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## WAITING FOR CONSOLIDATION:

### Monitoring Colombia's U.S.-aided counterinsurgency and development program

February 2012

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Since 2006, the Colombian government has chosen about fourteen zones to carry out a U.S.-supported military and development aid program. Known as “Consolidation” or “Integrated Action,” this large-scale effort can be considered the successor to “Plan Colombia.” It purports to introduce a functioning government in long-neglected territories.

The Consolidation program is a high priority for the U.S. government, which has been seeking models for establishing a state presence in ungoverned areas in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Obama administration officials have hailed the program's initial results; those who have paid visits to Consolidation zones within the past year include the deputy secretary of state, the White House “drug czar,” the director of the CIA, the commander of Southern Command, several congressional delegations, and several assistant secretaries of State and Defense.

During 2011, with support from the Ford Foundation, our four organizations visited three Consolidation zones to monitor the program's performance. We interviewed leaders, community members, military and civilian Consolidation officials, human rights defenders, analysts and others in the Pacific coast port of Tumaco, the La Macarena zone in south-central Colombia, and the Montes de María zone near the Caribbean. In the latter two zones, large USAID-funded contracts have been supporting Colombia's National Plan for Territorial Consolidation (PNCT). In Tumaco, the U.S. Agency for International Development [awarded](#) a contract to support the program only very recently, in October.

Though its design indicates that learning has taken place since Plan Colombia's launch in 2000, we have concerns about Consolidation: the role of the military, coordination between government bodies, consultation with communities, effects on land tenure, and several others.

In each of the chosen zones, the Consolidation strategy begins with offensive military operations to establish “security conditions.” Then, it aims quickly to bring in the rest of the government to provide basic services in a phased, coordinated way. According to the Consolidation program's documents, the desired end state is the military's near-total pullout from the zone, leaving behind a functioning government, greatly reduced violence, the absence of armed groups, and the elimination of drug production. (For more background about the Consolidation program, see CIP's 2009 report “[After Plan Colombia](#)” and our joint website, [www.ccai-colombia.org](http://www.ccai-colombia.org).)

We found that end-state to be distant in all three zones. In some areas, the security situation was difficult. In all areas, the military's role remained predominant. Getting “buy-in” from the entire government was a frequent challenge, and local governments' performance varied very widely. In general, the pace of progress toward the declared end-state had slowed noticeably since the Consolidation program's initial phase (about 2007-2009).

We found a program in flux, getting less attention from a central government that changed leadership in August 2010. The government of Juan Manuel Santos -- who, as defense minister in the previous government had helped launch the program -- appeared to be putting more emphasis on other initiatives like an ambitious land-restitution plan. Though it remains the framework that guides much -- perhaps most -- U.S. aid to Colombia today, the Consolidation Plan is referred to rarely in official speeches, or even on government websites.

The Santos government has nonetheless devoted significant bureaucratic energy toward the program, running the Consolidation framework through a “rethinking” process, involving dozens of government agencies, that has taken more than a year to complete.

In the meantime, though, we were left with a strong sense over the course of 2011 that the program was in a holding pattern.

This is troubling because so much of its success depends on the population's perception that the Colombian government, beyond making promises, is truly committed to being present, and improving poor populations' livelihoods, in conflictive areas that have been historically abandoned. A failure to see the program through could lead these populations to distrust the state still further, or it could lead to them living in a state of de facto martial law as the armed forces control territory with no accompaniment from civilian government institutions.

The Consolidation program's apparent loss of momentum in 2011 is not fatal. In fact, the “rethinking” process could bring more robust participation of the rest of the government. Plans to spend significant resources through 2014 are encouraging, and the land-restitution program could bring the desired end-state closer.

Even a recharged and reinvigorated program, however, must confront the same daunting challenges as before. These include the military's outsized role, civilian agencies' slow response, uncertain land tenure, unaccountable local governments, persistent security challenges, and the justice system's continued absence. The following three narratives illustrate these challenges in the contexts of Tumaco, La Macarena, and the Montes de María.

## TUMACO, NARIÑO

A port city in Nariño department in southwestern Colombia, Tumaco is one of the most conflictive parts of Colombia today. With a [population](#) of 180,000 and a land area about equal to Rhode Island, the city and surrounding municipality (county) of Tumaco make up one of Colombia's most troubled and [violent](#) territories. As recently as the 1990s, this was a relatively tranquil community with a large indigenous and Afro-Colombian population.

However, counter-drug operations elsewhere, especially in Putumayo department to the east, pushed the coca trade and its armed-group activity to such an extent that every year Tumaco is [listed](#) as Colombia's number-one or number-two municipality for the cultivation of coca, the crop used to make cocaine (the country has 1,100 municipalities). It also has one of the country's highest [murder rates](#) — well over 100 homicides per 100,000 residents — and a strong guerrilla and paramilitary-group presence.



After pushing the coca economy from Putumayo, Plan Colombia followed the coca crops to Tumaco. The U.S. and Colombian governments' initial response to Tumaco's drug and violence crisis was not to strengthen the state's presence in the municipality. Instead, Plan Colombia offered a sharp increase in aerial herbicide fumigation over the Afro-Colombian Community Councils' collectively held lands. Nariño, led by Tumaco, has been by far the [most fumigated](#) of Colombia's 32 departments during the past ten years.

The fumigation came with alternative development programs, financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other donors. These covered only a small portion of the affected communities, though, and could do little in a context of statelessness, lack of transportation, uncertain land tenure, and out-of-control violence. Worse, the U.S.-backed Colombian National Police fumigation program has insisted on spraying any coca plants it detects, meaning that alternative development projects funded by USAID have routinely been sprayed merely because of the proximity of coca plants.

Despite large-scale fumigation, coca growing has proved stubborn in Tumaco. This is largely a result of the state's absence from most of the territory and the lack of other economic alternatives for growers. So when the U.S. and Colombian governments began pursuing Consolidation, Tumaco appeared to be a prime candidate.

## Consolidation in Tumaco

Technically, the PNCT has been in Tumaco since 2008. However, our visit made it clear that Tumaco had seen very little investment in the Consolidation framework. When asked about the CCAI (The Center for Coordination of Integrated Action - pronounced “Say-Kigh”), local civil society leaders responded, “What kind of fruit is that?” A top municipal government

official told us of having received an e-mail about the program and hearing nothing since, until the CCAI held a meeting in early April 2011, weeks before we arrived in the region.

The CCAI headquarters for Tumaco consisted of a room with desks, computer equipment and maps at a beachside hotel complex heavily used by police and contractors involved with coca-eradication missions. The office is meant to coordinate all government agencies' activities to establish a presence in the zone. However, it appeared to have only a handful of staff and a very small administrative footprint.

The activities the United States is actually paying for in Tumaco look more like the same Plan Colombia programs of a decade ago. As in Putumayo circa 2002, fumigation is massive, while alternative development projects lag behind in stateless, insecure areas. Building up a civilian, institutional state presence on the ground is still a faraway goal toward which little progress is notable, even in the town center.

When fumigation eliminates growers' legal crops or food crops, food security assistance is rarely available. Local human rights and development workers affirmed that a significant portion of those who displace from Tumaco's Afro-Colombian communities today are fleeing repeated fumigation.

Why has Consolidation stumbled at the starting gate in Tumaco? The main reason is resources. Its far-flung geography makes Tumaco very hard to govern, and its high poverty and indigence rates mean that needs are greater. A proper Consolidation program in Tumaco would require an immense amount of funding--a large multiple of what USAID, other donors and the Colombian treasury are currently providing.

### Si Se Puede

The significant exception in Tumaco is a program begun by the Nariño governor's office called "*Si Se Puede*" (Yes We Can). Though strapped for cash, the *Si Se Puede* program answered positively to a request for development financing from the leaders of one Afro-Colombian Community Council in Tumaco: the community of Rescate-Las Varas.

Here, in exchange for the community's willingness to eradicate their own coca, the government is offering assistance with USAID support. Instead of being required to have "zero coca" before receiving government support, farmers in Las Varas are receiving food-security aid while they switch to legal cash crops like cacao, coconuts, managed forestry, fish farming and others. The successful eradication of most coca in



Fumigation planes share the tarmac at Tumaco's airport



Afro-Colombian Community Council: Rescate Las Varas

Las Varas led local officials to use the community as a model and local coordinators of the CCAI in Tumaco to work with the Las Varas community to guarantee further investment and to extend the model elsewhere in the region.

At the end of 2011, Governor Navarro and his party left office, placing the sustainability of the government's commitment to Las Varas in question. Consolidation may have to pick up where "*Si Se Puede*" left off.

This may be far more difficult than it sounds. The community's trust in the government remains fragile, and relationships forged with the governor's office may not be easily transferrable to a new entity. Meanwhile the Las Varas community faces friction with other



Tumaco

rivers and corridors, and joint guerrilla-paramilitary drug shipments have been detected.

The security situation in Tumaco remains dire. Most people we talked to, regardless of their social sector, were reluctant to talk at length about the perpetrators of the zone's violence and narcotrafficking. Some authorities, however, said that the number of incidents of murder and other violent crime had dropped since the middle of 2010. This, they suspect, may be a result of the *Rastrojos*' defeat of their paramilitary rivals and assumption of greater territorial control. Tumaco's trafficking routes may be somewhat less contested than before, and the FARC — with the exception of some recent kidnapping-for-ransom attempts in the city center — are largely forced to operate upriver, further from the coast.

Community Councils uncomfortable with its embrace of the state or unhappy that they are not receiving similar investment.

## Security

The Consolidation program is proceeding haltingly in conditions that continue to be among the least secure in the country. Indeed, the Las Varas community has suffered the death of six or seven village leaders as a result of their choice to abandon coca and work with the state. The FARC guerrillas remain very active in Tumaco and neighboring municipalities, participating in the drug trade, targeting local leaders, particularly indigenous leaders, attacking military and police targets, and making travel difficult on the few existing secondary and tertiary roads.

Further downriver and along the coast itself, one finds the heirs of the AUC paramilitary group, which disbanded officially in 2006. Former mid-level AUC commanders now control smaller groups that exist mainly for the drug trade, but still regularly threaten local leaders and engage in land theft. These so-called “emerging criminal groups” are [popping up](#) all over the country. Many reportedly have little to fear from the police and military, though this is usually a result of corruption, not alliance. Some in fact do drug business with the FARC guerrillas, and often fight each other for territory.

In Tumaco, the “new” paramilitary group that appears to have wrested control from the others is called *Los Rastrojos* (the word refers to what is left behind after a harvest), which is one of the most powerful of the new groups nationwide. The *Rastrojos* now control most riverine traffic in coastal Tumaco, especially the boatloads of cocaine that continue to leave the zone. The FARC, however, do continue to control some

The government response to the *Rastrojos* remains unclear. As in other parts of the country, the armed forces tend to consider them primarily to be a police responsibility. Colombia's police forces, however, are meant to operate in urban areas (with the exception of small, specialized units like *Carabineros* or *Junglas*). When they operate in rural zones, as they usually do, the *Rastrojos* end up in a “doughnut hole” of security-force responsibility: they are in the jurisdiction of army and marine units who consider them primarily to be a police issue. This is compounded by a chronic lack of coordination between the armed forces and police.

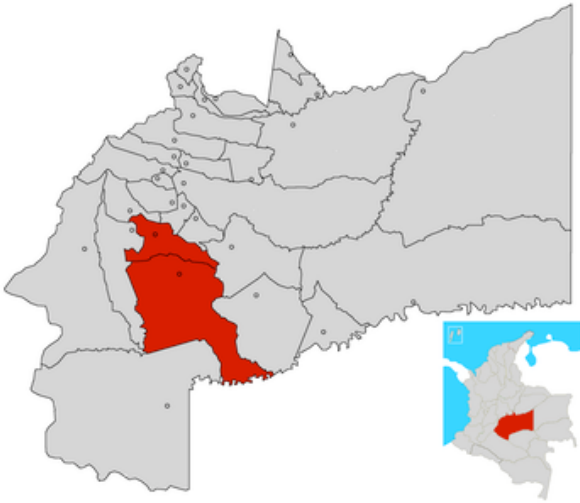
Amid this panorama of violence and narcotrafficking, the Consolidation effort has barely begun in Tumaco. Tumaco's challenges make it difficult to determine where to start, especially when U.S. and Colombian government funding has not been generous.

## LA MACARENA

La Macarena is a region of jungles and plains in the department of Meta, about 200 miles south of Bogotá, that has been a FARC guerrilla stronghold for decades. In 1998, the Colombian security forces vacated much of the area, meeting a FARC pre-condition for peace talks that took place in the zone until their failure in 2002. La Macarena is the oldest and most heavily funded of all Integrated Action zones. Since 2006-07, the Colombian, U.S. and other donor governments have spent about a quarter of a billion dollars ([450 billion Colombian pesos](#)) on security, crop eradication, infrastructure, governance and development programs.

### The “La Macarena Integrated Consolidation Program”

The “La Macarena Integrated Consolidation Program” (known as PCIM for its initials in Spanish),



with its headquarters, or “Coordination Center,” on a military base at the entrance to Vistahermosa’s town center, is by far the most advanced example of the Consolidation strategy.

At the very end of April and beginning of May 2011, we traveled to the town centers of two municipalities within the La Macarena zone, Vistahermosa and San Juan de Arama, and attended a series of meetings in Meta’s departmental capital, Villavicencio.

### The role of the military

What we heard leads us to conclude that the civilian handover was not happening. Colombian Army units within the Joint Task Force Omega, as well as some police, continue to be the PCIM’s most visible representatives, and by far its most visible face outside of the zone’s town centers. Soldiers continue to carry out public-works projects; we heard about an ambitious sewer project in Puerto Toledo, in Puerto Rico municipality, which was not functioning at the time of our visit. With the exception of Social Action, getting civilian agencies to carry out infrastructure projects and other services in this sparsely populated zone continues to be a problem. And except for a few prosecutors, the justice system remains far off.

Soldiers are keeping a tight lock on security and playing basic policing roles. Roadblocks are frequent; we heard complaints about soldiers at roadblocks photographing riders’ ID cards, taking down numbers from their cellphones’ recent-calls lists, and limiting the number of people who can ride in a vehicle. This heavy-handed approach is in part a reaction to a security situation that, though better than four years ago, has grown more complicated in the past several months.

### Titling has begun, slowly

The lack of clear land titles was a big issue in 2009 and continues to be the first complaint we heard from producer associations. Late last year, a pilot titling program finally began; the goal is to title 1,250 plots of land in twelve hamlets (*veredas*). Many of these titles are now in their final phase of approval: awaiting revision by the Environmental and Agrarian division of the Inspector-General’s Office (*Procuraduría*). Officials [say](#) the goal is eventually to title 5,000 plots in this zone.

Farmers remain concerned, though, about the likelihood that they will either lose their claim to their land or be pressured to sell to agribusiness investors. Many noted that legal “protection measures” to prevent large-scale land grabs were quietly lifted sometime in 2010, and land sales (which do take place, through signed contracts, in the absence of clear title) have been accelerating. Even without titles, though, we heard agreement that campesino producer associations – which barely existed in the zone before the PCIM’s entry – have become stronger.

### USAID after OTI

On April 20, 2011, USAID [awarded](#) a five-year, \$115 million contract to Associates in Rural Development (ARD), a Vermont-based company that has executed a large portion of USAID’s alternative development programs in Colombia since 2005. With these funds, ARD will be supporting the “alternative livelihoods” side of Consolidation in La Macarena, as well as southern Tolima and parts of Valle del Cauca



The “Coordination Center” in Vistahermosa

department. This will be the main non-military U.S. support to the PCIM.

The nature of USAID's support changed significantly in 2011, as its Office of Transition Initiatives – which is designed to carry out short-term, quick-impact projects with minimal bureaucracy – ended its mission ([PDF](#)) in Colombia after four years. OTI's field office in Meta closed down at the end of March 2011.

The former head of the OTI office at the U.S. embassy has remained in country, and now holds the title of "Coordinator Of CSDI Implementation" in the USAID mission. Still, a Colombian government official with Consolidation responsibilities told us frankly that "regular" USAID had become noticeably slower and more bureaucratic with OTI's exit from the scene.

While local leaders expressed gratitude to donor governments, a frequent complaint surrounded the "operadores," the contractors and subcontractors hired to carry out infrastructure and productive projects. They charge high operational "overhead" costs, the argument goes, which means that much aid money doesn't actually reach the target communities. Costs that contractors claim to pay for items (construction materials, livestock) are higher than communities claim to be able to obtain for them on the open market. Operators' timeframes for projects are often only two or three years, and they are under pressure to spend down their money by the end date. What suffers are long-term planning and the flexibility needed to work in a very fluid environment.

Despite these concerns about "operators," however, the producer associations that have formed within the PCIM structure in both municipalities remained very dedicated to the program. We heard no accounts of increased coca planting, and the reductions achieved since 2007 in the zone appear to be stable.

## Security

Leaders in Vistahermosa also reminded us that it would have been impossible for them to come and meet with us in their town six or seven years ago. The FARC's dominion over the town would have made that too risky for all of us.

However, security appears to have improved only incrementally in the zone since 2009. In particular, the Consolidation program continues to face challenges in operating beyond the municipalities' main town centers. In rural zones, armed groups remain fully able to intimidate the population.

In September 2010, a bombing raid in the PCIM zone, in the nearby municipality of La Uribe,

killed the FARC's top military commander, Víctor Julio Suárez alias "Mono Jojoy." Contrary to what one might expect, the FARC has since been *more* active in Vistahermosa, San Juan de Arama, and much of the PCIM zone than it was in 2009.

This was the assessment of both military and civil-society leaders alike. The FARC leader assigned to replace Mono Jojoy, Jaime Alberto Parra alias "El Médico," did not operate inside the same elaborate security cordon as his predecessor. Therefore, the fighters assigned to Jojoy's "security rings" – there may have been as many as 2,000 – have been freed up to go on the offensive. [According](#) to the Colombian daily *El Tiempo*, "Reports from demobilized guerrillas indicate that four key guerrilla fronts have increased in size."

FARC fighters are operating in smaller groups, at times out of uniform, and carrying out more frequent attacks in the PCIM zone. These attacks are occasionally taking place in close proximity to town centers. In [April](#), the FARC killed a police auxiliary and kidnapped two merchants in Mesetas, and killed a lieutenant and two soldiers in La Macarena. Just before that, about 10 miles outside the Vistahermosa town center, two guerrillas stopped and burned a passenger bus (the passengers were unharmed); it was the fourth such attack in six months.

We heard that the FARC has reasserted control of some "pacified" towns in which police stations had not yet been established. Puerto Toledo, which we visited two years ago, is one of these.

"Several communities in the PCIM area, including communities recovered by the military as long as two years ago, have been subject to periodic, albeit brief,



Former FARC leader Mono Jojoy and new leader "El Médico"

Source: Semana magazine



Police at a roadblock handed this “wanted” leaflet, depicting a top FARC leader, to the 6-year-old son of someone we interviewed.

visits by uniformed members of the FARC,” reads USAID’s most recent report on the PCIM zone ([PDF](#)). “To address ongoing security concerns, the police will this year build permanent police stations in Santo Domingo, an important crossroads town in Vista Hermosa, and Jardin de Penas in Mesetas.”

The FARC have stepped up their targeting of civilians. This is one reason why nearly all attempts to return displaced populations, officials acknowledged, have been unsuccessful so far. Meanwhile the charging of *vacunas* – extortion payments, like US\$15 per head of cattle – is way up, by all accounts. An official based in Villavicencio, Meta’s departmental capital, said that residents were complaining of *vacunas* in towns well outside the PCIM zone, such as Granada and San Martín, which had known no FARC presence for years.

We heard that the FARC are now prohibiting populations in remote parts of the PCIM zone from participating in social programs: not just the Consolidation programs, but conditional cash-transfer programs like “Families in Action,” which makes payments to parents who ensure that their children get medical checkups and go to school. Guerrillas, for instance, are prohibiting parents from traveling to town centers to collect subsidies.

We heard a few, unconfirmed reports that the FARC may be trying to compete with the PCIM by instituting its own social programs. A so-called “Plan Amigo,” possibly launched at the beginning of the year, purportedly includes some construction projects and an order that FARC fighters be more friendly toward, and avoid killing, civilians.

For their part, the “new” paramilitary groups active in Meta also suffered a blow in late 2010. In December, an elite Colombian police unit hunted down and killed Pedro Oliveiro Guerrero, alias *Cuchillo* (Knife), a former mid-level AUC commander whose so-called Popular Anticommunist Revolutionary Army (ERPAC) had been growing quickly – and trafficking tons of cocaine – between Meta and the Venezuelan border.

The ERPAC continues to exist, and apparently has remained strong enough to prevent other “new” paramilitary groups from entering western Meta. The group’s presence has been weaker in the PCIM zone, though, and its remnants appear to be cooperating with the FARC in the drug trade. Episodes of combat with the guerrillas have been very rare.

All of our concerns from our first visit to La Macarena in 2009 remain relevant. The pace of the civilian handover remains very slow, in part because the security situation remains very complicated. Land titling still lags. Judicial personnel needed to combat impunity are absent.

Consultation with communities about development needs is partial. So is coordination between illicit crop eradication and food-security and development aid. Coordination in general remains a big challenge, especially as many of the Consolidation program’s initial managers are now gone, either transferred elsewhere or out of government, and have been replaced by new officials who may not share the same vision.

## MONTES DE MARÍA

For nearly five years, with U.S. support, Colombia’s Montes de María has been a priority region for the government’s National Territorial Consolidation Plan (PNCT).

In November 2011, we visited several municipalities of the Montes de María region, including all four in which the Consolidation program is operating. These are San Onofre and Ovejas in the department of Sucre, and El Carmen de Bolívar and San Jacinto in the department of Bolívar. Like our trip to La Macarena, this was our group’s second visit to the Montes de María region.

We found a zone where, following several years of relative peace, tensions are rising. The national government is gearing up to launch an ambitious land-restitution program. Consolidation, meanwhile, gives a big role to the military while assisting small farmers, including returning displaced populations, and improving local government. This is happening amid a backdrop of rapid concentration of land in fewer hands,



## The 15 municipalities of the Montes de María region.

Source: Fundación Programa de Desarrollo y Paz de los Montes de María.

a notable increase in violence against small-farmer leaders, doubts about local leadership, and the presence of “new” paramilitary groups.

The land restitution program, an initiative coming from Bogotá, and the “Consolidation” program, designed in Bogotá and Washington, confront an environment that is complex at best and outright hostile at worst. To succeed, both will require extensive political will, resources, attention from top leaders, and a well-defined plan. These elements are not yet in place, we conclude from our interviews of military and civilian officials, local government leaders, development practitioners, civil-society leaders, analysts and others.

### Background

In a country that never implemented a true land reform, the Montes de María region is notable for being home to some of Colombia’s most cohesive and active small-farmer (*campesino*) activism. It is also notable for the ferocity of the landowner-supported paramilitary backlash against this activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which included dozens of massacres so brutal that the names of the towns where they occurred

(El Salado, Chengue, Macayepo, Mampuján) are infamous throughout Colombia. In the four municipalities where the PNCT is focused, according to a confidential report from a PNCT-funded consultant, violence since 1995 forcibly displaced more than 110,000 people, or over half the population.

Over the course of the 2000s, the Montes de María grew steadily more peaceful, as the paramilitaries who came to dominate the zone underwent a negotiated demobilization process with the government, and, perhaps more importantly, began to encounter significant opposition from Colombia’s Marines — the principal military force in the zone — during the second half of the decade.

Still, illegal activity remains common. Coca is not cultivated, but large quantities of cocaine continue to pass through on their way to the Caribbean. “New” paramilitary groups, especially the *Rastrojos* and *Urabeños*, are present especially in the northern and western part of the region.

The Montes de María, meanwhile, gained notoriety throughout Colombia for the linkages between its political machines and the AUC paramilitary group. Colombia’s “para-politics” scandal hit the local political class very hard, sending governors and senators to jail. Their patronage and influence networks remain intact, however, as the same political groups remain in control in most municipalities following October 2011 mayoral and gubernatorial elections. The newly elected governor of Sucre department, reported Colombia’s most-circulated newspaper *El Tiempo*, comes from a “caste that has governed for years in spite of ‘paramilitarism.’”

Though they won a majority of votes, local politicians were the targets of most of the anger we heard from citizens in the region. Corruption remains at epic levels. The largest municipality in the region, El Carmen de Bolívar, went through about three dozen acting mayors in 2009. Residents of San Onofre said that it costs about US\$2 million to run a successful campaign, using funds of unclear provenance, to win the impoverished municipality’s mayorship.

With lower violence, and some displaced people seeking to return, the Montes de María is hosting some flagship government projects supported by the international community. These include the land restitution program initiated by a law passed in June 2011; a European Union-backed “Peace Laboratory” of social and economic development programs; a proposal to declare much of the region a “Campesino Reservation Zone” in which sales of small landholdings would be restricted; and, of course, the National Territorial Consolidation Plan.



## The Consolidation Program in Montes de María

The Colombian government launched the PNCT in Montes de María in mid-2007, making it the second zone (after the La Macarena region of south central Colombia) to receive significant investment coordinated by a national Center for Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI). At first, the program was headed by an active-duty military officer, a Marine general who was known in the region for breaking with precedent and confronting the paramilitaries.

The Montes de María effort counted with advice and support from U.S. Southern Command, and starting in early 2008, with resources from the USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). Southcom and OTI supported the creation of a "Coordination Center": an office in Cartagena at which military, police and civilian development representatives would work together in the same space to coordinate the PNCT's management. The Coordination Center, managed by the Colombian Presidency's "Social Action" office, opened its doors in early 2009. (For a thorough look at the Montes de María Consolidation program as of mid-2009, see CIP's "[After Plan Colombia](#)" report.)

The OTI program ended in mid-2010, with USAID's role shifting to management of a five-year, \$32 million project to support the Consolidation effort in Montes de María. The contract for this project was awarded to CHF International, a Washington, DC-area corporation. CHF worked with the Coordination Center on a set of assistance and capacity-building programs for the four municipalities chosen for Consolidation.

The CHF-supported programs, which bear the highly visible name "Colombia Responde," started work during the second half of 2010. Colombia Responde seeks "to work collectively with multiple actors and in coordination with local and regional governments to establish a sustainable state of peace and security" in the Montes de María.

In 2009 the Consolidation program's main goal in Montes de María was to help a small number of returning communities of displaced people recover land and improve their economic conditions. While that is still a component, the Colombia Responde mission is broader. The program now has two objectives: to strengthen local government and civil society capacities, and to increase economic opportunities.



El Carmen de Bolívar

Colombia Responde staff, along with consultants working as public policy advisors, put a heavy emphasis on capacity-building, offering frequent training and workshops on subjects like management, planning, participation and transparency. Under a project called Participatory Action for Community Engagement, the program works with communities on short-term plans for development, and community leaders are trained to develop realistic plans and budgets. Twenty such community plans had been presented to mayors' offices, where co-financing is expected, as of late 2011. Further training aims to equip local governments and community leaders to guarantee transparency over how money is spent.

Colombia Responde's income-generation activities have included some "quick-impact" infrastructure projects, especially improvements to sections of tertiary roads linking farmers to markets. However, the bulk of primary road-building has been carried out by the Colombian Marines. Instead, the Colombia Responde program sponsors "productive projects" — agricultural development programs — with recipient communities, most of whom include formerly displaced people who have returned. Participants in productive projects, we were told, are consulted about what they wish to produce, and receive technical support, food security assistance and credit. If the crop in question takes a few years before the first harvest (like cacao, a frequent choice of communities), growers receive a subsidy equivalent to minimum wage from a fund that will be replenished from the eventual profits of their production.

Colombia Responde manages a project for formerly displaced farmers called "Return to My Land," which accompanies their return to their communities of origin

by providing for basic needs. As part of that project, some farmers are to receive assistance in obtaining clear title to their landholdings. This land formalization process — which is parallel to the land-restitution program just getting underway throughout the country — is excruciatingly slow and complicated. In Ovejas municipality, for example, Colombia Responde expects to title over 300 landholdings, but as of November 2011 had only managed 25.

For its part, the Colombian military and police forces' participation in the Consolidation program, with a modest but unknown level of U.S. support, has been large and at least as visible as Colombia Responde. The Marines and police provide security, build roads and other infrastructure, and meet regularly with communities.

### Evaluations of the PNCT in Montes de María

At a Bogotá gathering of *campesino* leaders to discuss the *Campesino Reserve Zones* proposal, we had an opportunity to talk separately with representatives of communities from San Onofre, El Carmen and Ovejas participating in Colombia Responde programs. Even without PNCT officials present, the group was effusive in its praise of the program. In particular, they noted the rapidity with which assistance arrived, the way the process was taking their input into account, the armed forces' improved relations with the population, and the fact that this was the first time Colombian government institutions had treated them with respect.

On the minus side, they admitted that land titles had been slow to arrive and that trust in the local governments (mayors' offices) remained low. They also felt estranged from nearby communities that were not receiving assistance from the program.

Most concerns and critiques about the program came either from communities not participating in the program (including some from outside the PNCT's four municipalities in Montes de María) and from *campesino* activists, analysts and development workers not affiliated with the program. The principal critiques we heard were the following.

- **The program's limited geographic scope**, which excludes much of the Montes de María region: "How can you only work in four out of 15 municipalities?" the head of another development program asked. "It's like a mother of 15 favoring four of her children."
- **Planning**, either not enough of it or too much: During the PNCT's initial phases in Montes de María (2007-2010), an official with program responsibilities told us, the Cartagena-based

Coordination Center came under some criticism for a lack of a detailed workplan. The office's small staff (a military representative, a police representative, and two representatives of the Colombian Presidency's Social Action office) had a set of programmatic objectives and the outlines of actions to take. But its project plan did not go much further. "They had a proposal. But a proposal is not a workplan," this official said. CHF — which reports directly to USAID, not the Colombian government — endeavored to make more thorough and professional planning a priority once it began work in 2010.

On the other hand, we heard sentiment from some communities that planning was getting so much emphasis that it appeared to be a substitute for action. "We see a lot of workshops and meetings, but not enough results," said a community leader from Ovejas participating in a training workshop. While this may simply be impatience with non-immediate payoffs, these sentiments are a concern because a perception of inactivity could hurt the program's credibility among the population.

- **The military's outsized role:** Military and police representatives of the Coordination Center assured us that, in the field, the PNCT presence is "fundamentally civilian." As elsewhere in Colombia, however, the PNCT involves military personnel playing roles that have little or nothing to do with combat or protecting the population, and that could, under adequate security conditions, be played by civilians. These include building infrastructure, especially what will be the only paved east-west road crossing the Montes de María. Some interviewees criticized the quality and slowness of this road's construction — it was being built when we visited in 2009, and is not finished yet — alleging that the Transportation Ministry could have done a better job than the Defense Ministry. Others, however, acknowledged that damage elsewhere from severe flooding since 2010 caused both civilian and military roadbuilders to be called to fix highways elsewhere.

Other unusual military roles we heard about were soldiers providing health services, training schoolchildren in avoiding domestic abuse, and forming *Campesino Leaders' Associations* to work with the PNCT. In a related concern — a charge we have been unable to corroborate — leaders from Ovejas told us that active-duty military officers have

been buying up land from *campesinos* in their municipality.

- **An alleged unwillingness to work with existing organizations and processes:** “We didn’t come here to divide people,” the Coordination Center’s staff told us. But elsewhere, we heard repeated concerns about the arrival of a large, well-funded program in a zone that — unlike the remote agricultural frontier of the La Macarena region — already has a number of social organizations and development programs. “Colombia Responde has an ‘Adam complex,’” a *campesino* leader in El Carmen said, accusing the program of acting as though nothing had come before it. A leader from Ovejas complained that the program is “creating unnecessary alternative networks.” Others charged that Colombia Responde was not hiring existing businesses and organizations to carry out projects, that contracts were instead being given to outside groups, or to newly formed groups.

Some whom we interviewed clearly see the PNCT as competition, while others, somewhat conspiratorially, see a conscious divide-and-conquer strategy. “For the *viejos* of the ANUC, it really pains them to see how the group is being divided,” an activist in El Carmen told us. An official from an existing development program that follows a slower, more process-oriented methodology worried that the PNCT’s quick-impact projects were changing the local culture: “people want to see the money first before they work with you.”

- **A lack of focus on the justice system:** The Consolidation program intends to strengthen the presence of civilian government institutions in zones that have historically seen very little such presence. In the Montes de María, where the security situation does not prevent civilian government agencies from operating, that civilian presence has increased at least slightly. The justice system, however, lags badly behind. Residents of El Carmen de Bolívar told us that their town, the largest in the region, has only three judges. San Onofre has only one judge and one prosecutor. This is simply not enough to adjudicate cases of violent crime, corruption, human rights, land fraud, and other issues of central importance to the success of “Consolidation.”

- **Concern about local political leaders’ ethics and interests.** The PNCT places a strong emphasis on working with local governments, which channel resources from the central government, command police, and share responsibilities for managing issues like land tenure and assistance to displaced people. Some mayors and governors of the Montes de María ran into serious trouble in the “parapolitics” scandal. While current officials do not face accusations of the same gravity, we repeatedly heard strong opinions about disorganization, influence-peddling (“*politiquería*”), clientelism, and corruption among departmental and municipal officials who are meant to be the PNCT’s principal partners. We also heard concerns that elected officials, even when not accused of corruption, are likely to protect the interests of their largest campaign contributors: the large landholders and agribusinesses who have been accelerating their acquisitions of farmland in the Montes de María region in the past few years.

### A troubled context: land tenure and victims

It is this issue — the land, who controls it, who is buying it, who is selling it, and who is being forced off of it — that hangs over the Montes de María like a storm cloud. Land tenure is the central concern in this unusually fertile and strategically located region. The Consolidation and land-restitution programs, under the leadership of apparently well-intentioned officials, are seeking to address this concern. But they are coming



Home abandoned following displacement a decade ago, Chinulito, Sucre.



## Programa de Desarrollo y Paz de los Montes de María



Note the extreme similarity between the logos of the Montes de María Peace and Development Foundation (top), the non-profit that carries out the European Union's "Peace Laboratory" programs, and that of the "Friends of Montes de María" (bottom - their El Carmen de Bolívar headquarters), a group of businesspeople who are aggressively buying up *campesinos'* land.

online within a complicated context of competing agendas and growing tensions over land ownership.

By 2007, the FARC's eviction from the area and the military's policy of confronting paramilitary violence brought a period of calm — and with it, a very sharp rise in agricultural property values. Wealthy investors and shadowy corporations — their partners' identities a closely held secret — have since been scouring the Montes de María for land to buy, and increasing the region's already unequal landholding.

Colombian journalist Alfredo Molano names some of the mysterious companies, whose names we also heard during our visits: "Tierras de Promisión, Arepas Don Pancho [or "Don Juancho"], Agropecuaria El Carmen, and Agropecuaria El Génesis." Some encourage land sales while cloaked in the guise of development aid associations. Names frequently cited include the "Federation of Leaders of Montes de María" and the "Friends of Montes de María Corporation." The latter group identifies itself, down to its logo, in a way that makes it closely and confusingly resemble the Montes de María Peace and Development Foundation, the non-profit organization that manages the European Union's "Peace Laboratory" projects.

They have many potential buyers among the region's remaining smallholding *campesinos*, many of whom received their parcels from the government after the land movement activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Some are selling to the newcomers because the offers appear generous. Some are selling because, years after being displaced to cities like Cartagena and Sincelejo, they no longer wish to live in the countryside.

Many more, however, are selling because they see no other choice. Of these, some owe unsustainably large amounts on the government loans they used to purchase their properties — loans they could not pay after being violently displaced a decade ago. Others are selling because the recently arrived land purchasers are buying up all of their neighbors' parcels, leaving them surrounded by private holdings, at times even cut off from access to roads and water. Many of those forcibly displaced have seen their land titles stolen out from under them by criminals colluding with corrupt land-registry officials. And still others, discussed below, are selling in the face of threats and intimidation. Data gathered by the Colombian NGO ILSA (Latin American Institute for Alternative Society and Law) have shown a strong correlation between areas of massive land purchases and areas of greatest displacement in the Montes de María.

The buyers are not all shady speculators. Some of Colombia's largest companies — Argos, Monterrey, Colanta — have launched agribusiness projects in the Montes de María within the past few years. Crops that have been massively planted include teak trees, sugar cane (mainly for biofuels) and African oil palm (for food and biofuels). These vast areas of monoculture are profitable, but employ few people: palm oil, for instance, requires about one employee per hectare.

One of the pioneers of African oil palm monoculture in Colombia is Carlos Murgas, a former agriculture minister. Murgas has invested heavily in oil-palm cultivation around the site of a processing plant in María La Baja municipality, which borders two of the municipalities chosen for the Consolidation program. (We requested a meeting with directors of the processing plant, but were turned down.) Local leaders told us that unlike other investors in big monoculture projects, Murgas is not massively buying up property: his company is instead encouraging — some said pressuring — nearby communities to grow palm for the oil-processing plant. "Murgas is a great expert in agricultural economy," writes Alfredo Molano, "which allowed him to see clearly that the true business is not in owning land, but in controlling its use." Or as one development expert more succinctly put it, "Why have more property if you're Murgas?"

The region's remaining smallholding *campesinos* are organizing to respond to the concentration of land. In 2010, the government of Juan Manuel Santos surprised



A palm processing plant in María La Baja, Bolívar

When discussing threats against them, communities generally did not refer to the “new” paramilitary groups active throughout much of northern Colombia, especially the department of Córdoba immediately to the west. While groups like the *Rastrojos* and *Urabeños* are present in the area, they said, they have mainly confined their activities to narco-trafficking. “They make their shipment and then leave,” a San Onofre resident told us.

Instead, local leaders referred most often to armed men — “*hombres armados*” — as those responsible for acts of violence and intimidation. Some intimated that they may be in the employ of large landowners and land purchasers.

many by agreeing in principle to a longstanding request of the region’s *campesino* groups: the establishment of a “*Campesino* Reservation Zone” in which sizes of parcels and sales of land would be limited. The idea of creating such a zone — a figure established by a 1994 law — had gone nowhere during the 2002-2010 government of Álvaro Uribe, who favored an unfettered free market in the countryside and publicly associated the Reservation Zones with the guerrillas’ agenda. The process of creating such a zone is now advancing, though, with one nearing approval and demarcation in the Montes de María.

*Campesino* groups want a larger zone than what the government has proposed. On the other side, some in the government — including officials with responsibility for the Consolidation program — are concerned that the Reservation Zone will go too far in restricting the market for land, depressing values and thus making it impossible to obtain credit. Supporters of the Reservation Zone proposal, in turn, voiced suspicions that the Consolidation program “goes in the other direction,” as communities that benefit from the PNCT may be less willing to participate in the Zone. Needless to say, meanwhile, the investors who are busily buying up land in the region are staunchly opposed to the creation of a *Campesino* Reservation Zone, and by some accounts are scrambling to accumulate as much territory as possible before the Zone is officially declared.

### Tensions and Threats

With this array of forces, and the big land-restitution program on the way, tensions and threats increased in the Montes de María in 2011. We were alarmed by the frequency of violent acts against *campesinos* in the region. We are concerned that these may be the first signs of a violent landowner backlash.

At least four leaders of groups that have received land, or are petitioning for land, were killed in the Montes de María region between May 2010 and June 2011. Most were killed in San Onofre, the municipality where paramilitary leader “Cadena” located his headquarters at the height of the 2000-2002 violence.

- On May 18, 2010, Rogelio Martínez was killed near the La Alemania farm in San Onofre. La Alemania is a well-known case: a 550-hectare farm that the government granted to 52 organized families in 1997, only to have it stolen by AUC paramilitaries.
- Óscar Mause, a displaced leader trying to recover his original lands in Antioquia department, was killed on November 24th, 2010 in San Juan Nepomuceno.
- Éder Verbel was killed on March 23, 2011 in San Onofre. (For its activism on behalf of victims, the Verbel family was featured in a 2005 New York Times article about San Onofre.)
- Antonio Mendoza, a displaced-community leader and town councilman from the left-of-center Polo Democrático party, was killed on June 20, 2011 in San Onofre.

San Onofre victims’ movement leaders said that the second half of 2011 was a bit calmer, though threats continue to arrive frequently. In Ovejas, meanwhile, tensions continue around the efforts of 113 families to recover La Europa, a farm granted to them in 1969 from which they were displaced by paramilitaries. Upon returning to the area, the families discovered that much of their farmland had been purchased by a shadowy company called “Arepas don Juancho.” *Campesino* houses on the La Europa farm were torn down, or burned down, by “unknown men” on at least two occasions in 2011. In San Jacinto, residents’ commemoration of the 1999 Las Palmas massacre

hosted an uninvited guest: men taking pictures from an SUV parked nearby. When they investigated the vehicle's license plate, they found that it belonged to "*señores de la compra de tierras*" (men involved in land purchases).

Some of the most troubling recent incidents are occurring in María La Baja, the municipality with the region's most extensive oil-palm cultivation. We heard recent accounts of groups of armed men entering hamlets in areas where land values are high, especially because of access to irrigation. With lists in hand, they threaten and interrogate community members, demanding information about their economic activity and resources they receive from the municipal government.

Most alarming of all, María La Baja leaders said that they had counted eleven cases of rape by armed groups in September and October. The sexual violence appears to follow a pattern in which the armed men invade a house, threaten the male owner, and attack the owner's wife, not his daughters or any other women present. The armed men then leave, and in most cases the family abandons the land.

Fear is increasing, especially in areas where land purchases are greatest. These threats are a huge limit on *campesino* organizations' work. Memories of the bloodshed of ten years ago are still very fresh, and it does not take much to dissuade people from organizing and pressing for land claims. "You have to be careful," Ovejas community leaders told us. "You can't use words like 'social mobilization' or talk about human rights."

It is in this context that the U.S.-backed Consolidation program, and the Colombia Responde program, must operate. On one side are small farmers claiming their land, fearing dispossession, and promoting measures like *Campesino* Reservation Zones. On the other are large landholders and their backers in the local political system.

The PNCT is in an uncomfortable position: its mandate requires it to work with the small farmers on land titling (and land restitution) and productive projects. But its mandate also requires it to work with local governments, increasing the capacities of institutions that have shown little interest in protecting small farmers and that have even collaborated with the dispossessors.

In order to confront local resistance and protect their beneficiaries, the PNCT and Colombia Responde — as well as the agencies that will carry out land restitution — will need clear, strong, visible backing from the central



government in Bogotá. But the messages from the capital are mixed.

## A REORGANIZATION AT THE TOP

For most of 2011, the Santos administration appeared to have placed the PNCT on the back burner. The program was undergoing a "rethinking" and reorganization process, with 15 thematic working groups involving 60 government agencies. Results of this review were to be announced with a formal launch expected last June, then after the October local elections. But no formal announcement of a new strategy has come.

Instead, the Colombian Presidency has reorganized its well-resourced social development agency, previously known as "Social Action," in a way that appears to place the Consolidation program on a more prominent, autonomous and perhaps less military-heavy footing.

In November, "Social Action" was replaced by an even larger agency in the Colombian presidency, known as "[Social Prosperity](#)." This agency has four programs, of which one — Territorial Recovery and Development — includes the Consolidation program. The head of this program, Álvaro Balcázar, previously ran the Consolidation effort in the La Macarena region. Balcázar told us that the Colombian government is committing US\$1.5 billion to the PNCT nationwide between 2011 and 2014.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Now that Bogotá has finished rearranging things, the central government will have to do more to make its presence felt in each of the regions we visited.

Based on what we observed in the Montes de María, La Macarena, and Tumaco, we recommend that the Consolidation program adopt the following adjustments on an urgent basis.

1. **Do more to protect campesino communities**, whether or not they are direct recipients of PNCT assistance. This means improving response times and the quality of investigations after threats are issued. In rural zones, it also means having procedures in place to determine whether the response should fall to the armed forces or to the police, which (other than specialized units) normally don't operate outside of town centers. The security forces must work to eliminate the presence of "new" paramilitaries and other criminal groups. The justice system must do more to confront the corrupt elements of the state on which these criminal groups, and the region's illegal land purchasers, depend.
2. In order to do so, **the justice system must be present** in the first place. Numbers of judges, prosecutors and investigators must increase, and their offices will need modern equipment, particularly databases and technology necessary to adjudicate land claims. Cases of murdered land-rights leaders need to result in rapid, visible verdicts against those responsible. Curtailing impunity is the best way to prevent future murders.
3. **Actions must assure campesinos that "Consolidation" will not dispossess them.** We repeatedly heard fear that a greater presence of the state will mean pressures to get small farmers off of their land. In the minds of many, the state is equivalent to large landholders, including those currently making massive purchases. The PNCT needs to break with that, demonstrating through actions that the program intends to help farmers remain on their land — and to do so without pushing them into a monoculture economy. Titling of land is the action that offers the clearest assurance that "despojo" is not forthcoming. The security forces must ensure that protecting campesino lands and communities is a priority, which would be a historic change. And leaders in Bogotá need to be present in the zone frequently, both to accompany campesinos receiving land, and to stare down opposition from those accumulating and concentrating land.
4. **Work with local officials will remain challenging**, given ongoing complaints about clientelism, corruption, and favoring of large landholders. This is critically important because in the population's eyes, local officials' behavior can either uphold or destroy the credibility of the entire Colombia state. The main recommendation here is that the Consolidation program continue to do what its officials say they are doing: to build management capacities and to focus resources especially on local-government officials that, in the program's judgement, appear to be most capable and honest. If PNCT officials encounter evidence of local authorities' corruption, they must ensure that the justice system investigates and punishes that corruption. Another area worth exploring is the encouragement and protection of whistleblowers within local government.
5. A frequent request we heard from communities is that the PNCT **place more emphasis on building roads**, which are necessary to the economic success of the "productive projects" the PNCT is supporting. We second this recommendation, despite the reality that roads are very expensive, and that the damage from flooding since 2010 has been significant.
6. We also heard requests that PNCT planning **work with campesino and displaced organizations that already exist**, rather than create new structures. While we were unable to determine the extent to which the PNCT is actually doing this, we relay this recommendation because we heard it several times.
7. Eradication of coca should be voluntary. However, where enforcing laws requires forced eradication, **eradication must be coordinated closely with food security assistance and participation in productive projects.** Though coca is an illegal crop, leaving producers with no way to support themselves is a poor way to win the population's trust.
8. Finally, the Consolidation program needs to **ensure that its military component relinquishes non-security duties to civilians as quickly as possible.** A greatly increased military role in civilian life, with soldiers as road-builders and community organizers, must not be a permanent legacy of the Consolidation program.

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