

# **THE DECISIVE PHASE OF COLOMBIA'S WAR ON NARCO-TERRORISM**

by

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# The Decisive Phase of Colombia's War on Narco-Terrorism

Dario E. Teicher



Figure 1. Areas of Greatest Enemy Activity in 2001<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

### Background

The chapter “The Colombian War and the Narco-Terrorist Threat” published in *The Homeland Security Papers: Stemming the Tide of Terror* defined the strategic value of Colombia to the U.S., identified the enemies

besieging the government of Colombia, and illustrated what remains a difficult conflict to resolve. It also concluded that perhaps the war in Colombia, which appeared to be a lost cause in late 2001, was in fact entering the decisive phase.<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on this definitive period, where in late 2004 victory is perhaps within Colombia's grasp.

In early 2002, the final days of Colombian President Andres Pastrana's administration were marred by an unending internal war against right wing and leftist narco-terrorists and criminal cartels. During his administration the narco-terrorists reached their zenith of power (see Figure 1). For example, the right-wing paramilitary groups, under the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) umbrella organization, were demanding legal status and greater political power. The two major leftist groups, the largest being the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and the other the *Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional* (ELN), threatened the capital and were able to operate in every region of Colombia. Furthermore, all of these groups were well armed due to the immense sums of narco-dollars, which maintain them in the field to this day.<sup>3</sup>

In a desperate bid for peace, President Pastrana ceded to the FARC a vast safe-haven (approximately the size of Switzerland), known as the Zona del Despeje (see Figure 1), in exchange for participation in peace talks. Regardless, the FARC continued illicit trafficking and even engaged in terrorist acts while "talking peace." A similar offer was under consideration for dealing with the ELN.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Drug Cartels**

As discussed in "The Colombian War and the Narco-Terrorist Threat,"<sup>5</sup> the notorious Colombian Cartels of the 1980s were "rolled up" and gave way to

"...many small technologically and socially sophisticated, and less integrated cartels. In other words, the new drug lords of Colombia blend well into high society and are not excessive in their use of violence."<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the Plan Colombia mission statement has as an emphasis to "...break the links, between the illegal armed groups and the

criminal drug industry that supports them.”<sup>7</sup> Without the illegal armed groups, the cartels simply can become a police matter, although one should expect continued U.S. and Colombian military support.

Current Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez's priority is to force the illegal armed groups to the peace table or militarily defeat them. He is focused on the military threat posed by these narco-terrorist groups, which can seize and hold terrain to create “ungoverned space” (a lawless area).

## **II. Plan Colombia**

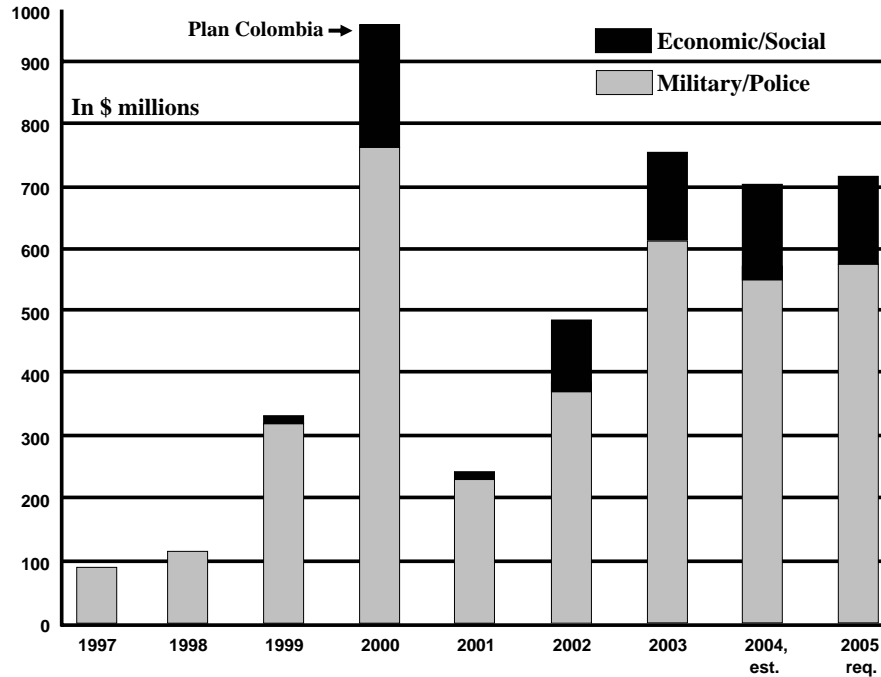
### **The Focus of Plan Colombia**

President Pastrana ran on a peace platform. He intended to make peace with the FARC (the most powerful of the narco-terrorist groups), while seeking radical social reforms to make peace and tranquility possible and permanent. His vehicle was Plan Colombia, a six-year strategy to overhaul almost every aspect of Colombian society.<sup>8</sup>

The plan was developed with considerable U.S. assistance and in essence focused on five critical areas:

- Curbing narco-trafficking
- Reforming the justice system
- Fostering democratization and social development
- Stimulating economic growth
- Advancing the peace process<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, it is not a war plan but instead a national strategy to achieve social change and peace. Despite financial and political difficulties, the plan remains the foundation for victory in Colombia.



*Figure 2. U.S. Foreign Aid to Colombia (1997-2005)*<sup>10</sup>

### Funding Plan Colombia

President Pastrana envisioned a \$7.5 billion budget to execute Plan Colombia. Colombia pledged \$4.0 billion, while calling on the international community to provide the remaining \$3.5 billion.<sup>11</sup>

Plan Colombia was launched in October 1999, with high expectations. One year later it became apparent the international community, led by the European Union, had balked and Colombia could only muster national funds totaling less than half of its stated goal. One explanation given was that members of the international community did not agree to more military aid and regarded Plan Colombia as a fig leaf for increasing military assistance and U.S. involvement.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, more than 75% of the U.S. Plan Colombia grant was aimed at the military and the national police (see Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> The European Union was right but more U.S. military assistance became vital after President

Pastrana's failed peace attempt. The peace talks dragged for over three years, consuming the Pastrana administration and stalling military operations against the FARC.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, Pastrana did achieve one major goal under Plan Colombia. The initiative served to more meaningfully commit the United States to assisting Colombia.<sup>15</sup> Figure 2 illustrates the year 2000 (Plan Colombia U.S. aid package) as the high-water mark of U.S. assistance but there's every indication Colombia will continue to receive sufficient aid and well above the pre-Plan Colombia years.

### **III. President Alvaro Uribe Velez Assumes Power**

#### **Security First**

On January 9, 2002, Colombia's President Andres Pastrana's peace initiative ended in absolute failure as government Peace Commissioner Camilo Gomez declared the end of the Despeje.<sup>16</sup> The decision was purely academic because on August 7, 2002, President-elect Alvaro Uribe would assume office promising an uncompromising hard-line towards the narco-terrorists.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Plan Colombia remains the strategic foundation for waging Colombia's war on narco-terrorism but the emphasis has changed to "advancing the peace process" from a position of strength. Therefore, the Uribe administration at the outset assumed three fundamental tasks:

- Reacquire national territory
- Establish permanent government presence...to provide law and order, development opportunities, and other services
- Negotiate with the three illegal armed groups to end the fighting<sup>18</sup>

President Uribe is committed to the achievement of these tasks, which are at the core of his administration's "Democratic Defense and Security Policy (DSP)." The thrust of the DSP is

"...to provide the state with the capacity to confront illegal armed groups by controlling more territory with more troops and newly created special military and police



units... While its goal is to defeat the insurgents, the DSP does not close the door on the possibility of negotiated settlements. On June 29, 2003, President Uribe symbolically launched the DSP in Putumayo...[However,] Implementation of most of the measures contemplated in the DSP began immediately following Uribe's inauguration."<sup>19</sup>

Through the DSP, President Uribe means to shape the strategic environment in favor of Colombia to give peace a chance, something Pastrana failed to do. Uribe is steadfast in his belief that without a secure environment the social and economic issues identified in Plan Colombia cannot be achieved. During a recent interview, President Uribe said,

"Poverty and misery are induced because of terrorist activity... Because of violence people do not invest, and in the absence of investment, it is impossible to create employment, it is impossible to affiliate people to social security, it is impossible to collect taxes, it is impossible to pay public debts, it is impossible to expand social investment..."<sup>20</sup>

### **Uribe Mobilizes Colombia**

The election of President Uribe has revitalized Plan Colombia. Particularly, he is focused on the interdiction of narco trafficking and forcing peace on his terms. Uribe's two pillars to achieve success are to genuinely commit Colombia to the war effort and to ensure continued U.S. assistance.

In 2001, the Colombian Armed Forces numbered 125,000 in a nation of over 40 million people; meaning approximately 0.3% of the population was under arms, with only 30,000 soldiers actually engaged in counterinsurgency operations.<sup>21</sup> By comparison, during El Salvador's civil war (1980-92), a small nation of 5 million people mobilized an armed force of over 50,000 (one percent of the population), which forced the insurgents to the peace table and demobilization.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, within days of the inauguration, Uribe's administration announced several measures (later incorporated into the DSP) to commit the nation to the war effort:

- Uribe quickly promulgated a decree invoking emergency powers, which provides authority to recruit quickly up to 6,000 soldiers for two elite mobile brigades, as well as 10,000 new police officers and 100,000 civilian informers...
- He imposed a 1.2% war tax on approximately 400,000 upper income individuals and businesses...to raise the \$800 million needed for an expanded military effort.
- He initiated the Plan Meteor unarmed citizen police informant network.
- His administration announced a plan to arm thousands of peasants (news accounts cited some 15,000 – 20,000 [campesino soldiers]) to be the first line of defense against guerillas and paramilitaries in areas where there is no military presence.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, even though Plan Colombia calls for a 50% reduction in cocaine production in six years, the Pastrana administration seriously limited aerial fumigation of coca fields.<sup>24</sup> President Uribe removed all restrictions on aerial spraying and is nearly meeting the goals set in Plan Colombia.<sup>25</sup> According to the 2004 U.N. World Drug Report, Colombia by 2003 had experienced a 30% decrease in cocaine production since 1999, which is considered the peak year for coca cultivation.<sup>26</sup> In fact, coca production has been in a steady decline every year since 2001 and Uribe means to force the downward trend until "...not one gram of cocaine, not one gram of heroin, would come out of Colombia."<sup>27</sup>

### **U.S. Military Assistance**

U.S. Southern Command (the U.S. military regional command responsible for security cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean) is assisting Colombia in perhaps consolidating victory during this window of opportunity presented by the election of President Alvaro Uribe. According to General James T. Hill, Commander, U.S. Southern Command:

"President Uribe is a unique leader who has galvanized the will of the people and motivated his armed forces. He has

personally demonstrated that one individual can change the course of events. Without his personal leadership, energy, and dedication, I don't think the Colombians would have achieved the remarkable progress we have seen. Yet his personal charisma and drive only go so far, and he well knows it. That is why he is building the structures to sustain momentum and institutionalize success beyond that of his term and beyond that of Plan Colombia."<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, U.S. Southern Command is managing and applying available U.S. security cooperation resources to assist Uribe in sustaining momentum. For 2005, in addition to continued support for fumigation and other counter-narcotics programs, the Bush administration has requested from Congress assistance for Colombia, which includes:

- Operational support (training, supplies, repair parts maintenance and infrastructure) and specialized equipment, including weapons, night vision goggles and communications, to the Army. The focus of this support will be on the elite mobile brigades, the Rapid Reaction brigade (known by the Spanish acronym FUDRA) and the Comando and Lancero Battalions.
- The Colombian Army 5th Mobile and 18th Infantry Brigades, trained in 2003 to provide protection to the Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline, a key element of Colombia's economic infrastructure, will receive additional munitions, equipment and training.
- ...Establishing a national training center and developing an automated logistical system.
- FMF [Foreign Military Financing] funding [to]...support the Colombian Navy and Air Force and include the provision of interdiction boats, additional combat aircraft, training and infrastructure improvements, maintenance and operational support for Colombia's C-130 transportation fleet.
- ...Funds to purchase battlefield medical treatment, CSAR [combat search and rescue] and medevac-related equipment and training for Army and Air Force units.

- FMF...[support for] naval interdiction programs by providing secure communications equipment, spare parts, and assistance to establish an operations center.
- Riverine forces...[receiving] spare parts and other logistic support.
- The AKI [Anti-Kidnapping Initiative], which provides tactical and investigative training and equipment to the Colombian Government's military and police anti-kidnapping units (Unified Action Groups for Personal Liberty -Spanish acronym "GAULA".) It is also assisting in the establishment of an interagency anti-kidnapping Joint Task Force, developing an interagency database to collect, analyze and disseminate information on kidnappings and assist in upgrading Colombian facilities. Three GAULA units have completed training.<sup>29</sup>

One more item that is making a difference is the Planning Assistance Teams (PAT) program. These teams are assigned to key Colombian military operational-level (or higher) headquarters, where they assist in planning and coordination, and represent U.S. commitment to the war on narco-terror.<sup>30</sup>

These teams, along with the U.S. Embassy Country Team, have been eyewitnesses to President Uribe's mobilization of Colombia and the decisive edge provided by adequate U.S. support. Currently, the PATs and the other U.S. assistance programs are contributing to what many regarded as impossible two years ago, a Colombia on the strategic offensive, which may push the narco-terrorists to a final defeat or the peace table on the Colombian Government's terms.

### **Restrictions on U.S. Military Assistance**

Initially, under Plan Colombia and prior, the U.S. Congress created an imaginary separation between narcotics interdiction and counter-terrorism, where Congress wanted to ensure no possibility of direct U.S. involvement against the narco-terrorists. For example, under the Plan Colombia grant, "...helicopters, training and other assistance [went] to three Colombian Army *counter-narcotics* battalions," which was an artificial differentiation

from *counter-insurgency* and included operational restrictions, which limited the units to obvious narcotics trafficking targets.<sup>31</sup>

In the aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. Congress has agreed with the Bush administration. The President's 2002 National Security Strategy announced, "In Colombia, we recognize the link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the state, and drug trafficking activities that help finance the operations of such groups."<sup>32</sup> Congress calls it; "...*Expanded Authority* to use counter-drug funds for counter-terrorism missions in Colombia because it concluded that there is no useful distinction between a narco-trafficker and his terrorist activity – hence, the term *narco-terrorist*..."<sup>33</sup>

Regardless, the U.S. Congress expressed concern "...about "mission creep" – the possibility that U.S. personnel may find themselves embroiled in Colombia's conflict." As a result, a provision that first appeared in the 2000 Plan Colombia aid package and has been renewed each year established a maximum of 400 U.S. military personnel and 400 U.S. citizen contractors, who could be in Colombia at any given time.<sup>34</sup> For fiscal year 2005 and 2006, the U.S. Congress voted an increase to the "Colombia Cap" of 800 military personnel and 600 civilian contractors.<sup>35</sup> However, the law still forbids the U.S. Armed Forces, including contractors, from participating in any combat operation.<sup>36</sup> Note: On February 13, 2003, three defense contractors were captured by the FARC following the crash of their aircraft. The Colombian Cap would not apply to a future U.S. rescue attempt.<sup>37</sup>

## **IV. President Uribe Seizes the Initiative**

### **The Strategic Objectives of Plan Colombia**

U.S. policymakers have acknowledged the intertwined nature of the enemy, i.e., the blend of the narcotics trade with terrorism. Therefore, the Plan Colombia Strategic Objectives serve Uribe to focus a broad war on narco-terrorism. The six objectives are:

- Strengthen the fight against drug trafficking and dismantle the trafficking organizations through an integrated effort by the armed forces.

- Strengthen the judicial system and combat corruption.
- Neutralize the drug trade's financial system and seize the resources for the state.
- Neutralize and combat the agents of violence allied with the drug trade.
- Integrate national initiatives into regional and international efforts.
- Strengthen and expand plans for alternative development to the areas affected by drug trafficking.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, Plan Colombia has a stated goal, which says, "Over the next six years, the goal is to reduce the cultivation, processing, and distribution of narcotics by 50%."<sup>39</sup> However, President Uribe's aim is 'zero tolerance' and peace through strength to force the illegal armed groups to demobilize. Consequently, while Plan Colombia initially called for the military to primarily "strengthen the fight against drug trafficking..." Uribe correctly revised the main effort to, "neutralize and combat the agents of violence allied with the drug trade."

### **The Phases of Plan Colombia**

Plan Colombia presents three strategic phases to end the Colombian conflict:

- Phase 1: Short-range military, police and judicial effort aimed at Putumayo and the south and planned for one year.
- Phase 2: Medium-range military, police, judicial and social effort aimed at the southeastern and central parts of the country, and planned for 2-3 years.
- Phase 3: Extend the integrated effort throughout the country over 3-6 years.<sup>40</sup>

In December 2001, Phase 1 of Plan Colombia began with the introduction of two U.S. trained, counter-narcotic (CN) focused, battalions and their CN brigade headquarters. A third CN battalion would be ready in May 2002. Accordingly, the CN brigade was deployed to Putumayo and Caquetá;<sup>41</sup> two cocaine rich departments in the southwest of Colombia

(see Figure 3). By any measure, this unit is one of the best equipped and trained in the Colombian Army. According to Major General Gary D. Speer, who was Acting Commander, U.S. Southern Command, "The FARC now avoids head-on engagements against the Colombian military in Putumayo and Caquetá Departments because of the training and capabilities of the CN Brigade."<sup>42</sup>

On January 11, 2002, with the collapse of the peace talks, President Andres Pastrana ordered 10,000 government troops to eliminate the Despeje (see Figure 1). In accordance with the terms of the peace talks, Pastrana granted the FARC 48-hours to depart, which they used to withdraw in good order. Later, the military entered but, without a plan to stay, the land would soon return to being "ungoverned space" and a possible killing ground for right wing or leftist terror. One campesino (peasant farmer) echoed the sentiments of the inhabitants by saying, "We were scared before the troops left, scared of the guerillas while they were here, and we're scared of what will come next. We're kind of used to being scared."<sup>43</sup> It was a false start to Phase 2 of Plan Colombia.

## **FARC Activity Prior to Phase 2**

Through 2000, FARC terrorist activity in the center of the country increased. The FARC 53rd Front began systematic terrorist attacks against 55 municipalities in the departments of Cundinamarca and Meta. In response, the Colombian military launched a series of small inconclusive offensives against the 53rd Front.<sup>44</sup>

In 2001, as "peace talks" staggered, the FARC threatened to conduct an urban terrorist campaign in Bogotá and other major urban centers.<sup>45</sup> By 2002, FARC urban terrorism was accelerating. Bogotá and other cities were under siege. For example, "On April 14, 2002, FARC urban militias exploded a bomb in Barranquilla in a failed attempt to kill front running Colombian presidential candidate Alvaro Uribe."<sup>46</sup> Also, Uribe's inauguration was greeted with another attempt on his life, when a "...suspected rebel mortar attack rocked Bogotá... Three of the blasts went off just blocks from the parliament building where Mr. Uribe was taking the oath of office."<sup>47</sup>

In 2003, it was Uribe's turn to strike back effectively and with measurable results. In the center of Colombia, the government forces were

gaining the upper hand. A major setback for the FARC was "...the killing of five midlevel FARC commanders in Cundinamarca Department near Bogotá..." by government forces.<sup>48</sup> By the end of 2003, "The Colombian military effectively cleared the area around Bogotá of terrorist fighters."<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, in Arauca, the U.S. training of the Colombian 5th Mobile and 18th Infantry Brigades showed dramatic results defending the Caño Limon Oil Pipeline (see Figure 3). Primarily the ELN, but also the FARC, attacked the pipeline a record 170 times in 2001, shutting-down oil-flow all year, with the spills causing an environmental nightmare. Fortunately, throughout 2003, the narco-terrorists were under pressure and only able to muster "...below two dozen..." attacks.<sup>50</sup>



*Figure 3. Plan Patriota*<sup>51</sup>



## **Phase 2: Plan Patriota**

By all accounts, Uribe is courageous, a workaholic, and a demanding taskmaster. He is a “man of action” and expects the same from his generals or they will be removed. To which Uribe says, “I demand a great deal from them. In Colombia, our entire future depends on advancing the security agenda.”<sup>52</sup>

By June 2004, with U.S. equipment and training sufficiently absorbed, reliable U.S. assistance flowing under “Expanded Authorities,” and his aggressive philosophy understood by his generals, President Uribe launched Colombia's most ambitious military offensive. News organizations were soon reporting on Plan Patriota and over 17,000 Colombian soldiers advancing into the FARC heartland.<sup>53</sup>

Phase 2 of Plan Colombia was well underway. As illustrated in Figure 3, the main effort is the methodical advance into the old Despeje and other south-central areas of previously ungoverned space. The other ongoing operations (see Figure 3) serve to support the main effort and include:

- The interdiction of narcotics in Putumayo and the FARC lines of communications leading into Ecuador.
- Clearing operations in Cundinamarca and Meta to maintain the security of the capital.
- Operations in Arauca and along the oil pipeline to keep the oil flowing and pressure the ELN.

The challenge for Plan Patriota “...is to recover and maintain control...over a vast territory that has long been under FARC influence.” It will be a long and difficult operation, but Uribe intends to retain control of acquired territories, to establish law and order, and to continue to offer peace on his terms.<sup>54</sup>

## **V. Measures of Effectiveness**

### **The Effort to Reelect Uribe**

President Alvaro Uribe was elected to end the violence by imposing a hard-line on the narco-terrorists. With a 70% popularity rating, "...most Colombians think he has delivered."<sup>55</sup> If the measure of success for a politician is reelection, then Uribe should be well on his way. Unfortunately, Title VII, Chapter I, Article 197 of the Colombian Constitution, prohibits a second 4-year term.<sup>56</sup>

In a recent interview, Luis Edgar Devia Silva, a.k.a. Raul Reyes of the FARC Secretariat, discussed the FARC strategy in response to Plan Patriota. It is to retreat deeper into the vast wilderness of Southern Colombia, prepared to resume attacks, and there wait for President Uribe's term to expire in August 2006.<sup>57</sup>

However, polls released on August 8, 2004, by leading Bogotá daily *El Tiempo* indicated that 68% of the people favored Uribe's reelection. Additionally, President Uribe who ran as an independent has the support of Colombia's Conservative Party and enough members of the other major party (The Liberals) may be breaking ranks "...in favor of a presidential reelection bill..." If election politics continue to unfold along current lines, the narco-terrorists may be awaiting Uribe's departure until 2010.<sup>58</sup>

### **Demobilization of the AUC**

From the outset, President Uribe has indicated he would treat the AUC on a par with the FARC and ELN, and "...he would seek dialogue with those groups operating outside the law, on the condition that they give up terrorism and agree to a cease-fire." His predecessor never dealt with the AUC.<sup>59</sup>

In October 2002, Colombia's High Commissioner for Peace, Dr. Luis Carlos Restrepo Ramírez, and five Roman Catholic Bishops met with the AUC leadership. As a result, the AUC declared an indefinite cessation of hostilities. Some member groups concurred and others did not. Nonetheless, by December 2003, President Uribe was ready to appoint a commission to explore the demobilization of the AUC.<sup>60</sup>

Although often accused of tolerating right wing abuses, the Colombian Government has cracked down on paramilitary groups that have not joined the AUC cease-fire and the demobilization talks. One example is the Casanare Peasant Self-Defense Forces (ACC), which is in great disarray having recently suffered serious casualties inflicted by the Colombian military including the wounding of the ACC leader.<sup>61</sup>

For the AUC, demobilization has caused the fracture of what already was loosely knit groups. When leaders of the three eastern blocs (Centaurus, Self Defense Forces of Meta and Vichada, and Arauca Victors) agreed to disarm, violence erupted among the member groups. For example, on September 21, 2004, opponents to demobilization killed Miguel Arroyave (leader of the 6,000 strong Centaurus Bloc).<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the leaders of 10,000 – 12,000 self-defense group members are involved in peace talks, while another 2,000 – 4,000 remain outside the process. Estimates are that already 3,500 members from the various illegal groups have accepted demobilization.<sup>63</sup>

### **The State of Dialogue with the FARC and ELN**

In January 2002, President Uribe tried to engage in quiet dialogue with the ELN. However, by December 2002, the ELN suspended the talks claiming that Uribe's stubbornness, the enlistment of campesino soldiers, the use of citizen informants, etc., were all leading the country away from peace and towards an expanded "unjust war."<sup>64</sup>

One more factor weighing on the ELN leaders is the history of leftists seeking to work within Colombia's political system. For example, in 1985, the FARC formally established the Patriotic Union (UP) Party to legally run candidates in the electoral process and through 1988, "...over 3,000 UP members and 150 elected officials would (have) be (been) assassinated..."<sup>65</sup> Not surprisingly, the FARC continues to reject U.N. mediators' in their attempts to open a dialogue between the rebel group and the government.<sup>66</sup>

However, Uribe has dramatically changed the security environment in Colombia. The country remains, for example, the kidnap capital of the world but the trends are undeniably positive. In 2003, the overall homicide rate dropped by 20%, terrorist incidents dropped by 49%, and kidnappings by 39%. These trends continue into 2004.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, the government and armed forces of Colombia have met criteria set by the U.S. Congress related to human rights. Specifically, the U.S. State Department official statement of September 24, 2004, says:

...That the Colombian Armed Forces are suspending military officers credibly alleged to have committed gross violations of human rights or to have aided or abetted paramilitary organizations, cooperating with civilian prosecutors and judicial authorities in prosecuting and punishing such members, severing links with paramilitary organizations, and dismantling paramilitary leadership and financial networks; and that the Colombian Government is prosecuting and punishing those members of the Armed Forces credibly alleged to have committed gross violations of human rights or to have aided or abetted paramilitary organizations.<sup>68</sup>

Colombian military professionalism is also reflected in public opinion, where the armed forces are second only to the Church as the most respected institution in Colombia. Further evidence is the demobilization program, where 77% of the illegal combatants who desert, have surrendered to the government forces knowing their human rights will be respected.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, whereas no dialogue exists between the leftist groups and the government, the battlefield success of the armed forces, coupled to a growing demobilization program, is making it difficult for the illegal groups to fill their ranks. To date, the AUC has formally demobilized approximately 1,000 combatants. Additionally, the leftist groups have suffered over 2,000 desertions, with reports of "...deteriorating living conditions...plummeting morale...and internal discipline [being] enforced with harsh measures."<sup>70</sup>

### **The Consolidation of Colombia and U.S. Socioeconomic Support**

As already discussed, Plan Patriota operations are the main effort to recover ungoverned space in the FARC-controlled south-central regions of Colombia. Furthermore, actions are being taken by all government agencies "...to consolidate state presence throughout Colombia." For example, U.S. trained "Carabinero squadrons," which are rural mobile

police, support the "...Colombian National Police units now deployed in every single municipality (1,098 total) in Colombia, (thus) fulfilling a key commitment undertaken by President Uribe at the outset of his administration."<sup>71</sup>

In this process of state consolidation, the United States is a vital partner. The U.S. Plan Colombia aid package addressed non-military state consolidation issues and represents over 25% of the \$860 million grant, not including equipment and training for the national police. A review of the list of programs and initiatives financed under each component of the 2000 Plan Colombia grant, shows that socioeconomic programs for state consolidation were well represented (these programs are highlighted in italics below).

**I. Support for Human Rights and Judicial Reform.**

- *Protecting non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with human rights*
- *Strengthening human rights institutions*
- *Establishing human rights units within the Colombian National Police (CNP) and the Colombian attorney general's office*
- *Training judges and prosecutors*
- *Providing funding to train and support Colombian law enforcement personnel in anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, and anti-kidnapping measures*

**II. Expansion of Counter-Narcotics Operations into Southern Colombia.**

- Training and equipping the second and third counter-narcotics battalions in the Colombian Army
- Procurement and support of 14 UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters; procurement, refurbishment, and support of 30 UH-1H Huey II helicopters
- Support for 15 UH-1N helicopters for use by the Colombian army
- *Help for persons displaced by conflict in the region*

- *Developmental assistance, including technical and agricultural assistance to farmers in southern Colombia*

### **III. Alternative Economic Development.**

- *Support alternative and economic development programs in Colombia to assist small farmers who now grow coca and opium poppies*
- *Assist internally displaced persons*
- *Voluntary eradication programs*
- *Assistance to local governments*
- *Environmental programs to protect fragile lands and watersheds*

### **IV. Increased Interdiction.**

- Upgrading the radar systems in four U S Customs Service P-3 airborne early warning interdiction aircraft
- Upgrading the Colombian Air Force OV-10 aircraft
- Support Colombian air interdiction programs,
- Support and provision Colombia's riverine interdiction program
- Support the Colombian navy's counter-narcotics intelligence infrastructure

### **V. Assistance for the Colombian National Police.**

- Procurement, training, and support for two UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters
- Funds to procure 12 UH-1H Huey II helicopters
- Funds to purchase Ayers S2R T-65 agricultural spray aircraft and OV-10 aircraft
- Funds were also available for communications equipment, ammunition, spare parts, training, and logistical support<sup>72</sup>

Estimates are the United States will continue to provide over \$700 million in total aid per fiscal year to Colombia for the foreseeable future.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, despite the priorities of waging combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. Government is committed to assisting Colombia in achieving final victory in the war on narco-terror.

## **VI. Conclusions**

### **Plan Colombia Remains Relevant**

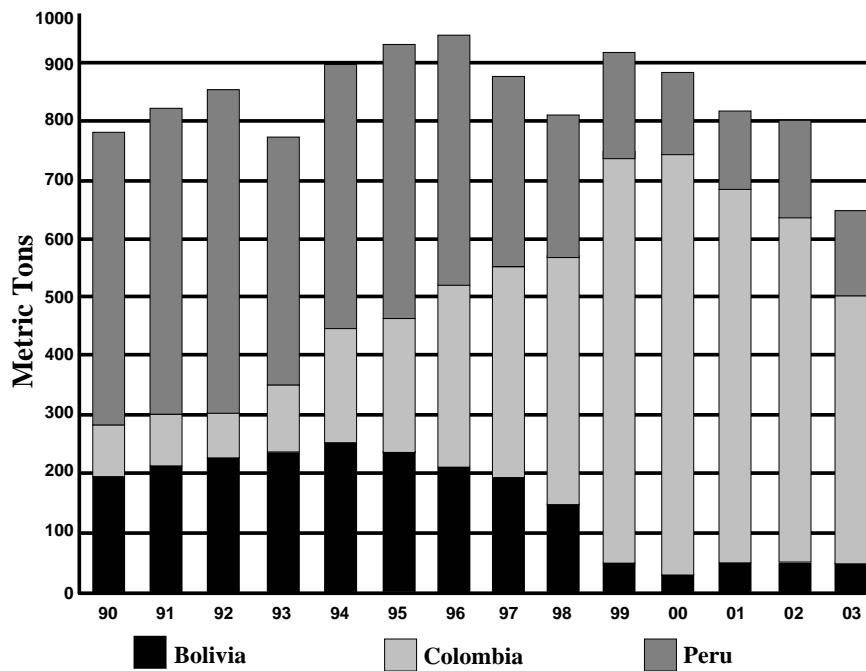
Plan Colombia was drafted as a six-year counter narcotics plan, which would end in 2006. In fairness to the plan, it was never funded to capacity making the timeline flawed. Nonetheless, the intertwined nature of counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism means the focus of the plan and its strategic objectives remain relevant. Narco trafficking is being curbed through efforts such as aerial eradication and the employment of the Counter Narcotics Brigade.

Meanwhile, military operations, the largest being Plan Patriota, are breaking the link between the terrorist groups and the narcotics industry. Within the context of Plan Colombia, President Uribe is shaping the strategic-operational environment to force demobilization and to forge an advantageous peace with all illegal armed groups.

Key to his success has been Expanded Authorities and U.S. training and equipment, which have provided the edge. No combination of leftist fronts or AUC paramilitary groups can directly take on the mobile brigades and other elite formations of the Colombian military. Also, the revised "Colombia Cap" means U.S. personnel will be able to support full-scale operations across the depth of the country. Therefore, Colombia may soon be ready to transition into Plan Colombia, Phase 3.

In short, Colombia does not need a new strategic plan but it will need a new operational plan to follow up the success of Plan Patriota and to execute Phase 3 of Plan Colombia. Consequently, future U.S. funding and personnel must be prepared to support a new execution plan to Phase 3, in what may be the final offensive of a forty-year war.

### **The Possible Spillover of the Narcotics Trade**



*Figure 4. Cocaine Production 1990 - 2003*<sup>74</sup>

The Plan Patriota offensive has dislocated FARC operations. As admitted by FARC Commander Raul Reyes, leftist forces are retreating deep into the south of Colombia. Every indication is that while Uribe is President, he will be relentless in pursuit and keep to a “zero tolerance” narcotics policy.

Figure 4 shows cocaine production in the “source zone.” Since the mid-1990s, Peru and Bolivia witnessed dramatic drops in cocaine production. Unfortunately, the reductions in Peru and Bolivia were offset by equally dramatic cocaine production increases in Colombia.

The October 1999 start of Plan Colombia coincides with the beginning of a cocaine production downward trend in Colombia, which has accelerated during the Uribe years. There already is evidence of



FARC and other Colombian cocaine enterprises spilling into all countries bordering Colombia and beyond, such as, Bolivia and Paraguay.<sup>75</sup> As pressure continues to increase narco traffickers in Colombia, one may see a major spike in drug trafficking in one or more of these countries.

It is a situation, which U.S. Southern Command must monitor carefully and be prepared to sound the alarm. Timely security cooperation with Peru, Bolivia, and other potential spillover countries, should occur within the context of a regional Counter Narcotics strategy to avoid the possible “Colombianization” of another country in the future.

### **The Consolidation of Military Success may be in Doubt**

One election can have tremendous historic significance on the fortunes of a country if the gains can be consolidated. In two years, President Alvaro Uribe has achieved more to end the Colombian conflict than many would have imagined possible. He did this by keeping to the “three fundamental tasks” of not relinquishing acquired territories, establishing law and order, and offering peace on his terms.

Uribe has mobilized Colombia's resources for war and is using U.S. security cooperation to gain the decisive edge. He has the leftists groups on the run and the right wing groups seriously talking peace. Also, most major trend indicators point in Colombia's favor. Murder and kidnapping rates are decreasing. Cocaine production continues to fall, and he has brought a national police presence to every municipality in Colombia.

There are two major concerns, which risk blemishing this success story. One is that President Uribe cannot run for reelection unless the Colombian Constitution is amended. If the efforts to amend the Constitution fail, the FARC and the other illicit traffickers are betting the next Colombian President will not be as dynamic. The second concern is Uribe's social and economic agenda, which recently received a serious setback.

General James Hill in testimony before Congress stated that Uribe was “...building the structures to sustain momentum....”<sup>76</sup> Clearly, with continued U.S. training and equipment, the Colombian security structure should retain its edge over the narco-terrorists but political fortitude in a post-Uribe Colombia is an unknown. Also, the program for reforming the economic and social structure must be addressed further.

In fact, in an effort to move his socioeconomic agenda, President Uribe brought a 15-point referendum before the Colombian public. On October 25, 2003, Colombians voted on each of the following points:

1. Persons that in any unlawful way have earned money from any official institution could never again be government employees or have contracts with any government institution.
2. That the vote of the congressional members should be nominal and public, so the people could know how each congress member votes on the different laws.
3. That the substitutes [someone who sits-in and votes] will be eliminated for the Congress, state corporations, and city councils.
4. That the Congress should be responsible for designing the National Expenditures Budget after publicly consulting with the country and its regions.
5. That members of Congress should not be involved in the administrative matters of the Congress. These functions should be executed by an independent entity.
6. To reduce the number of congressional members.
7. That members of congress, state corporation deputies, and city council members should lose their investiture for unlawful financing of their electoral campaigns or by unlawful management of public assets.
8. That government pensions cannot exceed 25 times the minimum national salary per month.
9. To eliminate the states' and counties' controllers. Their functions should be assumed by the General Country's Office of Controlling Public Spending which will help civic organizations, whether state or privately managed.
10. To eliminate the so-called "economic aids" [public campaign funds] given to members of congress.

11. That the savings obtained by eliminating the states' and counties' Offices of Controlling Public Spending should be only spent on education and health.
12. That the resources coming from oil or other royalties should be mainly for education and health.
13. No increases, for two years, of the functioning expenditures of the government and the salaries of public employees that earn more than two times the minimum national salary per month.
14. That the parties or political movements that do not have at least 2% of the total votes for Congress or 5% of the total votes for President cannot present candidates for national or local election.
15. That the referendum should apply as soon as it is voted for.<sup>77</sup>

Despite prior polling numbers indicating overwhelming support, 14 of 15 points failed and Uribe's effort to combat corruption and reform the nation's economy suffered a major setback. The one success was the first referendum item, which called for officials convicted of corruption to be barred from government employment.<sup>78</sup>

The following day in local elections, "One of the offices at stake was that of mayor of...Bogotá, the country's second most important elected office. By electing a former union leader and an outspoken critic of Uribe's security and economic policies, Luis Eduardo "Lucho" Garzon, as Bogotá's new mayor, voters again dealt a blow to Uribe."<sup>79</sup>

With the election of a leftist as mayor of Bogotá and the failure of the referendum, Uribe suffered two serious political defeats but he remains very popular with the Colombian people. Perhaps a combination of Election Day violence, vote fraud, and a prior Gallup poll finding of voter apathy, conspired against him.<sup>80</sup>

Colombia's problems are deeply rooted in a culture of violence, corruption, and economic inequality. President Uribe is addressing the violence, through effective security initiatives and combat operations, but Plan Colombia also calls for social and economic reform, and Uribe's referendum to address these issues failed. One must consider that Colombians are not heeding the warning, when Uribe says, "we have the snake almost defeated. If we let go now and allow it time to breathe, the snake not only will survive but will grow again."<sup>81</sup>

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## **USAF Counterproliferation Center**

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