



**American Friends
Service Committee**

Six Things Friends Should Know About the U.S. Military Aid and Its Impact on Colombians

A conflict with deep roots: To understand the conflict in Colombia one must look back decades, long before the emergence of drug trafficking and the current armed actors. The conflict is deeply rooted in economic, social, and political inequalities. Wealth and land remain concentrated in the hands of a few and Colombia's political system neglects the needs of the majority of the population. Many of the excluded are Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples. The government and those in power respond with violent repression to those who attempt to change the unequal situation. Despite the Colombian government's inability to protect its own population, and the Colombian military's tacit participation with illegal armed paramilitary groups— who are categorized as terrorists by the U.S. State Department—the United States government has given billions of dollars in military aid to the Colombian government. Under the guise of the war on drugs the U.S. has focused its military aid on defeating the guerrilla groups and has become involved in what international human rights organizations have categorized as one of the worst humanitarian crises in the western hemisphere.ⁱ

Getting beyond the headlines: Current media coverage of Colombia flashes headlines about the drug trade and the violence perpetrated by leftist guerrilla organizations, the Colombian armed forces, and their collaborating paramilitary groups. Rarely do these periodic reports go beyond this portrayal, nor do they highlight the deep-rooted economic, social, and political causes of the more than 40-year civil war, which predates the emergence of drug trafficking and the various armed factions. Also not mentioned are the economic interests, such as the need for oil and other natural resources that are part of the United States' motive for its escalating involvement in Colombia.ⁱⁱ

What generates even less media coverage is Colombia's peace movement, which includes national peace, human rights, and church organizations, as well as local grassroots groups that offer peaceful solutions to the conflict. Within this movement, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities are at work as protagonists for peace.

The failures of Plan Colombia: In January, the U.S. Justice Department reported that "Cocaine is widely available throughout most of the nation, and cocaine supplies are relatively stable at levels sufficient to meet current user demand." Now, let's look at the results of coca eradication in Colombia and the Andes in general. Despite record aerial herbicide spraying of over hundreds of thousands hectares of coca crops in 2005, coca cultivation has gone up by 10% according to the office of the Drug Czar's report. A dozen years of aerial herbicide fumigation in Colombia has shown one thing clearly: spraying people who have no other economic alternatives is effective only at reducing coca-growing in a specific zone for a specific period of time. According to an October 2000 White House report, "The goal of President Pastrana's Plan Colombia (October 1999) is to reduce Colombia's cultivation,

processing, and distribution of drugs by 50 percent over six years.” The 2005 coca-cultivation figures reported yesterday show that **Plan Colombia has demonstrably failed to reach that goal**. It hasn’t even come close. ⁱⁱⁱ Insufficiently considered are the people at the other end of the forced eradication strategy. From the start of Plan Colombia until today, the humanitarian side of our policy approach, alternative development and assistance to those displaced, has lagged woefully behind the enforcement/ eradication side. The reality is that coca is produced by poor farmers. It is a small scale cash crop often produced along side of subsistence food crops. Glyphosate, the herbicide being sprayed, does not make a distinction between coca and beans.

Displaced persons, an unaddressed crisis: Colombia has the second largest population of internally displaced persons in the world, after Sudan. This displacement is primarily caused by Colombia’s 40 year-old internal armed conflict, but U.S. drug policy is making the displacement problem worse. According to CODHES, the Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento, a Colombian NGO working on issues of displacement, about 47,000 people were displaced in 2005 after their coca and legal food crops were destroyed by fumigation. Aerial eradication is not simply an ineffective policy, it is a cruel one.^{iv} Afro-Colombians and Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by displacement.

Focusing on nonviolent solutions: Both the current political situation in Colombia and the military backing from the United States will likely lead to a further escalation of the Colombian conflict, thus affecting the peaceful work of Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups. Decisions and policies of the U.S. government toward Colombia are critical and can continue to fuel the fires of war—or they can be a positive force for peace. In 2002, the situation in Colombia took a turn for the worse. The four-year-old peace process between the government and the largest guerrilla group in the country, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), collapsed. Furthermore, President Pastrana was succeeded by Álvaro Uribe Vélez, a hard-line candidate favored by the paramilitaries. There has been an increase in the scope of action by paramilitary forces, whose human rights violations and massacres are made possible by the military’s implicit blessing. In addition, throughout Colombia there has been a drastic increase in military operations by guerrilla forces, who operate with little respect for conventions of international humanitarian law.

While President Uribe has requested help from the United Nations in mediating peace talks between the Colombian government and the guerrillas, no cease-fire has taken place. Concomitant to his proposal for negotiated peace, Uribe is strengthening the Colombian counter-insurgency operations, in large part through U.S. financing, and is implementing war-like policies that further jeopardizes the lives of the civilian population.^v

ⁱ Colombia Time line: 1998-2004, American Friends Service Committee, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Views From the South: peaceful Alternatives to the War in Colombia, American Friends Service Committee.

ⁱⁱⁱ Colombia Coca Cultivation in 2005, Center for International Policy, Adam Isacson, April 2006.

^{iv} Addicted to Failure, Statement of Joy Olson Executive Director Washington Office on Latin America, March 2006.

^v Views From the South: peaceful Alternatives to the War in Colombia, American Friends Service Committee.