

Plan Colombia - Six Years Later

Report of a CIP staff visit to Putumayo and Medellín, Colombia

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In July 2000, Bill Clinton signed into law a bill appropriating nearly a billion dollars for Colombia, most of it aid to Colombia's military and police. In the six years that followed, only Iraq, Israel, Afghanistan and Egypt have received more aid from the United States.

The Bush administration enthusiastically continued this aid for "Plan Colombia," a multi-year counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism and development program. U.S. aid to Colombia since 2000 now totals \$4.7 billion. Over eighty percent of that amount - \$3.8 billion, or \$1.5 million per day - has gone to the Colombian security forces for weapons, helicopters, planes, boats, combat equipment, training, advice, intelligence, and the spraying of herbicides over 2 million acres of Colombian territory. The remaining 20 percent has supported rural development, judicial reform, human rights, and assistance to some of the millions of Colombians forced from their homes by a decades-long, bloody conflict.

Since 2002, U.S. aid has supported a government in Bogotá led by Álvaro Uribe, a fervent believer in military force and free markets as the antidotes to Colombia's related ills of poverty, violence, narco-trafficking, weak governance and impunity. Uribe's "Democratic Security" strategy has complemented Plan Colombia with a sharp rise in military spending and a greatly increased deployment of troops and police throughout the national territory. Uribe has also conducted negotiations with pro-government paramilitary militias, seeking the demobilization of wealthy, powerful warlords with strong ties to the

military, large landholders, and the drug trade.

The U.S. and Colombian governments don't hold back when praising this convergence of "Plan Colombia" and "Democratic Security." In June, the Republican-controlled House Appropriations Committee hailed "the successes of Plan Colombia and the measurable improvements that have resulted in the everyday lives of the Colombian people. Some have declared Colombia the 'greatest success story in Latin



With U.S. support, the military presence in Putumayo has increased, but social investment lags behind. As a result, security has improved only slightly.





President Álvaro Uribe.

America.” Nicholas Burns, the State Department’s number-three official, wrote in an April *Miami Herald* op-ed, “The United States’ investment in Colombia is paying off. Colombia is clearly a better place than it was before we embarked on our joint

undertaking to win Colombia back from the criminal gangs that were destroying the country.”

Sweeping statements like these, especially when made by officials evaluating their own programs, cry out for independent verification. In fact, a closer look quickly reveals that the real picture is mixed at best. While violence levels have improved in much of the country, in many key respects - illegal drug production, impunity for abuse and corruption, the weakness of non-military institutions, the power of paramilitary criminals - the extent of failure is alarming.

The Center for International Policy has closely monitored U.S. policy toward Colombia since the late 1990s. This monitoring has included frequent visits to regions that directly feel the impact of both U.S. initiatives and the Colombian government’s U.S.-supported security policies.

This report presents the main findings of our most recent monitoring visit, in July 2006, exactly six years after the “Plan Colombia” aid package became law. The author traveled to Putumayo, the remote rural region where “Plan Colombia” got started, and to Medellín, Colombia’s second-largest city, where the best and worst aspects of the Uribe government’s security strategy are vividly on display.

I. An Update from Plan Colombia’s “Ground Zero”

This was the third visit of CIP staff since 2001 to Putumayo, a small jungle department (province) in Colombia’s far south, along the border with Ecuador. During this period, we have also traveled near Putumayo, once to the Ecuadorian side of the international border, and once to a meeting of Putumayo community leaders just over the departmental border in eastern Nariño.

We keep coming back to Putumayo because there is no better place to gauge the impact – the success or failure – of U.S. policy in Colombia.

This province of perhaps 350,000 people is where “Plan Colombia,” the major escalation of U.S. military assistance that essentially continues today, got its start back in 2000-

2001. At that time, Putumayo had far more coca (the plant used to make cocaine) than any of Colombia’s 32 departments. It also had a strong presence of guerrillas from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), while its principal towns were being methodically, brutally taken over by paramilitaries.

Putumayo was the focus of a military “Push to the South” that lay at the heart of the Clinton administration’s big 2000 aid package. Supported by U.S. funds, trainers and contractors, a new Colombian Army Counter-Narcotics Brigade, bristling with helicopters, would clear Putumayo’s coca-growing zones of armed groups. Augmented counter-narcotics police would vastly increase their campaign of fumigating the coca fields with herbicides sprayed from aircraft. In their wake would come alternative-development programs to help Putumayo’s farmers participate in the legal economy.

Six years and many hundreds of millions of dollars later, did the strategy work in Putumayo?

Though there are a few bright spots, the answer is clearly “no.” Like much else in Colombia, the results in Putumayo tell us that the strategy needs to be very long-term, must consult closely with local leaders and organizations, and must abandon its narrow emphasis on military operations and fu-



Putumayo, in Colombia’s southwest, is where Plan Colombia got started in 2000.

migration. By all appearances, though, these lessons haven't come close to sinking in.

A series of observations follows, based on a three-day late July visit to the municipalities of Puerto Asís, Orito and La Hormiga.

The security situation appeared to be better than in past visits, though levels of security in Putumayo tend to oscillate wildly between relative safety and extreme danger. Right now, travel along main roads is possible, while the likelihood of running into guerrillas is considered to be low. Road travel at night is still inadvisable, though doable.

This owes in part to Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, who ordered an enlarged military to increase its presence along previously abandoned main roads, population centers, and vulnerable infrastructure sites. We passed through more army and police checkpoints than on earlier visits, and the security forces' presence was greater in general. Small contingents of soldiers were regularly stationed at key energy and transportation sites, including the rebuilt bridge over the Guamués River, which the FARC had blown up before CIP's last visit in 2004 (we had to board a canoe to get across). Many of the soldiers and police we saw were clearly from elite units, judging from their physical size and the quality of their equipment. (The soldiers who patted us down at checkpoints, however, were generally smaller and younger.)

New police stations had been established in some small towns along the main road. Also notable, especially in the oil-producing town of Orito, was the presence of troops from a new energy and road infrastructure-protection army brigade. Soldiers and police in many posts sat behind bags of cement piled high into walls, a bulletproof defense (known as *trincheras*) that resembled preparations for a flood.

Though we've never run into uniformed guerrillas on any of our visits to Putumayo, one usually sees ample evidence of their presence. Guerrilla graffiti – once so common that it was even spray-painted on the sides of tractor-trailers that had passed through FARC roadblocks – was faded, when visible at all.

Much more visible, though, were scars from the last flare-up of guerrilla violence in Putumayo, at the beginning of this year in the run-up to March legislative elections. A guerrilla “armed stoppage” (*paro armado*) halted road traffic between towns for weeks, causing shortages, while attacks on power lines left much of Putumayo in the dark. Along the



A burned tree and a pool of sludge show where the FARC guerrillas recently bombed the local oil pipeline.

main road we saw burned patches from trucks that the guerrillas set afire for disobeying the stoppage. As on previous visits, blackened vegetation and pools of sludge indicated places where the guerrillas had recently blown holes in the oil pipeline that follows the main road for much of its length.

Episodes of increased guerrilla activity, several local leaders said,

were still common and could happen at any time. One likely reason was that a U.S.-supported military offensive immediately to the north of Putumayo, a two-year-old effort known as “*Plan Patriota*,” had forced many guerrillas to relocate, increasing their numbers particularly in border departments like Putumayo, Nariño, Vaupés and Norte de Santander. By all accounts, the guerrillas' grip on Putumayo's rural zones – the majority of the department's territory, away from the principal towns, the main road and the most-traveled rivers – was unchanged, if not stronger.

While the frequency of FARC attacks in the department was reduced and limited to more remote areas, their intensity when they do occur has been greater. Body counts per at-

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Putumayo's White Elephant, or How Not to Win Hearts and Minds

While driving through Putumayo, our group decided to branch off the main road and pay a quick visit to Orito, the main town in the municipality (county) of the same name. We had heard that one of the largest projects funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in Putumayo, an animal-food concentrates processing plant in the town, was having some difficulties, and we wanted to find out what was going on.

The plant's concept appeared to make sense: take crops that are easily grown in Putumayo, like yuca and corn, and turn them into food for cows, pigs, chickens and other livestock. USAID and its contractors helped to set up a publicly traded company to run the plant and invested over \$2 million to build the facility, buy machinery and perform studies (feasibility, environmental impact, etc.).

This high-profile project, it was hoped, would help wean thousands of Putumayo's farmers away from coca-growing, while turning a profit for its shareholders. It greatly raised expectations among a population battered by massive coca cultivation, relentless fumigation, chronic government neglect and constant violence at the hands of illegal armed groups.

We found the concentrates plant easily enough, as it was located right next to Orito's oil refinery and the base of the army's energy-infrastructure protection battalion. It is a great-looking facility, modern and clean, with intricate machinery, a cafeteria, meeting spaces, and a big plaque thanking USAID for making the whole thing possible.

Everything looked great, except the whole scene was strangely quiet. The expensive-looking machinery was idle. There were no animal-feed concentrates, yuca or corn to be seen anywhere. The plant was not functioning.

The big building was not empty, though. About forty people were using it as a meeting space. When we arrived, several had gathered for a job-training workshop. Others, including two Orito council members, were assembled elsewhere in the building. When they saw us arrive, all stopped what they were doing and gathered around us – and especially CIP's representative, the lone U.S. citizen in the group.

Once we explained that we were not from the U.S. government, but independent investigators trying to figure out what happened, everyone started talking at once. We were hit by a wave of anger and frustration. Things soon calmed down,

and we tried to take notes as quickly as we could. This is more or less what the residents of Orito told us.

1. The concentrates plant cost about 6 billion pesos (US\$2.5 million) to establish. It opened in late 2003 and shut its doors in mid-2005. There are no plans to re-open it. The plant's machinery is already being sold off, and some had already been carted away. Those who had been convinced to invest in the plant had lost money.
2. The main reason the concentrates plant failed was a lack of inputs. Nobody wanted to sell it yuca or corn because it offered to buy it at prices considered to be ridiculously low.

The plant offered to pay 120,000 pesos – about US\$50 – for a ton of yuca. That means 5 U.S. cents per kilo or 2.2 cents per pound. The same kilo of yuca could be sold in local produce markets for about eight times as much money. We were told that the cost of renting a vehicle and transporting that ton of yuca through roadless Putumayo to the processing plant would eat up more than one-third of those 120,000 pesos.

It made no sense for local farmers to sell yuca or corn to the concentrates plant, when they were guaranteed to lose money at the prices offered. The plant's managers apparently took a "take it or leave it" attitude, not budging on the price (and it is possible that they could not make money at a higher price). The farmers, of course, were happy to "leave it," selling yuca at better prices elsewhere, or braving the U.S.-funded herbicide fumigations and re-planting coca.

3. The plant was plagued by other problems that should have been foreseen. The machinery, most of which was apparently used and refurbished, never worked at anywhere near top efficiency. Storage of yuca and seeds was a problem in Orito's very humid climate.
4. Those with whom we spoke wondered how the idea of a concentrates plant was chosen, alleging that the community was never consulted. Others wondered why it was located in oil-producing Orito, when better soils for growing yuca and corn were located in municipalities about an hour's drive to the south.

Since 2000, U.S.-funded planes have sprayed herbicides

over 155,534 hectares (about 390,000 acres) of Putumayo, making it the second most-fumigated of Colombia's thirty-two departments during this period. The "stick" of fumigation has been strong and swift, but the "carrot" of development aid has not only been smaller – only 20 percent of U.S. aid to Colombia is non-military – but it has been slower to arrive, haphazardly planned, and has largely failed to improve lives and livelihoods. "Orito today is in its worst economic crisis," a councilmember told us.

Our experience in Orito was made possible by one of the most frustrating aspects of watching U.S. policy unfold in Colombia over the past several years: its systematic undervaluing and neglect of all things non-military.

For planners of U.S. assistance to Colombia, non-military programs have always been an afterthought. Four out of five dollars in U.S. aid goes to Colombia's armed forces, police, and fumigation program. Policymakers have placed a far lower priority on the rest of the aid, which supports governance and development.

Too often, these funds go to programs that are improvised, uncoordinated, left entirely up to contractors, carry high overhead costs, and appear to ignore completely the lessons of similar programs attempted elsewhere. Oversight is weak, dubious claims of success go unquestioned, and higher-level officials show little interest. It is easy to get the impression – false or not – that nobody in charge of these projects cares whether they succeed: the point is to spend the money and demonstrate that an objective was fulfilled. The Orito concentrates plant is a perfect example.

It is not news that progress will be only temporary until Colombians who live in depressed rural areas like Orito – a minority of the population living in the majority of the country's territory – can trust their government to protect them, to enforce laws and to make a functioning legal economy possible. Counter-insurgency experts always insist that "the people are the center of gravity."

But in Orito, Putumayo – right in the middle of one of the main battlegrounds for the Colombian government's U.S.-aided counter-insurgency effort – the people we talked to are very angry. The angrier and more distrustful they get, the more likely it is that even the small security gains that the Uribe government has achieved in Putumayo will be reversed.



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tack have been much higher and damage to infrastructure has been more costly. Just before we arrived, guerrillas had kidnapped thirteen medical personnel in the rural zone of Puerto Asís municipality, eventually releasing all but one of them. While we were present, combat was taking place along the Ecuadorian border; one night in La Hormiga we could hear the periodic soft thud of what sounded like mortar rounds going off many miles away to the south.

For the most part, we heard few strong complaints about the increased military and police presence in Putumayo. Nobody with whom we spoke denounced cases of serious abuse or large-scale corruption at the hands of police or soldiers, with the exception of some instances of rough treatment or disrespectful language.

Two issues, though, require attention. First, several indigenous leaders expressed concern about the recent construction of a military installation, part of the government's larger Center for Attention to the Border Zone (CENAF), on land belonging to an indigenous reserve in San Miguel municipality. We heard numerous complaints about the way in which it was installed, with a refusal to dialogue and a flat insistence on national security priorities and the government's right to be present wherever it wishes. We also heard concerns that the CENAF facility leaves the indigenous reserve more vulnerable than ever to guerrilla attack.

The other issue was a general consensus that military and



Plots of coca are smaller and harder to spot, but still visible from the main road.

police efforts against “former” paramilitaries in Putumayo are still minimal to nonexistent. Since 1999, paramilitaries – well-funded, well-organized rightist death squads that have a history of working with the armed forces – have dominated Putumayo’s main towns and vied with the FARC for income from coca cultivation and processing. They have maintained this dominance by exercising brutality (first massacres, then selective killings and “social cleansing” that continue today), providing security for residents and businesses in the towns, and enjoying a nearly complete absence of opposition from the security forces.



Carlos Mario Jiménez, alias “Macaco.”

At some point around 2002 or 2003, the Putumayo paramilitaries’ leadership shifted from Carlos Castaño’s Córdoba and Urabá Self-Defense Groups (ACCU), which claimed to seek less involvement in the drug trade, to the powerful Central Bolívar Bloc (BCB), which actively sought narco funding. The BCB officially demobilized early this year, one of the last paramilitary blocs to undergo this formal step as part of a negotiated settlement with the government.

However, the BCB’s Putumayo branch appears to have continued its activities with few changes. It still disputes control over drugs and territory with the guerrillas, and continues to carry out selective killings on a near-daily basis. “Macaco’s guys are still everywhere,” said one interviewee, referring to the BCB’s most feared – if not most visible – leader, who once worked in Putumayo buying coca for drug cartels.

While this was the first time that we visited Putumayo without seeing uniformed paramilitaries, their plainclothes presence was still in evidence. “Paraco,” mouthed a colleague as we sat in a Puerto Asís restaurant, nodding nervously toward two men passing slowly by on a motorcycle.

“Few notice that the young people in the high schools of Puerto Asís [Putumayo’s largest city] keep disappearing before the sad eyes of their friends,” Efrén Piña, an investigator at the Bogotá-based hu-

man-rights group CINEP, wrote in October. “They march in the streets to denounce their absence, but nobody listens to them. Because it doesn’t matter either that three or four people die every day in La Hormiga, for reasons that everyone knows but nobody says out loud.”

A few miles north of Puerto Asís, close to the large military base in the crossroads town of Santana, sits “Villa Sandra,” a large compound with a big house, a pond and recreational facilities. Six years ago, during the paramilitaries’ bloody takeover of Putumayo’s town centers, and then during the beginning of Plan Colombia’s execution, Villa Sandra was the paramilitaries’ center of operations. Everyone in Puerto Asís – except, apparently, the military and police – knew that the *paras* were headquartered there, and that many who were forcibly brought there never left the premises.

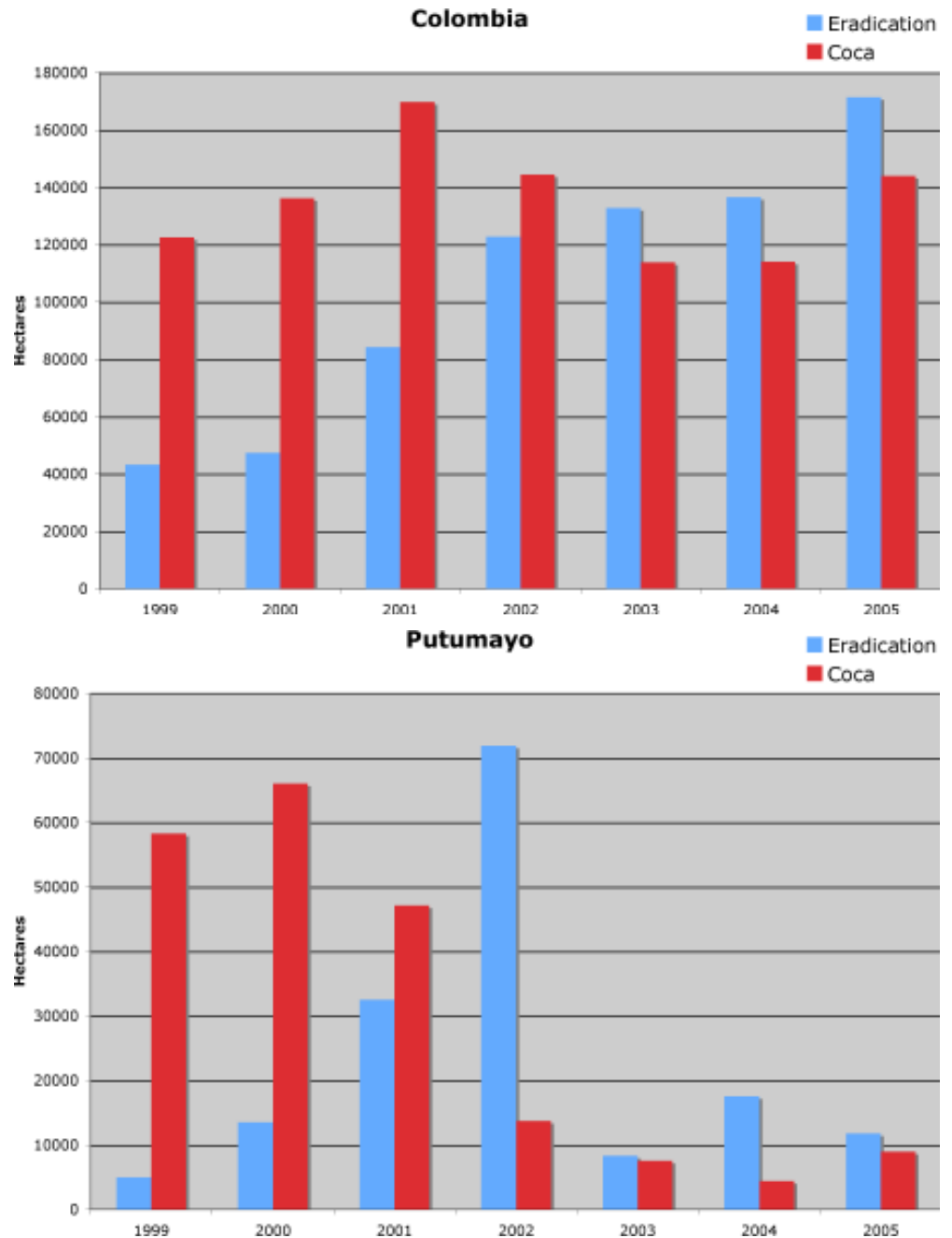
During our 2001 visit to Putumayo, Villa Sandra was very much in use. When we returned in 2004, it was abandoned, and remains so now, its facilities in evident disrepair behind a high chain-link fence. Many in Putumayo believe that an inspection of the compound’s grounds would reveal much about the paramilitaries’ activities in the zone – including, in some likelihood, mass graves. That Villa Sandra remains untouched and uninvestigated is eloquent evidence of the paramilitaries’ continued influence over Putumayo, despite the recent demobilizations.

In October 2006, a few residents of San Miguel, a municipality in southwestern Putumayo across from Ecuador, dared to guide representatives of the Colombian attorney-general’s office to several mass graves that, they believed, held bodies of loved ones killed by the paramilitaries between 2000 and 2004. They said that while they knew about the sites, they had to stay quiet for several years for fear of ending up in graves themselves. So far, sixty-one bodies have been

unearthed, but local residents estimate that over 500 may be buried in San Miguel. That they feel they can come forward indicates that fear of Macaco’s paramilitaries may be ebbing – an important indicator of Putumayo’s security situation.

If the security situation is mixed but trending slightly better, patterns of **coca cultivation** are mixed but trending worse. When we visited Putumayo in early 2001 after Plan Colombia’s first round of spraying, the department was Colombia’s undisputed coca capital – the UN measured

Coca Cultivation and Fumigation in Colombia and Putumayo



Sources: U.S. Department of State, UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

66,000 hectares of the plant there in 2000. Coca was in abundance, with large plots easily visible from the main road, especially in the Guamués valley of southwestern Putumayo.

When we visited in April 2004, Putumayo had been hit with massive herbicide fumigation – over 125,000 hectares sprayed between 2000 and the end of 2003. Coca was no longer visible from the main road, while overgrown fields indicated where it had been before. Coca was still present – a short drive down any side road made that clear enough, where plots, most of them smaller than before and often newly planted, were easy to find – but the spray planes had deeply cut back cultivation. By the end of 2004, the UN’s satellite data found only 4,400 hectares of coca in all of Putumayo.

This stunning reduction is proving to be temporary. As coca cultivation moved to other parts of the country, particularly the neighboring department of Nariño, the spray planes and counter-narcotics brigades left Putumayo to follow it.

In the absence of better economic options, the absence of massive eradication has had a predictable result: coca is returning to Putumayo, and it is doing so quickly. The UN noted a doubling of coca cultivation in the department between 2004 and 2005 (from 4,400 to nearly 9,000 hectares), and replanting continues. What we saw in Putumayo bears this out: unlike 2004, we were once again able to spot coca cultivation from the main road, in apparent defiance of the increased military and police presence along that same road. Plots are smaller than they were in 2001, and a bit harder to see – on hillsides or even amid overgrowth – but they are definitely back. Meanwhile, prices offered for coca paste remain low – about 1.6 million pesos or US\$650 – indicating that scarcity is not a problem for buyers.



Tent city on the outskirts of Orito.



While the recent increase in coca has not been great enough to bring a return to the late-nineties gold-rush boom years, there is money in Putumayo’s economy – at least its illegal sector. The discos and boutiques in jungle boomtowns like La Hormiga and Puerto Asís remain open for business – we saw no empty storefronts, and the bars and billiard halls were overflowing in La Hormiga on Saturday night. Many people continue to be getting paid.

Writes Piña, the CINEP investigator, “In the major towns of lower Putumayo one sees ... the return of the narco-trafficking mafias of Valle del Cauca [the department that includes Cali], the drug lords who walk calmly through the streets, guarded

by “demobilized” people, impassively greeting everyone and imposing prices for the purchase of coca base.”

Times are harder for those not participating in the coca trade. Many with whom we spoke used the word “depressed” to describe the state of Putumayo’s legal economy. The reduction of coca-growing from 1999-2001 levels has meant less money circulating overall, a situation that has been compounded by a stagnation in prices offered for most legal crops.

A symptom of the department’s rural economic crisis is a notable increase in migration

from the countryside to town centers. A vivid example was on display from the road on the way into the town of Orito, where a large number of people from the county’s rural zone (800 was the estimate we heard) had just invaded a patch of land whose ownership was unclear. Living out in the open under sheets of plastic, the settlers hoped that their economic prospects would be better in the center of the oil-producing town. It was a sight one would expect to find perhaps on the outskirts of Medellín or Cali – but not Orito, a town of perhaps 25,000 people.

The state of Putumayo’s legal economy has not been helped

appreciably by the **alternative development programs** that were supposed to be the “soft” or “carrot” side of the fumigation strategy, intended to help coca-growers find new ways to make a living. It is hard to believe that the U.S. and Colombian governments have invested nearly \$60 million in Putumayo since 2000.

While some projects appear to be having success and buy-in – particularly cooperatives, assistance to indigenous communities, and specialty crops like black pepper and vanilla – the overall reaction we heard was one of frustration.

A major source of this frustration is the road network, a crucial priority if legal products are to have any hope of making it to market. Lack of roads not only adds to the isolation of communities that remain in the grip of armed groups; it makes it very difficult to get any crops to market – with the exception of coca paste, which allows several hectares’ harvest to fit in one bag.

Nearly six years after Plan Colombia began in Putumayo, even the main road between its capital, Mocoa, and its largest city, Puerto Asís – a stretch of less than 100 miles – has not been paved. The road is dirt. (However, paving is currently underway between Puerto Asís and Santana, covering about the first eight miles of the trip to Mocoa.) The segment of road that is paved, between Santana and La Dorada, was paved well before Plan Colombia began, funded by the state oil company in order to service the pipeline that runs along that section of road – and even this has deteriorated since our first visit to Putumayo. All other roads, including those leading to significant towns and villages off the main road, are unpaved and in bone-jarringly bad condition, if they exist at all.

Beyond the road network, we heard several complaints about alternative development projects’ design and management. For the most part, these concerns are common to alternative development projects – indeed, rural development efforts – all over the world. People complained that their communities were not consulted in the projects’ design, that out-

side experts unfamiliar with the region told them what crops were most promising, and were often wrong. (The bitter experience of a multimillion-dollar animal-feed plant in Orito, which opened in 2003 and closed in 2005, is an important example. See pages 4-5.) They cited a lack of help with marketing crops once they had been produced: transporting the product on the poor road network and making connections with buyers willing to pay enough for the farmer to clear a profit. Many said that credit was still impossible to come by, and even when it was available, lenders often failed to take into account that many crops take years to produce their first harvest.

Many with whom we spoke were particularly resentful of perceived layers of “middlemen” in the development assistance process.

In their view, USAID’s contractors, and their Colombian (and rarely Putumayo-based) subcontractors, have accrued the lion’s share of development assistance for themselves. Each link in the chain, they assert, has squandered resources on overhead, salaries, consultants, and in some cases petty corruption, leaving only a trickle of investment for the recipient communities.

In defense of the alter-

native development programs, those we spoke with had few concrete suggestions for alternative crops that could prosper in Putumayo – at least in the absence of decent roads, reliable security, enforceable property rights, access to credit, and much else.

However, we did hear a good deal of interest in developing a market for the many Amazon-basin fruits that Putumayo produces in abundance but are rarely available elsewhere, even elsewhere in Colombia. Products like chontaduro, lulo, manzana de agua, tomate de árbol, arazá, or uchuva could find a market in the United States, though currently a series of non-tariff barriers – particularly standards for imported produce – prevent them from entering. The domestic market is not sufficient for such fruits, which are so ubiquitous



Putumayo’s main road still awaits paving.

that they fetch only rock-bottom prices. We shared a ride with a farmer who lost a pile of money trying to grow arazá last year, only to find that the prices were laughably low. He said he was thankful that he had kept a little bit of coca to give himself a financial cushion.

While in La Hormiga, we were able to attend a day-long meeting attended by governors of indigenous reserves. Most of the twelve **indigenous nations** found in Putumayo were represented: Cofán, Inga, Pasto, Nasa, Awá, Embera, Yanacóna, and others. They had gathered to discuss Plan Colombia: how it has impacted them, what was to come and what they could do to prepare for it.

For these, the communities with the deepest roots in Putumayo, Plan Colombia is only the latest of several close encounters that have left them wary of western “modernity” and the global economy.

A century ago, Putumayo – a nearly empty zone with an almost entirely indigenous population of perhaps a few thousand – was at the center of a boom in rubber production. The mostly foreign owners of rubber plantations enslaved and terrorized the region’s indigenous people as they sought to extract the product. (A harrowing account of this period can be read in anthropologist Michael Taussig’s classic 1987 study *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*.) During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the discovery of oil led to another rush of investors and settlers. Today, Putumayo is number three among Colombia’s oil-producing departments. As in the country’s other oil zones, though, one sees little evidence of oil wealth, and plans for new drilling continue to be frequent subjects of controversy. Twenty years ago, Putumayo played host to a new export-oriented bonanza, one that brought in even more settlers from elsewhere in Colombia: the boom in coca production that persists today and continues to make the department one of Colombia’s most violent.

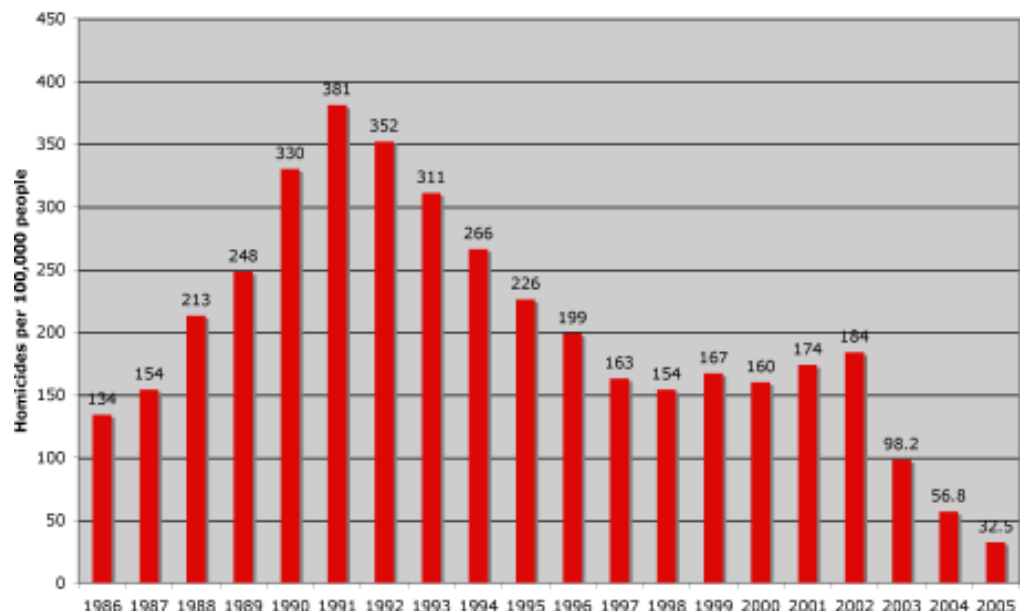
For Putumayo’s indigenous communities, each of these events has meant an influx of outsiders, theft of land, displacement from territory, and weakened social fabric and cultural traditions. It is unsurprising, then, that they discuss Plan Colombia as inseparable from

Colombia’s free trade pact with the United States (currently signed and awaiting ratification), big foreign investments – particularly in oil – and fears of massive infrastructure “megaprojects” that would evict them from their land.

The picture is more complicated than that, not least because several Putumayo indigenous communities have accepted, and benefited from, assistance through USAID-funded Plan Colombia programs. But these communities clearly fear that the “next phase” of Plan Colombia will involve “*desterritorialización*” – forced displacement from ancestral lands – in favor of foreign investment projects. The installation of the CENAF military base and recent disputes with a Canadian oil company are being viewed as harbingers of what is to come as Plan Colombia proceeds. The U.S. and Colombian governments must endeavor, through adherence to the rule of law and through non-military investments, to convince them that this is not the case.

On the trip back to the airport in Puerto Asís, our driver tuned in to the army’s radio station, which mixes popular music with public-service announcements encouraging guerrillas to desert. Flying out of Puerto Asís, it was easy to spot plots of coca carved out of Putumayo’s swiftly disappearing jungle. Also evident was the near-total isolation in which too many of the department’s citizens live. Looking east to the edge of visibility are hundreds of parcels of land gouged from the surrounding forest, most with small houses in the middle. No roads or rivers appear to penetrate anywhere near these landholdings. Pushed by a lack of opportunity elsewhere and pulled by the perverse incentives of the coca

Medellín's Homicide Rate



Source: Government of the municipality of Medellín.

economy, a small but significant portion of southern Colombia's rural population continues to live far beyond the reach of its government – with the exception of its government's spray planes.

Whether viewed from the air or from the ground, Putumayo offers abundant reminders of how much needs to be done to make citizens out of millions of marginalized Colombians. And how little Plan Colombia – with its emphasis on military force and fumigation – has helped to achieve that goal.

II. Why Is Medellín Safer?

For much of the world, Medellín is synonymous with violence. Colombia's second-largest city resides in the public consciousness as one of the most dangerous places in the world, a lawless urban nightmare dominated by drug lords, gangs and guerrillas. Tell someone from Washington that you are going to Medellín, and he or she will invariably tell you to be careful.

Yet if recent statistics are accurate, Medellín is actually safer than Washington. Last year, after three years of steeply declining violence measures, Medellín's murder rate totaled 32.5 killings for every 100,000 inhabitants. This compares favorably with U.S. cities like Washington (45), Detroit (42) and Baltimore (42). Medellín today is about as violent as Atlanta.

Everyone CIP spoke with during a few days in the city – right, left and center – was encouraged by the change. Being able to walk the streets without fear of kidnappers, the disappearance of hitmen on motorcycles, and the ability to enter any neighborhood without aggression from territorial gangs have given residents a new sense of civic pride.

They have also won high approval ratings in the city for Colombia's hard-line president, Álvaro Uribe, and Medellín's jeans-wearing, left-of-center mayor, Sergio Fajardo. (Fajardo's approval rating reached 90 percent in a recent poll by *Semana*, Colombia's most-circulated newsweekly.)

Nonetheless, those interviewed – Mayor Fajardo and members of his government, human-rights defenders, local journalists, businesspeople, demobilized paramilitaries – were less in agreement about why Medellín has become so safe in such a short time.

Many credited President Uribe's tough security policies, which have brought a greater police and military presence in the vast, lawless slums that surround the city. Many said that Medellín is more peaceful because "the paramilitaries won" – the right-wing groups ejected guerrilla-tied gangs from the slums, dominate criminal activity in the city, and are pres-

ently on their best behavior as a controversial demobilization process proceeds. Many also praised Medellín's city government, which has invested in projects in poor neighborhoods and in programs to reintegrate former paramilitary fighters and gang members.

As far as we could tell, all of the above hypotheses are correct. Uribe's "Democratic Security" strategy, the paramilitaries' uncontested dominion, and the mayor's office's programs combine in several ways – some encouraging, some sinister – to explain Medellín's "renaissance."

1. Democratic Security. The Uribe government is the first to have really sought to establish a government presence – even if a largely military-police presence – in the poor *barrios* that ring Medellín. That presence simply didn't exist before.

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, new arrivals to Medellín – many of them displaced by violence elsewhere – built their homes on the steep mountainsides that overlook the rapidly growing city to the east and west. What started out as squatter settlements of makeshift shacks grew – often with the help of guerrilla groups – into labyrinthine warrens of hand-made brick homes, steep stairways and pirated water and



Medellín, with about 2.1 million people, is Colombia's second-largest city.



Views of the Comuna 12 and 13 districts on Medellín's western edge, built on steep hills overlooking downtown.

electricity. As rural poverty and conflict-related violence pushed ever more migrants to Medellín, these neighborhoods kept growing, and today their residents make up at least half of the city's population of about 2.1 million.

It is hard to explain to a non-Colombian audience that even though these neighborhoods are easily visible from just about everywhere in downtown Medellín, they were, until very recently, just as completely ungoverned as far-flung, isolated jungle zones like Putumayo. As recently as 2002-2003, police and soldiers dared not enter them except in very large numbers, while most other central and municipal government agencies stayed away.

Residents grew accustomed to living under the control of street gangs made up largely of young people. Some were involved in organized crime, particularly Pablo Escobar's Medellín drug cartel, and others (known as *combos*) were mainly territorial. In the absence of police, gangs carried out brutal "social cleansing" campaigns, ejecting or killing petty criminals, prostitutes, street children, drug addicts and other non-conformist elements.

During the 1990s, especially as the effort to take down Pablo Escobar loosened the drug lords' grip, the gang structure was taken over by guerrilla militias, the urban appendages of Colombia's FARC and ELN insurgencies. Both guerrilla groups, founded in the mid-1960s, control much territory in rural areas, but have generally had difficulty establishing a toehold in cities.

They managed to establish an operational presence in many urban areas by establishing gangs – or taking over existing ones – made up largely of unemployed young people, including many minors. The *milicias urbanas* freely roamed the city's slums, carrying arms, wearing ski masks over their faces, spray-painting political slogans and forcing residents to attend political indoctrination meetings. They also carried out "social cleansing," and facilitated rural guerrillas' supply and transit in and out of the city.

A source named "Marco Aurelio" described life under the guerrilla militias in a 2005 book by Colombian journalist Ricardo Aricapa:

Was there more security in the neighborhood? Yes, undeniably. There were no more robberies of shops, assaults on buses or burglaries of homes. You could be out until two or three in the morning, even wake up in the street, and nothing happened to you. They patrolled, asked things, and even got involved in resolving conflicts between neighbors. ...

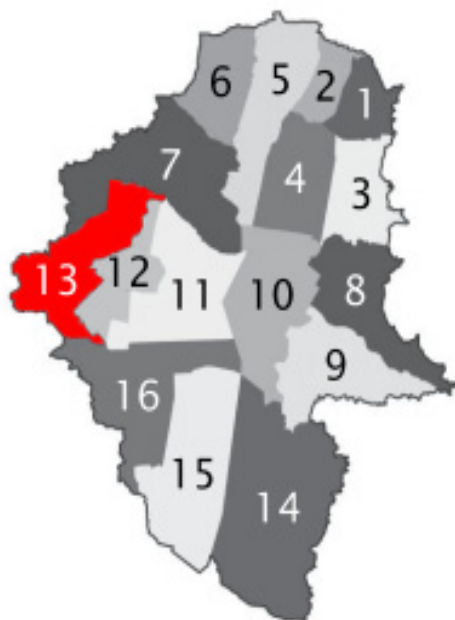
[T]he kids saw that being a *miliciano* had its advantages. It was like moving up in the world. And put yourself in the kids' place: from very poor families, without education because they didn't even have bus fare to go to high school, and without possibilities for employment, because they were minors. Instead, the situation was different for them as *milicianos*. They carried weapons and this made them feel powerful, they had money to buy clothes and sneakers. And they got to go with the prettiest girls in the neighborhood. ...

But the worst, I think, the real reason why things went as far as they did, was that the government did nothing. They took no notice of the things that were happening in this neighborhood. A policeman wouldn't dare show up here, not even if he was lost. They tried to install a CAI (a small police post) near the entrance to the neighborhood, but the *milicianos* dynamited it. And they didn't try to rebuild it. They decided it would be better to leave these neighborhoods completely without security forces.

Starting around 2000, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia – the AUC, Colombia's feared network of right-wing paramilitary groups – began to challenge the militias' domination of Medellín's slums. The paramilitaries' Metro Bloc, under the command of Rodrigo Franco, who called himself "Rodrigo 00," and Cacique Nutibara Bloc (BCN), under the command of longtime drug-underworld figure Diego Fernando Murillo or "Don Berna," steadily increased their presence in the lawless *barrios*.

Unlike their rural counterparts, the urban paramilitaries rarely marched through the streets wearing camouflage uniforms and carrying heavy weapons. Like the guerrilla militias, they were difficult to distinguish from the gangs that had long dominated the slums – and in fact took over much of the existing gang structure.

The paramilitaries and militias waged ever more intense firefights in the neighborhoods' streets. "*Balaceras*," or shootouts, erupted frequently, as the neighborhood's resi-



Location of Comuna 13.
(Map source: CINEP, Banco de Datos de Derechos Humanos y Violencia Política)

dents huddled in the parts of their flimsy houses least likely to be reached by stray bullets. Dozens were caught in the crossfire, and hundreds more were executed on suspicion of collaborating with the other side. The city's murder rate soared to nearly 200 per 100,000, a level not seen since the final years of Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel in the early 1990s.

Wealthy with drug money and unchallenged by the security forces, Medellín's paramilitaries gained ground quickly. By mid-2002 they had ejected militias and taken over gangs in many neighborhoods. The guerrilla militias, however, continued to maintain strongholds in several slums, especially those in *Comuna* (Ward) 13 on the city's western fringe.

In May 2002, just as Colombians were about to hand Álvaro Uribe a first-round presidential election victory, the Colombian government made its first real foray into Comuna 13, a one-day military offensive called Operation Mariscal. A day of house-to-house urban warfare killed about a dozen civilians. The operation failed to dislodge the militias, who a few days later were able to turn back an attempt by Medellín's mayor to visit the neighborhood.

Álvaro Uribe was in office for just over two months, in October 2002, when thousands of Colombia's military, police and judicial police launched Operation Orión in Comuna 13. The offensive, an intense campaign of house-to-house fighting, went on for weeks and emptied the neighborhood of most of its residents. This time, the civilian death toll was lower, but over 400 people were arrested, most of them later released for lack of evidence. After Operation Orión and a few other efforts elsewhere in 2003, the guerrilla militias were gone from Medellín's neighborhoods.

At the same time, the soldiers and police who entered Comuna 13 and other neighborhoods stayed there. The Uribe government built police posts and increased the number of soldiers and officers assigned to Medellín. To date, there have been relatively few complaints about the police's treatment of the population; responses to crime events have been generally rapid, and cases of abuse or corruption have been infrequent – though still rarely punished when they happen.

(This is not the case with the 4th Brigade, the Colombian Army unit responsible for Medellín and much of surrounding Antioquia department. The brigade stands accused of killing dozens of civilians during the past two years, dressing their bodies in camouflage and presenting them as guerrillas killed in combat. Nearly all of these cases, though, have occurred in rural areas beyond Medellín.)

There is now at least some government presence in all of Medellín's neighborhoods. This has allowed Medellín to participate in a nationwide downturn in violence that accompanied President Uribe's deployment of soldiers and police to population centers and main roads throughout the country.

2. The paramilitaries won. In many neighborhoods, however, state *presence* has not become state *control*. The paramilitaries were not ejected by Operation Orión and other military efforts; by some accounts they even assisted in the assault. They appear, in fact, to have emerged stronger as their principal enemies were pushed out of the city.

"Operation Orión was the beginning of the installation of a new power in Comuna 13, the same one that had ruled over other comunas in the city: that of the paramilitaries," wrote Ricardo Aricapa, the author of the above-cited 2005 book, in a recent UN Development Program newsletter.

Following the guerrilla militias' expulsion, a period of fighting ensued throughout the city between the paramilitaries' Metro Bloc and Cacique Nutibara Bloc; by the end of 2003, Don Berna's BCN had won exclusive control. The BCN killed Metro Bloc leader "Rodrigo 00," a critic of the paramilitaries' narco activity who corresponded frequently with U.S. reporters, in eastern Antioquia in May 2004.

"Those who know the issue are certain that more than three-quarters of Medellín's poor neighborhoods today are under Don Berna's control," *Semana* reported in 2003. "It seems incredible to all that the police who patrol the zone are the only ones who appear not to notice what happens before

everyone's eyes."

In December 2002, the AUC paramilitaries agreed to sit down with the Uribe government to negotiate the terms of their disarmament, a process that today is nearly – though not entirely – complete. This process had gone almost nowhere in November 2003, when Don Berna unexpectedly announced the demobilization of his Cacique Nutibara Bloc.

In a highly staged and highly questioned ceremony, 868 purported members of the BCN turned in less than half as many weapons. It would be the first of a long series of paramilitary demobilization ceremonies throughout Colombia over the next two and a half years.



Don Berna's men – some of them officially demobilized, some apparently not – are still a powerful force in Medellín today. They continue to control nearly all gang activity in Medellín's slums. Killings of opponents continue, though at a much lower level; use of knives or other instruments, instead of guns, is increasingly common. Young men in plainclothes can still be seen keeping quiet watch over many *barrios*, though they no longer install roadblocks or bar outsiders from entering.

"A worrying situation of illegal control is observed in the city, in territories that used to be under the open domination of paramilitary groups," reported the Medellín city government's ombudsman (*personería*) earlier this year.



Diego Fernando Murillo or "Don Berna."

What has changed now is that this control is exercised in a different way, without massacres or a high number of murders, though authoritarian and violent social control practices are maintained. ... In many of the investigated zones, it was found that groups of demobilized persons are dedicated to supposed safeguarding of citizen security, which should not happen in a city where the state should be sovereign. It is worrying that in some sectors, this control is happening in the full but passive view of the authorities – or worse, with their open collaboration.

Don Berna's near-monopoly on criminal control of Medellín's neighborhoods is a major reason for the downturn in violence. Relative peace often results when a territory finds itself under a single group's uncontested dominion. The civil-

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The “Casa de Paz:” Beginning of a New Peace Process?

While in Medellín, CIP had an opportunity to visit the “Casa de Paz,” a large old estate on Medellín’s northern outskirts, set way back from the highway. At the gates, a smiling policeman tried a few English words as he took down our information in a notebook.

Police surround the compound’s perimeter, partly to provide security and partly to keep its occupant from escaping.

The sole resident of the Casa de Paz is Francisco Galán, a leader of the ELN guerrilla group whom the government captured in the mid-1990s. Galán is very unlikely to attempt an escape: from his previous jail cell in Itagüí, south of Medellín, and elsewhere, he has long served as the main conduit between the ELN and the outside world – including the Colombian government.

Galán has played a central role as the Uribe government and the ELN have slowly moved closer to dialogue. His position is a difficult one. On one side, he must deal with a government that would like to conclude a peace agreement as soon as possible. On the other is the ELN, “in the mountains,” whose members not only lack a detailed agenda for talks, but have achieved only a bare consensus about whether the talks are desirable.

The ELN, much more than the FARC, has sought contact with, and even participation of, Colombia’s “civil society” in the elaboration of an agenda for talks. Seven non-governmental leaders are helping by serving as the “guarantors” of the house where Galán is today.

Since September 2005, the “Casa” has served as a space for Galán to receive outside visitors, and thus to help the ELN develop proposals for future peace talks. It has ample meeting spaces, well-tended gardens and a panoramic view of Medellín. Its upkeep is funded by the Colombian government and by the three international “friends” of the ELN process, Spain, Norway and Switzerland. Two thousand visitors and ten international delegations have passed through.

The “Casa” is an innovative example of a confidence-building measure: while what goes on there cannot be considered “negotiations,” it can create conditions for eventual peace negotiations. It reflects a belief that contact between armed groups and the rest of Colombian (and international) society should be fostered (though regulated of course) – not banned.

To keep groups hermetically sealed, isolated in the jungle, is to make them more out of touch with contemporary realities, more paranoid, and more extremist. Instead, it makes sense to have a space where members have to answer to critics, consider other viewpoints, listen to their past victims, and learn about their country’s current political reality. This is a very de-radicalizing experience. In our view, even in the absence of peace talks, the FARC should also be given the opportunity to have a “Casa.”

The FARC are no doubt watching the ELN’s process closely. This process, said Galán, was “on standby” – not an acrimonious impasse or freeze, but a slowdown of the dialogues’ pace. “Exploratory” talks occurred in Cuba late last year and early this year, and have begun again as this report goes to press in mid-October. While these have been helpful exchanges of views, many observers hope that formal negotia-

tions - with a cease-fire in place - may begin soon. Colombia’s January-May election campaign slowed things down, as has the ELN’s decision-making model, which seeks the maximum possible consensus among fighters and commanders of all ranks.

The government, of course, wants a cease-fire – including a halt to kidnappings and a release of those whom the ELN is cruelly holding for

ransom – as a pre-condition for substantive dialogues. Before entering into a cease-fire, Galán said, the ELN would first prefer to have more agreement on the talks’ agenda, and a “humanitarian accord” guaranteeing more support to the conflict’s victims, especially displaced people. Another stumbling block in the way of a cease-fire is money: the ELN, which gets little or no funding from the drug trade, would need to support itself. President Uribe has indicated that he would seek money from donor nations to sustain the ELN during a cease-fire.

For now, though – and probably for some time to come – the talks are in a trust-building phase, as both sides develop relationships and measure each other’s will and ability to deliver on promises and commitments. This is one of the most difficult and delicate phases, in which progress is hard to measure and patience is badly needed as both sides test each other and try to convince their constituencies that the process is worth pursuing.



From www.casapaz.org.

ian population, tired of being caught in the crossfire, welcomes the change in its security, even if it is not quite the result of government control. It is a relief to have to pay extortion money to only one group, or to be free of threatened retribution for helping the “other side” – because there *is* no other side. Notes the city ombudsman:

It is worth mentioning that while these actions are carried out with a great deal of intimidation, in more than a few places many people accept this activity of dominance as a legitimate and necessary project, or as a reality before which nothing can be done, because ultimately the groups in control “won the war” and are the victors. This contributes to the favorable conditions that demobilized leaders have enjoyed.

By several accounts, Don Berna has helped bring down violent crime rates by ordering his followers to desist from committing large-scale murder, displacement, and other harassment of the civilian population. The feared paramilitary leader is currently in the Itagüí prison south of Medellín, accused of ordering the killing of a state legislator last year. Nonetheless, he continues to maintain a strong “pyramidal structure” of control over the Cacique Nutibara Bloc “*muchachos*,” according to leaders CIP interviewed at the office of *Corporación Democracia*, a non-governmental organization founded by ex-BCN paramilitary leaders. In 2005, candidates supported by *Corporación Democracia* made a strong showing in elections to Community Action Boards (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*), a government-sanctioned network of neighborhood advisory bodies.

The former BCN leaders professed their continued loyalty to their “maximum leader, Adolfo Paz” (Don Berna’s preferred nom de guerre), crediting him with having “humanized the war” and brought an end to the violence. “Adolfo Paz is the pacifier of Medellín,” they assured us.

While acknowledging that Don Berna’s order to behave has been a factor, Medellín city government officials insist that it is not the main factor. They recall that violence indicators have declined in much of the country, including many areas outside of Don Berna’s influence. “Don Berna does not control Medellín. He only controls criminality in Medellín,” said the city’s secretary of government, Alonso Salazar.



Rendering of a library under construction at the entrance to Comuna 13 in San Javier.

That is probably quite accurate. And Don Berna’s consolidation of that control is an undeniable factor in Medellín’s recent decline in criminality.

This decline is far from absolute, however. By many accounts, the security situation has ceased improving, and new violent groups may be making an appearance. “Fear Continues in Comuna 13,” read a headline in the September 4 edition of *El Colombiano*, Medellín’s most-circulated daily. “Com-

mon criminals, guerrilla militias that want to re-take power, or demobilized paramilitaries who are up to no good? Whoever is behind the changed atmosphere in Comuna 13, residents of this sector of western Medellín are experiencing fear and dread almost equal to that of four years ago.” The article cites the August 23 murder of Haider Ramírez, a neighborhood activist and organizer, adding that several other neighborhood leaders had received threatening flyers. A police commander said that at least fifteen criminal gangs still operate in the district. This is occurring despite the presence of about 500 police and soldiers assigned to Comuna 13.

This emerging situation is rather confusing, and for now, local activists are afraid to discuss it. “The leaders have made a decision not to talk with anyone but the authorities about the zone’s problems,” *El Colombiano* reported. ““We don’t know who we’re talking to at any given moment, and anything we say can put us at risk. We don’t know whom to trust,’ some said.”

3. Medellín’s city government is investing in peace.

The Uribe government oversaw an increase in the security forces’ presence and activities in Medellín and elsewhere in Colombia. A common critique, however, is that it has done far less nationwide to cement security gains with investments in infrastructure, education, health, and other basic needs.

In Medellín, which has more resources than most municipalities, the local government has picked up much of the slack. It has accompanied the introduction of a police presence with investment in a “community policing” model focusing on improved response times, building community members’ trust, and a less adversarial approach.

The mayor’s office has launched numerous infrastructure projects in the poor hillside *barrios*, building transportation,

parks, libraries, museums and schools. In many cases, these buildings are not being constructed on the cheap: designed by architects, they stand out sharply from the ragged hollow-brick houses that surround them. The “Metrocable,” a system of overhead trams, now transports residents of north-eastern Medellín’s *barrios* up the steep hillside; another is planned for the western neighborhoods. Taking a page from former Bogotá mayor Antanas Mockus, Mayor Sergio Fajardo hopes that quality facilities, along with efforts to inspire a culture of citizenship, will encourage community members to take a more active role in maintaining tranquility and prosperity.

Where is the money coming from? Fajardo says that “tax collection in Medellín has increased by 20 percent since my administration began.” He told CIP that he has broadened the tax base, convincing the business community and others to pay more through transparent management of the city’s finances. “Nobody is going to call me ‘Sergio 15,’ someone who takes a 15 percent cut from every contract,” he said. “We aren’t stealing ... way too much money was stolen in the past.”

Medellín needs a particularly full treasury because it has become a principal haven for former paramilitaries from throughout Colombia. Over 4,000 of the 31,000 who took part in collective demobilizations since 2003 now live in the city. The city government has spent much of its own money – about 23 billion pesos (US\$10 million) so far – on attention to the demobilized population.

When the Cacique Nutibara Bloc demobilized in November 2003, many saw it as a joke. 868 young men lined up before the cameras to turn in a smaller number of weapons. No agreement with the paramilitaries existed, and no law was in place for dealing with them. Many of those who demobilized, it was widely alleged, had no paramilitary past – they were gang members or common criminals who had been rounded up in the days or weeks before the ceremony. After a couple of weeks in an orientation center outside



Since the BCN demobilization in 2003, Colombia has seen 37 collective demobilizations of paramilitary blocs, like this one in Putumayo in March. But Colombia’s central government lacks a well-resourced, institutionally sound strategy for assisting either former fighters or their victims. Medellín’s city government is one of few that have sought to fill the resulting vacuum.

Medellín, those young men who did not have outstanding arrest warrants were returned to their own neighborhoods with vague promises of subsidies, education and job opportunities. Nothing was foreseen for their victims.

Colombia’s national government distanced itself from the BCN demobilization; Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo even called it an “embarrassment.” The central government did not even offer a monthly stipend to the 868 ex-paramilitaries, though participants in all subsequent demobilizations are getting 400,000 pesos (about US\$170) per month for twenty-four months.

The Medellín city government made the best of it. Guided by Secretary of Government Alonso Salazar, an expert in Medellín’s urban violence, the mayor’s office chose not to distinguish between “real” paramilitaries and gang members. There is simply too much overlap between the two, they argued, and the city government did not want to miss an opportunity to get troubled youth off the street and into the system. (Salazar, who will seek to succeed Fajardo as mayor in October 2007 elections, resigned from his post in late August.)

The designers of the city’s reintegration programs have clearly studied lessons learned from past experiences elsewhere. In addition to subsidies, former fighters are getting education and job training far beyond what the central government offers. “We found that, in most cases, a few months of education was not enough for them to get a real job,” said Jorge Gaviria, who works on the city’s reintegration effort. “They

didn’t speak well or present themselves right. They just weren’t ready.”

The city invested in psychological attention to the former fighters, including workshops in socialization and relationships with their communities. In some cases, this has included efforts at reconciliation with victims, including asking for forgiveness. Victims are also receiving a modest amount of attention, as the city government has recently launched a series of programs to provide psycho-

logical attention, offer employment assistance and “recover memory.”

We found a divergence of opinion about whether the former rank-and-file combatants have truly abandoned paramilitarism. Most appear to be taking advantage of the opportunities presented to them by the Medellín government’s reintegration programs. At the same time, many of the young men (and a handful of women) receiving this assistance are still “*muchachos*” within the structure of the *Corporación Democracia*. When asked whether they remain loyal to Don Berna, their former commander, a group of ex-paramilitaries interviewed by CIP, visibly uncomfortable, preferred not to answer the question.

Those who were footsoldiers in the old paramilitary blocs, as well as those whose participation more closely resembled gang activity, are likely to drop their old allegiances if their employment prospects and living standards improve. Less clear is what will become of their immediate commanders – the mid-level and higher-ranking figures who still openly profess loyalty to Don Berna and other maximum leaders. Have these commanders truly left their old ways behind? Have the networks that sustained them been broken? We found no consensus of opinion on that point – and in fact heard much pessimism. Clearly, someone is still doing Don Berna’s bidding in the *comunas*, running criminal activity and recruiting from a large pool of unemployed youth, even if they are doing so with less violence than before.

Can it last? Medellín’s gains are remarkable. But they may be fragile and easily reversible. In the absence of a coherent central government reintegration strategy and a credible system for punishing abuse and corruption, recent gains depend too heavily on the policies of a mayor whose term ends soon, and the goodwill of a feared criminal group.

Until the Bogotá government and foreign donors invest far more in non-military needs and institutional strengthening, at least four key factors put Medellín’s recovery at risk.

1. The current gains are threatened by an incomplete transition from paramilitary domination to state control. This transition is moving ahead slowly, if at all. Though there is now a government presence in Medellín’s *barrios*, the police alone do not appear to be enough. At a July 24 security meeting, Mayor Fajardo repeated a long-time request that President Uribe send another 2,000 police to the city. (In October, President Uribe made an appearance in Comuna 13 to announce the arrival of 500 new police.)

The full amount is unlikely to be forthcoming. Even if it were, Colombia has not managed to reduce the near-total impunity enjoyed by those in the security forces who abuse human rights or work with paramilitaries. Such crimes occasionally result in firings but almost never in convictions. If not punished when they happen, abuse and collaboration with pro-government criminals are likely to remain common, and even to increase along with the security forces’ presence.

Even today, not enough is being done to keep the ex-paramilitaries from playing a de facto security role in many neighborhoods. This is both unacceptable and unsustainable.

2. Don Berna could be extradited. At any time, the DEA might discover new evidence that the “Pacifier of Medellín” is still conspiring to send drugs to the United States, in violation of the Colombian law offering leniency to demobilized paramilitaries. This would bring renewed U.S. pressure to extradite him, which Colombia’s government might find impossible to resist. Should Don Berna be put on a plane to Miami, his *muchachos* could revolt and re-arm, plunging the city into violence. Even if that outbreak of violence proves to be shortlived, the absence of a “maximum leader,” combined with the absence of a sufficient state presence, could touch off a renewed power struggle for control of Medellín’s organized crime and gang activity. Neighborhoods could once again become contested territory, and crime rates would rise.

3. A future Medellín government might not place the same value on reintegration, attention to victims, and projects in poor neighborhoods. Mayor Fajardo’s term ends at the end of next year. Mayors are not allowed to run for re-election in Colombia, and there is always a chance that Alonso Salazar, his likely successor, might not win (neither Fajardo nor Salazar, for example, is considered to be a political backer of President Uribe, who is quite popular in Medellín). Continuity of the city government’s current programs, then, is never assured. However, even a civic-minded government could see its costly programs threatened by either an economic downturn or by the arrival of still more demobilized paramilitaries. Attracted by its generous reintegration efforts, which contrast sharply with what is available elsewhere, ex-paramilitaries are believed to be pouring into the city; the *Corporación Democracia* estimates that their numbers could grow from the current 4,000 to as much as 10,000 by the end of 2007. If that happens, the current system will not be able to deal with demand for its services.

4. The national government’s lack of planning could contribute to the reintegration effort’s collapse – though this is an even greater risk outside Medellín. Disturbingly, *everyone* we interviewed in Medellín – from the local

government to the ex-paramilitaries to non-governmental human rights advocates – was frustrated with the Bogotá government’s handling of the paramilitary reintegration process. Every single interviewee mentioned the lack of a national strategy for dealing with the former fighters (most used that exact phrase). The words “improvisation” and “neglect” were frequently invoked to describe the central government’s approach to the challenge of helping more than 30,000 former combatants become citizens and participants in the legal economy. Bogotá has done little more than provide stipends and vocational training, leaving Medellín to fill in a lot of blanks.

The problem is far more serious beyond Medellín, where municipalities hosting former combatants are poorer, weakened by corruption, or simply unwilling to spend scarce resources on reintegration. They are even less able to adjudicate cases of stolen property or reparations to the conflict’s hundreds of thousands of victims. In these cases, the lack of a more coherent central government strategy may bring disaster. Beset by a flood of unemployed young men with few marketable skills, other than killing, dozens of cash-strapped cities and towns throughout Colombia will have little hope of emulating Medellín’s recent, but fragile, successes.

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Much more is available on the CIP Colombia Program website at www.ciponline.org/colombia.

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Clockwise from top left: the author with Medellín Mayor Sergio Fajardo; with Medellín Secretary of Government Alonso Salazar; meeting with demobilized paramilitaries in Medellín; speaking at a forum in Colombia’s Congress in Bogotá; and driving through Putumayo’s countryside.



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