

10-1-1999

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### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Colombian President Pastrana Looks for International Aid." (1999). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12691>

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## Colombian President Pastrana Looks for International Aid

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 1999-10-01

Colombian President Andres Pastrana took his Plan Colombia to Washington, DC, in September. The plea for international financial assistance to combat Colombia's myriad problems, including a guerrilla war and drug trafficking, received some support but also increased concerns about growing US involvement in Colombia.

Before leaving for the US, Pastrana unveiled for Colombians the ambitious US\$7.5 billion plan. With the country suffering the worse economic recession since the 1930s, financing the plan will be difficult. Pastrana said other countries have contributed too little to helping Colombia fight the international drug problem. "Colombia has paid a truly disproportionate price, and unjust, I would say, in lives and resources," he said.

Pastrana targeted the aid at "approximately US\$1.2 billion a year over the next three years." Colombia would provide \$4 billion. The aid being sought from the US is five times the US\$289 million authorized for 1998. Pastrana goes to US Pastrana outlined his plan at a speech to the UN General Assembly Sept. 20. He then went to Washington hoping to convince President Clinton and Congress that pouring significant additional money into Colombia would make a difference.

Despite the plea for massive aid, Pastrana denied his government is threatened. "Our problems are big," Pastrana said. "But talk of a government in jeopardy, of a nation on the brink of collapse, or...of guerrillas who are on the outskirts of Bogota is hardly what is happening in Colombia." Pastrana said the faltering peace negotiations were just one leg of a strategy that will also focus on economic recovery, strengthening the military, investing in poverty-stricken regions, and reforming the justice system.

The president defended his efforts to end the guerrilla war, including ceding a large area to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), saying the peace process "requires time, patience, and above all faith, but also the understanding of the international community."

Pastrana seemed frustrated with the lack of emphasis in Washington on social development, crop substitution, and trade programs. Addressing the Colombian-American Association, Pastrana said that Colombia seeks more international trade. "If we are given...access to open and fair markets, we will be able to overcome our present economic difficulties by generating new growth and creating new jobs," Pastrana said.

### *"Narcoguerrillas" become target*

Strongly contributing to the growing crisis in Colombia is the increase in drug production despite an expanded and more expensive US-funded eradication program. The US more than doubled its aid in the 1999 fiscal year, but coca cultivation increased, especially in the southern province of

Putumayo. US government sources say coca hectares expanded by nearly 30% last year (see NotiSur, 1999-03-05).

A US delegation visiting Colombia in August expressed the administration's concern that Pastrana did not have a coherent strategy for stemming the drug trade and containing the growing rebel threat. Republicans in Congress and the Colombian military see a close link between the two issues, claiming that Colombia's guerrilla groups are really "narcoguerrillas" heavily involved in the drug trade.

Pastrana's plan makes it clear that US military aid will go toward military solutions in Colombia, whether to drug- trafficking or guerrilla operations, and the US will have a more difficult time maintaining its official position that it only funds anti-narcotics operations. The sharp increase in aid would come despite concern, even within President Bill Clinton's administration, that it could escalate the civil war and lead to greater US intervention.

### *Human rights abuses remain a concern*

Until recently, Washington restricted aid to the Colombian army, whose human rights record has been among the worst in the hemisphere for the past decade. In addition, some in Washington believe that senior army officers are involved in the drug trade and are tied to paramilitaries.

Most US assistance went to the Colombian National Police (CNP) which has a better human rights record. But the police cannot take on the guerrillas by themselves, say Clinton's anti-drug czar Barry McCaffrey, top officers in the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), and Republican lawmakers. They support increased aid to Colombia's military, as well as the CNP (see NotiSur, 1999-08-06).

In a report on his August visit to Colombia, McCaffrey said the country faces "an enormous crisis" because guerrilla and paramilitary groups "are attacking democracy, in large part financed by drug-trafficking." McCaffrey says it is the US's responsibility "to give the army and the police in Colombia the resources they need" to confront these threats.

The Pentagon, however, has reservations about deeper involvement in Colombia. The dangers of a stronger US role became evident in July when a US spy plane crashed into a mountainside, killing five US soldiers and two Colombians (see NotiSur, 1999-07-30). Questions persist regarding improvements on the human rights front.

Responding to complaints of military ties to paramilitary groups, Pastrana recently fired Brig. Gen. Alberto Bravo, the third general he has fired since taking office 13 months ago. The UN had accused Bravo of failing to prevent paramilitaries from killing 36 villagers in August in an area under his command.

Federal human rights ombud Jose Castro considers the human rights training now given soldiers useful but called for tougher action against the paramilitary groups. "We helped develop the plan, and we're working with the Colombians" on the best way to channel US aid, said Peter Romero, acting assistant secretary of state for Western Hemispheric affairs, who said future aid would include measures to ensure that human rights concerns were met.

### *Aid to go to special units*

Pastrana said military aid and training would be channeled mainly to special units being created to fight guerrillas who support the drug trade. Pastrana launched the first elite US-trained army anti-drug unit Sept. 14. Both the 1,000-member battalion and a special forces unit also commissioned by the president have been training at Tolemaida under the guidance of US Special Forces advisers. Defense Minister Luis Fernando Ramirez said Colombia hopes to create four more anti-drug battalions over the next three years and to double its contingent of 2,500 navy and army troops now fighting drug traffickers and guerrillas along the country's rivers.

Pastrana said he would not ask the US for sophisticated attack or transport helicopters, but that Colombia will seek US authorization to buy as many as 15 aircraft with their own funds. The shift could mean less scrutiny on the Colombian military's use of the helicopters as gunships against the guerrillas. The US recently delivered six UH-1H helicopters to Colombia. US aid or intervention? US officials have made several trips to Latin America in recent months and warned that the Colombian insurgency is on the verge of spreading to neighboring countries.

Most Latin American leaders have strongly opposed any military action by the US or a multinational force in Colombia. Colombia has said it appreciates solidarity in the peace process but would under no circumstances allow foreign intervention. But some experts say foreign intervention is already a reality, given the large amount of US military aid already authorized and the promise of much more to come, plus increasing numbers of US military trainers on the ground.

### *Aid requests still unclear*

On Sept. 29, the State Department said the administration would "soon" send Congress a proposal for additional aid to Colombia in the neighborhood of US\$1.5 billion. Romero said, "We are working as quickly as possible" to send the package to Congress. The House International Relations Committee issued a statement from chair Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-NY) rejecting increased military aid until government access is restored to the "Switzerland-sized demilitarized zone ceded to narcoterrorists."

Little time remains in the current legislative session and any aid measure might have to wait until 2000. Gilman said Congress will want to know where the money is coming from and what are the specific objectives for the money. [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 09/19/99; Reuters, 09/14/99, 09/20/99; The New York Times, 09/15/99, 09/21/99; Associated Press, 09/15/99, 09/17/99, 09/20/99, 09/23/99; Inter Press Service, The Financial Times (London), 09/23/99; Spanish news service EFE, 09/17/99, 09/29/99; The Miami Herald, 09/23/99, 09/28/99, 09/30/99]

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