



Challenges for U.S. Policy Toward Colombia: Is Plan Colombia Working

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I want to thank you for this – my first chance to speak about real progress being made in Colombia and the Andean region, toward a hemisphere not only fighting, but winning, against the twin scourges of heroin and cocaine. I would like to share with you my views on the efforts to date, the threats that are afoot, the Administration's sense of optimism, but also the tempering realities that we face in Colombia and the region.

As time allows, I would also like to share with you a sense of the conceptual battle in which we find ourselves right now, one that calls forth and relies upon real leadership. One that is significant in historical context. The future is very likely to stand in sharp contrast to the recent past. As never before, hanging in the balance is our regional security, national security, community security and personal security. That, of course, is why I am here – to help describe how your investment of time, and money, personal conviction and long-term commitment is paying off.

It is appropriate that, in my first hearing as Assistant Secretary of INL [Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs], I should sit before some of the nation's strongest supporters of counternarcotics efforts in the Andes. The Administration's policies are bearing fruit, thanks to a bipartisan effort made real by your commitment to the future, to our kids, to our own national and community stability and to our hemispheric neighbors.

Looking South, I can assure you that the top levels of the Colombian Government are extremely grateful for the strong, sustained and equally determined support of you, Mr. Chairman and the Members of this Committee dedicated to Plan Colombia and the Andean Counter-drug Initiative or ACI.

President Uribe has publicly and repeatedly emphasized his personal commitment to taking the war for Colombia's future – and against the ruthless Colombian drug traffickers and terrorists – into their own domain, onto their own turf. This is the essence of his plan, and it is – with U.S. help – showing results.

President Uribe has broadened the aerial eradication program, enhanced the capabilities of all Colombian counternarcotics forces, increased the effectiveness and coverage of drug interdiction programs, and enhanced refugee and alternative development programs. In turn, thanks to U.S. Congressional support, we have exercised expanded legislative authority to selectively support high-value Colombian counterterrorism efforts – without sacrificing our core counternarcotics mission.

For the record, we shall never give up on the primacy of the CN mission in Colombia, and the protection of human rights in that mission. We have so far successfully used aviation assets against both targets effectively, and we will continue to do so.

Underlying these efforts has been a strong commitment by the Colombian Government to bring increasing amounts of Colombian territory under its permanent control. Under Plan Colombia, we have assisted the Colombian National Police in reestablishing a police presence in 140 municipalities out of a total 158 that had no rule of law ten months ago.

This effort has a direct and important long-term impact on U.S. counternarcotics policy, by bringing the rule of law to remote areas where drug crops are cultivated, and where we have the greatest stake in keeping hitherto isolated populations from falling into the hands of drug and terrorist organizations for lack of alternatives.

After three short years, I am pleased to report that the Government of Colombia's implementation of Plan Colombia is beginning to reverse 30 years of large-scale coca and opium production in Colombia. Under President Uribe's "zero tolerance" policy toward coca cultivation, aerial eradication has become a reliable law enforcement tool and a successful deterrent to drug crop cultivation. Interviews with drug-cultivating farmers in key areas show that there is an increasing understanding that the Colombian National Police will eliminate any drug crop investment, and return to eliminate it again and again if it is replanted or moved elsewhere. With such a strong deterrent, farmer receptivity to alternative development program increases significantly.

Incredibly, this Bureau's Air Wing and the Colombians have virtually eliminated the coca crop in the Putumayo region, once home to the world's largest nucleus of illicit cultivation. The coca crop in Putumayo reached 47,400 hectares in 2002. In March 2003, that same area was estimated to have 1,500 hectares of coca – a 97% decline.

More broadly, coca cultivation in Colombia declined by 15%, with an overall decline of 8% in the Andean region during 2002. So far in 2003, you and INL have supported the Colombian National Police in spraying 118,000 hectares of coca, and we will probably achieve 140,000 hectares sprayed by the end of 2003. And we have done it while adhering to strict environmental guidelines and in accordance with Congressional certification requirements.

One of Plan Colombia's goals was to reduce coca cultivation by 50% by 2005. President Uribe's aggressive support for spraying, and the professionalism and efficiency of State Department contractors may well have put us ahead of that mark. If that trend line holds, and if we apply the right combination of management accountability and measurable results on the ground, we may get to a point soon in which we have reduced cultivation of both coca and heroin poppy to levels not seen in two decades.

On opium poppy, I am – and I know many of you are – deeply concerned. South American heroin has made its way in ever-greater quantities in recent years to U.S. cities and suburbs, places like Minnesota and Connecticut, Indiana, Delaware, and even Maine. To combat this growing threat, we have initiated and maintained an aggressive spray program that has already covered 2,527 hectares in 2003, from an identifiable estimate of 4,900 hectares of poppy. These poppies are identified through a range of means and virtually all cultivation lies in remote, difficult-to-navigate mountainous areas, and this has hampered our efforts but we will continue to work to identify new areas.

As we move into a new phase of spray aircraft deliveries, I am pressing for a three-tiered approach that will accelerate success. The three tiers are

greater safety, more direct and measurable accountability, and higher and more measurable results on the ground as a result of methodical aerial eradication.

While guarantees are not possible, we nevertheless expect a significant fall in total hectareage of poppy cultivated, as repeated spraying of small fields in outlying areas discourages poppy cultivation by poppy farmers. We are also attacking heroin poppy cultivation through rewards programs for information leading to well-hidden fields, as well as to organizations trafficking in heroin. Our funding has also increased the number of X-ray machines and search dogs at the international airports to detect swallowers and smugglers of heroin.

But I also wish to make a pivotal point for the committee. Our combined effort – Congress' and ours at INL – to make permanent strides in Colombia goes well beyond drug crop reduction.

For three years, a sizable portion of INL's funding has gone to Colombian National Police interdiction efforts and the training and deployment of a Colombian Army Counternarcotics Mobile Brigade. This effort has been animated by a need to press forward with counternarcotics missions in terrorist-held regions of a beautiful but terrorist-ravaged country.

Specifically, our funding – your funding implemented by INL – has trained over 10,000 municipal and rural (Carabinero) police, and provided hardened police stations in key municipalities to prevent terrorist forces from overrunning them. This has had countless redeeming effects.

This determination has effectively allowed the Colombian forces to strike deep into trafficker and FARC/ELN/AUC-held areas. As many of you know, that has called for a substantial commitment in helicopter airlift resources. But Congress has been there. For Plan Colombia, the combination of congressional and INL leadership has created a Colombian Army helicopter airlift capability of 72 helicopters to support the Brigade, and has increased support for 66 helicopters of the Colombian National Police.

Lest cynics try to bend your ear, so far in 2003, this Counternarcotics Brigade has destroyed 15 cocaine hydrochloride and 278 base labs, seized over 4 tons of cocaine and dismantled five FARC base camps.

In another sign of progress, the Colombian National Police have destroyed 71 cocaine hydrochloride and 239 base labs. Further, on the strength of your commitment, they have seized over 41 tons of drugs, mostly refined cocaine.

I would like to note that we are not alone in supporting these Plan Colombia successes. In 2001 and 2002, the Colombian Government spent less than 3.5% of GDP on security. Today, in 2003, the Colombian Government is spending 3.8% of GDP on security, with plans to spend 5.8% by 2006.

There is also measurable progress – and a quantum leap in the potential for success – in other areas. In April 2003, the U.S. and Colombian Governments concluded a new Airbridge Denial Program Agreement. On August 18, following a thorough certification of procedures and interagency agreement, the President signed the Determination to allow the United States Government to resume assistance to the program.

Since then, the Colombian Air Force has worked with INL's contractors, DOD's Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South), and the Narcotics Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá to identify and intercept aircraft reasonably suspected of narcotics trafficking, using a tightly vetted checklist of safety procedures that are designed to ensure the safety of civilian aircraft and which are certified annually.

Already, the program has resulted in the destruction or capture of five aircraft, the seizure of one go-fast boat, and the seizure of approximately 5.6 metric tons (mt) of cocaine. Interestingly, these 5.6 mt of cocaine were seized in Guatemala as a result of the Colombian Air Force's handoff to JIATF-South of information on three suspect aircraft leaving Colombian airspace.

But there is more to this comprehensive effort to establish a stable, rural environment than merely eradicating crops, reinforcing police, stopping rogue aircraft from transiting drugs and stirring regional self-interest to life. Under Plan Colombia, there is new emphasis on long-term institution building. There is a new way of thinking about reinforcing the will of the Colombian People. We have supported, through your assistance and in cooperation with the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice, numerous programs, many of which are implemented by the United States Department of Justice, to establish and maintain special human rights units, to reform the country's criminal code, to improve money laundering and asset forfeiture regimes and to provide for witness protection in key cases. Already there has been a 25% increase in money-laundering prosecutions and a 42% increase in asset forfeiture cases.

In truth, I think the leadership of President Uribe has already begun a paradigm shift that follows from his own rethinking and re-prioritizing of Colombia's needs. He plainly sees a need to reestablish permanent central government control outside the urban areas of Colombia. He is encouraging us to support alternative development efforts that will set the stage for long-term development, and a sustainable, legal economy in regions now victimized by drug trafficking and terrorist-domination.

I defer to my colleague, Adolfo Franco, for the specific achievements and vision associated with our development efforts under Plan Colombia. But no one should argue that progress is not real and meaningful, and generating a sound return on the present investment. Without the leadership of the U.S. Congress, we would not be here now announcing real progress.

In doing all of this, we also must not ignore the rest of the region. Plan Colombia will only succeed if we can hold on to U.S.-supported counternarcotics successes in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.

As recent political events in Bolivia attest, those gains cannot be taken for granted, and we must buttress the efforts of these governments as we anticipate the "balloon effect" – whereby anti-narcotics efforts in one country may increase narcotics production in a different country – which will result from our successes in dismantling the narcotics and terrorism infrastructure in Colombia.

With U.S. assistance, both countries have been able to reduce coca production dramatically. Peru anticipates meeting its goal of eradicating 8,000 hectares of coca this year, and we must work with the new government in Bolivia to ensure that it understands the importance of sustaining its counternarcotics efforts in the face of trafficker pressures.

Ecuador's northern border remains under the shadow of Colombian traffickers and terrorists that could cross the Colombian border to establish drug trafficking at any time. Our funding is a critical bulwark to supporting Ecuadorian police and military efforts to maintain order along that border.

Ultimately, the intent of the Administration is to provide for a robust, self-sustaining regional counternarcotics effort, with Colombia's leadership a template for the future in the region.

U.S. programs in Colombia represent a response to one of the most important challenges that we confront today. No more compelling argument for this exists than the 21,683 Americans who died this year at the hands illegal and addictive drugs. The issues raised by Colombian narcotics trafficking and terrorism directly affect U.S. national security, the survival of Colombian democracy, and the stability of the entire Andean region.

In short, I believe the commitment already shown by President Uribe and consistently supported by the U.S. Congress represents a unique opportunity for both of our countries to make serious, significant, and enduring progress in combating drugs, and in turn, the terrorism that drug profits support. Thank you.

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