

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF PLAN COLUMBIA

### Introduction

Plan Colombia was first proposed by former Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango in 1998, and presented officially in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Today, Plan Colombia operates to combat illegal drug trafficking in Colombia and the insurgency of FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) guerillas that frequently support it.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the final, U.S.-supported version of the plan, Pastrana's original plan called for a substantial focus on developmental aid and the manual destruction of drug crops, as opposed to the large-scale fumigation measures currently in place.<sup>3</sup> However, after considerable input by the Clinton Administration, Plan Colombia adopted a much stronger emphasis on anti-drug measures (primarily the destruction of coca and poppy fields used to produce cocaine and heroin, respectively) and fortifying Colombian military power against FARC.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the differences between the originally proposed and final versions of Plan Colombia prompted former U.S. ambassador Robert E. White to comment:

If you read the original Plan Colombia, not the one that was written in Washington but the original Plan Colombia, there's no mention of military drives against the FARC rebels. Quite the contrary. (President Pastrana) says the FARC is part of the history of Colombia and a historical phenomenon, he says, and they must be treated as Colombians.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Plan Colombia's use of fumigation on the coca fields of numerous Colombian farmers has led to serious environmental consequences involving the contamination of Colombia's soil, air, and water supply along with direct adverse health effects for Colombians, causing some critics to question whether the Plan should be allowed to continue.<sup>6</sup>

### I. Plan Colombia's Health and Environmental Effects

In the mid to late 1970s, the U.S.-backed Colombian government used paraquat herbicide to fumigate marijuana fields; when marijuana production relocated mainly to Mexico, Colombian farmers shifted to coca production.<sup>7</sup> Currently, most aerial fumigations have targeted southern Colombia in areas largely populated by local farmers and peasants, where FARC has gained a strong foothold.<sup>8</sup> The Antinarcotics Directorate of the Colombian National Police (DIRAN) administers the aerial fumigation by spraying herbicides on coca and poppy fields selected by the Colombian government, while "the U.S. Embassy's NAS Aviation Office supports the DIRAN with technical advice, jet fuel, spray aircraft, armed escort helicopters, and pilots from a [Department of State] contractor."<sup>9</sup> The U.S. Department of State has asserted that the Colombian government has employed an "independent environmental auditor" to monitor environmental effects of aerial spraying over the last few years, although the Department has never permitted the auditor's analyses to be made publicly available.<sup>10</sup>

At any rate, the human health consequences of spraying have been extremely serious. More specifically, Colombian

physicians in affected areas have observed a substantial increase in respiratory, skin, and gastrointestinal illnesses, ailments which the physicians claim are directly attributable to chemical exposure following spraying.<sup>11</sup> Other health complaints related to spraying have included headaches, dizziness, fever, red eyes, and vomiting.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps predictably, both the Colombian government and the U.S. Department of State have consistently denied any adverse health effects traceable to the fumigations; however, “in August 2001, a commission from a European human rights organization visited the Province of Santander and concluded, ‘we were able to verify skin conditions (rashes and itching caused by skin drying to the point of cracking) in both children and adults who were exposed directly to spraying while they worked their land or played outside their homes.’”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in February 2001, the Putumayo Health Department published a study based on the reports of medical staff in three local hospitals indicating an increase in skin, respiratory, digestive, and ocular diseases.<sup>14</sup> However, the detrimental effects of spraying have not been limited to Colombian residents; in fact, “studies have found Ecuadorian communities living near the Colombian border have suffered from the same illnesses as the people in Colombia after the commission of aerial fumigations in the region.”<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, aerial spraying has also significantly contributed to the destruction of legal crops, with local farmers witnessing the eradication of their banana, corn, and yucca crops.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, this has resulted in thousands of Colombians being forced to abandon their lands, perversely compelling even more farmers to turn to coca production as a means of subsistence.<sup>17</sup>

Aside from the degradation of Colombia’s public health, Plan Colombia has also resulted in the deterioration of Colombia’s environmental landscape. For example, a group of Colombian environmental experts issued a technical paper indicating that spraying has caused soil infertility, blockage of vegetative regeneration, erosion, desertification, deforestation, interference with terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, and groundwater contamination.<sup>18</sup> As with the collateral destruction of legal crops, “in the Middle and Lower Caguán regions, in the Department of Caquetá, fumigation with glyphosate conducted between April and November 1998 severely affected rubber plantations, cacao, fruit trees, food crops (pancoger), fodder, water sources, lagoons, and wetlands (cananguchales).”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, organisms necessary to maintain healthy soil quality like earthworms, fungi, and microbes have reportedly been negatively affected by spraying, and fumigations have likewise killed off segments of Colombia’s animal population including fish, birds, horses, cattle, poultry, and dogs.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Plan Colombia has resulted in the destruction of rainforest habitat and consequent reduction in species biodiversity as coca farmers push ever deeper into virgin rainforest following fumigation of their former coca fields.<sup>21</sup> U.N. officials have also observed some of Colombia’s fumigated areas, and “U.N. experts described an area in which a coca field was aerielly eradicated as a ‘desolate scene’ with ‘indiscriminate destruction of the jungle, legal crops, medicinal plants, and fish-ponds. There is clear evidence that wildlife has fled, rivers are contaminated and production in the region has fallen.’”<sup>22</sup>

## II. The Solution: Terminating Plan Colombia

Famed MIT professor Noam Chomsky has recognized and written on the deleterious social and environmental effects of Plan Colombia, even commenting that “these measures multiply the ‘dangers to the civilian population, the environment, and legal agriculture,’” and that “the ‘drug war’ is crafted to target poor peasants abroad and poor people at home; by the use of force, not constructive measures to alleviate the problems that allegedly motivate it, at a fraction of the cost.”<sup>23</sup> However one may characterize Plan Colombia and the larger War on Drugs that encompasses it, the United States certainly does not possess the moral authority to recklessly harm the health, environmental, and property interests of the Colombian citizenry in the name of furthering its own domestic policy goals. Hypothetically, were Colombia, working in conjunction with the American government, to destroy methamphetamine labs in the United States, thereby causing the sickening of innocent American civilians and unjust destruction of private property, such an action would undoubtedly never be tolerated by the United States or global communities. Sadly, the Colombian public’s comparatively weaker socioeconomic status seems to prevent such outcry from fully reaching other world societies, or affecting policymakers’ decisions. Of course, the hypocrisy of U.S. foreign policy is nothing new, but if the Plan is to be terminated, or its harmful effects at least substantially mitigated, the U.S. populace must become educated on this serious crisis, and must demand that its leaders honestly address and redress the situation.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of W. Hemisphere Affairs, Background Note: Colombia, U.S. Dep’t. St. (Mar. 6, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35754.htm>.

- <sup>2</sup> Stephen Johnson, *Helping Colombia Fix Its Plan to Curb Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Insurgency* (2001), available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2001/04/helping-colombia-fix-its-plan>.
- <sup>3</sup> Grace Livingstone, *Inside Colombia: Drugs, Democracy, and War* 123-30 (Marcela Lopez Levy ed., Rutgers Univ. Press 2004), available at <http://books.google.com/books?id=cOU0bvG8ZGwC&pg=PA123&dq=farc+paramilitaries&cd=49&hl=en--v=onepage&q=farcparamilitaries&f=false>.
- <sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 123-26. Actually, U.S. input on Plan Colombia was so extensive that the original draft of the Plan was composed in English, not Spanish. *Id.*
- <sup>5</sup> Dan Gardner, *Canada: Column: Losing the War on Drugs, Part 2, Media Awareness Project* (Sept. 6, 2000), <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v00/n1323/a08.html?152>.
- <sup>6</sup> Gerald Ungerman & Audrey Brohy, *Plan Colombia: Cashing in on the Drug War Failure*, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EE8scPbxAI> (last visited Apr. 19, 2012).
- <sup>7</sup> Ricardo Vargas, *The Anti-Drug Policy, Aerial Spraying of Illicit Crops and Their Social, Environmental and Political Impacts in Colombia*, 32 *J. Drug Issues* 11, 11 (2002), available at <http://www.tni.org/sites/www.tni.org/archives/archives/vargas/jdpi.pdf>. Today, paraquat herbicide is no longer utilized under the official Plan Colombia; instead, agro-giant Monsanto's glyphosate herbicide is used. *Id.* at 12.
- <sup>8</sup> Zachary P. Mugge, *Plan Colombia: The Environmental Effects and Social Costs of the United States' Failing War on Drugs*, 15 *Colo. J. Int'l Envtl. L. & Pol'y* 309, 319 (Spring 2004). The fumigations have principally taken place in the "departments" (a type of Colombian governmental subdivision) of Putumayo and Caqueta. *Id.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 320.
- <sup>10</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 323.
- <sup>12</sup> Joanne Sum-Ping, *A New Approach to Extraterritorial Application of Environmental Statutes?: Uncovering the Effects of Plan Colombia*, 31 *Colum. J. Envtl. L.* 139, 143-44 (2006).
- <sup>13</sup> Mugge, *supra* note 8, at 323-24.
- <sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 324.
- <sup>15</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 326.
- <sup>17</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>18</sup> Vargas, *supra* note 7, at 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> Id. at 31.

<sup>20</sup> Mugge, *supra* note 8, at 328-29.

<sup>21</sup> Sum-Ping, *supra* note 12, at 143. Some reports have indicated that such farmers also occasionally move their coca production to neighboring regions in Bolivia and Peru. *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 144.

<sup>23</sup> Noam Chomsky, Plan Colombia, Chomsky.Info, [http:// www.chomsky.info/books/roguestates08.htm](http://www.chomsky.info/books/roguestates08.htm) (last visited Apr. 24, 2012) (excerpted from Noam Chomsky, *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs* (South End Press 2000)).