

Military overdose: U.S. involvement in Colombia

by [Tom F. Driver](#) in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

The news from Colombia is mostly bad. The number of people forced to flee from their homes and find makeshift shelter has increased from about 2 million in 2001 to nearly 3 million today. They flee both from the armed conflict and from having their farms sprayed with poison from airplanes—a futile attempt to eradicate the production of coca, from which cocaine is derived. Many of the settlements of displaced persons, including two that I have visited, have themselves become battlegrounds fought over by the very guerrilla groups and paramilitary forces from whom the refugees have fled.

The Colombian government has no program to aid those displaced or to enable their reentry into society. U.S. government assistance to them averages \$10 to \$15 per person per year.

In March the staff at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá acknowledged to a delegation of Presbyterians and members of Witness for Peace that the main result of aerial fumigation is to remove the small farmers (campesinos) from their lands and push them into the factory labor market. Meanwhile, Colombia's food market, which the campesinos used to supply, is flooded with produce from the U.S. Although the aerial fumigations have been dramatically increased, total coca production has not declined, nor has the supply of cocaine entering the U.S.

Colombia's president, Alvaro Uribe Velez, elected in May 2002, has sworn to end the fighting by taking tough military action. So far this approach shows no sign of success. The Uribe administration has shown itself heedless of many democratic rights and constitutional guarantees, conducting many arrests, searches and wiretaps without warrants. Uribe has called for U.S. troops and naval vessels to be sent to Colombia as soon as they are no longer needed in the war against Iraq. He is the only head of state in Latin America who publicly endorsed that war.

To the \$1.3 billion that President Clinton won from Congress for Plan Colombia in 2000 (80 percent of it for Colombia's military and police) George W. Bush has added another \$1.2 billion (this took place mostly while the American public was thinking about Iraq). Bush has shifted the rationale from fighting drugs to fighting terrorism.

Bush has expanded Plan Colombia into the Andean Regional Initiative (also known as the Andean Counternarcotics Initiative), signaling that the war is spreading beyond Colombia's borders and that the U.S. seeks a military presence in much of South America. He has also sent several hundred members of U.S. Special Forces into Colombia's department of Arauca to train Colombian military to guard an oil pipeline used primarily by Occidental Petroleum. Oil's key role in defining the U.S. interest in Colombia is becoming clearer. However, as the *Washington Post* observed, "it is clear from the training taking place . . . that defending the pipeline will mostly entail offensive operations against . . . guerrillas" (February 7).

In February three U.S. civilians working under contract to the U.S. Department of Defense were captured by FARC, the largest of the rebel groups, when the small plane carrying out what FARC said was a spy mission went down in mountains near Florencia, the capital of Caquetá Department. U.S. sources said the plane crashed because of engine failure. FARC claimed to have shot it down. A fourth U.S. agent and a Colombian who had also been aboard were shot at the scene of the crash. Six weeks later another plane searching for the captives also crashed, killing all three crew members. More recently a third U.S. plane went down, killing its mercenary pilot.

The incidents mark a gradual escalation of direct U.S. participation in the conflict. According to one report, "more than 1,000 U.S. troops are fighting Colombia's guerrilla insurgencies" (the New Colombia News Agency; www.anncol.com/index-english.htm).

Two U.S. companies—Coca Cola and Drummond, an Alabama-based mining enterprise—have been brought into U.S. courts on well-founded charges of complicity in the use of Colombia's paramilitary forces to kill labor organizers at the Colombian plants with whom these corporations have long-term contracts. On March 31, the federal district court in Florida ruled that allegations against Coca Cola were sufficient to allow a union's case against it to proceed. Two weeks later, the U.S. Court for the Northern District of Alabama ruled that a Colombian labor union could bring suit against Drummond in connection with the murder of three union leaders.

On June 4 officials of numerous religious denominations, labor organizations and other groups—including Church World Service, World Vision, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Lutheran World Relief—sent a letter to members of Congress proposing a new approach to Colombia. (The full text of the letter can be found at the Latin America Working Group's Web site: www.lawg.org/colombia.)

Among other things, the letter calls for the Colombian government to end collusion between the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary forces responsible for severe human rights violations. It proposes phasing out aerial fumigation while increasing alternative development, increasing aid to the displaced and providing more protection and assistance to them by the Colombian government. The letter insists that Colombia's security measures not undermine the democracy they seek to protect and asks the Colombian government to increase efforts to protect threatened labor leaders, religious leaders and human rights defenders. The officials also urge a step back from escalating U.S. military involvement and call for adequately funded drug treatment and prevention programs in the U.S.