

Opening Remarks of Chairman Henry Hyde
Full Committee Hearing, “Plan Colombia: Major Successes and New Challenges”
May 11, 2005

It is my pleasure to call to order today’s hearing on our policy of combating narco-terrorism in Colombia. I especially welcome our distinguished Speaker, Dennis Hastert, who has agreed to appear before our Committee.

Speaker Hastert has been our most effective leader in advocating a successful counter-drug policy in Colombia. We are honored to have him with us today, and look forward to his testimony.

Today, as we face the ramifications of one potential failed “narco-state” in Afghanistan, we remember that Colombia -- whose capital city is a three hour flight from Miami -- faced that same unacceptable fate in the mid 1990s.

Until Plan Colombia emerged as a bipartisan initiative to address this grave threat to Colombia and our own national security, Colombia’s future was in peril. Under the leadership of Speaker Hastert and others in the House of Representatives - this Committee in particular - a sustained U.S. commitment to Colombia was made in time. Now, under the leadership of President Uribe, and bolstered by U.S.-provided Plan Colombia military and other assistance, the picture is much brighter and Colombia is far more stable.

The statistics tracking the implementation of Plan Colombia since 2000 speak for themselves. I will recite just a few data points for the record from a recent Mort Kondracke column in Roll Call on our success in Colombia:

- Coca production was reduced by 1/3, (And I might add that nearly all the known hectares of opium poppies used for heroin production were fully eradicated in 2004);
- Terrorist incidents were reduced from 1500 to 700 per year;
- Kidnappings were reduced from 1,900 to 750 incidents per year, including Americans;
- The number of displaced persons was reduced from 340,000 to 137,000;
- 3700 FARC terrorists were killed or defected in 2004; and
- An economic growth rate of 3.9% was achieved in 2004, the second highest in Latin America after Chile.

Real progress has been made, but Colombia is not yet out of the woods. The narco-terrorist threat will not simply fade away. We have more work to do in Colombia. We must stay the course and finish the job. President Uribe’s recent request for additional aerial spray capacity deserves our full and very serious consideration.

Today, our hearing will focus on the progress we have seen. We also must highlight a few policy items in Colombia that need more focused attention and ongoing Congressional oversight.

For more than a year now, a legal morass has clouded a clear determination as to whether we can support the deployment of Members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) who have defected, and others who have renounced their ties to terrorist organizations by U.S.-provided assets including air transport. These defectors are available to help manually eradicate smaller, hard to reach and spray drug crops; particularly opium poppies. Yet still today, the help of these defectors is unavailable for this task as a result of our own legal wrangling.

This Committee helped secure new DC -3 transport planes for the Colombian National Police to transport manpower and materials for manual drug eradication. Some in the executive branch hold the misguided view that putting defectors on these planes to engage in manual drug eradication would somehow constitute material support for terrorism. This was never the intent of Congress. We are needlessly and unwisely tying our own hands.

How could having former members of a terrorist organization eliminate the very drugs that help finance the terrorist organization they have turned against possibly constitute material support for terrorism? We will require answers today, and hopefully untangle this protracted legal mess.

The demobilization of large numbers of combatants from terrorist organizations is a challenge and an opportunity. Getting these fighters off the field of combat and ending their drug production significantly reduces the number of people killed or otherwise subjected to violence in Colombia and here. We must be willing to help Colombia help itself and us in this way.

We must not forget, however, that leaders of these terrorist organizations -- including the so-called United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) -- are entrenched in criminal activity. This includes drug trafficking into the United States.

Colombia's authorities must set forth a concrete and workable framework for dismantling the hierarchy of these terrorist groups so they don't simply continue as criminal syndicates. The Uribe government has clearly demonstrated its steadfast commitment to extraditing Colombia's most dangerous, high profile drug traffickers to face trial in the United States. Continuing this commitment to extraditions is essential to successfully dismantling these terrorist organizations.

2004 saw a very successful 52% reduction in opium poppy cultivation in Colombia. But, we are seeing a spillover effect in Peru. Opium planted in Peru for transport to Colombia for processing into heroin headed for the USA is our next challenge. Peruvians must demonstrate the same commitment and energy to eradicating opium poppies in their country that we have seen by the Colombian police.

We face new challenges on the drug interdiction front. After our nation was attacked on 9/11, we sharply increased the deployment of military surveillance aircraft to protect our homeland. I fully understand and support the homeland security mission. Many of these military airplanes were previously used to support maritime interdiction of drugs, including so-called fast boats, both in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Reducing our Marine Air Patrols by some 70% opened up the corridors for the flow of illegal drugs into our nation. Interdicting drugs at sea, in addition to aerial eradication and overland interdiction in Colombia, is a matter of our national security.

Recent record setting large scale maritime seizures served to underscore the need for a long term plan to fill this Marine Air Patrol gap in the Pacific and Caribbean. While we have suggested some courses of action, we look forward to listening to the Administration's proposed solutions for the evident need.

Due to the limited amount of time Speaker Hastert has, I welcome opening comments from the Ranking Democratic Member Mr. Lantos only at this time. When we move to Panel two, I will allow one-minute opening remarks by Members who arrived before the gavel.