

## Drug War Chronicle - world's leading drug policy newsletter

# Plan Colombia: Ten Years Later

from Drug War Chronicle, Issue #640, 7/16/10

The United States has been trying to suppress Colombian coca production and cocaine trafficking since at least the time of Ronald Reagan, but the contemporary phase of US intervention in Colombia in the name of the war on drugs celebrated its 10th anniversary week. As **Washington Office on Latin America** (WOLA) security analyst Adam Isaacson pointed out Wednesday in a cogent essay "**Colombia: Don't Call It A Model**," it was on July 13, 2000, that President Bill Clinton signed into law a \$1.3 billion package of military assistance known as Plan Colombia.



Plan Colombia coca eradication scene

Plan Colombia was supposed to cut Colombian cocaine production in the mid-decade, and while total US expenditures on it have now risen to \$7.5 billion, that goal was clearly not met. But, a decade down the road, there has been some "progress." The leftist peasant guerrillas of the FARC have been seriously weakened and are operating at half the strength they were 10 years ago. Violence has steadily decreased, as has criminality. The Colombian military has been strengthened -- especially its military, which has nearly doubled in size.

Still, as Isaacson notes, those gains have come at a tremendous cost. Thousands have been killed at the hands of rightist paramilitary groups aligned with powerful landowners and political elites, and while those paramilitaries officially disbanded several years ago, they appear to be reconstituting themselves. The seemingly endless "parapolitics" scandals linking the paramilitaries to high government actors demonstrate that the price of "progress" in Colombia has been corruption, impunity and human rights abuses.

And the war continues, albeit at a lower level. Some 21,000 fighters from all sides and an estimated 14,000 civilians died in the fighting this decade, and all the while, peasants were planting and harvesting coca crops, and traffickers were turning it into cocaine and exporting it to the insatiable North American and, increasingly, European markets.

While Colombian and US policy-makers have hailed Plan Colombia as a "success," neither Isaacson nor other analysts who spoke to Drug War Chronicle this week were willing to make such unvarnished claims. "'Success' has come at a high cost," wrote Isaacson. "Colombia's security gains are partial, possibly reversible, and weighed down by 'collateral damage,' including mass killings, other human rights abuses, and the weakening of democratic institutions."

"Success has eluded efforts to achieve Plan Colombia's main goal: reducing Colombian cocaine supplies," wrote Isaacson. Despite years of aerial eradication, coca remains stubbornly entrenched in the Colombian countryside, showing a significant decline only last year, after Colombia switched its eradication emphasis from spraying to manual eradication. "This strategic shift appears to be reducing coca cultivation, for now at least. In 2009 -- a year in which both aerial and manual eradication dropped sharply -- the UNODC found a significant drop in Colombian coca-growing, to 68,000 hectares."

But, as Isaacson and others note, that decline has been offset by increases in cultivation in Peru and Bolivia. In fact, total coca cultivation in the region has remained remarkably consistent since 2003, at about 150,000 hectares per year.

"If you look at it from the point of aiding the Colombian government to fight against the FARC and other insurgents, it has worked," said Carlos Hidalgo, Latin American analyst for the libertarian-leaning **Cato Institute**. "A decade ago, Colombia was close to being a failed state, with the FARC controlling large swaths of territory and threatening major cities. Today they are terribly weak and on the run, and much of their leadership has been killed," he noted.

"Due to the widespread use of helicopters and the fact that guerrillas don't have that kind of mobility, the Colombians and Americans have been successful in shrinking the area of operation available to the guerrillas, and that has hurt the guerrillas' ability to recruit," said Larry Birns, director of the **Council on Hemispheric Affairs**. "A few years ago, there were maybe 16,000 FARC operating in six or seven major theaters, and now it's about half that. But that doesn't necessarily mean the FARC is finished; we haven't seen any sign of that. Their options are fewer, but they are far from disappeared. Plan Colombia has been successful in empowering the Colombian military, but not so much in solving the problem of the FARC insurgency."

"On the military side, the counterinsurgency, there has been definite progress," agreed Vanda Felbab-Brown, a drugs and

counterinsurgency expert at the **Brookings Institution**. "The situation in the late 1990s was very bad. The FARC was in the hills above Bogotá, and the paramilitaries were highly organized. Today, the FARC is much weaker, land travel is more possible, and other security indicators also show progress. That said, the FARC is still around in substantial numbers and can jeopardize security and economic development in particular areas. And the paramilitaries are back, even if the Colombian government insists they are not the paramilitaries. They are, for all intents and purposes, just like the paramilitaries of the 1980s and 1990s."



coca seedlings

"The idea was that if they suppressed the coca, the capabilities of the FARC, the ELN, and the paramilitaries would be substantially weakened," said Felbab-Brown. "They said that if you eliminated coca in Colombia, the conflict would end, but I don't think you can bankrupt the belligerents through eradication. That didn't pan out. In some places, the government was able to diminish at least temporarily economic flows to particular elements of the FARC, but that was the result of military operations, not eradication," she argued.

"A lot of people say the FARC have lost their political agenda, that they are just traffickers, but I don't subscribe to that view," said Felbab-Brown. "If someone wants to conduct a rebellion, they have to have a way to finance it. I don't think the FARC is any different. One of the big accomplishments of the US and the Colombian military was taking out a lot of top FARC leaders," she continued. "Their current leaders have been out in the jungle so long, they suffer from a lack of intellectual imagination. But the FARC are peasant guerrillas, a few intellectuals and students, and they were never strong ideologically. There is no equivalent of Comrade Gonzalo [of Peru's Shining Path] or Mullah Omar or Bin Laden for the FARC. And I think they've run out of ideas. Times have changed, and the ideological story that they want to tell the world and their members is crumbling, but it's not the case they are just interested in money. They still want power, they still believe in narratives of war and conquest, but they don't have anything to frame it with anymore."

"They are about more than just criminality," agreed Isaacson. "They're raising drug money to buy guns and those guns are for something. While their ideology may be pretty stunted at this point, they are driven by a desire to take power -- unlike, say, the Sinaloa cartel, which is driven by a desire to sell drugs. They hate Colombia's political class, and they represent that small percentage of peasants on the frontier. Those boomtowns on the frontier, that's where the FARC's base is. Wherever there is no government and people are on their own, the FARC claims to protect them. They are not bandits -- they are more dangerous than bandits."

The paramilitaries continue to wreak havoc, too, said Felbab-Brown. "They assassinate community leaders and human rights organizers," she said. "In some areas, they collude with the FARC; in others, they fight the FARC over cocaine routes and access to coca production. They are still a real menace, and it is very discouraging that they have come back so quickly. That shows the failure of the Colombian government to address the real underlying causes of the problems."

That has been a serious flaw from the beginning, the Brookings Institution analyst said. "At first Plan Colombia was aimed at root causes of conflict and coca production, but that was dropped, and in the Bush administration it morphed into a counternarcotics and counterinsurgency project. Economic development was a minor component of the plan, and the US never tried to pressure Uribe to think about economic redistribution and the distribution of political power, nor has the US been very vocal about human rights and civil liberties issues."

"When Plan Colombia was first conceived, it was primarily a domestic program aimed at drawing in the Colombian population, which at that time had become totally disaffected from the state," recalled Birns. "It was to emphasize economic development, nutrition, and education. It was the Clinton administration that militarized Plan Colombia and made it into a security doctrine rather than an economic development formula."

That only deepened in the wake of 9/11, said Birns. "Increasingly, Plan Colombia morphed first into a counternarcotics program and then again into an anti-terrorist vehicle. The US began to define the FARC, which never had any international aspect, as terrorists. It was a convenience for the US policy of intervention to emphasize the terrorism aspect."

But at root, Plan Colombia was first and foremost about reducing Colombian coca and cocaine production. "It wasn't sold here in the US as a counterinsurgency effort, but as an effort to reduce the supply of cocaine to the US market," Cato's Hidalgo pointed out. "If you look at the acreage of coca planted in Colombia, it has decreased, but the production of coca remains the same, and coca production is increasing dramatically in Peru and Bolivia. Once again, we see the balloon effect at work."

"As the reduction took place in Colombia, it simply moved back to Peru, whence it originally came," concurred COHA's Birns. "Peruvian cocaine production is now half the regional total, so total cocaine production remains essentially the same, even though there has been a reduction in the role Colombia plays."

"One of the best measures to see if the supply of cocaine has decreased is to look at price, but what that tells us is that cocaine was 23% cheaper in 2007 than it was in 1998 when Plan Colombia was launched," said Hidalgo. "It is clear that Plan Colombia has failed in its goal, which was to reduce the supply of cocaine to the US market."

"We've tried everything," said Hidalgo. "Aggressive aerial spraying of fields, manual eradication, as well as softer measures to entice producers to adopt other crops, and it's all failed. As long as the price of cocaine remains inflated by prohibition, there is a big profit and a big incentive for producers and traffickers to grow the plant and export the product to the US and elsewhere. The only way to curtail it

by legalizing cocaine. Other than that, I don't see this as a battle that can be won."

Felbab-Brown called the coca and cocaine production estimates "extraordinarily squishy," but added it was clear that Plan Colombia failed to achieve its goals there. "The plan was supposed to halve production in six years, and that clearly was not accomplished," she said. "It would be false to deny there has been some progress, but it has not been sufficient. I think it was bound not to work because it was heavily focused on eradication in the context of violence and underemphasized the need for economic programs to address why people cultivate coca. And the larger reality is even if you succeeded in Colombia, production would have moved elsewhere."

Counternarcotics cannot solve Colombia's problems, said Felbab-Brown, because coca is not at the root of those problems. "There is so much that counternarcotics programs can do given the basic economic and political situation in Colombia," said Felbab-Brown. "You have a set-up where labor is heavily taxed and capital and land are lightly taxed, so even when you get economic growth, it doesn't generate jobs, it only concentrates money in the hands of the rich. The Colombian government has been unwilling to address these issues and inequality continues to grow. You can only do so much if you can't generate legal jobs. You have to take on entrenched elites, the bases of political power in Colombia, and Uribe's people are not interested in doing that."

But Uribe will be gone next month, replaced by his elected successor, Juan Manuel Santos. That could mean change, said Isaacson. "I'm not as ideologically to the right as Uribe, some of his appointments indicate people who actually have an interest in governance, and I think the principle author of the program they're carrying out in the countryside to get the state and not just the military out there," he said could also be more open to the idea of peace negotiations than Uribe was."

That may or may not be the case, but Plan Colombia under whatever president is not going to solve Colombia's drug problem -- nor America's, said Isaacson. "At home, we need to reduce demand through treatment and other options," he said. "In Colombia, as long as you have parts of the country ungoverned and as long as members of the government have nothing to fear if they abuse the population there will always be drugs. Colombia needs to build the state and do it without impunity. We built up the Colombian military, but there was no money for teachers, doctors, or any public good besides security."

summary:

Ten years ago this week, President Bill Clinton signed off on the first \$1.3 billion installment of Plan Colombia. A decade later, how is it working out? We ask the experts.

Bookmark/Search this post with:

 [digg](#) |  [reddit](#)

**[Drug War Issues](#) [Cocaine](#) - [Coca](#) - [Andean Drug War](#) - [Military](#) - [Human Rights](#) - [Eradication](#)  
[Consequences of Prohibition](#) [Turf Wars](#) - [Political Instability](#) - [Government Corruption](#) - [Drug Trade Funding](#)  
[Terrorists](#) - [Civil Conflict](#)  
[Politics & Advocacy](#) [Politics Outside US](#) - [Executive Branch](#) - [Congress](#)**

PERMISSION to reprint or redistribute any or all of the contents of Drug War Chronicle (formerly The Week Online with DRCNet) is hereby granted. We ask that any use of these materials include proper credit and, where appropriate, a link to one or more of our web sites. If your publication customarily pays for publication, DRCNet requests checks payable to the organization. If your publication does not pay for materials, you are free to use the materials gratis. In all cases, we request notification for our records, including physical copies where material has appeared in print. Contact: StoptheDrugWar.org; the Drug Reform Coordination Network, P.O. Box 18402, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 293-8340 (voice), (202) 293-8344 (fax), e-mail [drcnet@drcnet.org](mailto:drcnet@drcnet.org). Thank you.

Articles of a purely educational nature in Drug War Chronicle appear courtesy of the DRCNet Foundation, unless otherwise noted.

StoptheDrugWar.org • 1623 Connecticut Ave., NW, 3rd Floor, Washington DC 20009

Phone (202) 293-8340 Fax (202) 293-8344 [drcnet@drcnet.org](mailto:drcnet@drcnet.org) • [Privacy Policy](#)