

May 2003

Dear Member of Congress,

As you act upon the President's foreign aid request, we ask you to consider carefully the direction of Colombia policy. It is not the time to turn away, as Colombia is in the midst of a tremendous social, political and economic crisis. But three years after initial passage of Plan Colombia, it is time to assess the impact of US aid, and understand that significant changes are essential.

We ask the Congress to:

1. Insist that the Colombian government end collusion between the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary forces responsible for severe human rights violations. Army tolerance for and involvement in paramilitary violations continues-and so does impunity for such crimes, as detailed by the United Nations' and State Department's March 2003 human rights reports. According to the State Department, "some members of the security forces actively collaborated with members of paramilitary groups-passing them through roadblocks, sharing intelligence, providing them with ammunition, and allegedly even joining their ranks while off duty." Remarkably little progress has been made since the passage of the first substantial aid package in 2000 to investigate, prosecute and sanction high-level military officials who face credible allegations of collusion with and tolerance of paramilitary forces. Indeed, the current Attorney General has removed diligent prosecutors and investigators from cases involving high-level army officials implicated in corruption and abuse. Moreover, the United Nations' March 2003 report states that direct violations by the Colombian armed forces increased in 2002.

In an implicit recognition that Colombia was not meeting the human rights conditions Congress established, the FY2003 omnibus appropriations bill removed the conditions from 75% of military aid. This sent a disturbing message: if you perform poorly, we will lower our standards on human rights.

2. Shift attention to the social side of the equation. As alternative development efforts barely begin to take root and the humanitarian crisis of Colombia's internally displaced escalates, the administration proposes a decrease in the already inadequate social aid to Colombia (according to the International Affairs budget request summary for FY04, from \$164 million requested for FY2003 to \$150 million requested for FY2004).* The Congress should:

Ø Increase alternative development and phase out aerial fumigation. While the welcome drop in coca cultivation in Colombia was cited as an example of success of the aerial spraying program, 44% of the drop in the Putumayo region, the main focus of eradication efforts, was attributed by USAID statistics to manual eradication with alternative development. Many farmers who were fumigated and not provided aid of any kind-either emergency food aid or crop substitution programs-moved to neighboring provinces to grow illicit crops once more. Yet aerial fumigation far outpaces alternative development: the United States sprayed over 122,000 hectares in 2002 alone while promoting alternative development on 24,550 hectares from 2001 to the present. Manual eradication accompanied by alternative development is a more humane and effective response.

Ø Increase aid to the displaced and insist on better protection and assistance to the displaced by the Colombian government. The number of people displaced by political violence increased dramatically to 412,000 displaced during 2002, with Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations strongly affected, according to the respected Colombian nongovernmental agency CODHES. The Colombian government's "early warning system" which, with US funding, is supposed to protect communities and prevent displacement, has functioned poorly as a protection mechanism. Although the system issues numerous alerts, it rarely results in effective intervention to protect endangered communities. The Colombian government by law is supposed to provide three months of assistance, which is inadequate for families to rebuild their lives. However, many do not receive even this limited aid. Moreover, the Uribe administration has embarked upon a policy of returning people to their land regardless of risky security conditions. The US government should insist that the Colombian government increase the length and quantity of humanitarian aid to the displaced, adhere to a policy of voluntary returns in consultation with communities, and improve its response to alerts from at-risk communities. In addition, the United States should increase its aid programs for displaced people.

3. Insist that security measures do not undermine the democracy they seek to protect. The Uribe administration, in its efforts to strengthen security, has introduced measures that reduce democratic rights and constitutional guarantees. These included emergency measures that permitted arrests, searches, and wiretaps without warrants. These expanded powers have already been used in questionable ways to carry out arbitrary detentions and to search the offices of nongovernmental organizations engaged in legitimate civic activity. When these measures were struck down by Colombia's constitutional court, the Uribe administration introduced a

package of constitutional reforms into the Colombian legislature which would grant the military the same powers. The US government should insist that measures to increase security do not undermine basic democratic rights and guarantees.

4. Call upon the Colombian government to increase efforts to protect threatened labor leaders, religious leaders and human rights defenders. Colombia continues to lead the world in assassinations of labor leaders, while human rights defenders, religious leaders and other civil society leaders are threatened and killed with frightening regularity by paramilitaries and guerrillas. The US government should press the Colombian government for progress in investigating and prosecuting those responsible for such threats and attacks. The US government should continue to fund the Colombian government's program to protect at-risk labor and human rights leaders, but must insist upon improvements in this program, which has been hampered by bureaucratic delays. Moreover, the US government should insist that the Colombian government take actions to sanction civilian and military officials who endanger civil society leaders by publicly equating nongovernmental organizations with guerrilla forces-as high-level officials have done recently.

5. Step back from escalating military involvement. US military aid to Colombia has spiraled from \$100 million in 1998 to \$600 million this year. More US troops are on Colombian soil than ever before (almost 400). Last year, Congress expanded the military-aid mission beyond the drug war, to something resembling Central-America-style counterinsurgency. Yet after \$2.5 billion since 2000 - 80 percent of it for Colombia's military and police - there has been no change in the availability of drugs in the United States. Colombia's violence has only intensified, including in Putumayo and Arauca, the areas of greatest US and Colombian security focus. Despite repeated requests from Congress, the administration has been unable to articulate a coherent vision of its goals for Colombia or how it plans to use US resources to achieve them.

Before getting more deeply involved without sufficient debate, we urge the Congress to consider the complexity, danger and dimension of Colombia's conflict. Faced with what could become an enormous, open-ended commitment, Congress should question whether an overwhelmingly military strategy can ever succeed. It is time to shift resources from security assistance toward eliminating the causes of violence by fostering rural development, economic opportunity, and civilian, democratic governance.

6. Adequately fund effective drug treatment and prevention programs in the United States. US eradication efforts chase drug production from one province of Colombia to another, from one Andean country to the next. Making substance-abuse treatment available for all who seek it will help address the problem of drugs at home and lessen the profits that fuel violence in Colombia.

We urge you to consider taking these important steps to ensure US policy towards Colombia actually accomplishes its stated goals, including combating the problem of drugs and strengthening human rights, the justice system, and democratic institutions in Colombia.

Sincerely,

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*Note: There is a lack of clarity regarding actual numbers of social aid for Colombia. Almost all social aid for Colombia comes from the Andean Counternarcotics Initiative, under INL, listed as "alternative development/institution building" in the International Affairs budget request summary for FY2004. That document lists a decline from \$164 million requested for FY2003 to \$150 million requested for FY2004 (p. 68). AID's Colombia request remains nearly constant, from \$151 million in FY2003 to \$150 million in FY2004. However, since other agencies besides AID draw from the ACI "alternative development/ institution building" account, a decline in that account suggests that the AID request is unlikely to be fully funded. In FY03, for example, ACI funded AID, PRM (which includes important emergency assistance to displaced persons and refugees that supplements AID's longer-term aid to the displaced), DoJ, and INL programs considered "soft aid." It appears that AID Colombia programs were funded at approximately \$117 million for FY03. Thus a decline in the ACI "alternative development/institution building" account could lead to less assistance for alternative development, aid to the displaced and other social aid.