Colombia: A Vital U.S. Interest?

by Brian S. Priestley

We must not stand by and allow a democracy elected by its people, defended with great courage by people who have given their lives, [to] be undermined and overwhelmed by those who literally are willing to tear the country apart for their own agenda.

– President Clinton

Nothing so convinces soldiers of the inevitability of escalation as hearing their leaders make frequent promises to Congress that U.S. forces will not be required, if only military aid expands dramatically. When generals insist that “advisers” can handle the mission, Sergeant Rock starts packing his rucksack.

– LTC Ralph Peters, USA Retired

As more than $1.6 billion in proposed U.S. foreign aid to Colombia slowly works its way through Congress, this is a good time to examine some of the issues involved in aiding the Colombian government. General Barry McCaffrey, USA Retired, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, cites the following reasons why the United States must support the Colombian government:

- to stop the flow of heroin and cocaine;
- to support a democratic government;
- to support the rule of law;
- to promote economic stability; and
- to protect human rights.

As adamant as McCaffrey and the administration have been, the aid package is not moving quickly through Congress. Skeptics, both inside and outside of government, are questioning the wisdom of getting more deeply involved in what some see as a potential Vietnam-like quagmire: protecting a weak government against a well-financed and well-armed insurgency, on difficult terrain, for limited strategic interests.

Author Ralph Peters believes that basic questions must be asked and answered before the United States decides to send the requested aid. Does the Colombian government deserve our help? Is that government, often corrupt, the solution or part of the problem? Why should U.S. dollars, let alone U.S. soldiers, prop up the Colombian military when no Colombian with a high-school diploma is required to serve? Is this another case of what Peters calls “Saudi Syndrome,” in which a foreign regime manipulates the United States into doing the fighting for it?

Colombia

A nation the size of Texas, New Mexico and Arkansas combined, Colombia possesses all of the resources necessary to make a dramatic leap forward and be one of the economic leaders of South America. However, Colombia’s 38 million citizens are caught in the crossfire among 20,000 guerrillas,
6,000 paramilitary terrorists, and national democratic forces. The level of violence is exacerbated by drug profits, which allow outlaw factions to purchase more weapons. Some 35,000 Colombians have been killed in the past decade in Latin America’s longest-running internal conflict.

The United States officially aids only Colombia’s war on drugs, but if the rebels and the narcotics traffickers are one and the same, then the mission becomes blurred. There are currently heated debates in the governments of both Colombia and the United States over the depth of rebel involvement in the drug trade, and the implications of that involvement for the peace process, as well as for U.S. military involvement in Colombia. Overall, the Colombian government has committed $4 billion and is asking the United States and European countries to contribute $3.5 billion to a $7.5 billion plan to fight drug trafficking in Colombia.

The majority of the proposed $1.6 billion aid package from the United States would fund 33 Black Hawk and 30 Huey helicopters, the pilot training and logistical support those aircraft will require, and the training and outfitting of two Colombian army counterinsurgency/counter-narcotics battalions. The funding would also support alternative economic development efforts and peace initiatives.

According to General McCaffrey, Colombia’s rapidly expanding cocaine and heroin production threatens the national security of the United States and the well-being of its citizens. Ninety percent of the cocaine entering the United States originates in or passes through Colombia, and annual cultivation of high-purity opium poppies is now great enough to meet over half of the U.S. demand for heroin.

While coca cultivation in Peru (down 66 percent since 1995) and Bolivia (down 55 percent since 1995) has plummeted, it has increased by 140 percent in Colombia. Whereas in the past Colombia was primarily a distributor of Peruvian and Bolivian cocaine, it now produces 520 metric tons of cocaine a year—two-thirds of the world’s total. The increase in production, concentrated in the guerrilla-dominated areas of Putumayo and Norte de Santander, was compounded by the introduction of a higher-yield strain of plant. At the beginning of the 1990s, Colombian drug organizations made the strategic decision to enter the heroin business. Opium poppies grow year-round in Colombia, with multiple harvests. A majority of the heroin seized on America’s eastern seaboard now comes from Colombia. Fighting the drug traffickers is now more difficult than ever. After the demise of integrated cartels based in Medellín and Cali, smaller cells began specializing in limited aspects of the drug trade. Such groups are hard to disrupt, and dismantling one has little impact on the others.

The increase in drug production greatly expanded Colombia’s insurgency problems. Left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups draw enormous profits from the drug trade by “taxing” the peasants who grow illegal substances in areas under their control. Estimates of income from drugs run as high as hundreds of millions of dollars annually, and the profits augment the funds such organizations get from kidnapping, extortion and bank robbery. Serious human rights violations allegedly committed by these groups include executing prisoners, torture, expropriating property, and recruiting minors.

For the first time in three decades, Colombia’s economy is shrinking. The gross national product decreased by 5 percent in the first six months of 1999. Unemployment exceeds 20 percent. Displaced people desperate for work, especially in rural areas, seek paid jobs with narco-traffickers and illegal armed groups. According to General Charles E. Wilhelm, USMC, Commander in Chief, U.S. Southern Command (CINCSOUTH), an insurgent or narcotic group recruit is paid 25 times as much per month as an army conscript, and more than twice as much as an army volunteer. Colombia has nearly a million displaced citizens—more than Kosovo.

Colombia faces the dual internal security threats of narcotics traffickers and insurgents. Rebels from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the smaller Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) have grown in strength in the last decade. According to the recent estimates, FARC has 15,000 insurgents, while ELN numbers approximately 5,000 rebels. Until recently, the insurgents have consistently outfought the Colombian military in the country’s eastern jungles, though the military has maintained control of the mountain and coastal cities.
Paramilitary units like the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) came into existence in the 1980s as a response to the government’s inability to deal with the insurgents. Elements in the Colombian government and military had a hand in setting up the paramilitaries and facilitating their continued existence and development, but the paramilitaries are today far from simple puppets of the regime. The paramilitary units, numbering around 6,000, continue to complicate current efforts to reach a peace agreement with Colombia’s remaining rebel groups. Additionally, evidence suggests that AUC uses money from the narcotics trade to finance its activities and is guilty of many of the same types of human-rights violations as the guerrillas.9

Both FARC and ELN were born in the 1960s, and the government has tried unsuccessfully over the past four decades to reach a peaceful settlement with the rebels. The rebels are wary of any peace accord with the government since previous attempts at integrating into the political system ended with the murders of rebel officials. In the last decade, government officials and military personnel from both Colombia and the United States have questioned the groups’ devotion to their founding Marxist ideology, focusing instead on their involvement with the narcotics industry.10 General Wilhelm has called the Colombian situation “the only self-sustaining insurgency I’ve seen in my entire life.”11

The purported relationship between drug traffickers and insurgents gave birth to the term “narcoguerrilla” and served to justify increased U.S. military involvement in counterinsurgency operations in Colombia. FARC derives a good majority of its income from “taxes” imposed on drug traffickers operating in FARC territory. Some government officials in both the United States and Colombia contend that FARC involvement in the drug trade extends beyond merely taxing traffickers, and that FARC itself is actively involved in trafficking narcotics. FARC holds considerable power in portions of the departments (states) of Huila, Caquetá, Tolima, Cauca, Boyacá, Santander, Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Meta, Cundinamarca and Arauca.12

Colombian President Andres Pastrana has attempted to engage FARC in a dialogue aimed at ending the violence. Before he took office in August 1998, Pastrana had a historic meeting with some of the FARC leadership in the guerrillas’ jungle hideout to discuss peace. In November 1998, Pastrana demilitarized a portion of Colombia the size of Switzerland as a sign of good faith, hoping to entice FARC to come to the negotiating table. Instead, the area became a safe haven for coca production and for the FARC insurgents.

Recently, just prior to the start of a round of peace talks pushed by President Pastrana, FARC announced a new policy threatening to kidnap Colombian millionaires and corporate executives unless an unspecified “tax” was paid to the group. Under the new rebel policy, individuals or heads of companies worth more than $1 million who refuse to pay the tax will be kidnapped. “Their liberation will depend on a ransom to be determined,” FARC added. In the three-point communiqué, FARC stated this extortion policy was needed to counter government aggression fueled by multinational corporations and “Yankee imperialism.”13

Although smaller than FARC, ELN has been very successful in conducting operations against the Colombian government and people. Most of ELN’s activities are concentrated in the departments of Norte de Santander, Santander, Bolívar, Cauca, Antioquia and Arauca. ELN operations usually include kidnappings and sabotage of Colombia’s energy infrastructure. For example, ELN has attacked the Cano Limón-Covenas pipeline 586 times since 1982; 105 of those attacks took place between January 1998 and March 1999.14 Recently, ELN kidnapped 160 worshipers at a Catholic Mass as well as an airliner full of people. ELN uses these attacks to call attention to what it sees as the exploitation of Colombian natural resources by foreigners and to disrupt the national economy.

In late April, President Pastrana proposed establishing a temporary demilitarized zone (DMZ) for ELN similar to the one established for FARC. Unlike FARC’s jungle enclave in the south, ELN’s zone is located in an area with both an agricultural and industrial base, including oil pipelines sabotaged by ELN in the past. Business and community leaders have already voiced concerns over the potential impact on the local economy from the creation of a rebel zone. An indication of the temporary nature of the agreement lies in the government’s proposal itself. In the south, FARC has become the de facto government of a demilitarized
zone the size of Switzerland. The deal with ELN doesn’t include this same dispensation. President Pastrana has promised that civilian authorities will remain in place. Additionally, the government will reportedly create a security cordon around the enclave and patrol the Magdalena River that flows through the valley.

However, making another land-for-peace deal with a rebel group may encourage other rebel groups to increase their activities. While most of Colombia’s rebel groups have either already made peace agreements with the government or have disbanded and joined the larger FARC or ELN, there are still factions who randomly commit terrorist acts. For example, a splinter group from the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), disbanded in 1991, kidnapped fourteen people on April 22.

Despite this potential problem, the second DMZ should give the Colombian government time and leverage in its dealings with FARC. Peace negotiations are ongoing, and while forces for both sides still conduct low-level raids and incursions, neither side is leading a major offensive. The bulk of the money the United States has pledged for counternarcotics efforts will directly aid the military in its fight against FARC, who facilitate much of Colombia’s drug trade. Without the aid from the United States, the Colombian government does not have the capability to defeat FARC.

However important Colombia may be to U.S. national security, caution is justified. In Vietnam, the United States learned the painful lesson that no matter how generous the economic or military aid, the fall of a weak government can only be postponed, not prevented. Before the United States increases its commitment to Colombia, a number of difficult questions must be asked and satisfactorily answered. For example, will U.S. aid to the Colombian government, earmarked to fight the drug trafficking, cause the delicate peace negotiations with the insurgents to fail? What incentive do the rebels have to come to the peace table if the United States is providing funds for the government to fight them?

Another problem is defining the enemy. General Wilhelm discussed the need to identify the enemy by its conduct. For example, men setting up to ambush the Colombian army are most likely insurgents, and are therefore off limits. Groups guarding a coca field are drug traffickers, and are legitimate targets. But what about a group preparing to ambush the Colombian army as the army moves towards a coca field? Are they insurgents, or are they drug traffickers? Should U.S. military advisers warn the Colombian army about the impending ambush, even if the attackers are not narcotics traffickers, to save the lives of the troops? The lack of a clear line of distinction between who is and who is not the enemy makes the U.S. advisors’ task much more difficult. The United States must be very cautious to prevent being pulled into a fight against the insurgents in order to stop the drug traffickers.

Over the next few months, the level of America’s commitment to the fight to stop drug trafficking from Colombia will be decided. This is a difficult decision in which both sides of the argument have legitimate points. The United States learned in Vietnam that sometimes determination to succeed matters more than military capability. The United States also learned that when fighting a well-financed and well-armed insurgency, incremental engagement favors the enemy, and the enemy cannot be vanquished when it is allowed to retreat into sanctuaries.

On the other hand, the United States learned that walking away from a strategically important ally and a struggling democracy only promotes more chaos and causes the loss of credibility. Therefore, it is important for the United States to remain engaged and to provide aid to the Colombian government and military. The United States must make it perfectly clear, however, that although U.S. help is available, it is up to the government and people of Colombia to solve their internal problems. The high cost of drug use, especially to American youth, is evident every day on the streets of the United States. But however tragic that may be, the American war on drugs should never become an American war in the jungles of Colombia.

more . . .
Endnotes

4. Peters.
5. McCaffrey.
7. According to General Wilhelm, conscripts into the Colombian army are paid the equivalent of $20 per month, volunteers around $200 per month. The insurgency and narcotics groups pay around $500 per month.
8. McCaffrey.

(Brian S. Priestley is an ILW Research Fellow.)