

April 22, 2005
FOR IMMEDIATE
RELEASE

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Secretary Rice in Colombia: How to make the most of a brief visit

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will spend a few hours in Colombia on Wednesday, April 27, as part of a visit to several Latin American countries. During her brief stay, we can expect her to issue glowing praise for Álvaro Uribe, one of the most pro-U.S. leaders in modern Latin American history. We can also expect much self-congratulation about the perceived successes of "Plan Colombia," the framework that has guided aid to Colombia since 2000.

"We're going to hear leaders selling their own evaluation of their own policy's performance, painting a rosy picture," says Adam Isacson, director of the Center for International Policy's Colombia Program. "But the real picture is far more complicated. In fact, it points to an urgent need for a new policy."

Adds Lisa Haugaard, director of the Latin America Working Group, "Let's hope that Secretary Rice isn't coming just to celebrate fragile claims of progress and to insist that 'we are winning.' She must recognize the many ways in which Plan Colombia has been a disappointment. It is time to start thinking about alternatives, and this visit offers a perfect opportunity."

Since 2000, the United States has given Colombia \$4 billion in aid; 80 percent of it (\$3.2 billion) has gone to Colombia's security forces for a long list of counter-drug and counter-terror programs, from herbicide fumigation to support for ambitious counter-insurgent military offensives. The Bush Administration's request to Congress for 2006 is identical: aid through the Foreign Operations and Defense budgets would total \$700 to \$750 million in 2006, 80 percent of it for Colombia's security forces. No change in strategy is being contemplated. The emphasis continues to be on military force and chemical eradication of illicit crops.

"This is the wrong approach. The current policy isn't yielding anywhere near the results we were promised back in 2000, when Plan Colombia began," says Haugaard.

Poor results against drugs. U.S. support to Plan Colombia has utterly failed to meet its principal goal: reducing the supply of cocaine and heroin entering the United States from Colombia. The price, availability and purity of cocaine on U.S. streets has

Blueprint for a New Colombia Policy

Convinced that now is the time for a fundamental re-thinking of our approach to Colombia, several U.S. organizations published a joint document in March recommending the following ten policy changes. The "Blueprint" is available online at <http://www.lawg.org/docs/Blueprint.pdf>.

1. Use U.S. leverage far more vigorously in support of **human rights and the rule of law**.
2. Support the recommendations of the **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**.
3. Insist upon the complete **dismantlement of paramilitary forces and structures**, within an effective legal framework for justice, truth and reparations.
4. Support **a strong judiciary and an independent human rights sector**.
5. Expand alternative development within **a comprehensive rural development strategy**, and end aerial spraying.
6. Encourage the strengthening of **civilian governance** in rural areas.
7. Make **trade policy** consistent with sustainable drug policy and human rights.
8. Increase and improve humanitarian assistance, and expand protection, to **displaced persons and refugees**.
9. Encourage **negotiations** with the guerrillas for a just and lasting peace.
10. **Reduce U.S. demand** for drugs through evidence-based protection strategies and improved access to high-quality treatment.

been unaffected – in fact, street prices have inexplicably dropped since 2000. Fumigation – which takes a heavy toll on poor peasants with no other economic opportunities – has exhausted itself: in 2004, a record amount of spraying failed to reduce coca cultivation by even one acre. The amount of coca grown in Colombia in 2003 and 2004 was 285,000 acres – only 20,000 acres (6.5 percent) less than it was in 1999.

Poor results on human rights. Reports of human rights violations by the military, including extrajudicial executions and torture, have increased, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Colombian Commission of Jurists. Reports of army-paramilitary collaboration – including in Arauca province, now a central focus of U.S. assistance – remain abundant. The fight against impunity is not being won: investigations and prosecutions of military personnel are as rare as ever in human rights cases. Despite the documented frequency of abuses and collusion with paramilitaries, the number of military personnel under investigation or indictment is remarkably small and has not grown. The Secretary of State now has pending before her a decision on whether Colombia meets the human rights conditions in law regarding breaking links between the army and paramilitary forces and investigating and prosecuting security force officials alleged to be involved in serious human rights abuses. Though this certification has been pending since the beginning of March, the Secretary has not issued her decision.

Mixed results on security. Several indicators of violence have declined – murders, kidnappings, attacks on populations and others. These fragile gains owe nothing to U.S. assistance, which has focused mainly on counternarcotics operations, protection of an oil pipeline, and support for the “Plan Patriota” military offensive in sparsely populated southern Colombia. Worse, there are troubling signs that progress on the battlefield has not been as great as advertised. Guerrilla attacks have grown more frequent during the first few months of 2005, casting strong doubt on claims – such as Southern Command Gen. James Hill’s 2004 prediction that the FARC would be “combat ineffective” by 2006 – that the group’s defeat is imminent. When the guerrillas attack, civilians often bear the brunt, as we have seen in the vicious recent FARC mortar attack on the indigenous town of Toribío.

A new policy would recognize that military force alone makes it possible only to *occupy* territory. To govern territory requires a robust, well-funded and coordinated civilian government presence. Colombia has repeated a frustrating pattern over the past few years: military offensives clear armed groups out of a zone, but the rest of the government fails to establish itself. No funds are available to introduce judges, road-builders, doctors, teachers, land-titlers or local-government officials. When the military withdraws, it leaves a vacuum of state presence that the illegal armed groups easily fill. “Without more investment in Colombia’s non-military needs, U.S.-aided efforts will fail to produce sustainable results,” says CIP’s Isacson.

An increasing mission and military presence. Eight years ago, U.S. aid went mainly to Colombia’s police and was restricted to counter-narcotics. Plan Colombia expanded Washington’s commitment to include Colombia’s armed forces, but kept the counter-narcotics restriction in place. In 2002, as the “global war on terror” got underway, the counter-narcotics restriction disappeared, allowing U.S. aid to be used in Colombia’s armed conflict. The steady progression continued in 2004, as Congress approved a Defense Department request to double (to 800) the legal limit on the number of U.S. troops who can be in Colombia at any time, and increased by 50 percent (to 600) the limit on U.S. citizens working for private contractors. Though U.S. personnel are still prohibited from participating in combat, U.S. involvement in Colombia’s conflict is growing with a momentum of its own.

It is time to give serious consideration to a new policy. *The Blueprint for a New*

Colombia Policy contains ten recommendations, five of which would cost nothing to implement. The United States must act more forcefully in support of human rights and the rule of law in Colombia, using diplomacy, the UN High Commissioner's human-rights recommendations, and tools in existing foreign-aid law. The United States must condition any support for paramilitary demobilizations on strong provisions for justice, reparations, and the complete dismantlement of paramilitarism. The United States must ensure that a trade agreement avoids dealing severe shocks to Colombia's already-battered countryside. The United States must play a more constructive role in any effort to get negotiations re-started with guerrilla groups.

What does that mean for Secretary Rice's visit? **We strongly recommend that the Secretary take the following steps on April 27.**

1. Do not offer a blanket endorsement of the Uribe government. Differences with Álvaro Uribe's policies should not be downplayed. It is important to recognize that, despite President Uribe's claims to the contrary, **an armed conflict *does exist in Colombia***, requiring full respect for international humanitarian law and negotiations about more than just surrender terms. It is vital to make clear that the United States does not share Mr. Uribe's belief that **human-rights groups** are "spokespeople for terrorism." It is important to urge the Colombian government to do far more to introduce **civilian governance** into long-neglected areas.

2. Express strong concern about continued impunity for human rights abusers. Acknowledge that this remains a serious problem. **Do not certify the Colombian military's human rights performance until there is greater progress in breaking links between the army and the paramilitary forces, and until there is greater progress in investigating and prosecuting key cases**, including the recent massacre of eight people in the San José de Apartadó peace community.

3. Express concern about the paramilitaries' non-observance of a cease-fire and the severe shortcomings of the law, nearing approval in Colombia's Congress, that will govern paramilitary groups' demobilization. The current bill lacks the tools necessary to identify those responsible for crimes against humanity, to seize paramilitaries' stolen assets, to make reparations to victims, to keep notorious narcotraffickers from gaining amnesty, and – most importantly – to dismantle paramilitary command and support structures. Without a strong dismantlement regime, it is likely that paramilitary groups will continue to exist as politically powerful mafias, controlling both legal and illegal economic activity and silencing opponents through death-squad tactics. **Make clear that the United States will not support a process that appears likely to yield that outcome.**

4. Express support for the important role played by non-governmental human rights organizations and other citizen groups working peacefully for reform and an end to impunity. They do so at great personal risk, and a message of support from the Secretary of State would do much to relieve the pressures they face.

5. Commit the United States to greater investment in social aid and indicate openness to altering the largely military approach of the past several years. Our annual aid packages must stop favoring the security forces above all other needs by a four-to-one ratio. The move toward balance must begin immediately.

Links to recent documents about U.S. policy toward Colombia:

Blueprint for a New Colombia Policy, by [Latin America Working Group Education Fund, Center for International Policy, Washington Office on Latin America & U.S. Office on Colombia]:
<http://www.lawg.org/docs/Blueprint.pdf>

War and Drugs in Colombia, by the International Crisis Group:
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3238&l=1>

Are We There Yet? Measuring Progress in the U.S. War on Drugs in Latin America, by the Washington Office on Latin America: http://www.wola.org/publications/ddhr_measures_brief.pdf

Colombia's Peace Talks with Paramilitaries: Conditions for U.S. Support, by the Center for International Policy:
<http://ciponline.org/colombia/041207cip.htm>

Aid to Colombia since 1997:
<http://ciponline.org/colombia/aidtable.htm>

Report on the situation of human rights in Colombia, by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: <http://www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/informes/altocomisionado/informes.php3?cod=8&cat=11>

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Colombia, by the U.S. Department of State: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41754.htm>

World Report entry, Human Rights Watch:
<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/01/13/colomb9847.htm>

Information about the San José de Apartadó massacre:
<http://www.peaceincolombia.org>

Coca-growing in Colombia since 1988:
<http://ciponline.org/colombia/cocagrowing.htm>