (above) and a fish pond (below).



Yet we both saw and heard evidence that the spraying had sharply increased cases of skin outbreaks, gastrointestinal disorders like vomiting and diarrhea, and respiratory ailments. A physician in La Hormiga told us that young children were the most heavily affected, and that the effects appeared to be stronger at the outset of the fumigations in late December. He speculated that perhaps the additives in the spray mix were to blame. Most people no longer showed symptoms when we arrived many weeks later; most remaining skin disorders had faded to a few patches. In La Isla, however, we saw a five-month-old baby whose skin was covered with bumps, scabs and rashes. Her mother said that the condition appeared immediately after the spray planes flew over the town in late December, and that because she scratches herself, the inflammation has only grown worse.

Putumayo's indigenous communities, especially the Cofán people of the Guamués valley, have also been hit hard by the fumigations. Indigenous leaders told us that while they plant little coca themselves, their reservations have been invaded by illegal squatters (*colonos*) who grow significant amounts, attracting the fumigation planes. The spraying destroyed both indigenous communities' food crops and their sacred ceremonial crops, such as *yagé*.

Without humanitarian and alternative development assistance, the families we did not expect to find in the "industrial zone" may soon be facing famine. Or they



This baby's mother said her skin condition appeared just after the spray planes hit La Isla in December.

may choose to relocate elsewhere into Colombia's California-sized jungles, knock down a few more hectares of trees, and plant more coca.

A January 28 U.S. Embassy document claims that "there has been minimal displacement, with some 20-30 people displaced since spray operations began in mid-December." Everyone in Putumayo to whom we read this statistic reacted with disbelief. Since the fumigations began, leaders in La Dorada told us, peasants have been leaving the area by the truckload – about four or five loads per day.

Many of those displaced are planting new coca elsewhere in Colombia. A common destination is Nariño department to the west, where coca cultivation is now increasing rapidly. Others are moving to Puerto Leguizamo municipality in southeastern Putumayo, to Colombia's large, empty department of Amazonas, and across the border into Ecuador. By many accounts, the fumigations of December through February brought a 25 percent increase in the price of coca paste, making coca-growing that much more attractive. "When they fumigate forty hectares, eighty more appear," Puerto Asís Mayor Alzate told us.

The social pacts

U.S. and Colombian officials are quick to emphasize that their plans in Putumayo go beyond military offensives and aerial fumigation. They point out that they have made funding available for a series of "social pacts" with local producers who are willing to give up coca voluntarily.



Dead banana trees indicate that the spray planes passed directly over this shack.

Peasants who sign the pacts agree to eradicate their coca manually within twelve months in exchange for funding, credit, and technical assistance for the cultivation of legal crops. The agreements, signed with hundreds of farmers in a single community, are managed by the Colombian government alternative development agency (PLANTE) and carried out by a non-governmental organization (NGO) working on a contract basis. Each contracted NGO will manage five pacts. The farmers who sign the pacts will receive in-kind assistance valued at 2 million pesos (about US\$1,000), and will have access to credit and technical assistance (one technician will be assigned to each 100 farmers). Infrastructure projects, such as road building, are also foreseen. Farmers who do not eradicate their crops within twelve months of receiving funds will face fumigation.

So far, the Colombian government has signed four pacts. The U.S. government's aid package has sponsored two of these: a December 2, 2000 pact in Puerto Asís and a January 15 pact in Santana, a town in Puerto Asís municipality. These two agreements incorporate 1,453 families. Two others have been signed with Colombian funds: a February accord with an indigenous community in San Miguel municipality, and a March 15 pact in Orito. The U.S.-supported pacts are outside the so-called "industrial zone," which will get no U.S. economic aid at all.

The region's coca-growing peasants, most of whom would welcome an opportunity to abandon coca, are watching the pacts very closely. Their mistrust of government alternative development programs dates back at least to Bogotá's noncompliance with the agreements that ended the 1996 anti-fumigation protests. It has been compounded by other colossal failures, like a half-built wreck of a hearts-of-palm processing plant that sits outside Puerto Asís, a monument to a PLANTE project that never got off the ground.

The U.S. embassy reported in late January, "The signing of even two elimination agreements has had a positive effect, in that many more families are interested in signing them now that they are perceived as a reality. The signings appear to have lessened some local officials' opposition to aerial eradication as well."

When we came to Putumayo in mid-March, we found that not a cent had arrived for those who had signed the pacts months earlier. Instead of an active alternative development project, all we found were angry and discouraged peasants. Because of a lengthy negotiation process with Fundaempresa, the Cali-based NGO chosen to administer the first pacts, no aid had been disbursed and nobody had contacted the signatories in Puerto Asís and Santana to let them know what was happening.

Doubts and uncertainty grew after an incident that was brought to our attention several times during our trip. According to local leaders and the affected farmers, in early February a contingent of troops from the new U.S.-created counternarcotics battalions paid visits to thirteen families in the villages of La Esperanza, La Planada, Bretania, Yarinal and Santa Elena, in the municipality of Puerto Asís. The thirteen families had signed the first social pact in December, and were awaiting funds.

Gustavo,* one of the farmers whom the battalion visited, is one of the better-off coca-growers we met. He welcomed us into his three-room house, with glass windows, a fan, a television, stereo, and a shelf full of books. He told us that the soldiers from the battalion came one morning, chatted with him and his wife, then asked him to sign a paper certifying that he had been treated well. Once he signed, the troops marched into his coca fields, pulled up plants and burned his coca-paste laboratory.

Gustavo protested that, as a signer of a social pact, he had twelve months to eradicate his coca. He told us that the soldiers replied, "How stupid and foolish you peasants are. You believe the politicians who say they are going to help you. We don't know of any Señor de Francisco [Gonzalo de Francisco is the Colombian government official in charge of anti-drug efforts in Putumayo]. The United States pays us directly."

Whether true or not, news of this incident has spread throughout Putumayo, weakening peasants' will to enter into future pacts. (Gonzalo de Francisco told us that if the incident did occur, which he doubted, it was an error.) While de Francisco told us on March 13 that disbursements of funds for the first pacts should begin in four



* Name changed for security reasons.

weeks, in Putumayo there is a growing sense that the peasants are being fooled yet again. “It’s all pure bureaucracy, they’re going to waste it all on per diems,” a peasant leader told us. “It will be like the hearts-of-palm plant all over again.” On a few occasions, we found ourselves in the odd position of defending the U.S. government before angry farmers, assuring them that this time the aid had to arrive because it was included in U.S. law.

It is crucial that the funds for the pacts reach their destination with no further delay. All eyes in Putumayo are on these initial projects, and if they prove to be successful they could have an enormous demonstration effect. Trust in the Colombian government could be established for the first time, laying the groundwork for future coca-eradication projects that do not depend on fumigation.

So far, however, the residents of Putumayo have seen a rush to deliver helicopters, train battalions and spray farmers, and a halfhearted attempt to carry out economic alternatives. As of this writing, the U.S. approach to Putumayo – whose supporters sell it as a “balanced approach” – has been 100 percent military.

“Instead of sixty helicopters, the United States should be sending us sixty road graders or tractors.”

A better approach

Everyone we talked to in Putumayo – from mayors and council members to farmers by the roadside – was adamantly opposed to fumigation. While we were in Putumayo, the department’s governor was in Washington spreading the same message. “Fumigation is not the solution,” Iván Gerardo Guerrero told a press conference on March 12. “It has a great defect. It doesn’t really take into account the human being. All it cares about are satellite pictures.”

We heard uniform opposition to increased military aid as well. Those who live in Putumayo’s day-to-day reality see the region’s problem as social, and view a military response as absurd. “Instead of sixty helicopters, the United States should be sending us sixty road-graders or tractors,” Mayor Alzate told us. The mayor scoffed at the notion, heard often in Washington, that drug eradication in Putumayo could weaken the FARC guerrillas by taking away their income. “The guerrillas will be just as strong without coca. They can increase kidnapping and extortion to support themselves. They’re powerful in many

parts of the country that don’t have any coca.”

Putumayo residents generally agreed that an effective coca-eradication strategy must be manual, gradual, and mutually agreed with the affected communities. The social pact structure includes these elements to some extent, but ultimately fails on all three.

While the pacts include manual eradication, they carry the threat of aerial fumigation if coca plants are not pulled out in the agreed period. The pacts allow producers to taper off coca-growing gradually over twelve months, but most insist that the transition should be longer. While coca can yield a first harvest within a few months, most other crops will take longer, often well over a year, to bring in any income. Most crops that thrive in the generally poor soils of lower Putumayo, such as rubber, bananas, or



hearts-of-palm, grow on trees that will still be saplings after a year. Since 1999 the Municipal Rural Development Commission of Puerto Asís, a prominent peasant group, has been promoting a crop-substitution plan with a three-year tapering-off period. The social pacts may risk failure unless the government either allows signers to taper off coca-growing more gradually, or pays them a basic wage while they await their first legal harvests.

Though they take the form of a mutual agreement, the terms of the pacts are handed down by the government in a “take it or leave it” fashion. Local producers complain that Bogotá government officials are imposing the pacts without ever consulting with the affected communities. An indigenous leader suggested that Gonzalo de Francisco “come to Putumayo more often and hold public discussions and forums with the affected population, instead of just meeting with the mayors and town council members.” Leaders of agricultural and indigenous organizations wondered why the government felt it necessary to contract with organizations from outside the re-

gion, such as Fundaempresa, to administer the aid and to design alternative development projects. Some expressed alarm that many of the pacts may encourage farmers to cultivate African palm (a source of palm oil), a non-native plant that produces little employment per hectare.

Alternative development, many pointed out, is more than just crop substitution. The department is in desperate need of basic infrastructure, from potable water to farm-to-market roads. Agricultural producers demand assistance with marketing their produce, access to credit, and – at least in the short term – a guaranteed price for their legal crops. Education is another deeply unmet need; as much as 85 percent of Putumayo’s population has never been in school beyond the fourth grade.

These initiatives would have a greater chance of success if the United States would do more to reduce demand for drugs at home, especially by expanding treatment programs for the hard-core addicts who account for most domestic drug use. (While treatment funding did rise 41 percent since 1994, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy notes, funding for foreign anti-drug aid, most of it military, increased by 175 percent.) Peasants in Colombia do not deserve a military approach. Military and police efforts should be aimed higher up the drug-production chain, against the drug kingpins, the importers of precursor chemicals, and the financial entities that help the narcotraffickers launder their money.

Washington and Bogotá are likely to ignore the local population’s proposals for a manual, gradual, and mutually agreed program and go ahead with the spraying and battalions. This may indeed bring a sharp reduction in the amount of coca grown in Putumayo. But the coca trade will continue to flourish, powered by an endless army of unemployed and uneducated migrants who will find a way to feed themselves elsewhere.

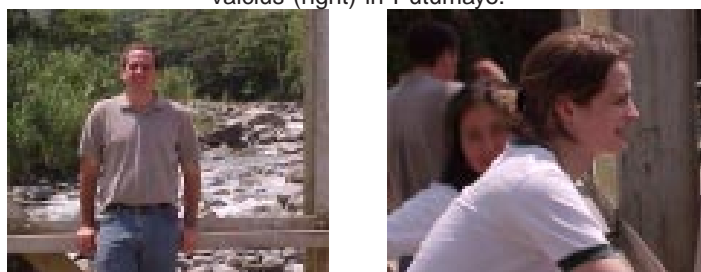
The U.S. anti-drug strategy now underway in

Putumayo – rapidly expanding fumigation and seriously lagging development assistance – has already been tried elsewhere in Colombia. So far, it has done little more than inconvenience the coca trade, forcing it to relocate somewhere else every few years while total acreage continues to increase. It is this approach that caused Putumayo to be overrun with coca in the late 1990s. The same response in Putumayo will succeed only in moving coca growing to another patch of untouched jungle, either in Colombia or across the border in Ecuador, Peru or Brazil.

The relocated coca will bring environmental destruction, armed groups, random violence, and further fumigation plans to places that still look the way Putumayo did twenty years ago. “Look how we’ve destroyed our own house,” one longtime Putumayo resident said to us, lamenting his region’s lost forests, beauty, and tranquility. If the United States and Colombian governments change course in time, perhaps others’ houses can yet remain unspoiled.

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CIP Senior Associate Adam Isacson (left) and Associate Ingrid Vaicius (right) in Putumayo.



IPR • Colombia

Center for International Policy
1755 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Suite 312
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 232-3317
Fax: (202) 232-3440
cip@ciponline.org
www.ciponline.org

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