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U.S. to Boost Aid Package for Colombia

by LADB Staff
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The administration of US President Bill Clinton is asking Congress to increase aid to Colombia by US$1.28 billion to help combat drug trafficking, revitalize the economy, and carry out judicial and other reforms. While both the administration and the Republican-controlled Congress are committed to up the aid, human rights groups are concerned that the money will increase US involvement in Colombia's civil war and will mean more human rights violations by security forces.

"Strengthening stability and democracy in Colombia, and fighting the drug trade there, is in our fundamental national interest," Clinton said on Jan. 11.

"We must and we will intensify this vital work." Secretary of State Madeleine Albright will fly to Colombia this weekend to explain the package. Albright said the money would be used against drug trafficking and to further democracy and economic stability, and she warned that the funds could not be diverted to other uses such as fighting the guerrillas. "This program is specifically directed against the narcotrafficking and trying to make sure that the eradication programs go forward," Albright said.

Colombia receives the third-largest amount of US foreign aid, behind Egypt and Israel. It received nearly US$300 million last year and more than US$200 million has already been earmarked in the current budget. With the money previously allotted, the two-year package would total US$1.6 billion and shows strong support for the administration of Colombian President Andres Pastrana, who said in September the nation would need US$3.5 billion in outside assistance to confront its myriad problems (see NotiSur, 1999-10-01).

"We are very pleased with the decision of President Clinton," said Pastrana after the announcement in Washington. He said the aid is "recognition that drug trafficking is a world problem and requires countries that produce drugs and consumer countries to share the responsibility."

Pastrana's popularity has declined since he was elected by a large margin 18 months ago, in part because he has been unable to reach a peace accord with rebel groups or to stop drug trafficking.

Despite massive aid, drug production is up
Despite the US$289 million in US aid last year, mainly for counternarcotics efforts, the amount of hectares planted with drug crops rose nearly 11%, Colombia's National Police said. The US estimates that Colombia's cocaine production has doubled in the last four years.

Colombia's military say the drug trade has become the "center of gravity" for the rebel Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), whose alliance with drug traffickers brings them an average US$290 million a year. "The guerrillas are an army and they draw their sustainment and support from narcotraffickers in large measure," Gen. Charles Wilhelm, chief of the US Army's Southern Command, said during a December visit to the Tres Esquinas military base in Caqueta.
Tres Esquinas is the base for the Colombian army's new 950-member elite anti-drug battalion, trained and equipped by US Special Forces and supplied with 18 UH-1N "Superhuey" helicopters.

The new aid will provide another 60 combat helicopters. Spending for military equipment and "state building" More than half the proposed aid will be included in a White House request for a supplemental appropriation for this fiscal year, with the remainder to be part of the FY2001 budget scheduled to be sent to Congress Feb. 7.

Most of the money, including the approximately 80% that would go for military equipment, would be directed by the State Department, not the Pentagon. But the Pentagon would receive US$144 million to help train two additional anti-narcotics battalions, which would operate in southern Colombia.

Pastrana has said that no counternarcotics program will work unless farmers have viable alternatives to growing crops for drugs such as coca and poppy. Under the Clinton proposal, spending on alternative crop development would increase from about US$2 million to US$145 million. In what the administration calls "state building" and an "integrated comprehensive package," money is also earmarked for protecting human rights workers and training judges and prosecutors. Funding will also go to revitalize the economy, now in severe recession.

**Opponents cite risks of escalating involvement**

Congressional debate is expected to start in early February. Republicans support increased drug-fighting money for Colombia, but they want it to go to the police, while the administration prefers the spending be spread over a range of programs, as requested by the Colombian government. Any monies going to the military will be closely scrutinized by congressional Democrats, who already have banned US aid to military units suspected of human rights violations.

And, some Democrats cautioned that the administration's strategy would require many more years and billions of dollars with no guarantee that the US could avoid being drawn into the civil war. "Everyone wants to stop the flow of illegal drugs into the United States, but we have spent billions trying to do that, and the flow has gotten worse, not better," said Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT).

"What we are seeing is a dramatic ratcheting up of a counterinsurgency policy in the name of counterdrug policy." At the heart of opposition to increased aid is whether the US assessment that the guerrillas are heavily involved in drug trafficking is fact or a pretext to become more involved in the civil war.

Also at issue are the effectiveness of US anti-drug efforts and human rights abuses by security forces. "More weapons and more soldiers have not, and cannot, defeat the source of illegal narcotics," said Winifred Tate of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). "Military assistance as proposed by the Clinton administration ...threatens to directly implicate the US in brutal counterinsurgency campaigns."

US officials insist they have no intention of getting involved in Colombia's civil war. But a June General Accounting Office (GAO) report said US authorities now "routinely" share intelligence with
the Colombian military on guerrilla movements in the south "to plan counternarcotics operations in an area controlled by the insurgents."

Victor Ricardo, government peace commissioner who is leading peace talks with the FARC, doubts the US description of the rebels as "narcoguerrillas." "I do not share the US vision," said Ricardo. "There's a social problem where peasants are engaged in illicit cultivation because of the lack of real possibilities. The FARC work in regions where illicit crops are grown and receive money for "taxes," but that is not drug trafficking."

Carlos Salinas of Amnesty International said any increase in aid to the Colombian army is a concern because of its links to rightist paramilitary groups. "These forces are responsible for most violations committed in Colombia, including massacres," he said. "We must question whether this aid package is another thinly veiled counterinsurgency program, one that will deepen the US involvement in this dirty war."

"We're talking about giving money to an army that is deeply wedded to paramilitary groups that are the main human rights abusers," said Robin Kirk of Human Rights Watch. "This is a very dirty war, and you have to ask where will US tax dollars ultimately end up." [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 01/07/00; Clarin (Argentina), 01/09/00; Spanish news service EFE, 01/02/00, 01/07/00, 01/08/00, 01/11/00; Reuters, 01/06/00, 01/08/00, 01/12/00; The Miami Herald, 01/08/00, 01/12/00; The New York Times, 01/11/00, 01/12/00; The Financial Times (London), 01/12/00; Associated Press, 01/10/00, 01/11/00, 01/13/00]