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## Washington Should Avoid Repeating Plan Colombia's Failures

Lauren Carasik

*Western New England University School of Law, Carasik@law.wne.edu*

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# Washington should avoid repeating Plan Colombia's failures

*Investing more in ineffective militarized policies will undermine, not strengthen, peace and justice*

February 9, 2016 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

On Feb. 4, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and President Barack Obama celebrated the 15th anniversary of Plan Colombia, a [controversial U.S. aid program](#) to Bogotá signed in 2000 to fight the so-called war on drugs and enhance internal security.

The Colombian government is expected to sign a long-awaited peace agreement with Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in March, ending the country's 50-year conflict, in which more than 220,000 people — mostly civilians — were killed. Washington has provided nearly \$10 billion in aid to Colombia since 2000, 71 percent of which has been allocated to security forces. U.S. officials say the initiative was instrumental in moving the peace process forward.

But glowing reviews of Plan Colombia obscure its [ineffectiveness](#) and the devastating [human costs](#) of the country's militarization. The crackdown has led to massive upheaval, with more than 4 million people internally displaced since 2000. Of those, most were women and children, with Afro-Colombian and indigenous people disproportionately affected. The staggering number — about a tenth of the country's nearly 50 million people — adds to those previously dispossessed, leaving Colombia second only to Syria in terms of internally displaced people. The National Unit for the Integral Attention and Reparation of Victims has registered more than 6 million people seeking restitution for harms inflicted during Plan Colombia's operation.

The crackdown was also accompanied by [egregious human rights abuses](#). Since the plan's inception, more than 1,000 trade unionists and at least [370 journalists](#) have been killed; at least 400 human rights defenders were murdered, with many more activists tortured, disappeared, kidnapped or detained; and nearly half a million women were [subjected to sexual violence](#) from 2001 to 2009.

To burnish claims of the plan's success, security forces killed [more than 5,700 civilians](#) from 2000 to 2010, many lured to their deaths by the promise of jobs. Military members later staged combat scenes to make it appear as if the deaths were caused by warfare. Impunity has been widespread. Out of some 3,500 killings investigated by Colombia's prosecutor general, only 402 resulted in convictions, mostly of low-level forces. Last year, Prosecutor General Eduardo Montealegre announced that [22 generals are being investigated](#), but their long overdue prosecution is far from certain. In fact, some top officers associated with the scandal have been [nominated for promotions](#).

Human rights groups have criticized the demobilization of right-wing paramilitary groups operating under the [United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia](#) coalition, which was closely allied with Colombia's armed forces. The paramilitaries were among the worst violators in the conflict, [responsible for most of the killings](#), and were the [primary beneficiaries of a massive land transfer](#) that led to forced displacement of locals.

The group's members were offered reduced sentences in exchange for telling the truth and reparations, but most have yet to face justice, since the process has moved at a glacial pace. And some formed criminal gangs dubbed bacrim, which continue to operate with the [cooperation of U.S.-backed Colombian security forces](#).

Parts of Colombia, particularly the southern Pacific coastal area, have experienced a troubling recent spike in paramilitary activities. The bacrim remain active in the increasingly violent port city of [Buenaventura](#). The economy is more stable, yet poverty and inequality have been exceptionally stubborn in rural areas. But Plan Colombia mostly benefited the country's elites.

**Washington must critically assess the harmful effects of Plan Colombia and adopt a nonmilitarized approach, designed with the broad participation of civil society, to help rebuild the country.**

Aside from the catastrophic humanitarian toll, crediting Plan Colombia with paving the way for peace by weakening FARC and forcing the insurgents to the bargaining table is misleading. In fact, the militarization prolonged the bloodshed by helping derail peace talks from 1999 to 2002 between then-President Andrés Pastrana and FARC. U.S. investment in the military buildup helped embolden his government to reject a negotiated settlement in favor of a battlefield victory.

Santos is now seeking an increase in U.S. aid for post-conflict reconstruction. As Washington commits to additional funding, it should take stock of the plan's abysmal failures, which have contributed to incalculable misery. For one, Plan Colombia's *raison d'être* — fighting drug trafficking — has failed. Bogotá is still the world's top producer and exporter of cocaine. [Cultivation has been rising](#) since 2012 and is nearing the level in 2000.

Second, the effect of Colombia's militarization extends far beyond its borders. Thanks to its well-funded military forces — trained by the U.S. in counternarcotics and counterinsurgency — Colombia has evolved into a security exporter, providing [training to foreign military forces](#) throughout the rest of South America, the Caribbean and West Africa. [U.S.-funded](#) international training programs are seen as a way of capitalizing on the skills acquired under Plan Colombia and providing secure employment for demobilized Colombian troops.

[Key details of U.S. assistance](#) and logistical support for the training programs remain shrouded in secrecy. For example, it is unclear who is conducting the training, which forces are being trained and whether they are being properly vetted for compliance with human rights norms. Without transparency, the programs cannot be subject to proper monitoring and assessment. It is ironic that

Santos is now exporting the militarized and prohibitionist aspects of the war on drugs, the logic and effectiveness of which he has [openly questioned](#).

Ravaged by decades of conflict, Colombia faces the monumental task of rebuilding its institutions and dismantling the conditions that gave rise to the conflict, including [dramatically unequal land distribution](#). But the threat of continued violence will not evaporate with the peace deal, prompting some observers to call for ongoing vigilance and the importance of treating the next phase as [post-accord](#) rather than post-conflict.

Last month FARC and Santos' government asked the United Nations to provide an unarmed peacekeeping mission to verify a bilateral cease-fire and disarmament. The focus will now turn to winning the support of war-weary Colombians, who must approve the deal through a referendum, and securing funding necessary to implement the plan.

Costs of post-conflict reconstruction are estimated to be more than [\\$90 billion over the next 10 years](#) to cover development aid, especially for rural areas, and to assist in demobilizing and reintegrating FARC fighters. Obama announced that he will seek more than \$450 million — a 25 percent increase from the year before — from Congress under a new plan called Peace Colombia.

Colombia needs international support to achieve a lasting peace. But before committing to additional aid, Washington must critically assess the harmful effects of Plan Colombia and adopt a nonmilitarized approach, designed with the broad participation of civil society, to help rebuild the country.

*Lauren Carasik is a clinical professor of law and the director of the international human rights clinic at the Western New England University School of Law.*

*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.*