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CIP Colombia Program

MEMORANDUM

June 13, 2006

To: Interested colleagues

From: Adam Isacson, Colombia Program, Center for International Policy

Re: Ten questions for President Uribe's visit to Washington

The president of Colombia, Álvaro Uribe, will be in Washington tomorrow for a brief visit. Uribe's hard-line security policies have made him popular at home, giving him a landslide re-election victory on May 28. Uribe hopes to maintain (or even increase) U.S. [aid](#) to Colombia, currently about \$750 million per year, four-fifths of it military and police assistance.

Despite his popularity, we have concerns about several of President Uribe's policies, including those that the U.S. government is generously supporting. Those in Washington who share these concerns – journalists, members of Congress, non-governmental analysts – will have very few opportunities to convey these concerns during Uribe's short time here. If we could ask the re-elected president a few questions, though, these would head the list.

1. A central component of the U.S. strategy in Colombia is **aerial herbicide fumigation** of coca crops. You have enthusiastically supported this strategy, promising to “spray and spray” all coca in Colombia. Critics have pointed out that fumigation is not only cruel, as it principally targets poor farmers in neglected zones, but that it is not discouraging coca-growers from planting the crop. The latest State Department [estimate](#) of coca cultivation in Colombia acknowledges that coca-growing has not been reduced since Plan Colombia began in 2000.

Given these results, do you still believe that large-scale fumigation is worth pursuing, or would you consider a change in strategy that puts more resources into governance of isolated rural zones where coca is grown? For its part, should the U.S. government devote more resources to drug treatment to reduce demand at home?

2. Since 2000, about 80 percent of **U.S. aid to Colombia** has gone to your country's security forces (\$3.8 billion out of \$4.7 billion). If Colombia has made as much progress as you claim, is it not time to change that proportion so that the United States can help Colombia meet other urgent needs like rural development, judicial reform, and assistance to internally displaced people?

3. In a [statement](#) last week, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern about a recent **wave of threats against Colombia's non-governmental human-rights community**. “In the last month,” the office's statement reads, “various human-rights defenders have been threatened in Bogotá, Medellín and other regions of the country.” Activity has gone beyond threats to include break-ins and theft of information from human-rights groups' offices and some employees' homes. The UN further notes that “some public servants have made

statements disqualifying human-rights defenders' activities, or minimizing the threats they have received." How seriously is your government taking these threats? Is their origin being energetically investigated?

4. In the last few months, Colombia's security forces have been rocked by **a series of scandals**. Several accusers claim that the Presidency's intelligence service, the DAS, has been thoroughly **infiltrated** by narco-traffickers and paramilitaries. Narco-traffickers' influence also appears to play a role in the May **massacre** of an elite police counter-drug unit at the hands of an army patrol. In February, revelations of **torture** of recruits forced the resignation of the Army commander. Last week, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights **asked** Colombia's government to investigate 37 cases of alleged military executions of civilians in 2005 and 2006. In the majority of cases, victims were later presented as guerrillas killed in combat.

It is looking less likely that these scandals are isolated incidents, and we are concerned that the performance of one of the United States' main military-aid recipients is evidently not improving. Can you assure us that these cases will be tried and judged swiftly, though that has rarely occurred in the past? Is your government willing to undergo the often painful prosecutions and reforms that, these scandals indicate, are clearly required?

5. It has been a year since Colombia passed the "**Justice and Peace**" law to govern the demobilization of paramilitary groups. Yet not a single paramilitary leader has been tried through this process, and almost no paramilitary assets have been turned over. Why is the process going so slowly?

6. Colombia's Constitutional Court has determined that all **paramilitary-held land and property**, even including legal holdings, may be seized if necessary to pay for reparations for their tens of thousands of victims. Paramilitary leaders are insisting that this is unacceptable. Can you assure us that, despite their objections, the Colombian government will swiftly and fully enforce the Constitutional Court's ruling, confiscate all stolen property in paramilitary hands, and seize legal assets if needed to pay for reparations?

7. **According** to the Colombian newsmagazine *Cambio*, Colombia's defense ministry has so far documented the existence of twenty-two "**emerging criminal bands**" with about 2,500 members, most of them demobilized paramilitaries. Many are active in urban areas. Does the Colombian government have a strategy for dealing with this and other manifestations of paramilitary power? Is this strategy sufficiently resourced? Can the United States help?

8. Thanks to the Justice and Peace law, paramilitary leaders can avoid **extradition** to the United States, even though many are wanted by U.S. courts for sending tons of cocaine to U.S. shores. Can you say with certainty that former paramilitary leaders aren't sending drugs to the United States *right now*?

9. It is encouraging that you are taking steps to increase **contacts with the FARC guerrillas**, with an eye toward an eventual negotiation. We note, though, that you have long been a critic of dialogue with insurgents in the absence of a cease-fire. The FARC, it appears clear, have no intention of declaring a cease-fire in the near future. Do you disagree with this assessment, or do you plan to be flexible and hold substantive talks even amid continued fighting?

A likely first topic of talks with the FARC might be a discussion of terms to release about sixty prominent **hostages** whom the guerrillas have been cruelly holding for many years. These talks will be difficult enough, but the FARC continues to insist on a month-long demilitarization of two entire municipalities in southwestern Colombia. The guerrillas have rejected all of your proposals for alternative formulas, including those supported by European governments. How do you propose to move beyond this impasse?

10. Your next defense minister, Juan Manuel Santos, is [known](#) to be a vehement critic of the Chávez government in neighboring **Venezuela**. He has called Hugo Chávez a “tyrant,” a “kidnapper of democracy,” and compared him to Hitler and Mussolini. While there are reasons for concern about executive power and the health of Venezuela’s institutions, Colombia has sought to maintain friendly relations with a neighbor who shares a 1,300-mile border. Does Santos’ nomination to the defense position indicate that Colombia will be taking a more aggressive stance toward Venezuela?