



WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 10, 2005
TO: Foreign Policy Aides – Appropriations
RE: FY2006 Appropriations for Colombia

RETHINKING PLAN COLOMBIA: AS DRUG CONTROL POLICY, PLAN COLOMBIA DOESN'T MEASURE UP

From FY2000 through FY2005, the United States invested \$4 billion in Plan Colombia and its successor programs. For FY2006, the Bush administration has requested \$553 million in aid to Colombia under the Andean Counterdrug Initiative (ACI) and the Foreign Military Financing program (FMF), with another \$150 million or more expected through the Defense appropriation. A primary U.S. objective for Plan Colombia has been to prevent the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. Aerial spraying of herbicides on Colombia's coca crops has been the centerpiece of the U.S. strategy to curb drug production. The Colombian government has recently requested an additional \$130 million in U.S. funding for the spray program.

Bush administration officials and many in Congress portray Plan Colombia as a great success. But before Congress sinks even more money into the same strategy, these claims of success should be examined with care. Drug control was the major impetus for Plan Colombia at its inception in the year 2000, and congressional expectations that the strategy would eventually deliver strong drug control results have sustained years of bipartisan support and robust funding. But what has Plan Colombia actually achieved in terms of basic U.S. drug control objectives? Unfortunately, the U.S. government's own data provide stark evidence that Plan Colombia has been an expensive drug control failure.

- **Aerial spraying is not deterring new coca cultivation, only spreading it further throughout Colombia.** Despite a record number of hectares sprayed in 2004, estimated net coca cultivation was unchanged from 2003. According to CIA estimates, net coca cultivation in 2004 (114,000 hectares) was barely 7 percent lower than in 1999 (122,500 hectares), before Plan Colombia began. Even more tellingly, the estimated total area under coca cultivation (hectares eradicated plus hectares remaining) was 36 percent *higher* in 2004 than in 2000. As Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) Director John Walters has acknowledged, in 2004 “coca growers re-planted and reconstituted their crops faster than we have seen them do in the past.”¹
- **Cocaine remains readily available on U.S. streets, at lower prices than ever, and levels of use are stable, if not rising.** The rationale for supply-side strategies like aerial spraying is that they will reduce the consumption of cocaine and heroin in the United States by curbing availability and driving up prices. For some time, Bush administration officials have been predicting imminent success on this score. But such predictions have not been borne out. On the contrary—cocaine is reported to be even more accessible, prices have continued to fall, and use among high school students has increased.

- **Availability.** According to the Justice Department’s February 2005 *National Drug Threat Assessment*, “Key indicators of domestic cocaine availability show stable or slightly increased availability in drug markets throughout the country... Heroin is readily available in most major metropolitan areas ... and heroin availability continues to increase in rural and suburban areas.”²
- **Price and purity.** Released by ONDCP in February 2005, the most recent price and purity data (through mid-year 2003) show U.S. wholesale and retail prices for cocaine and heroin to be at or near their all-time lows, with purity at or near historic highs.³ The new data provide the first look at prices and purity since Plan Colombia began in 2000. Since the explicit objective of U.S. policy is to drive up the retail price of cocaine, and since U.S. officials have been predicting that Plan Colombia will soon achieve exactly that, it bears emphasis that the street price of cocaine fell by nearly a third between the first half of 2000 and the first half of 2003.
- **Use.** According to the *Monitoring the Future* survey of student drug use, current (past-30 day) use of cocaine and heroin among 10th and 12th graders was higher in 2004 than in 2001.⁴ The 2003 *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (NSDUH) reported 13 percent and 7 percent increases over 2002 in the numbers of current cocaine users and crack users, respectively.⁵ The NSDUH also found there to have been two-thirds more first-time cocaine users in 2002 than in 1993, and 90 percent more first-time heroin users.

Upon sending the Administration’s FY2006 budget to Congress, President Bush admonished that “Taxpayers in America don’t want us spending their money on something that’s not achieving results.”⁶ The President’s 2005 *National Drug Control Strategy* declares itself to be focused on “achieving a single goal—reducing drug use.” According to the *Strategy*, “programs and efforts that do not reduce drug use must be restructured or eliminated.”⁷ In considering whether to continue high levels of funding for Plan Colombia, Congress should heed the President’s words. The evidence is in, and Plan Colombia has proven an expensive drug control failure.

For further information, please contact:
John Walsh, Senior Associate for the Andes and Drug Policy
(202) 797-2171

¹ John P. Walters, Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), “The Andes: Institutionalizing Success,” testimony before the House Committee on International Relations, May 11, 2005.

² U.S. Department of Justice, *National Drug Threat Assessment, 2005*, February 2005.

³ ONDCP, *The Price and Purity of Illicit Drugs: 1981 Through the Second Quarter of 2003*, November 2004. (Note: While the report is dated November 2004, ONDCP did not actually release it until late February 2005.)

⁴ Data tables available at Monitoring the Future website at www.monitoringthefuture.org

⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Results from the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*, September 2004.

⁶ President George W. Bush quoted in *The American Prospect*, March 2005, p. 7.

⁷ ONDCP, *National Drug Control Strategy*, February 2005.