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U.S. Involvement Deepens As Armed Conflict Escalates In Colombia

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While American public attention has been focused elsewhere, U.S. engagement in Colombia has been steadily growing, as has the armed conflict there.

A peace process under way for three years under former president Andrés Pastrana failed last year and a war-weary public ushered in President Alvaro Uribe with a mandate to address Colombia's grave security concerns. Since then, the security for much of the civilian population has deteriorated, political space for legitimate dissent and the defense of basic human rights is being undermined, and dire human needs are not being addressed. Nonetheless, there are signs that, despite the stalling of the national peace process, civil society continues to find ways to encourage peace.

On April 22, 2003, the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) co-hosted a Current Issues Briefing entitled "[Colombia: Trip Report on Armed Conflict and Society](#)," to discuss these issues and the related findings of a delegation to Colombia organized by the Washington Office on Latin America. The briefing was held at the Institute, and related resources, including archived audio from the proceedings, are available online.

[Virginia M. Bouvier](#), program officer in the Institute's [Jennings Randolph Fellowship Program](#) and a Latin America specialist, participated in the WOLA delegation and moderated the discussion. Four other delegation members also participated in the session:

- **Congressman James P. McGovern** (D-Massachusetts);
- **Charles Currie**, president, Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities;
- **Kimberly Stanton**, deputy director, Washington Office on Latin America; and
- **Eric Olson**, advocacy director for the Americas, Amnesty International.

This USIPeace Briefing summarizes the [purpose of the trip](#) and outlines the key concerns expressed by delegation participants at the event. In addition to the speakers at the Institute, the delegation included: Thomas Hoyt, president-elect, National Council of Churches; Steve Beckman, assistant director, Governmental and International Affairs Department, United Auto Workers; Saëel Nieves, Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ, New York; Roberto Pagan Rodriguez, president, Service Employees International Union Local 1996; Ellen Lutz, executive director, Center for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution, Fletcher School of Diplomacy, Tufts University; Cindy Buhl, legislative director, Office

of Rep. McGovern; Jason Hagen, associate for Colombia, WOLA; and Tina Hodges, program assistant for Mexico and the Andes, WOLA.

The views summarized below reflect the findings of the delegation discussed at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

Local Variations Highlight Complexities Of Violence

Violence in Colombia is multi-faceted and is perpetrated by a variety of armed actors—guerrilla groups, paramilitary organizations, public security forces of the state, organized crime rings and cartels, drug traffickers, and common criminals. The security situation in Colombia varies widely by locality, according to regional configurations of these groups.

During the week of Feb. 14-20, 2003, the WOLA delegation traveled to Colombia's capital, Bogotá; Barrancabermeja, in the province of Santander; Popayán, in the province of Cauca; and Sincelejo, in the province of Sucre. Members met with local, regional, and national governmental authorities; U.S. Embassy officials; military authorities; members of the judicial branch (including the nine members of the Constitutional Court and members of the Office of the Public Ombudsmen/Defensoría del Pueblo); educators, scholars, and administrators of schools and institutes of higher education; leaders of the Catholic and Protestant communities; labor union leaders; human rights organizations; and representatives of popular sectors and development organizations in each locale. The purpose of the trip was to evaluate the effects of the internal armed conflict on Colombian civil society and the consolidation of democratic institutions, examine civil society initiatives that could contribute to the resolution of the conflict, and explore ways that the international community might support peace efforts in Colombia.

With Little Debate, U.S. Role Expands In Colombia

U.S. involvement in Colombia has been steadily expanding in scope and in dollars. Last year, the U.S. Congress authorized the use of lethal U.S. assistance—previously limited to counter-narcotics efforts—for the purpose of counter-terrorism efforts. The United States has more troops and civilian contractors on the ground in Colombia now than ever before. Some of them are directly involved in training and advising the counter-insurgency war, which is frequently difficult to separate from the counter-narcotics effort. Americans have been killed and captured in this war—including three Americans still being held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) at the time of the briefing. By early May 2003, the United States and Colombia agreed to resume anti-narcotics reconnaissance missions, which will further increase American exposure in the region.

Colombia, which produces 90 percent of the world's cocaine, is the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid after Israel and Egypt. From 1999 to 2002, the U.S. gave Colombia over \$2 billion in aid: more than four-fifths of that amount went to Colombia's military and police. In April 2003, President Bush's request for an additional billion dollars for Colombia for the next two years was supplemented with an appropriation of an additional \$104 million, again mostly in military aid.

Colombian Conflict Worsens

As foreign aid, drug money, and corruption bolster the armed forces, guerrillas, and paramilitaries alike, the armed conflict in Colombia has intensified both in brutality and scope since Uribe took office. The government rescue effort on May 10 that resulted in FARC killing ten hostages—including former defense minister Gilberto Echeverri, Antioquia governor Guillermo Gaviria, and eight soldiers—is the latest evidence of the escalation of the conflict. The delegation noted the following other signs of deterioration:

- Formal negotiations between the government and the largest guerrilla organization, FARC, have collapsed and there is no indication of their resumption;
- The war has expanded to all areas of the country;

- Violence and repression by paramilitary and guerrilla forces against the civilian population have escalated significantly;
- Human rights crimes and abuses by official government military and security forces are on the rise; and
- There is no credible prosecution of high military and government officials accused of or charged with human rights crimes, especially of those charged with collaborating with paramilitary groups.

The "democratic security" policies of the Uribe government are exacerbating an already severe humanitarian crisis. Nearly 3 million of Colombia's 44 million people have been displaced by the conflict, and the U.S. Department of State reports that the numbers of internally displaced persons grew by more than 400,000 last year alone, as selective assassinations, massacres, and armed confrontations drove entire communities off their lands. In the context of a forty-year-old civil war fed by inequities and poverty rates which hover at 67 percent, government initiatives to recruit one million paid informants and to establish a force of 15,000 peasant-soldiers are likely to involve the civilian population even further in the conflict.

Democracy Undermined By Security Policies

Recent legal reforms under the Uribe government have criminalized a range of activities that are vital to the workings of democratic societies, including freedom of assembly, the right to strike, and collective bargaining. Labor lawyers told the delegation that such reforms make legitimate union activities even more difficult in a country already reputed to be the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist.

In the wake of these reforms and other measures (establishing a state of emergency, placing regions of the country under military control, creating an informants' network, and seeking to give judicial police powers to the military), the ability of civil society—especially human rights groups, labor unions, and opposition politicians—to express criticism of official government policy or advocate for alternatives has greatly decreased. Leading government officials have publicly disparaged and implicitly or explicitly linked their critics to "subversion" or "terrorism," leaving the latter with little recourse and making them even more vulnerable to retributive attacks.

Local Initiatives Offer New Paths To Peace

Churches, non-governmental groups, and local and regional authorities have taken the lead in designing and implementing comprehensive development programs that offer alternatives to violence and address the root causes of poverty and injustice at the local community level. The delegation visited communities organizing to build schools, feed children, provide employment, and create a variety of economic alternatives to illegal drug crops. Many of these efforts are funded by the Europeans, the United Nations, and in some cases, by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The delegation learned of many initiatives, including the Program on Development and Peace in the Middle Magdalena River valley; the Alternative Plan of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC), spearheaded by the governors of six southwestern provinces; and the mayors' development plan for the Montes de María region. These programs share an integrated approach to sustainable development, with attention to human rights and culture as well as economic alternatives. They are all highly participatory and multi-sectoral, involving the private sector, universities, and public institutions as well as nongovernmental organizations. Each project seeks to organize and strengthen the capacity of civilian institutions and organizations to address basic needs for food, water, education, health, housing, and infrastructure.

The delegation also learned of grassroots efforts to establish peace communities or zones of non-violence. In every region the delegation visited, unarmed communities were engaging in dialogues with paramilitary and guerrilla forces in an effort to decrease the levels of violence that threaten their communities. These communities are demanding some level of accountability of the armed actors and the

official armed forces that occupy their regions. Such courageous acts may, over time, become the basis of confidence-building that could lead to region-wide or even country-wide cease-fires or negotiations.

Despite security risks, economic difficulties, and government indifference or hostility, local development programs are offering new paths to peace based on a broader human security, of which basic human needs are an integral part. Within the last year the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) supported the creation of Redprodepaz, a network of 15 development and peace programs with a presence in 28 provinces and 300 municipalities.

Delegation members cautioned that civil society is moving in to fill the roles that the Colombian state should be playing—providing education and basic health services, financing development, and even facilitating pragmatic dialogue with armed actors. Nonetheless, the delegation concluded that such efforts merit international support, as they form the basis for beginning to address Colombia's long-standing, deeply-rooted problems.

Of Related Interest

- [Colombia: Trip Report on Armed Conflict and Society](#)
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- [Boundary Disputes in Latin America](#)
- [U.S. Human Rights Policy toward Latin America](#)
- [State and Soldier in Latin America: Redefining the Military's Role in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile](#)
- [On the Web: Colombia](#)
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