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# Understanding Colombia

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Under heavy Congressional pressure, the Clinton administration decided last year to spend \$1.3 billion to support Plan Colombia, an effort to eradicate narco-guerillas in that Andean nation. However, U.S. aid is focused mainly on winning the military side of the conflict. The European Union, which was to be primarily responsible for the economic and social aspects of the aid package, has backed out, leaving a critical vacuum. It is precisely the economic and social components of Plan Colombia that will determine the ultimate course of the Colombian conflict. Unless the Pastrana government strengthens Colombian institutions and ameliorates its social disparities, Colombia will continue to be plagued by violence.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the United States has become increasingly involved in the civil war in the Andean nation of Colombia, a war that has claimed over 35,000 lives. In 2000, the Clinton administration committed the U.S. to provide over \$1.3 billion in aid for an anti-narcotics and anti-insurgency program known as Plan Colombia. Recent revelations that U.S. pilots were shot at while helping to eradicate narcotics crops have heightened the concern that the U.S. is about to become involved in another Vietnam. Indeed, the complexity of the Colombian conflict rivals the one in Southeast Asia a quarter-century ago. However, U.S. aid to Colombia, if properly constructed, can yield a far different result.

## THE STORY SO FAR

The independent Republic of Greater Colombia was formed in 1819, encompassing what is today Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. Almost from independence, Colombia has been a democratic, two-party state. Indeed, since independence Colombia has only been under military rule three times for a total of less than six years—in 1830, 1854, and 1953-1957. This easily qualifies Colombia as having one of the strongest democratic traditions in Latin America.

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However, democracy has not always come easily. The 1830 coup was enmeshed with the secession of Ecuador and Venezuela from the republic. In 1953, the military overthrew the elected government in an attempt to end a civil war that cost over 300,000 lives. The problem has been that both the Liberal and Conservative parties in Colombia have been willing to use violence to achieve their political aims. The result is unconsolidated democracy.

In addition to the Liberal-Conservative violence, Colombia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is plagued by Marxist guerillas. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish acronym FARC, was created from the militant left wing of the Liberal party during the 1953-1957 military government. During the Cold War, FARC found a ready source of financing from Cuba, which was anxious to spread its Communist ideology throughout Latin America. A splinter rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), was formed in the 1960s. The problem for Bogota is that it never controlled the entire country even in the best of times. As FARC and the ELN grew stronger, it was increasingly difficult for the government to exercise effective control over remote and far-flung regions.

The last decade has seen two major new developments in the Colombian conflict. First, the end of aid from Cuba forced FARC and the ELN to find new sources of financing. Kidnapping and taxation of narcotics production quickly replaced Cuban support and have kept both forces in the field far longer than their Latin American counterparts. Second, growing anger at the government's inability to handle the rebels led some landowners and others in Colombia to form paramilitary groups to fight the guerillas. However, the paramilitaries quickly spun out of the landowners' control and are now as much a part of the narcotics trade as FARC and the ELN. Thus, the paramilitaries are actually increasing Colombia's enormous instability. At the end of 2000, the National Defense Council Foundation gave Colombia an instability index rating of 68.02, which makes Colombia the most unstable state in South America and second only to Haiti in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the Colombian government has announced two major initiatives to fight the rebels. President Andres Pastrana, who was elected on a platform of ending the civil war, granted FARC a Switzerland-sized demilitarized zone in November 1998 in an attempt to foster peace talks. In January 2001, he extended a similar, though smaller, zone to the ELN. While the name demilitarized zone seems benign, in reality both zones were quickly occupied by rebel forces and are currently the main bases of operation for both FARC and the ELN. The second Pastrana initiative is Plan Colombia, a \$7 billion program designed to increase Colombia's ability to fight the rebels. Under Plan Colombia, the United States and European donors would dramatically increase their developmental and military aid programs to Colombia. However, both of these efforts will fail unless they address the four underlying causes of the Colombian conflict.

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## SOURCE OF CONFLICT I: ENTRENCHED NARCO-GUERILLAS

Scholars who study the Colombian conflict believe that the Colombian military would win any conventional battle with the paramilitaries, FARC, or the ELN. Although figures are hard to come by, it is estimated that FARC fields a force of around 20,000 men, while both ELN and the paramilitaries are significantly smaller with forces slightly under 10,000 each. By contrast, the Colombian government has 145,000 military personnel bolstered by 105,000 police.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Colombian government holds a significant statistical advantage.

However, this advantage is of limited use. FARC and the ELN have effectively leveraged their forces by using irregular warfare and terrorism. By using guerilla tactics, FARC and the ELN are able to fight only when and where they have the advantage, neutralizing the Colombian military's superior size and advanced technology. Historically, counter-insurgency operations have required the government to outnumber the guerillas by a factor of ten or twenty to one.<sup>3</sup> Thus, even if Colombia's military were only dealing with the insurgencies and ignoring its other duties, it would need a force strength of 400,000 to 800,000 troops to defeat the 40,000 insurgents it currently faces. This is roughly the same size as the allied force that won the Gulf War.

Geography adds to the Colombian military's problems. Since the Andes separate the guerillas from the rest of Colombia, it is difficult for the military to attack the 40 percent of Colombia that the rebels control. Moreover, Colombia's porous borders make neighboring states attractive as rear bases. The unstable political situations in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Peru mean that even if the Colombian government were able to field a force capable of destroying the rebels, FARC and the ELN would have little trouble bribing or fighting their way into a neighboring state to survive.

## SOURCE OF CONFLICT II: THE ECONOMICS OF NARCOTICS

Given that the Colombian army cannot field a force of a half million troops, Bogota must reduce the numbers of rebels by sapping the rebels' will to fight. To achieve this goal, the Colombian government must strike at the economic base of the rebellion. The cornerstone to such a strategy is strangling the economic support FARC, the ELN, and the paramilitaries receive from narcotics.

FARC and the ELN have combined military budgets of about \$100 million a month, most of which comes from the narcotics trade.<sup>4</sup> A recent World Bank study claimed that FARC alone receives over \$700 million annually from narcotics and kidnapping. The same study goes on to argue that civil wars result from an over-reliance on natural resources that can be easily looted, leading to "predatory" rebel movements.<sup>5</sup> Colombia is a classic example of this phenomenon. Because

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producing the coca plant that yields cocaine is a time-consuming process, rebels must be able to take and hold remote areas in order to survive. Moreover, since cocaine is highly portable once processed, it is an easy source of financing for illegal armed groups like FARC or the paramilitaries.

When the Pastrana government created demilitarized zones that were free from government military activity, it inadvertently strengthened FARC and the ELN. Without having to fear government attacks, both groups now have a safe haven to cultivate and process cocaine before smuggling it north. At the same time, the demilitarized zones are an obvious place to stash kidnap victims while FARC and the ELN wait for ransom.

By contrast, the evidence suggests that Plan Colombia's eradication program is having an impact on FARC and the ELN. At the time this article was being written, the Colombian government had sprayed over 75,000 acres of coca-leaf plantations (roughly 20 percent of the total) with the herbicide glyphosate.<sup>6</sup> The use of glyphosate, which kills crops indiscriminately, marks an unfortunate decision on aerial eradication. A second chemical compound, known as Tebuthiuron or "Spike," is known to selectively kill coca while leaving legal crops alive. However, due to rebel threats against the producer of Tebuthiuron, Spike has been unavailable for aerial eradication since 1988.<sup>7</sup> In any event, reports that FARC and the ELN are attempting to purchase shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles are a strong indicator that the aerial eradication effort is having a substantial effect.

### **SOURCE OF CONFLICT III: POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS**

Colombia is Latin America's oldest democracy. However, Colombian democracy's longevity has not translated into deep democratic institutions. Indeed, recent evidence indicates that support for Colombian democracy has deteriorated after years of corruption, violence, and civil war. According to a recent survey, support for democracy by the Colombian public has fallen from 60 percent in 1996 to 50 percent in 2000.<sup>8</sup> In turn, the deteriorating political system increases support for non-state actors such as the rebels and the paramilitaries.

In fact, the Colombian people often view their political leaders as impotent and corrupt, a perception that worsened with the 1994 election of Ernesto Samper, who had taken campaign donations from narcotics traffickers. Indeed, corruption is pervasive in Colombia. Transparency International, a corruption watchdog group, rated Colombia as one of the thirty most corrupt countries on earth in its 2000 study of global corruption.<sup>9</sup> Colombia's two-party system feeds corruption because neither party is willing to attack its opponent's corruption for fear of revealing the skeletons in its own closet. The Colombian parliament's failure to impeach Samper after he was tied to narcotics traffickers is the most visible example of this phenomenon. Government credibility was further weakened

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when Colombia underwent its worst recession since World War II in the late 1990s and was stripped of investment-grade status by Moody's Investor's Service in 1999.

Moreover, the Colombian government was further undermined by the rise in drug violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Medellín and Cali cartels became the driving forces behind most government policies, including the Samper election. Narcotics traffickers are the main reason why an estimated 290 Colombian judges have been assassinated since 1990.<sup>10</sup> While the National Police under General Rosso Serrano successfully undermined both cartels, the Colombian justice system repeatedly failed to put and keep major drug kingpins behind bars, embarrassing the Colombian government both domestically and internationally.

As people become increasingly disaffected with the political system, they gravitate towards paramilitaries, FARC, and the ELN. The formation of demilitarized zones was incredibly controversial in Colombia, and thousands have taken to the streets to protest the government's concessions to the rebels. Dissatisfaction with the war's progress is the driving force behind the creation of the paramilitaries. In many cases, landowners feel that the paramilitaries are far better than government forces at protecting them from Marxist rebels. Some factions of the military sympathize with the paramilitaries' efforts to destroy the rebels, leading to accusations that the Colombian military and the paramilitaries are actually allies.<sup>11</sup>

The collapse of government institutions creates an opening for opportunistic ideologues. Certainly, the government's inability to curtail FARC and the ELN has led to a groundswell of support for Alvaro Uribe, a right-wing politician who promises a harder line against the rebels. The same anger with the war has led to explosive growth in paramilitary activities. The largest group, the Self-Defense Union of Colombia (AUC), reportedly fields a force of 8,000 men and is growing in both popularity and strength. On the other side of the equation, the brutality of the paramilitaries, who often behead civilians accused of collaborating with the rebels, has made FARC commander Manuel Marulanda one of the country's most recognizable and trusted figures. This is despite the fact that FARC has been accused of a long list of abuses, including using child soldiers and firing gas-cylinder mortars into populated areas.

#### **SOURCE OF CONFLICT IV: SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES**

In a general sense, the Colombian economy is fairly well developed. Per capita gross national product is estimated at \$5,709 on a purchasing power parity basis, and infant mortality and literacy both approach first world standards. However, while the overall economy is robust, the distribution of income in Colombia is a major social problem. Colombia's Gini index of 57.1 puts it in the

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same league as notoriously unequal states like Brazil and South Africa. Moreover, one in ten Colombians lives on less than a dollar a day, while one in four lives on less than two dollars a day.<sup>12</sup>

Colombia's distribution of income is the direct result of the structure of its economy. Colombia is highly dependent on natural resource and agricultural exports, particularly oil and coffee. The problem is that, like most natural resource exports, petroleum and coffee provide wealth, but few high-paying jobs. Colombia is apparently caught in a resource trap where coffee and oil are the only industries profitable enough to attract investment, crowding out credit for the development of an industrial and service economy. The fact that the Colombian government is beholden to oil and coffee interests makes meaningful reform almost impossible.

Extreme poverty makes the rural population a prime target of FARC and ELN recruiters. In many rebel-held areas, FARC and the ELN provide what the government cannot—pension plans, health care, small business loans, and the like.<sup>13</sup> To its credit, the Colombian government seems to appreciate the need for social and economic development in ameliorating the conflict and strangling rebel recruitment; however, to date it has failed to pursue a successful program. The use of glyphosate to destroy crops and the relative lack of protection from paramilitaries and rebels only enhances rural anger at the Colombian government.

#### THE OUTLOOK FOR PLAN COLOMBIA

Originally, Bogota hoped for over \$1 billion in foreign military aid and \$2 billion in economic assistance to pursue Plan Colombia. While the United States has offered to foot the bill for the main military provisions, social development aid has been less forthcoming. Initially, Pastrana hoped that the European Union would send over \$2 billion in aid, mainly to promote crop substitution programs. In the end, the EU offered only \$280 million.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Plan Colombia is heavily weighted toward military goals, while programs such as road construction and crop substitution have suffered.

While the military equipment and training provided by the United States have enhanced the Colombian government's ability to fight FARC and the ELN, Colombia is unable to provide the manpower for a total counterinsurgency effort. Moreover, instead of using economic and social programs to constrict FARC and the ELN's recruiting, the creation of demilitarized zones and the inability of the government to fight corruption and end economic disparities makes the rebels and paramilitaries stronger. The recent negotiations between Pastrana and Marulanda in the FARC-controlled zone may have been a public relations coup for Pastrana, but the reality is that the extension of the zone in early February only gives FARC more time to regroup and rearm.

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The role for the United States is clear. There is no political appetite or popular support for sending U.S. troops to Colombia in a combat role, and it would be foolish for the U.S. to do so even if such support existed. The Colombian civil war must be won by the Colombians. U.S. support in both the military and socio-economic spheres must maintain this concept as the guiding principle.

The U.S. can help the Colombians to help themselves through programs that enhance the Colombian military's training in both counterinsurgency warfare and human rights protection. However, the U.S. must be wary of a potential quagmire. In Vietnam, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave the Johnson administration a blank check for escalation. The result was an open-ended commitment with no ceiling on troops. The lesson is that there must be a hard numerical limit on U.S. military advisors in Colombia. During El Salvador's civil war, the U.S. presence was limited to 55 advisors and 100 medical personnel. Given that Colombia is eight times the size of El Salvador, a limit of 400-500 advisors would be appropriate.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, all advisors must have a clearly defined mission that precludes them from engaging in combat. This not only protects the United States from getting bogged down in another Vietnam, but also ensures that the Colombian government will not be seen as a puppet controlled by Washington.

The U.S. can also enhance its aid packages to promote social and economic development, including crop substitution programs. The Bush administration recently announced that it would push for reduced tariffs on Colombian goods. If this trade preference is targeted to help Colombian manufacturing, it will promote a much-needed restructuring of the Colombian economy. At the same time, the United States, World Bank, and others must work with the Colombian government to increase the accountability of government institutions and reduce corruption.

Finally, the United States must work with other nations in the region to ensure that the rebels and paramilitaries do not avoid Plan Colombia by moving across the border. Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Panama have all expressed concern that Plan Colombia will simply spread the violence throughout the Andes. The U.S. must work with these states to improve their border patrols and intelligence capacities to avoid that very scenario. Similarly, it must pressure both Cuba and Venezuela to end their tacit support for FARC and the ELN.

On the Colombian side, the government has to reign in the paramilitaries. While such groups have the support of ultra-conservative landowners and others, they are counterproductive to the war effort. Similarly, the use of demilitarized zones to promote negotiation has been an abject failure. By extending the FARC zone seven times without significant concessions, the Pastrana government has shown that it wants the negotiations far more badly than do Marulanda and FARC. This is an extraordinarily weak negotiating position. Moreover, the zones are exactly the bases that the rebels need to consolidate their narcotics efforts, making them harder to defeat in the end.

The Colombians must also strengthen their support for rural development programs—a set of policies Pastrana calls his toolbox for peace. By promoting rural development, the Colombians can cut off the main source of the rebels' manpower. Opening up the economy and promoting an industrial and service-based economy will also help to ameliorate poverty and strengthen Colombian democracy in the long run. Ultimately, both Bogota and Washington must understand that the Colombian conflict will not be won by military force but by the promotion of clean government, economic development, and social justice. ■

## NOTES

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- 2 United States Department of State, "Background Notes: Colombia," August 2000.  
[www.state.gov/www/background\\_notes/colombia\\_0080\\_bgn.html](http://www.state.gov/www/background_notes/colombia_0080_bgn.html)
- 3 The ten or twenty-to-one figure is based on successful U.S. counterinsurgency operations in Malaya and the Philippines. By contrast, in Vietnam the force level peaked around five-to-one. Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 177.
- 4 F. Andy Messing Jr. and James Dempsey, "A New President Facing Old Turmoil," *The Washington Times*, August 7, 1998, A16.
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- 7 NDCF staffers have actually eaten the fruit off of trees that were sprayed with Spike. Andy F. Messing, Jr. and Allen B. Hazelwood, "U.S. Drug Control Policy and International Operations," (Alexandria, VA: The National Defense Council Foundation, 1989): 12-13.
- 8 Marta Lagos, "Between Stability and Crisis in Latin America," *Journal of Democracy* 12 (January 2001): 139.
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[www.freedomhouse.org/survey/2000/reports/country/colombia.html](http://www.freedomhouse.org/survey/2000/reports/country/colombia.html)
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- 14 "Uncle Sam in Colombia," *The Economist*, February 3, 2001, 22.
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