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A WOLA BRIEFING SERIES

Protecting the Pipeline: *The U.S. Military Mission Expands*

The U.S. government has recently provided \$99 million to help protect an oil pipeline in Colombia.¹ The Bush Administration's request for fiscal year 2004 includes an undetermined amount, up to \$147 million, to provide munitions, equipment, and training in order to continue the program. The pipeline protection program is the most concrete manifestation thus far of the Administration's desire to expand U.S. commitments in Colombia beyond counter-narcotics programs to include counter-insurgency operations and the guarding of strategic physical infrastructure.

Yet, given the brutality of Colombia's conflict, it is difficult to comprehend why guarding an oil pipeline should take precedence over defending civilians from attacks by armed groups. It is also troubling that U.S. public monies are being used to support an abusive foreign military so it can protect the resources of private companies. Beyond the grave human rights implications, the wisdom of this policy is dubious because the United States risks stepping onto a treadmill of foreign military assistance that is very difficult to slow down. Perhaps most importantly, the policy raises alarm bells regarding the transparency of U.S. government interests and the role of the private sector in Colombia and the Andean region.

Arauca province: spilled oil and growing violence

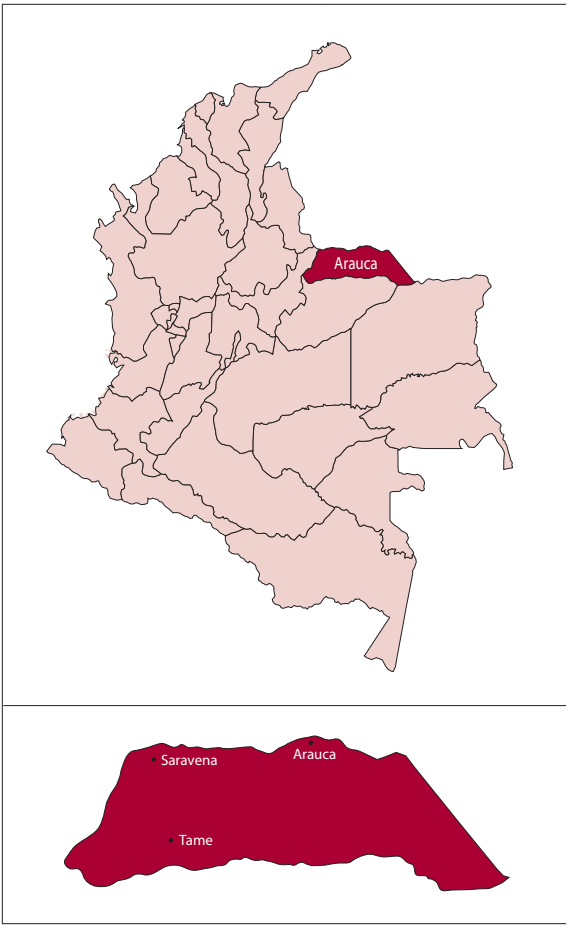
The Bush Administration's pipeline protection plan aims to train, equip, and assist two elite Colombian army battalions of up to 800 soldiers to shield the first 75 miles of the 480-mile Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline. The pipeline, which originates in the northeastern province of Arauca and ends in the Caribbean port of Coveñas, is frequently attacked by Colombia's two major guerrilla groups — the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Colombia's state oil company, Ecopetrol, holds fifty percent ownership of the pipeline; U.S.-based Occidental Petroleum holds forty-four percent; and Spain's Repsol-YPF holds six percent. When it is operating normally, the pipeline carries 110,000 barrels of crude per day. The Caño Limón oil field accounts for approximately twenty percent of Colombia's oil production and about five percent of Occidental's worldwide annual production of 133 million barrels.²

The Colombian government argues that U.S. military assistance will enable it to capture revenue lost to spills and diminished production — nearly \$500 million in 2001 — resulting from the guerrilla attacks, as well as enhance the military's ability to fight the guerrillas and thus reduce the country's reliance on the United States. The United States, for its part, is keenly interested in securing oil sources beyond the Middle East and perhaps even reducing its reliance on Venezuela, where populist leader Hugo Chavez has rankled elements of that country's oil sector and unsettled policymakers in Washington. A recent two-month nationwide opposition strike led in part by oil industry leaders brought that economy to a near standstill.

Produced by the Washington Office on Latin America, the Colombia Monitor combines timely analysis of policy dynamics in Washington with on-the-ground monitoring of the impact of U.S. policy in the Andean region. The intent of this briefing series is to broaden and inform the public and policy debates about how to strengthen democracy, human rights, and prospects for peace.

This issue analyzes the role of oil in Colombia's conflict and the dangers of the United States' growing military mission in Colombia.





Map of Colombia's Arauca province.

Arauca province, nestled next to Venezuela in northeastern Colombia, covers 9,000 square miles of territory (about the size of New Hampshire) and counts 250,000 inhabitants. As of this writing, there were an estimated 2,000 FARC fighters in Arauca, as well as 1,000 ELN troops, and some 800 paramilitaries.³ Coca cultivation has also boomed in the area, rising from 978 hectares in 2000 to an estimated 12,000-18,000 hectares planted today.⁴

Seventy members of the U.S. Army's 7th Special Forces Group are already in Arauca, a historic guerrilla hotbed and now one of the country's most violent regions, to train Colombian troops. Forty of the advisors are on a small military base near the town of Saravena and the remainder are on a larger base in the town of Arauca, the provincial capital. The training could keep the advisors there for as long as a year.⁵ The idea is to create "an offensive-minded unit of Colombian counterinsurgency analysts who will interpret intelligence data from high-tech equipment and informers and then deploy rapid-response forces stationed at strategic points along the pipeline to thwart rebel attacks."⁶ Some of that training occurs "during actual military and intelligence-gathering operations."⁷

The bulk of the money Congress appropriated will be dedicated to ten troop transport helicopters,⁸ while the remainder will be spent on training, infrastructure, intelligence support, and the building of bomb-proof barracks for U.S. troops.⁹ Colombian Defense Minister Martha Lucia Ramírez said the aid will "make

our actions against these groups [the guerrillas] much more effective and allow us to obtain the result we want, which is to hit these groups hard."¹⁰ According to Maj. William White, in charge of the Special Forces in Arauca, "Our mission is to train the Colombians to find, track down and kill the terrorists before they attack the pipeline."¹¹

Colombia's 18th Army Brigade, under the command of Gen. Carlos Lemus Pedraza, will provide the bulk of the troops for training by U.S. Special Forces, in addition to members of the newly-created 5th Mobile Brigade, the marines, and the national police. Some 7,000 soldiers are expected to be trained eventually. The 18th Brigade has dramatically expanded its presence in Arauca during the past year, and some 1,000 additional police and military have been added to the region since August 2002. Five of the brigade's six battalions are now involved in pipeline protection, up from two battalions last year.¹²

Since September 21, 2002, three municipalities in Arauca province — Saravena, Arauquita, and Arauca, stretched west to east over 75 miles with a total population of 180,000 — have been part of a "Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zone." The only other area designated as such is located in Sucre and Bolívar departments, in the northwest part of the country where the pipeline reaches the sea. In these zones, which are an essential element of President Álvaro Uribe's new "democratic security" project, the government cedes special powers to the military at the expense of elected civilian leaders. Originally, military commanders were granted certain judicial and police powers, the mobility of civilians was limited, individuals without identification could be held for twenty-four hours, censuses were conducted to determine where people worked and lived, and restrictions were placed on the presence of foreigners and journalists. On November 11, 2002, some two thousand people were rounded up in Saravena and taken to the local

stadium. They were photographed, had their fingerprints taken, and those without a criminal record were stamped on the arm with indelible ink. Eighty people were arrested and 43 were taken to jail in Bogotá.¹³ In the three municipalities, 1,329 searches and “voluntary registrations” have been conducted, and 49,000 people are now in the police database.¹⁴

Although the Constitutional Court declared many of those powers unconstitutional in late November 2002, reports from the region suggest that the armed forces continue to act as if they enjoyed such powers.¹⁵ One mayor said, “The soldiers are in the cities and not in the countryside; it seems as if the war is against us and not against the guerrillas.”¹⁶ According to Army Colonel Jesús Alberto Ruíz, “This is war. Nobody has absolute rights.”¹⁷

The 18th Brigade is now engaged in psychological warfare operations in the town of Saravena, using clowns to earn the cooperation of children. Accompanied by uniformed troops, the clowns move door to door handing out candy and leaflets that promise rewards to residents who provide information about guerrilla activities. On Thursdays, children between the ages of three and twelve are invited to the military base to play “Soldier for A Day.”¹⁸ According to the Saravena base commander, Col. Santiago Herrera, “We decided to concentrate on the children because it’s the fastest way to reach their parents,” many of whom he suspects are guerrilla collaborators.¹⁹

Under U.S. law, foreign military units receiving U.S. aid must have no credible evidence of human rights violations against them. Yet, the 46th Counter-Guerrilla Battalion, which was apparently not vetted for human rights abusers because it is not part of the “organic” structure of the 18th Brigade, is now posted outside Occidental’s fields in Arauca. Colombian government investigators have linked the 46th Battalion to the killing of at least some of 145 civilians in neighboring Norte de Santander province in 1999. General Lemus regards the 46th as part of the 18th Brigade, and claims to have commanded the 46th for two years.²⁰

Along with military presence in Arauca have come illegal paramilitaries, raising serious questions about the 18th Brigade’s potential ties to these extralegal armies and its respect for human rights.²¹ Paramilitary activity was first reported in southern Arauca in August 2001, and has since expanded throughout the province. Paramilitaries were active from June 21 through August 14, 2002, for example, in the town of Arauca, despite the large military base there. They also maintain a regular roadblock in the hamlet of Rosario, thirty minutes from the town of Arauca on the road to Saravena.²² Paramilitaries are known to currently control the town of Tame, and are present in Cravo Norte, Puerto Rondón, and Fortul. Tame has become the most violent town in the province, the location of over half of Arauca’s murders, this year averaging one per day.²³ Paramilitaries are reportedly moving north towards the oil-producing towns of Arauca province, using the town of Hato Corozal, in Casanare province, as their base.²⁴

News reports claim that paramilitary commanders in Arauca are attempting “to ‘purify’ the province of politicians, journalists and others affiliated with the guerrillas. Targets are selected with the help of local guerrillas who have switched sides to join the better-paying paramilitaries.”²⁵ Overall, the murder rate is soaring in Arauca,



WITNESS FOR PEACE

Mayor of Saravena, Arauca overlooks the destruction of municipal offices. A bomb launched by the FARC missed the police station and destroyed part of the administration’s offices.

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Troops from the Colombian Army's 18th Brigade in Arauca.

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with about 160 killings per 100,000 people this year, twice the rate of the late 1990s. In the United States, the average is under six per 100,000.²⁶

In a region intended to be a security priority and a showcase for how pacification can work under the new government, the results have been disturbing. Arauca has become a magnet for an explosive mix of actors, all jockeying to control the area's considerable material resources. Since October 2002, the region has suffered from violence on an unprecedented scale: five car bombings attributed to guerrillas that took fourteen lives and

injured eighteen; several assassinated mayors, government advisors, and city council members; numerous resignations of elected officials under threat by armed actors; rotating military and police commanders; selective assassinations for which no responsibility is claimed; and the forced displacement of rural dwellers in untold numbers.²⁷ Two foreign journalists on assignment for the *Los Angeles Times* were kidnapped for eleven days by the ELN in late January, and a five-person Colombian television crew sent to cover the kidnapping was briefly taken hostage by the FARC.²⁸ Human rights defenders, trade unionists, and other journalists have also suffered from intimidation by the military, among other actors.²⁹ After two reporters were killed within a span of nine months, presumably by paramilitaries, sixteen journalists chose to leave Arauca because they did not believe the government could protect them.³⁰

The governor of Arauca, a retired Army Colonel, resigned in January 2003 and claimed that his life was in danger, only three months after Uribe appointed him to the post. Days later, his chief of staff was killed by gunmen as she left her home. Even President Uribe cancelled a December 2002 visit at the last moment upon learning of death threats. In Saravena alone (pop. 48,000), which has been proclaimed a security success by Minister of Defense Marta Lucia Ramírez, there were 21 assassinations between January 23 and February 27 of this year. This situation is cited as an achievement, apparently, because there were eighty guerrilla attacks in that town in 2002, destroying most every building surrounding the police station.³¹

The Ministry of the Interior and Justice, Fernando Londoño, said that despite the apparent chaos, "this situation does not mean that the government, the armed forces, and the police have lost control of Arauca."³² Asking for public patience, Minister of Defense Ramírez said, "in six months you can't end terrorism. We don't know if we'll be able to end it in four years."³³ Nonetheless, criticism is building: According to a high-ranking government official, "Arauca is the wart on President Uribe's security policy."³⁴

Washington's Oil Rhetoric

Since the advent of the \$1.3 billion Plan Colombia aid package in 2000, the discussion of U.S. engagement has centered almost exclusively on the drug war and has tiptoed around trickier questions of counter-insurgency and U.S. trade interests, to the extent that they even entered polite conversation. In February 2002, however, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Anne Patterson placed U.S. energy and corporate interests at the center of U.S. policy toward Colombia. The Caño Limon-Coveñas pipeline, she said, was only one of 300 critical "infrastructure points" in Colombia of concern to United States. Patterson admitted that the pipeline plan reached beyond the anti-narcotics mission to which the United States was limited at the time. But, she said, "It is something we have to do...It is important for the future of the country, for our petroleum supplies and for the confidence of our investors."³⁵

Patterson highlighted the strategic importance of Mexican, Venezuelan, and Colombian oil given threats to “traditional sources” post-September 11, 2001. “Colombia has the potential to export more oil to the United States, and now more than ever, it’s important for us to diversify our sources of oil,” the ambassador said.³⁶

The importance of Colombia and its oil producing neighbors, Ecuador and Venezuela, as suppliers of crude to the United States had been in the background of policy debates about Andean military aid for some time.³⁷ Although oil was overshadowed by more immediate concerns over the drug trade and the insurgency, some prominent policy-makers were making a case for energy issues before Plan Colombia became a hot topic. In 1998, General Charles Wilhelm of U.S. Southern Command said oil discoveries had increased Colombia’s “strategic importance” to the United States. Wilhelm also likened Colombia’s eastern neighbor, Venezuela, to the Middle East: Venezuela, he said, provides “the same amount of oil to the U.S. as do all the Persian Gulf states combined.”³⁸ Senator Bob Graham (D-FL) and Brent Scowcroft, a former National Security Advisor, said in April 2000, as Plan Colombia was being developed, that Colombia’s oil reserves were “only slightly less than OPEC members Qatar, Indonesia and Algeria.” These reserves, they warned, would not be available “unless stability [in Colombia] is restored.”³⁹

Scowcroft and Graham also looked beyond Colombia, describing the Andean region in strategic terms in April 2000:

*Our nation’s interests in the Andean region extend beyond helping to target the source of this drug flow. The struggle between insurgents and the Colombian government has bled into neighboring nations... Particularly troubling is the fact that one of those nations — Venezuela — is our largest petroleum supplier.*⁴⁰

The late Senator Paul Coverdell (R-GA), also promoting Plan Colombia, positioned oil as key to U.S. military strategy in Colombia. He framed resource procurement as essential to U.S. interests in the Andes, comparing the region to the Persian Gulf and advocating deepened intervention:

*The recent rise in oil prices has revived America’s appreciation for its strategic relationships in the Middle East and reminded us why we came to their defense in the Persian Gulf War a half-world away. To me there is an indisputable parallel to the situation in our own back yard: the crisis in Colombia.*⁴¹

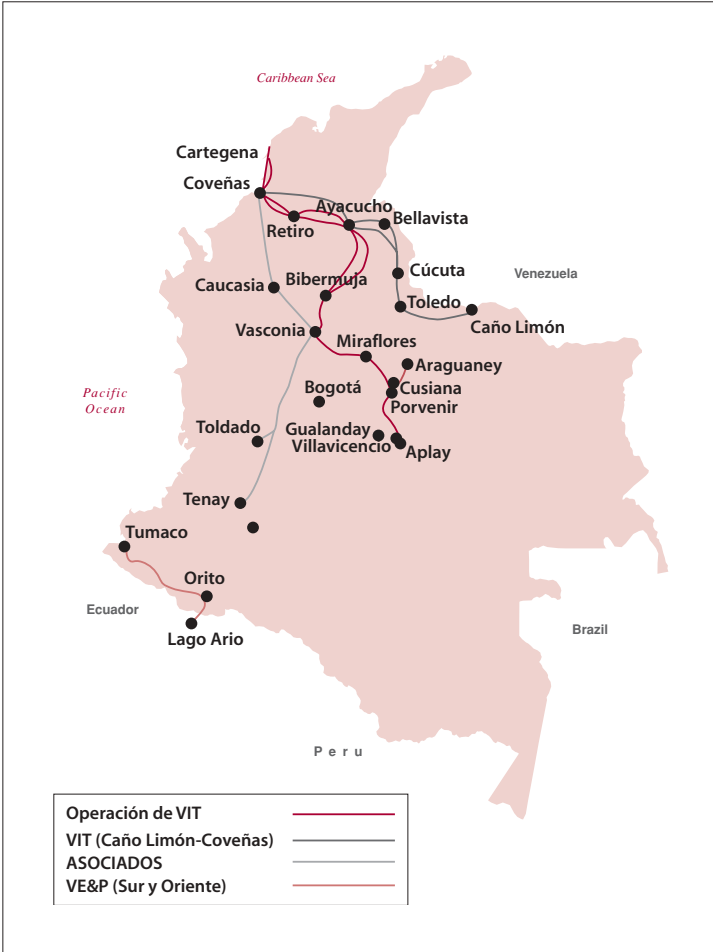
The Panama Canal is on the U.S. Department of Energy’s list of six strategic “world oil-transit chokepoints.” Disruption of transport in the canal would interrupt crucial Atlantic-Pacific oil flows.⁴² John Mica (R-FL), chair in 2000 of the House Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources Subcommittee, added Panama to the list of strategic regional priorities linked to material resources and the Colombian conflict:

*Our vital national interests are undeniably at stake. With 20 percent of the U.S. daily supply of crude and refined oil imports coming from that area, and with the vitally important Panama Canal, located just 150 miles to the north, the national security and economic implications of Colombia’s rebel activity spilling over into neighboring countries are enormous.*⁴³



WITNESS FOR PEACE

Civilians from Tame marching in opposition to the increasing presence of the paramilitary AUC in Arauca, February 2002.



This map of Colombia's oil pipelines shows the Cañon Limón-Coveñas pipeline, which runs across northern Colombia between Cañon Limón in the east and the Coveñas port on the Pacific coast.

Private sector representatives have echoed arguments made by these policymakers. In 1996, U.S. oil companies joined Ecopetrol and the Colombian Chamber of Petroleum Services in taking out an advertisement in U.S. newspapers. Oil, the ad said, was a “powerful new weapon...in the war against drugs.” It featured a dramatic, pistol-like photograph of a gas pump nozzle.⁴⁴

During House of Representatives hearings on Plan Colombia in February 2000, Occidental's public affairs vice president, Lawrence Meriage, testified that oil is of “vital strategic importance to the United States because it reduces our dependence on oil imports from the volatile Middle East... (Colombia's) potential to add new production is very high because large areas of the country are unexplored.” Meriage asked Congress to not only approve Plan Colombia, which then centered on the southern provinces, but also to include within its scope areas in northeastern Colombia where Occidental operates.⁴⁵ That wish has indeed come to fruition, as the pipeline protection program in Arauca now gets underway. Between 1996 and 2000, Occidental spent nearly \$8.7 million lobbying U.S. officials on Latin America policy, largely related to Colombia. Other oil and energy companies, such as Exxon Mobil, British Petroleum, Amoco, Unocal,

Texaco, and Philips Petroleum spent some \$13 million during the same period.⁴⁶

Occidental denies that it requested any special favors of the U.S. government to protect its assets in Colombia, because making that happen seemed “out of the realm of possibility.”⁴⁷ But several sources say otherwise. According to a Republican congressional aide, Occidental lobbied members of Congress and the Administration for the program. The same aide said that Colombia's ambassador to the United States, Luis Alberto Moreno, met with Administration officials as well as members of Congress to discuss the pipeline program well before the Administration publicly announced its intentions.⁴⁸ According to another source, the program was in large part designed in 2001 by Andrés Soto, a Colombian who worked for Occidental at the time, and is now a Vice-Minister of Defense.⁴⁹ The plan was billed as a Colombian “self-help” program that would resonate with U.S. legislators who were reluctant to provide more money to Colombia. According to an Occidental representative, company officials were often in contact with the U.S. embassy in Colombia and encouraged the embassy to convince the Colombian government that the security situation in Arauca needed more attention.⁵⁰

What ultimately got the government's attention, apparently, was the fact that some \$500 million in tax revenue — about two percent of the national budget — was lost due to pipeline bombings in 2001. Occidental lost approximately \$50 million from those attacks. According to Occidental, when officials from the State and Defense Departments began visiting the Occidental installations in Arauca in 2001 to study the feasibility of protecting the pipeline, the company believed it was part of a general infrastructure program for Colombia that would apply beyond the company's own

facilities. When Occidental was singled out in the legislation, it came “as a great surprise” and company representatives subsequently visited congressional offices to make their case in favor of the pipeline program.⁵¹

Although hawkish legislators and oil companies for some time provided mere background music to a larger discussion about coca eradication and terrorism, the Washington debate has now turned to energy issues with alacrity. Defending Colombia’s “economic lifelines” has apparently become important to the Bush Administration and is part of the reason for the pipeline plan.⁵² Ambassador Anne Patterson said, “a country cannot lose an [important] percentage of its production for very long without effects on its democracy.”⁵³ In March 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell told Congress that pipeline bombings were affecting the “basic economy of Colombia” and that additional military support was needed for Colombia “to deal with this threat to their survival as a nation — this threat to their economic well-being.”⁵⁴

In October 2002, STRATFOR, a well-known private agency specializing in risk analysis, argued that in light of the proposal to guard the pipeline, the Bush Administration’s “higher priority is to protect key Colombian oil assets and to secure large rural areas believed rich in oil reserves so that U.S. energy companies can initiate large-scale exploration safely and quickly.” Stratfor also warned of serious consequences attached to expanded U.S. involvement, such as guerrilla attacks on U.S. military advisors, U.S. citizens, and U.S. companies.⁵⁵ Two years earlier, Stan Goff, a retired U.S. Special Forces intelligence sergeant who trained Colombian anti-narcotics troops, made similar claims, stating that the purpose of Plan Colombia was to protect “the operations of Occidental, British Petroleum and Texas Petroleum” and to obtain “control of future Colombian fields... The main interest of the United States is oil.”⁵⁶

Andean Crude Reality

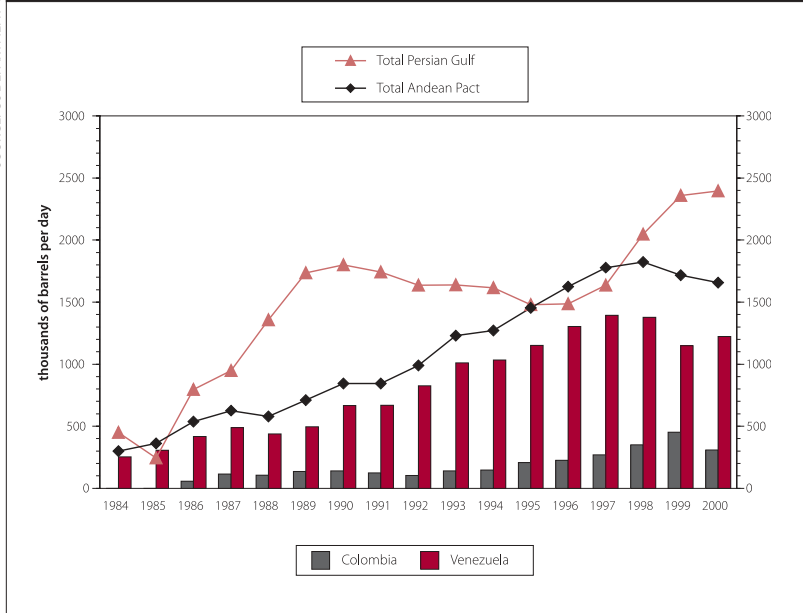
The Andes are important for U.S. energy interests. According to 1996-2000 averages, Venezuela (which produced 1.64 million barrels per day [bpd]) barely surpassed Saudi Arabia (1.63 million bpd) and Canada (1.60 million bpd) as the number one crude exporter to the United States. During that same period, Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador together exported the same average amount of crude to the United States as the Persian Gulf States combined — 2.1 million bpd, or 20.1 percent of U.S. annual net oil imports.⁵⁷

Colombian crude represents more than two percent of total U.S. oil imports and, depending on the year, ranks between number five and ten as a foreign oil supplier to the United States, though it is far behind Venezuela and Mexico in the volume of its exports. In 1999, Colombia’s production peaked at roughly 800,000 bpd, compared to around 100,000 bpd in the early 1980s. But output fell to 604,000 bpd in 2001 as a result of pipeline attacks and natural depletions in Occidental’s Caño Limón and British Petroleum’s huge Cupiana-Cusiagua fields. These reserves, Caño Limón with an estimated 300 million barrels, and Cupiana and Cusiagua with a combined 1.6 billion barrels, were among the largest fields discovered in the world in the 1980s. Since those fields came on stream in the mid-1980s, Colombia has been a net exporter of oil. Oil is Colombia’s number one source of foreign exchange, providing around 35 percent of Colombian export revenues in 2000 and 25 percent in 2001.⁵⁸

Yet, Colombia has the potential to produce even more. Ecopetrol signed an unprecedented 32 exploration contracts with foreign companies in 2000, and an additional 28 in 2001. Colombia’s proven reserves were estimated at 1.75 billion barrels in 2002; however, high-end projections of potential reserves shift between 25 billion and 37 billion barrels

Between 1996 and 2000, Occidental spent nearly \$8.7 million lobbying U.S. officials on Latin America policy, largely related to Colombia. In addition, company officials were often in contact with the U.S. embassy in Colombia and encouraged the embassy to convince the Colombian government that the security situation in Arauca needed more attention.

U.S. Crude Oil Imports, 1984-2000



— roughly a third to half the amount of Venezuela’s proven reserves.⁵⁹ In February 2002, Ecopetrol President Alberto Calderon Zuleta was so hopeful about Colombia’s oil potential that he claimed advances in exploration would bring a veritable petroleum “harvest” during the next presidential administration.⁶⁰ Oil company and government analysts persistently stress that only seven of eighteen sedimentary basins with geological hydrocarbon are being exploited commercially, and geologically, Colombia’s basins share characteristics with the oil-packed rock formations that traverse Venezuela.

Colombia is not a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and is thus not restrained, as is Venezuela, by production quotas. With upwards of half of Colombia’s present

production exported to the United States, one Ecopetrol analyst said increases in flows from non-OPEC countries like Colombia can help the United States put pressure on the market in times of supply stress.⁶¹

In August 2002, Canada’s Petrobank Energy and Resources and the U.S. firm Argosy Energy International announced they had signed exploration contracts with Ecopetrol to drill in 50,000 hectares of the Putumayo basin, which borders Ecuador’s oil hub and is the heart of U.S.-backed coca fumigation operations. Ecopetrol estimates the basin’s non-proven reserves at 2.4 billion barrels — how much is recoverable remains to be seen.⁶² However, the region is viewed as troubled as well as strategic: “Exploration and production could be tricky,” wrote the Energy Intelligence Group, an industry monitor. “Putumayo is also the center of Colombia’s massive cocaine industry and is fiercely disputed by both leftist rebels and far-right paramilitary outlaws.”⁶³

Colombia’s Conflict and the Risks of Pipeline Protection

Oil and violence have long been linked in Colombia. Legal revenues and illegal extortion have provided income to the primary armed actors in the war — government forces, left-wing guerrillas, and right-wing paramilitaries. Guerrillas use nationalist, anti-imperialist arguments to justify declaring oil installations, pipelines, company personnel, and equipment as military objectives. Bombings, sabotage, kidnappings, and extortion are common, and in some cases, company employees have been murdered. Government troops and private contractors in turn militarize strategic resource zones. Paramilitaries have targeted members of the *Union Sindical Obrera* (USO), which represents oil workers nationally, assassinating 85 workers and disappearing two since 1988.⁶⁴ Human rights defenders and their families have also been targeted: Some lawyers who sought compensation from British Petroleum for environmental damage due to the construction of the Ocsa pipeline in the 1990s have been assassinated and others continue to receive threats.⁶⁵

Oil, like cocaine, provides revenues that enhance the armed actors’ ability to participate in the war; the war in turn, provides them with opportunities for profit. The result is what one scholar describes as a “positive political economy” of war under which armed actors

acquire resources “through war that they could not access under conditions of peace.”⁶⁶ World Bank economists Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler have documented powerful links between oil and the protraction of internal conflict, citing the fact that oil is one of “the most lootable of all economic activities.” This lootability is a result of high profits, which open the doors for extortion and corruption, as well as the fact that oil installations are fixed, meaning they must be protected because they are vulnerable to attack. Moreover, oil reserves around the globe, and specifically in countries like Colombia and Ecuador, are often found in remote areas where government presence has historically been weak.⁶⁷

Given this lawlessness, extralegal armed actors frequently acquire a monopoly on violence in resource-rich regions. One Colombian analyst said that when this occurs, in order to continue operations, “companies will comply with the existing authority — guerrillas, paramilitaries, common delinquents. Historically, he said, in zones where one or another group dominates, the agreements are often straightforward: “Extortion is already factored in, monthly payments are made, there is no problem.”⁶⁸ In November 2001, an Ecopetrol official said, “Despite the public order problem here, and all the other problems in Colombia, there is a relative stability that the Middle East does not have right now.”⁶⁹ However, if multiple armed groups pressure for tribute, “be they guerrillas, paramilitaries, or common criminals — that’s when [companies] prefer to pay off their own group to finish off the others.”⁷⁰

Guerrilla revenues from extortion and kidnapping related to oil were calculated at \$140 million annually in the late 1990s.⁷¹ At the time, cocaine and heroin supplied the rebels with between \$200 and \$500 million.⁷² Both the FARC and the ELN have charged so-called “war taxes” on foreign companies. Occidental’s Lawrence Meriage told the U.S. Congress in February 2000 that his company’s contractors have paid these fees and Occidental workers have in the past been forced to pay protection rents.⁷³ Several million dollars in extortion payments levied by the ELN against the contractor that built the Caño Limón pipeline allegedly brought that ailing rebel group back to life. It had dwindled to a few dozen members; today there are up to 5,000 ELN cadres.⁷⁴

Through the extortion of local politicians, the ELN has especially benefited from royalties that Arauca province receives from a “National Royalty Fund” created by the central government.⁷⁵ Arauca receives about \$40 million from the fund each year, which amounts to about 90% of the provincial budget.⁷⁶ Not only did a recent Colombian government study find high levels of irregularities and suspected corruption stemming from such funds throughout the country, but the guerrillas in Arauca are said to have typically skimmed 5-10% off public works contracts and told the local government which contractors to hire. The Uribe Administration now claims that nearly \$200 million have gone to the guerrillas from the fund during the past six years.⁷⁷ As a result, it decided in January 2003 to freeze the Arauca account and administer the money directly from Bogotá.

According to the Colombian government, guerrillas have bombed Colombia’s pipelines — Caño Limón most frequently — more than 1,000 times in the past thirteen years, spilling 2.9 billion barrels of crude and causing massive environmental and economic damage. Losses from attacks on Caño Limón between 1990 and 1995 were estimated at \$1 billion.⁷⁸ The pipeline was bombed 152 times in 2000 and a record 178 times in 2001, but fewer than fifty times in 2002. The explanation, according to some insiders, has to do with FARC and ELN competition over the royalties. While the ELN bombed the pipeline for years to remind local government officials that it was capable of slowing production, the FARC began bombing aggressively, shutting the pipeline down for 220 days in 2002, to force the ELN to share more of the proceeds extorted from the government. A deal was made, and the number of attacks declined.⁷⁹

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Oil refinery in Barrancabermeja, Colombia's "oil capital."

Paramilitaries reaped an estimated \$100 million in 2002 by illegally siphoning and selling gasoline from pipelines in areas they control.⁸⁵

While guerrillas sabotage foreign oil companies and extort local governments, paramilitaries increasingly compete with guerrillas over oil-rich regions. Political scientist Nazih Richani writes that in the late 1990s, "the prime objective" of two major paramilitary leaders was "establishing and consolidating a buffer zone that could diminish the guerrillas' influence in the surroundings of the pipelines." The goal of this strategy, Richani found, is not only to "push the guerrillas from villages located in the pipeline areas" but also to "deny the guerrillas the extraction of protection rents that they obtained from the oil companies."⁸⁰

Paramilitary chief Carlos Castaño asserts that paramilitaries commonly "tax the multinationals as the guerrillas do."⁸¹ Union officials claim paramilitaries provide other business services to oil companies, which bring in additional revenues for those groups and strengthen their presence in key areas.⁸² One report on oil and security in Colombia argues that paramilitaries in a single region gleaned \$2 million by offering pipeline protection.⁸³ Lt. Colonel Hernán Moreno, a battalion commander from the Colombian army, included oil in the factors contributing to the January 2001 paramilitary advance on the Magdalena River port, Barrancabermeja, which houses a major refinery and is a nerve center for oil production. "Here, we pump out all the energy we need," he said. "The takeover of power is thus of prime importance to these armed groups."⁸⁴

Gasoline, too, literally fuels the conflict. Paramilitaries reaped an estimated \$100 million in 2002 by illegally siphoning and selling gasoline from pipelines in areas they control.⁸⁵ In Barrancabermeja, one of the country's most militarized cities, stolen gas is sold openly, and there are an estimated 500 "clandestine" points of sale throughout the Middle Magdalena region.⁸⁶ Local police are even known to buy stolen gasoline, and authorities in Bogotá believe this enterprise is the largest single source of paramilitary income in the region, eclipsing even the drug trade. By stealing from the state oil refinery, the paramilitaries are able to sell gas to poor residents at reduced prices, who then re-sell it to motorists. This not only expands the paramilitary coffers, but also generates employment and creates a web of civilian support for the paramilitaries. The AUC believes it supports at least 5,000 poor families this way.⁸⁷ The stolen gasoline even helps them compete in the drug trade, because gasoline is a key ingredient in processing cocaine. Paramilitaries also extract a direct supply of precursor chemicals — substances used in transforming coca leaves and paste into cocaine.⁸⁸ Last year, over two million barrels of refined gasoline were stolen, a twenty-fold increase since 1997. That constitutes about 4.7% of Ecopetrol's total stock.⁸⁹ In September 2002, the government claimed it would lose \$160 million in tax revenue that year because of gasoline theft.⁹⁰ It had lost some \$255 million since 1999.⁹¹ Despite the government's stated concern and the heavy military presence in Barrancabermeja, very little has been done to control the problem.

Foreign Money in Colombia's Conflict

Private security contractors, especially multinational ones, are also part of the oil-security-profit nexus. There have been cases in which the activities of private security companies coincide with the counter-insurgency objectives of the government's

military forces and illegal paramilitary groups. Nazih Richani cites a relationship, for example, between British Petroleum, the British security company Defense Systems Limited and its Israeli counterpart, Silver Shadow, for pipeline protection in the Antioquia province at a time when paramilitary killings had increased in the area. According to Richani, security agencies contributed to the design of military and psychological strategies “against the social base of the guerrillas.”⁹²

A second case, rigorously documented in the *Los Angeles Times*, underscores the kinds of interactions that can develop among multinational oil corporations, private security firms, and armies involved in counterinsurgency activities. It also warns of the potential consequences for human rights and public accountability. The report asserts that beginning in 1997, Occidental contracted the services of AirScan, “a private U.S. company owned by former Air Force commandos.” For six months, AirScan’s role was to provide Occidental with high-tech surveillance of the pipeline and monitoring of guerrilla movements. During this period, Colombian military officials allegedly requested AirScan’s assistance in operations beyond the region housing the pipeline. The U.S. Embassy in Bogotá reportedly told Occidental that Airscan needed to stick to pipeline surveillance, but Occidental subsequently transferred the AirScan contract to the Colombian air force, under the financial auspices of Ecopetrol.⁹³ In December 1998, a Colombian air force helicopter crew, accompanied by AirScan pilots, dropped a cluster bomb that killed 17 civilians (including six children) and seriously wounded 25 others (including fifteen children) in the town of Santo Domingo, approximately 30 miles south of the Caño Limón field installations.⁹⁴

Despite Occidental’s prior severing of its contract with AirScan, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Occidental “provided crucial assistance to the operation...directly or through contractors” such as “troop transportation, planning facilities and fuel to the Colombian military aircraft, including the helicopter crew accused of dropping the bomb.”⁹⁵ The report claimed that the day of the bombing, AirScan personnel showed military officials aerial videotape of the village and “pointed out guerrillas who they said could be seen in the town, mingling with civilians.”⁹⁶ Colombian air force pilots interviewed by the newspaper claimed that AirScan employees routinely supported Colombian military operations throughout Arauca, providing surveillance of guerrilla movements and celebrating successful operations.⁹⁷ A recently-found videotape “makes clear that the pilots were in constant contact with a commanding [military] officer” at the Occidental oil complex during the operation, and U.S. embassy and Colombian government sources confirm that Airscan also played a role, despite the company’s denials.⁹⁸ Three U.S. citizens who worked for Airscan have been implicated in the massacre, one of them an active-duty member of the U.S. Coast Guard at the time.⁹⁹ No charges have been filed against them, however, and it is unclear where they currently live.

Although the case has bounced around the military and civilian legal systems in Colombia for years, the Colombian government recently decided to suspend the Colombian helicopter pilot and a crewmember from active military duty for three months for their role in the bombing.¹⁰⁰ A lawyer in the inspector general’s office said, “They made no distinctions as to whom they were attacking.”¹⁰¹ Following an F.B.I. investigation of the incident, the State Department decided in January 2003 to decertify the unit responsible, the Colombian Air Force’s 1st Air Combat Command,



Children pedal past a Barrancabermeja neighborhood soccer field where paramilitaries massacred six and disappeared twenty-seven people in May 1998 during their push for control of the city.

Colombian Air Force Commander Hector Fabio Velasco has refused to accept air force responsibility for the killings of civilians in Santo Domingo. He has repeatedly changed his story after originally insisting that a guerrilla car bomb caused the deaths.

For-profit military enterprises, such as the companies contracted by the United States to operate in Colombia, are a booming business. A large danger in this arrangement is that the companies' nebulous military status hampers their accountability.

which accounted for 20% of the Air Force's combat capabilities.¹⁰² U.S. funding for the unit had been more than \$2 million annually, in the form of fuel and training. One State Department official said, "I would not describe it as a cover-up, but what I suggest is that the investigation has been neither quick, nor transparent, nor does it reflect with precision what happened."¹⁰³ Citing unreasonable delays in the resolution of the case in Colombia, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has agreed to review the case.¹⁰⁴

Colombian Air Force Commander Hector Fabio Velasco, who has repeatedly changed his story after originally insisting that guerrillas planted a car bomb in Santo Domingo, has refused to accept air force responsibility for the killings. He called the State Department's decision to cut off aid "unjust and hurried."¹⁰⁵ A noted Colombian investigative journalist also claims that the United States delayed the investigation, may have covered up the facts, and has displayed a double-standard in condemning the Colombian air force while its own citizens were also responsible for the errant bombing.¹⁰⁶

The Santo Domingo episode is symptomatic of a larger danger of U.S. policy in Colombia, because for-profit military enterprises are a booming business, hired by the Pentagon to serve in Colombia and other global hotspots.¹⁰⁷ Last year, three private companies had contracts with the State Department, and seventeen had contracts with the Department of Defense.¹⁰⁸ Colombia's most important newsweekly, *Semana*, called these private contractors "a band of lawless and godless Rambos" who have even been involved in a heroin trafficking scandal.¹⁰⁹ Despite these concerns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs Marc Grossman said, "contractors will continue to be a very important part of our effort [in Colombia]. That is how the modern world works."¹¹⁰

Although the AirScan pilots were employees of a foreign-based private security company originally hired by a foreign oil company, they frequently provided assistance to the Colombian armed forces: in this case, for a counter-guerrilla operation that led to human rights abuses. Because of their nebulous military status, the activities of these and other contractors are unclear and their accountability to the U.S. public, and even the Colombian government, is hampered. This is particularly troubling when events go awry. At least eight U.S. contractors have died in Colombia during the past decade (five already this year), and at least three others are being held captive by the FARC.¹¹¹ Precious little information about them, and their activities, however, has been made public.

The Colombian army has received significant income from oil companies in order to protect installations and personnel. Beginning in 1992, foreign companies were charged a "war tax" (the same term used by the guerrillas) of around \$1 per barrel so the Colombian government could improve military presence and operational capacity in oil zones.¹¹² General Harold Bedoya, the former army commander, claimed that protection of oil and mining facilities at one point in 1996 was a full time chore for approximately half of Colombia's troops.¹¹³ In 1997, the Office of the Public Ombudsman said that public funds destined to the security of oil installations were "enormous."¹¹⁴ Occidental said that in 1997 around ten percent of its in-country operating budget went to security, the majority channelled to the Colombian army.¹¹⁵ According to another estimate by Occidental officials, the company provides \$750,000 a year in cash and in-kind payments to the Colombian military.¹¹⁶ This "nonlethal" assistance includes uniforms, airplane tickets to visit home, food, and other amenities. The company also transports army personnel to bomb sites.¹¹⁷

Oil and Violence in Ecuador

Just across the Putumayo river, which demarcates part of Colombia's southern border, is Ecuador's historically most important oil producing region — Sucumbios province. Sucumbios and Orellana province to the south produce upwards of sixty percent of Ecuadoran crude, providing up to forty percent of the central government's budget. This region, however, has suffered from intensifying trans-border violence. For example, in Colombia's Putumayo province to the north of Sucumbios, more than 500,000 barrels in exports were held up in 2000 by the bombing of the Transandino pipeline, which carries nearly 11,000 barrels of Colombian oil per day from Putumayo to the Pacific port of Tumaco.¹¹⁸ In September 2000 alone, the FARC allegedly bombed the Transandino 31 times. These bombings affected Ecuador's oil supply, because Petroecuador was using the Transandino infrastructure to export 45,000 bpd. The Ecuadorian military was already protecting much of a second pipeline, the TransEcuadorian System, which links oil reserves in the Oriente region to Ecuador's Pacific Coast.¹¹⁹

FARC rebels were known to use Lago Agrio, the hub of the oil industry in Sucumbios, as a rest and recreation spot for years. However, the mounting violence between Colombian guerrillas and paramilitaries, forced displacement because of violence and fumigation in neighboring Colombia, and increased legal militarization stemming from Plan Colombia itself, has intensified conflict along the Ecuadoran border. One observer commented in August 2001 that oil installations in Ecuador are:

*close enough to the border that guerrilla groups thought to originate in Colombia or to be influenced by Colombian rebels have become a threat to operations. The groups have attacked Ecuador's main oil pipeline at least three times and have kidnapped 10 oil workers. And with the construction starting on a new heavy crude oil pipeline, companies are even more concerned about protecting their investment.*¹²⁰

Ecuador's 385,000 bpd output in 2001 was much less than Colombia's, as was its 109,000 bpd export average to the United States. But northern Ecuador is the site of one of the region's most significant energy infrastructure projects: the \$1.1 billion Heavy Crude Pipeline, known locally as the OCP, its Spanish acronym. A consortium of multinationals is behind the project — Spain's Repsol-YPF, Canada's Alberta Energy Co., Italy's Agip S.A., Argentina's Perez Companac and Techint, and two U.S. companies, Kerr McGee Corp. and Occidental Petroleum. Occidental is responsible for OCP construction, and in February 2002, the company estimated it would invest \$808 million in Ecuador before 2006.¹²¹

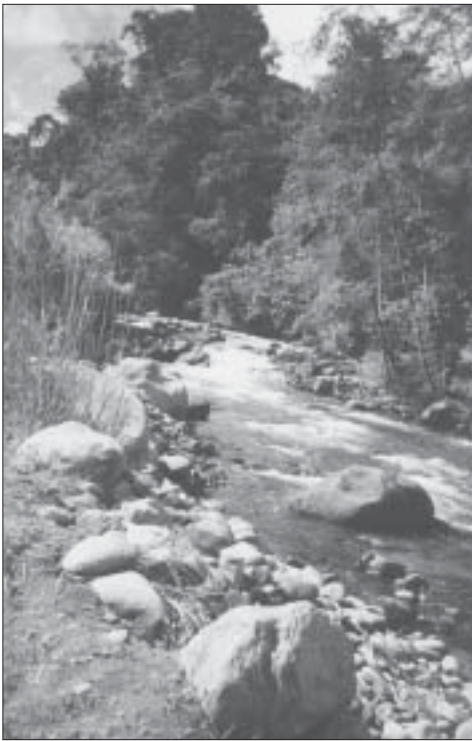
The 300-mile pipeline, originally slated for completion in 2003, will carry heavy grade crude from existing and new exploration sites in the Amazon over the Andes to a Pacific port. The project aims to double crude production and transport capacity in Ecuador to 850,000 bpd, although private companies and government officials note that reaching full capacity will not be possible for years. However, with new finds and internal demand fairly stable, a good portion of the production increase resulting from the OCP would be available for export, primarily to the United States and Japan.¹²² Moreover, OCP construction is expected to draw approximately \$3 billion in total foreign investment.¹²³ Under International Monetary Fund conditioning, an estimated 70-80 percent of receipts from the pipeline will be placed in a fund to support payment of Ecuador's \$15 billion foreign debt.¹²⁴ In addition to the OCP, Ecuador is seeking private sector partners to exploit the huge, heavy crude, 1.4 – 2.0 billion barrel Ishpingo-Tamococho-Tiputini oil field in the eastern Orellana province, discovered in 2002.¹²⁵



WITNESS FOR PEACE

One of Caño Limón's production facilities.

The trend toward militarization, while still nascent in Ecuador, resembles events in Colombia. Sixteen private oil companies operating in Ecuador and Petroecuador arranged a deal under which they can pay the military for protection.



The new pipeline's route crosses 45 km of Ecuadorian countryside where there are high risks of pipeline ruptures more than once per year due to geological instability. This photograph shows one such area that the new pipeline will cross through, the Mindo cloud forest bioserve.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to disentangle oil from the country's conflict. Oil, like other material resources such as coca, is one of the elements driving the violence, and the United States, by betting on Colombian oil, has stepped into the heart of the war.

Social protests have increased in tandem with these new investments, particularly by peasants, villagers, and indigenous people contesting the expansion and terms of oil development projects in the region housing the OCP. From its inception, environmentalists have fought the project, citing its threat to the Mindo-Nambillo Nature Reserve and other protected areas the pipeline traverses. Mindo alone is home to 450 bird species. Area inhabitants and environmentalists frequently blockaded the construction of the HCP. In February 2002, for example, local authorities, peasants and indigenous representatives paralysed oil production and pipeline construction in Sucumbios and Orellana for two weeks. They were demanding \$10 million in social investments and reparations for environmental harm from the HCP consortium. They also pressured the government to upgrade local infrastructure. President Gustavo Noboa declared a state of emergency to confront the strikes: At least one protestor was killed in ensuing clashes with anti-riot forces.¹²⁶

Local militarization has been accompanied by broader national security arrangements related to oil, and by an increase in U.S. military aid to Ecuador as part of a regional version of Plan Colombia, the Andean Counterdrug Initiative. This trend toward militarization, while still nascent in Ecuador, resembles events in Colombia. In August 2001, an industry monitor stated, "in a bid to improve security in areas bordering Colombia," sixteen private oil companies operating in Ecuador and Petroecuador "arranged a deal under which they can pay the military for protection."¹²⁷

Conclusion

The Colombian pipeline protection program marks a new rhetorical and practical approach to U.S. involvement in the Andean region, under which the protection of strategic resources combines with anti-narcotics and anti-terrorism objectives to legitimize an expanded U.S. military presence.¹²⁸ The emerging focus on battling terrorism and securing strategic resources is troubling because, among other reasons, it largely disregards the communities most affected by militarization. In the words of Arauca mayor Jorge Cedeño, "How is it that they are bringing in troops for oil and the rest of the country — nothing? It seems that the U.S. government is interested in taking oil, and that's it."¹²⁹ Maj. Julio Burgos of the 18th Brigade says, "The United States is interested in oil the same way it interests any other country in the world. There is a U.S. company that has its interests in this country. The United States is defending its interests."¹³⁰

At the same time, the complexities of Colombia's conflict, and the pivotal role oil plays in that conflict, have been overshadowed by anti-terrorist rhetoric in Washington and Bogotá. The United States is willfully becoming a protagonist in Colombia's war, and the costs for both countries will be human as well as financial. What started as an open-ended but drug-centered Plan Colombia under President Bill Clinton has been transformed by the Bush Administration into an ever more sprawling mission that lacks clearly defined goals, a definition of success, or an exit strategy. The State Department increasingly argues that its goal is to provide security for all Colombians, and that protecting the Caño Limón pipeline is part of an integrated package that includes aerial fumigation of coca and poppy, as well as counter-insurgency assistance in order to bring about a safe and stable Colombia. Despite congressional requests for more transparency, it is unclear how much money will be spent or how many years the mission will take.¹³¹

Such a loosely-defined mission, however, is exactly what some Colombian government officials prefer, in the hopes that the United States will solve Colombia's historic social and political problems with heavy doses of military aid. According to Vice-President Francisco Santos, "an exit strategy now is a disaster strategy. The only sure thing is that without U.S. help we will not win."¹³² Even with U.S. support, however, the conflict has only intensified and the geographic foci of U.S. operations have become particularly dangerous places to live. Instead of calming Arauca, U.S. military assistance has apparently contributed to the region's mounting levels of violence. As the guerrillas have aggressively resisted the presence of U.S. military advisors and the Colombian government has created Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones precisely where the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline begins and ends, it is becoming increasingly difficult to disentangle oil from the country's conflict. Oil, like other material resources such as coca, is one of the elements driving the violence, and the United States, by betting on Colombian oil, has stepped into the heart of the war. The course of action taken now in Colombia will limit the options available to policymakers in the future.

There is evidence to suggest that many of Plan Colombia's operational details were guided by private financial interests, such as those of weapons manufacturers.¹³³ Now that the U.S. mission in Colombia has expanded beyond fighting drugs to include protecting Occidental's infrastructure, one must ask which of Colombia's 338 priority sites U.S. taxpayers will be asked to protect next, and who will benefit from such protection. By paying guerrillas in order to operate in territory the guerrillas control, Occidental has helped finance an organization that Washington has long regarded as the biggest terrorist threat in Latin America. Yet, Washington's pipeline assistance amounts to a subsidy of at least \$3.70 per barrel for Occidental.¹³⁴ Meanwhile, ordinary Colombians continue to suffer the brunt of the violence in a war that seems to have no end.

Notes

- ¹ The initiative is financed through the 2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 107-206) and the fiscal year 2003 Omnibus Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-7).
- ² T. Christian Miller, "Blood Spills to Keep Oil Wealth Flowing," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September, 2002.
- ³ Juanita León, "La reconquista de Arauca," *Semana*, 3 February, 2003.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*; "Carro bomba en Tame (Arauca) deja seis soldados y un civil muertos, así como ocho heridos," *El Tiempo*, 27 January, 2003.
- ⁵ "U.S. Special Forces to Arrive in January," *Reuters*, 29 October, 2002.
- ⁶ Juan Forero, "New Role for U.S. in Colombia: Protecting a Vital Oil Pipeline," *New York Times*, 4 October, 2002.
- ⁷ Linda Robinson, "Warrior Class: Why Special Forces are America's Tool of Choice in Colombia and Around the Globe," *U.S. News and World Report*, 10 February, 2003.
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- ⁹ Frances Robles, "U.S. Trains Colombians to Protect Oil Pipeline," *Miami Herald*, 13 December, 2002.
- ¹⁰ Vanessa Arrington, "U.S. Envoy Greets Forces in Colombia," *Associated Press*, 18 January, 2003.
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- ¹² Juan Forero, "New Role for U.S. in Colombia: Protecting a Vital Oil Pipeline," *New York Times*, 4 October, 2002.
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- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
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- ¹⁹ David Adams, "Reclaiming Rural Colombia," *Saint Petersburg Times*, 6 April, 2003.
- ²⁰ Steven Dudley, "War in Colombia's Oil fields," *The Nation*, 5/12 August, 2002.
- ²¹ T. Christian Miller, "Incidents May Link Colombian Army to Paramilitary Squads," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September, 2002; "The Real Costs of Pipeline Protection in Colombia: Corporate Welfare With Deadly Consequences," A Witness for Peace Report from Arauca, July 2002; Amnesty International, "Colombia: Security at What Cost? The Government's Failure to Confront the Human Rights Crisis," December 2002.

Now that the U.S. mission to Colombia has expanded beyond fighting drugs to include protecting Occidental's infrastructure, one must ask which of Colombia's 338 priority sites U.S. taxpayers will be asked to protect next, and who will benefit from such protection.

- ²² Garry M. Leech, "The Battle for Colombia's 'Little Sarajevo.'" *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol.36, No. 5, March/April 2003.
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- ²⁵ T. Christian Miller, "Blood Spills to Keep Oil Wealth Flowing," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September, 2002.
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- ³⁵ Clara Inés Rueda, "E.U. cuidará sus intereses en Colombia," *El Tiempo*, 10 February, 2002.
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- ⁵⁸ See the United States Energy Information Administration, www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/colombia.html.
- ⁵⁹ United States Department of Energy, Office of Fossil Energy, <http://www.fossil.energy.gov/international/colbover.html>. Ecopetrol calculates the country's reserves at 47 million barrels, an amount 30 times high than current production levels. See "El milagro?," *Revista Cambio*, 18 October, 2002.
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The *Colombia Monitor* is part of WOLA's "Drugs, Democracy and Human Rights" project, which began in 2001. The project examines the impact of the drug trade and U.S. international counter-narcotics policy on human rights and the consolidation of democracy throughout Latin American and the Caribbean. Looking at both producer and transit countries, researchers from Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico and Central America will document and analyze a number of themes, including:

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