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### **Testimony of Adam Isacson Director of Programs, Center for International Policy**

#### **Hearing of the House Government Reform Committee on “The War Against Drugs and Thugs: A Status Report on Plan Colombia Successes and Remaining Challenges”**

**June 17, 2004**

Let me begin by thanking the Committee for holding a hearing on the status of Plan Colombia. It is absolutely crucial that Congress perform close oversight over our strategy in Colombia, and I truly appreciate the opportunity to offer input. I know that this has been a long session with many witnesses, and I thank you for staying to hear my testimony.

Today, we have heard many glowing assessments of what Plan Colombia has achieved so far, and many optimistic predictions about the near future. Colombian government statistics are indicating less violence and reduced coca cultivation. I have no way of disputing these data; no organization has the ability to take their own measurements. However, my own recent interviews with local officials, religious and community leaders in Colombia have revealed a lot of skepticism about these indicators. People on the ground have seen little change in violence or drug-crop cultivation as a result of Plan Colombia or President Uribe’s security policies.

I would like to talk about the example of Putumayo, a department or province in southern Colombia, about the size of Maryland, that was the center of Colombian coca-growing and the main focus of Plan Colombia when it began in 2000. I visited Putumayo in March of 2001, and returned there for a few days in late April, seven weeks ago. In the three years between my two visits, the United States funded the aerial fumigation of at least 100,000 hectares in Putumayo, and supported a dramatic expansion in Colombian military and police capabilities. USAID spent tens of millions on alternative development programs to help some peasant families to make a living in the legal economy.

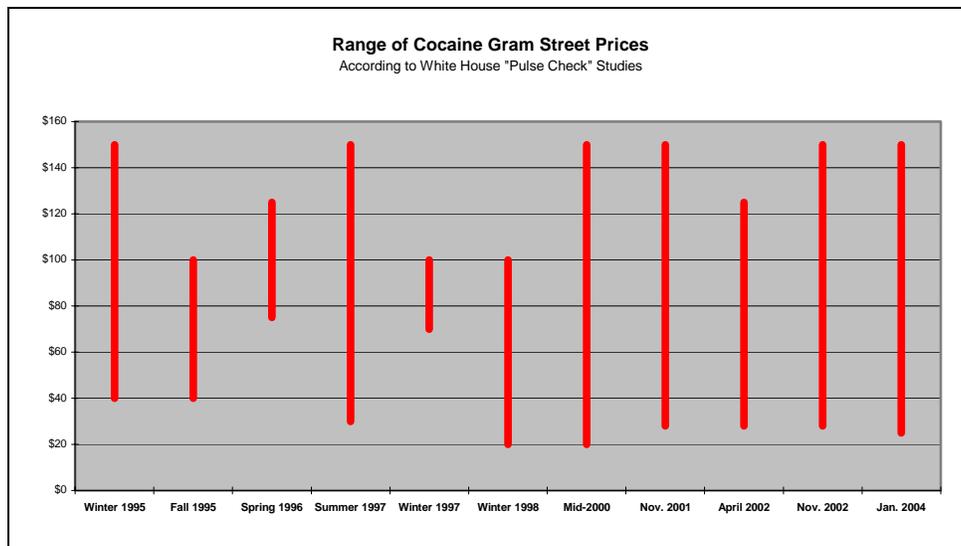
I saw less coca in Putumayo than I did three years ago, but even after wave upon wave of fumigation, it was still easy to find coca. This picture, which I took within a quarter-mile of the main road, shows a pretty common sight: a small cultivation of new coca bushes, growing in a field that had been fumigated recently. Replanting is common, and several people I interviewed said that seeds and nurseries are very booming industries in Putumayo. (According to the UN, our satellites can’t detect newly planted coca bushes, so the official estimates of coca cultivation may be missing a lot of new planting.<sup>1</sup>) Three years ago, Putumayo was full of large, multi-acre plots of coca; fumigation has now made that impossible. Cultivation continues, though, only now the plots small and scattered. Some locals spoke about increased success growing coca in shade, where it can go undetected. Meanwhile, new coca continues to pop up in new parts of Colombia that didn’t have any before.



Most tellingly, everybody I asked both in Putumayo and the neighboring department of Nariño said that the price of coca leaves and coca paste has not changed since the fumigations began. A kilo of coca paste continues to sell for roughly 800 dollars. This would appear to violate the law of supply and demand: if fumigation were making the product scarcer, the price would be expected to

rise. But that has not happened.

Similarly, even though the State Department's statistics tell us that coca acreage has been dropping since 2001, the price, availability and purity of cocaine in U.S. cities is unchanged. ONDCP has been collecting data on drug prices in the United States since 1995 as part of a series of studies it calls "Pulse Check." The last Pulse Check study notes that the price of a gram of cocaine on U.S. streets varied between 25 and 150 dollars in January – the same range of prices as in 1995. Supply is meeting demand as well as it ever has.



This should tell us that the traffickers are adapting, yet again, to increased fumigation. To counter this, we will have to do something else than just fumigate more. Sending planes to spray

people overhead won't do it: if you want to eradicate drugs, there is no substitute for governance. There is no substitute for a civilian government presence, with officials who are able to look people in the eye and say "what you are doing is illegal, but we're committed to providing the basic conditions you need to make a living" – which is the role every government has to play.

So far, we're nowhere near there. Of the 3.15 billion dollars the United States has given Colombia since 2000, only 20 percent is aimed at improving civilian governance or alleviating poverty - even though 82 percent of rural Colombians live below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> The rest of our aid has gone to guns, helicopters, and spray planes.

And the U.S.-funded military buildup is very evident in Putumayo. Here, we have helped Colombia create a new army brigade, a new navy brigade, and strengthened all existing military and police units. Despite all of this, though, Putumayo is still a very dangerous place.

In April, I had to take a canoe across the Guamués River because there was no bridge: late last year the FARC, apparently unaffected by the military buildup, was able to bomb out this and several other bridges along the main road. This campaign of violence included dozens of attacks on Putumayo's oil infrastructure, including a few Gulf War-style oil well fires. The paramilitaries, meanwhile, continue to maintain a heavy presence in the towns, and bodies show up on the streets and roadsides nearly every day. The paramilitaries are also easy to find: I came across several of them, in full uniform, on the outskirts of one of the principal towns.

Certainly, the *pattern* of violence had changed in response to the military buildup. A greater security-force presence has forced guerrillas out of town centers and away from the main roads, so that road travel was considered safer than it had been three years ago. Paramilitaries were present, but much less obvious, in the town centers. But I received numerous reports of a greatly deteriorated security situation in the rural zones, further from the main roads, where the armed groups are able to act with complete freedom and are fighting over profits from the coca trade. Populations are caught in between, and it is considered very risky to travel from the guerrilla-heavy rural areas to the paramilitary-dominated town centers, even to buy food or to get health care.

So violence continues and cocaine persists in Putumayo, a zone that was the original "ground zero" of Plan Colombia. This is a very disturbing outcome, and we have to learn from it as we hear about ambitious new plans to aid military offensives like "Plan Patriota."

The last several years in Colombia are full of stories of supposedly successful military offensives. The pattern is familiar: thousands of troops rush into a guerrilla stronghold, the guerrillas offer minimal resistance and retreat into the jungle. The troops stay a few weeks, or even months, but the Colombian government doesn't commit any resources to bringing the rest of the government into the zone. The soldiers can't stay forever – and since they operate with virtual impunity, that's not always bad news for the civilians in the zone. When the military eventually has to go back to its bases, though, we find that no moves have been made to bring in judges, cops, teachers, doctors, road-builders, or any of the other civilian government services that every society and economy needs in order to function.

When the military leaves, they leave nothing behind but a vacuum. Sometimes, the paramilitaries fill that vacuum. (Just in the past couple of years, we've seen that in the Comuna 13 neighborhood of Medellín, Nariño's Pacific coast, northwestern Cundinamarca department, and southern Arauca department, among other zones). On other occasions, the vacuum gets filled once again by the guerrillas. We should recall two years ago, when Colombia's military swept into the former demilitarized zone where peace talks had been taking place with the FARC guerrillas. Today, the zone's rural areas have returned to undisputed FARC control.

If we keep pursuing an unbalanced, overly military strategy – call it Plan Patriota or Plan Colombia 2 – we will continue to reap the same frustrating result. As I've said in this committee before, our aid program must achieve more balance and must be prepared to do a lot of things at once.

If we're going to help Colombia's government achieve authority over its territory, we have to remember that military power is only a small part of that. A government gains authority by guaranteeing its citizens the basic conditions they need to make a living in peace. A government has to adjudicate disputes, issue and respect property titles, educate children, fight disease, and make transportation and communications possible. A government also has to punish officials who are corrupt or commit abuses. Colombia's government has never done this in places like Putumayo or other insurgent-dominated zones. U.S. aid hasn't contributed either. As a result, violence and drug trafficking persist.

I know it seems odd for me to be calling for a fundamental change in direction after you've heard several officials testify about the supposed success of the current strategy. But I hope the contrary evidence I've presented in these few minutes is enough to make clear that victory is far from around the corner. In fact, if we continue on the present path, the next phase of Plan Colombia may well be a long, slow slog.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Office of Drug Control and Crime Prevention, Censo de cultivos ilícitos en diciembre de 2002 & Estimado intercensal en julio de 2003, September 2003 <[http://www.unodc.org/pdf/colombia/colombia\\_coca\\_report\\_2003-09-25\\_es.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/colombia/colombia_coca_report_2003-09-25_es.pdf)>: 51.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando Millán, "La tierra, comienzo y fin del conflicto," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá, Colombia: October 12, 2003) <[http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/coar/estostienesalida/ARTICULO-WEB-\\_NOTA\\_INTERIOR-1282804.html](http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/coar/estostienesalida/ARTICULO-WEB-_NOTA_INTERIOR-1282804.html)>.