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THE PRESIDENT'S FLAWED PLAN TO AID COLOMBIA

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With great fanfare, in early January the Clinton Administration rolled out a \$1.6 billion emergency request for counter-narcotics efforts in Colombia, citing the tripling of coca production since 1992 and the high social costs of illicit drug use in the United States. But the Administration's request will not do the job. It relies on vague peace negotiations to isolate Colombian guerrillas while failing to address local and regional problems. Congress should ensure that any aid bill fixes the flaws in the President's proposal.

Colombia's Nightmare. Coca production has flourished in Colombia, where 40 percent of the countryside is controlled by two Marxist guerrilla groups—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army. The insurgents make some \$100 million to \$500 million a year from ransoms, extortion, and protection for drug lords. They have grown stronger because Colombia's political and economic elites resist strengthening the government. Colombia's public institutions provide inadequate services, with little presence outside major cities, and the judicial system has been unable to prosecute or hold human rights abusers, drug outlaws, or common criminals.

Though Colombia's armed forces have grown in numbers, they remain reactive and ineffective against widely dispersed guerrilla forces. The National Police lack adequate weapons to fight militarized and heavily armed guerrillas,

paramilitaries, and drug lords. Violence has taken a toll on the once steadily growing economy, which shrank by 3.5 percent in 1999 as unemployment soared to 20 percent. As a result, Colombia now faces a war on five fronts:

narco-trafficking, leftist guerrilla insurgencies, right-wing paramilitary violence, a weak government, and a faltering economy. Clearly, the United States has an interest in assisting the government of President Andrés Pastrana to fight this war.

A Flawed Aid Proposal.

The President's request to give Colombia \$1.6 billion over two years is part of a \$7.5 billion effort involving money, loans, and international donations. The proposal, based on President Pastrana's *Plan Colombia*, released in September 1999, has five goals: (1) equip the police with 30 Blackhawk and 18 additional Huey helicopters and deploy Colombian Army counter-narcotics battalions and police in the southern region where much of the coca and heroin poppy is grown; (2) strengthen interdiction with local and regional radar; (3) enhance coca eradication with more spray planes and base facilities; (4) promote

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crop substitution; and (5) improve the administration of justice to reduce violence and improve human rights. This seems like a lot, but the Administration's plan will not do enough to relieve Colombia's major problems. The reasons:

- **U.S. aid is based on a flawed premise.** Like the *Plan Colombia*, the President's proposal relies on an ambiguous peace process with narco-traffickers to curb insurgency. But while the guerrillas are well-heeled and well-armed, they have little support among the majority of Colombians. Capitulation to their demands, such as an unelected role in government or authority over the drug-producing territory, would legitimize the guerrillas and traffickers while strengthening transnational drug links throughout the Caribbean and Mexico.
- **U.S. aid is neither immediate nor focused.** Although the Administration calls for "emergency appropriations," the first Blackhawk helicopters might not arrive in Colombia for 18 months. Past delivery of aid has been bungled; over the last year, the State Department sent outdated ammunition to the Colombian police, while fresh rounds were delivered to the Department itself. In addition, the Administration's plan requests more money to strengthen crop eradication strategies in Bolivia and Peru but neglects interdiction strategies for the porous borders with Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela through which traffickers could escape.
- **The request fails to address economic and political needs.** The Andean Trade Preferences Act will expire in 2002, but it is not clear that the Administration's plan makes any provision to ensure markets for Colombia's alternate crops or existing legal commodities. To establish a rule of law and protect the lives and rights of all its citizens, Colombia needs effective levels of government across the country. The only assistance the Administration requests in this area is for the administration of justice and increases in human rights activities—but these address a small part of the much larger problem.

A Focused Agenda. If stanching the flow of illicit drugs from Colombia is an important U.S. objective, Washington should provide assistance that enables the government of Colombia to meet its five-front challenge while promoting a regional interdiction approach.

For such aid, Washington should encourage the Pastrana government to demand that the guerrillas either divorce themselves from drug lords or risk being treated as traffickers. The peace talks with the guerrillas should be about the FARC's reentry into electoral politics, not giving them unelected authority. Moreover, counter-narcotics aid should be timely: If this is an "emergency" request, then the materiel should be readily deliverable. U.S. assistance should leverage Colombia's resources to train, field, and equip security forces that can protect the lives and rights of its citizens. To ensure outlets for all legal commodities, the Andean Trade Preferences Act should be extended. Farmers cultivating alternate crops should be assured of security to protect them from reprisals for abandoning illicit production. And the aid should help expand effective government and law enforcement throughout the country, with border surveillance and interdiction capabilities focused more regionally to discourage the flight of traffickers to more hospitable locations.

Conclusion. Arriving five months after *Plan Colombia*, the Administration's request is neither realistic in relying on a vague peace process nor comprehensive enough to strengthen a weak government. By now, U.S. credibility in supporting Colombian democracy and combating narcotics trafficking is at stake. Denying aid would give the outlaws the upper hand, but approving the current proposal would merely slap a band-aid on a cancerous problem. Congress can fix the flaws in the President's plan to help Colombia establish a government strong enough to handle such challenges in the future.

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