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DRUG CONTROL

Financial and Management Challenges Continue to Complicate Efforts to Reduce Illicit Drug Activities in Colombia

Statement of Jess T. Ford, Director
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Highlights of [GAO-03-820T](#), testimony before the Caucus on International Narcotics Control, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The United States has been providing assistance to Colombia since the early 1970s to help reduce illicit drugs. In 1999, the Colombian government introduced Plan Colombia—a program that, among other things, proposed reducing illicit drug activities by 50 percent over 6 years. In fiscal years 2000-03 alone, the United States provided more than \$2.5 billion in counternarcotics assistance. Despite this aid, Colombia remains the world’s leading producer and distributor of cocaine and a major source of the heroin used in the United States.

This testimony discusses the status of U.S. counternarcotics assistance to the Colombian Army and for a U.S.-supported Colombian police aerial eradication program. It also addresses challenges Colombia and the United States face in sustaining these programs.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-820T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4268 or FordJ@gao.gov.

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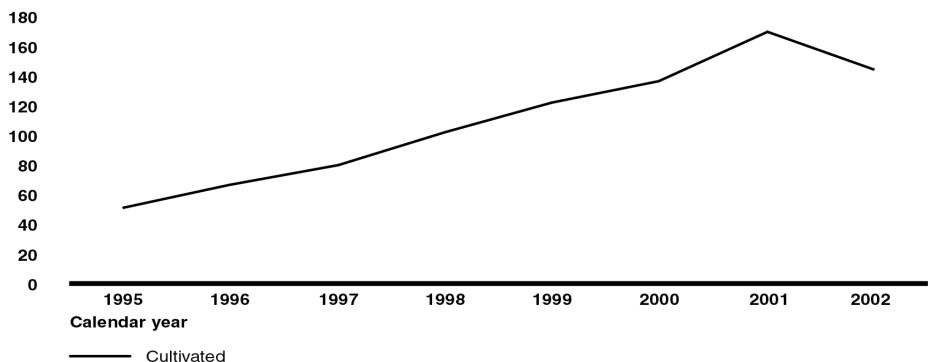
What GAO Found

In fiscal years 2000-03, the United States provided about \$640 million in assistance to train and equip a Colombian Army counternarcotics brigade and supply the army with 72 helicopters and related support. Most of this assistance has been delivered and is being used for counternarcotics operations.

In recent years, the Colombian National Police aerial eradication program has had mixed results. Since 1995, coca cultivation rose in every year until 2002 and opium poppy cultivation remained relatively steady until 2001. But, for 2002, the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy reported that net coca cultivation in Colombia decreased 15 percent and net opium poppy cultivation decreased 25 percent—the second yearly decline in a row. U.S. officials attributed this success primarily to the Colombian government’s willingness to eradicate coca and poppy plants without restriction.

Although the U.S.-supported counternarcotics program in Colombia has recently begun to achieve some of the results envisioned in Plan Colombia, Colombia and the United States must continue to deal with financial and management challenges. Neither the Colombian Army nor the Colombian National Police can sustain ongoing counternarcotics programs without continued U.S. funding and contractor support for the foreseeable future. According to U.S. embassy officials, these programs alone may cost up to \$230 million per year, and future costs for some other programs have not been determined. Because of overall poor economic conditions, the government of Colombia’s ability to contribute more is limited, but the continuing violence from Colombia’s long-standing insurgency limits the government’s ability to institute economic, social, and political improvements. Moreover, Colombia faces continuing challenges associated with the need to ensure it complies with human rights standards and other requirements in order for U.S. assistance to continue. As GAO noted in 2000, the total costs of the counternarcotics programs in Colombia were unknown. Nearly 3 years later, the Departments of State and Defense have still not developed estimates of future program costs, defined their future roles in Colombia, identified a proposed end state, or determined how they plan to achieve it.

Net Hectares of Coca under Cultivation in Colombia, 1995-2002
Hectares in thousands



Source: U.S. Department of State, Office of Aviation

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Caucus:

I am pleased to be here to discuss GAO's work on U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia. Today we will highlight the preliminary findings from our ongoing review of U.S. assistance to Colombia. Our draft report is with the responsible agencies for comment; we expect to issue a final report in mid-June. I will focus my comments on (1) the status of U.S. counternarcotics assistance to the Colombian Army in fiscal years 2000-03 and how this assistance has been used, (2) what the U.S.-supported Colombian National Police aerial eradication program has accomplished in recent years, and (3) what challenges Colombia and the United States face in sustaining these programs.

In 1999, the Colombian government introduced Plan Colombia—a \$7.5 billion program that, among other things, proposed reducing the cultivation, processing, and distribution of illegal narcotics by 50 percent over 6 years.¹ A key component of the Colombian-U.S. counternarcotics strategy was the creation of a Colombian Army 2,285-man counternarcotics brigade, for which the United States agreed to provide helicopters to help it move around southern Colombia to reduce cocaine production and trafficking. Closely allied with this objective was U.S. support for the Colombian National Police's aerial eradication program to significantly reduce, if not eliminate, coca and opium poppy cultivation.²

Summary

In fiscal years 2000-03, the United States provided about \$640 million to train and equip the Colombian Army counternarcotics brigade and supply the army with 72 helicopters and related training, maintenance, and operational support. Most of this assistance has been delivered and is being used for counternarcotics operations. However, some problems were encountered. For example,

- After a successful first year of operations, the brigade's results dropped off in 2002. U.S. and Colombian officials attribute this, in part, to coca

¹For more information on U.S. assistance for Plan Colombia, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Drug Control: U.S. Assistance to Colombia Will Take Years to Produce Results*, GAO-01-26 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 17, 2000).

²The leaves of the coca plant are the raw ingredient of cocaine, and opium poppy is used to produce heroin. The aerial eradication program involves spraying the coca and poppy plants from low-flying airplanes with an herbicide that attacks the root system and kills the plant.

growers and producers moving out of the brigade's range in southern Colombia. In late 2002, with U.S. assistance, the Colombian Army reorganized the brigade and gave it authority to operate anywhere in the country. This change, according to U.S. embassy and Colombian Army officials, will improve the brigade's ability to conduct operations against high-value, drug-trafficking targets, such as cocaine production laboratories and the leadership of insurgent groups involved in drug-trafficking activities. One of the brigade's retrained battalions has been operating in Narino department since early May 2003.

- Some initial impediments slowed the delivery and operational use of the helicopters. The start of entry-level helicopter pilot training was delayed 5 months while the United States determined who would provide and fund the training. The delivery of 25 UH-1H helicopters was delayed 5 months while the United States and Colombia decided what type of engine to use in the aircraft. U.S. funding for the brigade's operations was slowed for a total of about 5 months in 2002 because the Department of State did not meet congressional deadlines for reporting on Colombia's progress in addressing human rights violations.

U.S. assistance to support the helicopters provided as part of Plan Colombia was originally planned to end in 2006 with the Colombian Army taking over the responsibilities of operating and maintaining the aircraft. However, U.S. embassy and Colombian officials stated that a continued level of U.S. assistance will be needed beyond this date because the army is not expected to have the personnel trained or the resources necessary. Although U.S. embassy officials stated that they have not officially estimated what this assistance level will be, they tentatively projected that it would cost between \$100 million and \$150 million a year to sustain ongoing counternarcotics programs. In addition, other recently initiated U.S. programs will require additional support.

In recent years, the Colombian National Police aerial eradication program has had mixed results. Since 1995, net coca cultivation rose in every year until 2002 and net opium poppy cultivation remained between 6,100 to 7,500 hectares. But in recent months, the Office of National Drug Control Policy reported that

- net coca cultivation in Colombia decreased 15 percent in 2002, from 169,800 hectares in 2001 to 144,450 hectares, and
- net opium poppy cultivation in Colombia decreased 25 percent in 2002, from 6,500 hectares in 2001 to 4,900 hectares—the second yearly decline in a row.

U.S. embassy officials attributed this recent success primarily to the current Colombian government's willingness to spray coca and poppy plants without restriction in all areas of the country. However, since at least 1998, U.S. embassy officials have been concerned with the rising U.S. presence in Colombia and the associated costs of the aerial eradication program. At the time, the embassy began developing a 3-year plan to have the Colombian National Police assume control over the program; but, for various reasons, the police never agreed to the plan. Since then, contractor involvement and the associated costs have continued to rise, and the Colombian National Police are not yet able to assume more control of the aerial eradication program. In fiscal year 1998, U.S. embassy officials reported that the costs for the U.S. contractor, fuel, herbicide, and related support totaled \$48.5 million. For fiscal year 2003, U.S. embassy officials estimated that the comparable costs totaled \$86.3 million. Much of this increase occurred between fiscal years 2002 and 2003 to support the additional spray aircraft, multiple operating locations, and the anticipated continuation of spray operations throughout Colombia. According to U.S. embassy officials, these costs are expected to remain relatively constant for the next several years.

Although the U.S.-supported counternarcotics program has recently shown some of the results envisioned when Plan Colombia was first introduced, Colombia and the United States continue to face financial and management challenges in sustaining programs in Colombia.

- Colombia's financial resources are limited. Neither the Colombian Army nor the Colombian National Police can sustain ongoing counternarcotics programs without continued U.S. funding and contractor support for the foreseeable future. According to U.S. embassy officials, ongoing programs alone may cost up to \$230 million per year, and future costs for some other programs have not been determined.
- Colombia also continues to face challenges associated with its political and economic instability fostered by its long-standing insurgency and, for U.S. assistance to continue, the need to ensure that (1) the military and police comply with human rights standards, (2) the aerial eradication program meets certain environmental conditions, and (3) alternative development is provided in areas subject to aerial eradication.

Colombia is a longtime ally and significant trading partner of the United States and, therefore, its economic and political stability is important to the United States as well as the Andean region. Colombia's long-standing insurgency and the insurgents' links to the illicit drug trade complicate its

efforts to tap its natural resources and make systemic economic reforms. Solving these problems is important to Colombia's future stability. On the other hand, recent world events—from the global war on terrorism to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—have diverted scarce U.S. resources and made it paramount that the United States fully consider the resources committed to its overseas assistance programs. As we noted in 2000, the total costs of the counternarcotics programs in Colombia were unknown. Nearly 3 years later, the Departments of State and Defense have still not developed estimates of future program costs, defined their future roles in Colombia, identified a proposed end state, or determined how they plan to achieve it.

Background

The United States has provided assistance to help reduce illegal drug production and trafficking activities in Colombia since the 1970s. Yet, Colombia is still the world's leading cocaine producer and distributor and a major source of the heroin used in the United States. According to State, Colombia provides 90 percent of the cocaine and about 40 percent of the heroin entering the United States. The Drug Enforcement Administration reports that several billion dollars flow into Colombia each year from the cocaine trade alone, and this vast amount of drug money has helped the country's two largest insurgency groups—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army—gain unprecedented economic, political, and social power and influence. The insurgents exercise some degree of control over 40 percent of Colombia's territory east and south of the Andes where much of the coca is grown.

In an effort to address the influx of cocaine and heroin from Colombia, the United States has funded a counternarcotics strategy in Colombia that includes programs for interdiction, eradication, and alternative development, which must be carefully coordinated to achieve mutually reinforcing results. Besides assistance for the Colombian Army counternarcotics brigade and the Colombian National Police aerial eradication program, the United States has supported Colombian efforts to interdict illicit-drug trafficking along rivers and in the air as well as alternative development, judicial sector reform, and internally displaced persons programs. The Departments of Defense and State have provided most of the funding and State, through its Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and Narcotics Affairs Section in the U.S. Embassy Bogotá, oversees the program. In fiscal years 2000 through 2003, the United States provided more than \$2.5 billion to Colombia for counternarcotics assistance. (See table 1.) For fiscal year 2004, the administration has proposed an additional \$700 million in aid.

Table 1: U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance to Colombia, Fiscal Years 2000-03

Dollars in millions

Agency	Fiscal years				Total
	2000 ^a	2001	2002	2003 ^b (estimated)	
State	\$774.9	\$48.0	275.4	\$452.0	\$1,550.3
DOD	128.5	190.2	119.1	149.9	\$587.7
USAID ^c	123.5	0	104.5	151.0	\$379.0
Total	\$1,026.9	\$238.2	\$499.0	\$752.9	\$2,517.0

Source: Departments of Defense and State and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

^aIncludes funds appropriated for Plan Colombia through the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act, Fiscal Year 2000 (Division B of P.L. 106-246).

^bIncludes \$93 million in Foreign Military Financing funds appropriated in the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Appropriations Act, 2003 (Division E, Title III of P.L. 108-7); \$34 million appropriated to State and \$34 million appropriated to Defense in the Supplemental Appropriations Act to Support Department of Defense Operations in Iraq for Fiscal Year 2003 (P.L. 108-11); and \$37.1 million for Foreign Military Financing allotted from fiscal year 2003 supplemental appropriations.

^cIn fiscal years 2000-03, State transferred \$375 million to the U.S. Agency for International Development for alternative development, judicial sector reform, and internally displaced persons programs.

Following increased violence in Colombia during early 2002, the Congress provided “expanded authority” for the use of U.S. assistance to Colombia, which enabled the Colombian government to use the U.S.-trained and -equipped counternarcotics brigade, U.S.-provided helicopters, and other U.S. counternarcotics assistance to fight groups designated as terrorist organizations as well as to fight drug trafficking. Similar authority was provided for fiscal year 2003 and is being sought for fiscal year 2004.

Assistance to the Colombian Army Has Been Delivered, but Problems Were Encountered

U.S. assistance to the Colombian Army during fiscal years 2000-03—\$640 million for the counternarcotics brigade, 72 helicopters, and related support—has, for the most part, been delivered and is being used for counternarcotics operations. However, both the United States and the Colombian Army experienced some unanticipated problems that delayed the operational use of the helicopters. In addition, U.S. support will be needed for the foreseeable future to sustain operations.

Status of the Brigade

The United States initially agreed to train and equip a Colombian Army counternarcotics brigade of three battalions and a total of about 2,285 professional and conscripted soldiers. The United States provided the

counternarcotics brigade with about \$45 million in training and equipment—from weapons and ammunition to rations, uniforms, and canteens. The brigade’s primary mission was to plan and conduct interdiction operations against drug-trafficking activities, including destroying illicit drug-producing facilities, and, when called upon, to provide security in insurgent-controlled areas where aerial eradication operations were planned. According to U.S. and Colombian officials, the brigade was highly effective in 2001—for example, it destroyed 25 cocaine hydrochloride laboratories³—but was less successful in 2002, when it destroyed only 4 such labs. U.S. embassy officials stated that the brigade became less effective because the insurgents moved their drug-producing activities, such as the laboratories, beyond the brigade’s reach. In addition, according to these officials, the brigade became more involved in protecting infrastructure, such as bridges and power stations, and performing base security. Moreover, the aerial eradication program did not call on the brigade to provide ground security on very many occasions, essentially planning spray missions in the less threatening areas.

In August 2002, U.S. embassy and Colombian military officials agreed to restructure the brigade to make it a rapid reaction force capable of making quick, tactical strikes on a few days’ notice. As part of this restructuring, the Colombian Army designated the brigade a national asset capable of operating anywhere in Colombia rather than just in its prior area of responsibility in southern Colombia. The newly restructured brigade consists of three combat battalions and a support battalion with a total of about 1,900 soldiers, all of whom are professional. Two of the combat battalions have been retrained. The third combat battalion should be retrained by mid-June 2003. This change, according to U.S. embassy and Colombian Army officials, will improve the brigade’s ability to conduct operations against high-value, drug-trafficking targets, such as laboratories containing cocaine and the leadership of insurgent groups involved in drug-trafficking activities. One of the retrained battalions has been operating in Narino department since early May 2003.

Status of the Helicopters

A key component of U.S. assistance for Plan Colombia was enhancing the brigade’s air mobility. To do this, the United States provided the

³The laboratories are used in the final stages of processing coca into cocaine and are considered high-value targets.

Colombian Army with 33 UH-1N helicopters, 14 UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, and 25 UH-1H helicopters.⁴

- The 33 UH-1N helicopters were supposed to serve as interim aircraft until the UH-60 and UH-1H helicopters funded under Plan Colombia were delivered. The UH-1Ns were delivered in stages between November 1999 and March 2001. Since flying their first mission in December 2000, the helicopters have logged 19,500 hours in combat and have supported more than 430 counternarcotics brigade operations. Colombian Army personnel are qualified as pilots and mechanics, but many of the experienced pilots and mechanics who operate and maintain the aircraft are provided through a U.S. contractor.
- The UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters were delivered between July and December 2001 but did not begin support operations for the brigade until November 2002 because of a shortage of fully qualified Colombian Army pilots. Forty-two Colombian Army personnel have completed the minimum UH-60 pilot training, of which 13 have qualified as pilot-in-command. U.S.-funded contract pilots fill in as pilots-in-command. In addition, a U.S.-funded contractor continues to maintain the helicopters and provide maintenance training.
- State procured 25 UH-1H helicopters under Plan Colombia and planned to deliver them to the Colombian Army between November 2001 and June 2002. However, they were delivered between March and November 2002 instead because the Colombian military was considering whether to use a more powerful engine in the helicopters than the one usually installed. Ultimately it decided to use the more common engine. According to NAS officials, although some of the UH-1H helicopters are being used for missions, all the helicopters will not be operational until June 2003. As of January 2003, 25 Colombian Army pilots had completed their initial training and 21 of these pilots are completing the training needed to qualify for operational missions. However, contractor pilots continue to supplement Colombian Army pilots and a U.S.-funded contractor continues to provide maintenance support.

Problems with Pilot and Mechanic Training

Although all the U.S.-provided helicopters are in Colombia, a number of unanticipated problems in training Colombian Army pilots and mechanics

⁴Of the 33 UH-1Ns, 28 remain available for use by the brigade; 1 crashed on a mission and 4 were transferred to support the aerial eradication program.

to operate and maintain the helicopters were encountered. Some of these problems continue to limit the Colombian Army's ability to operate and maintain the aircraft. Primarily, the Colombian Army will have to continue to rely on contractor support because it will not have enough trained pilots-in-command and senior mechanics for the foreseeable future.

- When the United States agreed to provide the UH-60 and UH-1H helicopters for the Colombian Army in July 2000, the assistance for Plan Colombia did not include any funds to train the Colombian pilots and mechanics needed to operate and maintain the helicopters. About 6 months after passage of U.S. assistance for Plan Colombia, Defense agreed to provide the training and reported that it would transfer up to \$20 million from other counternarcotics projects in Colombia to pay for it.
- A training plan was approved in mid-2001. Although the plan provided training for Colombian Army personnel to meet the minimum qualifications for a pilot and mechanic, it did not include the additional training necessary to fly missions in a unit or to become a senior mechanic. Basic training for 117 helicopter pilots—known as initial entry rotary wing training—began in November 2001 and is projected to be completed by December 2004. This training is intended to provide a pool or pipeline of pilots for more advanced training to fly specific helicopters. In addition, according to U.S. embassy officials, a new pilot takes an average of 2 to 3 years to progress to pilot-in-command.
- According to U.S. embassy and contractor officials, 105 out of 159 Colombian Army personnel have completed the basic UH-60 and UH-1H maintenance training and are taking more advanced training to qualify as senior mechanics. These officials told us that the remaining 54 personnel will receive the contractor-provided basic training in the near future, but they did not know when it would begin. Moreover, these officials also told us that it typically takes 3 to 5 years for mechanics to gain the experience necessary to become fully qualified on specific helicopter systems, in particular the UH-60 Black Hawks.
- The Colombian Army Aviation Battalion is responsible for providing helicopters and other aircraft and personnel for all Colombian Army missions with an aviation component, including counternarcotics and counterinsurgency operations throughout Colombia. Information provided by the Colombian Aviation Battalion shows that it is staffed at only 80 percent of its required levels and that, over the past several years, it has received between 60 percent to 70 percent of its requested budget for logistics and maintenance. The Colombian military's decision to continue using the UH-1H helicopters in addition to the UH-60 and UH-1H helicopters

will also make it more difficult for the Aviation Battalion to provide the numbers of personnel needed to operate and maintain the helicopters. State originally intended that the UH-1N helicopters would not be used after the UH-60 and UH-1H helicopters were available to support operations.

- According to bilateral agreements between Colombia and the United States, the Colombian Army must ensure that pilots and mechanics who receive U.S. training be assigned to positions using their training for a minimum of 2 years. This has not always been the case. For example, although 19 Colombian Army personnel were qualified to serve as pilots-in-command on UH-1N helicopters, only 1 pilot was assigned to serve in this position. The remaining pilots-in-command were provided by a U.S. contractor.
- Of the funds appropriated for fiscal year 2002, \$140 million was used to support Colombian Army counternarcotics efforts. Most of this amount was used for U.S.- provided helicopter operations and maintenance, logistical, and training support. However, not all the funding could be released until the Secretary of State certified, in two separate reports to appropriate congressional committees,⁵ that the Colombian military was making progress meeting certain human rights conditions. Because State was late in providing these reports, the U.S. embassy could not use this funding for operations and training on two occasions for a total of about 5 months during 2002.⁶ These delays resulted in fewer counternarcotics operations and limited the training and experience Colombian Army pilots could obtain to qualify as pilots-in-command.

⁵Section 567 of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2002 (P.L. 107-115). Specifically, the act provided that not more than 60 percent of the funds could be obligated until after the Secretary of State made a determination and certification that the Colombian military was (1) suspending members of the Colombian Armed Forces who have been creditably alleged to have committed gross violations of human rights, (2) cooperating with civilian prosecutors and investigators, and (3) severing links between the Armed Forces and paramilitary groups. In addition, the remaining 40 percent of the funds could be obligated only after June 1, 2002, and after the Secretary of State made a second determination and certification with respect to the same conditions.

⁶According to U.S. embassy political section personnel, they encountered difficulties developing the information required to make the human rights determination and certification. The first report was issued on May 1, 2002—almost 2 months later than State's target date. The second report was issued on September 9, 2002—almost 3 months later than State's target date.

Continued U.S. Support Needed to Sustain Operations

U.S. assistance to support the helicopters provided as part of Plan Colombia was originally planned to end in 2006 with the Colombian Army taking over these responsibilities. However, U.S. embassy and Colombian Army officials stated that a continued level of U.S. contractor presence will be needed beyond this date because the Aviation Battalion is not expected to have the personnel trained or the resources necessary. Although the embassy officials stated that they have not officially estimated what this assistance level will be, they tentatively projected that it would cost between \$100 million and \$150 million annually to sustain the U.S.-supported counternarcotics programs. Moreover, other recently initiated U.S. programs will likely require U.S. assistance and contractor support, but the long-term costs of sustaining such programs are not known.

Colombia's Aerial Eradication Program Has Had Mixed Results

Since the early 1990s, State's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (through the U.S. Embassy's Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) and the Office of Aviation) has supported the Colombian National Police's efforts to significantly reduce, if not eliminate, the cultivation of coca and opium poppy. However, for the most part, the net hectares of coca under cultivation in Colombia continued to rise until 2002, and the net hectares of opium poppy under cultivation remained relatively steady until 2001-02.⁷ In addition, the U.S. embassy has made little progress in having the Colombian National Police assume more responsibility for the aerial eradication program, which requires costly U.S. contractor assistance to carry out.

Recent Progress in Reducing Net Cultivation of Coca and Poppy

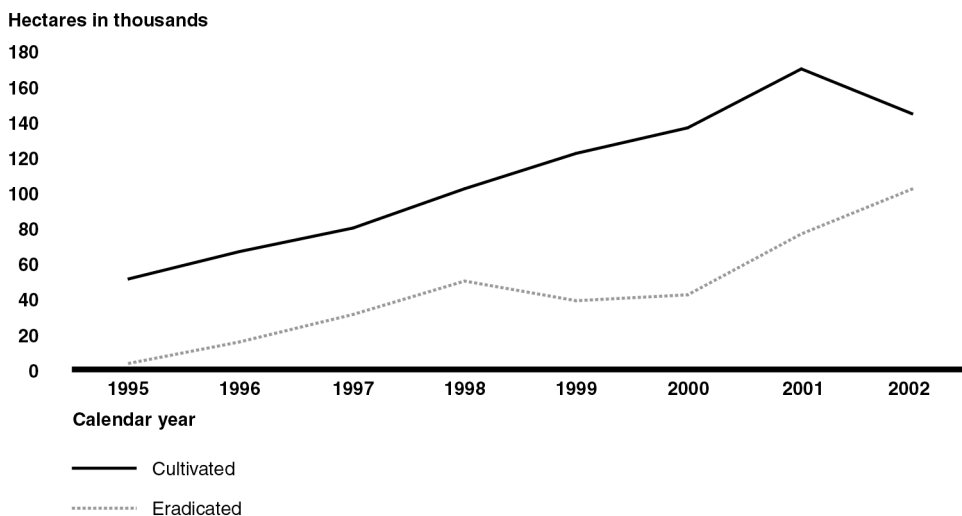
As shown in figure 1, the number of hectares under coca cultivation rose more than threefold from 1995 to 2001—from 50,900 hectares to 169,800 hectares—despite substantially increased eradication efforts.⁸ But in 2002, the Office of Aviation estimated that the program eradicated 102,225

⁷The estimates of net hectares of coca and opium poppy under cultivation are prepared annually by the U.S. Director of Central Intelligence, Crime and Narcotics Center. See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Drug Control: Coca Cultivation and Eradication Estimates in Colombia*, GAO-03-319R (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 8, 2003).

⁸The number of hectares eradicated is provided by the Office of Aviation and is based on the number of net hectares sprayed multiplied by an estimated "kill rate." Although many thousands of hectares of coca and poppy are killed, coca and poppy farmers often replant in the same or other areas, which helps explain why the number of hectares under cultivation often does not decline.

hectares of coca—a record high. In March 2003, the Office of National Drug Control Policy reported for the first time since before 1995 a net reduction in coca cultivation in Colombia—from 169,800 hectares to 144,450 hectares—a 15 percent decline.

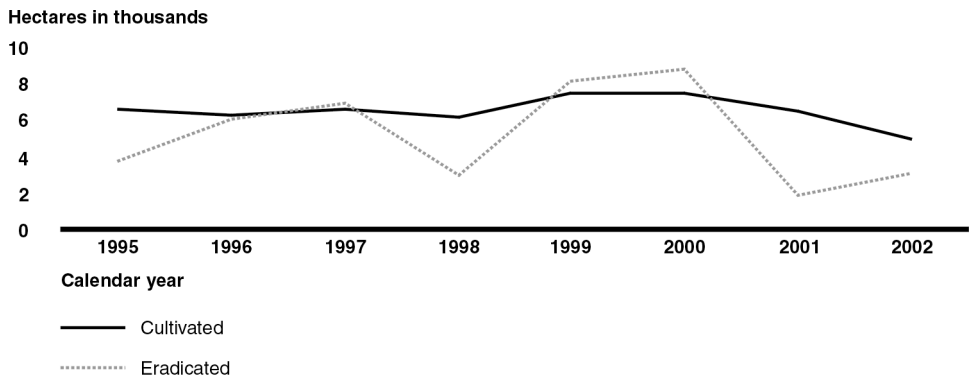
Figure 1: Net Hectares of Coca under Cultivation and Hectares Eradicated in Colombia, 1995-2002



Source: U.S. Department of State, Office of Aviation

As shown in figure 2, the net hectares of opium poppy under cultivation varied between 6,100 and 6,600 for the period 1995-98 but rose to 7,500 hectares in 1999 and 2000. In 2001, the net hectares of poppy estimated under cultivation declined to 6,500 and, in 2002, further declined to 4,900—nearly a 35 percent reduction in net cultivation over the past 2 years.

Figure 2: Net Hectares of Poppy under Cultivation and Hectares Eradicated in Colombia, 1995-2002



Source: U.S. Department of State, Office of Aviation

U.S. embassy officials attributed the recent unprecedented reductions in both coca and poppy cultivation primarily to the current Colombian government's willingness to allow the aerial eradication program to operate in all areas of the country. They also noted that

- the number of spray aircraft had increased from 10 in July 2001 to 17 in January 2003;
- recently acquired spray aircraft can carry up to twice the herbicide as the older aircraft; and
- as of January 2003, aircraft were flying spray missions from three forward operating locations—a first for the program.

The ability to keep an increased number of spray aircraft operating out of three bases was made possible, at least in part, because the U.S. embassy hired a contractor to work with the Colombian National Police to, among other things, help maintain their aircraft. As a result, the availability of police aircraft for the spray program increased. Moreover, in August 2002, the Colombian government allowed the police to return to a higher strength herbicide mixture that, according to embassy officials, improved the spray's effectiveness.⁹ These officials project that the aerial eradication program can reduce the amount of coca and poppy cultivation to 30,000

⁹In March 2002, the previous Colombian government reduced the strength of the spray mixture because of environmental concerns.

hectares and 5,000 hectares, respectively, by 2005 or 2006, assuming the police continue the current pace and can spray in all areas of Colombia.

Colombian National Police Have Not Assumed Control over Aerial Eradication Operations

As we reported in 2000,¹⁰ beginning in 1998, U.S. embassy officials became concerned with the rising U.S. presence in Colombia and the associated costs of the aerial eradication program. At the time, the embassy began developing a 3-year plan to have the Colombian National Police assume increased operational control over the program. But for various reasons, the police did not agree to the plan. Since then, contractor involvement and the associated costs have continued to rise and the Colombian National Police are not yet able to assume more control of the aerial eradication program.

As shown in table 2, in fiscal year 1998, the Office of Aviation reported that the direct cost for a U.S. contractor providing aircraft maintenance and logistical support and many of the pilots was \$37.8 million. In addition, NAS provided \$10.7 million for fuel, herbicide, and related support, for a total of \$48.5 million. For fiscal year 2003, the comparable estimates for contractor and NAS-provided support were \$41.5 million and \$44.8 million, respectively, for a total of \$86.3 million. Most of this increase occurred between fiscal years 2002 and 2003 and is for the most part to support the additional spray aircraft, multiple operating locations, and the anticipated continuation of spray operations throughout Colombia. According to NAS and Office of Aviation officials, these costs are expected to remain relatively constant for the next several years.

¹⁰GAO-01-26.

Table 2: U.S. Support for the Aerial Eradication Program, Fiscal Years 1998-2004

Dollars in millions								
Cognizant office	Fiscal years							Total
	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003 (estimated)	2004 (proposed)	
Office of Aviation	\$37.8	\$36.8	\$52.5 ^a	\$38.0	\$38.2	\$41.5	\$45.0	\$289.8
Narcotics Affairs Section	10.7	14.1	20.9	11.1	17.6	44.8 ^b	44.2	\$163.4
Total	\$48.5	\$50.9	\$73.4	\$49.1	\$55.8	\$86.3	\$89.2	\$453.2

Source: U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and the Office of Aviation.

^aIncludes \$20 million for additional spray aircraft.

^bIn addition, NAS paid \$38.8 million for a contractor to support the Colombian National Police Aviation Service. NAS could not readily identify the proportion of this contract that is related to aerial eradication. NAS officials stated that they expect this expenditure to continue for the next 2 years and possibly up to 4 years.

The Colombian National Police do not provide funding per se for the aerial eradication program and, therefore, the value of its contributions is more difficult to quantify. In recent years, the police have provided helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft for spray mission support and the use of many of its facilities throughout Colombia. In addition, the police have about 3,600 personnel assigned to counternarcotics missions and estimate that 84 are directly supporting the aerial eradication program.

U.S. Efforts to Improve Police Capacity for Aerial Eradication

To help the Colombian National Police increase its capacity to assume more responsibility for the aerial eradication program, NAS has initiated several efforts.

In February and March 2002, the Office of Aviation conducted an Aviation Resource Management Survey of the Colombian National Police Aviation Service. According to Office of Aviation officials, these surveys are intended to provide a stringent on-site assessment of flight operations from management and safety to logistics and maintenance. The survey team made a number of critical observations. For example,

- The Aviation Service’s organizational structure, lines of authority, and levels of responsibility were not clear. Relying on an overly centralized command structure resulted in unnecessary delays and the cancellation of some planned aerial eradication missions because the commanding general could not be reached.

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- The Aviation Service did not have a formal flying hour program to help forecast its budgetary requirements and enhance maintenance scheduling.
 - About 35 percent of the maintenance staff were inexperienced. According to the survey team, this could result in improper maintenance procedures being performed, which could adversely affect flight safety and endanger lives.
 - Management of items needing repair and control of spare parts were deficient. The survey team found 230 items awaiting repair—some from August 1998—and more than \$4 million in UH-1H helicopter blades and parts stored outside and unprotected.

As a result of the survey, in July 2002, a NAS contractor (a \$38.8 million, 1-year contract with options for 4 additional years) began providing on-the-job maintenance and logistical training to the Aviation Service and helping the police address many of the issues raised by the Aviation Resource Management Survey team. Embassy officials noted that a more formal flying hour program has improved the availability rates of many of the Aviation Service's aircraft. For example, the availability rate of the Aviation Service's UH-1H helicopters—often used to support aerial eradication missions—increased from 67 percent in January 2002 to 87 percent in December 2002. According to these officials, improved availability rates made it easier to schedule and conduct spray missions.

In addition, NAS has begun a program for training pilots to fly T-65 spray planes and plans to start training for search and rescue personnel who accompany the planes. U.S. officials stated that the contractor presence should decline and the police should be able to take over more of the eradication program by 2006, when NAS estimates that coca and poppy cultivation will be reduced to “maintenance levels”—30,000 hectares and 5,000 hectares, respectively.

Financial and Management Challenges Continue to Complicate Efforts to Reduce Illicit Drug Activities

The U.S.-supported counternarcotics program in Colombia has recently begun to achieve some of the results envisioned in 1999-2000. However, Colombia and the United States must continue to deal with financial and management challenges.

Under the original concept of Plan Colombia, the Colombian government had pledged \$4 billion and called on the international community to provide \$3.5 billion. Until recently, Colombia had not provided any significant new funding for Plan Colombia and, according to U.S. embassy

and Colombian government officials, anticipated international assistance for Plan Colombia—apart from that provided by the United States—did not materialize as envisioned. But because of overall poor economic conditions, the government of Colombia’s ability to contribute more is limited.

- The Colombian government has stated that ending the civil conflict is central to solving Colombia’s problems—from improving economic conditions to stemming illicit drug activities. A peaceful resolution to the long-standing insurgency would help stabilize the nation, speed economic recovery, help ensure the protection of human rights, and restore the authority and control of the Colombian government in the coca-growing regions. The continuing violence limits the government’s ability to institute economic, social, and political improvements.
- For U.S. assistance to continue, Colombia faces continuing challenges associated with the need to ensure that the army and police comply with human rights standards, that the aerial eradication program meets certain environmental conditions, and that alternative development is provided in areas subject to aerial eradication.

Overall, neither the Colombian Army nor the Colombian National Police can sustain ongoing counternarcotics programs without continued U.S. funding and contractor support for the foreseeable future. According to U.S. embassy officials, these programs alone may cost up to \$230 million per year, and future costs for some recently initiated programs have not been determined. In addition, we note that this estimate does not include future funding needed for other U.S. programs in Colombia, including other aerial and ground interdiction efforts; the police Aviation Service’s U.S.-funded contractor; and alternative development, judicial sector reform, and internally displaced persons programs.

In recent years, world events—from the global war on terrorism to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—have diverted scarce U.S. resources and made it paramount that the United States fully consider the resources committed to its overseas assistance programs. As we noted in 2000, the total costs of the counternarcotics programs in Colombia were unknown. Nearly 3 years later, the Departments of State and Defense have still not developed estimates of future program costs, defined their future roles in Colombia, identified a proposed end state, or determined how they plan to achieve it.

Scope and Methodology

In conducting our work, we reviewed pertinent planning, implementation, and related documentation and met with cognizant U.S. officials at the Departments of State and Defense, Washington, D.C.; the U.S. Southern Command headquarters, Miami, Florida; and the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia. In Colombia, we interviewed Colombian military, police, and government officials and visited the Colombian Army bases at Larandia, Tolemaida, and Tres Esquinas and other sites in the primary coca-growing regions of Colombia. In addition, we observed a Colombian Army counternarcotics brigade airlift operation and several aerial eradication missions.

We also discussed this testimony with cognizant officials from State's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and its Office of Aviation and State's Bureau for Western Hemisphere Affairs. They generally concurred with our treatment of the issues presented.

We conducted our work between July 2002 and May 2003 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Contacts and Acknowledgments

For future contacts regarding this testimony, please call Jess Ford at (202) 512-4268 or Albert H. Huntington, III, at (202) 512-4140. Individuals making key contributions to this testimony included Jocelyn Cortese, Allen Fleener, Ronald Hughes, Jose Pena, George Taylor, Kaya Taylor, and Janey Cohen. Rick Barrett and Ernie Jackson provided technical assistance.

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