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**Fumigation and  
Conflict in Colombia  
In the Heat of  
the Debate**



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The aim of the TNI *Drugs and Conflict* series is to highlight current issues involving the global drug phenomenon, in order to foster public debate around antidrugs strategies and contribute to a search for alternative policies. Bearing this in mind, we dedicate the second issue of our series to the controversial topic of Colombia's aerial fumigation of coca and opium poppy fields.

Colombia began an intensive campaign of massive aerial spraying in December 2000, under the aegis of Plan Colombia. The programme has set in motion strong opposition by the peasant and indigenous communities involved and national and international organisations from civil society. The number of voices speaking out against using chemical herbicides to eradicate illicit crops has grown spectacularly this year, fostering an even broader debate about this Latin American country's entire drug policy.

Right now, the debate focuses on the consequences of fumigation for health and the environment. The various positions taken range from questioning the technical aspects of how fumigations are being handled, to the frontal rejection of aerial spraying combined with alternatives such as decriminalising small peasants and undertaking manual eradication procedures in a gradual, negotiated and voluntary manner.

Colombia has enjoyed little autonomy with respect to the management of illicit crops, as a strong link exists between aerial spraying and the war dynamics. A decision to suspend fumigation, therefore, is not likely to be based on technical arguments but depends largely on policy considerations with respect to the course the armed conflict is taking. On the other hand, escalation of the conflict will not be avoided simply by suspending aerial spraying. It will also depend on other factors involved in the critical stage that Colombia's peace process has entered.

The peace talks, though tenuous, still form part of Colombia's present panorama. The direction that these conversations take will be of paramount importance for the immediate future. Either the efforts to find a political solution to the conflict can be continued or a generalized intensification of war will occur. The search for peace and the need to re-evaluate current antidrugs policies have thus become inseparable.

*Fumigation: In the Heat of the Debate* offers an overview of the events related to the present fumigation campaign since it began in December 2000.

*Fumigations and Armed Conflict in Colombia* provides an analysis of the current state of the debate around the subject of fumigation and its link to the crisis of the peace process and the imminent risk of intensification of the armed conflict.

To conclude, we publish a letter sent by sociologist Ricardo Vargas, associate fellow of TNI and representative of Acción Andina in Colombia, to Anne Patterson, U.S. Ambassador in Colombia. This letter is a reaction to the Ambassador's warning that an eventual suspension of fumigation would also imply the U.S. pulling out of Plan Colombia. Vargas explains the reasons why such a suspension would be beneficial instead of posing a problem, describing in detail what discontinuing the Plan would signify for Colombia.

At the closure of this edition TNI learned about the re-initiation of large-scale spraying in the southern departments. The objective is to eradicate more than 100,000 hectares of coca and opium poppy between now and December. Before this new wave of fumigation started on September 6, a major security operation was carried out by army battalions to secure the areas on the ground and ensure safe entry for the aircraft. The name of the operation: 'Apocalypse'.



In July 2000, Ex-President Clinton approved a law destining 1.3 billion dollars for the “war on drugs”, within the framework of Plan Colombia. A good share of this money was allocated to Colombia by way of military aid. This included training, overhead costs and supplies for the Army antidrugs battalions operating in the south of Colombia, where an estimated 60% of illicit drugs produced in the country is grown. The objective: mass-scale spraying of chemicals by air, intended to destroy the region’s illicit production. Today aerial spraying in the Putumayo – located in the Amazon jungle and on the frontier with Ecuador – has turned this province into Plan Colombia’s first “laboratory”.

The south of Colombia is not an area exclusively devoted to growing illicit crops, however. With a population of almost six million inhabitants, many indigenous communities and a significant share of Afro-Colombians coexist in this southernmost region.

Colombia’s south is also an important area of influence for the FARC. This guerrilla organization derives part of its income from charging taxes to those who grow coca in the territory under its control. Destroying the coca fields, aiming to eliminate a main source of income, increases the military presence in the region, implying the potential escalation of an ongoing armed conflict. Fumigation is literally carried out under the wings of the Army’s antidrugs battalions (U.S. trained), which fly in armoured helicopters (U.S. donated) while professional land troops scour the area.

## The Chemical Spraying of Plan Colombia

Fumigation with chemical herbicides is not new in Colombia. More than two decades of aerial chemical fumigation have yielded ample experience on that score. Enough experience, in any event, to argue that such programmes are useless: in two decades, the total surface covered with illicit crops not only did not decrease but, in fact, remarkably increased. The innovative aspect of Plan Colombia’s aerial fumigation programme was the intensity of application and the new chemical formula used. The idea was to eliminate as many hectares as possible in the shortest time span, using a new, more effective concentration of Roundup (which,

incidentally, was introduced already a year before). Roundup is a commercial formula containing glyphosate patented by the Monsanto Company.

It did not take long for the effects of the changes in concentration and intensity to be felt. The most recent aerial spraying operations have not only destroyed coca plantations but also legal crops, and affected human health by causing skin ailments and other illnesses. Complaints have poured in, also involving the death of many domestic animals and pondfish and water contamination. Last December, indigenous leaders of Amazon communities travelled to Washington to denounce the fact that aerial fumigation with glyphosate was endangering the health of the Amazon’s inhabitants and the jungle’s ecological balance.

Reporters from all over the world, environmentalists from well-established international environmental organizations, scientists expert in the area, etc., have visited the region since this new chemical mixture began to be applied.

The outcry of those directly affected (peasants and indigenous peoples) has been joined by public servants directly linked to the Colombian state (the Ombudsman’s Office, the General Comptroller’s Office and some members of Congress). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) studying the drug phenomenon, organizations from civil society and various political sectors in Colombia, neighbouring countries and the U.S. have also made their voices heard. The evidence is irrefutable. Medical sources from the areas reported sharp increases of eye and skin afflictions. The symptoms began after exposure to spraying and only disappeared with the passage of time in the following weeks. Something similar could be observed with respect to sprayed crops. While formerly a coca bush took up to ten days to begin wilting after being sprayed, now it shrivelled in one or two days. The same thing held true for cassava, plantain, corn and other food crops in the surroundings. “*Glyphosate was not as effective before. Now, when I visit fumigated areas, they look as if someone had poured gasoline on them and then lit a match*” (R. Vargas).

The documented side effects of fumigation and its ineffectiveness have caused a great deal of controversy. Once more, political analysts ask whether a policy that has repeatedly proven to be useless in the past makes any sense today. Environmental-

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ists point to the ecological aspect: the production of coca and cocaine, in the form that it is practised, causes serious damage to the Andean cloud forest and the Amazon jungle. Forced eradication via aerial herbicide spraying only adds to this destruction, not only due to the still unknown effects it might have on the environment, but also due to the fact that producers are forced to relocate their crops deeper into the jungle. These will eventually be fumigated also, generating a vicious cycle of destruction. The peasants who cultivate crops in the fumigated areas, with the support of their Governors and other high government officials, have made continuous appeals for the suspension of spraying and the implementation of effective voluntary manual eradication and crop substitution programmes. Indigenous communities demand respect for their ancestral territories, stressing the value that their cultures attach to the land itself.

The U.S. government has reacted by persistently refusing to contemplate other alternatives. Aerial spraying is a core policy of the war on drugs and specifically of the co-operation with Plan Colombia. The U.S. insists it is not debatable and is not willing to make any concessions. *“If aerial spraying were to be suspended, this would have an immediate, very likely devastating impact on U.S. support to Plan Colombia”*, warned U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson at the beginning of August in Bogotá. All indications are that the President Pastrana’s government is not willing to deal with such a risk.

## The Formula Sprayed

A central aspect of the controversy hinges on glyphosate, the most well known ingredient of the various components constituting the formula. For a long time, glyphosate has been pointed to as a product responsible for the various health problems reported among the population, the destruction of legal crops and damage to the environment. In response to this, every certain period the U.S. State Department issues a Fact Sheet, a press release or some other form of official communication designed to stress the product’s good qualities. Its position is that this broad-spectrum herbicide, widely used for farming in many countries, and also being used in Colombia since 1984, is *“less harmful than aspirin and table salt”*. Colombia’s central government, Army and Anti-Narcotics Police have consistently echoed these arguments.

TNI, together with several pesticide scientists, has produced reports and documents questioning the assertions made by the U.S. State Department, laying emphasis on the fact that, until recently, public opinion barely knew anything about the new formula currently applied in Colombia. It makes little sense to keep pondering the benefits of glyphosate, when the truth is that this herbicide is only one more component in the formula being sprayed. Due to the pressure exerted by the several sectors interested in divulging the new formula’s composition, the corresponding official bodies finally revealed the presence of ingredients like Cosmoflux-411F and Cosmo-InD – among others – in the Colombian mixture, also disclosing the high concentration of glyphosate used in today’s formula.

The U.S. State Department’s Anti-Narcotics Office has responded by issuing a new report in which it states that the ingredients just made public are safe to use and do not imply any risk to human health. This in spite of the fact that no scientific study actually verifying this contention is yet in existence.

Meanwhile, intensive aerial spraying continued to be carried out in the region, producing new and successive complaints. The damages done to farms taking part in the alternative development projects supported with international co-operation funds



### Chemical Spraying Mixture

#### Composition

45% Roundup Ultra; 54% water; 1% Cosmo-Flux 411F; 0,33% Cosmo-InD. Roundup Ultra in itself consists of 41.0% glyphosate (the active ingredient); 44.5% water, and 14.5% of a POEA surfactant blend whose chemical composition is kept a Monsanto trade secret.

#### Dosage per hectare

On average 23.66 litres (6,25 gallons) of this mixture is sprayed per hectare of coca, which means, 10.4 litres of Roundup Ultra, 0.24 litre Cosmo-Flux and 0.08 litre Cosmo-InD, mixed with 13 litres of water.

were notorious. The situation motivated Germany to speak out against the “punitive and persecution” aspects contained in the Colombian antidrugs strategy. The Colombian Ombudsman’s Office has also confirmed the destruction of several farming projects spearheaded by official bodies like Plante, Corpoamazonía and United Nations. The Ombudsman then requested the immediate suspension of aerial herbicide operations throughout the country, until detailed cartographic information could be compiled in order not to destroy legitimate crops and projects.

Lack of accuracy where fumigation is concerned also feeds the debate. Though antidrugs authorities insist that aerial spraying is performed with millimetric precision, reality proves the contrary. A good example was the “glyphosate bath” (that’s how the press headed it) taken by U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone, a strong opponent of fumigation in the U.S. Congress, when he was invited to attend a demonstration of the technical precision with which aerial spraying is purported to occur. The wind dragged a cloud of herbicide to where the guests of honour were gathered, not exactly the site previously targeted by satellite.

This year in March, press reports and editorials began to appear almost daily in the main U.S. newspapers, mentioning the effects of chemical spraying on the population and the environment, the social repercussions of a strategy prone to escalate the armed conflict, and the indiscriminate destruction of licit crops. Klaus Nyholm, UNDCP representative in Colombia, affirmed that aerial spraying should not be used against the small peasants who find no other choice but to grow coca or poppy to survive. He also proposed creating an international monitoring body to supervise spraying operations. Four Governors of the Departments in Colombia most affected by fumigation went to Washington in an attempt to make the Bush Administration reconsider what they perceived was a militarist initiative against coca-growing peasants. In response, the State Department continues to insist that aerial spraying is not up for

debate as long as a significant reduction in the number of coca hectares does not take place.

Washington might permit itself the luxury of ignoring growing criticisms, dismissing them as excuses of the guerrilla and organised drug traffic, but President Pastrana’s government is facing great domestic and international pressure to suspend fumigation. One thing is the possible interests of

the guerrilla and drug dealers and quite another reliable evidence about the violation of technical guidelines to conduct fumigation, the absence of control by the state organisms created to supervise them, the destruction of virgin woods, licit crops and plantations under three hectares, all expressly forbidden by law. Even Colombia’s Ministry of Environment, traditionally

an advocate of fumigation, issued a resolution attacking the country’s Anti-Narcotics Office for not providing adequate information about the impact that chemical spraying has on the environment.

### Fuel Added to the Debate

Several facts have fed the debate in the last months. In mid-May, the results of a UNDCP study on the extension of coca crops in Colombia were published. The study, based on satellite images obtained in August 2000, revealed that there was more coca than originally estimated. This kindled the debate about the effectiveness of U.S. aerial antidrugs operations. According to data provided by the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, in December 1999 there were 122,500 hectares of coca in Colombia and, in spite of the fact that 58,000 hectares were eradicated in the year 2000, in December of the same year the extension was 136,200. (UNDCP holds that it was 162,000 hectares). Although between December and May 2001 alone, 254,000 litres (67,000 gallons) of herbicide were sprayed, illicit crops have not been curtailed. Why not invest these resources on alternative development and social programmes, asks the critical mass.

*“Glyphosate was not as effective before. Now, when I visit fumigated areas, they look as if someone had poured gasoline on them and then lit a match”*

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Last June, the British chemical company ICI announced that it was suspending the sale of an additive used to prepare the herbicide mixture applied in Colombia, due to the fact that it had not yet been tested for the purpose it was being used for. The substance in question is Atplus 300f, which the Colombian Cosmoagro Company uses to produce Cosmo Flux.

The government of Ecuador expressed concern to the Colombian government regarding the aerial spraying carried out over its frontiers, requesting that new studies be carried out in order to determine the impact of this spraying. The subject has generated widespread debate in that neighbouring country.

Also in June, 3000 coca-growing peasants in the Department of Norte de Santander rose to protest against herbicide spraying over their fields, even launching an attack on an air base where craft tanked up and setting it on fire. These acts represent one of the most violent mass protests undertaken by producers against fumigation efforts so far.

Early in July, the Anti-Narcotics Police announced that it was reinitiating aerial spraying over the south of the Cauca and the north of Nariño; this in spite of the fact that the Ombudsman's Office and the Governors of the two provinces reaffirmed their demand to suspend fumigation, due to the fact that the reasons leading to its suspension just months before continued to be valid. Over 35,000 peasant and indigenous inhabitants declared themselves to be in a state of alert, threatening to march on the Panamerican Highway and block it.

At around the same time, the Appropriation Commissions in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate expressed their concern about the effects of aerial spraying in Colombia, asking the State Department for detailed and periodical reporting on the subject, as well as requesting that mechanisms of verification be established in order to evaluate these effects. The Senate went as far as to forbid using U.S. funds for the purchase of chemicals until the U.S. government does not certify the absence of risks to the Colombian population.

An accumulation of pressures and cries of complaint at every level have contributed to changing the course of the controversy: at least temporarily, the possibility that the population had grounds

to complain was under consideration. In this context, on Friday, July 27, a judge in Bogotá ordered the immediate suspension of aerial spraying in the south of Colombia, due to health threats and threats to the environment. The order was temporary, while a suit filed by the indigenous communities of the Amazon against the state was considered. Eleven days later, the same judge lifted the suspension, when the suit was rejected for 'lack of evidence', although until now the necessary scientific studies to prove or disprove the claims in question have not been carried out.

According to Rand Beers, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, no scientific evidence exists that eradication programmes damage human health, although he does admit evidence of sanitation risks and that thus research should be carried out to determine herbicide safety. Beers also acknowledged that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has not analysed the new, more concentrated formula currently used to destroy coca plants yet, adding that soon scientists from that agency and the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta are to study the effects of the herbicides on human beings. This is how the Bush Administration hopes to silence the criticisms to aerial fumigation, although the results of these investigations are not yet known. The future of Bush's Andean Regional Initiative and, specifically, of aerial spraying, may depend on these results.

Meanwhile no further definition has been made of the various proposals launched by the United Nations, government and non-government organizations and national and international bodies alike, in the sense that either an international monitoring body should be created to evaluate the real effects of fumigation, or an independent international commission should be set in motion for the purpose of analysing the antidrugs policy in its totality.



## Opposition Grows to a Controversial Strategy

The fumigation campaign in the south of Colombia began in December 2000, in the midst of strong opposition from the peasant communities in the area and different national and international civil society organisations. Since then, the outcry against spraying chemical herbicides to eradicate illicit crops has grown spectacularly, paving the way for an even broader debate on the country's entire drug policy.

Three levels of discussion emerge with respect to the fumigation strategy. The first encompasses the technical aspects involved in the procedure, without requesting its suspension. The second level clearly demands suspending aerial spraying, based on technical, legal and economic objections. And the third, more political in nature, rejects aerial spraying for socioeconomic and environmental reasons, proposing the search for alternatives.

The first level of debate focuses on how fumigation is technically carried out, without expressly requesting the suspension of the strategy. In this sense, the position of the Colombian Ministry of Environment is worth highlighting. Its representative, Juan Mayr, an ardent defender of the strategy, felt forced to reject the Environmental Management Plan drafted by the National Directorate of Narcotics (DNE in Spanish), for not responding *"to the goals and objectives stated in the terms of reference or to Ministry's repeated demands for information"*.

At the same level, but this time on an international plane, UNDCP has criticised the aerial spraying of small plots, proposing the creation of an international body that monitors the fumigation programme.

At the second level of the discussion, the stakeholders involved expressly demand the suspension of aerial spraying, due to technical, legal and economic objections. At this level, we have the Colombian state's regulatory bodies, the People's Ombudsman and the General Comptroller's Office, whose representative, Carlos Ossa Escobar, has staunchly criticised Plan Colombia for the heavy foreign debt it entails.

On an international plane, the Andean Parliament recently requested the temporary suspension of aerial spraying until studies on the impacts of glyphosate are duly carried out.

The third level of debate hinges on the strategy's socio-economic and environmental impact. It is grounded on the total opposition to aerial spraying, calling for alternative proposals like the decriminalisation of small-scale illicit cultivation and gradual schemes of manual eradication procedures on a voluntary basis, by consensus.

Those advocating the last point of view include, among others, the Governors of the country's southern region, a heterogeneous group of Senators and Representatives and a wide range of national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Domestically, the debate is chiefly taking place in Colombia's south and before the mass media, in the context of the ongoing electoral campaigns and at the very core of the Congress of the Republic. In the Colombian Senate it has given rise to three proposals for new legislation: 1) the legalisation of illicit drugs production, distribution and consumption, to be placed under state monopoly; 2) the decriminalisation of the small peasants planting illicit crops and 3) the prohibition to carry out the fumigation of illicit-crop plantations.

At the same time, the European Parliament and the government of Ecuador have also requested that fumigation be suspended and alternatives should be found, though Ecuador limits its objections to the part of Colombia bordering on its territory. Germany had succeeded in getting the Colombian government to suspend aerial spraying in areas of Cauca and Nariño, two provinces in which alternative development projects financed by that European country are already underway.

Currently this approach has broadened to question the logic of the supply-reduction drug policy itself, with the Colombian Congress' decision to send Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, a letter requesting that a high-level commission evaluate the present antidrug strategies.

All this has given way to a vehement debate in the U.S. Congress, stimulated by a broad range of NGOs and seconded by the leading U.S. media. As a result, last July the Senate Appropriation Committee blocked the share of its funding to the Andean Initiative allocated to aerial spraying of illicit crops in Colombia, until the U.S. State Department produces a report on its safety, health and sanitation conditions. Several amendments have also been presented, aiming to condition the U.S. aid package on improving



## THE DEBATE ON FUMIGATION

	Technical debate without demand to suspend fumigation	Technical debate with demand to suspend fumigation	Opposition to fumigation and search for alternatives
<b>COLOMBIA</b>	<p><b>MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT</b> May 2001 Resolution rejects Environmental Management Plan presented by General Directorate of Narcotics, for not responding "to the objectives and achievements defined under the terms of reference or to the Ministry's repeated requests for information".</p>	<p><b>PEOPLE'S OMBUDSMAN</b> Has insistently petitioned the government, through Resolution from the Ombudsman's Office (Feb/01) and various letters to Ministry of Justice, to suspend aerial spraying of illicit crops.</p>	<p><b>LOCAL AUTHORITIES</b> Governors of southern Colombia propose gradual, voluntary manual eradication by consensus as an alternative to fumigation.</p>
		<p><b>OFFICE OF THE CONTROLLER GENERAL</b> In July 2001, Carlos Ossa Escobar proposes the creation of an international monitoring body to evaluate the illicit crop eradication programme and asks Environment Ministry so suspend fumigation until the necessary corrective measures are adopted.</p>	<p><b>SENATORS AND REPRESENTATIVES</b> Three new projects of law have been launched from within the Senate of the Republic: 1) legalisation of illicit drugs production, distribution and consumption under state monopoly 2) decriminalisation of small farmers growing illicit crops and 3) prohibition of aerial spraying against illicit cultivation.</p>
<b>INTERNATIONAL SPHERE</b>	<p><b>UNDCP</b> Last July, Klaus Nyholm, Director for Colombia and Ecuador voiced his objection to fumigating small plots before the Colombian government and proposed creating an international body to monitor the fumigation programme against coca and poppy cultivation.</p>	<p><b>ANDEAN PARLIAMENT</b> Last August, unanimously resolved that the Colombian government temporarily suspends aerial spraying of coca fields with glyphosate. The decision will be maintained until technical studies are carried out about the impacts of this chemical.</p>	<p><b>CIVIL SOCIETY</b> The four principal networks of Colombia's civil society organisations (Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace, Paz Colombia, Redepaz and Citizen Mandate for Peace) have demanded the suspension of aerial spraying and support the initiatives of the departmental governments in the south of Colombia.</p>
		<p><b>U.S. SENATE APPROPRIATION COMMITTEE</b> Last July, it decided to block funds of Andean Initiative destined to fumigating illicit crops in Colombia, until the U.S. State Department produces a report on its safety, health and sanitation requirements.</p>	<p><b>EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT</b> Issued resolution (Feb/01) rejecting Plan Colombia: the EU "must take the necessary steps to secure an end to the large-scale use of chemical herbicides...". Requested Pres. Pastrana to stop environmental damage, contain the exodus of internally displaced inhabitants and stop fumigation. The EP supports the manual eradication proposal launched by the Departments in the south.</p>
			<p><b>ECUADOR</b> The government of Ecuador has demanded from the Colombian government that it carries out aerial spraying at a 10-km distance from its border with Ecuador and recommended that Colombia abandons fumigation of illicit crops and instead tests out manual eradication alongside the frontier.</p>
			<p><b>INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS</b> <b>NGOs:</b> Caritas International; Oxfam; Latin American Association of Human Rights (ALDHU); Transnational Institute; Institute for Policy Studies; Wola; Centre for International Policy; World Wildlife Fund; and many others. <b>NETWORKS:</b> European NGO Council on Drugs and Development (ENCOD); International Coalition of NGOs for Just and Effective Drugs Policy (ICN); ABColombia Group; Latin America Working Group (LAWG); Amazon Alliance for Indigenous and Traditional Peoples of the Amazon Basin; Agroecological Movement of Latin America and the Caribbean (MAELA); Co-ordination of Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon Basin (COICA); network of 50 European organisations that signed the <i>Declaration of April 30 2001</i>.</p>

the human rights situation in Colombia, stopping or suspending aerial spraying of illicit crops and preventing U.S. support from becoming a counterinsurgency strategy instead of an antidrugs one.

Another factor weakening the position of the U.S. government is the controversy surrounding the recruitment of foreign personnel to carry out antidrugs operations in Colombia. The U.S. Congress imposed a limit of 500 military and 300 civil contractors as the maximum number to be hired at a time. However, in view of the fact that the law refers to 'U.S. citizens', the State Department and the various contracting firms active in the country, like DynCorp, are hiring personnel from Guatemala, Honduras and Peru in order to keep within the fixed limits. To make matters worse, some Central American pilots interviewed by DynCorp have disclosed to the press that they were asked to demonstrate having experience in combat (*Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 2001).

However, the antidrugs struggle and, within it, fumigation, have as a backdrop a war scenario, the wavering peace talks and an electoral period that locates the issue in a highly complex setting due to the series of political and military positionings that are currently taking place.

### Possible Scenarios

The peace talks, though tenuous, still form part of Colombia's present panorama. The direction that these conversations take will be of paramount importance in deciding whether a political solution to the conflict can be set in motion or whether a direct, generalized confrontation intended to significantly weaken the insurgency will occur.

The critical stage generated by the fragile nature of the peace talks, added to the current heated debate on fumigation, allow us to sketch two possible scenarios:

#### SCENARIO I: Escalation of the Conflict and Intensification of Aerial Spraying

The fumigation strategy in Colombia is highly linked to the armed conflict that the country is undergoing. As the debate on Colombia's drug policy kindles, one year from the end of President Pastrana's turn

in office, his banner programme -the peace process- enters its critical phase. The escalation of armed actions by government, guerrillas and paramilitaries alike, all severely affecting the civilian population, has deepened the crisis of the model of peace negotiations undertaken in the middle of armed confrontation:

- **GOVERNMENT.** The militarization of the antidrugs struggle and the implementation of Plan Colombia more and more clearly betray their counterinsurgent nature. Aerial spraying continues leaving in its wake negative effects on the population (health, economy and food security) and the environment. This has serious consequences for the legitimacy of the state and fuels the armed social control wielded by the various insurgent groups
- **ARMY.** The Army begins to undertake offensive war actions, generated, among other things, by the guarantee of the arrival of military logistics within the framework of Plan Colombia, the recruitment of more professional soldiers, the redrafting of strategies pertaining to irregular armed conflicts and the growing presence of foreign civilian and military personnel highly trained in counterinsurgency combat. Actions like those carried out through 'Operation August 7' in the Amazonian Department of the Guaviare, seek to deal a harsh blow to the insurgency, changing the correlation of forces in favour of the state's security bodies and thus attempting to influence the sphere of the peace talks.
- **GUERRILLA.** The suspension of talks with the ELN guerrilla has worsened the crisis in finding a political solution to the conflict, while at the same time it has sent a clear warning to the FARC. As a response, the ELN increased its actions against the country's economic infrastructures, its kidnappings, road blocks, etc., generally causing a heavy toll among the civil population while it seeks to make a show of force that modifies the state's indifferent behaviour towards them.

FARC's most recent actions have put this guerrilla group under the scrutiny of the international community: their kidnapping of three members of the German governmental technical co-operation agency GTZ, and of the Ex-Governor of Meta under circumstances compromising the



respect for diplomatic immunity. Simultaneously, FARC reacts indifferently to the appeals launched by the European Union rejecting the kidnapping of the three Germans and to the report by Human Rights Watch questioning their violations of international humanitarian law. These circumstances, together with the complaints that the clearance zone is being used as an integral part of degraded war scenarios (kidnappings, forced recruitment etc.) are being capitalised by those favouring a solution of force.

- **PARAMILITARIES.** These groups continue extending their strategic advance, consolidating their social control through the use of terror and the application of the death penalty against those suspected of collaborating or sympathising with the guerrillas. Likewise, they have executed members of the Colombian justice system, under conditions of complete defencelessness, while the latter were investigating the serious allegations made against the paramilitaries.
- **U.S.** The government team assembled under the Bush Administration implies a continuity in the growing militarization of the war on drugs and the extension of U.S. aerial and maritime control under the concept of hemispheric security. The constant declarations issued by U.S. public officials about Colombia's armed conflict, their questioning of the ELN's will for peace, the clearance zone or the benefits of the peace process undertaken with the FARC, all contribute to gradually eroding the already hazy frontier between U.S. involvement in the antidrugs struggle and in the armed conflict, abetting a solution of force in Colombia.

Everything indicates that, unless steps are taken to find a political solution to the armed conflict, based on a complete reframing of the process, what follows will be either the continuation of peace talks with no tangible end in sight –talks bound to be affected by the escalation of the armed conflict– or an all-out offensive seeking to defeat the FARC, thus weakening its bargaining power in the conversations with the government.

Whatever the option, aerial fumigation in this scenario would be consolidated as part of the instruments of war. This may lead to its intensification and to the fact that its effectiveness will be gauged in terms of its “undermining the guerrilla's finances”.

Nevertheless, due to strong national and international opposition, the Colombian government finds itself obliged to respond to the objections surrounding its fumigation strategy. The studies in progress that are meant to evaluate the impact of fumigation on health and the environment might be used to neutralise these objections and perfect the technique, if necessary introducing changes in the mixture sprayed currently.

The U.S. government has committed itself to conducting one such research study during the next six months. Its methodology raises great controversy, because it nears experimentation with humans. The investigation plans to examine a hundred peasants in the Putumayo region, in order to evaluate the condition of their health before fumigation. The same peasants will be examined shortly after aerial spraying takes place.

In a letter to U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy, Ambassador Patterson alleged that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) were designing this study. Recent press reports, however, have let it filter that EPA has never actually participated in its design and that CDC is just embarking on a preliminary phase of the discussion. What EPA did issue recently is a report referring, among the risks posed by glyphosate, to pulmonary and respiratory ailments and renal complications and effects on the reproductive system in the long term.

In this context, an international body created to monitor Colombia's fumigation programme, as proposed by Klaus Nyholm, UNDCP Director for Colombia and Ecuador, may actually reinforce the technical capacity of aerial spraying, providing the strategy with legitimacy. Thus, it could give way to a scenario in which an antidrugs policy amply proven incapable of diminishing the supply of illicit crops or the availability of illicit substances on the market will continue to be enforced.

## SCENARIO 2: Suspension of Fumigation and Strengthening of the Peace Process

The ineffectiveness of the antidrugs struggle, including fumigation, and the need to reanimate the flagging peace process, make it evident that the solution to the crisis Colombia is undergoing must extend far beyond the debate over whether forced eradication



is being handled technically in a way that will minimise its damage to health and the environment. No such thing as the perfect fumigation exists, particularly within the context of an armed conflict like the Colombian one, in which the role of fumigation is, to a great extent, determined by its effectiveness as an instrument of war.

The high degree of opposition to the fumigation strategy, both in Colombia and abroad, offers conditions favouring the decision to suspend aerial spraying, be it based on a resolution pressured by the Congress or on any of the other initiatives offered by the Ombudsman's Office, the General Comptroller's Office or the country's juridical system.

However, Colombia has enjoyed little autonomy with respect to the management of illicit crops, and a strong link exists between aerial spraying and the war dynamics. Therefore, a decision to suspend fumigation is not likely to be based on technical arguments but depends largely on developments and considerations with respect to the course of the armed conflict.

In this sense, rallying together those in favour of a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict and the widespread opposition to aerial spraying might well lead to a process of consolidation, mobilisation and co-ordination of the various initiatives towards peace emerging from Colombian society. With support from those sectors in the international community that favour a political solution to the conflict and reject the irrational use of force against illicit crops, a force of influence might be created that may serve to guide the outcomes of both the armed conflict and the problem of illicit crops, two themes that are inseparable as they stand. This would legitimate the suspension of fumigation on the basis of a cease-fire, a redefinition of the antidrugs policy and the reanimation of the country's peace process.

Within this perspective, formulas that still need to be debated are beginning to take shape, such as the need to convoke a National Constituent Assembly that supplies oxygen to the peace process in crisis and paves the way towards effective responses. A

redefinition of the current drugs policy in Colombia, within the framework of searching for solutions to the armed conflict, should include, in the case of production, the suspension of fumigation, the decriminalisation of small farmers and the reorientation of alternative development policies towards the following axes:

- Feasible manual eradication deadlines and criteria.
- Processes of territorial and environmental ordering around viable and negotiated alternatives, reassessing rural and environmental factors in the development model.
- Short, medium and long-range sustainable programmes.
- Guarantees in the sense that regional participation processes in new initiatives are a result of mutual trust between the parts, instead of today's manual eradication agreements that have been reached under the threat of fumigation and the results of which are measured in eradicating illicit crops in the shortest time possible.

*A redefinition of the current drugs policy should include the suspension of fumigation, the decriminalisation of small farmers and the reorientation of alternative development*

Creating an independent international commission to evaluate drug policies, a proposal launched by various sectors in Colombia and abroad, implies a decisive step in the search for alternatives to the deficient measures demonstrated in the current antidrugs strategy. In order for such a commission to perform the task of reviewing these policies in

full, it is essential to count on the support of those sectors of the international community that are aware of the problem represented by the current antidrugs strategy and the serious consequences its implementation entails, both in the Colombian crisis and with respect to the stability of the whole Andean-Amazon region.

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Bogotá, August 3, 2001

Mrs. Anne Patterson  
Ambassador of the United States of America  
Bogotá

Dear Ambassador Patterson:

On August 2, 2001, the headlines announcing your statement that suspending the fumigation would lead to a suspension of the Plan Colombia reflect an interesting warning. Your announcement should have led many Colombians to ponder what a scenario without Plan Colombia might look like. From my perspective, and as part of a realistic contribution to gauging the effects of your call to attention, I can perceive the following scenario without "Plan Colombia":

1. With the suspension of the fumigation and military actions in the coca-growing regions, in the very short term there would be overproduction of coca leaf, with the consequent dramatic fall in the price of coca paste, which would lead to a diminution in the total area planted, an effect not yet attained after 25 years of fumigation in Colombia. It is clear that the fumigations and interdiction actions are the main factor supporting the good price for the raw material used to manufacture cocaine, with the consequent effect of stimulating an increase in the areas planted in coca.

As we all know, this expansion of area planted in illicit crops is harmful to our environment, since the establishment of new crops produces more deforestation and more contamination, from the processing of the coca paste. This would create the best conditions for the peasant producers to embark upon alternative development programs for their regions -- without the blackmail of fumigation, which is as harsh as it is ineffective.

2. Ending Plan Colombia would remove one of the arguments the guerrilla insurgency uses to polarize the armed conflict, i.e. your government's undue intervention in Colombia's war. Ending Plan Colombia, accompanied by an appeal to the guerrillas and the pow-

ers behind paramilitaries to make a real commitment to fight drug trafficking -- in the context of a peace process posed in new terms, and with an emphasis on making decisions on the drug economy that have a real impact -- would be an interesting first step towards appeasing the concerns of the international community about Colombia's role in the drug economy.

3. It would also remove one of the structural obstacles to confidence-building between the parties engaged in the peace talks. In effect, Plan Colombia is one of the factors driving the radicalization of the armed forces as they continue to press for a military solution to the conflict, and it is cited by the guerrillas to justify their own rearmament, growth, and preparation for an escalated confrontation.

4. In addition, ending Plan Colombia would reverse the eroding legitimacy of the Colombian state in the coca- and poppy-growing areas, as fumigating has a detrimental impact on the legal and illegal economy of entire regions, without a viable alternative development scenario, nor any solution to the poverty of the peasant settlers and indigenous communities. The lack of clear judicial procedures for processing and making decisions on the complaints lodged by the campesinos, the lack of political will from the ministries of the environment and health to investigate these cases, lead in the medium and long term to a loss of legitimacy of and trust in the state, pushing the producers into the armed ranks of the guerrillas or the paramilitaries.

5. Ending Plan Colombia would create favourable conditions for international cooperation from countries other than the United States that are seeking alternatives to the production of illicit crops, alternatives based on manual eradication. The conditions would be quite different from the current "pactos," whose future is uncertain, considering the absurd conditions imposed. Such confidence-building would be supplemented by coordination and consensus-building with the communities involved.





6. *Suspending the fumigation campaigns, and hence Plan Colombia, would end the detrimental impact it has had on alternative development projects supported by international aid, as well as project's carried out by the Colombia government's own alternative development program, Plante. Accordingly, these initiatives would have a better chance of success.*
7. *More and more people would come to see that drug trafficking cannot be fought by fumigating illicit crops, but by fighting the most profitable part of the business: the criminal organizations, the money-laundering mechanisms, which produce considerable profit, the arms trafficking, prostitution networks, big casinos, and the like. Money-laundering is widespread in both the legal and illegal sectors of the economy, and enjoys impunity internationally.*
8. *The National Police would re-dedicate itself to its primary mission, to ensure citizen security, instead of the current distortion geared to attending to the requirements of the United States in the useless and harmful eradication campaign using hazardous chemicals. The criminals in the large and medium cities would once again feel the presence of law-enforcement, and it is likely that crime would diminish. At the very least, citizens would feel safer as the police re-assumed their traditional duties.*

*The Police would begin to understand that drug-trafficking should be fought by improving intelligence on organized crime, so as to begin to find out something about how many and what type of organizations are exporting hundreds of tons of illegal drugs to the United States and Europe from Colombia.*

9. *The security-related function of the Colombian armed forces would be re-focused on Colombia's problems, rather than on the agenda imposed by the United States in this respect. The morale of the troops – who today burn rustic labs or persecute small producers along the tattered roads of the producing regions, where poor settlers and indigenous people are made to wait four to five hours to be searched, while the drug traffickers move freely throughout Colombia, including in some echelons of government – would be boosted.*
10. *The conditions would be created for pursuing drug-traffickers where it hurts them most: seizing the assets they've acquired with the proceeds of the business. In this way, the public officials who have done nothing in this regard, or who have covered up their failure, would not be able to hide their lack of commitment through radical public statements on the need to fumigate the illicit crops.*
11. *In addition, the presidents would cease to use fumigations as a substitute for their lack of commitment to fighting corruption, one of the bases for the flourishing drug trade. And the ministers of justice would not be able to use the fumigation campaign to cover up their own absolute ineptitude when it comes to administering and organizing the prisons as centers of rehabilitation and not dungeons in the hands of private powers, including the drug traffickers.*
12. *Furthermore, without Plan Colombia the international community would begin to understand that in Colombia, it is not the guerrillas who took the place of the Medellín and Cali drug cartels. Rather, the drug trafficking organizations diversified and proliferated, and these dispersed groups are now the ones who keep up the major demand for raw material for producing illegal psychoactive substances. Indeed, it would be understood that guerrilla finances would be harder hit by going after the capital behind the purchases of raw material than by fumigating the illicit crops, which has been announced as the supposed "great strategy" for fighting guerrilla finances.*
13. *In addition, people would begin to understand that the distortion brought about by the laundered and legalized proceeds of drug trafficking poses a greater danger to Colombia's institutions than future drug exports. The laundered money has strengthened a private power unprecedented in Colombian history, which is directing the most successful counter-insurgency strategy*

*thus far, at the cost of the loss of exclusive government control over the means of coercion, ruthless violations of international humanitarian law, and violent expropriations of the great masses of Colombians.*

14. *Finally, ending Plan Colombia would reveal the great lie on which it has been based, i.e. that drug trafficking depends on the illicit crops, and it would show that indeed just the opposite is true, that the existence of the illicit crops depends on the capital of the drug traffickers.*
15. *But most important, Madame Ambassador, is that with the end of Plan Colombia, the international community would begin to understand that the repeated failures in the area of drug control are due not to the inefficacy of Roundup, nor to rejection of fumigation because of the devastating effects of Roundup Ultra; nor to the well- advised ban on the use of the fungus *Fusarium oxysporum*; nor to the guerrilla's armed control in southern Colombia; nor to the fact that there are addicts in your cities. Rather, these failures have been due to an old and irrational drug policy that has caused as much or more harm than poor-quality illegal drugs, used in conditions that augment their risks, because of the threat of the law that hangs over their users.*

*For the foregoing reasons, Mrs. Patterson, as a Colombian, I conclude by recommending that you leave an indelible mark in Colombia, and that you go into history as the most sensible representative of the United States in the history of our bilateral relations: carry out your warning promptly, and help end Plan Colombia as soon as possible.*

*With my utmost respect and consideration,*

*Ricardo Vargas  
Acción Andina – Transnational Institute  
(TNI)*

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## USEFUL WEBSITES

<http://www.tni.org/drugs>

Website of the Drugs & Democracy programme of the Transnational Institute (TNI) and Acción Andina. Special sections on Drugs & Peace in Colombia, chemical fumigations, the biological War on Drugs, Europe & Plan Colombia, Forward Operating Locations. Many documents referred to in this booklet can be found on this site.

<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aid>

Center for International Policy (CIP) in Washington. Colombia's conflict and human rights crisis are worsening, and U.S. military and police aid is rising fast. As the United States deepens its involvement in Colombia, this website offers a central source of information and analysis.

<http://www.usfumigation.org>

Special site on fumigations in Colombia and the Third World, maintained by Jeremy Bigwood.

<http://www.ceudes.org>

Corporación Unidades Democráticas para el Desarrollo (CEUDES), a Colombian team of experts from social, environment and health sciences, aiming to strengthen social participation in the peace process. Special web site section on illicit crops, substitution and eradication.



Colombia began an intensive campaign of massive aerial spraying in December 2000, under the aegis of Plan Colombia. The programme has set in motion strong opposition by the peasant communities involved and national and international civil society organisations. The number of voices speaking out against using chemical herbicides to eradicate illicit coca and opium poppy crops has grown spectacularly this year, fostering an even broader debate about this Latin American country's entire drug policy.

Right now, the debate focuses on the consequences of fumigation for health and the environment. The various positions taken range from questioning the technical aspects of how fumigations are being handled, to the frontal rejection of aerial spraying combined with alternatives such as decriminalising small peasants and undertaking manual eradication procedures in a gradual, negotiated and voluntary manner.

Colombia has enjoyed little autonomy with respect to the management of illicit crops, as a strong link exists between aerial spraying and the war dynamics. A decision to suspend fumigation, therefore, is not likely to be based on technical arguments but depends largely on policy considerations with respect to the course the armed conflict is taking. On the other hand, escalation of the conflict will not be avoided simply by suspending aerial spraying. It will also depend on other factors involved in the crisis that Colombia's peace process is reaching.

The peace talks, though tenuous, still form part of Colombia's present panorama. The direction that these conversations take will be of paramount importance for the immediate future. Either the efforts to find a political solution to the conflict can be continued or a generalized intensification of war will occur. The search for peace and the need to re-evaluate current antidrugs policies have thus become inseparable.

The Transnational Institute (TNI) is a decentralized fellowship of scholars, researchers and writers from the Third World, Europe and the U.S. committed to create and promote international co-operation in analysing and finding possible solutions to such global problems as militarism and conflict, poverty and marginalisation, social injustice and environmental degradation.

Since 1996, the TNI Drugs & Democracy programme has been analysing trends in the illegal drugs economy and in drug policies globally, their causes and their effects on economy, peace and democracy.

The Drugs & Democracy programme conducts field investigations, engages policy debates, briefs journalists and officials, coordinates international campaigns and conferences, produces articles, publications and briefing documents, and maintains a daily electronic news service on drugs related issues.

The aim of the project and of the Drugs and Conflict series is to stimulate a re-assessment of conventional prohibitive and repressive policy approaches and to argue for policies based on principles consistent with a commitment to harm reduction, fair trade, development, democracy, human rights, environmental and health protection, and conflict prevention.