AFTER PLAN COLOMBIA: EVALUATING "INTEGRATED ACTION," THE NEXT PHASE OF U.S. ASSISTANCE

December 12, 2009 | Report

By Adam Isacson, Abigail Poe

< Back to Publication

This report independently evaluates "Integrated Action," a new approach to state-building and counterinsurgency that the U.S. government is supporting in Colombia. Ten years and $6.8 billion after the 2000 launch of "Plan Colombia," officials from both governments are billing Integrated Action as the future direction of U.S. assistance to Colombia.

The term refers to a combination of military and development projects carried out in the same geographic areas. These have gone under many names in the past few years: Plan Colombia 2, Plan Colombia Consolidation Phase, Social Recovery of Territory (or Social Control of Territory), the National Consolidation Plan, the Center for the Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI), and the Strategic Leap.

These programs' importance extends beyond Colombia, where the government of two-term President Álvaro Uribe holds them up as its vision for the country's future military and counternarcotics strategies. For the United States, whose aid packages are becoming smaller and less military, Integrated Action offers, according to a May 2009 *Washington Post* analysis, "a remedy palatable to a Democratic-led U.S. Congress not only interested in emphasizing social development over military aid for this country but also looking for solutions to consider in Afghanistan."[1]

The Center for International Policy has closely monitored U.S. assistance programs in Colombia since the late 1990s, and we have taken a critical position toward a series of aid packages that, until 2008, favored Colombia's security forces by an 80-to-20-percent margin. We are not only concerned about the proper implementation of the program in Colombia, but also about how the experience in Colombia might be applied to contexts like the war in Afghanistan and the ongoing effort to rethink U.S. foreign assistance in general.

In the 21st century, guaranteeing national security requires managing threats that could emerge from countries in conflict, or from countries facing rebuilding and development challenges. At times, this in turn requires working flexibly to help those countries improve the quality of governance and reduce impunity. It means balancing a strategy to protect the population with a strategy for building state capacity, the rule of law, and a strong civil society, while avoiding an outcome that militarizes these priorities. Learning the wrong lessons in Colombia today could have serious repercussions for U.S. policy anywhere in the world where the consequences of weak governance are perceived to be generating threats to U.S. national security.

This evaluation is the product of months of documentary research, more than 50 interviews and meetings with well over 150 subjects, and travel to two of the zones in Colombia where this new model is being carried out. The program we are analyzing is still incipient, with nearly all of its activities launched since 2007. Because these programs are still in early phases, this evaluation is quite preliminary. We look forward to updating and amending our findings and recommendations as the situation evolves.

Recommendations

Demilitarize: Increase civilian agencies and institutions' participation in the planning and execution of the Integrated Action strategy. Do not create permanent non-security or development roles for the armed forces. Get the military out of non-security roles as soon as it is safe to do so. If it is not safe to do so, do not raise expectations by overselling security gains.

Coordinate: Give civilian agencies a much greater decision-making and management role in the Center for Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI) in order to encourage their "buy-in." Give more explicit high-level political backing, including firmer legal status, to this more civilian CCAI, to increase civilian agencies' participation. Ensure that the Presidency's Social Action agency does more to encourage civilian government agencies to support the CCAI by establishing their own presence in the priority zones as soon as minimal security conditions permit.

Consult: Ensure that development efforts are chosen by the communities themselves through a transparent process, so that the frequent criticism that programs were "designed at a desk in Bogotá" cannot stick.

Engage carefully with local elites: Do not seek out, but do prepare for, disagreements with elements of local political and economic elites, some of whom may have ties with illegal groups or plainly favor greater land concentration.

Address the land issue: Devote significant resources to reassure populations that they will not be victims of a "land grab" as a result of CCAI. Greatly speed up land titling, cadastral surveys, investigations into disputed landholdings, and victims' claims. Put a halt to the concentration of landholdings in areas where mass displacements have occurred. Improve smallholders' access to credit and technical assistance.

Halt "judicialization": Minimize harm to community relations by halting overzealous mass arrests of civilians suspected of guerrilla collaboration.

Coordinate eradication with aid: Eradicate coca only when immediate delivery of food-security and development assistance can be assured. Place a priority on programs in which eradication is voluntary. Relocate populations from areas where development is undesirable through a humane process with land titles and help with productive projects.

Zero impunity for human rights abuse: Quickly and transparently punish any examples of human rights abuse, so that impunity for abusers does not undermine trust in the state and intimidate citizens who should be participating in community planning processes. Aggressively confront any signs of paramilitary presence or other corruption or collaboration with criminal groups.

Guarantee sustainability: Focus more on the sustainability of the effort. Lengthen the timeframe beyond 2010. Integrated Action will not be credible to key constituencies — including civilian government agencies called on to take part in it — if it is in danger of ending too quickly. Use added resources to move beyond short-term demonstration projects and commit to larger-scale efforts, especially infrastructure and basic services.

The Integrated Action model

A difficult country to govern

This story begins in a country embroiled in a long, bloody, complicated internal armed conflict. Fighting has been ongoing in Colombia since the mid-1960s, when the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla groups formed in the countryside, followed in the 1980s by a series of far-right paramilitary militias. In the past twenty years alone the fighting, fueled on all sides by income from the drug trade, has killed more than 70,000 Colombians, most of them civilian non-combatants.

Some argue that Colombia's current violence in fact began in the late 1940s, with the outbreak of a decade of bloodletting between political parties, known simply as "*La Violencia*," that took as many as 300,000 lives. Others point to numerous minor wars during the 19th century, and one major civil war at the turn of the 20th century that took 100,000 lives, to argue that armed conflict has been the norm, especially in rural Colombia, since independence in 1819.

As the frequent strife indicates, Colombia is a difficult country to govern. Like many of its Latin American neighbors, it inherited from Spanish rule one of the world's worst distributions of wealth, land and income, which persists today. A 2003 study by the Colombian government's geographical institute found that 61 percent of land was in the hands of 0.4% of landholders.[2] The UN Development Program estimates that the top 10 percent of Colombians earns 60.4 times what the bottom 10 percent earns in a year, the fourth-highest proportion of all countries measured.[3]

Colombia's geography is more complex than that of most of its neighbors. Its nearly 50 million people — Latin America's third-largest population — are scattered across three rugged chains of the Andes, along thousands of miles of rivers, and on the coasts of two oceans. This in turn has eased the undetected transshipment of narcotics, making Colombia an early haven for the drug trade.

Less than 5 percent of the country lives in about half of the national territory, a vast region of jungle and savannah east of the Andes where the "agricultural frontier" remains open. As a partial result, Colombia is the only major Latin American nation where large landholders have avoided significant land reform.

Elites have made little effort to govern either these vast rural zones or the slums that rapidly grew around the cities as rural dwellers fled violence or poverty. (Colombia's population is now about three-quarters urban.) The nation's secondary and tertiary road network is very poor, rural health and education coverage is sparse, security forces are unable to cover territory, and the judicial system is absent. Bogotá's dictates have rarely carried any weight, and wrongdoing — corruption, criminal activity, human rights abuse — has gone unpunished.

Colombia's "ungoverned spaces" have, as a result, served as breeding grounds for warlordism. Local power matters the most, and it has often been in the hands of guerrillas, paramilitaries and narcotraffickers. Even more frequently, though, local powerholders have been political bosses, large landholders or military authorities.

Plan Colombia and other frustrations

This arrangement became unsustainable for Colombia by the 1980s, as the cocaine trade's enormous wealth made some of the country's most ruthlessly violent warlords and criminals some of its most powerful citizens. The Medellín and Cali drug cartels' bloody rise drew the notice of the United States. Military and especially police assistance began to increase during the Reagan and Bush administrations.

Several intense years of police work rid Colombia of the Medellín and Cali cartels, but the flow of cocaine from Colombia remained stable. The lucrative illegal trade fell into the hands of smaller narcotrafficking organizations and armed groups.

The FARC's 1993 decision to raise funds from coca-leaf production, and some fronts' later involvement in cocaine production and transshipment, caused the leftist group to grow vertiginously in the 1990s, from about 4,000 to 18,000 members by the end of the decade. By the second half of the 1990s, the FARC were mounting large-scale assaults on military bases and rural population centers, kidnapping hundreds per year for ransom, and making the nation's road network too dangerous for travel. The FARC and smaller ELN came to be responsible for about a quarter of civilian killings, the vast majority of kidnappings and extortion, and a growing share of forced internal displacement.

Colombia's narcotraffickers, landowners and regional warlords responded brutally. Starting in the 1980s but accelerating in the 1990s, and often with military support, they formed anti-guerrilla militias, denominated "self-defense groups" or paramilitaries. In 1997 the paramilitaries formed a national network called the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Fueled by the drug trade, the AUC grew at least as fast as the FARC during the 1990s. The paramilitaries targeted civilian non-combatants living in guerrilla-controlled zones, and by the end of the decade were responsible for about three quarters of civilian killings, including a shocking campaign of massacres, and the majority of forced displacement. Despite their extreme brutality, the paramilitaries benefited from the armed forces' frequent collaboration or willing acquiescence.

The guerrillas' advance in particular began to worry the U.S. government, whose Colombia policy had been focused mainly on the drug war. The government of Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) launched an effort to negotiate peace with the FARC, which quickly faltered, causing Clinton administration officials to worry openly about an imminent guerrilla takeover.

The response came in 1999. The Clinton administration communicated to the Pastrana government that it was prepared to offer a large aid package to Colombia, but that the two countries would have to work together on a plan with a large military and security component.[4] "Plan Colombia" was born.

In July 2000, President Bill Clinton signed into law a $1.3 billion appropriation with $860 million in new aid for Colombia, three-quarters of it for the country's military and police forces. The aid package's centerpiece was a "Push Into Southern Colombian Coca-Growing Areas," greatly increasing operations in a FARC-dominated zone around the department of Putumayo, which at the time was producing the majority of Colombia's coca leaf.

Rather than address the near-total absence of state presence in Putumayo, the Push into Southern Colombia bolstered the military and police presence. A new Army Counter-Narcotics Brigade, supplied generously with helicopters, would assure security conditions on the ground for an aggressive aerial fumigation campaign, spraying herbicides over tens of thousands of acres of coca-growing zones. A far smaller alternative development effort, carried out by private contractors in a vacuum of government presence, would attempt to support farmers' transition to legal crops.

Between 2000 and 2007, the Clinton and Bush administrations provided Colombia with $5.4 billion in assistance, 80.5 percent of it for the security forces.[5] This was accompanied by a major buildup in Colombia's own military expenditure under the Pastrana government, accelerated by the government of Álvaro Uribe, a hard-liner first elected in 2002 on a promise to intensify the war against the FARC and ELN. From 2000 to 2009, the size of Colombia's military and police forces nearly doubled to a combined 500,000 members, while the defense budget tripled to nearly $12 billion.[6]

The results have been mixed. The Uribe government's buildup put Colombia's army on the offensive, reducing the FARC to an estimated 9,000 members and pushing them out of more populated areas, greatly reducing kidnapping and extortion. As a result, Álvaro Uribe remains very popular in Colombia; he was re-elected in 2006, and the country is considering a constitutional change to allow him to run again in 2010.

Uribe cut a deal with the AUC paramilitaries, offering amnesty or lenient treatment in exchange for demobilization. The AUC formally dissolved, and 18 of its top leaders were extradited to the United States to face drug charges. Paramilitary killings declined, though the groups' networks of narcotrafficking and political ties have proved very hard to dismantle. More recently, a rapidly growing new generation of "emerging" paramilitary groups, involved in organized crime at least as much as in counterinsurgency, has sprung up in several zones, numbering between 4,000 and 9,000 members nationwide.

The counternarcotics effort, which to this day accounts for most U.S. military and police assistance, has been plainly frustrating. Drug eradication programs sprayed tens of thousands of *campesinos'* crops, increasing anger at the government in ungoverned, guerrilla-controlled zones. In a vacuum of governance, however, coca replanting easily kept up with the increased eradication.

UN estimates show no progress in eradicating Colombian coca after Plan Colombia's initial "push." U.S. estimates show only slightly less coca grown in Colombia in 2008 as there was in 1999, the year before Plan Colombia began.

The effort to wrest rural areas from guerrilla control has been similarly complicated. Military offensives into FARC territory became larger and more ambitious, especially "*Plan Patriota*," a U.S.-supported 2004-2006 operation in several southern Colombian departments. 18,000 Colombian security forces, and their U.S. advisors, found that these large, costly offensives could chase guerrillas out of territory — the FARC has rarely stood its ground when faced with a concerted attack — but could not keep them from returning after the offensive was over.

In military parlance, Colombia in the mid-2000s had a robust strategy to "clear" the guerrillas from territory, establishing a perimeter under military control. But it sorely lacked "hold" and "build" strategies: *Plan Patriota* and similar efforts came with no evident plan to bring the rest of the government — that is, all non-military institutions — into the briefly recovered territory.

Internal debate and the birth of Integrated Action

At this time, the U.S. government was encountering similar frustrations with its counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. In both countries, U.S. military commanders and defense planners began to speak more about the state's weakness and lack of credibility, and of the need to win citizens' trust. The rapid evolution in U.S. counterinsurgency theories was embodied by Gen. David Petraeus's 2006 Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual or the much-cited work of scholars and advisors like David Kilcullen, who recommends "A comprehensive approach that closely integrates civil and military efforts," "timeliness and reliability in delivering on development promises," and "careful cueing of security operations to support development and governance activities, and vice versa."[7]

In Colombia, U.S. and Colombian officials began developing a new civil-military strategy, through a process that began around 2004 and rose to prominence by 2006. The new rhetoric appeared to incorporate many of the arguments and suggestions of Plan Colombia's critics: that the effort shouldn't be entirely military; that social services are important; that forced eradication without aid will do harm; and that populations should be consulted.

This "Integrated Action" doctrine originated in the U.S. Southern Command (the Miami-based regional combatant command that coordinates U.S. military activity in the Americas) and Colombia's Defense Ministry. Together, they developed a national coordination body called the Center for Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI).

A December 2008 paper from the U.S. Army War College contends that the CCAI came from a U.S. military proposal.

> Following a suggestion from U.S. Southern Command, President Alfonso [sic.] Uribe created the Coordinating Center for Integrated Action (CCAI) and made it his vehicle to achieve the required unity of effort to defeat the insurgency.
>
> ... [T]he Civil Affairs section of the SOUTHCOM operations directorate proposed an initiative to establish a

> Colombian interagency organization "capable of synchronizing national level efforts to reestablish governance" in areas that had been under FARC, ELN, or AUI [AUC] control. Civil Affairs officers attached to the MILGP [U.S. Embassy Military Group] in Colombia presented the concept to the Minister of Defense who liked it and made it the basis for his proposal to President Uribe in February 2004.
>
> ... CCAI's first major planning activity was a senior leader seminar and planning session held from May 8-10, 2004, which developed an economic, social development, and security plan to reestablish long-term governance in southern Colombia.
>
> ... Implementation of this plan was sufficiently successful that planning was expanded to address a full seven conflictive zones throughout the country. This plan was addressed at an off-site planning session in Washington at the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies from March 28-31, 2005.[8]

Meanwhile, U.S. aid to Colombia began to change in 2007, following the Democratic Party's takeover of the U.S. Congress. Military and police assistance for 2008 and 2009 were cut by over $150 million, with the herbicide fumigation program hit the hardest, while resources for development, judicial reform, human rights and humanitarian aid were increased by $100 million. Enforcement of human rights conditions was strengthened, slowing the flow of some military assistance.

In Colombia, the Integrated Action model built momentum after 2006, as Álvaro Uribe began his second term and Juan Manuel Santos became his defense minister. Santos and a key vice-minister, Sergio Jaramillo, sought to attract resources and political support to the model they helped develop. In March 2009, only two months before leaving his post, Santos sought to brand the CCAI and the Integrated Action framework as part of a "Strategic Leap" (*Salto Estratégico*) toward, in his view, bringing Colombia's conflict to a definitive end.

Bringing the government into new zones

Santos offered this definition of the new strategy:

> It means state institutions' entry or return to zones affected by violence to satisfy the population's basic needs, like health, education and public services, as well as justice, culture, recreation and infrastructure projects.[9]

The underlying idea is that Colombia's historically neglected rural areas will only be taken back from illegal armed groups if the entire government is involved in "recovering" or "consolidating" its presence in these territories. While the military and police must handle security, the doctrine contends that the rest of the government must be brought into these zones in a quick, coordinated way.

In thirteen presumably "recovered" zones throughout the country, the CCAI purports to follow a sequenced and phased strategy that, on paper at least, begins with military operations, moves into quick social and economic-assistance efforts to win the population's support, and is to end up with the presence of a functioning civilian government and the withdrawal of most military forces. "The process begins with the provision of security and is followed by voluntary and forced coca eradication, the establishment of police posts, and the provision of civilian government social services, including a judiciary," explains a late 2008 USAID report.[10]

The CCAI considers different territories to be in different phases of "consolidation," and thus requiring different combinations of military and non-military investment. The schematic, frequently illustrated by designating zones as red, yellow, or green according to the phase that characterizes them, is as follows.

- *Territorial Control phase (red zones):* areas with active presence of illegal armed groups. Intense military effort to expel the armed groups.
- *Territorial Stabilization phase (yellow zones):* areas under control, but in process of institutional recovery. Intense military and police effort to keep order while seeking to attract other state institutions to the zone.
- *Territorial Consolidation phase (green zones):* areas stabilized. Intense political and social effort to establish state institutions and public services.

The CCAI institutional structure

The CCAI is now within the Colombian Presidency's Social Action office. Social Action, which does not operate out of a cabinet ministry, is a large, well-funded presidential initiative that manages several conditional cash subsidy, humanitarian aid, and alternative development programs. Its critics charge that much of its aid is short-term handouts that verge on clientelism.

The CCAI seeks to coordinate the entry of fourteen state institutions, including the military, the judiciary, and cabinet departments, into parts of Colombia considered to have been recovered from armed groups' control.

The new strategy is being billed as a "whole of government approach." It is meant to have a civilian component from the very beginning, and it envisions the armed forces becoming a minor participant by its latter stages, when the state presence is considered consolidated.

The CCAI is conceived as an inter-agency body. But because it originated in the Defense Ministry, and because the "Territorial Control" (red) and "Territorial Stabilization" (yellow) phases call for a large military role, the CCAI in fact includes heavy military participation and is under significant military leadership.

A March 2009 presidential directive places the CCAI under the leadership of a *Consejo Directivo* (Directive Council) whose members come almost entirely from the state security forces.

> The CCAI Directive Council will be made up of the Ministry of National Defense, the Commander-General of the Armed Forces, the Director-General of the National Police, the High Counselor of the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation, the Director of the DAS [Administrative Security Department, or presidential intelligence and secret police], and the Prosecutor-General of the Nation.[11]

Of this list, only Social Action and the Prosecutor-General are not security-force officials.

Other, non-military, government bodies belong to a CCAI *Comité Ejecutivo* (Executive Committee), which is meant to ease coordination but does not play the same leadership role. This committee includes the civilian ministries of Agriculture, Social Protection, Interior and Justice, Education, Mines and Energy, Transportation and Environment, Housing and Development, as well as the presidential planning department, the family welfare institute, the national technical training service, the sports agency and the civil registry.

The CCAI office itself, in the Social Action building near the presidential palace in Bogotá, is surprisingly small: an open space perhaps 20 feet square, ringed with computers and communications equipment, with a few adjoining offices and meeting spaces. The staff, made up of representatives of Social Action and the above-mentioned government entities, are largely young professionals. Their enthusiasm for the CCAI mission is as notable as the lack of more senior personnel.

Staff at the CCAI office aim to ease inter-agency coordination, a common challenge to rapid action in most government bureaucracies. Often on a rather ad hoc basis, they seek to move resources to where they are most needed in the thirteen zones, channeling requests from the regions and making many of their own requests from the relevant government ministries. The CCAI has little budget of its own; other government agencies have been instructed to give priority to CCAI requests to devote their own budgets to emerging needs in the Integrated Action zones.

In many of the CCAI regions, Social Action has set up miniature versions of the CCAI, at which representatives of different government bodies work to coordinate strategy and channel resources locally. These offices were at first dubbed "Fusion Centers," because they sought to fuse disparate government agencies.

Each Center, explained former Defense Minister Santos, is an office in the Integrated Action zone with "a military coordinator, a police coordinator and a civilian manager. This manager, who reports to the CCAI, is charged with administrating and supervising the implementation of plans in coordination with local and regional authorities."[12] Each Center's civilian manager is employed by Social Action.

In early 2009, with U.S. support, Colombia's Defense Ministry established its first two Fusion Centers. The first is in and around the La Macarena National Park in Meta department, about 150 miles due south of Bogotá in what, between 1998 and 2002, was part of a zone temporarily ceded to the FARC for unsuccessful peace talks. The other is in the Montes de María region southwest of Cartagena on Colombia's Caribbean coast.

By June 2009, five such centers had been established throughout Colombia, though only the La Macarena and Montes de María centers had significant U.S. funding. That month, it was decided to change their names to the less bellicose-sounding "Coordination Centers." (We will use both names interchangeably.)

The U.S. role

The U.S. agencies working most closely with the CCAI and the Fusion Centers are Southern Command (Southcom) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Beyond disaster-relief efforts, it is rare to see these two agencies contributing to the same project in the Western Hemisphere.

The Southern Command, which helped to develop the Integrated Action model with Colombia's Defense Ministry, continues to offer training, advice, military construction and logistical support. Some funding for CCAI support has come from the State Department-managed Foreign Military Financing program, but much has come from sources in the Department of Defense's

own budget: counter-drug authorities and "Section 1206 Train and Equip" authority, a controversial 2006 provision allowing the Pentagon to use its own budget to train and equip foreign militaries. The Southern Command has also used its own budget for conferences and other meetings to discuss and develop the model.

The U.S. Agency for International Development has generously supported the CCAI La Macarena program since March 2007. The main funding channels have been USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID-OTI), which carries out rapid, short-term projects in crisis situations and plans to leave Colombia in 2010, and the Defense Department's "Section 1207" authority (named for the section of the 2006 National Defense Authorization Act that created it), which allows the Pentagon to transfer some of its budget to the State Department and USAID for development projects.

In its early stages, the non-military effort does not aim to establish long-term, sustainable development. The focus instead is on quick demonstration projects that yield immediately visible results, and seek to make a high-profile display of the government's presence when, in USAID's words, "the potential for political impact is the greatest."[13] USAID-OTI manages an "Initial Governance Response Program" whose mission is to "work with CCAI to deliver quick-impact activities in the short term to build trust between the government and vulnerable communities and to establish a foundation for longer term socioeconomic recovery and growth."[14] While OTI supports training programs, planning processes, technical support and publicity strategies, the "quick-impact" projects are the most visible aspect of U.S. aid. Many of these projects — soccer fields, playgrounds, renovations and repainting of existing infrastructure —do more to build confidence in the Colombian state's incipient presence than meet residents' basic socioeconomic needs.

Other foreign donors have largely stayed away from the Integrated Action model so far, though the Dutch government supports a food-security and rural development program in the La Macarena area. While many donor agencies support projects in the Montes de María, the U.S. government is, so far, the only foreign supporter of the Coordination Center's activities in that zone.

USAID support for the model has totaled at least $25 million so far, most of it from Defense Department "Section 1207" grants. The Southern Command and military aid budget's total support is harder to determine (items like helicopter and equipment use are hard to quantify when they are used for other missions), but is likely as much as twice the USAID contribution.

Praise for the concept

The program's supporters are touting it as a model of state-building and counterinsurgency that will guide the future of U.S. aid to Colombia and could be replicated elsewhere. A few examples:

> USAID, early 2009: "The consolidation plan is now widely seen in Colombia as the model for creating the conditions necessary for sustained establishment of a state presence in formerly ungoverned parts of the country. The GOC [Government of Colombia] is basing its still-to-be-finalized national consolidation strategy on the unified consolidation plan that OTI has supported. Similarly, lessons learned during plan implementation are being used to help shape the U.S. Embassy's new embassy-wide strategy as well as the USAID Mission's revised strategy."[15]
>
> Defense Minister (at the time) Juan Manuel Santos, at a joint press conference in Bogotá with Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 2009: "This concept applied in Afghanistan is something that could really help. And we have particular experiences, like crop eradication, like the integrated fight against trafficking whereby we go after every link in the chain. In Afghanistan there are some jobs that are more important or less important than those that we have here, but the concept is applicable there. It is in this way that we think our experience could contribute in some way to solving the problem in Afghanistan or the problem in Iraq."[16]
>
> *Washington Post* article, May 2009: "Under the Integrated Consolidation Plan for the Macarena, named after a national park west of here, the military first drove out guerrillas and other armed groups. In quick sequence, engineers and work crews, technicians, prosecutors, social workers and policy types arrived, working in concert to transform a lawless backwater into something resembling a functioning part of Colombia." [17]
>
> U.S. Government Accountability Office, October 2008: "If successful, the approach in La Macarena is intended to serve as a model for similar CCAI efforts in 10 other regions of the country. It represents a key test of the government's enhanced state presence strategy and a potential indicator of the long-term prospects for reducing Colombia's drug trade by systematically re-establishing government control throughout the country." [18]
>
> Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2009: "As a strategy for consolidation of sustained state authority, the PCIM's [La Macarena Integrated Consolidation Plan's] emphasis on rapid and sequenced action coordinated on an interagency basis has considerable potential for success not only in the Macarena but also as a pilot project for use in other areas of Colombia."[19]

Impressions of Integrated Action

In order to evaluate these programs' strategy, achievements and challenges, the authors visited La Macarena in April 2009, and the Montes de María in July. During the second half of 2009, a third U.S.-funded Coordination Center was established in Tumaco, on the Pacific coast of southwestern Colombia. We have yet to visit that zone.

La Macarena

A zone that has been under solid FARC control for decades, La Macarena, in the western extremity of the department of Meta, has been a principal focus of Integrated Action since 2007, when the Defense Ministry instituted a special "La Macarena Integrated Consolidation Plan" (PCIM) to coordinate CCAI activities in the zone.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the La Macarena zone is its proximity to Bogotá. This area, which has long been considered wild and ungoverned, lies only about four hours' drive from Colombia's sprawling capital, whose population exceeds 8 million. This may be why the project has become something of a showcase, with reporters and foreign dignitaries frequently flown there to observe projects.

This area began to be settled in earnest during the middle of the 20th century, but its inaccessibility, and the central government's absence, left it lawless and violent.

The armed groups

South of Bogotá and Villavicencio, the capital of Meta department, a very recently paved two-lane road speeds through towns whose names are synonymous with the violent 20th-century colonization of the *llanos,* the vast savannahs that stretch from here into Venezuela. During the "*Violencia*" of the 1950s, San Martín, Granada, and El Castillo were under the dominion of Liberal Party warlords. Later, these roadside towns fell under strong FARC influence, until the 1990s, when a campaign of paramilitary violence, mainly directed at civilians, largely cleared the FARC out of the area between Villavicencio and the Ariari River.

The paramilitaries who came to dominate the area to the north of what is now the La Macarena Coordination Center zone fought each other frequently. The first was Héctor Buitrago, alias "Martín Llanos," who remains a fugitive today. Buitrago fought and lost a bloody 2003-2004 war with the "Centaurs Bloc" of Carlos Castaño and Salvatore Mancuso's United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), which at the time was supposedly engaged in a cessation of hostilities and peace talks with the Uribe government. The internecine fighting claimed over 1,000 lives.[20]

Miguel Arroyave, the head of the Centaurs Bloc and a noted narcotrafficker, was strongly interested in expanding large-landholder agriculture in Meta. Arroyave owned vast cattle ranches and enthusiastically promoted the planting of African oil palms, a biofuel crop that many in Meta still associate with him. Both cattle and oil palms are very much in evidence in the area north of La Macarena.

Arroyave was killed by his own men in 2004. One of the assassins, Pedro Oliveiro Guerrero, alias "Cuchillo" ("Knife," reputedly his preferred method of killing his victims), has since steadily expanded his power in much of Meta and Guaviare departments. He has done so in part by striking up alliances with other narcotraffickers, such as Daniel "El Loco" Barrera, and with the FARC, who are reputed to be one of Cuchillo's frequent narco business associates. Though President Uribe has ordered the security forces to capture the fugitive warlord, they have been unable to do so.[21]

Further south, the paramilitary influence wanes. The road, paved within the past three years, remains excellent all the way to Vistahermosa. About 3 1/2 hours from Bogotá, a tall mountain range rises sharply from the *llanos*: the Serranía de la Macarena, an unusual geological formation that anchors the La Macarena National Park.

This area has been a FARC stronghold almost since the group's formation. It falls within the borders of the "*despeje*" or clearance zone from which Colombia's security forces pulled out as a precondition for peace talks between 1998 and 2002, giving the guerrillas uncontested dominion over five municipalities (counties), including Vistahermosa and La Macarena. On the western side of the La Macarena range is La Uribe municipality, the birthplace of FARC military boss Jorge Briceño ("*El Mono Jojoy*"), and the location of the FARC's *Casa Verde* headquarters during a failed 1980s cease-fire and peace process.

The good road ends in Vistahermosa, county seat of the municipality of the same name. After that, weather permitting, the drive to La Macarena, the next county seat to the south, would take at least six hours on a poor unpaved road.

For decades, including the 1998-2002 "despeje" period, the FARC ruled this town openly. Guerrillas walked the streets, settled disputes, enforced their own laws, levied taxes, and encouraged a thriving coca trade. As late as 2004-2005, the FARC's control was reportedly so complete that people not only had guerrilla-issued ID cards, even their horses were required to have a *carnet de caballo*.

In 2004 and 2005, the U.S.-supported *Plan Patriota* military offensive swept through this zone. The offensive pushed the guerrillas out of the mostly small town centers of municipalities like Vistahermosa, leaving behind contingents of soldiers and police. *Plan Patriota* was not an example of Integrated Action: it was accompanied by almost no non-military effort.

The guerrilla reaction to *Plan Patriota* was to retreat, up to a point. The FARC left the town centers but remained in significant numbers in the countryside, amid the coca fields that have been prevalent in the zone since at least the mid-1990s.

The Fusion Center

The military and police base at the entrance to Vistahermosa is home to the Fusion (now Coordination) Center, which since early 2009 coordinates the government agencies carrying out the PCIM stabilization and consolidation effort in Vistahermosa, La Macarena, and parts of eight other municipalities in Meta and Caquetá departments.

The center itself is an underwhelming site: a cluster of FEMA-style cargo containers outfitted as offices. A plaque reads:

> Integrated Fusion Center
> Vistahermosa (Meta)
> Built by the
> Military Forces of Colombia
> With the Support of the
> Military Group of the Embassy of

The United States of America
December 2008

The center lies alongside the landing zone of the base, which was remarkably active on the day we visited, with police and army Blackhawks and Hueys constantly taking off and landing, loading and unloading dozens of soldiers outfitted for combat with packs and rifles at the ready. The deafening chopper noise made the base's level of activity obvious to anyone living in the town of Vistahermosa, including students at the public primary school across the road. It also made outdoor conversation at the Fusion Center impossible.

While the center bustled with personnel from all of Colombia's military services, we only saw three civilian government representatives during our stop there. Though that of course is indicative of nothing, the impression left was that of a military operation with a handful of civilians attached to it.

Security gains have been overstated

According to official rhetoric, the Integrated Action effort has had great success in reducing guerrilla influence in the La Macarena zone. "The people now reject the FARC in all of its manifestations, defend the state and support the security forces. They are seeing that after being submitted for so long to the FARC's violence, now, hand-in-hand with the state, progress and development are arriving," said Juan Manuel Santos in February 2009.[22] In May, he added, "These regions, which used to be refuges for terrorism and narcotrafficking, have been recovered for peace," Juan Manuel Santos said in May 2009.[23] USAID was similarly sanguine in a mid-2008 document.

> Because of improvements in the security situation, which have come about much faster than anticipated, the consolidation effort is seeing opportunities in transition zones that are proving relatively secure but where a State presence is practically absent. Communities that were controlled by the FARC and dedicated to coca production 6 months ago now find that the Colombian military is providing security, and that coca production is no longer an option. [24]

The town center of Vistahermosa today bears no sign of guerrillas. The military and police presence is heavy, with a very active joint base alongside the main road at the entrance to the town. Recent crop eradication offensives have weakened an economy that had become quite dependent on coca, and the town looks less prosperous, with quite a few storefronts shuttered.

Beyond the main towns, however, the map quickly goes from green to red. The degree of FARC activity in rural zones was greater than the triumphal official rhetoric had led us to believe. The guerrillas were so active near Vistahermosa's town center that travel on tertiary roads beyond the town's limits was thoroughly discouraged. The Fusion Center territory's rural zone was not what the military calls a "permissive environment" in which civilian development projects can be carried out safely.

The guerrillas continue to launch ambushes and attacks, including occasional attacks on civilian and military targets in the towns; to lay landmines; to recruit members, many of them children; and to make road travel dangerous. Reporting in October 2008, the Government Accountability Office noted that security concerns in the rural zones are very real: "CCAI representatives in La Macarena do not travel outside of a 5-kilometer radius of the city center due to security concerns."[25]

We visited the town of Puerto Toledo, about 20 miles from Vistahermosa in Puerto Rico municipality. During our time there, soldiers on the edge of town told us that guerrillas had attacked some coca eradicators only two kilometers away. The precarious security situation in the countryside meant that we had to make the very short trip to Puerto Toledo in an Army helicopter.

In mid-October 2009, the FARC's targets near Puerto Toledo even came to include human rights defenders. Islena Rey of the Meta Human Rights Civic Committee was gravely wounded by guerrilla gunfire while her boat traveled down the Güéjar River just outside of Puerto Toledo. With Ms. Rey, but unharmed, was a leader of the AgroGüéjar *campesino* group discussed below.[26]

There was a consensus among those interviewed that guerrilla activity in the area began to increase again in March 2009. "The guerrillas are reactivating" was how one leader in Puerto Toledo put it. March 2009 was the one-year anniversary of the death of Pedro Antonio Marín, alias "Manuel Marulanda," the FARC's co-founder and longtime leader, and two other FARC Secretariat members in unrelated incidents. As USAID put it: "The FARC called for a 'Black March' to commemorate the deaths and demonstrate its continued relevance after a year of setbacks. ... There was an uptick in FARC activities throughout the country."[27]

Local leaders and human rights defenders told of an increase in the guerrillas' recruitment of children in the area. The local FARC fronts, they said, have lowered their recruiting age and are now taking away children as young as 9 years old. This, they said, is a reaction to blows the FARC have received from the army, as well as a guerrilla consideration that children are "easier to control." Guerrillas are "constantly present in schools" in the zone, and parents are pulling their children out of schools in order to avoid their recruitment.

It is impossible to determine with certainty whether the guerrilla presence in the Vistahermosa — La Macarena zone is a fading but lingering phenomenon, or whether the guerrillas are still the dominant force beyond the town centers. It is certain, though, that the FARC's influence has not been reduced to such an extent that the local population has been able to lose its fear of retribution for participating in Integrated Action programs. The International Crisis Group, citing "local sources in Meta," wrote in March 2009 that "some communities remain apprehensive about a FARC resurgence should the government fail to keep the CCAI promise of permanent presence."[28] In rural areas, where that presence does not reliably penetrate, the apprehension is even greater.

The paramilitaries, meanwhile, are entering the picture. In Macarena, we heard reports that the paramilitary presence was increasing as the military chipped away at the guerrillas' once uncontested dominion over the zone.

The paramilitaries in question appear to be those at the command of alias "Cuchillo." We also heard the name of Víctor Carranza, a Boyacá-based emerald magnate who has long been accused of sponsoring paramilitary groups. The two warlords appear to be fighting each other for control of drug-trafficking corridors and territory to the east of the La Macarena zone.

Paramilitaries, we were told, are showing up in town centers, occasionally uniformed but often in civilian dress. In s

< Back to Publication

Contact Us • Jobs and Internships Site Map
2000 M Street NW, Suite 720 • Washington, DC 20036 • Phone: (202) 232-3317 • Fax: (202) 232-3440 Terms of Use