



July 14, 2010

Don't Call it a Model

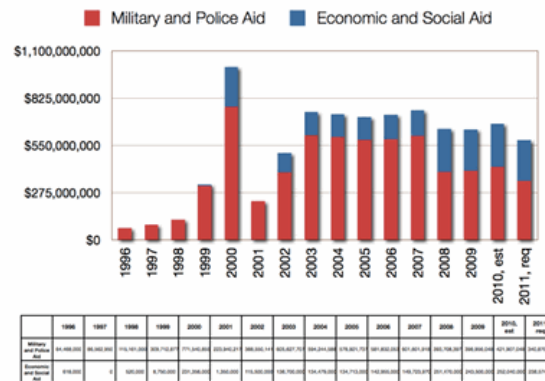
On Plan Colombia's tenth anniversary, claims of "success" don't stand up to scrutiny

(Written by Adam Isacson, senior associate for regional security policy, Washington Office on Latin America)

On July 13, 2000, President Bill Clinton signed into law a \$1.3 billion package of mostly military aid, known as "Plan Colombia," that made Colombia by far the biggest U.S. aid recipient outside the Middle East. Now, ten years later, Colombia often gets described as a "success" in Washington. [Officials](#) and [analysts](#) point to improvements in several measures of security in the conflict-torn South American country. They give the credit to U.S. assistance and to President Álvaro Uribe, who took over in 2002 and implemented a hard-line security policy.

Looked at more closely, though, **Colombia's security gains are partial, possibly reversible, and weighed down by "collateral damage."** They have carried a great cost in lives and resources. Progress on security has been stagnating, and even reversing. Scandals show that the government carrying out these security policies has harmed human rights and democratic institutions. Progress against illegal drug supplies has been disappointing. And wealth is being concentrated in ever fewer hands.

\$7.3 Billion in U.S. Aid Since 2000



[\(Click to expand\)](#) [\(Source data\)](#)

What Colombia has done is worth learning from. But since it favors military force while neglecting both civilian governance and impunity, it is not a model to be applied in Afghanistan, Mexico, or anywhere else. Colombia's new government and U.S. policymakers face an ever more urgent need to change it.

When U.S. officials praise Colombia, they grade their own work. The United States has spent [\\$7.3 billion](#) on aid to the country since 2000, when Plan Colombia became law. This gives officials a strong incentive to emphasize the positive. Colombia, meanwhile, is one of few

countries in Latin America today that actively seeks closer relations with the United States.



Colombian President Álvaro Uribe with President Obama, June 2009.

But some officials and analysts go too far. As Álvaro Uribe leaves office in August 2010, they see Colombia as a model for what the United States should be encouraging worldwide, especially in Afghanistan and Mexico.

- Visiting Bogotá in April, Defense Secretary Robert Gates [called](#) President Uribe “heroic” and said Colombia has become “a linchpin of security and prosperity in South America” and “a unique source of experience and expertise” for its neighbors’ security efforts.
- Visiting Mexico that same month, former U.S. President Bill Clinton called for a “[Plan Mexico](#)” along the lines of what was done with Colombia ten years earlier.
- “I see the same kinds of challenges in Afghanistan, and I also see them in Mexico,” [said](#) Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen on a June 2010 visit to Colombia, adding, “And there's a great deal to be learned from the success that has been seen here in Colombia.”

[Colombian Defense Ministry statistics](#) show security improvements

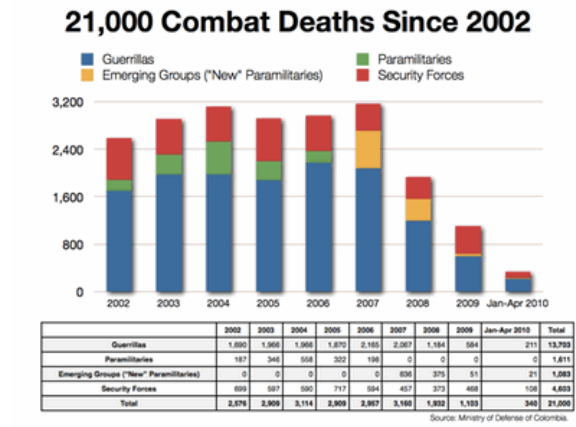
- 15,817 **homicides** in 2009, down from 28,837 in 2002
 - ([National Coroner statistics](#): 17,717 homicides in 2009, down from 27,829 in 2002)
- 213 **kidnappings** in 2009, down from 2,882 in 2002
- 486 “**terrorist attacks**” in 2009, down from 1,645 in 2002
- **Estimated strength of FARC guerrillas**: 8,000-10,000, down from 18,000-20,000 in 2002
- **Number of soldiers, sailors, airmen and police**: 446,638, up from 256,500 in [2000](#).

The Colombian government's U.S.-backed “Democratic Security” policy did bring security improvements. [Tripling the military budget, nearly doubling](#) the size of the security forces, deploying them throughout the national territory, and using citizens as [paid informants](#) reduced homicides, kidnappings, transportation disruptions and acts of sabotage. The FARC and ELN guerrilla groups (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and National Liberation Army, both founded in 1964) are weaker and less numerous now than they were in 2002. Pro-government paramilitary groups, whose national umbrella organization demobilized by 2006, kill fewer people than they did a decade ago. Foreign investors, especially in extractive industries, have been attracted by the improved security climate. In a region where most countries’ violence measures are going the wrong way, Colombia’s approach looks attractive.

But **“Democratic Security” is not a model to be replicated elsewhere.** Its flaws are severe, even tragic. Holding up Colombia as a “model” is both superficial and dangerous.

“Success” has come at a very high cost

First of all, **the human and financial cost of prolonged war has been staggering.** In early 2002, a three-year attempt to negotiate with the guerrillas collapsed – an outcome for which the FARC and ELN share the blame – and Álvaro Uribe was swept into office on a promise to intensify the war.



[\(Click to expand\)](#)

Eight years later, according to official figures, combat has [killed](#) 21,000 soldiers, police, guerrillas and paramilitaries. Human rights groups [estimate](#) that conflict-related violence killed another 14,000 civilian non-combatants – whether innocent victims or people denied due process – between 2002 and 2008. (Combat not involving the security forces – guerrilla-paramilitary, guerrilla-guerrilla, and paramilitary-paramilitary – probably killed a few thousand more during this period.)

Increasing the security forces’ size and capabilities over 2000 levels, meanwhile, has cost Colombia an additional \$40-50 billion over the past decade. This opportunity cost has undermined Colombia’s competitiveness. Had that money been invested in education and infrastructure, Colombia today could be alongside Chile and Brazil as a regional economic powerhouse poised to play a greater global role.

Parapolitics: death-squad sponsors in power

While Colombia has made security gains, **its democratic institutions and respect for human rights have been under siege.** A critical example is a scandal that Colombians simply call “parapolitics.”

Since the 1980s, [political bosses](#) from regions beyond the capital – many of them large landholders with ties to narco-trafficking – fostered and funded brutal pro-government paramilitary groups. These militias’ [scorched-earth tactics](#) killed tens of thousands of non-combatants in the 1990s and early 2000s. The paramilitaries’ onslaught, marked by hundreds of gruesome massacres and mass graves, caused them to surpass the guerrillas and the armed forces as Colombia’s worst human rights violators.

The paramilitaries could not have functioned without support from the politicians who held local power. Evidence, much of it from former paramilitary leaders, has brought a [cascade of criminal investigations](#) of legislators, governors, mayors and other officials, who made common cause with the far-right warlords.

Those embroiled in parapolitics include the President’s cousin, former Senator Mario Uribe; the brother of his former foreign minister, former Senator Álvaro Araújo; the brother of the current interior minister, former Medellín Chief Prosecutor Guillermo Valencia; and political supporters whom the President had named to be Colombia’s ambassadors to Chile and the Dominican Republic. The problem continues today: in March 2010, a pro-government party closely linked to the “parapoliticians,” the [National Integration Party](#) or PIN, won nine Senate seats and as many as twelve House seats in legislative elections (the final count is not complete). It will be the fourth or fifth largest party in Colombia’s 2010-2014 Congress.

As of November 2009, of the 268 congresspeople and senators elected in 2006:

- 43 were under official investigation,
- 13 were on trial, and
- 12 had been convicted for parapolitics.

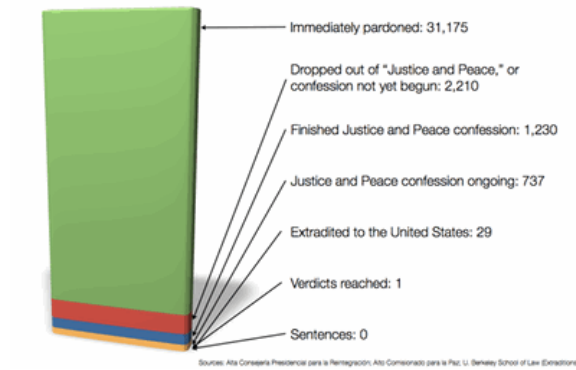
This total (68) is equivalent to 25% of the entire Congress. Eight were opposition legislators; the remaining 60 made up about 38% of the entire pro-government bloc.

It is positive that Colombia’s justice system has been slowly but actively investigating “parapolitics” allegations. But the investigators from Colombia’s Supreme Court are forced to work in the face of near-constant aggression from the President and his inner circle. Intimidation has included [wiretaps and surveillance](#) from the presidential intelligence service (discussed below); public attacks from President Uribe himself, including a [bizarre incident](#) in which the President used accusations from a paramilitary witness, who later retracted himself, to attack the chief parapolitics investigator; and even a [disturbing meeting](#) in the Colombian presidential palace between presidential advisors and paramilitary emissaries offering to wiretap and discredit Supreme Court parapolitics investigators.

“Justice and Peace”: a foundering transitional justice process

Between 2002 and 2006, the Colombian government negotiated a deal that secured the demobilization of the largest paramilitary organization, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia or AUC. The resulting “Justice and Peace” process, begun in July 2005, was to offer demobilized paramilitary leaders light jail sentences in exchange for full confessions and reparation of victims.

As of December 2009, the Justice and Peace Process hadn't punished anybody.



[\(Click to expand\)](#)

This has not happened. Until June 29, 2010, when the [first two sentences](#) were handed out (and could still be appealed), this very slow process had yet to convict a single paramilitary leader for human rights crimes, and has almost completely failed to return land and property the paramilitaries stole from hundreds of thousands of families.

Despite these glaring shortcomings, U.S. and Colombian officials frequently bill the “Justice and Peace” process as a success. The paramilitary confessions that have gone forward have clarified many crimes, even if they remain to be tried and punished. It also sharply decreased the paramilitaries’ killings of civilian non-combatants. A big exception, though, are those victims who have organized to demand the return of stolen land. Forty-five of them have been [murdered](#) since 2005.

“False positives”: killing civilians to boost body counts

With paramilitaries playing a smaller role, Colombia’s armed forces assumed far greater responsibility for the anti-guerrilla campaign. Almost immediately, the number of human rights abuses attributed directly to Colombia’s military shot upward.

While ardently supporting the armed forces, President Uribe pushed them hard for results against guerrillas. The most easily measured result has been “body counts” – the number killed in

By late last year, Colombia’s Prosecutor-General was investigating 1,302 cases of extrajudicial killings by the security forces, with 2,177 victims. Most are since 2002.

combat. Colombia's defense ministry set up a system of informal incentives for soldiers – special recognitions, leave time, promotions – and [formal incentives](#) for civilian informants to reward body counts. The army chief in the mid-2000s, Gen. Mario Montoya, visited brigades throughout the country exhorting troops to produce “[liters of blood](#).”

By 2005, human rights groups and the [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) were observing a very disturbing phenomenon: an increase in

complaints about civilian non-combatants being killed, their bodies later dressed in camouflage uniforms and presented as those of armed-group members killed in combat. By 2007, Colombian human rights groups [had counted](#) 955 cases of extrajudicial executions by the armed forces since 2002, including these so-called “false positives” (a Colombian term meaning, basically, falsified results against armed groups).

Human rights groups’ efforts to document “false positives” earned them extreme hostility from President Uribe, who had famously called them “[spokespeople for terrorism](#)” in a September 2003 speech before the military high command. Uribe and his defense minister, president-elect Juan Manuel Santos, insisted that human rights groups’ complaints owed to a guerrilla plot to undermine the armed forces with NGO surrogates’ trumped-up allegations.

“The guerrillas have another strategy,” President Uribe [said](#) in July 2007. “Every time there is a casualty in the guerrillas, they immediately mobilize their chorus leaders in the country and abroad to say that it was an extrajudicial execution.” He [repeated](#) this charge three months later in a speech before the OAS Inter-American Human Rights Commission. In 2006, then-Defense Minister Santos [called](#) some of the early “false positives” allegations “a pantomime with clear political intentions.”

As these words were making human rights defenders’ work more dangerous, the allegations continued to mount. Finally, in late 2008, the “false positives” scandal became too shocking to continue denying or ignoring. In September of that year, [families](#) of 19 young men who had disappeared from Soacha, a poor Bogotá suburb, [discovered](#) that their loved ones had been buried hundreds of miles away by the armed forces, which claimed to have killed them in combat. It turned out that the men had been [lured](#) away by the promise of gainful employment, taken to a combat zone and killed, their bodies presented as those of combatants in order to win rewards for the soldiers who killed them.

While the Soacha case horrified the country, the extent of “false positives” killings is far greater. As of November 2009, the State Department [reports](#), Colombia’s Prosecutor-General’s office (*Fiscalía*) was investigating 1,302 cases of extrajudicial killings by the security forces in nearly every corner of the country, with 2,177 victims. While these 1,302 cases go back to 1985, [at least 1,000 of them](#) are from 2002 – the year the U.S.-backed “Democratic Security” policy was launched – or later. “There have been too many killings of a similar nature to characterize them as isolated incidents carried out by individual rogue soldiers or units, or ‘bad apples,’” [contends](#) a 2010 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions.

Achieving convictions in even the most egregious cases has been difficult. At least forty-six of the military defendants in the 2008 Soacha case are currently [out of jail](#) pending trial, as their pretrial procedures have dragged on too long to allow continued detention. The delays – now totaling more than a year and a half – owed mainly to [procedural tactics](#) by the soldiers’ defense lawyers, including challenges to the civilian court system’s right to try them in the first place. The “false positives” scandal, and the government’s handling of it, have indelibly stained Colombia’s “success.”

The DAS: an intelligence service out of control

Similarly shocking have been the [waves of allegations](#) of criminal activity, collusion with paramilitaries, illegal surveillance and intimidation carried out by the Administrative Department for Security (DAS), the Colombian Presidency's intelligence service or secret police. This troubled agency, a longtime [U.S. aid recipient](#), appears to have been wildly out of control and used for evil purposes, severely undermining the Colombian government's security gains.

President Uribe's first DAS director, [Jorge Noguera](#), allegedly shared information about military operations with the AUC paramilitaries' Northern Bloc, among other paramilitary and narco-trafficking organizations. This included giving the paramilitaries lists of labor leaders, human rights defenders and other opposition figures to kill; [some of those orders](#) were brutally carried out. Today, Jorge Noguera, who served over three years as chief of presidential intelligence, is on trial for [aggravated homicide](#).

The presidential intelligence agency was keeping records of human rights defenders' families' movements – even their children's school pickup times, complete with photographs.

Noguera's departure did not end the problems at the DAS. In early 2009 Colombians were scandalized by [new revelations](#) that the security agency carried out a campaign of wiretaps and surveillance against dozens of human rights defenders, independent journalists, opposition politicians and even Supreme Court justices, especially those investigating "parapolitics." Leading human rights defenders were

[terrified](#) to learn that the presidential intelligence agency had been compiling thousands of hours of recordings of their phone conversations, archiving all of their email, and keeping records of their families' movements – even their children's school pickup times, complete with photographs. One human rights NGO worker found in her file a series of photos of every card in her wallet, laid out on her office desktop – though her wallet was never stolen.

[New DAS documents](#) from the mid-2000s, which emerged in early 2010, reveal a strategy of "[political warfare](#)" against the government's political adversaries. With a series of colorfully named operations ("Amazonas," "Transmilenio," "Halloween"), the documents lay out plans for smear campaigns against journalists, human rights workers, leading opposition politicians, and international organizations. The DAS efforts to "neutralize their influence" included spreading false allegations of guerrilla ties, corruption and adultery; acts of petty sabotage to complicate their work; and efforts to deny targets' U.S. visa approvals.

Judicial investigators still haven't been able to determine how high the DAS scandal goes: what President Uribe and his closest advisors knew, and when they knew it. The Prosecutor-General's Office has [concluded](#), though, that the intelligence agency's orders came from the [highest levels](#) of the president's office. Prosecutors have called on some of the President's closest aides to [testify](#) about their possible roles.

The DAS scandal, along with aggressive efforts to slow investigations into "parapolitics" and "false positives," show important elements of the executive operating outside the law, with

contempt for those who would hold it accountable. The President's feuds with the country's top court, whose justices he has accused of being "[nostalgic for terrorism](#)," "[lending themselves](#)" to terrorism, and "[trafficking in witnesses](#)," are extremely serious and have left the government gridlocked. At a time when criminal investigations are critically important, the country has spent a year without a chief prosecutor for lack of executive-judicial consensus on candidates.

Though it brought security gains, Colombia's model came with a disregard for human rights and a stubborn resistance to checks on power. "Parapolitics," "false positives" and the DAS revelations strongly undermine claims that Colombia's experience has been a "success."

A misguided drug strategy, only now beginning to change

Success has also eluded efforts to achieve Plan Colombia's main initial goal: reducing Colombian cocaine supplies. Between the mid-1990s and the late 2000s, the U.S. and Colombian governments believed that aerially spraying herbicides over fields of coca, the plant used to make cocaine, would reduce drug supplies. They were wrong.

In 1999, the year before Plan Colombia began, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [measured](#) 160,100 hectares of coca (1 hectare = 2 1/2 acres) planted in Colombia, which were used to make 680 tons of cocaine. By 2007 – after the aerial eradication of a million hectares of coca – that number had dropped to 99,000. But Colombia's cocaine tonnage had dropped only slightly (600 tons).

Faced with fumigation, coca-growing families, with no other way to make a living in stateless areas, adjusted their cultivation patterns to make similar amounts of cocaine. The policy proved not only to be cruel – spraying chemicals over rural households, usually with no food-security or development assistance – but the numbers showed it to be ineffective, too.

Starting in 2007, the U.S. and Colombian governments began [shifting strategy](#), putting less emphasis on spraying herbicides from overhead and more emphasis on increasing the civilian government's on-the-ground presence in coca-growing zones. Aerial fumigation fell by 39 percent from 2006 to 2009. This strategic shift appears to be reducing coca cultivation, for now at least. In 2009 – a year in which both aerial and manual eradication dropped sharply – the UNODC [found](#) a significant drop in Colombian coca-growing, to 68,000 hectares.

While this is encouraging, it is clearly not an argument for forced eradication. Instead, it is an argument for helping Colombia establish enough state presence in coca-growing zones to support a legal economy, while providing food security and other alternatives to households that had previously engaged in coca cultivation. In the past two years or so, Colombia has made incipient progress along these lines, but it has a very long way to go.

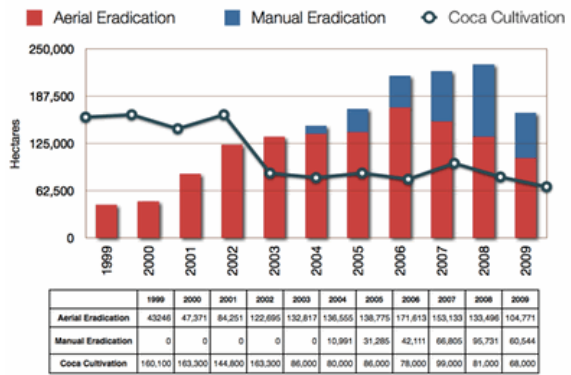
In the Andes as a whole, the picture is still grim. Coca production has increased somewhat in Bolivia, and substantially in Peru. Adding all three countries together yields about the same amount of coca production between 2003 and 2009 (a bit over 150,000 hectares). UN estimates of total cocaine tonnage produced in the Andes have not declined either: from 925 tons in 1999 to a [range](#) of 842-1,111 tons last year. The Southern Command, meanwhile, [offers](#) a still higher estimate of Andean cocaine production: “1,250-1,500 metric tons of cocaine per year around the region.”

While Mexican cartels have grabbed most of the cocaine transshipment market, Colombia’s narco-criminals remain wealthy and politically powerful. The last decade saw Colombia’s drug trade reconfigure. Instead of the old model of large cartels, [today’s drug organizations](#) are small armies with low-profile leaders, controlling key narco-trafficking chokepoints and maintaining ties with specific Mexican drug-trafficking organizations.

Some are [guerrilla fronts](#) operating with much autonomy from their commanders. Some are purely criminal organizations. And many are direct descendants of the AUC paramilitary organization, going by such names as Machos, Rastrojos, Nueva Generación, Black Eagles, Urabeños, Paisas, Ejército Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista, Renacer, and others. Estimates of the “new” paramilitaries’ combined strength range from [4,000](#) to [10,200](#) fighters – roughly similar to the guerrillas.

All seek to penetrate and corrupt the government. While the “parapolitics” scandal revealed the extent of this penetration, links between organized crime and local power have not been severed. (The PIN party’s strong showing in March 2010 legislative elections, [discussed above](#), is evidence of this.) Meanwhile, Colombia’s narco-mafias continue to supply U.S.

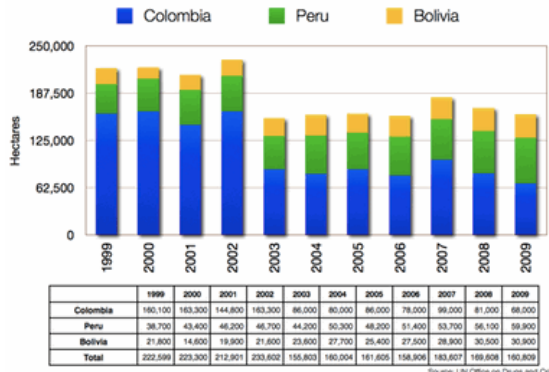
In Colombia, “Eradication” Hasn’t Eradicated Coca



[\(Click to expand\)](#)

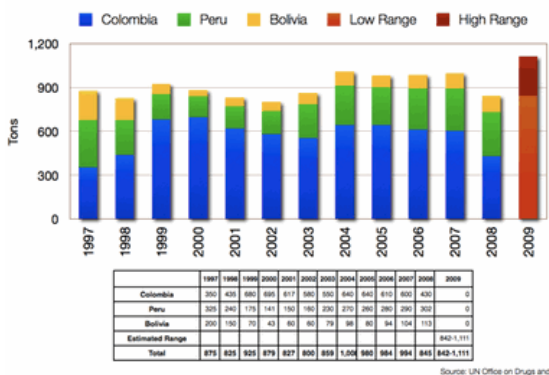
As strategy shifted in Colombia, both coca eradication *and* coca cultivation declined in 2009. (Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime.)

In the Andes, Coca Cultivation is Steady since 2003



[\(Click to expand\)](#)

Andean Cocaine Production is Unchanged



[\(Click to expand\)](#)

Charts of coca and cocaine production in the Andean region show drug supplies to be remarkably resilient despite U.S. efforts.

and European addicts' demand as well as ever.

The rich-poor divide widens

Though they saw security gains, the “Plan Colombia” and “Democratic Security” years were marked by a **worsening of Colombia’s already stark social inequalities**.

As elsewhere in Latin America, economic growth has been strong in the past several years, and the rising tide has lifted nearly all boats. But the boats of the poor have only budged slightly, while those of the wealthy are in the stratosphere.

Foreign investment, especially in extractive industries, has [more than tripled](#), attracted by the security gains of the 2000s. Capital markets have been robust: \$100 invested in Colombia’s [IGBC stock market index](#) in August 2002 would be worth \$1,025 today.

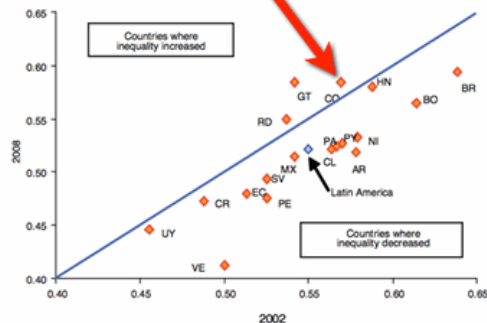
But [unemployment](#), 14.5 percent in May 2002, declined only to 12.1 percent in May 2010. Underemployment – people working insufficient hours or in the informal sector – fell only from 35.4 percent to 32.8 percent in that period. The [poverty rate](#) has decreased from 51.5 percent in 2002 to 42.8 percent in 2008, but in a region that has had a prosperous eight years, [this decline is less](#) than those of neighbors like Peru, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama.

The “extreme poverty” or indigence rate – those unable even to meet their most basic needs – hasn’t changed (24.8 percent in 2002; 22.9 percent in 2008). Though estimates are inexact, in rural areas – where 0.4 of landholders [control](#) 61.2 percent of landholdings – the poverty rate remains exceedingly high. It [dropped perhaps](#) from the upper to the lower 60 percent range between 2002 and 2009.

When Plan Colombia and “Democratic Security” were launched, Colombia was already one of the most economically unequal countries on earth. Whether measured by GINI coefficient or the ratio between the income of the richest and poorest ten percent, Colombia ranked near the bottom. Eight years later, much of the hemisphere has made strides toward greater income equality, but Colombia’s inequality measures have worsened.

Only three countries in Latin America have grown less equal economically since 2002, [according](#) to the UN Economic Commission on Latin America: they are Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. While the poorest Colombians are often some of the most grateful for

Colombia is one of only 3 Latin American countries where economic inequality increased between 2002 and 2008



The others are Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. Chart source: UN Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean

[\(Click to expand\)](#)

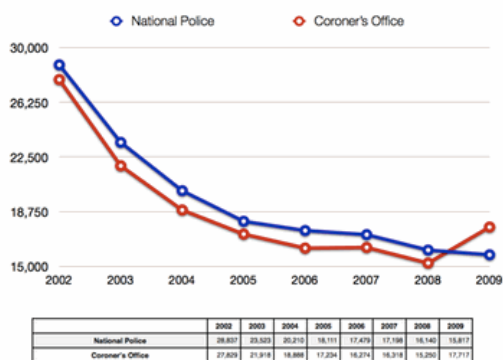
This chart comes from page 12 of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean’s 2009 “[Social Panorama of Latin America](#)” report.

the security gains of the past several years, they have been left out of the economic growth that resulted.

Progress has stagnated as the strategy reaches its limits

Finally, and despite these costs, **the Colombian government’s security gains are stagnating.** Independent security analysts, including Colombia’s [Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris](#) think-tank and the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC), found a modest but worrying rise in guerrilla attacks and activity since 2008, the high-water-mark year of the “Democratic Security” strategy. “What we see today, perhaps between the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010,” [said](#) Colombia ICRC delegation head Christophe Beney in April, “is that the FARC as a guerrilla group have adapted dynamically and once again have a capability, as we have seen in the last two or three months, to continue being an important actor in the armed conflict.”

Homicides Aren’t Dropping Anymore



[\(Click to expand\)](#)

At least 9,000 FARC and ELN guerrillas and a similar number of “new” paramilitaries persist in remote areas, urban slums, and along key strategic corridors. They carry out ambushes, lay IEDs and landmines, recruit children, and launch other attacks throughout the country on a daily basis – usually, though, in more remote areas than before.

Guerrillas’ destructive persistence is only part of the security story. Networks of criminal groups and gangs, most the [direct heirs](#) of the old paramilitary groups and all funded by the drug trade, are growing rapidly and have caused the murder rate to increase in several important areas. One of them is the city of Medellín, hailed for its dramatic mid-2000s reductions in crime, where the murder rate [doubled](#) from 2008 to 2009 – and 2010, so far, is [worse](#). Murders are also rising, though less sharply, in [Bogotá](#).

Nationwide, the murder picture is mixed but worrisome. Colombia’s National Police [found](#) a very slight reduction in homicides between 2008 and 2009, from 16,140 to 15,817. However, the national coroner’s office (*Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses*) is [sounding the alarm](#) about a 16 percent [rise](#) in homicides, after six straight years of decline, from 15,250 in 2008 to 17,717. This is the highest number the agency has measured since 2005.

The data show violence dropping rapidly at first, only to settle for the past few years at a level that remains unacceptably high.

Other measures of violence, like forced displacements and [threats](#) against human rights defenders, failed to improve during the years of security “success.” Internal displacement – basically, refugees who do not cross borders – continues to make Colombia one of the hemisphere's principal humanitarian emergencies. [286,389 people](#) were newly forced from their homes in 2009, according to

CODHES, the Colombian NGO that monitors the phenomenon. While this was the lowest amount of new displacement measured in three years, it was still about the same as the 288,127 CODHES recorded in 1999, before Plan Colombia began. Since 2002, 2.4 million (CODHES estimate) or 2.2 million people ([government estimate](#)) – about 1 in 20 Colombians – have been newly displaced. Colombia's total population of internally displaced people is the [second-largest in the world](#) after Sudan.

Even in areas of significant progress, the data show violence dropping rapidly at first, only to settle for the past few years at a level that remains unacceptably high. Plan Colombia and “Democratic Security” privileged military and police capabilities over other facets of governance, and now it looks like Colombia has reached the limits of what a military strategy can achieve on its own.

The far-off goal: a strong state without impunity

Words like “success” and “model” are unhelpful to understanding Colombia's experience. It has come with too many scandals, abuses, disappointments and high costs to be considered a template for other troubled states receiving U.S. assistance, like Mexico or Afghanistan.

It does offer some key lessons, though, for any effort to build a strong state governed by the rule of law. A growing consensus contends that Colombia – as well as other countries with vast “ungoverned spaces” – needs to create a credible state presence throughout the national territory. Colombia makes clear that this state presence must be more than just a military footprint, and that it must come without impunity: it does no good to introduce a government if that government’s representatives need not fear

Colombia's experience offers some important lessons. But copying its model elsewhere would be disastrous.

any punishment for abusing human rights, engaging in corruption or organized crime, or otherwise mistreating the population.

Plan Colombia, and especially “Democratic Security,” focused on strengthening state presence. But they focused almost exclusively on the presence of *part* of the state: the part that wears a uniform. Military, and usually police, capabilities were strengthened throughout Colombia’s territory, but those of the rest of the government – road-builders, land-titlers, healthcare workers, teachers, judges – lagged behind.

This unbalanced approach reduced several key measures of insecurity. But these have begun to stagnate at unacceptably high levels. The need to civilianize the strategy and deliver public goods other than security is becoming increasingly evident.

In the name of “consolidation,” Colombia is beginning to move in this direction, with a plan to build full state presence in several key zones where none has existed. While this plan has brought at least short-term reductions in coca-growing, its success will require it to be truly civilian, coordinated with civil society, and accompanied by a long-term commitment.

As for the other crucial ingredient – impunity – the past several years have seen very few steps forward. Colombia has witnessed a string of scandals that remain to be investigated and punished, its human rights situation remains very troubled, and its judicial system has been battered by years of fighting to maintain its independence.

A bit of what was done in Colombia can be rescued and applied elsewhere. Making at least part of the state’s authority felt in ungoverned territories, and weakening illegal armed groups, were important. But Plan Colombia and “Democratic Security” came at a high cost in lives and resources, only did part of the job, are yielding diminishing returns, and have left important institutions weaker. Colombia's experience offers some important lessons. But copying its model elsewhere would be disastrous.