



## Department of Social Development and World Peace Office of International Justice and Peace

### Background on Colombia February 2007

*My attention is focused in a special way on certain individual countries—notably Colombia, where the long internal conflict has provoked a humanitarian crisis, especially as far as displaced persons are concerned. Every effort must be made to bring peace to the country, to return to families their loved ones who have been kidnapped, to restore security and normal life for millions of people. Such signs will give confidence to everyone, including those who have been implicated in the armed struggle.*

--Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 8, 2007

**The Issue:** Colombia continues to experience one of the worst human rights crises in the world. The current conflict is rooted in a long history of extreme inequality and political exclusion, though it has intensified dramatically in recent years due in part to the infusion of drug-related profits that many of the armed actors currently receive.

Illegal armed actors, including the FARC and ELN guerilla groups and the nominally demobilized paramilitary combatants (AUC), continue to be responsible for significant levels of violence against the civilian population each year. Colombia has the second highest number of internally displaced persons in the world. It is increasingly recognized that displacement is intimately linked to strategies of depopulation and subsequent concentration of land and resources.

Colombia is the country from which 80% of the cocaine in the U.S. comes, as well as most of the heroin on the East Coast. It is one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid, an aid package that has been excessively tilted toward anti-narcotics and counter-insurgency strategies.

Colombia has become one the most dangerous places for human rights workers, journalists, union leaders and church workers. In the last decade some 60 Catholic representatives, including bishops, priests, nuns and seminarians, and even higher numbers of Protestant workers, have been killed.

There has been little progress toward ending widespread impunity for human rights abusers. The State Department calls impunity the “greatest challenge to the credibility of the Government’s commitment to human rights.” Criminal investigations and prosecutions of military personnel are exceedingly rare. Not a single high-ranking officer has been convicted of a human rights offense. According to the U.N., there were no actions “by the Minister of Defense to suspend personnel as a preventive measure in cases of grave human rights violations.”

**U.S. Aid:** U.S. aid to “Plan Colombia” was originally approved in 2000 as a six-year plan primarily dedicated to military support (80%) for counter-narcotics activities. The remaining funds were for alternative development, judicial reform, and aid to the internally displaced. The centerpiece of the U.S. aid was an anti-narcotics program to create and train new battalions, providing helicopters and intelligence aid, and relying on widespread fumigation as the principal means for eradicating coca. From 2000-2005, \$4 billion in U.S. aid has been provided, with \$3.2 billion dedicated to the security forces. Congress approved \$734.5 million for the overall Andean Counternarcotics Initiative in FY06. For FY07, the Administration request is for \$755.9 million with Congress calling for more.

A new area of concern is the paramilitary demobilization process. Although demobilization of armed actors is an important goal, the recent demobilization process with the AUC paramilitaries has occurred under a noticeably weak legal framework that does little to dismantle the paramilitaries or address impunity by those responsible for human rights violations and massacres, and is unlikely to be able to provide real compensation for the victims of the conflict. The U.S. Congress approved \$20 million to fund the paramilitary demobilization in Colombia in FY06. The Administration plans to take the \$20 million in aid for the demobilization out of the limited social aid for Colombia, including the aid for alternative development and possibly aid for the internally displaced.

**USCCB Position:** Since the spring of 2000, USCCB has stressed that U.S. aid should (1) strike an essential balance between assistance to the armed forces and aid that more directly addresses the root causes of the conflict and assists the victims; (2) condition all aid on human rights criteria; (3) provide major support for programs that advance the peace process, including (4) alternative development, (5) judicial reform, and (6) humanitarian aid to the displaced.

**USCCB urges the U.S. Government to:**

**Include basic standards for the protection of human rights in all aid programs.** Particular importance should be given this year to monitoring the impact of the paramilitary demobilization and re-integration process, to ensure strict application of the recently developed (Human Rights) conditions on U.S. aid for this process.

**Support multi-lateral efforts to bolster a negotiated, political path towards peace.** The Colombian Bishops have repeatedly emphasized the importance of continuing on the path to a negotiated peace process as the only viable long-term strategy for resolving the conflict. A small proportion of U.S. aid is dedicated to peace-building initiatives and the U.S. has not shown demonstrable support for U.N. and multi-national efforts to support national peace processes. An effort should be made to achieve a politically negotiated peace process with civil society participation.

**Increase development and humanitarian aid to Colombia.** Assistance to the internally displaced should be increased and its impact well documented. The U.S. can make a significant positive contribution to long-term peace and stability in Colombia by shifting the focus of its foreign aid toward greater emphasis on effective social development. Additionally, aid to the internally displaced is one of the most positive elements of the U.S. funds allocated to Colombia and it is greatly needed. These funds are a small percentage of overall U.S. aid and have been decreasing each year.

**Phase out aerial fumigation, and increase appropriate alternative development.** The Colombian Bishops have stated their clear opposition to fumigation. There are ongoing reports of legal food crops and livestock destroyed, water source contamination and increases in health problems. Many farmers who were fumigated and not provided either emergency food aid or crop substitution programs have either joined the ranks of the internally displaced or in some cases moved to neighboring provinces to grow illicit crops once more.

**Resources:** Statements (11/02) (3/02) (2/02) (3/00) and letters (3/02) (7/99) (1/99) can be found at <http://usccb.org/sdwp/international/latinamerica/colombia.htm>. See also the “CRS in Solidarity with Colombia” link at <http://www.catholicrelief.org/where/Colombia/index.cfm>. **For further information:** Tom Quigley 202-541-3184 (ph); 202-541-3339 (fax); [tquigley@usccb.org](mailto:tquigley@usccb.org)