
Plan Colombia's Genocidal Legacy

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The government, for its part, considers mining “one of five ‘engines’ of the Colombian economy,” the U.S. Office on Colombia [notes](#), adding that, in “the last twelve years, over 1.5 million hectares of Colombian land have been sold off to large-scale mining corporations for exploration and exploitation of Colombia’s extensive mineral deposits [.]”

These land sales mark one success of former President Álvaro Uribe’s (2002-2010) “Democratic Security and Defense Policy,” rolled out in 2003, and geared towards “defending Colombia’s sovereignty, the integrity of the territory and the constitutional order,” the government claimed. The state’s expanded presence, consolidation of territorial control, and subsequent auctioning of acquired regions seem to be the real legacies of the Plan Colombia era, too often discussed in “counterdrug” terms, and thus dismissed as a failure. A 2008 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) document, for example, pointed out that “coca cultivation and cocaine production levels [had] increased by about 15 and 4 percent, respectively” since the Plan’s 1999 launch, while Amnesty International mentions that “US policy has failed to reduce availability or use of cocaine in the US,” one indication that “Plan Colombia is a failure in every respect [.]”

Perhaps, but does Washington even want to roll back drug smuggling? “The vast profits made from drug production and trafficking are overwhelmingly reaped in rich ‘consuming’ countries,” Ed Vulliamy wrote in the *Guardian* two years ago, summarizing two Colombian academics’ conclusions. Alejandro Gaviria and Daniel Mejía’s research determined that “a staggering 97.4% of profits are reaped by criminal syndicates, and laundered by banks,” in Europe and the U.S. How many bankers has the “drug war” put in jail? Or would Washington undercut an ally’s source of funds? The Colombian paramilitaries, for example, function as the army’s unofficial “Sixth Division,” according to Human Rights Watch. And Carlos Castaño, the paramilitaries’ former leader, admitted in March 2000 that some 70% of their funding came from drug trafficking, an assessment in line with U.S. intelligence estimates, which “have consistently reported over a number of years that the paramilitaries are far more heavily involved than the FARC [guerrillas] in drug cultivation, refinement and transshipment to the US,” International Security expert Doug Stokes writes.

But while “counterdrug” efforts have been predictable failures, U.S.-supported Colombia policy has succeeded on other fronts. The Colombian Ministry of National Defense, for instance, repeatedly stressed in its progress reports a decade ago that the state was aiming to increase its territorial control, and it appears to have achieved this goal. In 1998, “the FARC controlled or operated freely in 40-60 percent of Colombian territory,” María Clemencia Ramírez Lemus, Kimberly Stanton and John Walsh write in their chapter in Drugs and Democracy in Latin America. The GAO later found that, by 2003, the Colombian government had gained control of 70 percent of the nation’s territory, and “was in full or partial control of about 90 percent of the country in 2007,” its extended reach coinciding with the killing of tens of thousands, the displacement of millions—and heightened investor confidence. “Capital is flowing back into Colombia,” a 2012 International Business Publications book on Colombia’s mining sector noted, “compared to a high rate of capital flight at the start of Plan Colombia.”

The government enhanced its territorial control as President Uribe reoriented Colombia’s economy, prioritizing “austerity, privatization, deregulation and export-led growth through trade liberalization,” York University Lecturer Jasmin Hristov wrote in a 2005 *Journal of Peasant Studies* article. The Colombian state’s targets ranged far beyond the FARC, in other words, as it aimed to convert acquired land from a means of subsistence serving, say, indigenous communities into a profit source for foreign companies. The U.S. Office on Colombia observes that “the government attacks indigenous lands under the guise of persecuting insurgent groups,” and that “statistics reveal a concerted effort to depopulate areas of mineral wealth”—particularly indigenous areas. “Half of the land of each of 27 indigenous reservations has been titled for mining while 14 reservations have been completely granted for mineral exploration.”

The immediate consequences for indigenous Colombians are what one would expect, given how the policies just reviewed reflect an unmitigated contempt for their way of life. For example, “the Cerrejón mine owned by Exxon-Mobil destroyed the entire village of Tabaco in 2001, and displaced all of its residents with the help of armed security forces,” Victoria McKenzie wrote for *Colombia Reports*. In 2009, mining company AngloGold Ashanti arrived in the Cauca department, where “the government tried to evict the Afro-Colombian community in La Toma, in the Suárez municipality by declaring them ‘squatters in bad faith’ and giving them a date for eviction despite the fact that the inhabitant’s ancestors had lived on and mined the land since 1636,” the U.S. Office on Colombia explains. Paramilitaries then “threatened the Afro-Colombians for their opposition to AngloGold Ashanti’s operations and declared these individuals ‘military objectives’ for ‘opposing national development.’” Eight people were subsequently killed in La Toma in a 2010 massacre—and again, this is merely one example of some of the immediate consequences of Colombian state policy. The longer-term predictions, as described at the start of this piece, foresee indigenous extermination.

The U.S. government, itself a specialist in cultural annihilation, has aided its Colombian ally with extreme generosity. Plan Colombia “has been the biggest US military aid program outside the Middle East,” *Al Jazeera*’s Chris Arsenault writes, noting its \$9.3 billion price tag and the fact that Colombia remains “the largest recipient of US military aid in Latin America.” This funding’s beneficiaries commit sickening crimes. Amnesty International reviewed them in its 2013 Colombia report: women and girls raped; tens of thousands of people forced from their homes; tens of thousands more disappeared; scores of human rights defenders and trade union members slaughtered. These are the victims of U.S. foreign policy under both Bush and Obama—and regarding the latter, it seems the ruin of Colombian indigenous culture is one kind of change we can believe in.

Nick Alexandrov lives in Washington, D.C.
