

Executive Summary: A Compass for Colombia Policy

U.S. policy should use as its guiding compass supporting efforts in Colombia to strengthen human rights and govern more inclusively. Far from a few changes along the margins, this requires a change of heart: from a celebratory embrace of a particular administration to a more strategic response designed to end impunity and improve life for excluded sectors, especially the rural poor. It entails reshaping aid from a largely military focus to an emphasis on civilian governance. The most potent forces for change are within Colombia, and U.S. policy should support and empower the human rights defenders, victims, judges, prosecutors, government oversight staff, journalists, legislators, union leaders, and Afro-Colombian, indigenous and other community leaders who are the driving forces for a more just Colombia. From justice, other goals will advance: an end to the conflict, reduced power and corrupting influence of the drug trade, and a more prosperous and stable Colombia.

Seven Steps to a Just and Effective U.S. Policy

- 1 Use U.S. Aid and Leverage for Human Rights and the Rule of Law.** The United States should take a principled stance in favor of protecting human rights and strengthening the rule of law in Colombia. This requires a decided shift in U.S. diplomacy to a tougher approach that helps Colombia end impunity, protect human rights defenders, preserve the judiciary's independence and strengthen its capacity, and improve the security forces' human rights performance. U.S. policy must insist that the Colombian government fully dismantle paramilitary networks and support victims' efforts for truth, justice, and reparations.
- 2 Actively Support Overtures for Peace.** Now is a moment when careful, renewed efforts to achieve peace could progress. In a war that threatens to go on indefinitely, the immense suffering of the civilian population demands that Colombia, its neighbors, and members of the international community, including the United States, take risks to achieve peace. The United States must make clear its desire to see a negotiated outcome in the near term, support the involvement of mediators who can lay the groundwork for face-to-face dialogue, and back the Organization of American States and other regional forums that strengthen regional cooperation. Actively supporting peace also means that the United States cannot continue endlessly bankrolling war.
- 3 Support Expansion of the Government's Civilian Presence in the Countryside.** The key to peace in Colombia lies in governing rural zones in ways that address poverty and inequality. The U.S. government should reconfigure the Colombia aid package to focus on strengthening Colombia's civilian government, particularly its attention to the rural population. This assistance should include alternative development and rural development programs, expand access to justice, and strengthen local governments' capacity to deliver basic services. But U.S. aid is a temporary fix that should be designed to be phased out. U.S. policy should encourage the Colombian government to devote budget resources to and deliver sustainable, accountable basic government services to poor rural conflict zones.



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- 4 Protect the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees.** Colombia is second only to Sudan/Darfur in the number of internally displaced people (IDPs). The United States must make prevention of displacement and protection of IDPs a top priority. The U.S. government can help prevent displacement by insisting that the Colombian government dismantle paramilitary networks and that Colombia's armed forces respect the distinction between combatants and civilians. It should increase aid providing durable solutions for IDPs and refugees and encourage the Colombian government to abide by the Constitutional Court's landmark decision about its responsibilities to IDPs. U.S. policy should urge the Colombian government to insist upon return of land illegally held by demobilized ex-combatants.
- 5 Protect the Rights of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Communities.** The U.S. government should protect Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities that have been disproportionately affected by displacement and the ravages of war, with special attention to their vulnerable land rights. It should encourage the Colombian government to complete land titling for Afro-Colombian communities, call for full return of land to displaced communities, and guarantee that U.S. aid projects are not carried out on land obtained by violence. U.S. policymakers should use the human rights conditions in U.S. law to insist that the Colombia's armed forces not violate these communities' human rights and land rights.
- 6 Ensure that Trade Policy Supports, Not Undermines, Policy Goals towards Colombia.** The United States should insist on progress in respect for labor rights, especially in reducing violence against trade unionists and ending impunity in such cases, prior to any vote on a trade agreement. Any trade agreement should protect the livelihoods of Colombia's small farmers and make the reduction of poverty a central goal. This is not just a question of fairness: it ensures that a trade agreement will not undermine major U.S. policy goals, such as reducing small farmers' dependence upon coca and poppy, helping the government establish governance in the countryside, and ending the conflict.
- 7 Get Serious—and Smart—about Drug Policy.** The United States is overdue for a major course correction in its drug control strategy, in Colombia and the Andean region. The U.S. government must stop bankrolling the inhumane and disastrously ineffective aerial herbicide spray program, which has only served to deepen small farmers' reliance on crops for illicit use. With the goal of gradual and sustainable reductions in coca growing, the U.S. government should invest in alternative development programs designed and carried out in close coordination with affected communities. Drug enforcement efforts should focus higher up the distribution chain, disrupting money laundering, and apprehending violent traffickers and organized crime bosses. Most importantly, the administration and Congress should make improved access to high-quality drug treatment in the United States the centerpiece of American drug policy, with ambitious increases in funding for services and research. Without such a commitment to reducing demand for illicit drugs here at home, even the best efforts in Colombia will make little difference in either country.