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War in Colombia

Guerrillas, Drugs and Human Rights in U.S.-Colombia Policy, 1988-2002

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Human rights, end-use monitoring and “the government’s inability to curb the paramilitary threat”

The Bush administration’s proposal to provide direct support against Colombian insurgent groups as part of an intensified strike on international terrorism and drug trafficking is the latest step in a series of policy decisions over the last decade that have steadily increased the scope of U.S. involvement in Colombia’s civil conflict. While U.S. support activities have been nominally limited to the counternarcotics mission, in practice these operations often bring Colombian security forces into conflict with guerrillas and other armed groups.

As these counterdrug deployments have increasingly come to resemble regular combat operations, the U.S. has encouraged greater involvement of regular Colombian military forces in these missions. However, many U.S. policymakers have expressed doubt about the Colombian Army’s commitment to the drug war, complaining that the aid is often used in pure counterinsurgency operations, sometimes with no measurable benefit against drug trafficking.

In February 1992 – after three years of a sustained military build-up – the U.S. and Colombia agreed to reduce the Colombian military’s level of involvement in the drug war and redirect some \$75 million in assistance to the Colombian National Police. At the time, operational reports from embassy officials and military attaches had begun to reflect their concerns about the inability – and often the unwillingness – of host government military forces to distinguish between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency operations. The U.S. Embassy complained publicly that the military had been using U.S. counterdrug aid to fight guerrillas.⁽¹⁹⁾ Military and economic assistance for all three Andean countries funded under the program was further reduced in January 1993 as part of an early Clinton administration effort to refocus the drug war to domestic programs.⁽²⁰⁾ Military assistance to Colombia – especially under the president’s “emergency drawdown” authority⁽²¹⁾ – was virtually halted for the next three years.

U.S. officials doubted that the Colombian military would ever fully embrace the

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counterdrug mission, suggesting that they often used the issue to gain access to U.S. assistance that could then be used against the insurgents. Indeed, the Colombian military has often tried to convince U.S. officials that these missions are indistinguishable, and that efforts to separate the two have precluded their ability to deal effectively with either one. Several of the documents included below underscore this premise, portraying aerial spray operations as tantamount to low-intensity close air support missions, during which spray aircraft routinely take ground fire from coca farmers and guerrilla groups, and in which well-armed military aircraft are needed to blanket the terrain with return fire.

But U.S. intelligence reports and other declassified documents present a somewhat inconsistent and often contradictory account of the actual relationship between drug traffickers and guerrilla groups in Colombia, perhaps reflecting their own organizational biases. But these differing reports may also be indicative of the fact that insurgents are involved at different levels of the process and to different degrees depending on which guerrilla front is involved. Finished intelligence reports obtained by the National Security Archive – two from the Central Intelligence Agency (See Documents [24](#) and [40](#)) and another from the Drug Enforcement Administration (See [Document 33](#)) – all maintain that the link is not nearly as strong as Colombian and other Andean officials indicate, suggesting that efforts to link the two were mainly attempts by Colombian security forces get permission to use U.S. security assistance against the guerrillas, with little or no benefit against traffickers.

Another particularly sensitive issue – recently raised by Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) and others([22](#)) – has been the involvement of American pilots and other personnel in the dangerous drug crop eradication missions of the Colombian security forces. This arrangement, under which U.S. pilots operate spray planes, search and rescue helicopters, and security escort aircraft, puts U.S. civilian contractors in combat situations, where direct engagement with guerrillas and other armed groups is a frequent occurrence.

By 1996, it had become clear to U.S. officials that the enhanced aerial herbicide application program begun in 1994 – under which the State Department provided eradication aircraft, technical advisors, instructor pilots, and major program funding – had not achieved its stated goals in terms of eradication, or in terms of ultimately transferring responsibility for these programs over to the Colombians. In August 1996 – with relations already strained over the “decertification” of Colombia’s counterdrug performance – the program was suspended for the second time that year, primarily because the Colombian government refused to allow U.S. “instructor pilots” on actual CNP eradication missions. The issue was finally resolved in September when Colombian officials, under strong U.S. pressure, reluctantly agreed to allow Americans to participate in these operations (See [Document 36](#)), an arrangement that continues to this day despite efforts to phase out the U.S. role.([23](#))

The controversy over the use of American civilians in Andean counterdrug missions took center stage following [**the shutdown by the Peruvian Air Force of an American missionary plane mistaken for drug traffickers by a CIA contractor in April 2001.**](#) In a separate incident, U.S. military and civilian contract employees allegedly provided information that initiated and supported the 1998 bombing by the Colombian Air Force of the town of Santo Domingo during a counterinsurgency operation, killing 18 civilians.([24](#)) Both issues raise questions about the ability to monitor how U.S.-supplied intelligence is used by host nation security forces.

As the documents below illustrate, aerial eradication operations place U.S. and Colombian pilots in combat situations, often involving the use of ground troops, close air support and armed search and rescue helicopters. Recently, FARC guerrillas forced down a U.S. government helicopter returning from an anti-drug mission, killing five Colombian police officers who were defending the wreckage. In a February 2001 incident American civilian contractors([25](#)) aboard a search and rescue helicopter traded

fire with FARC guerrillas after a Colombian police helicopter was shot down during a counterdrug mission.(26) Monthly Narcotics Reports from the Embassy's Narcotics Affairs Unit (See [Document 41](#)) confirm media reports indicating that U.S.-piloted aircraft are routinely hit by ground fire while on these missions.(27) Such accounts highlight the dangers that pilots and crewmembers face during these operations, and the very real possibility that an incident resulting in the death or capture of a U.S. citizen might drag the U.S. into a direct confrontation with Colombian guerrilla groups.(28)

Note: The following documents are in PDF format.

You will need to download and install the free [Adobe Acrobat Reader](#) to view.

Document 17



Central Intelligence Agency, "International Narcotics Situation Report," January 1991, Excerpt, Secret, 9 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Despite some notable achievements in 1990, the CIA estimates that the Colombian government "remains protective" about the role of its military forces in the drug war. The report notes that Colombian military chiefs were pleased to have planned and conducted the spectacular May 1990 raid on the remote Petrolera cocaine processing complex without the support of the U.S., although, the document adds, "they did depend on U.S.-supplied intelligence, training and equipment." Significantly, CIA believes that "the military's primary mission will almost certainly continue to be counterinsurgency," a condition that will "limit the near-term availability of this resource for counternarcotics operations."

Document 18



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, "COLAR Finds Opium Poppies," April 11, 1991, Classification Excised, 2 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Discoveries of poppy fields in Colombia were still relatively rare in 1991, as this heavily-excised intelligence report regarding the discovery of poppy cultivations by Army's Ninth Brigade indicates. Comments from the reporting U.S. military official note that in locations where poppy cultivation has been reported in Colombia "guerrilla groups are always involved."

Document 19



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, "Colombian Army Second Division Commander Requests USG Assistance: Reconnaissance and Eradication of ELN Coca Cultivations," May 2, 1991, Confidential, 5 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Emphasizing the link between guerrillas and drug cultivation, the commander of the Colombian Army's Second Division requests overhead reconnaissance and

other technical assistance from the U.S. to help with the manual eradication of coca fields believed to be associated with the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group. Embassy officials comment that the use of Colombian National Police (CNP) aircraft may result in “greater information exchange with the Colombian National Police on ELN narcotics activities.”

Under guidance issued in 1998, the U.S. restricted the sharing of guerrilla-related intelligence with Colombian security forces unless such information was directly related to planning counternarcotics operations. New guidelines issued in 1999 relaxed these restrictions to permit the disclosure of intelligence on what one U.S. official characterized as guerrilla “threats to counter-narcotics forces.”(29)

Document 20



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, “DIJIN Guerrilla Analysis,” August 23, 1991, Classification Excised, 5 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Among other items, this document stresses that FARC involvement in poppy cultivation – which had recently become a top priority for the Colombian government – “must receive the full attention of all intelligence agencies.” According to the report, guerrillas “are clearly and undeniably involved in narco trafficking.”

Document 21



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, “Drug Cultivation and Guerrilla Support,” December 11, 1991, Classification Excised, 6 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This DIA report provides a chart describing what is thought to be a close association between narcotics-related facilities and the presence of guerrilla fronts in Colombia. The nature of the relationship is so integrated, the report asserts, “it is not possible to differentiate exactly which the Army units are attacking.” Because of this ambiguity, the Army “has been carrying out simultaneous operations against the two threats” since 1982. The Colombian military, the author suggests, argues for U.S. counternarcotics assistance on the presumption that “the narco guerrilla relationship makes it impossible to combat narcos without fighting the guerrillas at the same time.”

Document 22



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, “Fifth Artillery BN, Order of Battle, Guerrilla Activity,” March 11, 1992, Classification Excised, 6 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Until recently there were no Colombian military units dedicated exclusively to counternarcotics operations.(30) Most, like the battalion discussed in this document, had a number of other missions, including counterinsurgency operations and, in the case of the Fifth Battalion, artillery support. As the document describes, the unit patrols its area of operations (AO) to “pursue guerrillas, destroy narcotics fields, or establish a presence which will deny guerrillas an operating area.”

According to the document, Fifth Battalion officers have complained to their U.S. counterparts about recent cuts in aid for the Colombian Army – cuts resulting from concerns that counterdrug assistance was being diverted to fight the guerrillas.(31) The officers explained that “by fighting the insurgents they were fighting narcotraffickers as the two had become tightly linked.”

Document 23



U.S. Transportation Command, “USTRANSCOM DISUM 076,” April 18, 1992, Secret, 10 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Although herbicides were used against marijuana crops for a period in the mid-1980s, Colombia had resisted U.S. pressure to use them against other drug crops until January 1992, when the government approved procedures for the aerial application of glyphosate against marijuana and poppy cultivations (at the time coca cultivation – as opposed to processing – occurred largely in Peru and Bolivia and was not a significant crop in Colombia). Aerial fumigation operations began in mid-February 1992.

Barely two months after the program got underway, this document reports an incident in which U.S. officials aboard a Colombian police helicopter during a poppy fumigation operation found themselves in the midst of a firefight with FARC guerrillas. According to the document, “U.S. counternarcotics officials were observing the fumigation operation from the helicopter, which was providing routine air cover, at the time of the incident.” In response to shots from the ground, the police helicopter – with U.S. officials on board – “directed covering fire at the suspected FARC position,” coordinating its operations with a Colombian Army unit in the area. “In all,” the document states, “the helo fired some 2,500 rounds.”

Document 24



Central Intelligence Agency, “Narco-Insurgent Links in the Andes,” July 29, 1992, Secret, 8 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This report from the CIA’s Counternarcotics Center

examines the relationship between narcotics traffickers and guerrilla groups in Colombia and Peru and assesses the implications of this relationship for U.S.-funded counterdrug programs in the region.⁽³²⁾ The report finds that guerrillas are indeed associated with the Andean drug trade, but nevertheless warns that the use by Andean security forces of counterdrug aid for counterinsurgency purposes would not produce a measurable result against trafficking.

The report cites a number of ways in which traffickers and insurgents collaborate. The insurgents, for example, are believed to be involved in the protection of “key trafficking infrastructure” and have also become “more directly involved in the transportation of drugs.” In Colombia, the report continues, guerrilla groups have made inroads in the burgeoning heroin trade, providing protection and also engaging in cultivation of poppy fields. The insurgents are also thought to use their trafficker connections to obtain weapons.

But the report also stresses that the relationship is one “characterized by both cooperation and friction.” Many traffickers resent the “revolutionary taxes” imposed by the guerrillas and some “have turned to corrupt military and police forces for protection” against guerrilla groups. The report adds, “many traffickers would probably welcome, and even assist, increased operations against insurgents.”

The CIA is skeptical of Andean government claims that “funding counterinsurgency operations with counternarcotics aid would lead to major gains against traffickers.” Moreover, the CIA believes that “officials in Lima and Bogotá, if given antidrug aid for counterinsurgency purposes, would turn it to pure antiguerrilla operations with little payoff against trafficking.”

The report does suggest, however, that “long term improvements in rural security,” extending the reach of counterdrug forces “by allowing them to use forward basing in areas formerly controlled by guerrillas,” might improve counternarcotics effectiveness down the road.

Document 25



U.S. Southern Command, “USSOUTHCOM Counterdrug Daily OPSUM/INSUM,” February 25, 1993, Secret, 3 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

One way the U.S. has aided Colombia’s counterinsurgency campaign is through the provision of intelligence, ostensibly for counternarcotics purposes, but often supporting operations in which guerrillas are also targeted. Information on these combined missions, as indicated in this summary of intelligence operations supported by U.S. Southern Command, is often freely passed between U.S. and Colombian officials.

The document includes a section (see second page) pertaining to a Colombian Army counterdrug operation in the Valle de Cauca, a mountainous region near the city of Cali that was then a primary focus of counternarcotics efforts in Colombia. The report boasts that the “catalyst” for these operations was intelligence provided by the U.S. Military Group (Milgp), noting that “six of the seven targets hit in the first three phases were provided by our intel.” The Milgp also reports that Colombian Army officials involved in the operation have “shared with the Milgp their opinion that guerrillas are providing protection for the drug labs.” The document adds that “all intel gathered,” presumably to include information on the guerrilla groups involved, “is being freely shared” between the two governments.

Document 26



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, “General Jose Serrano, Director of the National Police Anti-Narcotics Division, Discusses the Antinarcotic Police’s Current Efforts and Status,” March 5, 1993, Classification Excised, 5 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Among other comments at a meeting of police attaches, Gen. Jose Serrano, the director of Colombia’s anti-narcotics police, asserts that the drug war has become Colombia’s most pressing problem, adding that the guerrillas are now so deeply involved in the drug trade that one cannot consider the narcotics problem separately from the guerrilla threat.

Serrano’s emphasis on the drug threat is no surprise given his status as the country’s chief anti-drug official, and his linkage of the narcotics trade to the guerrillas may reflect his desire to defend his organization’s mission and budget at a time when the army’s counter guerrilla units were becoming increasingly involved in counterdrug operations.

The document’s author does not speculate about Serrano’s motives, but is struck by the “difference of opinion when the army and the police talk about the guerrilla issue.” While the police “put all guerrilla activity in with the narco’s” [sic], military officials “see an association between the narcos and the guerrillas but do not exclusively group them as one.”

Document 27



U.S. Embassy Colombia, “More Ground Fire Disables Two CNP [Colombian National Police] Aircraft in Opium Poppy Eradication Campaign,” June 22, 1993, Unclassified, 4 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This cable reports a number of hits on Colombian National Police (CNP) poppy eradication aircraft during May and June 1993. According to the document the ground fire is believed to have come from FARC guerrillas. “The

effectiveness of the ground fire and multiple hits on aircraft indicates the ambushers are using automatic weapons,” the cable notes, adding that poppy growers and other farmers are not organized enough to carry out such attacks. “The concerted attack on eradication aircraft suggests some other, more organized force is responsible.”

It is also reported that the CNP is preparing to execute “helicopter-transported ground raids against selected sites in the area as a deterrent to future ambushes.”

Document 28



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, “Neiva – Drug Spraying Operations,” November 23, 1993, Classification Excised, 4 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This report covers anti-poppy operations in the area around Neiva in the mountains of southern Colombia.

While Colombians feel that “actually visiting the site of narcotics cultivation” is the most efficient counterdrug strategy, it is also the most dangerous. Aerial spray operations, on the other hand, are “the easiest way to continue the eradication program without facing a well-armed narco-guerrilla enemy.” These missions, the document notes, “are often subject to random ground fire from automatic weapons.”

Document 29



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, “Smuggling Trends in the Department of Huila,” December 1, 1993, Classification Excised, 4 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This report briefly describes the heroin production process in the Colombian department of Huila – then a major source of opium latex – from cultivation through the various stages of processing and refining. According to the document, independent growers control much of the process, while major drug cartels do not generally become involved until the stage where morphine is refined into heroin.

The report also downplays the participation of insurgent groups in the process, noting that guerrilla involvement largely “focuses on the extortion of the peasants growing the poppy plants and producing the [opium] latex,” and that “there is little evidence that the guerrilla groups are physically protecting poppy fields.” The report also notes that attacks against eradication forces – which are frequently attributed to guerrilla forces – “are more instigated by the growers themselves and not by hired guerrilla protectors.”

Document 30



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, "Anti-Narcotic Police Operations in the Department of Huila," December 2, 1993, Classification Excised, 5 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This report covers the activities of Colombian police counternarcotics units in the poppy growing regions of Huila Department. According to the document, the anti-narcotic police are "designated as deployable personnel aboard the police helicopters while flying combat air support for the Turbo Thrush crop spraying aircraft." The police forces act as "door gunners" and also as "ground attack troops" as the situation demands. According to the cable, the "real or perceived guerrilla threat" discourages the police from carrying out ground operations without helicopter support.

Document 31



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, "Narcotic Cultivation Sites in the Department of Arauca," December 14, 1993, Classification Excised, 3 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This document describes what were then relatively small-scale coca cultivation activities in the department of Arauca in Colombia's eastern plains.

While coca (and increasingly heroin) production are emerging problems in Arauca, the document asserts that the biggest problem for Colombian security forces "is combatting the numerous guerrilla factions existing in the region." The report asserts that insurgent groups "are involved in the drug business more so from the trafficking side of the house." The insurgents, the report adds, participate in the drug trade "more so to get the means to buy arms, ammunition, and explosives than for the mere accumulation of wealth."

Document 32



Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, "Guerrilla Activity in the Department of Cauca," February 26, 1994, Classification Excised, 4 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This intelligence report examines guerrilla forces active in the Department of Cauca, a mountainous region in southern Colombia. The document notes that attacks against Colombian National Police forces are a main objective of the insurgent groups "because they are more susceptible to quick strikes for lack of manpower and are essentially unable to wage a concentrated counter attack without the backing of the Army."

Most of the guerrilla groups are believed to be financing at least some portion of their operations through an

association with the narcotics trade, but the document adds that “there is little indication that the various guerrilla factions are cultivating their own fields and coordinating their own processing and delivery systems.”

Document 33



Drug Enforcement Administration, Drug Intelligence Report, “Insurgent Involvement in the Colombian Drug Trade,” June 1994

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This finished intelligence report from the South American Unit of the DEA’s Strategic Intelligence Section refutes the frequent claims made by Colombian and some U.S. officials that guerrilla groups are deeply involved in virtually all stages of the drug trade and have become, in essence, the “country’s third drug cartel.”

The DEA finds that, “Despite Colombian security forces’ frequent claim that FARC units are involved directly in drug trafficking operations, the independent involvement of insurgents in Colombia’s domestic drug production, transportation, and distribution is limited.” The report adds that “no credible evidence indicates that the FARC or ELN has directed, as a matter of policy, that their respective organizations directly engage in independent drug production or distribution,” and also that “neither the FARC nor the ELN are known to have been involved in the transportation, distribution, or marketing of illicit drugs in the United States or Europe.”

Moreover, the DEA finds that the relationship between insurgents and traffickers “is characterized by both cooperation and conflict,” noting that the groups “do not have the same objectives,” and are thus unlikely to form anything more than “ad hoc ‘alliances of convenience.’” DEA “does not anticipate ... that the insurgents will ever challenge the cartels’ domination of Colombia’s illicit drug trade.”

Document 34



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, “OV-10’s for the Colombia Aerial Eradication Program,” September 19, 1996, Confidential, 3 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

In the midst of a dispute over whether Colombia would allow U.S. pilots aboard counternarcotics spray operations (see [Document 35](#)), the State Department began preparations to deliver for the first time an OV-10 “Bronco” aircraft to Colombia for use in these missions. According to Boeing, the producer of the OV-10, the Bronco is designed specifically for “anti-guerrilla operations, helicopter escort, close air support, armed reconnaissance, and forward air control.”(33)

While the State Department would prefer the aircraft to be flown by an American pilot, the Embassy finds this possibility “highly unlikely given the [Colombian government] adversity to direct American pilot participation.” Nevertheless, the Embassy supports giving the OV-10 to the Colombians, mainly because Colombia “continues to demonstrate it will commit military forces directly to counternarcotics activities.” According to the cable, the bigger, more secure Broncos would be an essential upgrade for the counterdrug forces “as the narco-guerrillas continue to target and score against eradication aircraft.”

Document 35



State Department cable, “NAS/GOC Aerial Drug Eradication Program,” September 25, 1996, Unclassified, 8 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

In 1994, the Colombian Ministry of Defense approved a program called Operation Splendor, an effort to wipe out all coca and poppy cultivation in Colombia through aerial fumigation with the chemical herbicide glyphosate. The program was halted twice in 1996 for several reasons, but primarily because Colombia was not willing to allow U.S. “instructor pilots” to fly on actual eradication missions with the Colombian National Police (CNP). This issue, as much as any other, helps explain why the U.S. “decertified” Colombia’s cooperation with U.S. counterdrug programs in March 1996, resulting in the cutoff of many kinds of assistance not related to narcotics.

This cable sent to the U.S. Embassy in Colombia maps out a strategy for negotiating this issue with the Colombians. According to the document, the absence of U.S. pilots on these missions has made it “impossible to train a competent CNP crew force.” The State Department questions “how much more we are willing to spend on an effort that is not producing adequate results,” and where U.S. pilots are not “allowed to perform their full range of duties.”

To support the U.S. position, the State Department cites a successful marijuana eradication campaign in Colombia piloted largely by Americans in the 1980s, and the presence of U.S. pilots on “other fixed-wing aircraft(34) in the same operating areas within Colombia as the spray aircraft.” The cable also notes that U.S. pilots “are trained to fly under adverse conditions including hostile fire.” The U.S. position explicitly rejects a Colombian proposal to allow American pilots to fly only “in safe areas,” since it will not result in the full eradication of drug crops and “will not provide optimum training and evaluation for the Colombian pilots.”

The Embassy is to offer the Colombians three options: 1) To accept American instructors alongside Colombian pilots; 2) to allow third-country nationals to act as instructor pilots; or 3) to “go it alone.”

Document 36



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, “NAS/GOC Aerial Drug Eradication Program,” September 26, 1996, Confidential, 13 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

In an emotional meeting with the Colombian defense minister and two officials from the Colombian National Police (CNP), U.S. Ambassador Myles Frechette explained the conditions under which the State Department would restart the drug crop eradication program suspended in August (See [Document 35](#)).

According to Frechette, the reaction from the Colombians “varied between anger, indignation, and outrage” in the case of Colonel Gallego, the CNP counternarcotics chief, who at times had “tears running down his cheeks.” The Colombians, Frechette reports, told him that it was “imperative to begin spraying coca immediately ... so as not to give the narcos and the guerrillas, who had inspired the peasant demonstrations, the belief that by arranging demonstrations they could stop or even slow down the drug eradication program.”

Frechette explains that after listening to the three options, the Colombian defense minister felt he had no choice but to “reluctantly” recommend the use of the U.S. pilots, despite what he noted would be a difficult position to defend before the Colombian legislature. For his part, Frechette was “amazed to see the Colombians give way so easily.”

Document 37



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, “Expanded Aerial Interdiction: Implementation Plan,” October 7, 1996, Unclassified, 9 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This cable describes the phases by which the aerial eradication program – suspended since August 1996 – will be reintroduced in Colombia with the participation of U.S. pilots.

In the initial phase of the program, missions are to be carried out using three operational strategies: “combined interdiction/eradication operations, combined Colombian Army ground support/security for eradication flights, and aerially escorted operations without ground support.” Among the “critical details” to be addressed by State Department officials is “the use of [Colombian National Police] gunners on the U.S. rescue helicopters.”

Over the years, the presence of Colombian gunners on U.S. aircraft has involved American personnel in several firefights, including the 1992 incident discussed in

Document 23, and again in February 2001 (mentioned in the introduction to this section).

Document 38



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, “Aerial Eradication Division Resumes Spray Operations: Tactics, Training, and What to Expect,” February 7, 1997, Confidential, 6 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Building on success from the previous year’s “Operation Conquest” (See Documents [44](#) and [45](#)), and bolstered by new tactics and Colombia’s reluctant acceptance of U.S. spray pilots (See Documents [35](#) and [36](#)), the Embassy’s Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) briefs State, Defense, intelligence and other officials on recent aerial eradication missions in Guaviare Department. The document highlights the hazards of ground fire in U.S.-piloted eradication operations, and indicates the high level of coordination among U.S. counterdrug officials, Colombian police, and Colombian Army ground forces during these dangerous missions.

NAS reports that the spray teams have made tactical shifts “in an effort to thwart continued hits from ground fire.” The most recent operations, however, have been carried out in low threat areas since the departure of the Army’s Second Mobile Brigade (a unit later denied U.S. assistance after one of its intelligence officers was implicated in the July 1997 massacre of civilians at Mapiripán([35](#))). Until recently, the brigade was part of what NAS considered to be the proper mix of eradication support forces: “close helicopter support, coupled with [Colombian Army] support on the ground.” The document also indicates that American search and rescue (SAR) units have also been integrated into the team.

NAS believes that the departure of the Second Mobile Brigade “may be a factor in the number of hits received” by spray aircraft, adding that the Embassy had asked Colombian police to request the return of the brigade “until the eradication task force achieves its goal of maximum eradication of coca fields in that department” [sic]. NAS feels that the request “will ensure the [Colombian government] commitment to keep the [Colombian Army] fully engaged in areas of operation.”

Document 39



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, “Successful Visit by ONDCP [Office of National Drug Control Policy] and INL [State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs] Staff,” July 31, 1997, Confidential, 11 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

This cable summarizes the visit to Colombia by a team from the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and

the State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). The Americans were there to tour areas and facilities associated with U.S.-supported counterdrug programs.

The visit came only two days after the conclusion of the massacre at Mapiripán, in which Colombian Army-backed paramilitary forces killed dozens of civilians. Among the facilities toured during the trip was the Colombian Army Special Forces training base at Barrancon, located only a short distance from the airfield at San Jose del Guaviare from which the paramilitaries launched their attack on Mapiripán.

The trip also came during a period when the legal status of the "Convivir" civilian self-defense forces established by the government in 1994 was under review in the Colombian court system. Under the program, the government armed a network of civilians to act as rural militias against rebel forces. Human rights groups had criticized the program for involving civilians in Colombia's armed conflict and for alleged links between the Convivirs and illegal paramilitary groups. Noted in the cable are the comments of a Colombian official at Barrancon who provided "a verbal defense of the Convivir public defense forces," which he compared to "the hired sheriffs of the calvary [sic] of the wild west."

The team visited recently sprayed coca fields, and was briefed by a Colombian National Police (CNP) official who highlighted the dangers associated with the eradication program, telling the Americans that crop dusting planes are hit by ground fire "roughly every three days." Despite the danger, Colonel Gallego of the Anti-Narcotics Police said that the CNP did not need help from the Army, which in any case lacked the mobility necessary to support the eradication missions. Gallego told the team that the Army "sometimes offer help just to demonstrate involvement and then ask for resources."

Document 40



Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Report, "Colombia-Venezuela: Continuing Friction Along the Border," October 1, 1997, Secret, 14 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Alarmed by an increase in kidnappings, extortion, and attacks on its military outposts, the Venezuelan government in 1997 had become increasingly concerned about Colombia's apparent inability to reign in guerrilla activity along the Venezuelan border.⁽³⁶⁾

The report, from the CIA's Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis, assesses what the issue has meant for Colombia-Venezuela bilateral relations, and discusses the possible implications of the dispute for U.S. policy in the region. Analysts conclude that the diplomatic problems engendered by the dispute might complicate U.S.

counterdrug and other programs and could perhaps even “force the US to assume a greater role in the border problem.” The CIA predicts that both countries are likely to ask the U.S. to intervene, “ostensibly to interdict the narcotics flow ... by providing military equipment and technical support that could be used against the insurgents.”

Document 41



U.S. Embassy Colombia, “NAS [Narcotics Affairs Section] Bogotá Monthly Narcotics Report: August – November,” December 3, 1997, Unclassified, 21 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Among many other issues addressed by this report from the embassy’s Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) is the recent arrival of six U.S. government-owned UH-1H helicopters “to be exclusively assigned to security escort in the aerial eradication program” (see page 6). According to the document, these helicopters, which have been armored and equipped with machine guns, “will be piloted by U.S. contract pilots.” The cable characterizes these missions as “possibly the most dangerous flying in the so-called drug war.”

Underscoring the perils of these missions, the document reports a number of incidents in which U.S. or Colombian aircraft were hit by ground fire during the previous month of counterdrug missions (see page 14). On one occasion, Colombian police attempting to rescue a downed helicopter “came under heavy fire from guerrillas and ended up blowing the aircraft instead of leaving it for the guerrillas.” U.S. and Colombian-owned aircraft suffered a total of 68 ground fire incidents in 1997 according to NAS statistics.⁽³⁷⁾

Document 42



U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, “Request for Training Plan and Phaseout Timeline for DynCorp Operations in Colombia,” April 22, 1998, Unclassified, 4 pp.

Source: Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive

Citing the “heightened threat from guerrilla forces,” the Embassy requests that the State Department’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) prepare a plan to initiate the “phase out” of American pilots from the drug crop eradication program in Colombia. Under contract with INL, U.S. citizens employed by DynCorp – a Virginia-based company – have been flying and otherwise supporting counternarcotics missions over Colombia since November 1996.

While praising the work performed by the DynCorp pilots, Embassy officials believe that the presence of the Americans “has become a force protection issue,” and recommend the development of a plan “for ending DynCorp

support that is reasonable and viable, and can forestall sudden [Colombian government] decisions.” The Embassy suggests a “Colombianization plan” that would phase-out the DynCorp personnel as Colombian police are trained to take over the tasks themselves. Such a plan would also “lower the U.S. profile in the country,” according to the cable.

Despite the effort to withdraw the American pilots, DynCorp pilots are today flying more crop dusting, security escort and search-and-rescue missions than ever. Under a contract with INL, DynCorp has as many as 335 employees in Colombia – up from around 50 in April 1998 – about half of whom are Americans.⁽³⁸⁾

Notes

19. Joseph B. Treaster, “U.S. and Colombia Reduce Army’s Role in Drug Battle,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 1992.
20. Douglas Jehl, “U.S. Is Cutting Aid to Latin Drug War,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1993.
21. Section 506 of the Foreign Assistance Act allows the president to “draw down” material and funding from existing U.S. stocks for transfer into security assistance programs. Section 506(a)(2) has been used frequently to fund counterdrug programs in Latin America. See Adam Isacson and Joy Olson, *Just the Facts, 1999 Edition: A Civilian’s Guide to U.S. Defense and Security Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, D.C.: Latin American Working Group, 1999), p. 138.
22. http://www.house.gov/schakowsky/press2001/pr07_24_2001colombia.html
23. See, for example, Ibon Villedelabeitia, “Just a job, pilots call dusting of coca crop; Colombians label Americans lawless,” Reuters, August 19, 2001.
24. T. Christian Miller, “A Colombian Town Caught in a Cross-Fire; The bombing of Santo Domingo shows how messy U.S. involvement in the Latin American drug war can be,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 2002.
25. The civilian contractors were employed by DynCorp – a private military outsourcing company based in Virginia.
26. Jeremy Mcdermott, “US Crews Involved in Colombian Battle,” *The Scotsman*, February 23, 2001; Julian Borger, “A plane is shot down and the US proxy war on drug barons unravels,” *The Guardian* (London), June 2, 2001.
27. See, for example, Juan Forero, “Role of U.S. Companies in Colombia Is Questioned,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2001.
28. “U.S. chopper destroyed to thwart rebels,” *The Seattle Times*, January 25, 2002.
29. United States General Accounting Office, Drug Control: Narcotics Threat From Colombia Continues to Grow, GAO/NSIAD-99-136, June 1999; Juanita Darling and Ruth Morris, “Concerns Grow About U.S. Military Aid to Colombia; Controversy: American Officials Insist the Aim is to Fight Drugs. Critics Fear Agenda Includes

Battling Rebels,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 1999.

30. The first of three counternarcotics battalions was unveiled in December 1999.

31. Grant military assistance for the Colombian military (excluding training) was substantially lower in fiscal year 1992 (around \$30 million) than it had been the previous two-year period (during which it had received over \$120 million), but this to some extent reflected a U.S. policy shift in favor of the Colombian National Police which received \$24 million in grant assistance in 1992 (compared to only around \$16 million in the previous two years). For information on U.S. security assistance for Colombia see The Federation of American Scientists Arms Sales Monitoring Project, <http://www.fas.org/asmp>

32. Created in 1989, reports from the Counternarcotics Center represent the fusion of intelligence information from multiple government agencies involved in the counterdrug mission. See Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (Boulder: Westview Press, Fourth Edition, 1999), pp. 28-29; The name was changed to the Crime and Narcotics Center in 1994, reflecting an expansion of its mission to include international organized crime.

33. <http://www.boeing.com/companyoffices/history/bna/ov10.htm>

34. It is unclear what “other fixed-wing aircraft” means. Presumably, it refers to U.S. Customs Service, Department of Defense, Drug Enforcement Administration, or Central Intelligence Agency aircraft involved in counterdrug surveillance or other activities.

35. Juan Forero, “Colombia Massacre’s Strange Fallout,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2001.

36. See, for example, “Settlers head south, Colombia way: Insurgents and drug traffickers prompt Venezuela to act in border area,” *Financial Times* (London), October 29, 1997.

37. U.S. Embassy Colombia cable, “NAS Bogotá Monthly Narcotics Report: Dec – Mar,” April 17, 1998.

38. Andrew Selsky, “American pilots in Colombia drug war say they're not mercenaries,” Associated Press, August 17, 2001; Juan Tamayo, “Anti-drug pilots decry image of lawlessness: 'We're not Rambos,’” *The Miami Herald*, August 23, 2001.

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