

Testimony of

The Honorable Curtis W. Kamman

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Summary

Colombia is a prime example of the symbiotic relationship between narcotics trafficking and politically motivated violence perpetrated by three illicit groups on the State Department's international terrorist list. While the terrorist groups claim to act in pursuit of social justice and democracy, their viability depends on the money they receive for protecting the production and transportation of drugs destined for the overseas market.

The threat to U.S. interests from these groups is twofold. First, they make it possible for common criminals seeking illicit profits to produce and sell drugs that damage our society, especially our young people. Second, the vast profits of this illegal trade sustain a level of violence that undermines the legitimate government of Colombia, thereby risking the erosion of law and order throughout the country. Unlike the Islamist extremists in other parts of the world, the terrorists who operate in Colombia have not explicitly declared the United States to be their target. But their political and economic objectives are incompatible with our values, and they could ultimately represent a force for evil no less troublesome than Al Qaeda or irresponsible forces possessing weapons of mass destruction.

Responsibility for combating terrorist groups in Colombia obviously belongs to the people and government of that country. But the recent termination of a political dialogue between the government and the largest leftist terrorist group poses a challenge to the United States. Should we continue to limit our assistance to Colombia to operations against narco-traffickers, or should we attempt to strengthen the Colombian capability to defeat guerrillas and paramilitary groups that work hand in hand with the drug criminals?

I believe we can unshackle our existing assistance to the police and armed forces of Colombia and increase our material aid in ways that do not draw us into a combat role. We don't want to repeat the experience of Vietnam. But neither do we want to commit the error of neglect that allowed the Taliban to rise in Afghanistan.

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Discussion

Criminals and Terrorists. What is the fundamental distinction between narco-traffickers and terrorists? The drug merchant is a common criminal attracted by huge illicit profits, caring little for the damage to individual lives and whole societies as a result of drug addiction and peddling. The terrorist has a political or religious motive and deliberately targets innocent civilians as well as legitimate authority in order to advance his cause. In Colombia, the two kinds of antisocial elements have formed an alliance, a marriage of convenience, while retaining their separate basic goals. And neither group is especially reticent about its links with the other. FARC commanders have frequently acknowledged that they work with growers of coca, which they justify on grounds of providing economic support to the peasantry. They acknowledge when pressed that half or more of their income is derived from fees charged to narco-traffickers (the other major source is kidnapping). So-called self-defense groups, commonly referred to as paramilitaries, openly admit that they get a major share of income from protection money paid by narco-traffickers, along with money extorted from legitimate businesses.

Focus on Drugs. For years, the United States has devoted funds and effort to fighting Colombian narco-traffickers, but has maintained a hands-off attitude towards leftist guerrilla groups and illegal rightist paramilitary forces. We have defined the problem largely in terms of criminal conspiracy, and our partnership with the Colombian Government has occurred within the framework of international narcotics treaties or bilateral law enforcement cooperation. To be sure, such joint successes as dismantling the Medellin and Cali cartels, extraditing kingpin traffickers and eradicating thousands of hectares of coca have placed significant obstacles in the way of drug dealers. But so long as the traffickers enjoy the protection of the FARC and ELN guerrillas and the AUC paramilitaries, they will not be forced to abandon their lucrative business.

Focus on Terrorist Groups. The corrosive effect of narcotics money on Colombian society has distorted the economy, weakened the democratic political process and eroded confidence in the country's stability. But nowhere is this effect more damaging than in its continued fueling of violence by a tiny minority of radical insurgents, who in turn have stimulated the growth of right-wing groups organized as death squads. What began 40 years ago as protest movements against elite domination of political institutions, kept alive by ideological support from Moscow and Havana during the Cold War, have now evolved into organized armed units bent on controlling territory through intimidation of the civilian populace.

The Government of Colombia has attempted for the past three years to curtail the resources flowing into guerrilla and paramilitary groups by waging an all-out campaign against the drug trade, beginning with the eradication of industrial-scale cultivation of coca and extending to interdiction of the raw material and finished product at every stage of production and shipping. At the same time, it sought to reach a political settlement with the largest guerrilla group, the FARC, based on a common understanding of reforms consistent with the FARC's stated objectives. That effort came to an end last month with the FARC's kidnapping of two Senators, one of them a courageous woman whose candidacy for the Presidency was based on her long record as an opponent of corruption. A third Senator, also a woman, was murdered by the FARC.

Threat to U.S. Interests. Does the outcome of Colombia's struggle against internal terrorist groups matter to the United States? Strictly in the context of narcotics control objectives, it is

important to us. But we should also consider the broader impact on our humanitarian, economic and political objectives. We should ultimately examine how the fate of democratic stable government in Colombia could affect our own security. The end of the Cold War may have lulled us into a complacency about insurgent movements abroad that we now recognize as dangerous.

The people of Colombia in recent years have lived with a murder rate seven times that of the United States, a kidnapping occurring on the average once every three hours, and a total of well over a million people displaced from their homes by guerrilla or paramilitary violence. The methods used by the terrorist groups are brutal--summary execution of men in front of their families, attacks with home-made mortars made from cooking gas cylinders filled with nails, and massacres of whole villages by paramilitary groups as "punishment" for alleged collaboration with guerrillas.

Quite apart from these outrages to our humanitarian values, the FARC, ELN and AUC terrorist organizations have already done direct harm to U.S. interests. About 100 U.S. citizens have been kidnapped in the past decade in Colombia. Some are held for months, while others, like three activists working with Colombia's indigenous peoples in 1999, have been deliberately murdered by the FARC. Even kidnappings by non-political criminals often result in the hostages being held by guerrilla groups, who take custody of the victims and negotiate a high ransom. FARC and ELN guerrilla units continue to inflict great damage on pipelines and exploration activities of multinational oil companies, seriously affecting U.S. economic interests. And AUC or guerrilla extortion demands raise economic costs to U.S. investors, even if the response is only to increase security measures.

Terrorist groups in Colombia have so far not chosen deliberately to target the United States, in part because they have a healthy fear of retaliation that was heightened by our missile attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998 and certainly by the current campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Nevertheless, the enormous financial resources derived from the narcotics trade have enabled guerrillas to smuggle in high potency weapons in large quantities, such as a shipment in 2000 that was brokered by the sinister Peruvian official Vladimiro Montesinos. The FARC hosted three men from the outlawed Irish Republican Army (IRA) for five weeks last year, demonstrating how the power of money reaches across international borders.

U.S. Policy. We are thus faced with a witches' brew in Colombia that bodes ill for our counter-narcotics goals and eventually could result in an even more powerful sanctuary for terrorist groups whose political objectives are contrary to our own. The overwhelming majority of the Colombian people reject both the illicit drug trade and the violence begotten by terrorist groups. It has proved difficult to win the fight against narco-trafficking by concentrating only on the producers and smugglers. The armed groups on which they rely are equally inimical to our interests. The situation has not become so alarming that we must contemplate direct U.S. military action, as we have had to do in Afghanistan. But we should broaden the objectives of our assistance to law enforcement and military forces in Colombia. In order to break the link between drug traffickers and illicit armed groups, we should relax restrictions on our material and training assistance, while continuing to avoid any direct combat role in Colombia's internal struggle.

Colombia a Precedent? Narcotics entrepreneurs are no strangers to organized crime. And terrorist groups often resort to criminal activity to fund their operations. But the unique combination of organized armed groups pursuing political power, funded by proceeds of the illicit drug trade, has reached a stage in Colombia that does not exist in the other Andean countries, nor for that matter in Central and South Asia. If the terrorist link to narco-trafficking can be broken in Colombia, it will be less tempting to terrorist groups elsewhere in the world to go the same route as the FARC, ELN and AUC.