Democracy and Plan Colombia

by Héctor Mondragón

President George W. Bush has asked the American people to "be patient" so that Iraq can become like Colombia—so that the Iraqis can defeat terrorism and establish a stable democracy like the one Washington has nurtured in Colombia. I would like to comment on this nightmare.

Plan Colombia, a “pro-democracy” aid package provided by the United States to Colombia, was established in 1999. Its primary stated objective was to end drug trafficking in Colombia. Later on, it was discovered that the plan had the further objective of defeating the guerrilla movement, though that component of the plan was never acknowledged by Washington while Bill Clinton was in office. It was, however, made explicit in subsequent versions of the plan devised by George W. Bush’s administration, which identified its principal objective as combating “narco-terrorism,” thus conflating the drug war with the anti-guerrilla struggle. Furthermore, the Bush government has proposed that the plan combat any other threat to the security of the Colombian state, a proposal that has since been repeated in a State Department document. Obviously, these “other threats” to Colombian security do not refer to extraterrestrials, but to forces like the Chávez government in Venezuela and the indigenous mobilizations in Ecuador—forces that represent anti-neoliberal, anti-imperial changes in South America by way of democratic elections and popular mobilization.

Washington has now spent $4.7 billion on Plan Colombia, and if you include the expenditures of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in that total, it reaches $7.7 billion. But despite this investment, the U.S.-supported government of Alvaro Uribe has defeated neither the drug traffickers nor the guerrilla movement. To the contrary, the plan’s only success has been to guarantee a majority to the parties that supported Uribe in the Congressional elections of March 2006, and to guarantee Uribe’s own re-election last May.

When Uribe was first elected, his primary campaign promise had been to defeat the guerrillas, and to accomplish this, he instituted a
one-time war tax. In his campaign for re-election, he proposed a second “one-time” war tax. The reality is that, far from being defeated, the guerrilla movement in Colombia is today much stronger than when Uribe began his presidency. The guerrillas had been hard hit in the last year of the Pastrana government and during Uribe’s first year, in part thanks to U.S. technical assistance to the Colombian air force that allowed it to engage in effective anti-guerrilla bombing campaigns. The guerrillas had also suffered setbacks due to their own political and strategic errors, many of which negatively—and gravely—affected the civil population.

Nevertheless, the U.S. Southern Command and the Uribe government committed a huge military error known as Plan Patriota, which called for the Colombian armed forces to surround and annihilate the guerrillas in their interior strongholds. But these were locations the guerrillas knew well and where they enjoyed solid popular support, allowing them to soundly defeat the military. Today the guerrillas—especially the FARC—have gained political momentum after having launched an effective counter-offensive. Over the past year the Colombian military’s losses in the civil war have considerably surpassed those of the U.S. military in Iraq. The departments of Putumayo and Caquetá have been paralyzed for well over six months, and in many areas of Colombia the army cannot guarantee anyone’s safety. Yet despite failing to fulfill his main electoral promise, Uribe still managed to be re-elected. How was this possible? To paraphrase Bill Clinton: It was the economy, stupid.

Like many other areas in the world, Colombia is experiencing a post-Iraq-invasion economic boom. But Colombia’s boom may be the least sustainable of them all. Stock exchange values have increased 1,100%, meaning prices have multiplied 11 times. This has not occurred anywhere else since the 1920s, simply because no other country would allow it. Any other national bank or federal reserve system would intervene to curb such inflation, knowing that such rapid unchecked increases in value—which are not the result of growth but of pure speculation—will eventually cause a terrible recession. In Colombia this has not only been allowed, but actually encouraged through specific economic measures. For example, the Colombian state buys its own treasury bonds. It takes the money from its left pocket and lends it to its right pocket, and whereas a moment ago it had only four dollars, it now has eight—four dollars plus a certificate proving it has borrowed another four! So Colombia receives billions of dollars from the United States as part of Plan Colombia, and the Colombian government then lends the money back to itself. It plays the same game with its public health and pension funds. What’s going to happen when the government has to pay this money back?

But this doesn’t explain the whole story of Colombia’s spectacular growth. There is a much more important explanation: the agreement with the paramilitaries. Many have criticized this agreement, arguing that it amounts to an amnesty for crimes against humanity. But all of this discussion has obscured the economic essence of the agreement, which is to allow the legalization of billions of paramilitary narco-dollars. The paramilitaries finance not only their operations, but also their lifestyles with the country’s largest drug-trafficking operations.

Since negotiations between Uribe and the paramilitaries began, billions of dollars and euros in drug profits have entered Colombia. Throughout 2003, 2004 and the beginning of 2005, moreover, the paramilitaries exported a huge quantity of the cocaine they had stockpiled, knowing that anything sold prior to the amnesty would be pardoned under the peace agreement. This is the true cause of the enormous wave of speculation—a sea of illicit funds entering Colombia. And like an emperor of ancient Rome, Uribe was able to provide the populace with “bread and circuses” prior to the presidential elections of May 2006. Was Washington aware of this? Of course it was.

What is the primary objective of Plan Colombia?

Never before have drug traffickers had so much power in Colombia. Today they have penetrated the stock market, laundered their drug money in the form of treasury bonds and gained a foothold in the electoral process.

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that in 2005, $3 billion flowed through Colombia, with no record of how the money entered the country. No one planted money seeds and grew the $3 billion; this is just a portion of the billions of dollars and euros that the paramilitaries have laundered. Why does Washington, with its moral crusade, the War on Drugs, permit this? Because Colombia serves as its base for attacking the democratic processes taking place in neighboring countries.

This is the reality of U.S. intervention in Colombia. Colombia is becoming an eternal battleground, in order to secure the country as a base for operations for controlling Ecuador, Venezuela and possibly even Peru, Brazil and Bolivia. They say, “Have patience with Colombia; we’re heading to Venezuela and Ecuador! Be patient with Iraq; we’re on our way to Iran.”

In Colombia we are used to the fabrication of news that prevents us from seeing the reality that Uribe’s government reaps a harvest of terror; of 60 years of violence; of the killing of 4,000 trade unionists; of the destruction of workers’ rights; of the displacement of three million peasants from their land—and of transnational capital, which finds abundant cheap labor now that its trade unions have been violently destroyed.

In Colombia, however, there is also a democratic civil resistance that rejects the guerrillas’ methods and that is often, in fact, victimized by the guerrillas. It proposes a different country—one not ruled by drug barons, where food is secure and where the social movements that have resisted decades of terror have the political weight they deserve. Before paramilitary narco-dollars arrived, this civil resistance was able to elect the mayor of Bogotá and defeat a referendum in which Uribe sought to change the constitution to nullify our democratic rights. It has organized general strikes in December 2002 and October 2004; massive indigenous marches called “mingas”; and a popular consultation against the free-trade agreement in indigenous regions, in which more than 86 percent of the population voted.

Every day those of us in social movements risk our lives to change Colombia so that our country will stop moving against the grain of the rest of Latin America. Every day we risk our lives so that Colombia can be united with Venezuela and Ecuador, with what the MST (Movimiento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) is building in Brazil, with what the Uruguayans are doing, with what our people are doing these days in Los Angeles. The future of our country is in the balance.

NOTES

**Benevolence or Intervention? SpotLighting U.S. Soft Power**

1. References to the United States as an empire have found their way into mainstream discourse, as a recent NACLA Reportpoints out (“Empire and Dissent,” September/October 2005).


**Electoral Intervention in the Americas: Uneven and Unanticipated Results**


3. The first IMF agreement akin to this one was signed in South Korea in 1997 and included the IMF, the South Korean government and all presidential candidates.

**Democracy or Polyarchy?**
