

# US-backed 'Plan Colombia' to escalate bloody civil war

**Patrick Martin**  
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Thousands of government troops are being assembled on the border of a rebel-held zone in southern Colombia on the eve of the scheduled launching of a US-backed military offensive. Some 600 soldiers were flown into the region January 23 on US-built C-130 transport planes, reinforcing the 2,500 soldiers already in place.

Under the "Plan Colombia," approved by the Clinton administration last year, President Andres Pastrana will end a de facto truce with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's largest anti-government guerrilla force, on January 31.

The Clinton administration and the Republican-controlled Congress approved Plan Colombia last summer, including \$1.3 billion in US aid, the bulk of it directed to the Colombian armed forces, as well as a significant increase in the number of US advisers working with the police and military. The military buildup includes the recruitment of 10,000 more soldiers to form special mobile units, and training pilots and crew for 60 new attack helicopters to be supplied by the US. Some 33 helicopters are expected to be in use by the time the offensive begins.

The FARC has enjoyed undisputed control of most of Putumayo province, near the border with Ecuador, for two years. The Colombian military has been kept outside the 16,000-square mile zone, under an agreement between Pastrana and the FARC which led to inconclusive peace negotiations. The FARC broke off the talks in November, citing the threatened resumption of military action.

Since then, a series of bloody incidents has taken place, including the assassination of a prominent legislative leader who was monitoring the peace talks, bomb attacks on government and US officials, and atrocities by a right-wing paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

The 8,000-strong AUC has long operated as a fascist auxiliary for the Colombian police and army, but it is now playing an increasingly independent role, and its principal leader, Carlos Castano, now rivals the military chiefs and the president in influence within the country's ruling circles.

In one of the most brutal incidents in the decades-long civil war, AUC commandos butchered dozens of men in the farming village of Chengue, in Sucre province in northern Colombia, earlier this month. They marched into the community of avocado growers January 17, rounded up the residents in the main square, and killed 26 men by crushing their heads with heavy stones and a sledgehammer. This gruesome procedure was apparently chosen for two reasons—to avoid gunshots which might alert FARC guerrillas, and to maximize the terrorizing effect.

According to a detailed reconstruction of the massacre published January 28 in the *Washington Post*, "survivors said military aircraft undertook surveillance of the village in the days preceding the massacre and in the hour immediately following it. The military, according to these accounts, provided safe passage to the paramilitary column and effectively sealed off the area by conducting what villagers described as a mock daylong battle with leftist guerrillas who dominate the area."

Villagers from Chengue sent letters to Pastrana and to human rights groups in April, after right-wing paramilitary groups began activities in the region, and again in October, warning that they were being targeted for violence. The government made no response. Six of those who signed the letter were murdered January 17.

The military commander in Sucre province, General Rodrigo Quinones, became notorious for his close collaboration with right-wing death squads. He was charged in the murder of 57 trade unionists and human rights activists while serving as the regional head of naval intelligence in the early 1990s, but a military court acquitted him. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Washington Office on Latin America recently issued a report which called specifically for Quinones' removal, and the general was transferred to another post.

Last year right-wing paramilitaries carried out a massacre in the town of El Salado, near Chengue, using similar methods—the military sealed off the town, allegedly fighting a pitched battle with guerrillas, while the AUC killers moved

in. Anders Kompass, the representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, told the *Post*, “We are very worried and very suspicious about the coincidences. This involves the same officer in charge, the same kind of military activity before and after the massacre, and the same lack of military presence while it was going on.”

The ties between the AUC and the armed forces are so brazen that even the Clinton administration itself was compelled to admit it. In one of Clinton's final acts, the day before leaving office, he signed a letter to Congress conceding that the Colombian military has not complied with human rights conditions that were included in the “Plan Colombia” aid package.

Clinton had already waived compliance with the human rights conditions last August, as he was empowered to do under the law. His January 19 letter merely reaffirmed that the position in Colombia remains essentially the same.

While moving closer to a full-scale confrontation with FARC, Pastrana has sought to neutralize the second largest guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), offering it territorial concessions in its base area in northern Colombia, around the town of San Pablo. The ELN, which has long enjoyed Cuban backing, opened talks in Havana with the government and released dozens of captured soldiers and policemen as a goodwill gesture. ELN leader Nicolas Rodriguez said he might accept a regional cease-fire, something FARC has so far refused.

Pastrana's overtures to the ELN, and his overall policy of negotiations with guerrilla groups, have sparked increasingly bitter conflicts within Colombia's ruling elite. Alvaro Uribe Velez, a prospective candidate of the opposition Liberal Party, has denounced the proposed cease-fire with the ELN as “an irreversible act that would fracture the country.”

Uribe, linked by Colombian media reports to the UAC and other fascist paramilitary groups, is the most right-wing of three politicians seeking the nomination of the Liberal Party, which is favored to win next year's presidential election. Pastrana cannot succeed himself and his Conservative Party is trailing badly in the polls. The Liberal Party has backed Plan Colombia and is expected to continue the warfare against the guerrilla groups.

The Colombian conflict threatens to spill into neighboring countries, including Venezuela, Ecuador and Brazil. The governments of Venezuela and Colombia have staged a war of words in recent months, culminating in the mutual recall of ambassadors, after Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez permitted leaders of the FARC to attend a session of the Latin American Parliament held in Caracas. Colombian officials called it “an aggressive act, a meddling in our internal affairs,” while Chavez retorted that the “Colombian

oligarchy” was responsible for the increasing violence.

Both Ecuador and Brazil have stepped up military operations in the dense Amazonian jungles where they share borders with Colombia. Ecuador has requested a military aid package from Washington, while allowing the US to set up an airbase at Manta, from which planes conduct surveillance flights over Colombia.

Brazil is deploying a \$1.4 billion radar system, the Amazon Vigilance System (Sivam), also financed with US aid, to monitor small-plane flights over the huge region. Last October Brazil offered to share Sivam data with the United States, Colombia and other bordering countries. It will also spend \$3.5 billion over the next eight years for new supersonic fighter planes and transport planes for moving troops.

Outgoing Clinton administration officials defended the widening of the Colombia conflict. Undersecretary of State Thomas R. Pickering declared, “I think this is evolving now into not just a pure Colombia issue, but an Andean regional issue, something it has always been. I think in future years there will be a broader regional aspect to this as we plan and propose to the Congress new budgets for this kind of activity.”

In a significant editorial shift, the *Washington Post* argued that both the incoming Bush administration and the Colombian government itself should adopt a more aggressive posture and dispense with the claim that the purpose of the military conflict is to halt the flow of narcotics. “Mr. Pastrana should shut down the safe zones for the guerrillas and accept that while some negotiations may be useful, sweeping political treaties will not end the conflict,” the newspaper wrote. “The United States, for its part, should stop pretending that it is only supporting a campaign against the drug traffic in Colombia. If it is to continue training and equipping the Colombian army, the new administration cannot avoid involvement in the larger Colombian conflict.”



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