

Understanding Colombia Series

US POLICY TOWARDS COLOMBIA

In Brief

- The *War on Drugs* initiated the close relationship between the US and Colombia. This policy led to a large aerial fumigation campaign – which negatively impacted human health and the environment, in addition to being ineffective and causing displacement.
- Plan Colombia has been the defining agreement between the US and Colombia under which Colombia receives military, economic, and social aid from the US.
- The *War on Terror* has made US-Colombia relations even closer.
- There is a pending Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries.
- US policy towards Colombia has largely been based on drugs and military spending. These policies, however, have not assisted Colombia to develop economically or to quell its internal conflict.

Background

Since the Cold War, and even prior, the US and Colombia have enjoyed friendly relations. With the initiation of the *War on Drugs* in 1968 by President Nixon, this relationship was defined along anti-narcotics policy. As of 1973, the US began to provide anti-drug funding to Colombia under a package of \$6 million per year for 4 years to train about 600 Colombian anti-drug personnel. In the next several years, there was a great deterioration in the human rights situation in the country. In 1984, the US State Department formally recognized the existence of the Paramilitaries – adding a new level to US-Colombia relations. By 1989, however, the focus of US policy towards Colombia had shifted back to drugs. Relations between both countries have been exceptionally strong over the past several years under the administrations of President Álvaro Uribe and President George W. Bush.



"You are my personal friend and your country is a strategic partner of the United States", George W. Bush told Colombian President Álvaro Uribe on March 11, 2007, during a seven-hour visit to Bogotá, Colombia.

(Web Photo)

Important Facts

War on Drugs: For more than twenty years, the Colombian government has sprayed chemical herbicides on illicit drug crops from low-flying planes with no success. With financial support from the US, in December 2000 the Colombian government significantly increased its effort to fumigate coca – the raw ingredient in cocaine. Although over one million acres of Colombian land have been sprayed since 1996, coca has just been pushed to new parts of the country and back to Bolivia and Peru. Fumigation is notoriously inaccurate. It has destroyed the livelihood and food crops of many impoverished family farmers, forcing them to abandon their homes, endure hunger, and consider joining the illegal armed groups out of desperation. The massive spraying program also threatens human health and the rich biodiversity of southern Colombia. Moreover, cocaine prices in the US have continued to remain low, while consumption has not reduced significantly.

Plan Colombia. In 1998, President Andrés Pastrana proposed a "Marshall Plan for Colombia." His plan proposed a \$7.5 billion effort aimed at social development and negotiating peace with the guerrillas. He sought domestic and international funding for this proposal, dubbed Plan Colombia. US policymakers, however, designed their own plan. In 2000, the US Congress passed a \$1.3 billion spending bill officially aimed at fighting drugs and supporting democracy in the Andean region, particularly in Colombia. While social and economic assistance was included, a staggering amount of US aid – over \$700 million worth – was pledged to Colombia's police and military in 2000, followed by hundreds of millions every year since. The majority of the aid consisted of Blackhawk and Huey helicopters and Special Forces training for Colombian troops to accompany anti-drug spray planes into guerrilla held territory in southern Colombia. Recently, the division of US aid shifted towards a more proportional ratio with 60% of the aid going toward military enforcement and 40% going toward social programs.

War on Terror: About a month after the September 11th attacks, then-US Ambassador Anne Patterson described Plan Colombia as an anti-terrorist policy. Following suit, on February 20, 2002, President Pastrana used the word terrorist to describe the FARC insurgents for the first time. Under this new realm of the *War on Terror*, the US Congress passed a bill in August of 2002 allocating emergency funding that revoked restrictions on US security assistance, effectively allowing the Colombian government to use these funds to directly combat the various illegal armed forces in Colombia.

Free Trade Agreement: Colombia and the United States have enjoyed a rather open commercial relationship over the years. In order to solidify this tie, there is a pending Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the United States and Colombia – which both governments are greatly supporting. President Uribe and his administration have strongly encouraged the US Congress to pass the FTA legislation. However, President Obama has had his concerns, calling the current events in Colombia a “human rights crisis.” Various factions of Colombia’s civil society are fiercely opposed to the proposed FTA. Indigenous Colombians fear that looser trade policies will turn into means to expropriate land and knowledge from tribes, leaving the indigenous worse off. Echoing these concerns, Afro-Colombians are concerned that new business ventures will lead to further displacement for their community. Colombian trade unionists, who already face threats by paramilitary actors, believe that the FTA with the US will turn into worse wages and poorer working conditions for Colombian workers. Small farmers also oppose the pending FTA because they fear that their products will no longer be competitive in the local market and could then lead to unemployment.

Alternatives: Instead of a policy heavily based on military aid and fumigation, better ways to assist Colombia and curb drug use include: providing aid for alternative development and other economic programs; strengthening civilian democratic institutions; supporting the peace process; insisting on respect for human rights and the rule of law; and lowering drug consumption in the US by expanding treatment programs.

"I'm proud to call [Uribe] a friend and strategic ally."

"I appreciate the [Colombian] president's determination to bring human rights violators to justice. ... I believe that, given a fair chance, President Uribe can make the case."

-Former-President George W. Bush

For More Information

Center for International Policy

www.ciponline.org

Latin America Working Group

www.lawg.org

United States Institute for Peace

www.usip.org

Washington Office on Latin America

www.wola.org

Take Action!

Write a letter or call your US Congressmen/women asking them to encourage the shifting of US policy towards Colombia from being a relationship based on fighting drugs and fighting terrorism, to one that is founded on means to develop Colombia and to stop its on-going internal conflict. To find the address and phone number of your senators and representatives, please visit www.congress.org

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