

Colombia coca cultivation survey results

A question of methods

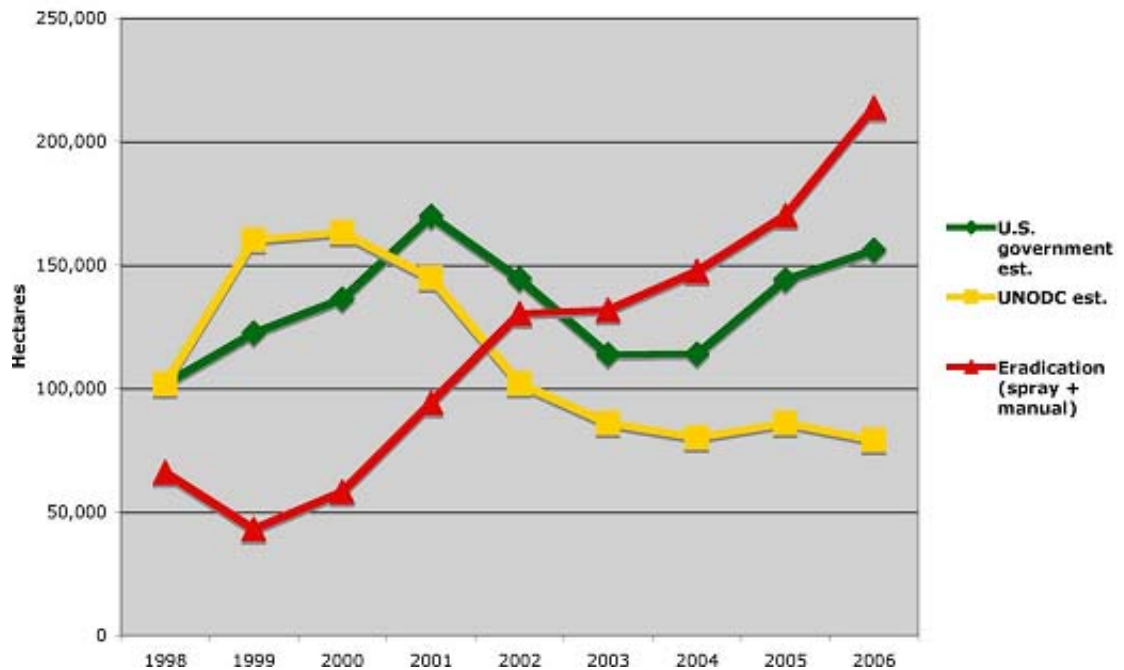
For the first time, an acting president of Colombia recently let it be known that something is amiss regarding the anti-drug policy used in the country. When informed of the increased area under coca cultivation, according to a survey conducted by the US Office of National Drug Control Policy ONDCP, a disappointed and confused Álvaro Uribe asked whether all of the efforts against coca planting had been in vain. He had plenty of reason to wonder. Despite 2006 witnessing the most intensive use of fumigation in the country's history, some 157,200 hectares of cultivation areas were detected, 13,200 hectares more than in 2005. Is the fumigation strategy failing?

This was only an initial reaction of concern, however, over the news of the cultivation increase. The Colombian government insists that fumigations have been effective and as proof, points to results from other surveys conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – UNODC, which are the only studies given credence in Colombia. The fact that Colombia will only accept UN survey data and not the studies conducted by the US government results in something of a paradox for Colombia, insofar as the funding for fumigation comes from the United States and not from the United Nations. Even more curious is the fact that the United States, the primary funding source for the aerial spraying program, insists in continuing it, despite its own statistics. This is the third straight year in which, according to ONDCP data, areas under coca cultivation have increased. What is the explanation? Could it be that, secretly, they also would prefer to only consider the

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Policy aimed at attacking the supply side has not ensured a reduction of cocaine on the international market. In Colombia there is a favourable consensus in support of changing current counter-narcotics policy. Colombia could take advantage of the divide between the White House and the US Congress to propose that the current strategy be revised and that a new emphasis be given to its social dimension.
- A gradual reduction in hectares under cultivation must combine with a corresponding increase in alternative revenues and enhancement of communities' quality of life.
- With or without funding from the US, Colombia must not continue with fumigation. Coordinated manual eradication programs should take its place. This should occur within the framework of sound development projects that do not result in displacement of peasants from their lands, as occurs with the current large-scale projects, on the contrary, they would encourage peasants to remain within their regions.
- The United States government is trying to repeat the counter-narcotics model that it has used in Colombia in Afghanistan. Clear recognition on the part of the UN system, the European Union and its member nations of the counterproductive effects of this model will contribute to impeding such an initiative in Afghanistan and will aid Colombia's move towards new strategies.

Coca in Colombia, 1998-2006



Source: Center for International Policy CIP

more convenient UN statistics? On the other hand, if the US only accepts its own statistics, what is the purpose of the UN surveys? Perhaps to see if Europe and the rest of the world can be convinced?

Drug enforcement authorities have tried to minimize the seriousness of the marked difference between the surveys – a difference of almost 80,000 hectares in 2006 – alluding to methodological problems. Then come to an agreement on methodology, President Uribe said, irritated, as if that would resolve things. The only thing a controversy over methods for conducting the surveys accomplishes is to blur the core issue over the effectiveness of the drug enforcement policy itself. In either case, the one clear conclusion is that fumigations are not working, they have only displaced cultivation to new zones with the environmental consequences this entails. Meanwhile, production continues unabated and drug trafficking is more active than ever. It is not just a case of coming to an agreement, rather, of disclosing the truth and coming to the logical conclusions that these results point to.

Price and purity of cocaine

This trick of delaying disclosure of important information out of fear of repercussions in the media was also seen recently when the Director of the ONDCP, John Walters, very discretely and quietly revealed that cocaine prices on the streets of the United States had fallen, while its purity was on the rise. The United States measures the success of its drug enforcement policy by the availability of drugs in the country. Low prices are a sign of high availability, and thus the low profile, to not alert the press or to risk public opinion beginning to question the usefulness of the billions spent on the war on drugs.

Because the conclusions are not to their advantage, top officials in the Bush administration prefer to avoid mentioning the subject so that they can go on publicly referring to the 'successes' of Plan Colombia. *"Plan Colombia has begun to change the much-lagged data on both price and purity levels for cocaine in the United States. Again, that is a hopeful sign"*, said Robert Charles, former assistant US secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement

in an article published in the US press in late April.¹ Then in May, during one of the many recent visits by President Uribe to Washington, Mr. John Negroponte, deputy secretary of state, congratulated the Colombian president for the successes of his counter-narcotics policies. Either the Bush administration fails to read its own reports or there is a clear intent to deceive.

On the drug trafficking side

The amount of coca cultivation and cocaine purity and prices are only two of the observable fronts on which the effectiveness of the war on drugs can be determined. A recent document from the Colombia offices of the United Nations Development Program - UNDP questioned whether Colombia is winning the counter-narcotics war.² If measuring cultivation areas has proven to be so difficult, it will be even more difficult to measure complex areas such as quantifying connections to drug trafficking, particularly in a country like Colombia where drug trafficking influences large sectors of society, including the highest spheres of political and economic power. The power and control of mafia groups has reached such a point that the dismantling of paramilitary groups associated with drug trafficking and the imprisonment of the main organized crime bosses has not led to the demise of the drug business. As we know from the detailed reports in the Colombian press, illegal activities continue to be managed from inside the prisons, politicians collude with drug trafficking paramilitaries to divide up regions and 'restructure' the State, leading businessmen and foreign multinationals³ continue to finance criminal activities of groups linked to drug trafficking. There is even talk of a third generation of paramilitaries. On these facts alone, who can state that we are winning the counter-narcotics war?

In a similar vein, the authorities twist information to suit their ends regarding how the Colombian and US governments measure results of attacks made on the drug-funded insurgency, especially the FARC.

Several security analysts in Colombia have shown that neither has "the FARC been dealt a critical blow",⁴ nor has waging all out war against the insurgency decreased drug production and shipment abroad. Worse yet, concentrating attacks against the FARC has had the perverse effect of providing an advantage to those who dedicate themselves solely to drug trafficking to operate more freely.

The transfer of cultivation and narcotics activities from one region to another, seen in all surveys conducted year after year, is the most convincing evidence of the failure of Plan Colombia. The Department of Nariño is currently a prime example of this situation. Cultivation was transferred to Nariño because of fumigation in neighboring Putumayo. Along with it came the activities of armed groups – including new rearmed groups of paramilitaries – which have made this department one of the most violent parts of the country. The transfer of a problem from one region to another is not a success, it is nothing more than a change of address. A new change of address of criminal activities seems to be currently taking place from Nariño along the Pacific coast to the port of Buenaventura, where there are reports of incidents that suggest a war by drug traffickers to take over the territory.

Poisonous gift

On hearing the news of financial cuts in Plan Colombia, President Uribe reacted with a popular saying, "never look a gift horse in the mouth". Plan Colombia, however, is no gift horse, it is a plain mistake. Even the 'soft' side of the Plan, the social component that would supposedly underpin the other side, is not exempt from controversy and failure. The alternative development programs in Plan Colombia are part of large-scale (palm oil and timber) projects of dubious origin, related to acts of extortion and expropriation of lands of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Plan

Colombia is rather what is popularly known as a 'poison gift'. This is true both metaphorically and literally. It is the kind of gift you would rather not receive.

The United States has political and security interests in what is taking place in Colombia, which explains why it ignores facts, statistics, and long experience of decades of counter-narcotics activities, to continue the 'war on drugs' as a means of ensuring its presence in strategic areas. But what may be true for the US, is not so for the European Union, nor for the multilateral organization responsible for drug policy, the UNODC, nor for the rest of the world. Based on facts, statistics and considerable experience, the international community should therefore react and be bold enough to acknowledge that Plan Colombia has not been a success, rather quite the opposite. This recognition should have been given years ago, so that it could have saved the country the economic costs, environmental degradation, impact on the health of the poor and all of the damage associated with large-scale spraying.

Another area where monitoring by the United States and the UN do not fully agree is in the analysis of the human rights situation. While the State Department - ignoring numerous serious acts in which Colombian public authorities were implicated in 2006 - 'certified' that Colombia was compliant with human rights protection criteria in its latest report last March; the UN noted an increase in executions without trial, torture and forced disappearances attributed to the military. According to studies by the UNHCR, there were more than three million displaced people inside Colombia, ranking it second throughout the world, behind Sudan, with the largest displaced population due to armed conflict.

Clearly the United States wants to convince its taxpayers, the ones whose money is being spent, on the benefits of the Plan. Why, though, do Europe and the UN have to continue playing along with this policy?

While it is true that Europe did distance itself from the focus of Plan Colombia from the beginning, preferring to channel its funds through other mechanisms, it has not been assertive enough in its disapproval of the strategy. Why does the Colombian government have to play along, especially now when the Bush administration no longer has the majority necessary to provide the support it promised? Why do the Colombian people have to continue putting up with it, when it is their land and they are the victims?

NOTES

¹ Charles, R., *Foreign Policy and Colombia*, Washington Times, April 24, 2007

² UNDP, Hechos del Callejón, ¿Colombia está ganando la lucha contra el narcotráfico?, June 2007 -

http://indh.pnud.org.co/files/boletin_hechos/asi_opt.pdf

³ The Chiquita Brands International company recently admitted to having reached financial agreements with self-defense groups accused of drug trafficking and crimes against humanity.

⁴ Alfredo Rangel, *Observatorio de Seguridad Suramericano*, Security and Democracy Foundation, March 2007

TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE
De Wittenstraat 25
1052 AK Amsterdam –
Netherlands
tel.: + 31 20 662 66 08
Fax: + 31 20 675 71 76
E-mail: drugs@tni.org