Colombia’s war: Drugs, oil and markets

by Tom F. Driver in the November 7, 2001 issue

In the name of the “war on drugs” much of Colombia is being subjected to terror in the form of massacres, assassinations, rapes and the spraying of poison from airplanes. When in August 2000 Congress approved President Bill Clinton’s request for $1.3 billion to implement “Plan Colombia,” the faith-based organization Witness for Peace decided to send a delegation of 100 people to see for themselves what was happening there, and I signed on. We feared that U.S. involvement would add to the violence in an already war-ravaged land, would create a situation similar to that of El Salvador in the 1980s or even lead to a debacle like our involvement in Vietnam. The trip confirmed these fears—and more.

Plan Colombia, which President George W. Bush renamed the Andean Regional Initiative, is being sold as a key component of the war on drugs. The propaganda for it is so effective that even critics of U.S. policy in Colombia assume it is true. For example, NBC’s August 31 *Dateline* devoted a full hour to a skeptical look at what the U.S. is doing in Colombia. The program’s host, Geraldo Rivera, suggested that it will be impossible to stop the flow of drugs as long as demand for them is so high in the U.S. and warned of the danger that we might be drawn into a civil war. Though both points are important and valid, the program was notable for what it did not say.

Rightly calling attention to the extremely high level of violence in Colombia, Rivera failed to mention the group responsible for 70 percent of that violence: the paramilitary forces which, although ostensibly private and illegal, receive aid and cooperation from Colombia’s army and hence, indirectly, from the U.S. Neither did Rivera mention the 2 million people who have fled from the fighting and the aerial fumigation of their farms.

These internal refugees, unemployed, living in squatters’ communities in the cities to which they have fled, are the principal result of the war so far. Many Colombians believe that they are its intended result, that the real aim of the war against

insurgents and against drugs is really to get small farmers off their land in order to make room for development. Under Colombia's coca fields is oil. Paramilitaries terrorize people into leaving their land, and labor organizers are the group most targeted for assassination. More than 1,000 have been killed in the past 12 years, 200 so far this year.

Colombia is a prime instance of U.S. military clout being used to serve the interests of corporate-led globalization. Because the campaign is such bad news for the poor of Colombia (and the rest of South America), and because it increases the level of terror in the world, it should be of great concern to America and its churches—all the more so since our own experience of terror on September 11.

To understand what is going on in Colombia, one needs to begin by looking at the country's long history of violence. The Spanish conquest in the early 16th century enslaved Indians to work in mines and on plantations. As a result of the subsequent importation of African slaves Colombia now has the third largest black population in the Americas, after Brazil and the U.S.

The country's violence has grown out of such endemic social factors as the severe, often brutal, exploitation of labor; the deep poverty of at least 60 percent of its people—though the land itself is rich in natural resources and the economy is productive; and the political disempowerment of more than 90 percent of its citizens. A small white ruling class controls Colombia's political life and holds most of its wealth. As a result of huge amounts of military spending, the national debt is massive. This social structure, an extreme form of what characterizes several other parts of Latin America, is such a formula for social unrest that Colombia will experience continuing violence as long as it remains unchanged.

Factionalism within Colombia's ruling class, moreover, has led to repeated episodes of warfare. Between 1899 and 1902, Conservatives and Liberals fought the savage War of the Thousand Days. Between 1946 and 1958 these factions fought again in an epoch known as La Violencia—a conflict satirized in Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. A fratricidal orgy that cost an estimated 200,000 lives, La Violencia precipitated the current time of troubles. Outraged that Colombia's factional wars did nothing to relieve the suffering of the poor, reformers became rebel guerrillas.

Formed toward the end of the 1950s, two of these groups remain active today: the FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces), which draws its primary strength from campesinos in the south, and the ELN (Army of National Liberation), whose strength is greater in the north among oil workers, indigenous groups defending their habitat against encroachment by the oil industry, and the Afro-Colombian population.

The guerrilla activities in turn led to the creation of Colombia's most deadly force today: the paramilitaries, made up of mercenaries easily recruited with a bit of pay, a uniform and a gun from among Colombia's desperately poor young people. At first they were financed and used by large landowners to defend their property against guerrilla incursions. Later they were also used by drug lords to protect their illegal activities. More recently they have been employed by the Colombian army to do the dirty work of terrorizing the campesinos and community leaders who are the real focus of the present war.

Not long ago the Colombian army had one of the worst records of human rights abuses in the Americas. Recently it appears to have delegated this kind of brutality to the paramilitaries, who commit atrocities on its behalf. U.S. military aid to Colombia indirectly subsidizes the paramilitaries' acts of terrorism. The human rights officer at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia's capital, acknowledged to our delegation the collusion between Colombia's army and the paramilitaries—a collusion that is often officially denied. She said that nothing could be done about it. However, on September 10 the U.S. finally blacklisted Colombia's largest paramilitary group as a terrorist organization, as it had done with the FARC and the ELN much earlier.

To speak of human rights abuses is to speak abstractly. The concrete reality consists of kidnappings, murders, tortures, rapes and massacres. Though all of the armed groups have engaged in some of these things, the paramilitaries are thought to commit about 70 percent of these crimes and appear to be the only group engaged in massacres. They have several times entered villages in broad daylight, forced a number of civilians into an open public space, gunned them down and then cut up the bodies with chain saws, scattering limbs, heads and torsos on the ground as a warning to the living that they will suffer the same fate if they do not flee. One such massacre took place in the department of Cauca during this past Holy Week.

Community leaders are often slain first. Their plight is so desperate—and so little noticed outside of Colombia—that the labor union leaders in Bogotá who met with our delegation welcomed us with the words, “We have been waiting for you for 50 years. Where have you been?”

A major form of violence in Colombia today, the spraying of poison on the farms of campesinos, has greatly escalated since the U.S. instituted Plan Colombia. Crop dusters fly over coca fields with helicopter escorts, spraying Roundup Ultra, a souped-up version of the weed killer popular in the U.S. It is manufactured by Monsanto Chemicals, the firm that made Agent Orange for use in the Vietnam War. Although the principal toxin in regular Roundup is glyphosate, in Colombia something called Cosmo-flux has been added to make it stick to the leaves of the coca plant. The combination is thought to increase the danger to animal and human life. Even the regular formula sold in the U.S. carries a label warning against possible damage to aquatic organisms, pets, grazing animals, rabbits, tortoises, fowl—and people. The label warns that one must not eat the fruit or nuts of trees that have been in the area sprayed with the chemical for 21 days. But these safety standards are not applied to the aerial spraying in Colombia.

Although the stated objective of the spraying is to kill only coca plants, it is not possible to restrict the damage. The spray can be carried half a mile or more by winds. Because coca is often planted in the same field with food crops, corn, bananas, yucca and beans are killed along with it. Farm animals often die from it, as do fish. Children become sick. On hillsides, the death of plants leads to soil erosion. Since the land is part of the Amazon basin, the ecological consequences are severe. As farmers are driven from their homesteads, many go into the jungle to clear new land for crops, with the result that some 1.75 million acres of rain forest have been lost.

The aerial fumigations are, as one might expect, extremely unpopular. While we were in Colombia the governors of four departments (states) in the south, where the spraying is most intense, flew to Washington to object. Meanwhile, the governor of Caquetá made the same point to our delegation, as did members of a morning-long symposium in which we heard from departmental legislators, nongovernmental organizations, educators and church groups. This past summer, when Colombia’s President Andrés Pastrana, acceding to widespread protest, announced that there would be a halt to the fumigations, he was quickly contradicted by the U.S. Embassy, and the spraying resumed a few days later.

People flee in huge numbers from the fumigations (which are carried out by the army) and from the fighting between guerrillas and paramilitaries. Since the UN reserves the term “refugees” for those who cross national borders, the 2 million Colombians who have been driven from their land and huddle in squatters’ communities are usually spoken of as “displaced persons.” We spent two nights in such a settlement, called Nueva Colombia, on the edge of Florencia, the capital of Caquetá. Three of us slept on the floor of a one-room house that a four-person family had built for itself out of planks and corrugated tin. The lucky father of this family had a job, unlike the 90 percent in Nueva Colombia who can find no employment.

This had been a farming family, tilling some 20 acres on which they could sustain themselves with several cows, some food crops and a small amount of coca. When the fields were sprayed the first time, they made a partial recovery; but after the second time they gave up, mostly out of fear for the health of their two small children. They now produce nothing and are completely dependent upon the market economy. Although the father works as night watchman of an office building, he has no job security.

It is important to understand why such farmers grow coca. Its cultivation is traditional in the Andes, where it is used as a mild intoxicant and hallucinogen for social, medicinal and religious purposes. It is, for example, a common remedy for altitude sickness. It has sacramental meaning for the indigenous Andeans, who use it, as some of them told me, “to communicate with our ancestors.”

During the 1980s, small farmers saw the market for their food products disappear. As a result of globalization and free-market policies, Colombia became flooded with food imported from the U.S. Deprived of the cash they had earned from their food crops, farmers found a ready, if illegal, market for their coca, which could be sold to traffickers as raw material for cocaine. At the same time, the war on drugs was pushing coca cultivation out of Peru and Bolivia (which are to the south of Colombia), making it an even more attractive cash crop for Colombian farmers. Now, when this crop is destroyed, they have no place to go and no way to live. They are victims of both the corporate and the military arms of globalization.

The international drug trade is itself an example and a beneficiary of economic globalization. It is a serious mistake to assume that the U.S. has a drug problem because coca and poppies are grown in Colombia, or that eliminating these crops

from Colombia would stem the flow of drugs into North America and elsewhere. If the drug crops could not be grown in Colombia, they would be grown in Ecuador or in other parts of South America, or perhaps in Africa.

The “war on drugs” is counterproductive, since it raises the price of the drugs, makes drug trafficking more profitable, and thus encourages dealers to try to sell more. Despite the many billions the U.S. has spent on the drug war, consumption in the U.S. has not declined. The Rand Institute has estimated that spending the money on drug treatment programs would be seven times more effective. That our drug policy has failed must be clear to our policymakers in Washington. Why, then, are we pouring so much money into Plan Colombia? The answer lies in the U.S. need for expanding markets and its high consumption of oil.

Beneath the coca fields in southern Colombia lie the largest undeveloped oil deposits in the Americas. Oil is already being piped from fields further north, where paramilitaries have been most active and where the tension is highest between management and labor and between the oil companies and the indigenous population. When Plan Colombia was under consideration by Congress, a vice president of Occidental Petroleum (in which Albert Gore’s family owns stock), who is also a leader of the U.S.-Colombia Business Partnership, testified in its favor. One company with large investment in Colombian oil development is Harken Engineering of Houston, Texas, which George W. Bush helped manage when he was in the oil business. While he was governor of Texas, Bush received a visit from President Pastrana encouraging expansion of Harken’s Colombia activity. Well known in Colombia, the oil connection is given little publicity in the U.S.

As farmers are driven off Colombia’s land, it is falling into the hands of speculators. Fewer and fewer people own more and more of the country’s land. There is talk of building a major highway that would cut across southern Colombia to connect Brazil with the Pacific Ocean. Such a highway would radically alter the economy of the region and increase land values. Plans are under way for the completion and improvement of the Pan American Highway running north to south. In the north, there are rumors of the construction of an interoceanic canal that could accommodate vessels too large for the Panama Canal. The mining of ore and precious stones is important to Colombia’s future. And agribusinesses are ever eager to supplant traditional farming methods.

In Colombia as throughout the world, small farmers stand in the way of the dreams and schemes of the strong and are considered expendable. The plight of the rural poor constitutes a crisis rapidly being made worse by corporate-led globalization, which offers significant benefit to only about 20 percent of the world's population. The resistance this creates induces the mighty to quash it by force, as activities in Colombia clearly demonstrate.

At Colombia's Larandia military base in Caquetá, our delegation interviewed the commanding officer of an antinarcotics brigade, who was accompanied by two other officers. He told us that he and one of the others had been trained at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia. Many in our delegation had participated in protests at the gates of Fort Benning aimed at closing the school, and some had served prison sentences for doing so. The school is notorious for its "counterterrorism" instruction, which means the training of Latin American armies to make war upon their own people. Over the years, some 10,000 Colombian officers have been trained there, more than from any other country. U.S. military involvement with Colombia began well before the drug war.

At the Larandia base we also saw U.S.-made helicopters and U.S. officers engaged in the supervision and training of antinarcotics battalions. These units are also used to fight insurgents. To help them, the U.S. has 500 military personnel stationed in Colombia, plus 300 people performing military tasks out of uniform and under contract to the Pentagon and/or the CIA. The latter are part of a policy to "outsource" or privatize certain jobs normally done by uniformed personnel.

The DynCorp company of Reston, Virginia, is one of several firms supplying personnel to this endeavor, usually men who have retired from the armed services. Such people made up the crew of the reconnaissance plane that last April fed information to the Peruvian fighter plane that shot down a family of missionaries. The use of such mercenaries makes it easier to fool Congress and the public about the nature and extent of U.S. military operations abroad. It also avoids the bringing home of bodies in flag-draped coffins.

Seeking to prevent another Vietnam, Congress put a cap on the number of U.S. personnel that could be assigned to military duty in Colombia, limiting the number to no more than 500 in uniform, plus 300 civilians. When President Bush asked Congress last summer for an additional $800 million for the Andean Regional Initiative, he requested that the personnel limit be removed. Although Congress

refused, it is likely that the request will be made again and again until Congress gives in, or perhaps, as with the Iran-contra case, a way will be found to circumvent the law.

As the term “Andean Regional Initiative” signals, Colombia is only one part of U.S. plans for a military buildup in South America. Already the U.S. air base in Ecuador is being expanded. Ecuador, many suspect, is being set up to function in South America as Honduras did in Central America in the 1980s—as a place from which U.S. military involvement in other countries of the region can be coordinated.

Legislators, educators, labor leaders and church groups in Colombia spoke repeatedly of the recolonization and the dollarization of Colombia. Some spoke also of U.S. military dominance of their country and their continent. Under the twin banners of a globalized economy and a war against drugs, the U.S. is pursuing the aim of controlling the political, military and economic life of all the Americas. The course we are taking there is not good news for the poor.