

Plan Colombia: Coca Moves to the Right

By Daniel Coronell

Six years and \$10.6 billion later, Plan Colombia has not eradicated coca; however, large areas of cultivation have moved from the guerrilla-controlled zones to paramilitary zones.

In 2000, the United States and Colombia undertook a huge campaign to strengthen Colombian institutions and fight drug trafficking. Plan Colombia, as the initiative was called, was originally presented as the beginning of the reconstruction of a country hit hard by decades of violence caused in large part by drug traffickers.

The first goal of Plan Colombia was to support the peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas, a communist group created in 1964 that clearly dominated coca growing areas at the time. The reactivation of the Colombian economy and some institutional reforms to strengthen local justice were also part of the plan's objectives.

However, it was one specific goal of the plan that allowed the Colombian government, led by then-President Andrés Pastrana, to gain bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress. The promise was to reduce cocaine trafficking to the United States by 50 percent over five years. The goal was ambitious and the parameters for its evaluation were clear: by 2006 the total area of coca cultivation in Colombia would be reduced by half and the price of cocaine on U.S. streets would double.

Results and Explanations

This attractive equation — crops cut by half, prices doubled — became the backbone of Plan Colombia. In an effort to achieve this goal, \$10.6 billion — \$3 billion more than initially planned — have been spent. Analysis shows that the results are poor.

The areas of coca cultivation in Colombia are slightly larger today than before Plan Colombia was instituted. In 1999, an estimated 122,500 hectares were planted with coca. In 2005, this number reached 144,000.

Several explanations have been offered to explain this lack of progress. Colombian officials

argue that they have done their part. In addition to contributing 60 percent of the total funds for Plan Colombia, the Colombian government has conducted massive spraying in the areas indicated by the United States. They also insist that American monies have not been received in a timely fashion, hindering Colombia's efforts to extend fumigation and eradicate illegal crops.

The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) has defined the results as "mixed." According to the U.S. government, the growth in coca production could be explained by the expansion of the sampling area where images are taken of the crops. They acknowledge that thousands of hectares have been conscientiously sprayed but point out that coca has reappeared in new areas or in areas that were not previously evaluated.

Aside from the expansion of cultivated areas, the other major indicator of Plan Colombia's progress is even more discouraging. The figures given by the State Department and the ONDCP indicate that the "retail" price of one gram of cocaine was \$135.51 in 1999 and \$106.54 in 2003.

Instead of a dramatic increase in price, as predicted in Plan Colombia, cocaine is cheaper than ever on U.S. streets.

With results like these, there are good reasons to think that the plan, six years and \$10.6 billion later, has not changed the coca market in Colombia. Nonetheless, a detailed analysis does indicate that while, broadly speaking, the numbers are the same, coca has shifted within the territory and has changed hands.

Movement

In 1999, just months before the implementation of Plan Colombia, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) presented a map of illicit cultivation in Colombia. This map showed the existence of two enormous coca growing areas in the southern region of the country. The first was in the department of Putumayo, near the border with Ecuador. The second ranged across the departments of Caquetá and Meta.



Photo by AP Wide World

It was also clear that there were other medium-sized areas on the border with Venezuela: the first in Norte de Santander and the second in the department of Arauca. In addition, the map showed a smaller coca-growing area in the north of Colombia on the border between the departments of Bolivar and Santander.

The map revealed another worrisome reality. The demilitarized zone, created by the Pastrana government in order to advance peace talks with the FARC, was the epicenter of the two largest coca-growing areas in the country.

Since the 1980s, the FARC had been financing its activities with the *gramaje* which they define as a “revolutionary tax” on illicit growers. All the analysts indicated that the financial and military strengthening of the FARC since that time had its origins in the millions of dollars earned from illicit crops, but in 1999 few had imagined how large the coca plantations had become in the areas controlled by the guerrillas.

The peace process, which had been progressively losing support because of abuses by the guerrillas in the demilitarized zone, broke down in 2002. President Pastrana broke off talks after the FARC hijacked a commercial airliner and forced it to land on a road in order to kidnap a senator

who was among the passengers.

President Pastrana’s popularity reached its lowest point in 2002, just before the presidential elections. Álvaro Uribe, whose campaign focused on the need for a military confrontation with the guerrillas, became the favorite to succeed him. Meanwhile, U.S. priorities had changed. Following the September 11 attacks, the war on drugs gave way to the war on terror.

Given the need to conserve American support for Plan Colombia, President Pastrana sought to have the FARC declared a terrorist group by the United States and the European Union. Soon after, military operations against the guerrillas and aerial spraying of illicit crops in their areas of influence multiplied.

Álvaro Uribe won the presidency and intensified these operations. Within a few months, however, he announced his intention to initiate a new peace process, this time with the right-wing paramilitaries and not the left-wing guerrillas.

These right-wing paramilitary death squads, who were responsible for massacring peasants, assassinating left-wing leaders and murdering ordinary citizens, claimed to have formed as a reaction to abuses by the guerrillas in various regions in Colombia. There is a measure of truth to this claim. However, it is also true that many

Anti-narcotics police guard the eradication of a coca field in southern Colombia.

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Photo by Jacqueline Sullivan.

Daniel Coronell speaks at Berkeley.

were private armies serving the drug traffickers.

When the possibility of a peace process with the Colombian government opened up, some drug lords not previously tied to paramilitary activity began to associate themselves with these right-wing militias. According to a Colombian police report, some drug lords bought militias for sums ranging from \$10 million to \$50 million in order to gain political status, avoid extradition to the United States, dialogue with the government and disguise their drug-trafficking activities.

The New Map

The first thing the paramilitaries obtained in their negotiations with the government was a guarantee that they would not be extradited to the U.S., a deal Colombian drug traffickers had been seeking for 23 years. They had never been afraid of the weak Colombian justice system, but they were afraid of U.S. prisons and the long sentences imposed by American judges.

With the slogan, “Better a grave in Colombia than a prison in the U.S.,” a group of drug traffickers led by Pablo Escobar had unleashed a bloody campaign of attacks in the

1980s and 1990s that took the lives of more than 3,000 people. Presidential candidates, government ministers, judges, policemen and journalists died during the terrorist offensive carried out by the so-called *extraditables*.

Today, 24 paramilitary leaders are sought by U.S. courts on charges of drug trafficking. Thus, the “no extradition” promise accelerated the peace process with the paramilitary squads. In 2004 and 2005, 30,000 self-declared paramilitary members were demobilized.

In April 2006, the United States government, through the ONDCP, revealed the modest results of Plan Colombia. Subsequently, the New York Times published an article that included a map, created using information from both the U.S. government and the United Nations, showing how coca cultivation had changed.

Despite the spraying, the size of the area under illicit cultivation had not changed since Plan Colombia was implemented. Instead, coca cultivation had moved from areas under guerrilla influence in the southern region of the country to areas under paramilitary control.

Today, coca is grown closer to Caribbean and Pacific ports and to various urban centers. The emergence and growth of these new cultivation zones occurred during the same years as the major paramilitary demobilization.

The map suggests that, without exception, the new areas of major cultivation are in zones where the paramilitaries have strong influence.

The facts appear to support those who argued that continued spraying would not eradicate coca but simply move it to unsprayed areas. In Colombia, coca cultivation has moved, not only geographically, but also from one political extreme to the other: from left to right.

Colombian journalist Daniel Coronell is currently a senior visiting scholar at CLAS. He gave a talk entitled “Plan Colombia: Auditing the Books” on October 23, 2006.