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Time for a Peace Paradigm in Colombia

Summary

- Since the advent of Plan Colombia in 2000, U.S. policymakers have sought to help Colombian governments win their multiple wars against insurgents, drugs and terrorism. Conventional wisdom had suggested that pursuing these paths concurrently would lead to peace and security.
- Colombia today is farther from a peace settlement than it has been in years. With national elections scheduled for the first half of 2010 and presidential candidates yet to be defined, peace does not appear on the government's public policy agenda and it has yet to materialize as a campaign issue. Faith in a military victory appears deeply entrenched at a popular level.
- Illegal armed groups are retrenching and adapting to years of sustained military offensives and the increased capacity of Colombia's armed forces. While security indicators had largely improved, violence in major cities last year jumped sharply, and internal displacement has reached crisis proportions.
- Colombia's conflict is increasingly affecting the Andean neighborhood, sending hundreds of thousands of Colombians across the borders. Patterns of violence and intimidation are emerging as illegal armed groups increasingly settle into these border regions. Sporadic incursions and incidents at the border have ratcheted up rhetoric and sparked diplomatic standoffs and movement of troops. A recent bilateral military accord between Colombia and the United States has also exacerbated tensions in the hemisphere.
- Policymakers increasingly question whether staying the course in Colombia is in the U.S. best interests. Some are calling for an overhaul of U.S. policy.
- Peace and regional security are integral to the multitude of U.S. interests in Colombia, and they should no longer be subsumed to other strategic interests. It is time to seek peace as a priority. This approach should emphasize respect for human rights and the rule of law; support for truth, justice and reparations for the victims of armed conflict; and the facilitation of processes conducive to peace as a key policy objective.

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National Dynamics

With congressional and presidential elections respectively scheduled for March 14 and May 30, 2010, electoral politics in Colombia will shape the prospects for peace in the coming months. Peace does not appear on the government's public policy agenda and it has yet to materialize as a

campaign issue. The continued stigmatization, surveillance and attacks on human rights workers and interlocutors for a peaceful resolution to the conflict make the climate for discussing political solutions more difficult.

With the official slate of presidential candidates still undecided, there are concerns that a third term for President Alvaro Uribe—which requires a referendum to approve a change in the constitution to permit the incumbent to run again—would undermine democratic institutions and practices, and that mafia and drug trafficking interests have penetrated the system and will block democracy’s “natural cleansing process.” The courts, especially Colombia’s Constitutional Court, will continue to play an important role in maintaining a balance of powers, particularly as tensions between the executive and judicial branches simmer.

Under the Uribe government, the Colombian Army has increased its budget, its ranks, and its logistical and intelligence capacity—and it has enjoyed commensurate military successes. Faith in a military victory remains deeply entrenched at a popular level, but the Colombian military’s reputation has been tarnished by human rights abuses, particularly some 1,766 cases of “false positives,” whereby 33 different Army brigades lured hundreds of impoverished youths with promises of jobs, “disappeared” and killed them, and dressed them in guerrilla garb post-mortem in order to elevate body counts and secure cash bonuses or days off. Four hundred plus members of the Armed Forces have been jailed and hundreds more are under investigation. While extrajudicial executions have declined significantly, the practice has not ceased and prosecutions have moved so slowly that cases are being thrown out of court.

Increasingly, Colombian civil society is seeking a more proactive role in putting peace on the national agenda. One participant in a recent conference at USIP noted, “We can no longer look at peace simply as a negotiation at a table between the government of Colombia and the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]. The question of peace has to do with supporting democratic institutions, the justice system, and land and other reforms.” Increasingly these are seen as the foundations that will create the conditions for a negotiated solution—not the other way around. Likewise, some Colombians challenged the idea that security must be in place in order for development efforts to advance—arguing that it is development itself that will create a more secure environment that could lead to peace.

Evolution of the Conflict

The conflict in Colombia is evolving. Military strategies to control land, transportation corridors, and resources have accelerated displacement. In 2008, violence forced more than 380,000 individuals to abandon their homes, bringing the number of internally displaced to 4.6 million people for the period from 1985-2008. Illegal armed groups that seemed to be diminishing in strength are showing signs of rejuvenation and refining their tactics as they adjust to new circumstances. In mid-December 2009, the two major guerrilla groups remaining—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and the National Liberation Army (ELN)—announced that they would be joining forces in a new alliance.

FARC

Plan Colombia, Plan Patriota, and other military offensives have halved FARC membership since 2002, when it was estimated at 16,000-18,000 members. There are signs nonetheless that the FARC is regrouping, particularly in the central cordillera and in the border zones with Venezuela and Ecuador. A Nov. 2009 report by the Fundación Nuevo Arco Iris/New Rainbow Foundation finds that the FARC has reactivated fronts in urban and rural areas, created a new front in Guaviare, and car-

ried out 1,429 attacks in the first ten months of 2009 (an increase of 30 percent since the previous year).¹ Furthermore, the FARC has stepped up its use of antipersonnel land mines (especially for offensive purposes), and has accelerated forced recruitment of minors and indigenous Colombians.

ELN

The window of opportunity for the government of Colombia to reach a settlement with the ELN appears shut after eight rounds of talks that started in 2005 came to a halt in 2007. In the absence of a political agreement, the ELN has begun to re-arm and increase recruitment. Reduced to some 300 troops a year ago, the ELN now counts some 1,000 members in its ranks, has deepened its involvement with the drug trade, and is showing renewed activity in the Cauca, Nariño, and Arauca provinces.

Paramilitaries and Criminal Violence

The demobilization of 35,000 paramilitaries of the Colombian United Self-Defense Forces (AUC) has given rise to the proliferation of new criminal organizations. These new groups are locally and regionally autonomous and lack a national structure—and thus are more difficult to control. Like the AUC, they engage in the strategic use of massacres, selective homicides (particularly of Afro, indigenous, women, and other community leaders), forced displacement, territorial and social control, and drug trafficking. Estimates of their membership range from 5,000 to 10,000 members, including new recruits, demobilized paramilitaries who have re-armed, and paramilitaries who refused to demobilize in the first place. These groups have been responsible for a sharp rise in homicides in 19 cities, including Bogotá, Medellín and Cali.²

Regional Insecurity on the Rise

The conflict is increasingly impacting Colombia's neighbors. With more than a half million new refugees fleeing to Ecuador and Venezuela last year, the refugee situation in the region has reached crisis proportions. Regions bordering Colombia have long provided temporary safe haven for all of Colombia's illegal armed groups. These groups are now settling in and battling each other for territory, resources, control and recruits. The northern Ecuadoran border in particular is beginning to mirror Colombian trends of criminality, intimidation, and displacement, as well as sexual exploitation and the trafficking of women.³

Colombia's conflict has impacted diplomatic relations in the Andean region as well. Tensions came to a head in 2008 when Colombian planes bombed a rebel camp in Ecuador, causing Ecuador and Venezuela to break diplomatic relations with Colombia and send troops to the border.⁴ Border killings, kidnappings, and a litany of accusations of cross-border spying and support for illegal armed groups have abounded in recent months.

The U.S.-Colombian Military Agreement

A bilateral defense cooperation agreement signed on October 30, 2009, granting U.S. access to Colombian military bases, prompted Venezuela to send 15,000 troops to the Colombian border, and Argentina and Brazil to call for "formal guarantees that such accords will not be utilized against the sovereignty, territorial integrity, security and stability of South American countries."⁵ U.S. and Colombian authorities assert that the accord merely updates a decades-old agreement.

Colombian civil society leaders have expressed concern that the bilateral agreement will aggravate Colombia's internal armed conflict and encourage militarization. They have critiqued the secrecy

and lack of consultation related to the accord, observing that the Council of State had determined on October 13, 2009, that the agreement required ratification by Colombia's Congress, as it departed significantly from previous treaties in granting the use of bases, territory, and benefits to foreign military forces. Finally, civil society leaders have expressed concern over the consequences of the accord for human rights (especially sexual violence) and for the humanitarian crisis.

The Shifting U.S. Context

With the Obama administration in place and its Latin American team settling in, there are calls to reassess U.S. policies on Colombia. Congressman Eliot Engel, D-NY, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, authored a bipartisan bill (H.R. 2134) to create an independent western hemisphere drug policy commission to evaluate U.S. counternarcotics programs. In December, 53 members of Congress, under the leadership of Democratic Representative James P. McGovern of Mass., called on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to embrace a comprehensive new approach to Colombia that emphasizes human rights, democracy, humanitarian needs and peace initiatives. On January 21, 2010, Democratic Senators Russell Feingold, Patrick Leahy, and Christopher Dodd urged Secretary Clinton to evaluate current policies and to seek ways to work with the Colombian government to "improve the climate for peace."

Conclusions: A New Peace Prism for Colombia Policy

The stake of Colombia's neighbors and the broader international community in the conflict's resolution is growing, and the situation favors international engagement on behalf of peace in Colombia. While the U.S. policy agenda is driven simultaneously by a multitude of interests, peace and regional security are integral to each. Secretary Clinton's recent acceptance of the invitation to meet with the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) will provide a timely opportunity to explore how the United States might work with Latin American leaders to support peace in Colombia.

Colombian civil society leaders urged the United States not to wait for a peace process before backing a political solution to the conflict in Colombia. The United States should seek ways to leverage peace initiatives and the efforts of civil society to build pressure for a political solution, and should make the facilitation of processes conducive to peace in Colombia a key policy objective. Civil society leaders echoed the need to revise U.S. counternarcotics approaches, and urged U.S. policymakers to proactively support democratic institutions and human rights (particularly human rights defenders); bolster judicial efforts to address impunity; and support truth, justice and reparations for the victims of armed conflict.

Such support will help create the context within which peace options can be more successfully explored.

Endnotes

1. León Valencia. "La seguridad democrática en crisis," in Observatorio del Conflict Armado/Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, *El declive de la Seguridad Democrática? Informe Especial*, November 2009.
2. In Medellín, for example, after a trend that cut homicides sharply from 2,012 (2003) to 709 (2006), the homicide rate has more than doubled in the last two years when it rose from 790 (2007) to 1,044 (2008) to 1,717 in the first 10 months of 2009. Valencia, "La seguridad democrática." While the national police figures show an overall decline in homicides (from 16,140 in 2008 to 15,817 in 2009, coroners' offices, ombudsmen, and other municipal authorities have challenged the figures and reported an alarming increase in homicides, particularly in Colombia's largest cities. See "Que

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report is based on meetings held at USIP on December 1, 2009 with Colombian civil society leaders and members of the U.S. government and nongovernmental sectors. The meetings were part of USIP's Citizen Dialogues for Peace Project and were co-sponsored with the Colombia Committee for Human Rights, Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), and the Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace. Virginia M. Bouvier, senior program officer in the Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution and director of the Colombia Conflict Team at the U.S. Institute of Peace, and Jorge Rojas, director of CODHES, moderated the sessions.

pasa en las ciudades?" *Semana*, Jan. 23, 2010, and Adriaan Alsema, "Colombian Police Claim Lower Murder Rates, Other Entities Report Alarming Rise," *Colombia Reports*, January 4, 2010.

3. "Conflict Beyond Borders: Humanitarian Impact of the Colombian Conflict in Ecuador?" *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and Norwegian Refugee Council*, October 10, 2009, p. 4-5.

4. "History of Tensions Between Venezuela, Colombia," *Reuters*, Nov. 6, 2009.

5. Responses to the release of a May 2009 U.S. Air Force presentation to the U.S. Congress which described access to Colombian military bases as "a unique opportunity for full spectrum operations in a critical subregion of our hemisphere where security and stability are under constant threat from narcotics-funded terrorist insurgencies, anti-U.S. governments [emphasis mine], endemic poverty and recurring natural disasters." Cited by Adam Isacson, "CIP Colombia News," November 24, 2009.



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