Colombia: Don’t Call it a Model

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Ten years ago this week, President Bill Clinton signed into law a $1.3 billion package of mostly military aid, known as “Plan Colombia.” Today, Colombia often gets described as a “success” in Washington. Looked at more closely, though, Colombia’s security gains are partial, possibly reversible, and weighed down by “collateral damage.” What Colombia has done is worth learning from. But since it favors military force while neglecting both civilian governance and impunity, it is not a model to be applied in Afghanistan, Mexico, or anywhere else.

On Plan Colombia’s tenth anniversary, claims of “success” don’t stand up to scrutiny

(Original version from Colombia’s Web site: http://www.state.gov.jm/nmi/100572/aid_large.cgi) (Source data: http://justo.org/2007/aid_large.cgi) (Click to expand)

On July 13, 2000, President Bill Clinton signed into law a $1.3 billion plan of mostly military aid, known as “Plan Colombia,” that made Colombia by far the biggest U.S.-aid recipient outside the Middle East. Ten years later, Colombia often gets described as a “success” in Washington. Officials and analysts (http://www.state.gov/jm/100572/aid_large.cgi) point to improvements in several measures of security in the conflict-torn South American country. They give the credit to U.S. assistance and to President Álvaro Uribe, who took over in 2002 and implemented a hard-line security policy.

Looked at more closely, though, Colombia’s security gains are partial, possibly reversible, and weighed down by “collateral damage.” They have carried a great cost in lives and resources. Progress on security has been stagnating, and even reversing. Scandals show that the government carrying out these security policies has harmed human rights and democratic institutions. Progress against illegal drug supplies has been disappointing. And wealth is being concentrated in ever fewer hands.

What Colombia has done is worth learning from. But since it favors military force while neglecting both civilian governance and impunity, it is not a model to be applied in Afghanistan, Mexico, or anywhere else. Colombia’s new government and U.S. policymakers face an even more urgent need to change it.


- 15,817 homicides in 2009, down from 28,837 in 2002
- 213 kidnappings in 2009, down from 2,882 in 2002
- 486 “terrorist attacks” in 2009, down from 1,645 in 2002
- Estimated strength of FARC guerrillas: 8,000-10,000, down from 18,000-20,000 in 2002
- Number of soldiers, sailors, airmen and police: 446,638, up from 256,500 in 2000

When U.S. officials praise Colombia, they grade their own work. The United States has spent $7.3 billion (http://justo.org/2007/aid_large.cgi) on aid to the country since 2000, when Plan Colombia became law. This gives officials a strong incentive to emphasize the positive. Colombia, meanwhile, is one of few countries in Latin America today that actively seeks closer relations with the United States.

But some officials and analysts go too far. As Álvaro Uribe leaves office in August 2010, they see Colombia as a model for what the United States should be encouraging worldwide, especially in Afghanistan and Mexico.

- Visiting Bogotá in April, Defense Secretary Robert Gates called (http://www.panos.org/noticia.es/defensas--defensores-afganiates/12251.php) President Uribe “heroic” and said Colombia has become “a linchpin of security and prosperity in South America” and “a unique source of experience and expertise” for its neighbors’ security efforts.

http://www.wola.org/publications/colombia_dont_call_it_a_model
- Visiting Mexico that same month, former U.S. President Bill Clinton called for a “Plan Mexico” (http://www.scipio.com/archivos/1010/04/25/bill_clinton-squivos-un-plan-mexico-para-combatir-el-creci) along the lines of what was done with Colombia ten years earlier.
- “I see the same kinds of challenges in Afghanistan, and I also see them in Mexico,” said (http://www.usni.org/shipnews/story.asp?Id=123212313) Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen on a June 2010 visit to Colombia, adding, “And there's a great deal to be learned from the success that has been seen here in Colombia.”

The Colombian government’s U.S.-backed “Democratic Security” policy did bring security improvements. Tripling the military budget (http://www.cipco.org/?n=447), nearly doubling http://www.mindresor.gov.co/ciclo2004/mediaciones/Documentos/escenarios/estadisticas2004/Legos_de_la_Politica_de_Consolidacion_de_la_Seguridad_Democratica.pdf, the size of the security forces, deploying them throughout the national territory, and using citizens as paid informants http://www.jesico.eit.co/d/index.php?fecha=2006) reduced homicides, kidnappings, transportation disruptions and acts of sabotage. The FARC and ELN guerrilla groups (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and National Liberation Army, both founded in 1964) are weaker and less numerous now than they were in 2002. Pre-government paramilitary groups, whose national umbrella organization demobilized by 2006, kill fewer people than they did a decade ago. Foreign investors, especially in extractive industries, have been attracted by the improved security climate. In a region where most countries’ violence measures are going the wrong way, Colombia’s approach looks attractive.

But “Democratic Security” is not a model to be replicated elsewhere. Its flaws are severe, even tragic. Holding up Colombia as a “model” is both superficial and dangerous.

“Success” has come at a very high cost

(Click to expand) (http://just.org/files/images/100701_combat_large.png)

First of all, the human and financial cost of prolonged war has been staggering. In early 2002, a three-year attempt to negotiate with the guerrillas collapsed – an outcome for which the FARC and ELN share the blame – and Alvaro Uribe was swept into office on a promise to intensify the war.

Eight years later, according to official figures, combat has killed (http://www.cicop.org/?n=1471) 21,000 soldiers, police, guerrillas and paramilitaries. Human rights groups estimate (http://www.coluristas.org/Portales/vida_06_08.pdf) that conflict-related violence killed another 14,000 civilian non-combatants – whether innocent victims or people denied due process – between 2002 and 2008. (Combat not involving the security forces – guerrilla-paramilitary, guerrilla-guerrilla, and paramilitary-paramilitary – probably killed a few thousand more during this period.)

Increasing the security forces’ size and capabilities over 2000 levels, meanwhile, has cost Colombia an additional $40-50 billion over the past decade. This opportunity cost has undermined Colombia’s competitiveness. Had that money been invested in education and infrastructure, Colombia today could both alongside Chile and Brazil as a regional economic powerhouse poised to play a greater global role.

Parapolitics: death-squad sponsors in power

While Colombia has made security gains, its democratic institutions and respect for human rights have been under siege. A critical example is a scandal that Colombians simply call “parapolitics.”

Since the 1980s, political http://www.hn.org/en/node/78372) killed tens of thousands of non-combatants in the 1990s and early 2000s. The paramilitaries’ onslaught, marked by hundreds of gruesome massacres and mass graves, caused them to surpass the guerrillas and the armed forces as Colombia’s worst human rights violators.

The paramilitaries could not have functioned without support from the politicians who held local power. Evidence, much of it from former paramilitary leaders, has brought a cascade of criminal investigations http://www.colombiatribunal.com/a/paramilitaristacion_of legislators, governors, mayors and other officials, who made common cause with the far-right warlords.

As of November 2009, of the 268 congresspeople and senators elected in 2006:

- 43 were under official investigation,
- 13 were on trial, and
- 12 had been convicted for parapolitics.

This total (68) is equivalent to 25% of the entire Congress. Eight were opposition legislators; the remaining 60 made up about 38% of the entire pro-government bloc.

Those embroiled in parapolitics include the President’s cousin, former Senator Mario Uribe; the brother of his former foreign minister, former Senator Álvaro Araujo; the brother of the current interior minister, former Medellin Chief Prosecutor Guillermo Valencia; and political supporters whom the President had named to Colombia’s ambassador to Chile and the Dominican Republic. The problem continues today: In March 2010, a pro-government party closely linked to the “para-politicians,” the National Integration Party (http://www.semanah.com/noticias/actividad-politica/pnpartido-sombraro/136373.aspx) or PIN, won nine Senate seats and as many as twelve House seats in legislative elections (the final count is not complete). It will be the fourth or fifth largest party in Colombia’s 2010-2014 Congress.

It is positive that Colombia’s justice system has been slowly but actively investigating “parapolitics” allegations. But the investigators from Colombia’s Supreme Court are forced to work in the face of near-constant aggression from the President and his inner circle. Intimidation has included wiretaps and surveillance (http://www.semanah.com/noticias/actividad-politica/pnpartido-sombraro/136373.aspx) from the presidential intelligence service (discussed below); public attacks from President Uribe himself, including a bizarre incident (http://www.semanah.com/col/t/actualidad.aspx?id=119878), in which the President used accusations from a paramilitary...
witness, who later retracted himself, to attack the chief parapolitics investigator; and even a disturbing meeting
http://www.semana.com/noticias/gobierno/manuel-santos/14756.html, in the Colombian presidential palace between
presidential advisors and paramilitary emissaries offering to wiretap and discredit Supreme Court parapolitics
investigators.

“Justice and Peace”: a founding transitional justice process

[Click to expand] http://justf.org/files/images/100792.jpg_large.jpg

Between 2002 and 2006, the Colombian government negotiated a deal that secured the demobilization of the
largest paramilitary organization, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia or AUC. The resulting “Justice and Peace”
process, begun in July 2005, was to offer demobilized paramilitary leaders light jail sentences in
exchange for full confessions and repARATION of victims.

This has not happened. Until June 29, 2010, when the first two sentences
http://www.google.com/hostednews/ugapicicle/Nc/s=caefc22e3030e0839c1a7fe1vEhivx2ADSCLAIPEU.png were handed out (and could still be appealed), this very slow process had yet to convict a single paramilitary leader for human rights crimes, and has almost completely failed to return land and property the paramilitaries stole from hundreds of thousands of families.

Despite these glaring shortcomings, U.S. and Colombian officials frequently bill the “Justice and Peace” process as a success. The paramilitary confessions that have gone forward have clarified many crimes, even if they remain to be tried and punished. It also sharply decreased the paramilitaries’ killings of civilian non-combatants.
A big exception, though, are those victims who have organized to demand the return of stolen land. Forty-five of them have been murdered http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/justicia/ya-han-45-los-fieles-de-victimas-asesinados-por-reclamar-sus-terras/7737821 since 2005.

“False positives”: killing civilians to boost body counts

With paramilitaries playing a smaller role, Colombia’s armed forces assumed far greater responsibility for the
anti-guerrilla campaign. Almost immediately, the number of human rights abuses attributed directly to Colombia’s
military shot upward.

While ardently supporting the armed forces, President Uribe pushed them hard for results against guerrillas. The most easily measured result has been “body counts” – the number killed in combat. Colombia’s defense ministry set up a system to count incentives for soldiers – special recognitions, leave time, promotions – and normal incentives, http://www.lasizavasaca.com/noticias/23575; for civilian informants to reward body counts. The army chief in the mid-2000s, Gen. Mario Montoya, visited brigades throughout the country extorting troops to produce “liters of bodies,” http://www.lasizavasaca.com/noticias/14059.

By 2005, human rights groups and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
http://www.hchr.org/EN/ES/20050720164500/investigacion/detenciones-2005.html were observing a very
disturbing phenomenon: an increase in complaints about civilian non-combatants being killed, their bodies later
dressed in camouflage uniforms and presented as those of armed-group members killed in combat. By 2007, Colombia’s human rights groups had counted http://www.lasizavasaca.com/noticias/955 cases of extrajudicial executions by the armed forces since 2002, including these so-called “false positives” (a Colombian term meaning, basically, falsified results against armed groups).

Human rights groups’ efforts to document “false positives” earned them extreme hostility from President Uribe, who had famously called them “spokespeople for terrorism”
http://www.presidente.gov.co/press/na/na/2005/3/sep/09/130892003.html; in a September 2003 speech before the military high command. Uribe and his defense minister, president-elect Juan Manuel Santos, insisted that human rights groups’ complaints owed to a guerrilla plot to undermine the armed forces with NGO surrogates’ trumped-up allegations.

“The guerrillas have another strategy,” President Uribe http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2007/10/18/colombia71731.html in July 2007. “Every time there is a casualty in the guerrillas, they immediately mobilize their chorus leaders in the country and abroad to say that it was an extrajudicial execution.” He repeated
http://www.presidente.gov.co/press/na/na/2007/12/17/1701272002.html, three charge months later in a speech before the OAS
Inter-American Human Rights Commission. In 2006, Defense Minister Santos called

As these words were making human rights defenders’ work more dangerous, the allegations continued to mount. Finally, late in 2008, the “false positives” scandal became too shocking to continue denying or ignoring. In September of that year, families http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/2008/08/15/47562-ja-luciano-de-sus-madres-de-soacha.html, of 19 young men who had disappeared from Soacha, a poor Bogotá suburb, http://www.presidente.gov.co/press/na/na/2007/12/17/1701272002.html discovered,http://www.presidente.gov.co/press/na/na/2007/12/17/1701272002.html, that their loved ones had been buried hundreds of miles away by the armed forces, which claimed to have killed them in combat. It turned out that the men had been http://www.ambest.org.org/la/asset/A/378277; http://www.ambest.org.org/la/asset/A/378277;/;http://www.ambest.org.org/la/asset/A/378277;6-434-af74-20087797990870010en.html, by the promise of gainful employment, taken to a combat zone and killed, their bodies presented as those of combatants in order to win rewards for the soldiers who killed them.

By late last year, Colombia’s Prosecutor-General was investigating 1,302 cases of extrajudicial killings by the security forces, with 2,177 victims. Most are since 2002.

While the Soacha case horrified the country, the extent of “false positives” killings is far greater. As of November 2009, the State Department
http://www.state.gov/g/drl/hrp/2009/wha/134106.html, Colombia’s Prosecutor-
General’s office (Fiscalía) was investigating 1,302 cases of extrajudicial killings by the security forces in nearly
every corner of the country, with 2,177 victims. While these 1,302 cases go back to 1995, at least 1,000 of them
http://www.pueblassolidario.org/index.php?option=com_agenda&ag=15&art=2009_02_file=13002006pdf are from 2002 – the year the U.S.-
backed “Democratic Security” policy was launched – or later. “There have been too many killings of a similar
nature to characterize them as isolated incidents carried out by individual rogue soldiers or units, or bad
The DAS: an intelligence service out of control

Similarly shocking have been the *juicios de acusación* (http://www.cipol.org.co/?s=115) of criminal activity, collusion with paramilitaries, illegal surveillance and intimidation carried out by the Administrative Department for Security (DAS), the Colombian President’s intelligence service or secret police. This troubled agency, a longtime U.S. aid recipient (http://el-nacional.com/www/elp_contenido.php?nodo=0298240Internacional/EE-UU-enfoca%20fiscalizaci%C3%B3n_de_Colombia.phtml), has become a byword for lies and deceit, appearing to have been wildly out of control and used for evil purposes, severely undermining the Colombian government’s security gains.

President Uribe’s first DAS director, Jorge Noguera (http://www.cipol.org.co/?s=197), allegedly shared information about military operations with the AUC paramilitaries’ Northern Bloc, among other paramilitary and narco-trafficking organizations. This included giving the paramilitaries lists of labor leaders, human rights defenders and other opposition figures to kill; some of those orders (http://www.ahistoria.com/ELN/Mercenarios/GaleriaDe Fotos/copiaras.aspx) were brutally carried out. Today, Jorge Noguera, who served over three years as chief of presidential intelligence, is on trial for aggravated homicide (http://www.elsanremo.com/noticias/nacion/respuesta/1731810.aspx).

The presidential intelligence agency was keeping records of human rights defenders’ families’ movements – even their children’s school pickup times, complete with photographs.

Noguera’s departure did not end the problems at the DAS. In early 2009 Colombians were scandalized by new revelations (http://www.cipol.org.co/?s=572) that the security agency carried out a campaign of wiretaps and surveillance against dozens of human rights defenders, independent journalists, opposition politicians and even Supreme Court justices, especially those investigating “parapolitics.” Leading human rights defenders were terrified (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/17/world/americas/17colombia.html) to learn that the presidential intelligence agency had been compiling thousands of hours of recordings of their phone conversations, archiving all of their email, and keeping records of their families’ movements – even their children’s school pickup times, complete with photographs. One human rights NGO worker found in her file a series of photos of every card in her wallet, laid out on her office desktop – though her wallet was never stolen.

New DAS documents (http://usist.org/content/the-worse-watergate) from the mid-2000s, which emerged in early 2010, reveal a strategy of “political warfare” (http://www.cipol.org.co/?s=1467) against the government’s political adversaries. With a series of colorfully named operations (“Amazonas,” “Transmilenio,” “Halloween”), the documents lay out plans for smear campaigns against journalists, human rights workers, leading opposition politicians, and international organizations. The DAS efforts to “neutralize their influence” included spreading false allegations of guerrilla ties, corruption and adultery; acts of petty sabotage to complicate their work; and efforts to deny targets’ U.S. visa approvals.

Judicial investigators still haven’t been able to determine how high the DAS scandal goes: what President Uribe and his closest advisors knew, and when they knew it. The Prosecutor-General’s Office has concluded (http://www.elsanremo.com/noticias/nacion/opera-circulo/139290.aspx) that the intelligence agency’s orders came from the highest levels (http://www.elsanremo.com/noticias/nacion/opera-circulo/139290.aspx) of the president’s office. Prosecutors have called on some of the President’s closest aids to testify (http://www.elsanremo.com/noticias/nacion/buenaventura-marco-marla-del-clar-burdo-interrogatorio-seguridades-legales/135015.aspx) about their possible roles.

The DAS scandal, along with aggressive efforts to slow investigations into “parapolitics” and “false positives,” show important elements of the executive operating outside the law, with contempt for those who would hold it accountable. The President’s leader with the country’s top court, whose justices he has accused of being “obstinate” (http://www.elsanremo.com/noticias/obstinato-juez/208652-de-acuerdo-agario) “funding themselves” (http://www.presidencia.gov.co/es/2008/10/26/20200826.html) to terrorism, and “trafficicking in witnesses” (http://web.presidencia.gov.co/es/2008/08/25/1252008.html), are extremely serious and have left the government gridlocked. At a time when criminal investigations are critically important, the country has spent a year without a chief prosecutor for lack of executive-judicial consensus on candidates.

Though it brought security gains, Colombia’s model came with a disregard for human rights and a stubborn resistance to checks on power. “Parapolitics,” “false positives” and the DAS revelations strongly undermine claims that Colombia’s experience has been a “success.”

A misguided drug strategy, only now beginning to change

As strategy shifted in Colombia, both coca eradication and coca cultivation declined in 2009. (Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime.)

Charts of coca and cocaine production in the Andean region show drug supplies to be remarkably resilient despite U.S. efforts.
Success has also eluded efforts to achieve Plan Colombia’s main initial goal: reducing Colombian cocaine supplies. Between the mid-1990s and the late 2000s, the U.S. and Colombian governments believed that aerially spraying herbicides over fields of coca, the plant used to make cocaine, would reduce drug supplies. They were wrong.

In 1999, the year before Plan Colombia began, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) measured http://www.uncod.org/documents/monitoring/index.html 160,100 hectares of coca (1 hectare = 2.5 acres) planted in Colombia, which were used to make 680 tons of cocaine. By 2007 – after the aerial eradication of a million hectares of coca – that number had dropped to 99,000. But Colombia’s coca acreage had dropped only slightly (600 tons).

Faced with fumigation, coca-growing families, with no other way to make a living in stateless areas, adjusted their cultivation patterns to make similar amounts of cocaine. The policy proved not only to be cruel – spraying chemicals over rural households, usually with no-food security or development assistance – but the numbers showed it to be ineffective, too.

Starting in 2007, the U.S. and Colombian governments began shifting strategy http://justinfo.org/content/after-plan-colombia, putting less emphasis on spraying herbicides from overhead and more emphasis on increasing the civilian government’s on-the-ground presence in coca-growing zones. Aerial fumigation fell by 38 percent from 2006 to 2009. This strategic shift appears to be reducing coca cultivation, for now at least. In 2009 – a year in which both aerial and manual eradication dropped sharply – the UNODC found http://www.mindeforca.gov.co/portalMindefarea7/vis LATIN/index.php?l=es&id=54514 InitialNoteFirstLevel-Baseurl-WDE1277901897386 a significant drop in Colombian coca-growing, to 68,000 hectares.

While this is encouraging, it is clearly not an argument for forced eradication. Instead, it is an argument for helping Colombia establish enough state presence in coca-growing zones to support a legal economy, while providing food security and other alternatives to households that had previously engaged in coca cultivation. In the past two years or so, Colombia has made incipient progress along these lines, but it has a very long way to go.

In the Andes as a whole, the picture is still grim. Coca production has increased somewhat in Bolivia, and substantially in Peru. Adding all three countries together yields about the same amount of coca production between 2003 and 2009 (a bit over 150,000 hectares). UN estimates of total coca tonnage produced in the Andes have not declined either: from 825 tons in 1999 to a range http://www.unodc.org/documents/monitoring/index.html 842-1,111 tons last year. The Southern Command, meanwhile, offers http://www.soucom.mil/library/2010/dynamics/coca cultivation/ trends-in-the-andean-countries.html a still higher estimate of Andean cocaine production: “1,250-1,500 metric tons of cocaine per year around the region.”

While Mexican cartels have grabbed most of the cocaine transshipment market, Colombia’s narco-criminals remain wealthy and politically powerful. The last decade saw Colombia’s drug trade reconfigure. Instead of the old model of large cartels, today’s drug organizations http://www.cicj.org/cicj/newsarchive.html?c=1966 are small armies with low-profile leaders, controlling key narco-trafficking checkpoints and maintaining ties with specific Mexican drug-trafficking organizations.


All seek to penetrate and corrupt the government. While the “parapolitics” scandal revealed the extent of this penetration, links between organized crime and local power have not been severed. (The PIN party’s strong showing in March 2010 legislative elections, discussed above, is evidence of this.) Meanwhile, Colombia’s narco-mafias continue to supply U.S. and European addicts’ demand as well as ever.

The rich-poor divide widens

Though they saw security gains, the “Plan Colombia” and “Democratic Security” years were marked by a worsening of Colombia’s already stark social inequalities.

As elsewhere in Latin America, economic growth has been strong in the past several years, and the rising tide has lifted nearly all boats. But the boats of the poor have only budged slightly, while those of the wealthy are in the stratosphere.


But unemployment http://www.dote.gov.co/dote揆征_VIS/index.php?l=es&id=54514 InitialNoteFirstLevel-Baseurl-WDE1277901897386 increased from 14.5 percent in May 2002, declined only to 12.1 percent in May 2010. Underemployment – people working insufficient hours or in the informal sector – fell only from 35.4 percent to 32.8 percent in that period. The http://www.eclare.org/pcp-bin/pcl/pclPob.php?year=2010&do=comunicaciones/xml/037860P37860.xml&ext=ids/pclpdfextbase/pclpob-bottom.xml has decreased from 51.5 percent in 2002 to 42.8 percent in 2008, but in a region that has had a prosperous eight years, this decline is less http://www.washingtongovern.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/14181/037860.xml&ext=ids/pclpdfextbase/pclpob-bottom.xml than those of neighbors like Peru, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama.

http://www.wola.org/publications/colombia_dont_call_it_a_model
The "extreme poverty" or indifference rate – those unable even to meet their most basic needs – hasn’t changed (24.8 percent in 2002; 22.9 percent in 2008). Though estimates are inexact, in rural areas – where 0.4 of landholders control 61.2 percent of landholdings – the poverty rate remains exceedingly high. It dropped perhaps 6.1 percent between 2000 and 2008, when Colombia’s poverty rates (left) fell from the upper to the lower 60 percent range between 2002 and 2009.

When Plan Colombia and "Democratic Security" were launched, Colombia was already one of the most economically unequal countries on earth. Whether measured by GINI coefficient or the ratio between the income of the richest and poorest ten percent, Colombia ranked near the bottom. Eight years later, much of the hemisphere has made strides toward greater income equality, but Colombia’s inequality measures have worsened.

Only three countries in Latin America have grown less equal economically since 2002, according to the UN Economic Commission on Latin America: they are Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. While the poorest Colombians are often some of the most grateful for the security gains of the past several years, they have been left behind in the economic growth that resulted.

**Progress has stagnated as the strategy reaches its limits**

Finally, and despite these costs, the Colombian government’s security gains are stagnating. Independent security analysts, including Colombia’s Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris (http://www.semana.com/noticias-conflicto-armado/seguridad-democratica-logo-su-techo-aro-iris/131787.aspx), think-tank and the International Committee of the Red Cross (http://www.redcross.org/Weborg/peaceconflicts/reliefcoltp_20010211) (ICRC), found a modest but worrying rise in guerrilla attacks and activity since 2008, the high-water-mark year of the “Democratic Security” strategy. “What we see today, perhaps between the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2010,” said http://www.icrc.org/eng/ourWork/committee/lower_pages/100918a.pdf, "is the FARC as a guerrilla group have adapted dynamically and once again have a capability, as we have seen in the last two or three months, to continue being an important actor in the armed conflict.”

![](http://wola.org/publications/colombia_dont_call_it_a_model/10070_homicides_large.png)

At least 9,000 FARC and ELN guerrillas and a similar number of “new” paramilitaries persist in remote areas, urban slums, and along key strategic corridors. They carry out ambushes, lay IEDs and landmines, recruit children, and launch other attacks throughout the country on a daily basis – usually, though, in more remote areas than before.

Guerrillas’ destructive persistence is only part of the security story. Networks of criminal groups and gangs, most the direct threats (http://www.hv.org/en/opinion/2010/12/05/paramilitaries-have-0.html) of the old paramilitary groups and all funded by the drug trade, are growing rapidly and have caused the murder rate to increase in several important areas. One of them is the city of Medellín, hailed for its dramatic mid-2000s reductions in crime, where the murder rate doubled http://www.elsريع/lima/default.asp?Id=9589963725.00.html, from 2008 to 2009 – and so far, it worse http://www.elcolombiano.com/ElColombiano/urgen_medidas_de_choque_pares_seguridad_de_medellin/urgen_medidas_de_choque_para_seguridad_de_medellin.aspx, Murders are also rising, less though sharply, in Bogotá http://www.diputado.co/bogota/articulo/ARTICULO-WEB-PARLAMENTA-3OTDA.INTERNDES.714488.html.

Nationwide, the murder picture is mixed but worrisome. Colombia’s National Police found http://www.mindefensa.gov.co/portalMindefensa/?NavegadorTema=reporte/03016/0112277C005309064518.html that “A very slight reduction in homicides between 2008 and 2009, from 16,140 to 15,817. However, the national coroner’s office (Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses) is sounding the alarm http://www.terraco.com/Noticias/articulo/31242_homicidios-en-colombia-aumentaron-16-por-ciento-en-2009.html about a 16 percent http://www.medicinalegal.gov.co/trivia/05/05/2009.html increase in homicides, after six straight years of decline, from 15,250 in 2008 to 17,717. This is the highest number the agency has measured since 2005.

The data show violence dropping rapidly at first, only to settle for the past few years at a level that remains unacceptably high.

Other measures of violence, like forced displacements and threats http://www.colombiadesfenders.org/ against human rights defenders, failed to improve during the years of security “success.” Internal displacement – basically, refugees who do not cross borders – continues to make Colombia one of the hemisphere’s principal humanitarian emergencies. 286,369 people http://www.codhes.org/imagenes/pdfs/formula%20de%20la%20CBA%203078.pdf were newly forced from their homes in 2009, according to CODHES, the Colombian NGO that monitors the phenomenon. While this was the lowest amount of new displacement measured in three years, it was still about the same as the 288,127 COAHES recorded in 1999, before Plan Colombia began. Since 2002, 2.4 million (CODHES estimate) or 2.2 million people (government estimate) http://www.coleccionismo.org/colombia/codhes/5.html were internally displaced people is the second largest in the world http://www.interinmigref.org/80F25708EF54E5E08/interPages/0289DCE2E19066DAM023708B35504873?OpenDocument&count=100 after.
Sudan.

Even in areas of significant progress, the data show violence dropping rapidly at first, only to settle for the past few years at a level that remains unacceptably high. Plan Colombia and “Democratic Security” privileged military and police capabilities over other facets of governance, and now it looks like Colombia has reached the limits of what a military strategy can achieve on its own.

The far-off goal: a strong state without impunity

Words like “success” and “model” are unhelpful to understanding Colombia’s experience. It has come with too many scandals, abuses, disappointments and high costs to be considered a template for other troubled states receiving U.S. assistance, like Mexico or Afghanistan.

It does offer some key lessons, though, for any effort to build a strong state governed by the rule of law. A growing consensus contends that Colombia – as well as other countries with vast “ungoverned spaces” – needs to create a credible state presence throughout the national territory. Colombia makes clear that this state presence must be more than just a military footprint, and that it must come without impunity: it does no good to introduce a government if that government’s representatives need not fear any punishment for abusing human rights, engaging in corruption or organized crime, or otherwise mistreating the population.

Colombia’s experience offers some important lessons. But copying its model elsewhere would be disastrous.

Plan Colombia, and especially “Democratic Security,” focused on strengthening state presence. But they focused almost exclusively on the presence of part of the state: the part that wears a uniform. Military, and usually police, capabilities were strengthened throughout Colombia’s territory, but those of the rest of the government – road-builders, land-tillers, healthcare workers, teachers, judges – lagged behind.

This unbalanced approach reduced several key measures of insecurity. But these have begun to stagnate at unacceptably high levels. The need to civilianize the strategy and deliver public goods other than security is becoming increasingly evident.

In the name of “consolidation,” Colombia is beginning to move in this direction, with a plan to build full state presence in several key zones where none has existed. While this plan has brought at least short-term reductions in coca-growing, its success will require it to be truly civilian, coordinated with civil society, and accompanied by a long-term commitment.

As for the other crucial ingredient – impunity – the past several years have seen very few steps forward. Colombia has witnessed a string of scandals that remain to be investigated and punished, its human rights situation remains very troubled, and its judicial system has been battered by years of fighting to maintain its independence.

A bit of what was done in Colombia can be rescued and applied elsewhere. Making at least part of the state’s authority felt in ungoverned territories, and weakening illegal armed groups, were important. But Plan Colombia and “Democratic Security” came at a high cost in lives and resources, only did part of the job, are yielding diminishing returns, and have left important institutions weaker. Colombia’s experience offers some important lessons. But copying its model elsewhere would be disastrous.