

**COLOMBIA'S BORDERS:
THE WEAK LINK IN
URIBE'S SECURITY POLICY**

23 September 2004



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COLOMBIA'S BORDERS:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

President Alvaro Uribe's security strategy is driving the conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) toward the country's extremely fragile borders. The goal is to force the insurgents to negotiate by making them take military losses, but the border regions are the weak link, since relations with Venezuela and Ecuador are not strong enough to absorb the pressure of an ever more intense armed conflict and associated drug eradication measures. The Uribe administration needs to engage its two neighbours in far stronger terms to forge a joint policy to contain the conflict and advance Andean security and border development cooperation.

Having evicted the FARC from areas near Bogotá with an aggressive campaign that began in mid-2003, the army is now operating with much less certain results in the southern jungle strongholds -- some of Colombia's most remote regions -- where the insurgents have historically exercised unchallenged control.

Meanwhile, despite ongoing demobilisation negotiations, there is overwhelming evidence that the far-right paramilitary groups (AUC) have not withdrawn from their fiefdoms on the Atlantic coast. Indeed, over the last three years, the AUC has expanded its grip on strategic regions, including departments bordering on Venezuela.

These border regions which are increasingly the focus of military attention have historically been forgotten by the central government. Compared with the rest of the country, they show consistently higher levels of poverty and structural underdevelopment. Effective abandonment of state responsibility has increased their vulnerability, and many have become

platforms for illegal activity, including gun running, drug trafficking and contraband.

The illegal armed groups (including the ELN, the smaller of the left wing insurgencies) frequently cross over into Venezuela and Ecuador, either to escape an army sweep, to rest and restock supplies, or to raise funds through extortion and kidnapping of wealthy Venezuelans and Ecuadorians. Further contributing to the climate of criminality on the frontier, drug cartels have linked up with the armed groups to move chemical precursors for drug processing into Colombia and ship refined illegal drugs back across the borders for export to the U.S. and Europe.

It is no coincidence that the largest centres of illicit crops have traditionally been in these border regions. Joint Colombian-U.S. counter-narcotics policy has focused on eradicating illicit crops through aerial spraying. Since the accelerated eradication started in 2001, this supply-end policy has not been complemented by equivalent programs to develop rural regions hard-hit by poverty, structural socio-economic imbalances and aggressive counter-narcotics measures.

The governments of Presidents Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Lucio Gutierrez in Ecuador are both concerned about the impact of Colombia's conflict on the institutional stability and security of their countries. While each came to office favouring a negotiated solution, they now distance themselves, focusing on their own grave internal political situations.

Disengagement and reliance on band-aid measures to deal with the spillover effects of Colombia's

troubles, however, will neither provide constructive long term solutions to the problems that fuel the armed conflict nor keep their own societies safe.

Colombia will not be able to resolve its conflict without extensive support from Ecuador and Venezuela. To get that support, it will need to take its neighbours concerns and needs seriously and offer them genuine cooperation in the planning and execution of both military and counter-drug activity and of development programs in the sensitive border regions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Colombia:

1. Develop an integrated security policy for the border regions with Ecuador and Venezuela to complement implementation of the current military campaign (Plan Patriota) and Plan Colombia including:
 - (a) social and economic programs targeted at reducing poverty in border regions as part of a nationwide rural development strategy;
 - (b) support for local government requests for funding of basic infrastructure projects such as roads and bridges as part of that rural strategy;
 - (c) greater attention to the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other humanitarian consequences; and
 - (d) an on-going, intense high-level dialogue with Ecuador and Venezuela about all aspects of the security problem affecting the border areas designed to achieve increased cooperation on both military/law enforcement and socio-economic/ humanitarian aspects, including promotion of cross-border trade and development initiatives.
2. Consult with the Ecuadorian and Venezuelan governments in advance on large-scale military operations that might affect the security and humanitarian situation in the border regions and design and implement joint plans with each neighbour on how to cope with such consequences.

To the Governments of Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela:

3. Increase police and judicial cooperation with regard to the border areas in order to stem cross-border criminal activity such as kidnapping, extortion, contraband and arms and drug trafficking, in particular by:
 - (a) sharing intelligence and coordinating police operations;
 - (b) carrying out more rigorous controls at legal and illegal border crossings alike; and
 - (c) agreeing on a common list of controlled substances.

To the Government of Ecuador:

4. Fund more integrated development programs, conduct more anti-narcotics operations along the northern border and strengthen measures against money laundering.
5. Investigate and prosecute any suspected involvement of military and civilian personnel in channelling weapons, explosives and chemical precursors to illegal armed groups in Colombia.

To the Government of Venezuela:

6. Take effective military and law enforcement action against illegal Colombian armed groups on Venezuelan territory.
7. Implement the government's international obligations to refugees by ensuring that state agents respect their rights and by improving the efficiency of the refugee determination process.

To the U.S. Government:

8. Strengthen anti-narcotics policy by:
 - (a) increasing funding to Colombia substantially for alternative livelihood and rural development programs in border regions as a means of supporting sustainable alternatives to illegal drug cultivation;
 - (b) designing and implementing a truly regional approach, taking into account the cross-border nature of the drug business and minimising the negative humanitarian, ecological, political and security effects of current counter-drug policy in Colombia on Ecuador and Venezuela.

To the United Nations:

9. Ensure adequate funding for the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other UN agencies to help Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela work more cooperatively and effectively on the problems of displaced persons and refugees resulting from the Colombian conflict.

To the Community of Andean Nations (CAN):

10. Fund creation of special Border Integration Zones (BIZ) as proposed in 2001 as a concrete contribution to implementing the Andean Peace Zone and the Andean Common External Security Policy.

To the European Union:

11. Fund development initiatives focusing on Colombia's borders, for example, the BIZ, as a first step towards real Andean economic integration.

To the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IADB):

12. Include in the Country Assistance Strategies for Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela specific consideration of border region problems and prioritise funding of projects directed at those problems, including cross-border initiatives.

Quito/Brussels, 23 September 2004

COLOMBIA'S BORDERS:

THE WEAK LINK IN URIBE'S SECURITY POLICY

I. INTRODUCTION

In early 2004, the government of President Alvaro Uribe launched an ambitious military campaign -- Plan Patriota. First said to be targeted at flushing the FARC insurgents out of their traditional strongholds in the southern jungles (an area of some 300,000 square kilometres) through the concentration of 17,000 troops, it is now said to cover the whole of Colombia.¹ According to General James Hill, commander of U.S. Southern Command, which has been deeply involved in designing the strategy, "Plan Patriota is to bring the FARC to the table".²

The Uribe administration claims it now has the strength to tackle the FARC in its rural strongholds, many of which are close to the country's borders. In effect, since it launched Operation Liberty One (Libertad Uno) in the central department of Cundinamarca surrounding Bogotá in mid-2003,³ the government has progressively taken the fight to the illegal armed groups -- the FARC, the smaller ELN insurgency, the drug traffickers, and, though more

ambiguously, the paramilitary AUC.⁴ The remote and neglected border regions, however, are the weak link in President Uribe's "democratic security policy" (DSP), and are in no shape to handle such military pressure.

Colombia has 6,004 kilometres of border with five countries -- Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil⁵ -- but it has historically paid little attention to even the sections most affected by the conflict, those touching Venezuela and Ecuador.⁶ Per capita income in the twelve border departments is 23 per cent below national average.⁷ Crippling poverty and absence of state institutions have left populations vulnerable to illegal activities, which inevitably spill into the neighbouring lands.

As illegal drug cultivation has expanded throughout Colombia since the late 1980s, the FARC, whose natural home for 40 years has been the remoter regions, and the paramilitaries have become more involved with the narcotics business. The border regions have become not only drug processing centres and transit points for finished cocaine and heroine, arms and ammunition but also the targets of rival armed groups and drug cartels.⁸ For residents,

¹ ICG interviews, Bogotá, 28 July and 3 September 2004. *El Espectador*, 15-21 August 2004, p. 5A. General Carreño Sandoval, commander of the army, said: "Plan Patriota is national and is for all armed forces". General Ospina Valle, head of the armed forces, stated: "Every region has its Plan Patriota".

² *El Tiempo*, 23 June 2004.

³ The armed forces claim to have driven 700 FARC out, killed or captured key commanders and established a permanent state presence throughout the department. ICG interview, Bogotá, 5 March 2004. Reportedly, only the FARC's 53rd Front maintains a reduced presence (some 50 fighters) in the southern part of Cundinamarca, close to the border with Meta department. *El Tiempo*, 1 September, p. 1/4.

⁴ United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and National Liberation Army (ELN).

⁵ The border with Brazil (1,640 kilometres) has less impact on the conflict as it is better patrolled on the Brazilian side by some 200,000 troops. Brazil has a defence scheme that makes it difficult for boats to cross an Amazon river undetected. Nonetheless, increasing drug flows from Colombia indicate that the border continues to be a security problem. ICG interview, Bogotá, 1 September 2004.

⁶ The borders with Venezuela and Ecuador alone total 2,805 kilometres.

⁷ Income per capita in Colombia is \$1,820. Figures denominated in dollars (\$) in this report refer to U.S. dollars.

⁸ See ICG Latin America Report N°3, *Colombia and its Neighbours: The Tentacles of Instability*, 8 April 2003.

involvement in illegal activity is often the only real alternative to extreme poverty. They either grow the illegal crops and sell them to whichever group is in control, are killed⁹ or join the millions of mostly rural Colombians who have fled to large urban centres or abroad.¹⁰

With his approval ratings around 70 per cent, Uribe is the most popular president in the Andean region and possibly Latin America, indeed one of the most popular in Colombia's history. Though in August 2004 the Supreme Court struck down his anti-terrorist statute as unconstitutional, he is in a strong position from which to seek a negotiated peace. Most Colombians are sceptical of peace processes given past failures,¹¹ but recent polls and peace marches show that they want a peaceful solution to the conflict.

The government started talks in 2004 aimed at demobilising 9,000 AUC fighters by the end of 2005. However, the paramilitaries still control huge portions of the northern departments and have expanded their reach strategically along the borders with Venezuela and Ecuador. The AUC's continued major involvement with drugs justifies the domestic and international scepticism about the demobilisation talks.¹²

The emerging rapprochement with the ELN shows more signs of leading to substantive talks than the government's recent exchanges with the FARC about prisoner releases. Some analysts believe Uribe is exploring diplomatic initiatives with the left-wing insurgents halfway through his four-year tenure in

order to soften his hard-line image and so promote his re-election.¹³

While Uribe's security policy may be winning domestic support, the military activity near the fragile borders will increasingly affect Venezuela and Ecuador, for whose internal security drug trafficking, contraband and increased criminality have become as problematic as they are for Colombia.

Colombia's neighbours, however, do not yet see the conflict as their problem. Underlying distrust has hampered cooperation, while efforts made in the past have been aimed at containing tensions and smoothing over diplomatic riffs.¹⁴

Venezuela and Ecuador seek to avoid being dragged into the conflict. Wary of Washington's policies against insurgency, terrorism and drugs, their presidents, especially Chávez of Venezuela, came to office advocating populist solutions internally and negotiated solutions externally¹⁵ and remain unconvinced by Uribe's emphasis on a military approach. For Uribe's strategy to succeed, he needs their help but he has not made a consistent effort to address the socio-economic and security consequences for the communities on either side of the border. How Venezuela and Ecuador will ultimately react to heightened conflict along their borders remains dangerously uncertain.

It is in the interests of both fragile democracies to see an end to the illegal activities in the border regions. However, they need to take a longer-term perspective on the stakes of the conflict, and Uribe needs to involve them in a meaningful dialogue about the borders.

While the level of information exchange and military cooperation Colombia has attained with Brazil and Peru could be an example for Venezuela

⁹ Selective killings and disappearances are routine in illegal drug production centres on Colombia's borders. ICG interviews Lago Agrio, Tulcán, San Antonio, Cúcuta, July 2004.

¹⁰ According to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2003 alone, 22,303 Colombians sought refuge outside the country, half in Ecuador. Estimates of the internally displaced (IDPs) range between 2 and 3.5 million. So far in 2004, 25 per cent of IDPs generated by the conflict are in the border areas, CODHES (Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento), "Tendencias del conflicto armado y de la crisis humanitarian en zonas de frontera", June-July-August 2004, p. 24.

¹¹ The most recent failure was under Uribe's predecessor, Pastrana, who after granting the FARC a demilitarised zone the size of Switzerland (*zona de despeje*), failed to reach a peace agreement in two years of negotiations.

¹² See ICG Latin America Report N°8, *Demobilizing the Paramilitaries in Colombia: An Achievable Goal?*, 5 August 2004.

¹³ Uribe seeks to change the constitution so a president can stand for a second four-year term. On the relationship between this campaign and the recent peace diplomacy, see, for example, *Cambio*, 24-31 August 2004.

¹⁴ In 1987, a Colombian warship encountered Venezuelan vessels in what Colombia considers to be contested waters but which Venezuela considers to be under its jurisdiction. The situation escalated, and an armed encounter was narrowly avoided through intervention of the OAS secretary general. Nevertheless, there is no real present threat of inter-state conflict.

¹⁵ Interview with Ecuador's President Gutierrez, *Cambio*, March 15 2004, p. 28.

and Ecuador as well, militarisation of the borders is not the answer. Control over illegal activity can be better achieved through integrated cooperation not only between security forces but also on border development, sustainable economic alternatives for the rural poor and trade initiatives. In other words, the conflict and the illegal activity that fuels it should be contained by a combination of cooperative security and development policies.

U.S. policy in Colombia also needs a more comprehensive security approach that is not primarily focused on counter-narcotics and military assistance. Acknowledging the cross-border nature of many of the problems that fuel the conflict is important but this has not yet been translated into an integrated strategy implemented with significant resources.

Colombia's neighbours must play an important part in plugging the leaks along the borders which perpetuate the spiral of criminality and poverty. The U.S. approach must be less individual-country focused. Calling a policy an Andean regional initiative does not make it so unless there are truly regional cooperative responses that work. A start requires a close look at Colombia's borders.

II. THE CONFLICT'S NEW FACE

For two years, Uribe has given the highest priority to restoring security to Colombia. The main thrust of his government's efforts has been to increase the capacity of the armed forces to restore state presence in former conflict areas and create incentives for the armed groups to demobilise.¹⁶

Plan Patriota is an integral part of this strategy, the second phase of an aggressive military campaign to eradicate the FARC in its traditional strongholds. In 2004, the southern departments of Guaviare, Meta, Caquetá, and Putumayo have been the focus of offensive operations. In support, the U.S. has allocated aid worth \$108 million for 2005, including specialized equipment, speed boats and combat planes.¹⁷ The army has been able to change tactics and establish a more permanent presence in remote, previously FARC-dominated villages in the middle and lower Caguán regions, along the Putumayo River bordering Ecuador, as well as the Llanos del Yarí in north eastern Caquetá department. According to human rights groups, the army, like the FARC, refuses to accept civilian neutrality and applies pressure on civilians to collaborate. It also blocks

¹⁶ See ICG Latin America Report N°6, *President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy*, 13 November 2003. Troop numbers have been boosted from 120,000 to some 200,000 soldiers, including 16,000 peasant soldiers; policemen have been deployed to all 1,098 municipalities, and new military and police units have been created. The government claims to have incorporated more than 1.5 million civilians in a network of "collaborators" and "informants". Massive detentions of suspected FARC or FLN collaborators in the first year of Uribe's term resulted in a 167 per cent increase in arrests. The resulting clogged criminal court system has meant severe delays in processing cases. www.semana.terra.com.co/opencms/opencms/Semana/articulo.html?id=81293. The anti-terrorism statute, which amended four articles of the constitution in June 2004, was struck down by the Supreme Court two months later for irregularities in its adoption. The government announced it will challenge the decision, *El Tiempo*, 4 September 2004, p.6. Proponents argue the law is necessary because remote villages lack judges or prosecutors, making it sometimes impossible for the armed forces swiftly to get warrants to search homes and arrest suspects. Human rights groups, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, the UN Committee Against Torture, the EU's Commissioner for External Affairs, Amnesty International and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have complained that it violates human rights treaties to which Colombia is party.

¹⁷ *El Tiempo*, 17 July 2004, p. 1/2.

food and medicine for areas beyond its control,¹⁸ a tactic which has led to much population displacement in Caquetá department in the past month.¹⁹

A. URIBE'S SECURITY POLICY

Since 2001, the Colombian government has increased military spending by some 33 per cent (overall spending is close to 3.5 per cent of GDP).²⁰ The armed forces, including 160,000 police, total 350,000.²¹ Its commander, General Carreño, says the army has increased its activity since 2003.²² In 2004, the armed forces have been involved in five combats per day, have captured over 4,000 ELN, FARC and AUC, killed more than 1,000, and demobilised something above 3,600.²³ However, the government is extremely careful not to give out any negative information on the military operations, and a government official has expressed doubt about their strategic effectiveness.²⁴ ICG has been told that in some areas covered by Plan Patriota, the military has instructions not to report any "bad news" to the press.²⁵

Still, the armed forces are convinced they are defeating the FARC militarily.²⁶ A high-ranking air force officer told ICG the FARC "are losing day by

day", and its troops have been reduced from 18,000 to some 16,000.²⁷

It is true that the army (reportedly with U.S. intelligence assistance) has had some high profile successes in 2004. These include the captures of Ricardo Palmera (a.k.a. Simon Trinidad), the most prominent member of the FARC ever seized, and Nayibe Rojas (a.k.a. Sonia), the head of finance of the FARC Southern Bloc's lucrative coca business in Caquetá department, and the deaths in combat of "Oscar, El Mocho", commander of the Teofilo Forero mobile front operating throughout the southern Andes mountains, and "Marco Aurelio Buendía", a senior commander behind the FARC's lucrative kidnapping industry in Cundinamarca department.²⁸

The FARC has consistently challenged government claims and maintains that it cannot be defeated militarily.²⁹ In a recent communiqué, the insurgents intimated that Plan Patriota is endangering the lives of the hundreds of hostages they hold.³⁰ In August, the FARC refused an offer to negotiate the release from jail of 50 of its fighters in exchange for freeing "political" hostages.³¹ It insisted instead on a "face to face" negotiation in a 31,000 square kilometre demilitarised zone in Caquetá department, the heart of the offensive.

Recent FARC attacks show a capacity to retaliate outside its known strongholds. It has struck parts of

¹⁸ "The Patriot Plan", CODHES, Boletín No. 50, 31 August 2004, p. 3.

¹⁹ In July 2004, Caquetá department registered the highest number of displacements -- 15,187 persons out of a total population of 455,508. Sala de Situación Humanitaria, Naciones Unidas Colombia, Informe July 2004, p. 5. This is triple the number of persons displaced a year earlier.

²⁰ Roger F. Noriega, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform regarding Colombia, 17 June 2004.

²¹ *Semana*, 30 August-6 September 2004, p. 38.

²² *El Tiempo*, 2 July 2004.

²³ Figures through July 2004, supplied by the Ministry of Defence. According to the Office of the President, 6,287 fighters have been demobilised since the beginning of Uribe's presidency, www.presidencia.gov.co.

²⁴ ICG interview, Bogotá, 1 September 2004. A statement by General Carreño that "sometimes he who had more soldiers killed ended up as the winner" might be read as a hint that Plan Patriota has resulted in high army casualties. *Semana*, 30 August-6 September 2004, p. 40.

²⁵ ICG interview, Bogotá, 31 July 2004.

²⁶ ICG interviews, Bogotá 28 July 2004 and 5 March 2004.

²⁷ ICG interview, Bogotá, 28 July 2004. For example, the military recently stated that Plan Patriota troops have killed 167 insurgents and captured another 123 in the southern departments. *El Tiempo*, 7 September 2004. The FARC, on the other hand, claim that in July and August 2004 they killed 309 members of the armed forces and lost only 51 themselves. Comunicados y partes de guerra del Bloque Oriental de las FARC-EP, www.farcep.org/novedades/comunicados.

²⁸ Interview with General Ospina and General Carreño in *El Espectador*, 15-21 August 2004, op.cit.

²⁹ *Cambio*, 26 July-2 August 2004. In relation to Uribe, Raul Reyes, the FARC spokesperson, has said: "The president is making a mistake, he doesn't understand that the FARC are a political organisation with strength, experience, with social and political motivations for its fight, and for these reasons it is not beatable".

³⁰ "Gobierno no suspenderá Plan Patriota pese a advertencia de las FARC", *El Espectador*, 19 August, 2004.

³¹ The FARC holds hundreds of civilians for ransom, but also a number of "political" hostages including 22 politicians (one of whom is Ingrid Betancourt, the ex-presidential candidate), 37 police and soldiers and three U.S. contractors.

the north and centre of the country -- Norte de Santander, Cundinamarca and Arauca departments -- where it was believed to be diminished. Civilians have been massacred in three instances: 33 in June in La Gabarra region (Norte de Santander); nine farmers (with displacement of some 506 people) in July in San Carlos (Antioquia); and ten in August near Tibú (Norte de Santander). Attacks on military and police include simultaneous assaults on four police stations in southern Nariño in July; a car bomb in Cundinamarca, which killed nine policemen; and, also in July, in one of the hardest hits against the army under Uribe, the killing of thirteen soldiers guarding a bridge in San Juan de Villalobos on the border between Cauca and Putumayo departments and the only highway connecting Putumayo with the interior.³²

A number of factors contribute to the FARC's continued strength. Hundreds of kilometres of jungle and rivers throughout south eastern Colombia, along the borders with Ecuador, Peru and Brazil, are home to some of its largest coca plantations. Revenue from cocaine enables it to buy arms and substantially frees it from having to rely on support from the local population.³³

While there is little information about the FARC's military organisation, it continues to operate on the basis of five main blocs, each responsible for several fronts.³⁴ The borderlands -- both the "agricultural frontier" inside the country and the international borders where historically the state has had a weak presence -- have been safe havens for the FARC and in some areas the ELN.

The FARC indicated how important to it are the large southern departments of Caquetá and

Putumayo (and parts of the Meta, in particular the Llanos del Yarí area), by making their conversion into a demilitarized zone a precondition for any humanitarian accord with the government. The FARC controls most of this territory except the main towns and larger villages. The army's capture of "Sonia" and its operations earlier in the year on the Caguán River did not much impress local inhabitants, who still experience FARC domination³⁵.

The FARC has been fairly well entrenched also to the west, in the mountainous terrain of Huila department (the Teofilo Forero front) and the border department of Nariño. Though the army has tried to close them off by creating six mountain ranger battalions (*batallones de alta montaña*), it controls several corridors over the mountain ranges connecting the Pacific Ocean with the eastern parts of the country, and -- most importantly for it -- with the southern jungles of Caquetá.³⁶

The military's strategy is to confront the FARC directly rather than surround it or hold a fixed defensive line. This leaves few resources to secure even a relatively short border like that with Ecuador. All but a few of that border's 586 kilometres are in the hands of the armed groups (mostly FARC, but with AUC pockets in the coca cultivation areas, such as between the Mira and Mataje Rivers near the Pacific coast and in larger villages and towns).³⁷

Other neglected parts of the border which are known entry points for arms and export points for drugs include the eastern jungle regions, in Guainía, Vichada, and Vaupés departments, across from Venezuela's Amazonas province. The FARC has been undisturbed there for many years, growing coca and sending it down the Guaviare River or by airplane across the border into Venezuela and Brazil. The largest municipality on this border, Puerto Carreño, has only 18,000 inhabitants, while the largest town on the Venezuelan side, Puerto Ayacucho, has some 150,000, a military brigade and 4,000 well-armed soldiers. The Colombian military presence is sparse -- two river battalions charged with patrolling some 1,500 kilometres of waterways. The real heart of the

³² Parte de guerra del 22 de julio de 2004 del Bloque Oriental de las FARC-EP. The FARC specifically called this attack "yet another response to Plan Patriota". www.farcep.org/novedades/comunicados/par2004/sur_julio_30.php. The FARC has tried to block access to Putumayo department in this manner on several occasions, most recently in March 2004 when it blew up the bridge over the Caquetá River north of Mocoa, the capital.

³³ There is a downside to such revenues, however. General Ballesteros, the Inspector General of the Colombian armed forces, notes that many commanders have deserted, lured away by their new riches. He believes drug trafficking will ultimately be the downfall of the FARC. ICG interview, Bogotá, 28 July 2004.

³⁴ The Bloque Oriental is the FARC's largest, with some 22 fronts and an estimated 3,000 armed men, *El Tiempo*, 17 September 2004.

³⁵ ICG interview, Bogotá, 24 July 2004.

³⁶ ICG interview, Bogotá, 27 July 2004.

³⁷ ICG interview, Quito, 20 August 2004. AUC presence in the south is mostly confined to urban centres while the FARC controls rural areas.

FARC lies further up river in Guainía department and closer to Meta and Guaviare, where much of Colombia's coca is grown.³⁸

There has been a massive increase in population displacements in the Amazonian border departments, in particular, Vaupés, which was previously untouched by the conflict. In effect, Plan Patriota is pushing the humanitarian crisis deeper into the jungle and towards the borders.³⁹

B. PEACE TALKS AND PARAMILITARY STRENGTH

Since the beginning of 2004, President Uribe has sought to pursue negotiations in parallel with his military strategy. Talks with the AUC and ELN are at very different stages. Those with the AUC have produced small but controversial results -- demobilisation of 850 fighters of the Nutibara Bloc in Medellín in November 2003 and the declared intention in August 2004 of groups in Casanare and Meta departments to demobilise.⁴⁰ The process with the ELN that began in June 2004 has yet to reach the stage where there is an agreement even about the shape of the table for future demobilisation negotiations.

Despite the talks, there is substantial evidence that the AUC has not withdrawn from its fiefdoms throughout the north, especially in Córdoba and Urabá departments as well as the departments of Atlántico and Magdalena on the Atlantic coast. During the last three years, paramilitaries have further expanded their influence in border departments, such as La Guajira, Cesar and Norte de Santander adjacent to Venezuela. The AUC reportedly operates on both sides of the Venezuelan border,⁴¹ though without any of the old bravado that once suggested President Chávez's

regime was a military target. The powerful Medellín drug cartels associated with the AUC are said to have bought large tracts of land in Venezuela's eastern border regions near Maracaibo Lake.⁴²

On Colombia's side of that border there is no sign that AUC predominance in the protection and cocaine businesses has diminished.⁴³ From Cúcuta, the capital of Norte de Santander department, northward along the border, most illegal activity is in its grip. Controlling Cúcuta, with a population of more than 600,000 and the most commercially active border town, provides a platform for trans-shipment of chemical precursors, arms and money laundering as well as easy access up the Magdalena River valley to AUC strongholds in Córdoba and Urabá.⁴⁴ The struggle for Cúcuta and neighbouring areas dates back to 2000. Until recently, when the FARC and ELN were all but pushed out, it was one of Colombia's most violent cities.⁴⁵ Sympathy for the AUC goes deep into the department's political structure, as the June 2004 arrest of Cúcuta's mayor indicates.⁴⁶

Further north along the border, in La Guajira department, a similar incident occurred in early September 2004. The mayor of the capital, Riohacha, was arrested along with a number of other officials on charges of having channelled public funds to the paramilitaries.⁴⁷ Since the AUC's arrival in 2000, the paramilitaries have attempted to encircle the FARC and ELN in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and have taken over the contraband business from the local indigenous population.⁴⁸ Clashes between the AUC and heavily armed Wayuus (the main local indigenous group) over coca shipments and contraband have occurred in 2004.⁴⁹ This drew attention to AUC failure to respect the ceasefire and caused some 400 refugees to flee into Venezuela in April.

³⁸ The Guaviare-Meta-Vichada region is responsible for 40 per cent of the national total. Including the border departments of Vaupés and Guainía, this area has recorded 34,700 hectares of coca. It has always been important for coca cultivation but is also strategically important as a trans-shipment point for drugs and smuggled arms as well as for storage of coca base before export through Venezuela or Brazil. UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Colombia Coca Cultivation Survey", June 2004.

³⁹ CODHES, "Tendencias del conflicto", op. cit., p. 30. In Vaupés department, population displacements increased tenfold.

⁴⁰ See ICG Report, *Demobilizing the Paramilitaries in Colombia*, op. cit.

⁴¹ ICG interviews, Cúcuta and San Cristóbal, 3-6 February 2004.

⁴² Ibid. Venezuelans consider illegal drugs a problem generated by Colombia and which Colombians should deal with.

⁴³ ICG interviews, Cúcuta, 22 and 23 July 2004.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Homicide rates soared from 878 in 1999 to 1,379 in 2000, according to local police statistics. Thus far in 2004, it is 519, the lowest in eleven years.

⁴⁶ ICG interviews, Cúcuta, 22 and 23 July 2004. However, city residents claim that the mayor was an unfortunate victim of political debt settling "Cúcuta style". Many politicians have died violent deaths there; a well known left wing politician, Tirzo Velez, was executed in July 2003; and the mayor of Pamplona the same year, both allegedly by the AUC.

⁴⁷ *El Tiempo*, 3 September 2004, p. 1/2.

⁴⁸ ICG interview, Riohacha, 1 August 2004.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Dirt tracks criss-cross this lengthy section of the Venezuelan border, and fast four-wheel drives carrying contraband easily escape army patrols. The commander of the Cartagena Battalion in Riohacha says that the border is literally impossible to control without air support.⁵⁰ Plans to build Colombia's first border battalion in Castilletes were put on hold when the new Spanish government cancelled a deal to sell 46 tanks.⁵¹

The AUC has not been as successful in the south, though new blocs⁵² have established a stable presence in the main towns in Caquetá, Putumayo and Nariño departments and a small presence in or close to key coca areas.⁵³ Controlling most towns along the main roads in both Putumayo and Nariño departments (and towns in Caquetá such as Florencia and Curillo) ensures dominance over the main land axes as well as a cut of the drug trafficking business that transits those locales. Coexistence with the local police and army has allowed the AUC to move relatively freely, so long as it keeps a low profile. In September in Putumayo department, the army uncovered one of the largest AUC arms caches of 2004.⁵⁴ The AUC has crossed occasionally into Ecuador in pursuit of victims.⁵⁵ However, it does not appear to be as feared there as along the Venezuelan border.⁵⁶

C. U.S. POLICY

The U.S. government considers Uribe a reliable partner in the fight against drugs and terrorism and has provided continuous funding for these

purposes.⁵⁷ Colombia's armed forces are now better equipped and trained in rapid reaction tactics.

Since 2000, the U.S. has spent \$3.2 billion in Colombia, mostly for military and counter-narcotics assistance. In 2003, it trained 12,947 military and police, more even than in Iraq or Afghanistan, and double the 2002 figure.⁵⁸ Actual troop presence in Colombia is capped at 500.⁵⁹ A serious buildup is unlikely for political reasons as well as commitments in Iraq, but training, equipment, know-how transfer and law enforcement program funding⁶⁰ are likely to continue around the same levels after Plan Colombia ends in December 2005.⁶¹

The aid package notably includes comparatively little for social and economic programs, despite the existence of deep structural inequalities, poverty and rural abandonment, and several million internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁶² The border regions do not figure as specific areas of concern, in terms either of strengthening economic and social structures or of addressing the cross border aspects of illegal drug activity and related security problems. Since 2000, less than a quarter of each year's funds have been allocated to broad social development and institution building.⁶³ Proposed 2005 funding shows no change: of \$577 million approved for Colombia under the Andean Counter Drug Initiative (ACI),⁶⁴ only \$150

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Learning of the cancellation during a summit with Chávez, in La Guajira, Uribe said Spain should exchange the tanks "for something more useful", *El Tiempo*, 15 July 2004. The Spanish Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Bernardino León, has since said that the deal was cancelled in order not to escalate tensions along the border, *El Espectador*, 13 September 2004.

⁵² In Putumayo, Bloque Sur Putumayo and in Nariño, Bloque Libertadores del Sur, both sub branches of the Bloque Central Bolívar, one of the blocs currently negotiating with the government.

⁵³ In Nariño department, for example, the area between the Mataje and Mira rivers are AUC- controlled, as is in the Putumayo a small triangle between the borders towns of La Dorada and San Miguel.

⁵⁴ It contained 46,474 rounds of ammunition for machine-guns, 182 grenades and 467 AK 47s, *Diario del Sur*, 8 September 2004.

⁵⁵ ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 8 July 2004.

⁵⁶ ICG interviews, Lago Agrio, Tulcán, Cúcuta, July 2004.

⁵⁷ The U.S. embassy in Bogotá recently announced a further \$250 million for anti-narcotics and anti-terrorism operations, *El Tiempo*, 1 September 2004.

⁵⁸ According to the U.S. State Department report, "Foreign Military Training in Fiscal Years 2003 and 2004", www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rpt/fmtrpt/2004.

⁵⁹ Raised from 400 in May 2004 by Congress but short of the 800 requested by the Bush administration, *El Tiempo*, 23 June 2004.

⁶⁰ Aimed at such matters as improving anti- money laundering legislation, financial security, police training and maritime and port security law reforms. www.usembassy.state.gov/colombia/wwwspceu.shtml

⁶¹ ICG interviews, Quito and Bogotá, 30 and 31 August 2004.

⁶² The EU also has been a large contributor of humanitarian aid to Colombia -- close to €100 million since 2001, compared with approximately \$175 million disbursed by the U.S. under Plan Colombia for IDP relief and other humanitarian purposes, www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/colombia/intro; also "El Apoyo de Estados Unidos a Plan Colombia", www.usembassy.state.gov/colombia/wwwspceu.shtml.

⁶³ \$321 million, www.usembassy.state.gov/colombia/wwwspceu.shtml.

⁶⁴ The Andean Regional Initiative (also called the Andean Counter-Drug Initiative) started to take into account the

million is for IDPs, human rights and justice initiatives and alternative development programs.

Yet soaring poverty, combined with weak social welfare systems and ill-functioning local institutions, underpins the conflict as much as illegal armed groups and drugs. A recent report by Colombia's Public Prosecutor found that 64.3 per cent of Colombians -- in rural areas 85.3 per cent -- live below the poverty line (roughly \$3 dollars per day).⁶⁵ Per capita income of the rural poor along the extensive borders is 23 per cent lower than elsewhere.⁶⁶

The border areas have particular vulnerabilities to illegal activity: higher rural poverty rates, strong illegal armed groups, and very little government presence. The absence of a cross-border approach has meant that eradication of illegal drugs and interdiction activities have failed to reduce the drug supply to the U.S. market. The "hub and spoke" U.S. drug policy in the Andean region has been criticized for not being sufficiently multilateral and for dealing instead with each country separately.⁶⁷

An example of local failure can be seen in Putumayo department, bordering on Ecuador and the largest single coca- growing area in 2000. Plan Colombia started an aggressive eradication program there combining aerial crop spraying with financial incentives for farmers to eradicate crops manually and technical assistance to replant legal crops. Today replanting of coca is reported in the very areas where alternative crop programs initially were focused.⁶⁸ The border remains the main transit route in the areas for chemical precursors and processed cocaine. The massive aerial fumigation campaign is said to be in part responsible for the increase in cultivation in neighbouring Nariño department. This suggests that the "balloon effect", which the U.S. claims to have countered regionally, manifests itself locally first.

regional effects of the Colombian drug problem. It allocates \$700 million to the Andean region annually.

⁶⁵ Contraloría General de la República de Colombia, "Evaluación de la política social 2003", Bogotá, July 2004, www.contraloriagen.gov.co:8081/internet/html/publicaciones/detalles.jsp?id=81.

⁶⁶ "En los confines de Colombia", especial para *El Tiempo*, August 2003, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Michael Shifter, "Breakdown in the Andes", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2004.

⁶⁸ The replanting is, however, at much lower levels than in the past. ICG interview, Bogotá, 30 July 2004. Also UNODC, op. cit., p. 15, which shows 66,000 hectares under cultivation in August 2000 and 7,559 in December 2003.

Coca cultivation in Nariño as in Putumayo escapes eradication and interdiction efforts largely because of its location next to the border.

Alternative development projects have covered only some 45,000 hectares since they were started in 2000, compared to the aerial spraying of over 400,000 hectares.⁶⁹ Even though coca cultivation has been reduced across the country by 47 per cent since 2000,⁷⁰ John Walters, head of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, suggested after an official visit that the policy has not been as successful as the figures indicate: "we have not yet seen in all these efforts what we're hoping for on the supply side, which is a reduction in availability".⁷¹ The U.S. Council on Foreign Relations maintains that "the emphasis on forced eradication -- the aerial spraying of coca crops -- is out of sync with reality in rural areas; there is not an effective state law enforcement 'stick' to prevent replanting".⁷² Like ICG in earlier reports, it emphasised the need for a major rural development strategy to present a national alternative to coca production.⁷³

The U.S. approach in Colombia contrasts with that to the Ecuadorian border, the aim of which is "to contain the spread of a coca/cocaine economy into Ecuador, by strengthening northern border communities through an integrated strategy of preventive development".⁷⁴ Since 2001 and coinciding with Plan Colombia's aerial spraying in southern Colombia, investment has been channelled towards fortifying the social and economic foundations of these areas of Ecuador through such productive infrastructure projects as drinking water and sewage systems, farm-to-market roads, small bridges, irrigation canals, and

⁶⁹ Figures vary, Roger Noriega, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, claims that 760,000 hectares have been sprayed since 2002, UNODC, op. cit., p. 51. Even where alternative development programs are effective in particular regions, they are not country-wide nor of a magnitude to respond hectare for hectare to those affected by aerial and manual eradication. In most instances, they are linked to voluntary agreements for coca eradication.

⁷⁰ Statement by Mario Costa, Executive Director, UNODC, 17 June 2004. www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2004.

⁷¹ "U.S. Anti-Drug Campaign Failing", BBC News, 6 August 2004.

⁷² "Andes 2020: a New Strategy for the Challenges to Colombia and the Region", Report of an Independent Commission Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations Centre for Preventive Action, New York, 2004, p. 17.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ www.usaid.gov/policy/budget.

support for licit productive activities.⁷⁵ This appears to have paid off by holding back the spread of coca cultivation and has given the northern border region a head start in building a sustainable local market economy.⁷⁶ Whether it will be sufficient to impact much on rural poverty is unclear. Thus far there has not been a significant change in either high local poverty levels or crime rates, which many link to the conflict in Colombia. Further, drug traffickers are using Ecuador's dollarised market to launder their money. A construction boom in the northern border province of Esmeraldas has been noted in recent months, suggesting a surprising increase in liquidity in one of Ecuador's poorest provinces.⁷⁷

Inhabitants of the Putumayo and Nariño departments across the border in Colombia have not benefited from the same regionally targeted socio-economic assistance. They have experienced mostly the "hard" side of U.S. policy -- drug eradication and military operations. Nor did the Uribe government respond to the end of the FARC-controlled demilitarised zone (*zona de despeje*) in Caquetá in 2002, with a major development initiative to show that it could offer what the insurgents could not -- positive state presence, major public investment in the towns and rural development. Most farmers currently planting coca on the Colombian side of the river claim they can only scrape a living together from that crop as the absence of roads along which to move agricultural produce to markets is a barrier to switching to licit crops.⁷⁸ A far larger investment is needed in development aid as part of a coherent rural strategy on both sides of the border to break this reliance on coca. There is nothing like the integrated border development project the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) initiated after resolution of the Peru-Ecuador dispute.

⁷⁵ ICG interviews, Quito, 13 July 2004. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) accounts for 46 per cent of assistance and continues to be Ecuador's largest donor, followed by the European (EU) Commission and Japan. www.usaid.gov/policy/budget.

⁷⁶ ICG interviews, Lago Agrio 8-9 July and Tulcán 14-15 July 2004. Municipal authorities, police and army consistently state that neither coca nor poppy cultivation is a problem in Ecuador. However, a few hectares have been spotted by development workers close to the borders.

⁷⁷ ICG interview, Quito, 27 August 2004.

⁷⁸ Buyers of cocaine sulfate, which most farmers are able to process themselves in "kitchens" in their homes, come directly to communities to make their purchases. A farmer who wants to sell bananas or another product has to transport his produce to local markets in villages, often many hours' walk away.

III. TURBULENT BORDERS

Social and economic instability in the border areas are common to Colombia and its neighbours. Border areas have been perceived as isolated backwaters. Such perceptions have contributed to the absence of any kind of central government development vision. Both central governments and local authorities are to blame for the lack of initiatives. However, the latter have not been empowered to develop any. Decisions flow from the capitals to the regions, and information coming from the regions is rarely taken into account in the capitals. Without a national rural strategy that gives significant priority to the border areas, there will be no change.

This abandonment has made the rural areas a natural home to armed groups. Violence has increased as AUC, FARC and to a lesser degree ELN have fought for control of illegal drug crops, import routes for chemical precursors and export routes to ship out refined cocaine and heroin. The revenues finance more arms, ammunition and explosives.

For the border population, all this has made life dangerous. Poverty, absence of state services and abandonment drives many who stay to become involved in illegal activities, without which most border towns would collapse. Until Bogotá, Quito and Caracas take concrete measures to address this reality, the borders will remain crime-ridden and harbour some of the most harmful elements of the Colombian conflict.

A. POVERTY AND STRUCTURAL UNDERDEVELOPMENT

As a rule, development levels in Colombia's border areas are consistently lower than nationally. In the twelve border departments, as noted, per capita income is 23 per cent lower than in the rest of the country, the index of human development (0.72) is lower than the national average (0.77), and the index of human poverty (14.74) is higher than the national average (10.6).⁷⁹

The border with Venezuela -- the longest at over 2,000 kilometres -- is the most densely populated (an estimated 2,594,000 inhabitants on the Colombian

⁷⁹ "En los Confines de Colombia", especial para *El Tiempo*, 10 August 2003, pp. 16, 34.

side). It is also the richest of the border regions but wealth is concentrated in a few areas: the fertile agricultural lands of Táchira and the oil fields of Zulia in Venezuela and the oil fields of Arauca and the coal mines of La Guajira in Colombia. The rest is either impenetrable jungle or dry desert (La Guajira). Apart from the main border towns of Cúcuta (Norte de Santander) and San Antonio (Táchira), which host most cross-border trade⁸⁰ and where the main highway connecting Bogotá to Caracas runs, most areas are poor, underdeveloped, under-populated, inaccessible by road and abandoned by the central state.⁸¹

Cross-border trade is literally a matter of survival for many small towns. However, recently communities such as Tulcán, Lago Agrio, and San Lorenzo in Ecuador and Ipiales in Colombia,⁸² which have always depended almost exclusively on trade with each other, have been hurt by decisions such as an increase in migration controls on Colombians in July 2004 and closure of three illegal border crossings in September.⁸³ Many Colombians cross the border seeking work, until recently with little control.⁸⁴

Tightened application of immigration laws was hotly contested by local businessmen in Tulcán, Ecuador, through which the Pan-American highway connecting Bogotá to Quito passes. Business in this once thriving little town was already suffering from a decrease in trade following dollarisation of Ecuador's economy in 2000. When the new rules were announced, local authorities and businessmen

pleaded with the government to exempt Tulcán.⁸⁵ Small local initiatives have provided a slight cushion against a faltering economy and creeping poverty rate but development prospects for the region in such circumstances are bleak.⁸⁶

Venezuelan border towns in Táchira state, such as San Antonio and Ureña, have received better central government support. An August 2004 decree exempts companies in the border areas from paying taxes, a move which businesses in the neighbouring Colombian town of Cúcuta (Norte de Santander) wanted but did not get despite promises President Uribe made when he visited.⁸⁷

Although cross-border corridors such as Cúcuta-San Antonio and Tulcán-Ipiales are the main trading points between Colombia and Venezuela and Colombia and Ecuador, they do not appear to have benefited from border development initiatives agreed upon by the Community of Andean Nations (CAN), such as special Border Integration Zones, proposed in 2001.⁸⁸ Development commissions have been formed, meetings organised and policies sketched by national governments but concrete measures that would allow real cooperation between governors, mayors, businessmen and companies across the border are lacking.

B. COCA CROPS AND ARMED GROUPS

Geographical isolation and absence of state authorities lend themselves easily to the spread of illegal crop farming. In many border areas not only is the humid terrain ideal for coca cultivation and hiding processing laboratories, but it also allows easy export to either the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans. La Gabarra (Norte de Santander) bordering on Venezuela's Táchira state and Llorente (Nariño) bordering on Ecuador's Carchi and Esmeraldas provinces are major coca cultivation and processing areas, with over 50,000 hectares. Because of their strategic location for exporting cocaine and heroin, they are hotly contested by the FARC and the AUC.

⁸⁰ The Cúcuta-San Antonio-Ureña axis accounts for 80 per cent of trade between Colombia and Venezuela. More than 600,000 live in the area it encompasses.

⁸¹ The border town of Puerto Careño (Vichada) received a 24-hour electricity connection only in June 2004.

⁸² Ecuador replaced Venezuela in 2004 as Colombia's second commercial partner after the U.S. Exports to Ecuador from Colombia were \$779 million, *El Tiempo*, 16 March 2004, p. 2.

⁸³ ICG interviews, Tulcán, 14 July 2004. Provincial authorities in the province of Carchi authorised the police and army to destroy three roads crossing the border without informing authorities in Colombia. The Colombo-Ecuadorian Neighbourhood Commission, which is tasked with solving cross-border problems, has not found a solution to illegal cross-border trade; *El Comercio*, 3 September 2004, p. A6.

⁸⁴ Due to the advantage of dollars, many Colombians agree to work for a lower daily wage than Ecuadorians. There is a sense that this has contributed to resentment against Colombians, who, before Ecuador's economy was dollarised, were "big spenders" in the country, particularly in the border towns of Lago Agrio and Tulcán. ICG interviews, 8 July 2004, Lago Agrio.

⁸⁵ All Colombians seeking to enter Ecuador are required to present a clean police record (*pasado judicial*).

⁸⁶ ICG interviews, Tulcán, 15 July 2004.

⁸⁷ *El Tiempo*, 3 September, 2004.

⁸⁸ CAN Decision 501 established the framework for creation of Border Integration Zones. Social and economic development projects were supposed to be carried out with financing from the International Development Bank and the Corporación Andina de Fomento (CAF) but few have materialised.

The strategic benefits of the borders are obvious. For the coca fields located in and around La Gabarra (Norte de Santander), Maracaibo Lake across the border in Venezuela is accessible by speed boat along the many tributaries leading to the lake or by road on the Venezuelan side. In Nariño, now Colombia's single largest coca producing area -- 20 per cent of the national total in 2003⁸⁹ -- a number of small uncontrolled ports between Tumaco and Esmeraldas in Ecuador are reachable in a few hours from the main growing areas. This pocket of coca fields and laboratories is isolated from Pasto, the department capital further inland, and connected by only one road, which is controlled at different parts by the FARC and AUC.⁹⁰ It is the most densely populated part of the border and one of the poorest.⁹¹ The combination of poverty and high concentration of people could account for the density of coca plants as well as the rapid replanting rate.⁹²

In July 2004, in this little coastal pocket in southern Nariño (the municipalities of Tumaco, Guapi, and the area between the Mataje and Mira rivers), the police and army jointly dismantled what has been referred to as the largest cocaine production complex found in Colombia since Pablo Escobar's infamous "Tranquilandia"⁹³: 62 production centres with an estimated production capacity of six to eight tons per week were destroyed.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ UNODC, op. cit, p. 26. This department has grown significantly since 1999. Official figures indicate 17,628 hectares were cultivated in 2003 compared with 15,131 hectares in 2002. This occurred despite the fact that Nariño was heavily sprayed. Possible explanations could be, the reduction of planting in neighbouring Putumayo department, causing a migration to Nariño, as well as effective and speedy replanting, *ibid*, p. 27.

⁹⁰ The closest Ecuadorian coastal town is San Lorenzo, with some 15,000 inhabitants. It is linked to inland towns by a road leading south to Esmeraldas and from there 472 kilometres southeast to Quito. There are no roads along the border eastwards towards Tulcán, which is dense mangrove swamp, then desolate jungle until the "cordillera".

⁹¹ UNODC, op. cit, p. 33.

⁹² There are over 1,700,000 inhabitants in Nariño department and close to 385,000 in Esmeraldas. *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁹³ "Tranquilandia" was a major coca processing and transshipment centre operated by the notorious Colombian drug until it was discovered by the Colombian Police and U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in March 1984.

⁹⁴ "La Nueva Tranquilandia", revista *Semana*, ed. 1164, August 2004. A leading Colombian expert on the drug trade, however, has cautioned that this report is exaggerated. Fransisco Thoumi, "Comentario a 'La Nueva Tranquilandia'", *Semana*, 6-13 September 2004, p. 15.

Coca has become a real industry in areas such as the Pacific littoral of Nariño. Recognising that proximity to the borders allows them to use shorter routes to coastlines with less risk of interception by the authorities, the AUC and FARC have -- an exception to their usual bitter relationship -- worked out a *modus operandi* that enables one to control the growing areas and the other to control the export business.⁹⁵ There are no armed confrontations so long as neither breaks the rules. Any civilian that does not accept this arrangement is deemed a military target by either group. Neighbouring Ecuadorian towns such as San Lorenzo and further south into Esmeraldas, as well as Lago Agrio in Sucumbíos province further east, have witnessed selective killings and more generalised gang violence.⁹⁶

Coca cultivation has not spread to Ecuador despite its proximity and high rural poverty and youth unemployment.⁹⁷ The main reason is the absence of armed groups exercising control over farmers, though local authorities fear that rural youth, with few other prospects, will become easy targets for recruitment by the FARC.⁹⁸

Some 20 per cent of Colombia's illegal drugs are said to transit Ecuador, and drug money is easily laundered in that country's dollarised economy.⁹⁹ The discovery in July 2004 by anti-narcotics police in Ipiales (Nariño) of 2.6 tons of cocaine destined for Ecuador's

⁹⁵ *Ibid*. Of the 62 production centers that were destroyed, nineteen were said to belong to the FARC and the rest to the AUC, Bloque Libertadores del Sur.

⁹⁶ Police statistics for Esmeraldas province for January-June 2004 report 134 homicides, many tied to AUC targeted killings. Judicial police statistics for the same period in Sucumbíos show 64 killings and some 50 threat cases. ICG interview, Quito, 21 September 2004.

⁹⁷ In Sucumbíos, some remote communities in the more inaccessible eastern parts of the province have threatened to plant coca if the municipal authorities do not meet their needs. ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 8 July 2004. Subsistence farmers in remote parts of Carchi as well as Sucumbíos need only look to their Colombian neighbours in Nariño and Putumayo to see that coca cultivation is lucrative for a grower, whose earnings from a single hectare could exceed \$1,000 every three months (coca plants can be harvested every three months). This is ten times what a regular farmer makes. ICG interview, Tulcán, 14 July 2004. One hectare of coca plants produces about one kilogram of cocaine sulfate (*pasta básica* or *base de coca*). Coca leaf farmers produce the cocaine sulfate themselves and sell it to buyers for the drug cartels.

⁹⁸ ICG interview, Tulcán, 14 July 2004.

⁹⁹ ICG interview, Quito, 19 August 2004.

main port, Guayaquil, indicates the size of such shipments. Manta and Esmeraldas are other known export points.

There are an estimated 40,000 hectares of coca in the region of La Gabarra (Norte de Santander) along the Venezuelan border.¹⁰⁰ According to official sources, the Catatumbo region produces 32 tons of pure cocaine per year with a U.S. street value over \$8 billion.¹⁰¹ Colombian Antinarcotics Police (DIRAN) recently sprayed 12,000 hectares in the area but before the planes return in six to ten months, the police say, the crops will have been replanted.¹⁰²

Further north along the Venezuelan border, illegal plantations of coca and poppy in the Serranía de Perijá (Cesar) have been a continuous source of tension. Since the 1980s, the area has seen Venezuelan counter-narcotics operations against Colombian poppy and coca growers, so-called "narcocampesinos", living on the Venezuelan side of the Serranía de Perijá.¹⁰³ It is one of the few areas where illegal crops are known to exist in the country (the estimate is only 400-600 hectares).¹⁰⁴

The armed struggles for control between the AUC and the FARC are what make illegal crop cultivation dangerous. Few coca growing areas in Colombia are without at least one of the armed groups. The UN estimates that the FARC is present in 162 and the AUC in 86 of the 186 municipalities where illegal crops are cultivated.¹⁰⁵ The areas in Norte de Santander in which coca is grown today, for example, were traditionally FARC and ELN-controlled until the AUC began to expand southward from Córdoba and Urabá. The struggle has been vicious, in particular in the province's La Gabarra and Catatumbo regions. When the AUC entered in

1999, it massacred 120 people and caused the flight of 2,000 farmers to Venezuela. Such displacements have been constant since then.¹⁰⁶

C. ARMS TRAFFICKING

Venezuela and Ecuador play an important trans-shipment role for arms traffic to Colombia's armed groups.¹⁰⁷ Just as geography favours illegal drug smuggling towards the sea, arms sourced primarily from Central America reach South America through the same coastlines. Studies indicate that weapons from neighbouring countries mostly trickle into Colombia by ones or twos or perhaps by the dozen. This has "detracted from the perceived importance of such routes, encouraging policy makers to focus on eliminating higher volume sea or air route supplies instead".¹⁰⁸ The arms are bought with illegal drugs, often on the simple ratio of one kilo of cocaine sulfate for one AK-47 assault rifle.¹⁰⁹

Venezuela is the transit route for arms that reach the Gulf of Venezuela, which are then transferred by road into Maicao (La Guajira). Weapons also enter by road from Venezuela to Tibú north of Cúcuta and then north west to the Catatumbo region, where they mainly supply the ELN.¹¹⁰ Arms, primarily for the FARC, have also been found coming across the border from Ecuador via both legal and illegal land crossings into Putumayo department. They likewise enter by sea via ports such as Esmeraldas, Ecuador and are transferred to the Colombian Pacific ports of Tumaco and Buenaventura, where they are distributed to the FARC and the AUC. It is suspected that there are at least 21 arms trafficking routes from Venezuela, 26 from Ecuador, 37 from Panama and fourteen from Brazil.¹¹¹

Further south along the border with the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, in June 2004, 40,000 rounds of

¹⁰⁰ UN sources indicate that there are only 4,471 hectares UNODC, op. cit. p. 15.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² ICG interviews, Cúcuta, 22 July 2004.

¹⁰³ A special anti-narcotics brigade of the National Guard in Zulia began operations in 1985 and has since conducted yearly eradication campaigns in the Serranía de Perijá. In 1996, the National Guard stated that in the previous twenty years it had eradicated more than 60,000 hectares of illegal crops. See Andrés Lopez Restrepo and Miguel Ángel Hernández Arvelo, "Colombia y Venezuela frente al narcotráfico" in Socorro Ramirez and José María Cadenas, eds., *Colombia Venezuela, Agenda Común Para el Siglo XXI* (Tercer Mundo), p. 268.

¹⁰⁴ International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2003, March 2004, at www.state.gov/g/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2003/vol11/html/29832.ht.

¹⁰⁵ UNODC, op. cit. p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ The government entity responsible for IDPs in Colombia, Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Solidarity Network), estimates that some 20,000 were displaced from Catatumbo in 2003, see *El Tiempo*, 12 August 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Brazil and Panama are also important trans-shipment points; the Darien Gap in Panama is well known for arms coming from Central America to the AUC.

¹⁰⁸ "Arms Trafficking and Colombia", RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2003, p. 32.

¹⁰⁹ *El Tiempo*, 24 August 2004.

¹¹⁰ "Arms Trafficking and Colombia", op.cit., p. 33.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.18.

ammunition for AK-47 assault rifles were found in Puerto Carreño (Vichada), allegedly destined for FARC units operating up the Guaviare River. Such reports are consistent with indications that many arms enter Colombia from Venezuela and Brazil via rivers in the Amazon rain forest.¹¹²

Private citizens have been known to provide guerrillas with weapons, often as part of kidnapping ransoms.¹¹³ Ecuador's police and army have seized weapons, ammunition and explosives along the border as well as inland. There are reports, however, that authorities have also been the source of arms reaching Colombia, including cases in which the Ecuadorian and Venezuelan militaries have been involved.¹¹⁴

The Ecuadorian military's involvement in arms trafficking to Colombia is down played, but ICG has been told it is a source of concern.¹¹⁵ Some high profile cases have caused scandals within Ecuador, such as the explosion of an ammunition store of the Brigada Blindada Galapagos in Riobamba in 2002, which was said to be a cover up for arms trafficking to the FARC.¹¹⁶ Other incidents have created tensions with Colombia, such as the rocket attack on the head of the Colombian Cattle Ranchers Association, Jorge Bisbal, in October 2003. An official investigation of the armed forces, carried out after Bogotá accused Ecuador's government of supplying the rocket to the

FARC, found that retired and active army officials had negotiated "at some point with the FARC".¹¹⁷

In the past six months, ten incidents have been reported in which Ecuador's police or army have come across weapons, ammunition, explosives, or detonators that they believed were destined for the FARC.¹¹⁸ Such incidents, though isolated and not necessarily connected to the armed forces, suggest there is a constant if small flow into Colombia.

Venezuelan-registered airplanes have been used by both the FARC¹¹⁹ and the AUC,¹²⁰ and reports have traced weapons found in FARC and ELN hands back to ammunition factories in that country.¹²¹ Incidents such as these are a serious source of tension between Colombia and its neighbours and have hampered efforts at greater cooperation and information sharing between security forces.¹²²

D. KIDNAPPING AND EXTORTION

Colombia's armed groups have traditionally largely financed their operations through extortion and kidnapping. Cocaine has provided a steady income only in the last fifteen years. Kidnapping and extortion occasionally have political motives but develop where there is a concentration of wealth, as in the Venezuelan border towns of San Cristóbal (Táchira) and, further north, in oil-rich Zulia state,

¹¹² Luiz Fernando da Costa (aka "Fernadinho") and FARC commander Tomás Medina (aka "El Negro Acacio") conducted profitable drug smuggling in exchange for arms from the village of Barrancominas (Guanía) until "Fernadinho's" arrest in April 2001. "El Negro Acacio" was the first FARC commander to be sought for extradition by the U.S.

¹¹³ ICG interview, Tulcán, 14 July 2004.

¹¹⁴ The most notorious case involving state authorities has been that of Vladimir Montesinos, the right-hand man to Peru's former president, Fujimori, who was charged with running an international arms smuggling ring in which 10,000 AK-47s from Jordan were parachuted into the jungles of Colombia to the FARC in 1999. Montesinos has been imprisoned for corruption in Peru since 2001. The U.S. State Department has written that "unconfirmed reports persist that elements of the Venezuelan Government may have provided material support to the FARC, particularly weapons". "The Global Patterns of Terrorism 2002", available at www.state.gov.

¹¹⁵ ICG interview, Quito, 27 August 2004.

¹¹⁶ A left wing congressman, Guillermo Haro, denounced this as a cover up. The military reacted strongly, asking for his immunity to be stripped so he could be tried for slander. The matter was debated in Congress for an entire day without a final decision, *El Tiempo*, 29 January 2004, p.7.

¹¹⁷ Vicente Burmeo, member of the transparency committee charged with the investigation, declaration to the press, 23 October 2003, available at www.espanol.news.yahoo.com/031024/1/mj8u.html.

¹¹⁸ On 14 July 2004, the army found 100 uniforms on their way towards Colombia (*El Diario de Hoy*, 14 July 2004); in another instance, it found 240 rounds of ammunition for 7.62 caliber rifles; on 29 July 2004, a combined Ecuadorian and Colombian patrol seized a shipment of chemical precursors heading across the international bridge in Sucumbíos (*El Comercio*, 29 July 2004).

¹¹⁹ A helicopter was reported stolen from a military base in the Venezuelan state of Bolívar on 21 April 2004, see *El Tiempo*, p. 15.

¹²⁰ *El Tiempo*, 11 July 2004, reported that a helicopter with a Venezuelan flag was found in the south of Bolívar department. In August, two planes with Venezuelan registration, presumably used by the Bloque Central Bolívar (BCB) of the AUC, were also found in the south of Bolívar, the centre of some of the AUC's coca cultivation operations, *El Tiempo*, 4 August 2004.

¹²¹ "Arms Trafficking and Colombia", op. cit., p. 29.

¹²² ICG interview, Bogotá, 5 March 2004.

and Sucumbíos province and land-rich Carchi in Ecuador.

While there is no doubt that the FARC, ELN and AUC all have some presence on the Venezuelan side of the border, there is uncertainty in Zulia and Táchira about responsibility for the continuing extortions and kidnappings. Until Chávez came to power in 1999, the FARC was considered the main culprit, but subsequent rumours suggest it agreed with the Venezuelan government to stop in exchange for a de facto sanctuary.¹²³ Authorities in northern Ecuador point to the FARC as traditionally responsible there although local networks have developed recently. Authorities in both Venezuela and Ecuador say many criminals call themselves or act as surrogates for the FARC and ELN.¹²⁴

The ELN has made its presence felt in Venezuela's Táchira and Apure states for more than 25 years.¹²⁵ It appears to have its hand in kidnapping both for income and as a political tool. It has been known to demand money from ranchers along the border in Táchira as well as better working conditions for illegal Colombian workers.¹²⁶

Security along the border is worse in Venezuela and Ecuador today despite the proliferation of agreements to strengthen bilateral police and judicial operations.¹²⁷ Police attribute this to a rise in criminality not directly connected to Colombia's armed groups but acknowledge instances in which valuable hostages have been sold to the FARC or ELN.¹²⁸ The Venezuelan Cattle Ranchers Association

(FEDENAGA) explains rising crime rates by saying that more dangerous local gangs are taking over from the organised, professional Colombian kidnappers.¹²⁹ Since 2001, 108 people in Venezuela have been kidnapped in the border area.¹³⁰

Ecuadorian press reports about high murder, extortion and kidnapping rates along the northern border in Esmeraldas, Carchi and Sucumbíos provinces have generated an image that local residents claim contributes to the region's isolation. However, in all the northern border provinces there have been only 61 reported kidnappings since 2001.¹³¹

Although the armed conflict in Colombia and the presence of armed groups fortifies organised crime, many analysts point to a highly fragmented police and intelligence system as the source of Venezuela's problem. Each municipality has its own police force under command of the elected provincial governor. Several different branches of security forces are under national command: the National Guard, the police intelligence unit (División de Servicios de Inteligencia y Prevención, DISIP), and the police forensic corps (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas Penales y Criminalísticas, CICPC).¹³² The degree to which all operate within the law is questionable. Human rights organisations estimate 76 per cent of human rights violations are caused by regional and municipal police.¹³³

¹²³ ICG interview, Caracas, 3 December 2003.

¹²⁴ ICG interviews, Tulcán, 15 July 2004 and San Cristóbal, 23 July 2004.

¹²⁵ ICG interviews, San Cristóbal, 8 December 2003.

¹²⁶ More recently, the ELN has demonstrated awareness of local Venezuelan politics by linking the kidnapping of a Venezuelan woman and her son to the case of nine former state employees, local trade unionists and business men of Táchira (known as the "political prisoners of Táchira") accused of rebellion. The hostages are the wife and son of a detainee, Jorge Hinestroza. The ELN announced it would liberate the son if the detainee demonstrated his innocence on videotape, see, "ELN acusa presos políticos", *El Universal*, 30 July 2004.

¹²⁷ See below. The Colombian and Venezuelan defence and foreign affairs ministries signed a memorandum of understanding in 1997 as well as an agreement the following year for police cooperation.

¹²⁸ This happened in the case of the ex-governor of Táchira state, Omar Calderon, who was kidnapped from his farm on 25 July 2003 and liberated after three months by the CICPC

and the Colombian Police (DAS). ICG interview, San Cristóbal, 23 July 2004. In Ecuador, there was a similar case involving Esteban Paz, son a wealthy banker, and current candidate for mayor of Quito.

¹²⁹ ICG interviews, San Cristóbal, 5 February 2004.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Sucumbíos has the highest kidnapping rate with nine reported cases in 2004 according to judicial police statistics. Such figures can be misleading, however, as most cases are not reported to the police, ICG interview, Quito, 3 September 2004.

¹³² The National Guard, an active branch of the military, has powers to arrest and is largely responsible for public order, guarding the exterior of key government installations and prisons, conducting counter-narcotics operations, monitoring borders, and providing law enforcement in remote areas. The interior and justice ministry controls the CICPC, which conducts most criminal investigations, and the DISIP, which collects intelligence and is responsible for investigating corruption, subversion, and arms trafficking.

¹³³ Venezuelan Human Rights Education-Action Program (PROVEA), "Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Venezuela", October 2003.

Ecuador's armed forces and police have traditionally kept their actions separate, and analysts believe lack of coordination hampers their ability to address security issues.¹³⁴ Although local police dependant on provincial authorities are sometimes bolstered by special units such as the anti-kidnapping police (UNASE) or anti-narcotics unit, in border areas they are largely alone, under resourced and prone to corruption.¹³⁵

E. REFUGEES

Colombia's conflict has caused thousands to flee into Venezuela and Ecuador and as many as 3.5 million to become internally displaced -- about 500 daily, according to UNHCR.¹³⁶ Others cross borders in search of economic opportunity. For Venezuela and Ecuador, the distinction between those who seek protection and economic migrants is important given the long history of commerce in the border areas and relatively informal migration rules.¹³⁷

An estimated 130,000 unidentified and undocumented Colombians live in Venezuelan border areas. Of these, some 15,000 require protection.¹³⁸ Only 47 refugee applications have been officially approved by the Venezuelan Commission for Refugees, with 2,338 requests pending, some for over four years, while temporary documentation is not provided or legal work allowed.¹³⁹ UNHCR documents are little protection against deportation. While the Commission was only established in 2003, and much of its local infrastructure is but recently in place, political will to process refugee claims seems to

be lacking.¹⁴⁰ NGOs working with refugees criticise the government for the gap between its welcoming words and the cold reality.¹⁴¹

Colombia's conflict has hit hardest in Ecuador where some 27,190 have sought asylum since 2000.¹⁴² They have benefited from a more generous and experienced refugee determination system set up in 1992. However, while the criteria for refugee recognition applied by the government is not overly restrictive, UNHCR has expressed concern about a downward trend in the refugee recognition rate: from 80 per cent in 2001 to 55.7 per cent in 2002 and 30 per cent in 2004.¹⁴³

Refugees in Ecuador and Venezuela live in particularly precarious situations. For fear of persecution by the armed groups from which they have fled, they often do not identify themselves. They are frequently stigmatised as drug traffickers or members of armed groups. Since most are poor farmers with little formal education, they often accept lower wages while their status is being determined, though they are not legally entitled to work. Many are persecuted by the armed groups.¹⁴⁴ Given their lack of documentation, refugee-seekers are often held up at the border where they are all the more vulnerable to the armed groups. In Venezuela's Táchira and Apure

¹³⁴ ICG interview, Quito, 13 July 2004.

¹³⁵ ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 8 July 2004. The U.S. embassy in Ecuador is reported to be financing construction of an anti-narcotics base in Tulcán and to have already financed two others: one which opened in Sucumbíos province in 2003 and a second in San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas province.

¹³⁶ *El Tiempo*, 8 September 2004. The 3.5 million figure is the NGO estimate. The government estimate is 2 million; see 23 August 2004, www.unhcr.ch. UNHCR is the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

¹³⁷ Ecuador and Colombia do not require visas of each other's citizens. Venezuela and Colombia also allow the other's citizens to move freely near the border.

¹³⁸ "Colombia Regional Report: Borders", Project Counseling Service and Norwegian Refugee Council, 19 May 2004, p. 5.

¹³⁹ The Venezuelan law recognising the rights of refugees (Ley Organica sobre Refugiados o Refugiadas y Asilados o Asiladas, LORA) was promulgated in October 2001 but only acknowledges the right to work after refugee status is officially recognised, Article 19, LORA.

¹⁴⁰ ICG interviews, San Cristóbal, 5 February 2004 and Cúcuta, 23 July 2004.

¹⁴¹ By contrast with the refugee determination process, the process of naturalisation of foreigners resident in Venezuela proceeded with great speed following promulgation of Decree 2823 in February 2004. As many as 600,000 people (including, according to recent statements by the Colombian minister of defence, Jorge Uribe, and some members of illegal armed groups) were estimated to have benefited from the naturalisation campaign. Interestingly, the process to make refugee status much simpler administratively has been notoriously slow, casting doubts on the Venezuelan government's willingness to take real steps to accommodate the thousands of poor farmers now living in the border areas. ICG interview, Cúcuta, 23 July 2004; and *El Tiempo*, 15 September 2004.

¹⁴² The estimated total of Colombians in Ecuador ranges from 70,000 to 250,000. ICG interview, Quito, 20 August 2004.

¹⁴³ Only 7,826 have received official recognition of their refugee status, while 8,752 applications have been rejected and 8,070 applications have been abandoned. UNCHR Quito figures, as of 31 July 2004. For a relatively positive evaluation of Ecuador's refugee determination system, see the chapter on Ecuador by Alexis Ponce in *Asilo y Refugiados en las Fronteras de Colombia*, Project Counselling Service (2003), p. 85.

¹⁴⁴ This occurs even as far south of the border as Quito, ICG interview, Quito, 1 July 2004.

states, ICG was told, there are daily selective executions.¹⁴⁵ Refugees also live in extreme poverty, facing problems of access to health care and education, and abuse.¹⁴⁶

Many Colombians are vulnerable in Venezuela in particular to detention, deportation and extortion by the authorities. Human rights organisations reported that in border areas security forces detain individuals and groups arbitrarily, citing the need to examine identity documents.¹⁴⁷

The Colombian government has clearly not taken into account the effects of its military strategy on the civilian population. It is only a matter of time before those displaced in June 2004 in Caquetá department make their way south to the Ecuadorian border. Though human rights groups and analysts have alerted authorities that the "hammer and anvil effect" of Plan Patriota will slowly put pressure on that border, Quito seems to have no clear policy to deal with the consequences either.¹⁴⁸

A month after the capture of the prominent FARC commander "Simon Trinidad" on 4 January 2004, the two presidents agreed to require all Colombians seeking to enter Ecuador to present a clean police record (*pasado judicial*). This caught the many for whom free border movement was a daily matter unaware. The only difference between legal and illegal border crossings had been the requirement to show an identity card.

For many fleeing the conflict, the new requirement is a real barrier. For example, in Caquetá and Putumayo departments, the closest offices of the investigative and migration police (DAS) are often many hours away in the capitals. For poor farmers who have left their remote homes deep in the jungle under threat of death, this means both an unaffordable expense and further exposure to

armed groups who are quick to label as informants anyone coming from certain areas.¹⁴⁹

The new migration control measures contribute to growing xenophobia against Colombians in Ecuador. If refugees are to find safe haven in any numbers, it needs to be better emphasised to the authorities that they are trying to save their lives, not take away jobs from Ecuadorians.¹⁵⁰

F. OIL AND GUERRILLAS

The oil producing infrastructure along Colombia's borders with Venezuela and Ecuador -- in Norte de Santander, Arauca and Putumayo departments -- attract ELN and FARC sabotage.¹⁵¹ Since 2000, oil pipelines have been blown up over 700 times.¹⁵² Analysts claim that the attacks are decreasing but some of the most damaging have been in 2004.¹⁵³

Incursions into Venezuela started in 1987, motivated mainly by construction of the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline in Arauca department.¹⁵⁴ A significant portion of U.S. military assistance funds protection of this pipeline from Colombia's largest producing oil field.¹⁵⁵ The ELN has declared it and other oil installations military targets, and attacks have caused prolonged interruptions and large scale river pollution

¹⁴⁵ ICG interview, Cúcuta, 23 July 2004.

¹⁴⁶ ICG interviews Lago Agrio and Tulcán, July 2004. This is the case for many Colombian women, who are forced into prostitution, for example.

¹⁴⁷ See U.S. State Department, "Human Rights Report for Venezuela, 2003", at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27923.htm.

¹⁴⁸ ICG interviews Lago Agrio and Tulcán, July 2004; "Ecuador tiene poca visión geopolítica", *El Comercio*, 1 June 2004, p. A7.

¹⁴⁹ UNHCR applicant figures for Lago Agrio indicate a decrease in refugees by almost half since the new requirement was imposed in June 2004, ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 8 July 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Overburdening the healthcare system seems to be an issue of concern to the population of Lago Agrio. Hospital figures indicate whether the person attended was Colombian or Ecuadorian. The same figures indicate that an estimated 5 per cent are Colombians; ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 9 July 2004.

¹⁵¹ Other acts of sabotage have been directed against electricity stations, roads, bridges and buildings. Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, "Evaluación Semestrial de Seguridad, 2001-2004", p. 4.

¹⁵² Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, Resultados Fuerza Pública, "Violencia, Criminalidad y Terrorismo, Periodo Presidencial", July 2004.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ The U.S. oil company Occidental Petroleum and Colombian-owned Ecopetrol jointly operate this oil field. For a more in-depth discussion of ELN presence in Arauca, see ICG Latin America Report N°2, *Colombia: Prospects for Peace with the ELN*, 4 October 2002.

¹⁵⁵ Over \$100 million of ARI funds from the U.S. have been directed at equipping and training special units to protect the pipeline.

that has become a matter of concern on both sides of the border.¹⁵⁶

The combination of attacks against oil installations, coca cultivation and territorial disputes between the ELN/FARC and the AUC contributed to making Arauca, in 2003, the department with the highest homicide, massacre and terrorist attack rates.¹⁵⁷ Recent reports by humanitarian organisations suggest that fighting between armed groups for control of illegal crops, army crack-downs and related mass arrests there have caused village-to-village displacements not accounted for in official statistics to jump to an estimated 23,000 in 2004.¹⁵⁸

Neither military protection nor payment of protection money has saved the oil companies from FARC attacks. In 2003-2004, oil installations in Putumayo, which has more than 30 per cent of Colombia's oil sediment, were hit at least 186 times.¹⁵⁹ This has diminished production by some 20 per cent but companies show no signs of withdrawing from the region.¹⁶⁰ Production has also been impeded by almost daily fighting between the army and the FARC. Military protection of oil installation, roads and pipelines is the government's chosen method of ensuring that extraction continues. However, Colombia will soon become a net importer of oil because reserves are declining due to a lack of recent exploration.¹⁶¹

On Ecuador's side of the border, oil industry vulnerability was highlighted by the kidnapping of twelve foreigners by the FARC in Sucumbíos in 1999. While the FARC has not shown interest in targeting oil workers or infrastructure there more

recently,¹⁶² it can reach some of the country's largest oil fields with a one-minute boat trip and short walk into the jungle. Foreign oil companies are acutely aware of the risks and invest heavily in private security.¹⁶³

G. CONTRABAND

Illegal crop cultivation and contraband are tightly interwoven. Over 30 chemicals are needed to process coca into cocaine sulfate (*pasta básica*).¹⁶⁴ Colombia controls many substances such as urea but not its neighbours. Venezuela is the major transit country for chemical precursors in the region.¹⁶⁵ Colombia also tries to monitor larger shipments of "dual use" elements such as gasoline,¹⁶⁶ but with all the illegal border crossings, many items go undetected.

Aside from the main stations, there are an estimated 22 illegal crossing points between Nariño and Carchi, Ecuador.¹⁶⁷ According to Ecuadorian army sources, complete border control is impossible, and the September 2004 decision by provincial authorities to close three roads is an admission of their inability to stop contraband.¹⁶⁸ Since for many moving contraband across the borders is the only work available,¹⁶⁹ this

¹⁵⁶ The Colombian state-owned oil company, Ecopetrol, estimates that between 1986 and 1998, 523 security incidents affected the pipeline, and over 1 million barrels of crude oil were spilled. Oil spills in the Catatumbo River, for example, cause particular concern in Zulia state, which draws 60 per cent of its fresh water from the river; see *Colombia Venezuela, Agenda Común Para el Siglo XXI*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁷ Local organisations say that 800 people have been killed in the past two years, CODHES, "Tendencias del conflicto", op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁵⁸ The government-run Social Solidarity Network -- RSS estimates 7,346 displacements between 1998 and 2004, *ibid*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ *Diario del Sur*, 11 July, 2004.

¹⁶⁰ ICG interview, Bogotá, 30 July 2004.

¹⁶¹ Energy Information Administration (EIA), "Country Analysis Briefs, Colombia", May 2003, p. 2, at www.eia.doe.gov.

¹⁶² At least not since it attacked the Transecuatoriano oil pipeline (which travels across Ecuador's cordillera to Balao) in January 2001 for the fourth time. "En los Confines de Colombia", especial para *El Tiempo*, 10 August 2003.

¹⁶³ A foreign oil company operating in the border area reportedly spends some \$6 million per year (excluding payments to the police and army) on oil field security. The cost has gone up since a breakaway FARC group kidnapped thirteen oil workers in Sucumbíos province in 2000 and a \$35 million ransom was paid. ICG interview, Quito, 10 September 2004.

¹⁶⁴ Cocaine sulfate is the substance extracted from the processed coca leaf. It is then refined (or "crystallized") into pure cocaine.

¹⁶⁵ It is estimated that 2 per cent of the 28 chemical precursors controlled by Colombia, including methanol, acetate, paint thinner, ammonium, rubbing alcohol and gasoline, enter the country legally from Venezuela. See *Colombia Venezuela, Agenda Común Para el Siglo XXI*, op. cit, p. 261.

¹⁶⁶ ICG interview with police commander for the Department of Norte de Santander, Cúcuta, 22 July 2004.

¹⁶⁷ In Carchi, the terrain lends itself easily to road crossings. Roads make easier transport of larger scale contraband items such as gas cylinders, and uniforms and arms for the FARC, for example, ICG interview, Tulcán, 14 July 2004.

¹⁶⁸ See Section III A above.

¹⁶⁹ ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 15 August 2004. In Sucumbíos, over 100 families are estimated to be connected with the gasoline contraband business. In Carchi, an estimated

decision has been hotly contested locally on both sides of the border. Some communities say they will rebuild the roads whatever the authorities do.¹⁷⁰

The police have been less strict about contraband between Cúcuta and San Antonio, Venezuela. Cúcuta police estimate that the sale of contraband Venezuelan gasoline provides a living for some 10,000 in the city and similar numbers on the other side of the border. However, they are aware that much gasoline is shipped to the Catatumbo and La Gabarra for processing coca into cocaine sulphate.¹⁷¹

In Sucumbíos, smugglers have the constant opportunity to siphon petroleum ether ("white gas") from wellheads and pipelines. They steal close to 14,000 gallons daily, which is moved across the border to Puutmayo and coca leaf processing "kitchens".¹⁷² This generates some \$2.5 million annually for traffickers, according to Ecuadorian army officials.¹⁷³ Buyers of cocaine sulfate, mostly working for the Cali drug cartel, transport processed cocaine sulfate back via Ecuador, through Lago Agrio, then eastward along the highway and north to Nariño for "crystallizing" into pure cocaine.

The Ecuadorian National Drug Council (CONSEP) did not consider white gas a controlled substance for a long time. Although the police and army occasionally seized shipments, they had no legal basis to prosecute. In June 2003, CONSEP decided it was chemically equivalent to petroleum ether, which is on the controlled list.¹⁷⁴ An army officer told ICG prosecution is still difficult, however, and suspects are charged with the lesser offence of gasoline theft, not trafficking in chemical precursors.¹⁷⁵ Local authorities also suggest the army and some oil company officials profit from the smuggling.¹⁷⁶

1,500 people were involved in moving goods across the three illegal border crossings recently bulldozed over, *El Comercio*, 3 September 2004.

¹⁷⁰ The governor of the province sought to assuage citizens by saying he would ask for combined army and police border posts to be built in the future, *El Comercio*, 8 September 2004, p. A8.

¹⁷¹ ICG interviews, Cúcuta, 23 July 2004.

¹⁷² ICG interviews, Quito, 10 September 2004.

¹⁷³ *El Comercio*, 29 August 2004, p. A6.

¹⁷⁴ U.S. State Department, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2003, Ecuador", March 2004. www.state.gov/g/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2003/vol1/html/29832.htm.

¹⁷⁵ ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 15 August 2004.

¹⁷⁶ ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 9 July 2004.

While there are efforts to monitor production and misuse of chemical precursors between Venezuela and Colombia,¹⁷⁷ and between Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela,¹⁷⁸ the illegal trade remains a major problem on both borders.

¹⁷⁷ Through the Joint Commission for the Prevention, Control and Repression of Trafficking in Illegal Substances (Comisión Mixta Colombo-Venezolana para la Prevención, Control y Represión del Tráfico Ilícito de Sustancias Estupefacientes y Psicotrópicas), a bilateral commission created in 1987.

¹⁷⁸ On 16 December 1995, the European Union (EU) and the Community of Andean Nations (CAN) signed five agreements aimed at controlling chemical precursors in drug production.

IV. WHAT THE NEIGHBOURS THINK

Relations between Colombia and its two neighbours are neither stable nor constructive when it comes to border security. Tensions flare periodically and are often made worse by recriminating remarks,¹⁷⁹ though inter-state conflict has not been an issue since an armed encounter between Colombian and Venezuelan warships was narrowly avoided in 1987.¹⁸⁰ Both Venezuela's and Ecuador's presidents seem preoccupied with their domestic problems, including deteriorating social and security conditions, and have turned their attention away from Colombia and their earlier offers to mediate its conflict.

Andean nations have made some regional and bilateral efforts to address mutual security issues but these have largely been ineffective. Community of Andean Nations (CAN) thinking has evolved in the past four years to acknowledge peace and security as specific aims of the organisation.¹⁸¹ Creation of an Andean Peace Area and approval of specific guidelines for an Andean common external security policy in July 2004 are meant to build on earlier commitments to combat drug and small arms trafficking.¹⁸² However, Andean countries have yet to prove they have sufficient political will to implement these declarations. CAN has rarely been effective on controversial political issues.

The neighbourhood commissions Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador have had since 1989¹⁸³ are removed from realities along borders. They only visit sporadically and often do not follow up their

own proposals. An Ecuadorian official says most bilateral agreements merely state intentions.¹⁸⁴

A. CHÁVEZ AND HIS CHALLENGES

Venezuela's political crisis¹⁸⁵ has distracted attention from relations with Colombia, which have always been tense concerning border security but fruitful economically.¹⁸⁶ Pursuing what he calls a "Bolivarian" foreign policy, Chávez has carved out a somewhat independent path, though one that is viewed sceptically by his neighbours.¹⁸⁷

He has raised hackles in Bogotá by denouncing the U.S.-financed Plan Colombia as interference in Latin American affairs and a cover for military intervention in the region. U.S. money for protecting the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline so close to the Venezuelan border and U.S. personnel in the area (60 U.S. special forces were sent to Caño-Limón to train Colombian soldiers in 2003) have increased concern that Plan Colombia is gradually tipping the arms balance toward Colombia and so have been used by Venezuela's military to justify increases to its own budget.¹⁸⁸

Chávez's vacillation about the FARC and ELN earlier in his presidency was another source of tension. Upon taking office in 1999, he offered to host peace talks between the Colombian government and the ELN. In 2003 he refused Uribe's request to declare the FARC and ELN terrorist organisations. However, since regaining the presidency after the April 2002 civilian-military coup, and particularly in light of his recent internal troubles, Chávez has taken a more conciliatory

¹⁷⁹ For more on past flare-ups between Colombia and its neighbours, see ICG Report, *Colombia and its Neighbours*, op. cit.

¹⁸⁰ See above, Section I.

¹⁸¹ "Quito Declaration on the Establishment and Development of an Andean Peace Area", Quito 12 July 2004. Previous CAN declarations on the matter include "Lima Commitment: The Andean Charter for Peace and Security, Limitation and Control of External Defence Spending", issued at the meeting of the Andean Council of Foreign Ministers with Defence Ministers, Lima, June 2002.

¹⁸² "The Andean Cooperation Plan for the Control of Illegal Drugs and Related Offences", adopted 22 June 2001, Decision 505; and "The Andean Plan for the Prevention, Combat and Eradication of Illegal Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Their Aspects", adopted 25 June 2003, Decision 552.

¹⁸³ The more active of the two, the Colombian-Venezuelan neighbourhood commission, has met 32 times. There have also been some 30 presidential commissions since 1989.

¹⁸⁴ ICG interview, Quito, 2 August 2004.

¹⁸⁵ See ICG Latin America Briefing, *Venezuela: Headed Towards Civil War?*, 10 May 2004.

¹⁸⁶ In addition to the long and highly conflicted border they share, Colombia and Venezuela have an unresolved maritime border dispute concerning the delimitation of the seabed in the Gulf of Venezuela, known as the Gulf of Coquivocoa.

¹⁸⁷ General Simon Bolivar (1783-1830), who led the struggle for independence from Spain, is a hero in all Andean countries. In September 1821, he was elected president of Venezuela and Colombia.

¹⁸⁸ ICG interviews, Caracas, March 2004. Some Chavistas see U.S. global military and economic strength as a threat to Venezuela's oil wealth. The Iraq War has further confirmed their view, ICG interview, William Para, former president of the National Assembly and prominent member of Chávez's Movimiento Quinta Republica, Caracas, 27 November 2003.

position with Colombia. The atmosphere was relaxed at the July 2004 bilateral summit.¹⁸⁹

Chávez is known to have turned a blind eye to FARC and ELN cross-border movements, and his revolutionary rhetoric is seen as ideologically akin to theirs. However, recent reports suggest his attitude has hardened, and will most likely remain so, particularly since five soldiers and one civilian were killed by a Colombian armed group in the border state of Apure on 17 September 2004.¹⁹⁰ Seventeen FARC combatants captured after a June 2004 fight have been deported.¹⁹¹ In January 2004, fighting was reported between the National Guard and Colombian armed groups in the northern border area along the Serranía de Perijá,¹⁹² in Zulia and in the Alto Guasare. Chávez's position about right-wing paramilitaries has always been tough. The arrest of more than 100 Colombian paramilitaries (and some Venezuelans including two army officers) in April 2004 on charges of planning a coup caused some friction with Colombia when Chávez accused General Carreño, the army commander, of collaborating with the organisers.¹⁹³

Chávez openly seeks to carve out a path for Venezuela as independent of U.S. policy as possible.

¹⁸⁹ Joint Uribe-Chávez press conference in El Tablazo, state of Zulia, Venezuela, 15 July 2004. Uribe made several references to "Bolívar, El Libertador" in his speech, see www.gobiernoenlinea.ve/docMgr/sharedfiles/Rueda_Prensa_3Encuentro_Colombia_Vzla.pdf.

¹⁹⁰ Regarding the attack, Chávez was reported to have declared: "Venezuela has not permitted, does not permit and will not permit armed groups to establish a presence in its territory". However, he did not point a finger at the FARC, thus implying that the paramilitary AUC might equally be responsible, *El Espectador*, 20 September 2004. Colombia's defence minister claimed there was evidence of FARC responsibility, *El Tiempo*, 19 September 2004.

¹⁹¹ "Venezuela deporta hacia Colombia 17 personas, entre ellas 8 presuntos guerrilleros de las FARC", *El Tiempo*, 20 June 2004, p. 3; "Dos GN heridos durante enfrentamientos en la frontera", *El Universal*, 18 June 2004.

¹⁹² Thirty National Guard soldiers fought with 100 armed Colombians in the Serranía de Perijá, *El Tiempo*, 30 January 2004, p. 7.

¹⁹³ General Carreño added to the controversy by acknowledging he had spoken to some Venezuelans during a recent trip to the border area but saying he did not participate in the coup. "Pulso de Generales", *Cambio*, 24-31 August 2004. Tensions have since subsided. Investigations by Colombian intelligence services brought out that of the 119 detainees whose backgrounds they were asked to check by the Venezuelan authorities, only one was identified as a paramilitary commander, operating in Cúcuta. The paramilitaries are being held in Venezuela for trial.

He has publicly criticized President Bush and his foreign policy¹⁹⁴ and attacked the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) as an effort to extend U.S. hegemony while strongly supporting the Mercosur trade pact.¹⁹⁵ Cuban influence in the Chavez administration and on some specific policies is frequently cited as a source of Washington's distrust.¹⁹⁶ Another is Chávez's efforts in OPEC to strengthen the bargaining power of oil producing states, including by aligning at times with Iran, Libya and other governments with which the U.S. is at odds.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, he regularly seeks to reassure the U.S. that Venezuela is a stable supplier. Despite his overt anti-Americanism and hostility towards Venezuela's oligarchy, his success in the 15 August 2004 referendum was greeted with some relief by energy analysts, who considered it would restore a degree of stability to the country's oil industry.¹⁹⁸

Venezuela remains deeply divided, as major elements of the opposition refuse to accept the referendum result as legitimate.¹⁹⁹ Until the next presidential election in 2006, however, Chávez looks set to pursue his programs aided by high oil revenues²⁰⁰ and with

¹⁹⁴ In his weekly Sunday television program, "Hello, Mr. President", Chávez refers to the White House as "the Devil's house". Since starting the program in 1999, he has talked for more than 1,000 hours in over 200 sessions. He recently joked that before the year's end he would be broadcasting from Cuba.

¹⁹⁵ Venezuela was accepted in July 2004 as an associate member of Mercosur, the southern cone customs union that includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

¹⁹⁶ "Misión Barrio Adentro", for example, is a medical assistance program launched in poor neighbourhoods across the country in which 10,000 Cuban medics participate. Venezuela provides Cuba with 78,000 barrels of oil per day at discounted prices and with low-payment options, pursuant to a five-year agreement, see www.americas.org/item_10659.

¹⁹⁷ ICG interview, 1 December 2003, Caracas; Luis E. Lander and Margarita Lopez Maya, "Oil and Venezuela's Failed Coup", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 26 April 2002.

¹⁹⁸ Venezuela supplies 1.4 million barrels a day to the U.S. Its reserves of 78 billion barrels are the largest outside the Middle East. On the referendum challenge, see ICG Briefing, *Venezuela: Headed Towards Civil War?*, op. cit. In the recall referendum, Chávez received 58 per cent support.

¹⁹⁹ They claim fraud though the Venezuelan National Electoral Council and international observers from the Carter Centre and the OAS have confirmed the results.

²⁰⁰ "High oil prices boost Venezuela's Chávez ahead of referendum", Anglo-German Foundation Press Service (AGF), 10 August 2004. The \$31 billion budget for 2004 was based on an average crude price of \$18.50 per barrel. Every

the potential for internal violence reduced.²⁰¹ Parts of the opposition are now somewhat reconciled to dialogue with the government.²⁰² Several opposition leaders have recognized Chávez's victory and members of the opposition Democratic Coordinating Instance (Coordinadora Democrática, CD) have acknowledged that it needs to find a leader strong enough to take on Chávez politically and to formulate a platform that appeals to the majority of dispossessed and poor citizens.²⁰³ Elections for mayor and governor in October 2004 will be an important test.

Since winning the referendum, Chávez has revived the thorny issue of land reform -- he calls it "agrarian revolution" -- by urging large land owners (*latifundistas*) to "negotiate with the government in order to find a solution to the problem, which is a security problem, a problem of state sovereignty".²⁰⁴ His 2001 land reform law seeks to redress deep social injustice in the countryside and revive agricultural production.²⁰⁵ It allows the executive to tax and expropriate idle land and forbids holdings greater than 5,000 hectares that are not productively farmed. In a country where some farms far exceed 100,000 hectares, the law has outraged many of the largest and wealthiest landowners,²⁰⁶ most of whom were his staunch foes even before.

Human rights groups say that since 1999 land invasions by poor farmers and the subsequent backlash have caused the death of up to 120 peasant leaders.²⁰⁷ Delays in implementing the goal of

distributing 2 million hectares to 500,000 farmers²⁰⁸ could explain Chávez's decision to revive this issue now, but it risks sparking tensions again in the border provinces of Apure and Táchira where there were earlier confrontations.

Some analysts suggest Chávez's Bolivarian movement could spread across the Andes, that the referendum has given him the democratic legitimacy to pursue more "definite touches of revolution",²⁰⁹ which could turn into a "revolutionary Andeanisation". They suggest this would not be an armed insurgency but rather a movement of the poor and disenfranchised for redress of historic injustice that could include violent protests such as Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia have witnessed in 2004.

A wider Andean revolution is not remotely likely, however.²¹⁰ There are common elements to political crises in the region -- institutional breakdown, corruption, poverty, absence of leadership -- but no indications that social unrest depends on backing from Venezuela. Nor does turning such social unrest into a cross-border movement seem within Chávez's capacity. Claims by his foes and his own controversial moves such as siding with Bolivia in its old border dispute with Chile should not be confused with ability to convert revolutionary rhetoric into fact.

B. CONTAINED CONFRONTATION

The Colombia-Venezuela border has been described as the militarily tensest on the Latin American continent.²¹¹ There have been a number of armed incursions by Colombian guerrillas; the most recent on 17 September 2004 in Mata de Caña, Apure state, close to the Colombian department of Arauca, resulted in the death of five soldiers and one engineer working for the state owned oil company (Pdvsa).²¹² It was one of the most serious border incidents since the 1995 attack on an army post in Carabobo state, when eight

dollar above that price earns Venezuela an additional \$700 million.

²⁰¹ However, the frustration and hatred harboured by some members of the opposition and exiled Chavez foes such as Pedro Carmona, who participated in the failed coup, should not underestimated. It could lead to destabilising acts. ICG participation in a forum on post-referendum Venezuela, Bogotá, 30 August 2004.

²⁰² Interview with Claudio Fermín, a CD leader, Radio Nacional de Venezuela, 30 August 2004.

²⁰³ Interview with Luis Manuel Esculpi, a CD leader, *El Tiempo*, 29 August 2004.

²⁰⁴ "Presidente Hugo Chávez amenaza con expropiar tierras si latifundistas no negocian", *El Tiempo*, 30 August 2004.

²⁰⁵ 70 per cent of productive lands are held by 3 per cent of the population, and 70 per cent of agricultural goods consumed in the country are imported. Economist Intelligence Unit, 2003.

²⁰⁶ Jose Luis Betancourt, the president of the Fedenaga and a strong opponent of the land law, is also a prominent member of the CD, which leads the opposition against Chávez.

²⁰⁷ Patrice Lemoine, "Les Terres Promises du Venezuela", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 2003, p. 9.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 5.

²⁰⁹ "Chávez el invencible", *Semana*, 16 August 2004.

²¹⁰ ICG interviews, La Paz, 24-25 August 2004.

²¹¹ Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, "Colombia: Guerra Interna, Inseguridad Regional e Intervención Externa", in *El Conflicto Colombiano y Sus Impactos en los Países Andinos*, CESO-Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá, 2003), p. 53.

²¹² The army was providing security for a Pdvsa engineering mission.

soldiers died.²¹³ Colombian farmers in Tibú (Norte de Santander) have complained of harassment by the Venezuelan National Guard and of Venezuelan helicopters hovering north of La Gabarra.²¹⁴

Venezuela's main response to border security problems has been to deploy close to 30,000 troops in two theatres since the mid-1990s. Although Colombia's army has opted for a more flexible approach in order to deal first with internal security problems, it has reinforced the Fifth and Eighteenth Brigades (in Bucaramanga and Arauca) with U.S. funds. In the wake of the 17 September attack in Apure, the Colombian minister of foreign affairs, Carolina Barco, indicated that the ministers of defence of the two countries would meet soon and that the Verification Commission (a bilateral instrument used to facilitate previous military and civilian investigations of security incidents along the border) would be revived.²¹⁵ Although most analysts agree the bilateral border commissions have been helpful over the past decade, they are reactive, not proactive. Moderate diplomacy and constant dialogue is needed to keep tensions in check.

Commercial deals signed in 2004 have provided a positive economic note. During the July summit, an agreement was signed for construction of a \$98 million, 215-kilometre gas pipeline between La Guajira and Maracaibo. A statement of intent was also signed committing both countries to a pipeline from Venezuela to the Pacific coast port of Tribugá in Chocó department (currently in planning), which would allow Venezuela to export oil to Asian markets and supply Colombia should its reserves run out.²¹⁶ There was also talk of eventually joining Colombia and Venezuela by road to Panamá through the Panamá-Pueblo plan as well as extending the gas pipeline to the Caribbean.²¹⁷ The

leaders agreed on building a bridge linking Norte de Santander department to La Fria in Venezuela and, thus, to the main road north to Maracaibo Lake.²¹⁸

Also of positive note, Chávez has made moves recently to reactivate the G-3 (Colombia, Venezuela and Mexico) as a trade bloc and to strengthen relations with Brazil by signing an agreement on common energy projects.

C. ECUADOR'S FRAGILE DEMOCRACY

Since his election to the presidency in November 2002, retired Colonel Lucio Gutierrez's ratings have fallen steadily.²¹⁹ Soon after coming to office, he alienated the powerful left-wing indigenous movement of the Pachakutik party and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), which had supported his election, to the point that they led violent protests against the government in February 2004. Since then internal splits within Pachakutik and CONAIE have weakened the movement.

Though the government has been rocked by ministerial departures, rumours of military unrest and hunger strikes, dissatisfaction has not translated into widespread public protest. Strong social resistance among the poor to austere fiscal policies and the proposed free trade agreement with the U.S. could quickly escalate but citizens appear tired of political instability, and the government's most vocal and violent critics seem to have lost popular backing.²²⁰

Gutierrez has been helped by traditional business interests and the army, though he had to jettison his original indigenous supporters when they balked at the turn to neo-liberal economic policies. Rising oil production due to the coming online of the heavy oil pipeline, Oleducto de Crudos Pesados (OCP), and

²¹³ This incident caused the Venezuelan army to claim the need for "hot pursuit" into Colombia.

²¹⁴ ICG interviews, Cúcuta, 23 July 2004. The reported incidents took place in 2003.

²¹⁵ Radio Nacional de Venezuela, 21 September 2004.

²¹⁶ Colombia announced an important oil and gas discovery in August 2003. Test wells in the area of "Gibraltar", between the north eastern departments of Boyacá and Norte Santander and near the border with Venezuela, revealed important gas reserves (630 million cubic metres) and much smaller amounts of oil (15 million barrels), thus opening up a new frontier for exploration. This is Ecopetrol's most important discovery of reserves in recent years. The area has both ELN and FARC presence.

²¹⁷ Plan Puebla is a cooperation plan of trade and aid linking all seven Central American countries with Mexico.

²¹⁸ *La Opinión*, 22 July 2004, 3B. The estimated cost of the project is \$12 million, to be shared by both governments.

²¹⁹ They reached 15 per cent in February 2004. See "Gutierrez loses backing of indigenous groups", *Financial Times*, 17 February 2004, p. 2. Ecuadorians have shown limited patience with their presidents. Since the 1995 war with Peru, they have had five, including two toppled by popular revolt.

²²⁰ Although the indigenous movement seems to have lost some momentum, it remains one of the strongest in South America. It has said it will fight the extreme poverty in which 60 per cent of Ecuador's 12 million people live.

exceptionally high oil prices have also been beneficial.²²¹

Gutierrez has sought and received U.S. support. Washington in turn has emphasised Ecuador's importance as a sort of military and diplomatic "cordon sanitaire" in the fight against Colombian drugs and armed groups.²²² The Bush administration has not increased its military aid, however, which irritates the government given what it says it spends to contain the spillover from Colombia.²²³ Ecuadorian analysts believe one reason more money is unlikely is the military's traditionally left leaning and strong political role.²²⁴ Equally feasible is the priority assigned to Colombia.²²⁵ But the U.S. has given the military satellite communication systems and 45 vehicles specifically for the northern border, helped create rapid reaction teams,²²⁶ and contributed to development of the northern border region.²²⁷

In 1999, Ecuador signed a ten-year agreement with the U.S. allowing its Southern Command to establish

a Forward Operating Location (FOL) in Manta port, on the Pacific coast, to support counter-narcotics operations in Colombia 400 kilometres to the northwest of Quito.²²⁸ Ecuadorian analysts argue that by supporting U.S. operations through Manta, the country is in effect "directly involved in military operations in Colombia".²²⁹ Ecuador also receives U.S. funding for its counter-narcotics operations under the Andean Counter-Drug Initiative, although only a fraction of what Colombia gets.²³⁰

D. ECUADOR AND THE COLOMBIA ISSUE

Gutierrez has steered an unpopular course on Colombia that many within the influential military consider acceptance of the "Washington-Bogotá consensus", which could drag Ecuador into the conflict.²³¹ Efforts to demonise the FARC are not accepted in traditionalist and leftist military circles.²³²

Declarations by Foreign Minister Patricio Zuquilanda about policy realignment have raised debate among elites over loss of national sovereignty but seem of no great concern to most citizens.²³³ Popular reactions are more likely to show increased xenophobia towards Colombian refugees and entrepreneurs, which feeds fears regarding spillover effects and provides justification for tougher action along the border. For Gutierrez's most outspoken critics, this is playing into Uribe's hands.²³⁴

An example of acquiescence to Colombian wishes was a recent decision by the bilateral technical and scientific commission studying the effects of aerial

²²¹ Revenues in 2004 are anticipated to be \$1.08 billion, an increase of 50 per cent over the previous year. "Ecuador: country outlook", Economist Intelligence Unit ViewsWire, No. 301, 23 July 2004.

²²² In a recent visit to Quito, Secretary of State Colin Powell congratulated Ecuador on its anti-narcotics work on the northern border, *El Tiempo*, 8 June 2004, p. 8. He pointed out that Ecuador is important to Colombia as a neighbour and said any assistance requested would be considered favourably, *El Tiempo*, 9 June 2004, p. 13. Brian E. Sheridan, department of defence: "The value of U.S. military presence options afforded by FOLs (Forward Operating Locations) for this mission, specifically the additional location at Manta, Ecuador which is geographically ideal to support D&M [detection and monitoring] missions in southern Colombia, cannot be overstated ...", statement for the record, "The Department of Defence's Role in U.S. Counter Drug Activities, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform, Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources, 6 August 1999.

²²³ Ecuadorian officials refer periodically to requiring "compensation" for the efforts along the northern border. There are reports that the government is preparing to present a bill to the U.S. In an interview reported by the BBC, Ecuador's ambassador to the U.S. stated that cost estimates for maintaining troops on the northern border are being developed, and a proposal will be presented to the State Department. "USA welcomes Ecuador's efforts to protect its borders, combat drugs trade", BBC Monitoring Americas, 8 August, 2004.

²²⁴ ICG interview, Quito, 19 August 2004.

²²⁵ ICC interview, Bogotá, March 2004.

²²⁶ *El Comercio*, 29 April 2004.

²²⁷ The total planned U.S. investment until 2006 is close to \$80 million. www.usaid.gov/ec/northernborder.htm.

²²⁸ The agreement allows U.S. planes to land at the Manta airport and carry out monitoring operations over Ecuador and Colombia. U.S. personnel at the Manta base is capped at 300. The U.S. has invested \$67 million in upgrading Manta's airport, ICG interview, Quito, 6 July 2004.

²²⁹ ICG interview, Quito, 20 August 2004. Adrián Bonilla, "Conflicto en la región Andina: Inestabilidad Política y Crisis Colombiana" in *El Conflicto Colombiano y su Impacto en los Países Andinos*, op. cit., p. 235.

²³⁰ In 2004, Ecuador has received some \$71 million to be distributed between counter-drug and social programs.

²³¹ ICG interview, Quito, 19 August 2004.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid. Patricio Zuquilanda said in *El Comercio*, 27 June 2004, p. A2: "We need to be friends with countries that are imposing their political and economic thesis. The objective is to tighten relations with the U.S., China Germany and Spain." See also "El Canciller suma protestas de ex ministros y funcionarios", *El Comercio*, 5 July 2004.

²³⁴ ICG interview, Quito, 20 August 2004.

coca crop spraying to refrain from asking Bogotá to respect the ten-kilometre swath along the border despite protests by residents.²³⁵ This was a reversal of previous strong opposition to spraying close to the border.

On a strictly bilateral level in 2004, Gutierrez has cooperated with Uribe's counter-terrorism policy by adopting stricter security measures along the northern border and increasing troop strength.²³⁶ Such actions suggest he has agreed to play the "anvil" to Colombia's "hammer" in an effort to defeat the FARC. Concrete measures include the requirement that all Colombians entering Ecuador produce their police record, acceptance of a permanent Colombian military presence on the international bridge over the San Miguel River, one of four main border crossings, and more troops -- reportedly over 8,000 -- on the Ecuadorian side.²³⁷ This is hardly enough to constitute a heavily militarised border, but considering that Ecuador has an army of only 60,000, it is a high concentration over a mere 500 kilometre stretch.

E. ECUADOR'S *MODUS VIVENDI* WITH THE FARC

Dealing with Colombia's armed groups seems less a problem for Ecuador than Venezuela. The border is only a quarter the length, and, except for the towns and larger villages in which the AUC is dominant, the FARC has the most consistent presence.²³⁸ Indeed, it has been there since the conflict began.

As far as the local authorities are concerned, this presence is not a security problem as "they do not want trouble with us and we do not want trouble with them".²³⁹ In some communities that are too remote for local authorities to attend to properly (i.e. nine hours by foot from an administrative centre), they tolerate that the FARC has established a sort of "moral authority" that is in some cases accepted by inhabitants and in many others imposed, in particular if supplies are needed.²⁴⁰ Even President Gutierrez has played down the presence of armed groups, stating that there "is no official report on the permanent presence of guerrilla groups in Ecuador".²⁴¹

Yet, ICG has been told the FARC has made its non-belligerent intentions clear on several occasions directly to the Quito command.²⁴² "Containment and prophylaxis" is the official military line on the conflict.²⁴³ Neighbourhood commissions and bilateral border commissions (Combifron) are relied on as "measures to increase confidence".²⁴⁴

In practice, the FARC and the military have a *modus vivendi* along the border that allows the insurgents a logistical supply and rest area.²⁴⁵ The armed forces see their role as providing a "dissuasive presence". They patrol routinely, sometimes with special troops, and have recently found abandoned camps and cocaine sulfate processing laboratories, particularly along the Putumayo River.²⁴⁶

²³⁵ *El Comercio*, 4 August 2004, p. A3. It was agreed that the planes could "fly low" in order to avoid wide dispersal of the spray. Colombian representatives on the scientific commission insist that coca is growing in Ecuador and urged Quito to recognise that drug trafficking is not only Colombia's problem: "if the neighbour's house is burning, no one can guarantee that the same will not happen to us".

²³⁶ Ecuador's first counter-insurgency group (45 soldiers) started training in September 2004 and is to be sent to the northern border within three months, *El Comercio*, 22 September 2004, p. A2.

²³⁷ ICG interviews, Tulcán and Lago Agrio, July 2004. Ecuador is careful to state that the troop deployments are normal, ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 9 July 2004.

²³⁸ As mentioned above, the AUC has a strong presence in the towns of Puerto Asís, La Dorada and San Miguel in the Putumayo (belonging to the Bloque Putumayo) and in Pasto, Ipiales, Llorente and Tumaco in Nariño (belonging to the Bloque Libertadores del Sur). Both are part of the larger Bloque Central Bolívar now in peace talks with the government.

²³⁹ ICG interviews, Lago Agrio, 8 July 2004.

²⁴⁰ ICG interviews, Tulcán, 14 July 2004.

²⁴¹ Interview with President Gutierrez, *El Espectador*, 14 March, 2004, p. 12A.

²⁴² ICG interview, Quito, 20 August 2004.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* This line is set out in the "White Book", a sort of military mission statement. In relation to the Colombian conflict, the "negative effects on Ecuador's internal peace and security" are noted. The aim is to deepen means of dialogue in an effort to prevent violence and halt illegal activities that violate state sovereignty. See www.libroblancoecuador.org/comprominternac.pdf, p. 45.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ ICG interviews, Lago Agrio, 9 July 2004.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; *El Comercio*, 11 July, 2004. After a five-day patrol by 600 special army forces, a coca processing laboratory was found as well as an abandoned FARC camp in the Piñuña Negra sector along the Putumayo River. In September, a 300-man patrol found three abandoned FARC camps on the banks of the Putumayo River, *El Comercio*, 12 September, 2004. This has received much more press attention than past discoveries of FARC camps in Ecuador and has highlighted

The military's attitude on border security suggests little concern about spillover effects of the conflict as far as the FARC is concerned. It is unfazed as the fighting comes closer and is sceptical of Plan Patriota: "It is impossible to sweep the jungle and push all FARC combatants towards the border in one clean sweep. Some will get through the net".²⁴⁷ In the wake of September 2004 fights between Colombian marines and the FARC 48th front along the Putumayo River, and the discovery of three FARC camps on the Ecuadorian side, Minister of Defence Nelson Herrera chastised the press for spreading untruths about armed groups on Ecuadorian soil: "I can guarantee that in our country there is no problem".²⁴⁸ Nor does the military envisage greater involvement despite repeated requests by Colombia. ICG was told that when Colombian commanders have asked for help in stopping FARC combatants from fleeing across the border when attacked, they have been politely turned down.²⁴⁹ Such help in denying sanctuaries is the key objective for both Bogotá and its U.S. supporters. Without the "anvil", the hammer strikes only air.

V. CONCLUSION

The high hopes expressed by the Colombian military of defeating the FARC through Plan Patriota and the Bush administration's confidence in the Uribe government's achievements regarding the drug problem are overshadowed by the numerous and deep seated problems at the root of the conflict, which a tough military approach alone cannot solve. Poverty, violence and chronic insecurity are nowhere more apparent than in the rural regions bordering Venezuela and Ecuador. There is still no national rural development strategy prioritising key border departments and to be implemented through social and infrastructure investment along with the rule of law wherever security can be restored. More fighting to dislodge armed groups will simply not be enough to win the strategic conflict. The explosive mix of poverty, illegal drug production and insurgencies so close to two neighbouring countries with which relations have never been particularly warm should be a cause for greater concern for President Uribe.

By steadfastly implementing his security strategy, Uribe has won the support of the majority of Colombians and possibly brought enough pressure to bear on the armed groups, other than the FARC, to cause them to consider serious negotiations. However, while the government has no choice but to confront illegal armed groups with force, security will not be achieved on this basis alone. Proactive engagement is particularly necessary from Colombia's neighbours.

Uribe received mixed messages from Venezuela and Ecuador early in his presidency. Now he has given up working hard enough for their support in his haste to reclaim the remoter corners of the country from the FARC and negotiate demobilisation with the AUC and perhaps also the ELN within his four-year term.²⁵⁰

As the conflict intensifies, he cannot be sure he can count on his neighbours. Relations with Venezuela and Ecuador limp from crisis to calm and back again. Neither will embrace Uribe's Washington-backed hard-line policies on drugs and terrorism wholeheartedly. Neither wants to expend resources

Plan Patriota's potential for pushing the FARC further across the border.

²⁴⁷ ICG interview, Lago Agrio, 9 July 2004.

²⁴⁸ *El Comercio*, 9 September, 2004, p. A7. Prompted by reports of population displacements and threats by armed groups to Ecuadorians living near the fighting along the Putumayo River, a humanitarian organisation visited the three villages that were allegedly threatened by paramilitaries. Local residents suggested that the press had misinterpreted the facts, ICG interview, Quito, 14 September 2004.

²⁴⁹ ICG interviews Lago Agrio and Tulcán, July 2004.

²⁵⁰ For more on Uribe's relations with his counterparts in Venezuela and Ecuador, see ICG Report, *Colombia and its Neighbours*, op. cit.

on bolstering their borders militarily, and even if they did, they could not provide the troops and police to patrol adequately.

Rather than further militarisation of the borders, law enforcement, economic development, and humanitarian action deserve far higher regional priority. Illegal activity crosses Colombia's borders, and responses should be genuinely regional. Strategies for cooperation need to be developed that go well beyond the ineffectual institutional mechanisms currently claimed to be promoting bilateral and regional cooperation such as the neighbourhood commissions and CAN tributes to Andean peace and security.

President Uribe bears the greatest responsibility for bringing about this cooperation, both because he is the political leader in the region with the strongest domestic support and because it is Colombia's problems that are spilling over borders.

Cross-border economic development efforts such as the CAN Border Integration Zones should be encouraged. The poor and excluded must be given expanded access to markets and political participation through economic development programs that focus on all three countries' border areas. Funding should be provided to help build sustainable economies not dependant on illegal crops.

Authorities in Bogotá, Quito and Caracas need to realise that the legal cross-border trade which has developed in the main towns must be encouraged, not stifled in the haste to curb illegal activity.

More effective police and judicial cooperation over illegal drug trafficking and related crimes should be promoted. Police cooperation agreements such as those between Venezuela and Colombia on information exchange, joint operations in the border areas, and monitoring of chemical precursors and suspicious aircraft must be revived and similar ones put in place with Ecuador.²⁵¹

Nor should the borders' role in providing a safe haven for refugees be forgotten. Measures which make asylum difficult violate the commitments of

Venezuela and Ecuador to protect persons fleeing persecution under the 1951 Refugee Convention and infringe on internationally protected fundamental human rights.²⁵²

The U.S., EU, World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and other major donors must support efforts to cooperate over Colombia's borders. In devising their assistance strategies, they should pay greater attention to addressing those borders.

Quito/Brussels, 23 September 2004

²⁵¹ The 1998 agreement providing for cooperation between police forces and the Joint Commission for the Prevention, Control and Repression of Trafficking in Illegal Substances have provided the principal institutional framework for police cooperation.

²⁵² The rights of refugees including to asylum are considered fundamental international human rights. See the right to asylum in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 13, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 12 and 13; and the Inter American Convention on Human Rights, art. 22.

APPENDIX A MAP OF COLOMBIA



Base 802670AI (R00820) 6-01

APPENDIX B

MAP OF ECUADOR



Base 801650 (B01215) 5-91

APPENDIX D

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 100 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. ICG also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a 12-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, www.icg.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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September 2004

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Colombia's Elusive Quest for Peace, Latin America Report N°1, 26 March 2002 (also available in Spanish)

The 10 March 2002 Parliamentary Elections in Colombia, Latin America Briefing, 17 April 2002 (also available in Spanish)

The Stakes in the Presidential Election in Colombia, Latin America Briefing, 22 May 2002 (also available in Spanish)

Colombia: The Prospects for Peace with the ELN, Latin America Report N°2, 4 October 2002 (also available in Spanish)

Colombia: Will Uribe's Honeymoon Last?, Latin America Briefing, 19 December 2002 (also available in Spanish)

Colombia and Its Neighbours: The Tentacles of Instability, Latin America Report N°3, 8 April 2003 (also available in Spanish and Portuguese)

Colombia's Humanitarian Crisis, Latin America Report N°4, 9 July 2003 (also available in Spanish)

Colombia: Negotiating with the Paramilitaries, Latin America Report N°5, 16 September 2003 (also available in Spanish)

Colombia: President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy, Latin America Report N°6, 13 November 2003 (also available in Spanish)

Hostages for Prisoners: A Way to Peace in Colombia?, Latin America Briefing, 8 March 2004 (also available in Spanish)

Venezuela: Headed Toward Civil War?, Latin America Briefing, 10 May 2004 (also available in Spanish)

Increasing Europe's Stake in the Andes, Latin America Briefing, 15 June 2004 (also available in Spanish)

Bolivia's Divisions: Too Deep to Heal? Latin America Report N°7, 6 July 2004 (also available in Spanish)

Demobilising the Paramilitaries in Colombia: An Achievable Goal?, Latin America Report N°8, 5 August 2004

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