

Will Narco-Guerrillas Become the Rulers?

The Los Angeles Times
F. Andy Messing Jr. and Dillon Twombly
August 03, 1998

When Andres Pastrana is inaugurated on Aug. 7 as Colombia's 37th president, he will inherit a Colombia rife with discontent, infested by insurgents and deeply entrenched in the drug trade—problems that have plagued Colombia for decades.

In an effort to facilitate peace talks between the government and the “narco-guerrillas,” Pastrana has initiated a dialogue with the over 15,000 strong Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the approximately 5,000 strong National Liberation Army (ELN). The Colombian people have grown tired of the violence that has left 35,000 dead in the past decade and are encouraged by the prospect of peace.

Thus far, both the FARC and ELN have expressed their willingness to negotiate with Pastrana. This was shown by the meeting July 9 between Pastrana and the FARC and by an additional meeting July 15 with the ELN in Mainz, Germany. These meetings are a bold fulfillment of Pastrana's campaign promise to start peace talks. But the Colombian government must not succumb to desperation and attempt peace negotiations from its current position of weakness. And the United States should help strengthen its hand.

The FARC and ELN have stated that in order for peace talks to occur, Colombian forces must be withdrawn from the 40% of the country they currently control. Pastrana has repeatedly stated that in the interest of peace, he will withdraw his troops as demanded and transfer the government's drug eradication programs to the predominantly guerrilla organizations in these territories.

This approach to peace could be naive and lead Colombia further down the road of destruction. Drug cultivation currently provides the bulk of the guerrilla's funding. El Tiempo, Colombia's largest newspaper, estimated that the FARC and ELN received more than \$1 billion last year from the drug trade, more than any of Colombia's three largest conglomerates generated in income. To paraphrase U.S. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale, “You have to take the cause away from the guerrilla” to achieve peace. Additionally, in the case of Colombia, you have to also take away the narco-money from the guerrilla. Expecting guerrilla organizations to eradicate their own drug crops is like asking the mob to regulate gambling.

The U.S. has traditionally been unwilling to help Colombia with its narco-insurgency problem. During his tenure, former U.S. ambassador to Colombia Myles Frachette maintained that the guerrillas are an internal political problem while drugs are an international problem. However, the U.S. must accept

that this distinction is no longer valid and allocate the appropriate resources necessary to ultimately reduce violence and the drug trade within Colombia.

The United States has a vested interest in helping Colombia enter peace negotiations in a position of relative strength, not its current state of weakness. The appropriate strengthening of the Colombian military will allow the government to maintain its credibility during peace talks and reach a settlement based on compromise, not fear. This strengthening will also allow the Colombians to combat drug trafficking more effectively, thereby reducing the volume of drug shipments to the U.S.

If the Colombian government falls, a narco-state will emerge from its ashes. This narco-state will then transition into an international safe haven for criminals and drug traffickers, threatening American national security.

In order to prevent Colombia from becoming a narco-state, the U.S. must conditionally provide increased levels of appropriate military aid to the Colombian military and Colombian National Police. Congress recently voted to provide the CNP with a paltry six Bell 212 helicopters and a World War II-era DC-3 cargo plane. Rep. Ben Gilman (R-NY) was being charitable when he described this aid as giving them “a Ford instead of a Cadillac.”

The U.S. needs to recognize that Colombia cannot be expected to fight these guerrillas using second-rate equipment. The esteemed Gen. Jose Serrano, head of the national police, states that, “90% of our anti-drug operations involve the use of helicopters,” underscoring the effect that an increase in helicopter capability would have on Colombia’s anti-drug effort. Modern, more capable helicopters like the Sikorsky UH-60 Blackhawk, large numbers of small river craft and additional training and intelligence must be provided to Colombia. Aid will allow Colombia to more effectively fight this rurally based conflict, where mobility and information are critical to success.

However, increased aid must be conditioned on two factors: decreasing human rights violations by the Colombian military and the elimination of the paramilitary extremists who are responsible for violence similar to that caused by the guerrillas. These are conditions similar to the ones the U.S. established with El Salvador in 1983, which helped to neutralize both extremes.

President-elect Pastrana has encouraged the U.S. to become involved in any peace talks that occur, and it is imperative that we do so. However, Colombia must negotiate from a position of strength to ensure a successful agreement. The United States’ actions in the next several months are critical to reducing violence and drugs and to generating peace in Colombia.

Retired Special Forces Maj. F. Andy Messing Jr. is director of the National Defense Council Foundation, Alexandria, Va. Dillon Twombly is research assistant for the foundation. E-mail: ndcf@erols.com.