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PUTUMAYO, 2004

AN EVALUATION OF FOUR YEARS OF PLAN COLOMBIA IN PUTUMAYO

Plan Colombia

Plan Colombia's stated goals when passed in 2000 were to support the Colombian government's efforts to strengthen democracy, promote respect for human rights and the rule of law, foster socio-economic development, and reduce coca cultivation in Colombia.¹ Initially this \$1.3 billion package was passed as a counter-narcotics plan. The focus on drug eradication in Colombia changed in August of 2002 with the passage of a Supplemental Bill (P.L. #107-206) which allows U.S. aid to be used by the Colombian public forces for counter-terrorist operations as well. Since the initial passing of Plan Colombia in 2000, the United States has given over \$2.5 billion in military aid to the Colombian government, most of which has been used for military counter-narcotics and counter-terrorist operations.²

Witness for Peace Research

Witness for Peace (WFP), a politically independent, non-violence based human rights organization with twenty years of experience working in Latin America, opened a program in Colombia in November of 2000. At the time Putumayo, a southwestern province of Colombia, was the main focus of Plan Colombia aid and operations, therefore Witness for Peace has focused its attention on this. As a result of WFP's continued presence and relationship building efforts in Putumayo the organization has built trust with people and organizations on the ground in Putumayo, a trust that allows otherwise silent and scared citizens to share their experiences and fears with WFP personnel. WFP therefore plays a unique role in that the organization is able to carry real stories and serious concerns directly from Putumayo to the United States.

Witness for Peace Conclusions

Four years of extensive on the ground research and experience in Putumayo has led Witness for Peace to the conclusion that Plan Colombia and continued U.S. military aid have not proven successful in decreasing drug-consumption in the United States or created more safety for Colombians living in Putumayo. Through testimonies and personal accounts based on first hand interviews with leaders, farmers and government officials in the region, Witness for Peace will demonstrate that:

The U.S. aerial fumigations program is a failure

- Coca farmers have no option but to plant coca and use more resistant strains of the plant that give a higher yield, leading to more coca being produced on fewer hectares.
- Fumigations leave poor farmers with no means of sustaining themselves or their families, thus forcing them to join illegal armed groups and leading to increased violence in the region.
- Farmers in Putumayo who are wrongly fumigated are not duly compensated for damages.

Human rights violations have increased, and civilian security has decreased in Putumayo

- Collusion between the Colombian military and illegal paramilitary groups persists.
- As the conflict in Putumayo escalates, civilians suffer at the hands of illegal armed groups.
- The Colombian military targets civilians in Putumayo, in attempts to prove their control in the region.

¹ US embassy in Colombia website: <http://usembassy.state.gov/colombia/wwwspcus.shtml> Accessed; June 16, 2004.

² Center for International Policy: <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aidtable.htm> Accessed; June 16, 2004.

FAILURE OF THE U.S. AERIAL FUMIGATIONS PROGRAM

In 2000, the U.S. Congress passed a multi-billion dollar initiative known as Plan Colombia. Initially, the \$1.3 billion package was passed as a counter-narcotics plan. With nearly 80%³ of all cocaine entering the U.S. from Colombia, Congress has argued that the U.S. would only be able to address its own drug abuse problem by fighting drugs at their source. Four years later, and after more than \$3 billion dollars invested, Plan Colombia's counter-narcotic's strategy is failing.

Consequences for Colombian Farmers in Coca Growing Regions

None of the previous facts begin to take into consideration the human impacts of this counter-narcotics strategy on Colombian small farmers. Since few to no economic alternatives exist for many of the families subsisting from coca crops, people who have had their farms fumigated are left with no healthy alternatives, but instead with the following options:

(1) Many small farmers choose to continue planting coca. One farmer was quoted as saying, "When it comes down to watching my children go hungry or growing [coca], I'll break the law."⁴

(2) Others have chosen to abandon their homes and join the more than 3 million internally displaced Colombians in the already crowded cities. In 2002 Gilberto Losano, a farmer and community leader from the Valle del Guamués municipality in Putumayo, explained the predicament of farmers whose crops – licit or illicit – have been fumigated: "Put yourself in our shoes. We just had everything fumigated. Now they say they are going to fumigate again in

two months. Would you plant food crops again just to have them fumigated again? What else can we do? People are fleeing the region, looking for other places to go."⁵ According to Putumayo's Human Rights Ombudsmen, Lozano's observations of two years ago still hold true. "The issue of displacement has not improved," he explained in a June 2004 interview with WFP. The overwhelming majority of displacement here [Putumayo] is caused by the effects of fumigation. We attend, in just this office alone, at least one displacement case every single day⁶.

(3) And many young people have chosen to take a salaried position with one of Colombia's illegally armed groups. Álvaro Rodríguez, a farmer from Puerto Caicedo municipality in Putumayo, comments that, "As a result of these [Plan Colombia] policies, both groups – the paramilitary and the guerrilla – grow [in number]. The fumigations contribute to their growth: the fumigations lead to displacement, and then people are unemployed and have nothing to do, and they join the illegal armed groups."⁷ The acting Mayor of Puerto Asis, one of the largest cities in Putumayo's coca growing region, confirms this theory, "When people are hungry and unemployed and the paramilitaries, for example, say 'come work with for us we will pay you,' there is really no choice. The people go work for them."⁸ Putumayo's Secretary of Education says that this year alone hundreds of students have left school to begin working with one of the illegal armed groups operating in the region⁹.

³ "U.S. Aid to Colombian Military" Washington Post; December 27, 1998.

⁴ Quoted in "The Fire that Burns, Yet More Fuel Arrives From the United States," Justapaz report, 2003.

⁵ Interview with Gilberto Losano; November 11, 2002.

⁶ Interview with Putumayo Human Rights Ombudsmen; June 9, 2004.

⁷ Interview with Álvaro Rodríguez; December 7, 2002.

⁸ Interview with Acting Mayor of Puerto Asis; February 26, 2004.

⁹ Interview with official from the Secretary of Education; June 9, 2004.

Misleading Indicators Present False Picture of Success

- (1) Although the number of coca producing hectares has decreased by 21.8% in the Andean region,¹⁰ the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency reported in 2004 that drug use in the U.S. has *not* decreased, accessibility remains unaffected, and prices have not risen.¹¹ All meaningful statistics that measure success in a counter-narcotics strategy.
- (2) There still remains 113,850 hectares of coca in Colombia alone,¹² the Andean region currently produces approximately 835 metric tons of cocaine. The U.S. only needs 250-300 metric tons to meet its demand.¹³ At this rate, not mentioning new strategies to hide coca, we are unlikely to ever see the results necessary to impact drug consumption in the U.S.
- (3) Rather than seeing new, large areas of coca there has been an “atomization” of coca producing fields. Growers are moving crops to areas harder to detect and more hazardous for fumigation planes to spray, producing more coca per hectare, an average increase of 6,000 to 30,000 plants per hectare.¹⁴ This means that fewer hectares could mean *more* coca. In a June 2004 interview with WFP, Putumayo’s Human Rights Ombudsmen explained, “Fumigations are no longer affecting a large percentage of coca crops because they are now situated deep in the jungle and difficult for pilots to detect.”

¹⁰ “Fewer Hectares, More Coca,” *Cambio*; June 7, 2004.

¹¹ Memorandum from Center for International Policy Study; March 22, 2004.

¹² U.S. State Department Report; 2003.

¹³ “Hide-and-Seek Among the Coca Leaves,” *New York Times*; June 9, 2004.

¹⁴ “Fewer Hectares, More Coca,” *Cambio*; June 7, 2004.

Failed Safety Nets: Alternative Development and the Compensations Program

After the failure of many alternative development projects funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), many farmers have lost hope in Plan Colombia’s economic aid. Many of the projects failed to provide sustainable farming options. And as of October 2002, the Colombian Government’s Ombudsman’s Office received over 360 official complaints of wrongful fumigation from farmers participating in alternative development programs funded by USAID.¹⁵

Mr. Jimenez, a farmer from Putumayo, planted six hectares of heart of palm in 2002 as part of an alternative development program. In May of that same year, while the plants were still young, his government-funded heart of palm crop was aerielly fumigated. A former neighbor of Jimenez’ – José Ospina – was one farmer who received aid. He was given two cows in 2001 and manually eradicated his coca crop. The pasture he prepared for his livestock, however, was destroyed by aerial fumigations in January 2002. Both farmers have yet to recover from their losses, “We are broke. We are in debt and I do not know what to do,” explained Mr. Jimenez in a October 2003 interview with WFP.

During the first year of Plan Colombia, thousands of farmers filed formal complaints for wrongful fumigations. However, with each round of sprayings, fewer complaints were filed. The local government Ombudsman receiving complaints in La Hormiga in the municipality of Valle del Guamués tells farmers that filling out the forms is “a lost cause” and “waste of time.” “No one ever gets compensated,” he explains.¹⁶

¹⁵ Colombian Government Ombudsman’s Office, “Resolution #26”; October 9, 2002.

¹⁶ Interview with local government Ombudsman’s Office; La Hormiga, November 2002.



A small farmer in the Valle of Guamués, Putumayo shows Witness for Peace staff her fumigated heart of palm plants, which were part of an international alternative development program. June, 2003.

Despite the 6,533 complaints received between late 2001 and October 2002 in Putumayo alone,¹⁷ as of October 2003 only six farmers in the entire country had been compensated.¹⁸ Since most of the complaints remain in process while more are being filed, the Colombian Government Ombudsman's Office has asserted that the compensation program is "an inadequate and inefficient process."¹⁹ The U.S. Embassy official charged with overseeing the compensation program explains, "The program was created to make Congress feel better...as is, the program should not exist. It is choked with claims and does not work."²⁰

¹⁷ Colombian Government Ombudsman's Office, "Resolution #26"; October 9, 2002.

¹⁸ Interview with Narcotics Affairs Section official; October 30, 2003.

¹⁹ Colombian Government Ombudsman's Office Report; February 9, 2001.

²⁰ Interview with Narcotics Affairs Section official; October 30, 2003.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVILIAN SECURITY IN PUTUMAYO: TESTIMONIES FROM THE FIELD

When Plan Colombia was initially passed, its stated goals were to support the Colombian government's efforts to strengthen democracy, promote respect for human rights and the rule of law, foster socio-economic development, and reduce coca cultivation by 50% by the end of 2005. The conclusions yielded by WFP's research in Putumayo raise fundamental concerns about the efficacy of U.S. strategy in accomplishing these goals, particularly in the area of human rights. The personal testimonies of Putumayo's inhabitants reveal that with the onset of increased U.S. military aid to the region, the human rights situation has worsened and civilians feel less secure than they did prior to the arrival of U.S. aid four years ago.

The following testimonies illuminate two trends in relation to civilian-military relationships in Putumayo: 1.) Increased military operations have left the civilian population vulnerable to retaliation by illegal armed groups. Civilians live in the crossfire without adequate security, paying the price of military intervention 2.) The Colombian military has targeted civilians. Such targeting, coupled with paramilitary-military collusion has created extreme fear and mistrust of military and police officials.

Conflict Escalates and People Pay

"Yes, there are more police and soldiers here [in Putumayo] but still murders and threats continue," explained Maria Gutierrez, an official from Putumayo's Secretary of Education, in a February 2004 interview with WFP. She continued to describe a recent murder she had witnessed. While traveling on the province's central road, she, along with fellow passengers, were stopped by armed guerilla soldiers who demanded that they get out of the car. Soon another small truck arrived and the guerillas opened fire on the vehicle. One person was shot

in the head and died, and the others were seriously injured. Maria witnessed all of this from the side of the road; she heard the screams and saw bodies bulging against the canopy covering the truck bed that was carrying passengers. She was left stunned. The guerillas dispersed and hours later she continued down the road only to be met by four paramilitary soldiers asking where the guerillas had gone, and racing off after them. “For months, I heard their voices at night [those of the people being shot] screaming for help,” said Maria.

Ironically, Maria was traveling that day to attend a speech given by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Vélez in the town of Orito. He was there, in part, to demonstrate the public forces’ success in making the traditionally guerilla-controlled region safe enough for even the nation’s president to visit. “There was no security for the people because the public forces had gone to protect the President,” explained Maria. “The civilian population was totally unprotected... I think they shot those people to show the President who was really in control.” She lamented, “How could they leave the people unprotected like that? The military is here but they do not make us safe.” Maria’s testimony illustrates the assertions made by many residents in Putumayo that the military does not prioritize citizen protection and, on the contrary, increased military presence only aggravates the conflict to which citizens are exposed.

Military Aim Targets Civilians

“The military kills small rural farmers and then puts guerilla fatigues on them. They did it to two of my neighbor’s day laborers when they were out cleaning the pasture,”²¹ recounted a soft-spoken farmer from lower Putumayo. Such reports are common but difficult to corroborate because, as Camilo Vargas, leader of Putumayo’s campesino organization ANUC (*Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos*)

²¹ Interview with farmer from town near Puerto Asis; February 7, 2004.

explains, “People are afraid to denounce. So many people are dying in Putumayo and people in the rest of the country do not know the truth of how or why.”²² Murder rates reflect his perception. In the town of Puerto Asis, for example, community and church leaders report at least one murder every day.²³ Sandra Alvarez, an employee of the province’s health ministry DASALUD (*Departamento Administrativo de Salud*), says that in May 2003 alone, there were 15 selective assassinations in the city.²⁴

“An Army that kills innocent people and violates human rights is not an army that we want. Protecting citizens needs to be a part of their operations—not just an end result,”²⁵ insists Vargas. His sentiments are shared by the Governor of Putumayo who is critical of Plan Colombia’s military component, “Security does not just mean keeping guerillas and paramilitaries away. Security means the ability to eat, study and live. We need to invest in security but security based upon empowering citizens, not investing so much in arms.”²⁶



Two, of many, young soldiers make their presence known in a small town in southern Putumayo. June, 2003.

²² Speech delivered by National Association of Small Farmers’ (ANUC) leader; Villa Garzón; February 8, 2004.

²³ Interviews; Putumayo February 24-26, 2004.

²⁴ Interview with province’s health department (DASALUD) official; Mocoa; February 24, 2004.

²⁵ Interview; Villa Garzón

²⁶ Interview; Mocoa; February 10, 2004.

Fear, Mistrust and Collusion

Civilians throughout Putumayo believe that the paramilitary operate with assistance from the military and police. Past U.S. State Department reports confirm such beliefs, “Some members of the security forces collaborated with paramilitary groups that committed serious abuses.”²⁷ Villa Garzón, an urban center where a large number of Colombian police and military are stationed and home of the U.S.- funded and trained Counter-Narcotics Brigade, is infamous for paramilitary violence.

In November 2003, community leader and former mayoral candidate Maria Benavides was gunned down outside of her home by what local residents say were paramilitaries. In a February 2004 interview with Witness for Peace, Benavides’ friend and local community council member explained, “There are more police and soldiers here now but there have still been lots of murders. In Maria’s case, the police were just one and half blocks away when she was killed, and they did not attempt to catch the killers.” One DASALUD official reports that murders in Villa Garzón rose significantly in 2003 and says people are afraid to denounce the killings for fear of reprisal by the paramilitaries.²⁸ The priest of Villa Garzón tells that Benavides had publicly denounced ties between paramilitaries and the military in Villa Garzón and even sent a letter to the national government concerning the collaboration shortly before her death.²⁹

In WFP’s experience traveling throughout Putumayo, it is clear that paramilitaries openly control specific towns and operate within a short distance of military units. It is not uncommon to pass a military post and soon thereafter encounter paramilitaries, either in fatigue or civilian clothing. In February 2004, WFP staff watched as a local paramilitary leader openly rode his motorcycle through the town of La

Hormiga, stopping to talk with residents and drink soda just blocks away from the nearest grouping of Colombian soldiers.

While individual military officials and certain brigades have, admittedly, made efforts to weaken paramilitary forces, their efforts are isolated. Such sporadic efforts do not represent a wide spread and consistent policy. As a result, Putumayo’s civilian population expresses little confidence in the military’s ability to provide protection. On the contrary, many residents live in fear of the military just as they do of guerilla and paramilitary soldiers.

Conclusion

In monitoring human rights, it is crucial that the U.S. Congress pay close attention to the personal experience of those living in Putumayo. It is through the testimonies of Putumayo’s residents that our policy’s failures are most palpable. Four years after the implementation of Plan Colombia policy in Putumayo, particularly increased U.S. military aid to the region, it is clear that the U.S. has gravely failed to promote respect for human rights and foster the rule of law. Stories of collusion, persecution and increased insecurity are as commonplace now as they were prior to Plan Colombia. As long as the civilian population feels vulnerable, continues paying the price of military actions, and sustains a deep-seeded mistrust of public forces, the Colombian government will never successfully administer in the region. It will be impossible to keep insurgent groups at bay, foster socio-economic programs and promote human rights.

For these reasons, the U.S. Congress has wisely made aid to Colombia contingent on the nation’s ability to protect human rights. Unfortunately, Putumayo’s profile demonstrates a grave inability to meet such standards.

²⁷ U.S. State Department’s Human Rights Report; 2002.

²⁸ Interview; Mocoa; February 24, 2004.

²⁹ Interview; Villa Garzón; February 23, 2004.