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### Plan Colombia 2?

## After Over \$3 Billion in Aid, Colombia's Visiting President Faces Questions Over a Lack of Results

On Monday, March 21 Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe arrives on a three-day visit to Washington. As on previous visits, he is here to burnish his government's controversial image and to seek trade concessions. According to his foreign minister, Uribe is also here this time to prod the Bush administration and Congress into supporting "**Plan Colombia 2**," a new multi-year package of counter-insurgency aid for Colombia's security forces.

Uribe is asking the United States to maintain or increase military aid levels through at least 2009. This time, the focus would be less on the drug war and more on Colombia's forty-year-old war against violent insurgent groups.

Mr. Uribe's request does not deserve an automatic green light. Like any donor or investor, the United States must judge past performance before approving any request for new funds. Past performance has been poor, whether measured by the availability of drugs in the United States, Colombia's human rights situation, or the likelihood of a peaceful end to the country's violence.

Since the spring of 2000, when the Clinton administration moved the original "Plan Colombia" through Congress, the United States has given Colombia \$3.15 billion (at least 80 percent of it, or \$2.52 billion, for Colombia's military and police).<sup>1</sup> The two governments can show few positive results for all this spending.

**Stopping drugs:** Since 2000, U.S. contractors have sprayed herbicides over nearly a million acres of Colombian territory in a risky effort to destroy coca and poppy, the crops used to produce cocaine and heroin. (The spraying doesn't target drug lords: the United Nations notes that 62 percent of Colombian coca plots are "family size" – less than 7.5 acres.<sup>2</sup>) Meanwhile, efforts to provide economic alternatives to peasants in neglected rural areas have been underfunded and lagged far behind.

The result: according to the White House Drug Czar's office, as of January 2004, the price of cocaine and heroin on U.S. streets is the same as it was before Plan Colombia began.<sup>3</sup> Drugs are as available, and as pure, as they were before 2000. Supply is meeting demand as well as ever. The supply-reduction strategy has been a failure.

**Human rights:** The Uribe government has produced statistics showing a decrease in many indicators of violence, from massacres to kidnapping to forced displacement. Much of this

decrease owes to a partial cease-fire declared by paramilitary groups, discussed below.

The Uribe government has utterly failed, however, to improve the government's response when security officials do violate human rights (often in collaboration with right-wing paramilitaries). "Impunity remained at the core of the country's human rights problems," the State Department's 2004 human rights report for Colombia states. "Despite some prosecutions and convictions, the authorities rarely brought high-ranking officers of the security forces charged with human rights offenses to trial."<sup>4</sup>

The human rights situation is even bleaker in the face of Mr. Uribe's much-heralded "Democratic Security" anti-terror policy. In his two years in office, Uribe has organized a network of nearly two million paid informants, inserted lightly trained "peasant soldiers" in remote areas, and pushed through Congress a constitutional reform empowering Colombia's army to carry out short-term warrantless arrests, as well as searches, wiretaps and interrogations of civilians.

Space for peaceful dissent has shrunk radically in Uribe's Colombia, as the security forces pursue mass roundups of human rights defenders, union leaders and other activists in conflictive areas, on suspicion of guerrilla collaboration (most are released for lack of evidence). On three occasions since last September, Uribe has intimidated Colombia's highly threatened human rights community by calling them "defenders" and "spokespeople" for terrorism.

**Peace:** The U.S. and Colombian governments sold Plan Colombia to the U.S. public as a contribution to a peaceful end to Colombia's long conflict. Not only did negotiations with the FARC and ELN guerrillas collapse shortly after Plan Colombia began, the U.S.-financed military buildup has done nothing to bring the insurgents closer to the negotiating table.

President Uribe has chosen instead to negotiate with pro-government paramilitary groups. Uribe made clear that his government would not negotiate with any armed group unless that group first declared a cease-fire. Most paramilitaries agreed to that condition in December 2002. Yet everyone, from the U.S. ambassador to the OAS to Uribe's vice president, acknowledges that no cease-fire is in place. In fact, paramilitaries killed nearly 1,000 civilians in the past year.

Both the Colombian government and the Organization of American States, which has recently agreed to monitor the paramilitaries' disarmament, have demanded that the right-wing paramilitaries congregate in "concentration zones" to ease monitoring of the cease-fire. The paramilitaries refuse, and the talks are currently at an impasse. Peace remains a distant goal.

**U.S. involvement:** With a mid-2002 change in the law eliminating restrictions on the use of counter-narcotics aid, U.S. personnel are now helping their Colombian military counterparts in ways that would not have been contemplated when Plan Colombia began in 2000. As was the case in El Salvador during the Reagan years, U.S. troops are now giving Colombia's military real-time intelligence, advising them on combat operations, training units to capture guerrilla leaders, and even helping them to defend an oil pipeline.

U.S. personnel are increasingly in harm's way. While U.S. military personnel have avoided

casualties so far, eleven civilians working on State Department and Defense Department contracts have died in Colombia since 1998. Three more have been hostages of the FARC guerrillas since February 2003.

Yet the Bush administration this spring is asking Congress to increase the legal limit on the number of U.S. personnel who can be in Colombia at any given time. Since Plan Colombia was approved, Congress has forbid the presence in Colombia of more than 400 U.S. troops and 400 U.S. citizen contractors. As recently as March 2003, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman told Congress that “there is no one who is advocating the breaking of those caps.”<sup>5</sup> A year later, though, Congress is about to consider a proposal to double the number of U.S. troops, to 800, and to increase the contractor cap to 600.

An increase in the cap will send a very strong signal that the United States is getting its overstretched military more deeply involved, with minimal debate, in another complex foreign conflict. Mr. Uribe must be very clear on this visit about what sort of roles he expects this greatly expanded U.S. presence to play, and what risks they face.

As the United States gets more deeply involved, the contribution of wealthy Colombians is still questionable. Colombia’s society is one of the most unequal on earth, with rates of tax collection far lower than the United States (13.3 percent of GDP as opposed to 29 percent in the United States). This leaves few resources to fight a war, much less to build schools, hospitals, and a functioning judiciary. The law, meanwhile, excludes those with a high-school education – the children of the country’s elite – from service in combat units, in the rare event that they are recruited into the military.

Under President Uribe Colombia’s defense budget for 2003 – excluding police expenditure – was estimated at 3.2 percent of GDP. By contrast, the U.S. defense budget (excluding homeland security) is over 4 percent. Mr. Uribe has taken some measures to increase tax collection, chiefly a one-time tax on the wealthiest to raise money for the military in 2002. There is no plan, however, to repeat this initiative.

If the United States is being asked to get more deeply involved in Colombia’s conflict, we must ask Mr. Uribe whether those at the top of his country’s economy and political system are truly prepared to increase their share of the burden.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources listed at Center for International Policy, “U.S. Aid to Colombia Since 1997: Summary Tables” <<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aidtable.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Colombia, Dirección Nacional de Estupefacientes, Proyecto Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos -SIMCI- Estadísticas Cultivos de Coca Consolidadas por Municipio (Bogotá: DNE, site visited October 2003) <[http://www.cultivosilicitoscolombia.gov.co/documentos/mapa\\_colombia\\_02.pdf](http://www.cultivosilicitoscolombia.gov.co/documentos/mapa_colombia_02.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> United States, Office of National Drug Control Policy, “Pulse Check: Trends in Drug Abuse, January 2004,” (Washington: ONDCP) <<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/drugfact/pulsechk/january04/index.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> United States, Department of State, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2003” (Washington: State Department, February 25, 2004) <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27891.htm>>.

<sup>5</sup> Press conference with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman (Bogota, March 5, 2003) <<http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/WO0303/S00095.htm>>.