

Extending the War on Terrorism to Colombia: A Bad Idea Whose Time Has Come

By Adam Isacson

The world's third-largest recipient of U.S. military aid is the South American nation of Colombia, the focus of our never-ending war on drugs. Before September 11, this made a lot of people in Washington nervous. Now there is even more reason to worry.

U.S. aid to Colombia's military and police has increased six-fold since 1997, to \$1.5 million per day in 2002. Both Clinton and Bush foreign policy officials have had to repeatedly assure members of Congress and the media that the U.S. mission in Colombia is tightly restricted to anti-drug activities. They have sworn not to cross an invisible line between the war on drugs and Colombia's brutal, messy, multi-front civil war, which has been raging since the Johnson administration.

Viewed through the lens of anti-terrorism, though, Colombia—home to three groups on the State Department's list of foreign terror organizations—sticks out prominently on a post-September 11 map of the world. Now a recent Bush administration "policy review" is seriously considering crossing this invisible line and transforming the war against drugs into a war against terrorism. If it does so, Colombia's military will be allowed to use future U.S. aid—guns, helicopters, intelligence, and training—to fight leftist FARC and ELN guerrillas, and presumably right-wing paramilitaries. But the Colombian military's collaboration with these death squads, such as the United Self-Defense Forces, is well-known and -documented, even though these groups are responsible for up to 70% of human rights abuses in the war, according to Amnesty International.

Before identifying the reasons why converting our anti-drug efforts to a war on terrorism in Colombia would be a bad idea, it's important to

clarify our terminology. In the Colombian context, counter-terrorism equals counter-insurgency. Colombia's guerrilla groups have large memberships (17,000 in FARC, 11,000 in the various paramilitaries, and 3,000 in the ELN), control large chunks of territory, and are well funded. These are not shadowy cells living in caves like Al-Qaeda. Wiping them out would require a large counter-insurgency effort, an area in which the United States has a decidedly mixed record.

A counter-insurgency campaign against terrorist groups in Colombia would be disastrous for three reasons. The first is the sheer size of the effort that would be needed. The case for such a policy is clearly spelled out in a June 2001 study by the Rand Corporation, funded by the U.S. Air Force. Recommending that Washington build up Colombia's anti-guerrilla efforts, the report argues, "The U.S. program of military assistance to El Salvador during the Reagan administration could be a relevant model." Never mind that twelve years of civil war and nearly two billion dollars of military aid achieved only a stalemate in El Salvador, after fighting killed 70,000 people and displaced over a million civilians. The Rand study's recommendations fail to estimate the financial expense to the United States or the potential human cost to Colombia, which is fifty-three times the size of El Salvador.

The second reason to pause before plunging into a counter-insurgency campaign is that there are few guarantees that our aid—whether weapons, intelligence, or military training—would not be misused against innocent civilians. Of the 3,500 people Colombia's war kills each year, 75% are men, women, and children killed in their homes, their places of work, or on

the street. It is not unreasonable to imagine, given the Colombian military's past cooperation with right-wing death squads, that if we give the army intelligence about guerrilla movements in a certain village, it could be passed on to the paramilitaries to commit atrocities against its inhabitants.

Finally, our past experience with counter-insurgency shows that it's doomed to failure if the local military elites do not share our commitment to fight the enemy. There are strong reasons to doubt that commitment in Colombia, where the law excludes high school graduates, meaning all but the poor, from serving in combat units. The World Bank's figures show that Colombians pay only 10.1% of GDP in taxes—half the U.S. figure

and lower than most of Latin America—which makes a serious war effort impossible. Even now the army, in the midst of a fighting a civil war, must go begging for gasoline from the government near the end of every fiscal year. It is doubtful that U.S. funds and personnel could or should make up the difference.

The roots of Colombia's conflict are deep and complicated, and will require a creative mix of strategies to solve it. While there is a role for Colombia's military, the real difference will be made by peace negotiators, judges and prosecutors, human rights and anti-corruption activists, honest legislators, reformist police and military officers, muckraking journalists, and others who want to build a viable, functioning democra-

cy. Colombia has no shortage of these brave and committed people, but all are working at great risk to their lives. The United States must support them, too. Resorting solely to the sledgehammer of counterinsurgency tactics in the name of fighting terrorism will bring neither security to Americans or peace to the Colombians.

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