



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Colombia February 2008

I never cease to raise fervent prayers to God for Colombia where for a long time many sons and daughters of this beloved Country have suffered from extortion, kidnapping and the violent loss of their loved ones. I ask the Lord to end this inhuman suffering once and for all and that they may find paths of reconciliation, mutual respect and sincere harmony, thus restoring brotherhood and solidarity, the solid foundations necessary for just progress and the building of lasting peace..

--Pope Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, February 3, 2008

The Issue: The current conflict in Colombia is rooted in a long history of inequality and political exclusion, though it has intensified dramatically in recent years, due in part to the infusion of drug-related profits that many of the armed groups currently receive.

Illegal armed actors, including the FARC and ELN guerilla groups and the nominally demobilized paramilitary combatants (AUC), continue to be responsible for significant levels of violence against the civilian population each year. Colombia has the second highest number of internally displaced persons in the world. It is increasingly recognized that displacement is intimately linked to strategies of depopulation and subsequent concentration of land and resources.

Eighty percent of the cocaine in the U.S. comes from Colombia, as well as most of the heroin on the East Coast. It is one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid, an aid package that has been tilted toward anti-narcotics and counter-insurgency strategies. Colombia has become one of the most dangerous places for human rights workers, journalists, union leaders and church workers. In the last decade some 60 Catholic representatives, including bishops, priests, nuns and seminarians, and even higher numbers of Protestant workers, have been killed.

In the past year, the Colombian government has been under intense pressure to show progress toward ending widespread impunity for human rights abusers. The State Department calls that impunity the “greatest challenge to the credibility of the Government’s commitment to human rights.” Criminal investigations and prosecutions of military personnel have been increased dramatically. (See Backgrounder on Trade).

U.S. Aid: U.S. aid to “Plan Colombia” was originally approved in 2000 as a six-year plan primarily dedicated to military support (80%) for counter-narcotics activities. The remaining funds were for alternative development, judicial reform, and aid to the internally displaced. The centerpiece of the U.S. aid was an anti-narcotics program to create and train new battalions, providing helicopters and intelligence aid, and relying on widespread fumigation as the principal means for eradicating coca. From 2000-2005, \$4 billion in U.S. aid has been provided, with \$3.2 billion dedicated to the security forces. Congress approved \$734.5 million for the overall Andean Counter narcotics Initiative in FY06. In 2007, Congress realigned funding priorities for Plan Colombia. In a major victory for advocates, Congress reduced funds designated for military support by 31% and increased economic and social aid by 70%. In addition, the new configuration of U.S. aid includes assistance that will do the following: strengthen enforcement of human rights and protect victims of violence, including funding for investigation and prosecution of human rights abuses; provide witness protection for victims; initiate investigation of mass graves; provide legal representation of victims; and support the UN Human Rights office in Colombia.

Afro-Colombians: Afro-Colombians constitute the majority of Colombia's 3.8 million internally displaced persons and 76% of them live in extreme poverty. In addition, the region with the largest population of Afro-Colombians, Chocó, receives the lowest amount of government support per capita for health, education, and infrastructure of any region in the country. Aerial spraying through the U.S. Plan Colombia is having detrimental effects on this population, as it is killing many crops grown traditionally by Afro-Colombians, further contributing to poverty and insecurity. House Resolution 618 calls attention to the importance of addressing the situation of Afro-Colombians. The resolution will formally back the Afro-Colombian population and call on the Colombian government to end racial discrimination as well as protect Afro-Colombians' constitutionally guaranteed lands. The resolution also asks the U.S. and Colombian governments to consult with Afro-Colombians on matters of consequence to them.

A new area of concern is the paramilitary demobilization process. Although demobilization of armed groups is an important goal, the recent effort with the AUC paramilitaries occurred under a noticeably weak legal framework and did little to dismantle the paramilitaries or address impunity by those responsible for human rights violations and massacres, and is unlikely to provide real compensation for the victims of the conflict.

USCCB Position: Since the spring of 2000, USCCB has stressed that U.S. aid should: 1) strike an essential balance between assistance to the armed forces and aid that more directly addresses the root causes of the conflict and assists the victims; 2) condition all aid on human rights criteria; and 3) provide major support for programs that advance the peace process, including alternative development, humanitarian aid to the displaced and judicial reform.

USCCB urges the U.S. Government to:

Include basic standards for the protection of human rights in all aid programs. Particular importance should be given to monitoring the impact of the paramilitary demobilization and re-integration process, and to ensuring strict application of the recently developed human rights conditions on U.S. aid for this process.

Support multi-lateral efforts to bolster a negotiated, political path towards peace. The Colombian Bishops have repeatedly emphasized the importance of continuing on the path to a negotiated peace process as the only viable long-term strategy for resolving the conflict. A small proportion of U.S. aid is dedicated to peace-building initiatives and the U.S. has not shown demonstrable support for U.N. and multi-national efforts to support national peace processes. An effort should be made to achieve a politically negotiated peace process with civil society participation.

Increase development and humanitarian aid to Colombia. Assistance to the internally displaced should be increased and its impact well documented. The U.S. can make a significant positive contribution to long-term peace and stability in Colombia by shifting the focus of its foreign aid toward greater emphasis on effective social development. Aid to the internally displaced is one of the most positive elements of the U.S. funds allocated to Colombia and it is greatly needed. These funds remain a small share of overall U.S. aid.

Phase out aerial fumigation, and increase appropriate alternative development. The Colombian Bishops have stated their clear opposition to fumigation given ongoing reports of legal food crops and livestock being destroyed, water source contamination and increases in health problems. Many farmers, who were fumigated but not given either emergency food aid or access to crop substitution programs, have either joined the ranks of the internally displaced or in some cases moved to neighboring provinces to grow illicit crops once more.

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