



## AFTER PLAN COLOMBIA

### Evaluating “Integrated Action,” the next phase of U.S. assistance

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

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

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

The Center for International Policy has closely monitored U.S. assistance programs in Colombia since the late 1990s, and we have taken a critical position toward a series of aid packages that, until 2008, favored Colombia’s security forces

by an 80-to-20-percent margin. We are not only concerned about the proper implementation of the program in Colombia, but also about how the experience in Colombia might be applied to contexts like the war in Afghanistan and the ongoing effort to rethink U.S. foreign assistance in general.

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

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

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **DEMILITARIZE:** Increase civilian agencies and institutions' participation in the planning and execution of the Integrated Action strategy. Do not create permanent non-security or development roles for the armed forces. Get the military out of non-security roles as soon as it is safe to do so. If it is not safe to do so, do not raise expectations by overselling security gains.
- **COORDINATE:** Give civilian agencies a much greater decision-making and management role in the Center for Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI) in order to encourage their "buy-in." Give more explicit high-level political backing, including firmer legal status, to this more civilian CCAI, to increase civilian agencies' participation. Ensure that the Presidency's Social Action agency does more to encourage civilian government agencies to support the CCAI by establishing their own presence in the priority zones as soon as minimal security conditions permit.
- **CONSULT:** Ensure that development efforts are chosen by the communities themselves through a transparent process, so that the frequent criticism that programs were "designed at a desk in Bogotá" cannot stick.
- **ENGAGE CAREFULLY WITH LOCAL ELITES:** Do not seek out, but do prepare for, disagreements with elements of local political and economic elites, some of whom may have ties with illegal groups or plainly favor greater land concentration.
- **ADDRESS THE LAND ISSUE:** Devote significant resources to reassure populations that they will not be victims of a "land grab" as a result of CCAI. Greatly speed up land titling, cadastral surveys, investigations into disputed landholdings, and victims' claims. Put a halt to the concentration of landholdings in areas where mass displacements have occurred. Improve smallholders' access to credit and technical assistance.
- **HALT "JUDICIALIZATION":** Minimize harm to community relations by halting overzealous mass arrests of civilians suspected of guerrilla collaboration.
- **COORDINATE ERADICATION WITH AID:** Eradicate coca only when immediate delivery of food-security and development assistance can be assured. Place a priority on programs in which eradication is voluntary. Relocate populations from areas where development is undesirable through a humane process with land titles and help with productive projects.
- **ZERO IMPUNITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE:** Quickly and transparently punish any examples of human rights abuse, so that impunity for abusers does not undermine trust in the state and intimidate citizens who should be participating in community planning processes. Aggressively confront any signs of paramilitary presence or other corruption or collaboration with criminal groups.
- **GUARANTEE SUSTAINABILITY:** Focus more on the sustainability of the effort. Lengthen the timeframe beyond 2010. Integrated Action will not be credible to key constituencies — including civilian government agencies called on to take part in it — if it is in danger of ending too quickly. Use added resources to move beyond short-term demonstration projects and commit to larger-scale efforts, especially infrastructure and basic services.

# THE INTEGRATED ACTION MODEL

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## A difficult country to govern

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

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

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

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

Less than 5 percent of the country lives in about

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

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

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

## Plan Colombia and other frustrations

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

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

The FARC's 1993 decision to raise funds from coca-leaf production, and some fronts' later involvement in cocaine production and transshipment, caused the leftist group to grow vertiginously in the 1990s, from about 4,000 to 18,000



members by the end of the decade. By the second half of the 1990s, the FARC were mounting large-scale assaults on military bases and rural population centers, kidnapping hundreds per year for ransom, and making the nation's road network too dangerous for travel. The FARC and smaller ELN came to be responsible for about a quarter of civilian killings, the vast majority of kidnappings and extortion, and a growing share of forced internal displacement.

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

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

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

In July 2000, President Bill Clinton signed into law a \$1.3 billion appropriation with \$860 million in new aid for Colombia, three-quarters of it for the country's military and police forces. The aid

package's centerpiece was a "Push Into Southern Colombian Coca-Growing Areas," greatly increasing operations in a FARC-dominated zone around the department of Putumayo, which at the time was producing the majority of Colombia's coca leaf.

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

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

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

Uribe cut a deal with the AUC paramilitaries, offering amnesty or lenient treatment in exchange for demobilization. The AUC formally dissolved, and 18 of its top leaders were extradited to the United States to face drug charges. Paramilitary killings declined, though the groups' networks

of narco-trafficking and political ties have proved very hard to dismantle. More recently, a rapidly growing new generation of “emerging” paramilitary groups, involved in organized crime at least as much as in counterinsurgency, has sprung up in several zones, numbering between 4,000 and 9,000 members nationwide.

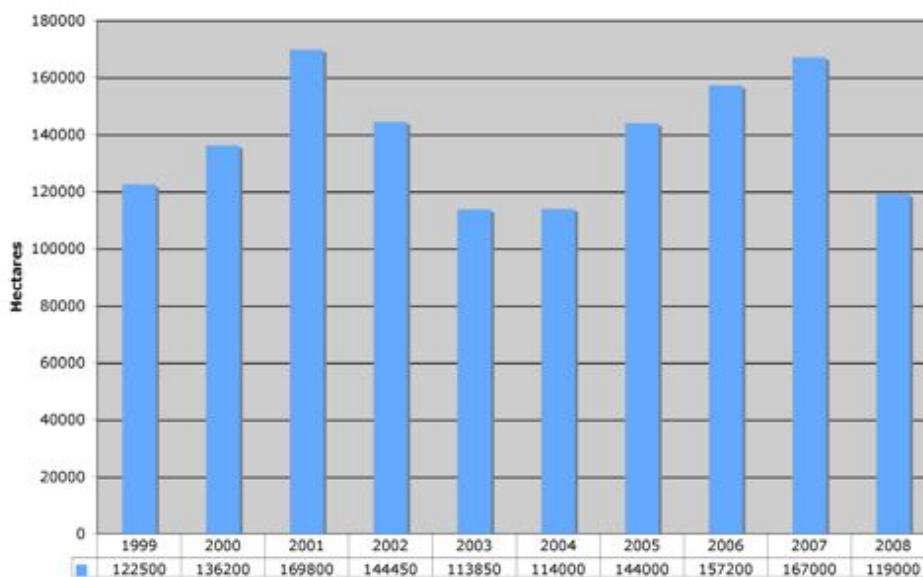
The counternarcotics effort, which to this day accounts for most U.S. military and police assistance, has been plainly frustrating. Drug eradication programs sprayed tens of thousands of *campesinos*' crops, increasing anger at the government in ungoverned, guerrilla-controlled zones. In a vacuum of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

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

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

In military parlance, Colombia in the mid-2000s had a robust strategy to “clear” the guerrillas from territory, establishing a perimeter under military control. But it sorely lacked “hold” and “build” strategies: *Plan Patriota* and similar efforts came

## Coca Cultivation in Colombia - U.S. Government Estimate



with no evident plan to bring the rest of the government — that is, all non-military institutions — into the briefly recovered territory.

### Internal debate and the birth of Integrated Action

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

In Colombia, U.S. and Colombian officials began developing a new civil-military strategy, through a process that began around 2004 and rose to prominence by 2006. The new rhetoric appeared to incorporate many of the arguments and sug-

gestions of Plan Colombia's critics: that the effort shouldn't be entirely military; that social services are important; that forced eradication without aid will do harm; and that populations should be consulted.

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

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

Following a suggestion from U.S. Southern Command, President Alfonso [sic.] Uribe created the Coordinating Center for Integrated Action (CCAI) and made it his vehicle to achieve the required unity of effort to defeat the insurgency.

... [T]he Civil Affairs section of the SOUTHCOM operations directorate proposed an initiative to establish a Colombian interagency organization "capable of synchronizing national level efforts to reestablish governance" in areas that had been under FARC, ELN, or AUI [AUC] control. Civil Affairs officers attached to the MILGP [U.S. Embassy Military Group] in Colombia presented the concept to the Minister of Defense who liked it and made it the basis for his proposal to President Uribe in February 2004.

... CCAI's first major planning activity was a senior leader seminar and planning session held from May 8-10, 2004, which developed an economic, social development, and security plan to reestablish long-term governance in southern Colombia.

... Implementation of this plan was sufficiently successful that planning was expanded to address a full seven conflictive zones throughout the country. This plan was addressed at an off-site planning session in Washington at the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies from March 28-31, 2005.<sup>8</sup>

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

lion. Enforcement of human rights conditions was strengthened, slowing the flow of some military assistance.

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

## Bringing the government into new zones

Santos offered this definition of the new strategy:

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

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

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





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

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

## The CCAI institutional structure

The CCAI is now within the Colombian Presidency’s Social Action office. Social Action, which does not operate out of a cabinet ministry, is a large, well-funded presidential initiative that manages several conditional cash subsidy, humanitarian aid, and alternative development programs.

Its critics charge that much of its aid is short-term handouts that verge on clientelism.

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

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

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

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

The CCAI Directive Council will be made up of the Ministry of National Defense, the Commander-General of the Armed Forces, the Director-General of the National Police, the High Counselor of the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation, the Director of the DAS [Ad-

ministrative Security Department, or presidential intelligence and secret police], and the Prosecutor-General of the Nation.<sup>11</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

Each Center, explained former Defense Minister

Santos, is an office in the Integrated Action zone with “a military coordinator, a police coordinator and a civilian manager. This manager, who reports to the CCAI, is charged with administrating and supervising the implementation of plans in coordination with local and regional authorities.”<sup>12</sup> Each Center’s civilian manager is employed by Social Action.

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

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

## The U.S. role

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

The Southern Command, which helped to develop the Integrated Action model with Colombia’s Defense Ministry, continues to offer training, advice, military construction and logistical support. Some funding for CCAI support has come from the State Department-managed Foreign Military Financing program, but much has come from sources in the Department of Defense’s own budget: counter-drug authorities and “Section 1206 Train and Equip” authority, a controversial 2006 provision allowing the Pentagon to use its own budget to train and equip foreign militaries. The Southern Command has also used its own



budget for conferences and other meetings to discuss and develop the model.

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

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

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

USAID support for the model has totaled at least \$25 million so far, most of it from Defense Department "Section 1207" grants. The Southern

Command and military aid budget's total support is harder to determine (items like helicopter and equipment use are hard to quantify when they are used for other missions), but is likely as much as twice the USAID contribution.

## Praise for the concept

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

USAID, early 2009: "The consolidation plan is now widely seen in Colombia as the model for creating the conditions necessary for sustained establishment of a state presence in formerly ungoverned parts of the country. The GOC [Government of Colombia] is basing its still-to-be-finalized national consolidation strategy on the unified consolidation plan that OTI has supported. Similarly, lessons learned during plan implementation are being used to help shape the U.S. Embassy's new embassy-wide strategy as well as the USAID Mission's revised strategy."<sup>15</sup>

Defense Minister (at the time) Juan Manuel Santos, at a joint press conference in Bogotá with Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 2009: "This concept applied in Afghanistan is something that could really help. And we have particular experiences, like crop eradication, like the integrated fight against trafficking whereby we go after every link in the chain. In Afghanistan there are some jobs that are more important or less important than those that we have here, but the concept is applicable there. It is in this way that we think our experience could contribute in some way to solving the problem in Afghanistan or the problem in Iraq."<sup>16</sup>

*Washington Post* article, May 2009: "Under the Integrated Consolidation Plan for the Macarena, named after a national park west of here, the military first drove out guerrillas and other armed groups. In quick sequence, engineers and work crews, technicians, prosecutors, social workers and policy types arrived, working in concert to transform a lawless backwater into something resembling a functioning part of Colombia."<sup>17</sup>

U.S. Government Accountability Office, October 2008: "If successful, the approach in La Macarena is intended to serve as a model for similar CCAI efforts in 10 other regions of the country. It represents a key test of the government's enhanced state presence strategy and a potential indicator of the long-term prospects for reducing Colombia's drug trade by systematically re-establishing gov-

ernment control throughout the country.”<sup>18</sup>

Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2009: “As a strategy for consolidation of sustained state authority, the PCIM’s [La Macarena Integrated Consolidation Plan’s] emphasis on rapid and sequenced action coordinated on an interagency basis has considerable potential for success not only in the Macarena but also as a pilot project for use in other areas of Colombia.”<sup>19</sup>

## Impressions of Integrated Action

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

## LA MACARENA

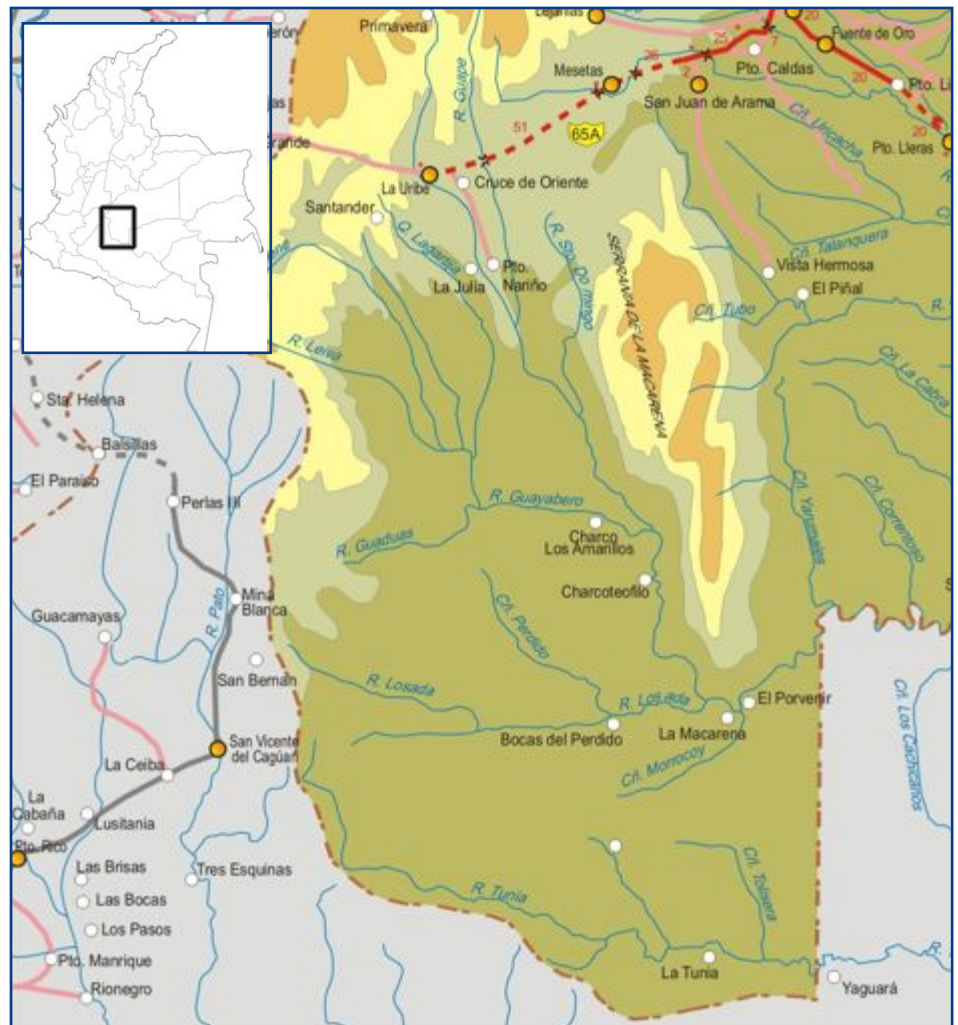
A zone that has been under solid FARC control for decades, La Macarena, in the western extremity of the department of Meta, has been a principal focus of Integrated Action since 2007, when the Defense Ministry instituted a special “La Macarena Integrated Consolidation Plan” (PCIM) to coordinate CCAI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

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

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

## The armed groups

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



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

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

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

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

This area has been a FARC stronghold almost



The Serranía de La Macarena

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

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

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

In 2004 and 2005, the U.S.-supported *Plan Patriota* military offensive swept through this zone. The offensive pushed the guerrillas out of the mostly small town centers of municipalities like Vistahermosa, leaving behind contingents of soldiers and police. *Plan Patriota* was not an



example of Integrated Action: it was accompanied by almost no non-military effort.

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

## The Fusion Center

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

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

Integrated Fusion Center  
Vistahermosa (Meta)  
Built by the  
Military Forces of Colombia  
With the Support of the  
Military Group of the Embassy of  
The United States of America  
December 2008

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

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



## Security gains have been overstated

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

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

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

Beyond the main towns, however, the map quick-

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

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

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

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

There was a consensus among those interviewed

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

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

It is impossible to determine with certainty whether the guerrilla presence in the Vistahermosa — La Macarena zone is a fading but lingering



Puerto Toledo

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

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

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

Paramilitaries, we were told, are showing up in town centers, occasionally uniformed but often in civilian dress. In some cases, Meta-based human rights defenders said, they claim to be there "with the state's permission," and they often encourage or even obligate the population to grow coca.

## Puerto Toledo

En route to Puerto Toledo, we flew over flat countryside full of swamps and rivers. It appeared mostly uninhabited, with only a few tiny hamlets, the occasional house, and most land uncultivated. Much of the agricultural activity visible from the air was cattle ranching and African oil palm cultivation, most of it looking very recently planted.

Perhaps ten blocks square along the Güéjar River, Puerto Toledo was a major coca market town when the FARC held uncontested dominion

over the area. Now, one's first impression while walking the town's dusty streets is one of emptiness. Very few people are out on the streets and sidewalks, and very little is open for business. Only a few years ago, Puerto Toledo had dozens of discos, bars and brothels open at all hours, where residents from throughout the area would gather to spend their easy coca profits. The discos are now closed. Today, Puerto Toledo is very quiet.

One of the former discos in the middle of town has been converted into the local office of Colombia's National Park Service, which is working to move hundreds of coca-growing families out of the La Macarena park and fringe areas around the park, along with the eradication of their coca, in exchange for assistance with housing, land titles, productive projects and food-security assistance.

The Park Service project office is one of the only visible signs that Colombia's civilian state has moved into Puerto Toledo. The town center is under solid military control (though the FARC set off a bomb in the town center in late 2008), but there is not even a police station yet. The main civilian projects were the repainting and refurbishment of the bridge over the Güéjar River, improvements to the town's school, and some improvements to roads on the outskirts.

At the Park Service office, we spoke with leaders of AgroGüéjar, an organization of smallholding farmers from several *veredas* (hamlets) in Puerto Rico municipality. The organization represents 300 families, residents of seven *veredas*, who have agreed with the Park Service to relocate away from the transition zone around the La Macarena Park. In exchange, they are receiving land titles, houses, and technical assistance with productive projects.

Theirs is an instructive story of what happens when a government tries to work with citizens who have never known life under a government. Residents of this area have lived alongside guerrillas for their entire lives, but still have a manifest desire to have the state present in their territory, and to feel connected to the rest of Colombia. But they also have a deep distrust of a state that has



always been absent, never honored its past commitments, and may prove unable to protect them.

“We didn’t come here for coca. We were displaced,” is how one leader introduced the group. Like nearly all farmers in southern Colombia’s “agricultural frontier” zones, the residents of Puerto Toledo and its environs had arrived within the past generation, pushed out from elsewhere by violence or drawn by economic opportunity — often illicit economic opportunity.

The leaders of AgroGüéjar insisted that their organization’s farmers want to stop growing coca, and have said for years that they are willing to eradicate, if the government would make the investments in infrastructure and basic services necessary for a legal economy to exist. They told a story rife with frustration. AgroGüéjar has its origins among participants in a self-financed organic produce cooperative that formed in 2004, in part because increased eradication after the 2002 end of the demilitarized zone was making coca harder to grow. The cooperative had its organic crops sprayed and lost its investment.

Its members protested to anti-narcotics authorities and arrived at an agreement stating that, in exchange for aid, they would voluntarily eradicate all coca in three *veredas*. The agreement included a three-month deadline to eradicate one-third of their coca, after which economic assistance would begin to arrive. An accord was signed, but fumigation planes flew over their communities the very day that it was to be implemented. The cooperative’s members “decided to shut off all contact with state institutions.”

AgroGüéjar formed in 2006, after the Colombian government, backed by the United States, began a major campaign of manual eradication — and



Puerto Toledo

later, fumigation — in the La Macarena park. Arguing that “we are hungry,” the new organization’s members led a 29-day march to Bogotá to demand government investment.<sup>29</sup> “The only government agency that responded to us,” they told us, “was the National Park Service.” The first response was a very modest food-security project, which AgroGüéjar, intensely distrustful, limited to 50 families. The Park Service complied with its commitments, however, and the organization quickly agreed to expand participation to 300 families.

The Park Service, one of the agencies that made up the Coordination Center and its predecessor, the La Macarena Integrated Consolidation Plan (PCIM), received a large grant for the relocation project from the Colombian Presidency’s Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, which together with funds from the Meta governor’s office (flush with oil revenues), USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives and the government of the Netherlands, has added up to about \$5 million. The families are to receive titled plots of land, with prefabricated houses. The Park Service is also offering technical assistance with several productive projects, forming cooperatives to produce and market several products that the communities have selected. A beekeeping project, which is getting technical support from Colombia’s National University, may be the most advanced.<sup>30</sup>

The AgroGüéjar representatives had kind words



*School project bearing the Acción Social logo in Puerto Toledo*

for the “quick-impact” demonstration projects that had been completed in and around Puerto Toledo, such as the refurbished bridge, the construction of a new school classroom, and minor road improvements. However, while these programs are welcome, the local leaders said, “Our biggest concern is the income of our families.” Larger projects, like paving farm-to-market roads or building bridges, electricity grids, clean water or communication networks, appear to be far off. In fact, the poor state of the region’s roads and bridges has complicated things for the Park Service. Efforts to deliver construction materials for promised houses have been stymied by delivery trucks’ inability to cross rivers on the narrow, rickety bridges that exist in the area.

Another type of quick-impact project has been offered but declined: the Colombian Army’s “health brigades” in which doctors, and sometimes veterinarians, visit an area offering free checkups and medical care. These brigades feature free haircuts and food, along with clowns handing out toys to the children. Puerto Toledo has turned down an Army health brigade visit because of “who comes after”: guerrillas angered by the community’s perceived welcoming of the security forces.

The military’s role has included heavy participation in, or even coordination of, meetings to discuss and plan for development needs. “The military, including Southern Command, meets with communities, offering [productive] projects,”

a community leader told us, referring to activities occurring in Vistahermosa municipality. “They’re involving the civilian population in a military dynamic.”

The AgroGüéjar leaders told of some frustrating experiences with the PCIM and the Fusion Center. During a seven or eight month period in 2007 and 2008, they said, the communities were subject to constant forced manual eradication of their coca, but received no other assistance, not even basic food-security aid. As a result, they said, “the eradicators had to keep eradicating plots that they had already eradicated before.” Even when commitments for aid had been made, its arrival was slow. “By the time the corn seeds arrived, we could have had ears of corn already.”

We also heard of a heartbreakingly grim scenario: elsewhere in the zone, some parents whose crops are fumigated and are going hungry make the painful decision to hand their children over to armed groups so that, as guerrilla or paramilitary fighters, they may have enough food to eat.

Similar delay has also been widely denounced in the case of land titling, which so far has been an exceedingly slow and unresponsive process in Puerto Toledo and elsewhere in the Fusion Center zone. The lag time for aid, titling, and similar efforts appears to be the result of bureaucracy, lack of coordination and civilian agencies’ inaction — the very problems that “fusion” and Integrated Action are purportedly designed to ad-

dress.

In addition, where manual eradication has replaced fumigation, we heard complaints that the eradicators themselves are not always the Colombian state's most diplomatic representatives when they interact with the population. "People fear the eradicators, they are abusive," one leader told us, citing coarse language and theft of food and other goods.

A particularly frustrating experience for the community began in August 2008, when 280 *campesinos* from the area gathered in Puerto Toledo to formulate a proposal for voluntary eradication and development assistance to present to the PCIM. They came to a consensus on the proposal and presented it formally in October 2008.

The PCIM responded by furnishing the leaders with an application form laying out an agreement for assistance. But the form had some troubling wording, which required several back-and-forth exchanges. The initial version of the form required the communities to affirm that they were "asking for the security forces to be present" in the area. Obviously, if the FARC were to learn that they had signed such a document, the leaders' lives would be in grave danger. They demanded that the document be altered.

In January of this year, the leaders sent the PCIM a counter-proposal. They received an e-mail reply in March communicating to them that their document was acceptable, but that the PCIM no longer had resources in its budget to carry out the agreement.

AgroGüéjar's remarkable approach to the government had effectively been rebuffed, at least for the time being. As a result, one leader put it, "We lost seven months, while eradication continues, and there are still no roads."

The organization's representatives discussed an additional frustration unrelated to economic development. In the La Macarena zone, they said, relations with the population are being strained by a belief or subtext that virtually all residents are somehow guerrilla supporters. Some said they felt that anyone who remained in the zone during

the entire 1998-2002 FARC "*despeje*" period is treated with suspicion by the newly arrived state authorities. "Of course people had to be with the guerrillas" during the time that the state vacated the zone, one leader said. "Should you accuse people of being guerrilla auxiliaries, then? You could do that with everyone here."

In Puerto Toledo and elsewhere, we heard many complaints about the most aggressive manifestation of this mistrust: mass arrests. Judicial and prosecutorial authorities are entering zones, which by itself is a good sign that the civilian part of the state has begun to arrive. However, their initial focus has been almost entirely on prosecuting suspected guerrillas and collaborators.

We were told said that security forces, accompanied by officials from the Prosecutor-General's Office [*Fiscalía*], were showing up in towns and rounding up citizens, usually local leaders, who had been fingered as likely guerrilla supporters. A representative of a humanitarian organization told us of arriving in one *vereda* in a white 4-wheel-drive vehicle, and finding the entire place empty. After a few minutes, townspeople emerged from their hiding places. "We thought you were the *Fiscalía*," they said.

Despite these frustrations, the balance of the National Parks-AgroGüéjar experience tilts toward the positive. The communities participating in the project have eradicated 2,000 hectares of coca, an amount equal to (if the 2008 UN Office on Drugs and Crime figures are correct) about one-fortieth of all coca grown in Colombia. This is the largest example of voluntary coca eradication we have ever known in Colombia.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, communities in a longtime guerrilla and narco stronghold are now looking to the state for assistance, associating themselves with a state agency (National Parks), and want the state — at least through this project — to increase its presence beyond the seven *veredas* of Puerto Rico municipality that are involved to date. (Puerto Rico has 22 *veredas*.)

Even without the added element of a guerrilla insurgency, overcoming distrust is one of the most difficult challenges faced when establishing a government presence where none has existed.



It requires keeping one's word. It requires listening to critiques and consulting frequently with the population. It also requires that *campesinos* not be treated as potential criminal suspects or guerrilla auxiliaries.

It is remarkable that groups like AgroGüéjar, though still intensely suspicious, are showing themselves open to working with their government. But this is just a first step, and it will be easily reversed — or the damage could be worse than if nothing was done at all — if the non-military component goes undelivered.

Hopes are being raised in Puerto Toledo and other rural areas in La Macarena. The Colombian government cannot afford to disappoint.

## MONTES DE MARÍA

To the south of Cartagena, a port city of a million people, Colombia's northern coast curves into a north-south line, with the Caribbean off to the west. Go a few miles inland and the land rises into a low mountain range, the Montes de María.

The surrounding region, 15 municipalities (counties) in the departments of Sucre and Bolívar, has some of the best land in the country. Farmers tell visitors that they don't even need to use fertilizer, and that avocado trees, if left untended, grow wild and produce more than can be brought to market.

The zone is strategic, as it is rugged terrain, with lots of hiding places, sitting right between nearby coca-producing zones and the Caribbean Sea. While the Montes de María is not a coca-growing area, the Gulf of Morrosquillo, a bay scooped out of the coast south of San Onofre, has long been a jumping-off point for boats carrying tons of cocaine every year.

On either of two good highways, the Montes de María are a less than two-hour drive from Cartagena, Colombia's fifth-largest city. Four hundred years ago, when Cartagena was one of the Spanish empire's principal slave-trading ports, the region's jungles and mountains were just far enough away for escaped slaves to hide. In fortified towns, or *palenques*, they resisted, maintained many West African customs, and became the Montes de María's first non-indigenous settlers.

Most (though not all) *palenques* eventually fell to the Spaniards, who divided up land among themselves in enormous estates. Ever since, landholding in the Montes de María — as in much of Colombia's north coast region — has been highly unequal. Agriculture has been the main economic activity, and small farming has been the norm, but most farmers have been tenants on vast tracts of land, in many cases owned by wealthy families who live in Cartagena or other cities.

Unequal landholding made the Montes de María a center of *campesino* protest in the 1970s, when a national movement, the National Association of *Campesinos* (ANUC), pressured for land reform with "invasions" of estates and other tactics. As a result, the Colombian government's usually inactive land-reform agency, INCORA (since renamed



INCODER), bought land from wealthy landholders in the 1970s and 1980s and distributed it to thousands of families in the region, in most cases requiring them to borrow money to pay 30 percent of the sale price.

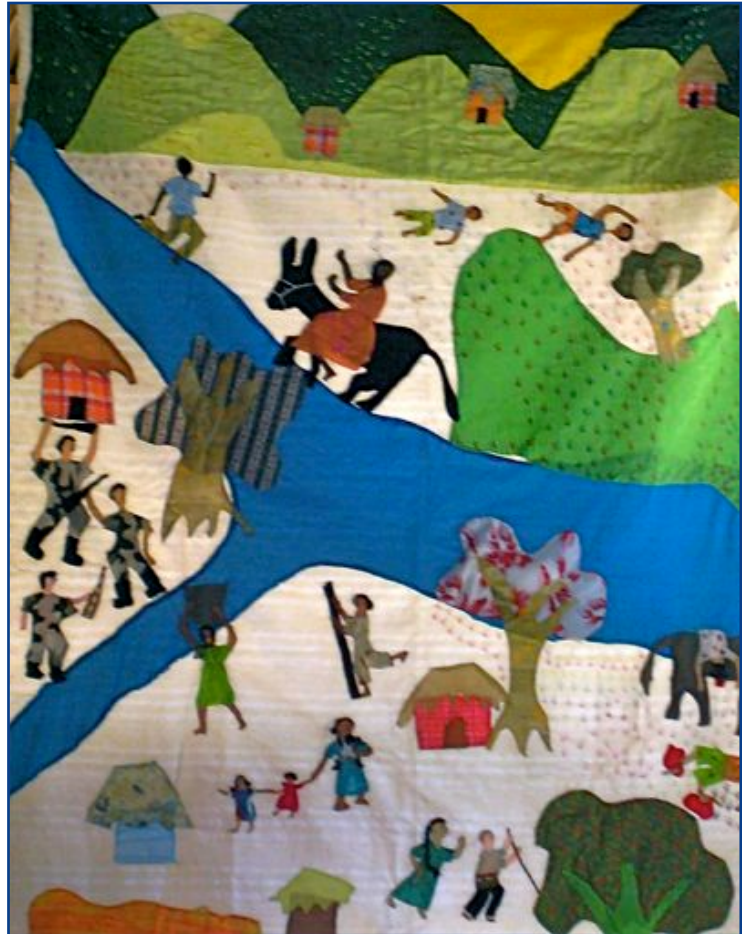
This was only a very partial reform, however, and large estates and tenant farming remain the norm. This fertile region's population is extremely poor: at least two-thirds subsist below the poverty line.<sup>32</sup> Though a relatively dense rural population has been there for generations, government neglect and absence are severe: although two highways run north-south from Cartagena, secondary and tertiary roads are very few, and most villages are still unserved by electricity or potable water.

## Armed Groups

As might be expected of a mountainous, strategically located region with a poor, aggrieved population, the Montes de María quickly fell under the control of leftist guerrilla groups in the 1970s. The FARC set up two fronts (35th and 37th), the ELN established its "Jaime Bateman Cayón" Bloc, and a smaller group, the Revolutionary Army of the Poor (ERP), was also active. All groups heavily extorted large landowners, charged levies on small businesses, kidnapped for ransom, and disrupted road traffic, including cargo moving between Medellín and Cartagena.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw narcotraffickers move into the area, buying up land and competing for control of lucrative routes for transshipping cocaine to the Caribbean. From the 1980s on, narcotraffickers and large landowners organized small "self-defense" militias to fend off the guerrillas. These militias carried out occasional executions and massacres of civilians, but posed little threat to the guerrillas' domination of the region.

That changed in the late 1990s, when the AUC expanded from its original strongholds just to the west, the department of Córdoba and the area around the Gulf of Urabá. Colombia's Security and Democracy Foundation explains:



Detail of a "memory quilt" sewn by massacre victims

In 1997 there was a meeting between members of local elites and [Córdoba-based AUC leader] Salvatore Mancuso, where it was decided that they would form a self-defense group, which would start to operate with financing from payments made by landowners and cattlemen. Also, one must not lose sight of the influence of narcotrafficking on this dynamic.<sup>33</sup>

The "Heroes of Montes de María" paramilitary bloc was born. Its three best-known leaders were Rodrigo Mercado, alias "*Cadena*" ("Chain," who has disappeared, either dead or, as some insist, a fugitive); Edward Cobo Téllez, alias "Diego Vecino" (participating in the "Justice and Peace" demobilization process and requested in extradition by the United States); and Húbert Bánquez, alias "Juancho Dique" (participating in the Justice and Peace process).<sup>34</sup>

Starting in 1999, this paramilitary bloc launched one of the bloodiest campaigns in Colombia's history, almost entirely directed at the smallholding *campesinos* who inhabited the guerrilla-controlled territories of the Montes de María. 1999 and 2000 alone saw 75 massacres, making notori-



ous the names of small villages like El Salado, Chengue, Macayepo and Mampuján. More than 3,000 people were killed or disappeared, many buried in mass graves. More than 20,000 families — nearly 100,000 people — were displaced by the violence between 1996 and 2000, according to official data, many of them filling up the rapidly growing slums ringing nearby cities like Cartagena and Sincelejo.

## Para-politics and local leaders

The “Heroes of Montes de María” counted on generous support from local leaders. Sucre was one of the first departments to be hit by the “para-politics” scandal, a series of revelations of politicians’ paramilitary ties that has ensnared a third of Colombia’s current Congress and which consumed Sucre department’s political class.

In Sucre department alone, the *Verdad Abierta* website (a project of the Colombian newsweekly *Semana* and prominent NGOs) noted in July 2009,

A total of 35 politicians have been processed for their ties to the paramilitaries. Eight ex-mayors, seven ex-councilmen, one former departmental legislator, three former governors, three former congressmen, three serving congressmen and 3 senators elected for the 2006-2010 period, 2 mayors and 5 councilmen elected in 2007.<sup>35</sup>

Jailed mayors included the former mayor of San Onofre, one of the four municipalities chosen for the Coordination Center’s work, as well as the mayors of neighboring municipalities Colosó and Toluviejo. Just to the east, in the vicinity of Magangué, Bolívar, the most powerful paramilitary-tied political boss was a woman: Enilce López, “*La Gata*,” now in prison, who also controlled much of the legal lottery business along Colombia’s northern coast. Evidence indicates that



Sucre Senator Álvaro García (pictured), now in prison, even helped the “Heroes of Montes de María” bloc to plot the October 2000 Macayepo massacre.

Colombia last held

municipal and gubernatorial elections in October 2007. In several parts of the country, the para-politicians’ political machines suffered stinging defeats at the polls. This was not so in Sucre, Bolívar and the Montes de María, where associates of the jailed and arrested politicians fared well. In San Onofre, the newly elected mayor was a politician widely accused of paramilitary ties. The gubernatorial election in Sucre is believed to have involved fraud in order to keep the same political group in power.<sup>36</sup> Also on a 2007 *Semana* list of candidates with a “high risk” of paramilitary links was the elected mayor of Sincelejo, the capital of Sucre, Jesús Antonio Paternina Samur. Meanwhile in Magangué, imprisoned regional boss “*La Gata*” scored another victory in July 2009 when her approved candidate won a special mayoral election.

## The military’s role in the zone

The region’s security is primarily the responsibility of the 1st Brigade of Colombia’s Marines (*Infantería de Marina*; as in many coastal areas, the Marines, a unit of Colombia’s Navy, play a far more prominent role than the Army). At the time of the paramilitary onslaught, the brigade was commanded by Gen. Rodrigo Quiñones, a now-retired officer who remains one of those most severely questioned by human rights groups.<sup>37</sup>

By 2002, security conditions in the Montes de María were so poor that newly inaugurated President Álvaro Uribe imposed virtual martial law in the region in September, declaring it one of two special “Zones of Rehabilitation and Consolidation” with a highly concentrated military presence, a military census of the population, and controls over road travel, among other measures. (The other designated zone was the oil-producing department of Arauca in northeastern Colombia.) The special “zone” status ended in April 2003, after Colombia’s Constitutional Court struck it down.

The increased military presence brought the region’s violence down from its horrific 2000-2001 peak. The cessation of hostilities that the AUC declared at the end of 2002, as it entered into negotiations with the Colombian government, also reduced the frequency of the paramilitaries’ vi-



Col. Rafael Colón



olent actions in the region. Leaders like “Cadena” and “Diego Vecino,” along with their partners in Sucre’s political class, nonetheless continued to exercise great power, even as their armed structure entered into a demobilization process, culminating in a July 2005 ceremony in which 594 members of the “Heroes of Montes de María” bloc turned in weapons.

The paramilitaries saw their power much more effectively reduced, and the region saw its security improve greatly, after the 2004 arrival of a much different officer at the Marine command once occupied by the notorious Gen. Quiñones. Col. Rafael Colón had lost a relative to paramilitary violence, and during his two years at the head of the 1st Marine Brigade he ordered his troops to carry out a campaign against the paramilitaries. Reports the Security and Democracy Foundation:

The Navy carried out a series of operations that impacted the structures and finances of the self-defense groups. A series of searches, surveillance and intelligence operations allowed 3.5 tons of cocaine to be interdicted in the Gulf of Morrosquillo in less than a year. The first captures also occurred, among them that of El Oso, one of Cadena’s right-hand men. ...

But Cadena had amassed such power that, faced with the offensive directed by Col. Rafael Colón, the commander of the Marines’ 1st Brigade, many of his political allies, influential personalities in the life of Sucre, began to ask through various channels that Colón be removed from the zone. According to *Semana*, they complained that the Navy only attacked the AUC and not the FARC — an argument that sought to decrease the pressure on the paramilitaries. Despite these demands, Colón stayed in the zone and the operations against the self-defense groups continued, which generated enough confidence that the local population began to denounce the abuses suffered under Cadena.<sup>38</sup>

With the paramilitaries actually on the run from the security forces — a situation not typical in most regions of Colombia, then or now — their victims became more vocal and organized. In the town of San Onofre, where Cadena based his operations at a large farm called “El Palmar,” dozens of witnesses began to come forward revealing the locations of mass graves dug by the paramilitaries. Hundreds of bodies were found, and by 2005 San Onofre came to be synonymous with mass graves in the Colombian and international media.

## A reduced FARC presence

In 2006 and 2007, the armed forces dealt blows to the reduced number of FARC guerrillas who, weakened by the paramilitary onslaught, remained in the highest and remotest reaches of the Montes de María. An operation at the very end of 2006 allowed the escape of a Cartagena politician whom the FARC had held hostage since 2000; shortly afterward, President Uribe named Fernando Araújo to the post of foreign minister, where he remained for nearly a year and a half. In October 2007, a military operation in El Carmen de Bolívar killed Gustavo Rueda Díaz, alias “Martín Caballero,” the commander of the 37th Front and probably the most powerful FARC leader remaining in Colombia’s Caribbean.

Today, the guerrilla presence in Montes de María is negligible. During our July visit to the zone, we heard estimates of the FARC presence in the Montes de María today ranging from zero to 40 members, perhaps with several dozen undercover militia members. However, we heard rumors of a guerrilla attempt to regroup and to forcibly recruit *campesinos* — including children — in some of the zone’s most isolated corners. In October, according to a colleague in the region, the guerrillas briefly set up their first roadblock in the Montes de María in several years.

## New paramilitaries and the victims’ movement

For their part, the paramilitaries are less visible and less lethal today, but they are very much present in the Montes de María, albeit in their

fragmented, post-AUC incarnation. These groups are heavily armed and recruiting rapidly, though they rarely wear uniforms and often resemble urban gangs more than armies. For the most part, their leaders are former mid-level commanders who served under AUC leaders extradited to the United States since May 2008, and who are now competing to fill the vacuum.

The “new” groups most frequently mentioned are the *Paisas* (related to the Medellín-based *Oficina de Envigado* narcotrafficking organization), the *Rastrojos* (the rapidly growing heirs to part of the North Valle drug cartel and the AUC’s Calima Bloc, which both originated in southwestern Colombia), and the organization led by “Don Mario,” a fugitive paramilitary leader and narcotrafficker captured in April. We also heard of the *Águilas Negras* (Black Eagles), a rearmed group whose name has emerged in many parts of the country, but the Marines told us that this group has not in fact appeared in the zone — they said it is a name used to intimidate, as when issuing threats.

The new groups’ principal motivation is narcotrafficking. The cocaine transshipment routes through the Montes de María continue to be much coveted, and violence is actually increasing

as these “new” paramilitary bands fight each other to control them. The governor of Sucre, Jorge Barraza, told us that 106 people were murdered in his department during the first six months of 2009 — more than double the 49 killed during the same period in 2008. Fighting between “new” paramilitary groups was the principal cause.

The groups have dramatically increased their recruitment. According to one displaced leader in San Onofre, “many of the demobilized paramilitaries returned to their ranks. Of the young men from our neighborhood, we estimate that around 20 have gone with them.” In San Onofre, members of these armed groups will sit in a park and offer 1,000,000 pesos (about US\$400) to join their group. It is tempting for young men and women to join the emerging groups — especially those who are displaced, unemployed and living in extreme poverty. If accepted, the new member is given a motorcycle, a gun, a salary, and a sense of purpose.

Victims’ group leaders said that, more than 3 years since the “para-politics” scandal first hit Sucre, many of the region’s mayors and councilmen maintain ties of corruption with the paramilitaries. The leaders also told us that in the first half of

2009 they suffered an increase in threats from the groups, particularly the *Águilas Negras*, in retaliation for their efforts to recover property, denounce corruption, and uncover the truth about what happened to their loved ones. Worsening threats forced Ingrid Vergara, an outspoken local leader in the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes, to leave the zone in late June. The Verbel family, featured

Abandoned church in Macayepo





in a 2005 *New York Times* story about San Onofre due to their leading role in organizing victims, continues to live under constant threat, with some members in hiding.<sup>39</sup>

Among the municipalities of the Montes de María, the armed groups' violence appeared to be worst in San Onofre, where the victims' leaders were seeing the worst threats, and where the new armed groups were estimated to have killed between 15 and 19 of each other's members during the first half of 2009. While violence has not returned to the peak levels of the early 2000s, some victims described their situation as worse, because with so many groups and armed actors "you don't know who is doing the killing. So we can't speak out."

These leaders receive threats via telephone, cell phone and even email. Many cannot leave their homes or are hiding in the mountains. Threats against women's groups have also increased; one leader was recently murdered in front of her five-year-old daughter. While government officials say that "only criminals are being killed" right now, the victims with whom we spoke in San Onofre told us that "those who are killed are not only the bad ones, some are being killed for telling the truth."

Currently, the police are responsible for citizen security in town centers, while the Marines handle the rural areas. We were told that a rural transition from Marines to police is likely to take place, though we heard little idea of a timetable. The United States is helping to set up mobile constabulary forces (*Carabineros*) and provide them with equipment in order to increase police coverage in rural areas. Still, the local police have yet to win the population's trust. We heard several times that they are often regarded as too tied to local political elites, too corrupt, and too quick to treat the local citizenry with suspicion, including suspicion of helping guerrillas.

We were told that "the police are not carrying out their duties" by both community members and military authorities. The first group attributes this mainly to corruption via narcotraffickers and emerging paramilitaries, while the latter attributed it to a lack of resources, telling us that many po-

lice must patrol without squad cars, even hailing taxis to take them to crime scenes. The governor of Sucre also said that while the national government recently dispatched 700 additional officers to the region, they still are unable to reach the rural areas.

As Colonel César Cardona, the commander of the Marines' 1st Brigade, explained the military's role to us, it was clear that the Marines — with little guerrilla presence to confront in the region — are playing an ever-increasing police role. Marines are manning control points, gathering intelligence and soliciting arrest warrants. Colonel Cardona appeared frustrated that the military could not carry out arrests. "We were told that the problem of the [emerging] criminal groups is of the police, and that we can only intervene when their capacity is surpassed, but since the beginning the police have been overwhelmed."

## Land

As a result of the violence at the beginning of the decade, as much as 150,000 hectares (375,000 acres) of Montes de María farmland is abandoned and uncultivated, "returning to the jungle." But in many cases, this land is either in the hands of large landholders whose tenant farmers are not returning, or it is simply unclear to whom it belongs.

As a result of recent security improvements, the value of the region's fertile land is skyrocketing. A hectare (2.5 acres) of land that would have sold for 200,000 pesos (US\$90) in 2001 is worth at least 4 million pesos (US\$1,800) today. Author and *El Espectador* columnist Alfredo Molano, writing in late 2008, described a phenomenon that we heard about in almost every encounter during our time in the region.

For the past several months, strange personalities have come to the towns of the Montes de María in bulletproof Hummers to negotiate land purchases. ... That is, they come to buy, at a low cost, small properties that have been foreclosed upon by the banks or by businesses. Or because they like to have their pistols seen and they don't hide their bodyguards. Campesinos who have managed to come out of the war alive, or who have returned after being displaced to other cities, are the first ones obligated to sell.<sup>40</sup>



We heard that, in fact, threats against those who refuse to sell are relatively rare (though they do happen). Instead landholders, especially those who received their titles from the INCORA land redistributions of the 1970s and 1980s, are either being enticed to sell by the attractiveness of the prices they are being offered, or — far more sinister — are selling because they cannot pay their mortgages after years of displacement from the zone. (Displaced people are supposed to have their debts frozen, but due to the bureaucratic difficulty of registering promptly as a displaced person, and the lack of communication between the parts of the government responsible for displacement and debt, this has offered little protection.)

Large landowners and investors in large-scale projects like African palm, bitter yucca (which produces starch and can be used for biofuels) and teak, are taking advantage of this situation and offering a price that will cover the farmer's debt plus a little extra — an offer that, though below current market prices, many *campesinos* cannot refuse.

As thousands of hectares change hands in each municipality, we were told, land is being concentrated in the hands of “*paisas*.” The term refers to people from the more populous, economi-

cally potent nearby department of Antioquia, and seems to indicate either large agribusinesses or narco-traffickers laundering profits through land purchases — or both.

The buying frenzy has reached the point where some local authorities are trying to implement a freeze on land purchases. In parts of El Carmen de Bolívar, where rumors are spreading that a large mining project is in the works, land is being bought up so quickly that the local government has had to place an embargo on more land sales. In an August 2008 “town meeting” in San Juan Nepomuceno, Bolívar, President Uribe himself exhorted the local citizenry, “Don’t sell your land!”

The CCAI, supported by the armed forces, is conducting a campaign to convince *campesinos* not to sell their land. The Montes de María Coordination Center plans to spend US\$4.5 million for a range of land-tenure activities, including cadastral surveys, adjudication of disputes, compensation, certifying possession, legal protection for small landholders, debt freezes, freezing land sales in specific areas, and investigating suspicious transactions. The Center does not, however, plan anything as ambitious as a full plot-by-plot cadastre (mapping of landholdings) in all four municipalities, nor does it plan a massive titling of small

landholders. Instead, it will focus on the roughly twelve returning communities it has already identified, taking an inventory of landholdings — “a snapshot of what landholding looked like when displacement happened” — and seeking to restore land to those who wish to return.

Even this more modest goal will require unraveling a lot of disputes. Did the landholders ever hold clear title? If they were tenant farmers beforehand, can they prove how much land they cultivated? If they

One of the 8 river crossings on the road to Macayepo



owned the land, did they sell it willingly or under duress (either direct threat or inability to pay debt due to displacement)? Did the current owner of the land buy it in good faith and thus deserve compensation, and if so, how much?

Meanwhile, the conditions leading *campesinos* to sell remain in place. When asked who is selling their land, Father Rafael Castillo of the Montes de María Peace and

Development Foundation listed off characteristics: “Indebted *campesinos*, *campesinos* who can’t get credit, *campesinos* who don’t want to return, *campesinos*’ relatives who do not identify as strongly with the land, and *campesinos* who are threatened, who are told, ‘Either you sell, or I’ll buy it from your widow.’”

Amid this backdrop, the deck is already stacked against small landholders, not to mention returning displaced persons. “As soon as INCODER [the government’s troubled land-reform agency] identifies an unowned plot, a large landowner shows up to buy it,” lamented one community leader. Smallholders also have a much more difficult time meeting legal requirements, including the hundreds or even thousands of dollars in notarized documents and other official fees involved in registering even a small land purchase.

Even though the land grab taking place in Montes de María appears often to be illegal, due to the intricate problems of land titling, it is being carried out in a way that, by the standards of INCODER and the Ministry of Agriculture, meets procedural requirements for legality. “This theft of land is being legalized,” a Cartagena-based government official with land responsibilities explained.



Evidence of new life emerges alongside abandoned homes

## The return of displaced populations

Amid this improved security and huge sell-off, a few people displaced in the 1999-2002 period are returning to their land. Many more have not: some are now accustomed to life in the cities, while others are semi-displaced, working their land during the day but traveling hours to sleep at night in urban areas. We visited a few towns that had been emptied by mass displacements in 2000 — Chinulito, El Aguacate, Macayepo — and were told that perhaps one-fifth or one-quarter of the population had returned to their abandoned plots. Some had periodically returned to maintain their farms, while others came back after seven or eight years to find their plots completely overgrown and their houses empty shells.

After the massacres many of the displaced fled to urban centers, including the county seats of San Onofre and María la Baja, as well as Sincelejo and Cartagena, where the majority remain today. We asked what people thought about the viability of return, and asked those who had returned about the problems they were facing. Some told us they did not want to return, others wanted to return but did not have the resources to make the move, and those who had already returned were struggling with virtually no state involvement or assistance.



## Very poor local governance

Local government officials were of the opinion that displaced people did not want to return. Yet from our conversations, it was clear that some who say they do not want to return now, would do so if the local government provided the basic services necessary to make their return viable. In San Onofre, these demands included security, roads, rebuilt houses, and basic services, which were referred to as “the basic conditions of dignity.”

We heard indications of a general mistrust in local institutions, complaints about public access to health care and education, a lack of basic services such as potable water, electricity, tertiary roads and sewage outside of urban centers, and a police force that is unable to respond to crimes promptly, or at all. Another element seen as a condition for return is rural education. In many cases, males are returning to farm their land, leaving their families behind in towns and cities so that their children can go to school — an opportunity that does not exist in rural communities.

For a region near major cities that has been settled for centuries, the communities of Montes de María have a striking lack of government presence. This is a factor of a lack of political will and insufficient resources, themselves often a result of local corruption. We visited rural communities whose residents said they have not been visited by a state official in years — other than during election season, when someone shows up to paint a campaign slogan on some houses in the community.

Rural community members noted that the lack of transportation infrastructure makes it nearly impossible to get crops to market. The road being built through many of these communities will eventually help with marketing, although most Montes de María farmers cultivate land very far from the new construction.

Delivery of basic services in these rural areas is the responsibility of the local government, which receives some funds for this purpose from the central government. These funds, themselves insufficient, frequently fail to reach their destination. As we were returning to Sincelejo after a day

of meetings with rural communities, we made one final stop in Chinulito, a community that sits along the main coastal highway. Community members, along with the sergeant heading the local police detachment, told us of several unanswered petitions to the local government for basic services to reach this community.

They told us that resources for the community’s rebuilding had been stolen by local officials. They allege that the previous mayor of the municipality of which Chinulito is a part (Colosó), now in prison for ties to paramilitaries, stole hundreds of thousands of dollars of central government funds intended for the town. As a result, Chinulito remains without a decent school, health post or potable water. Chinulito bestrides the principal highway, making these services easy to provide, yet the community appears just as neglected as those that sit two hours away up a dirt road.

## Other donors

While municipal resources and capacity remain low, less violence has meant a greater inflow of foreign assistance. Supported by Sweden, Spain and the Netherlands, the UN Development Program established *Redes* (Networks), a project that since 2003 has sought to improve local governance and support civil-society organizations, combining local conflict resolution and economic development. *Redes* assisted the creation of the Montes de María Peace and Development Network, a regional effort with heavy church involvement. The Network adapts the model of reconciliation and income generation first carried out in the Magdalena Medio region in north-central Colombia, where the Magdalena Medio Development and Peace Project has functioned since the mid-1990s.

The Montes de María Peace and Development Network, in turn, is the principal partner of, and executor of projects for, the “Laboratory of Peace,” the framework through which the European Commission provides much of its assistance to Colombia, with a principal focus on assisting civil society. Montes de María was designated the site of the third such “Laboratory” in 2005; funds started to flow in 2007. The plan is to invest about 24 million euros in Laboratory



activities in Montes de María and Meta over five years, of which about 14 million would go to the Montes de María.

The Network's director, Father Rafael Castillo, spoke of building peace on the foundation of a "triangle of sustainability" uniting civil society, state institutions and the private sector. His program, he argued, promotes a model of "development based on rights, not needs," avoiding an assistentialist, handout-based approach. And he made clear that the Network is more interested in building lasting "processes" through ongoing dialogue with communities than scoring quick, impermanent "successes" — a gentle critique of USAID's quick-impact approach.

Critics of the European-funded model contend that it moves too slowly and tentatively, making the larger community impatient to see results; that it does not distinguish clearly enough between effective civil-society organizations and "free riders"; and that its interactions with communities and the state too often ignore the power and influence of narcotraffickers.

## Integrated Action in the Montes de María

In 2007, the Montes de María also became one of the regions chosen as a focus for the Colombian government's new Integrated Action effort. The local CCAI effort was coordinated out of an office that by 2008 was being called a "Fusion Center." The office's head was Col. Rafael Colón, the marine officer who had won renown for confronting the paramilitaries. The Center declared one of its main objectives to be assisting the return of displaced communities.

We heard little evaluation of Colón's brief tenure during the CCAI's initial period in Montes de María, other than that it appeared well-intentioned but took too long to get started, seemed to lack resources, and envisioned an over-

size military role.

In June 2008 Col. Colón, speaking before a gathering of 350 victims of violence at an event organized by the NGO Redepaz in El Carmen de Bolívar, publicly begged the victims' pardon for the Marines' inaction during the worst years of the paramilitary slaughter. Col. Colón was immediately rebuked by his superiors, and shortly afterward was relieved of the directorship of the Montes de María "Fusion Center" and sent to what *El Tiempo* called "an overseas military commission." (Colón was promoted to the rank of general at the end of 2008, but has not returned to a post with responsibility for the Montes de María.<sup>41</sup>)

The Montes de María program was "reset" at the beginning of 2009, when the Colombian Presidency's Social Action agency signed an assistance agreement with USAID. This allowed for a larger budget and, in February, the opening of a Coordination Center office to provide on-the-ground coordination of the program's activities.

The Montes de María Coordination Center is not physically based in Montes de María, however: its headquarters are in an office building in Cartagena, with a satellite office in Sincelejo, the



*Behind the soccer goal is the Chinulito-El Carmen road that is to be paved by the Colombian Marines*

capital of Sucre. It is now headed by a civilian, Juan Carlos Vargas. As was the case at the CCAI headquarters in Bogotá, the civilian staff at the Montes de María Coordination Center was made up of able, energetic technocrats, most from the Social Action agency. Unlike La Macarena, most staff present were civilians.

Unlike La Macarena, where the main goal is to build a state presence where none exists, the Montes de María Center's main mission is to help displaced communities return to an area with little guerrilla presence. While security and "consolidating governance" are big parts of the methodology, the objective is far more economic or humanitarian than the more counterinsurgent program in La Macarena.

The Montes de María program focuses on only four of the region's 15 municipalities, making up roughly one-third of its land area: San Onofre and Ovejas, Sucre, and El Carmen de Bolívar and San Jacinto, Bolívar. As of early July 2009, the Coordination Center was developing operational plans for each of the four municipalities, focusing on about 12 specific communities where displaced populations are returning. As nearly all activities were in the planning or incipient operational phases, it was not yet possible to evaluate their performance.

The Coordination Center is involving local lead-



ership through the signing of "Political Pacts" with the authorities and other "fuerzas vivas" (business, religious, and civil-society leaders) in each of the four chosen municipalities. The pacts include commitments for development projects in the entire zone, but their chief focus is the return of displaced communities.

As in La Macarena, the USAID/OTI funding was focused heavily on "quick-impact" projects in and around these communities. They include:

- Transportation projects like a major road between El Carmen and Chinulito, and a series of bridges in San Jacinto being built mostly with funds from the government of Japan;
- Assistance in restoring returned communities' housing and neighborhoods;
- Water and electricity projects;
- Telecommunications projects like building up the mobile phone network, radio broadcasting (the Coordination Center staff said they sought to encourage community radio stations), and Internet through state-run "Compartel" access points in remote communities;
- Construction and repairs to schools, though longer-term needs like teachers and materials, the responsibility of the Education Ministry, remained to be dealt with;
- Construction of health posts in town centers, though the questions of doctors and supplies depend on the Social Protection Ministry. Some community members expressed concerns about providing care in rural areas with a lack of roads and ambulances, while others worried that these health posts, many of them managed by for-profit companies, were part of an effort to do away with public hospitals in municipal "county seats;"
- Food security projects, with cacao and yuca (cassava) the principal crops being encouraged. We were told that the Coordination Center's projects were not encouraging cultivation of the controversial African oil palm, though the municipality of María La Baja, Bolívar, adjacent to the zone of the Center's focus, is quickly becoming a center of oil palm production, and the crop is popular among many who are rapidly buying land in the region; and
- Accompaniment of projects for the conflict's victims, like mental health programs and historical memory efforts like the recent release of a report on the El Salado massacre, published by the Historical Memory Group of the National Reconciliation and Reparations Commission.<sup>42</sup>

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) is contributing modestly to the Montes de María program — amounts likely do not exceed \$3 mil-



lion, though we have been unable to obtain an exact figure for this region — but the agency as a whole is planning to invest more heavily after OTI's mandate ends in 2010. A recent USAID request for grant applications outlines an “Enhanced Livelihoods Initiative” that expects to spend \$32 million in Montes de María over the next five years.<sup>43</sup> A CCAI PowerPoint presentation about its Montes de María program appears to indicate a total investment from all sources of about \$43.3 million.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps due to the lack of state presence and civilian government political will in Montes de María, the Colombian armed forces are not just acting to secure the area, but they are also serving as economic developers. The Marines are working with some communities to create a “census” of their most immediate needs. They then take this list to other government ministries and petition for health, education, roads and other services.

The Coordination Center is also involving the military in many traditionally civilian service projects, including an east-west road passing through the heart of the Montes de María between Chinulito and El Carmen de Bolívar, the first paved road to connect the two north-south highways that pass through the region. As Alfredo Molano noted in December 2008, “The military has begun to contract all infrastructure projects with the civilian sector, such as roads, bridges, schools, or medical centers; to carry out health-care brigades; to organize campesino associations; to entertain the campesinos with a traveling circus; and, though it may surprise the country, to give human rights workshops.”<sup>45</sup>

Juan Manuel Santos offered examples of military-led construction in both U.S.-funded zones in early May 2009, shortly before leaving his post as defense minister.

Between 2009 and 2010, military engineers will spend the equivalent of more than 30 million dollars to build such important roads as the Montes de María Transversal [near the Caribbean coast, in the departments of Sucre and Bolívar] or road-paving in La Uribe [Meta] in the former demilitarized zone, a symbolic deed of greatest importance.<sup>46</sup>

Colonel Cardona of the Marines' 1st Brigade was

quite pleased with the road construction project, indicating that the military hopes to take part in more development projects in the future. Asked why the military should play such an important role in development, he responded that using soldiers for labor is cheaper: the Montes de María highway, he said, is being built for “40 percent less money” than civilian projects contracted out by the country's road institute. As a result, he continued, “the goal of the military is to eventually carry out projects such as helping to build roads, instead of being in this conflict. Each brigade wants to add a battalion of engineers to carry out constructions such as these.” Other Fusion Center personnel characterized it as the result of decisions made in 2007, when the zone was less secure and the CCAI was being established with an active-duty military commander. Regardless of the reason, we heard complaints that the El Carmen-Chinulito road-building project is being carried out inefficiently, with antiquated equipment and inexperienced military engineers.

While the Montes de María program is a less olive-drab affair than its counterpart in La Macarena, the military component is still viewed as central. “The patrols are there to accompany the *campesino*,” a military officer expressed to us. A prominent social leader was more critical: “Whenever the guns come out, we're the ones who get shot at.”

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCERNS**

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Our observation of the “Integrated Action” experience so far has raised concerns in seven broad categories. Failure to address these concerns adequately will gravely threaten the success of this program. Any similar efforts carried out elsewhere in the world must also address them.

These categories are:

- Militarization.
- Coordination among government institutions.
- Consultation with communities.
- Relations with local elites.
- Land tenure.
- Actions that generate distrust.
- The program's sustainability.



## Militarization

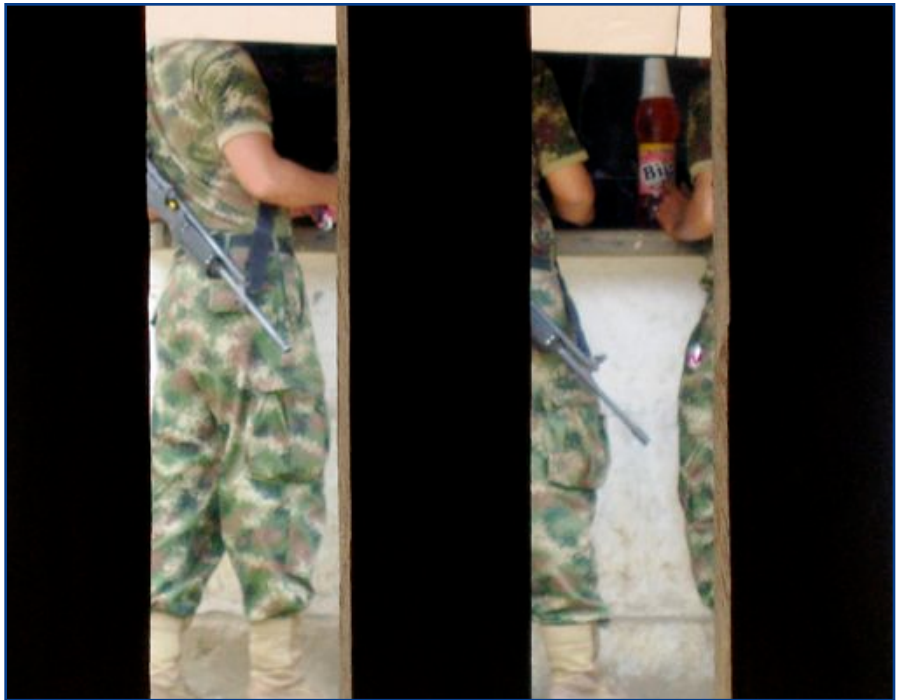
*Recommendation: Increase civilian agencies and institutions' participation in the planning and execution of the Integrated Action strategy. Do not create permanent non-security or development roles for the armed forces. Get the military out of non-security roles as soon as it is safe to do so. If it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

Looking at both regions, we can conclude that where the FARC are considered a threat, the principal face of Integrated Action is military. Where they are not — or where the main engine of violence is rivalry between “new” paramilitary groups — the military role is smaller. But it is still greater than in most contemporary Latin American democracies.

If illegal armed groups are still present in large numbers, and killing people, in the zone, then it is hard to argue against a very strong role for the security forces, including the fulfillment of some governance roles normally the province of civilians. Juan Manuel Santos had a point when he wrote in 2007:

Finding the right balance between military and social effort remains difficult. Our experience has shown that without minimum security conditions, social efforts are fruitless. For that reason, the first advance is military. ... [T]he military must establish the first strategy for consolidation which can be supported later by social activities.<sup>47</sup>

However, anyone who believes the main goal should be state-building and economic development would reject the rest of Santos' argument: “Military criteria must continue to be the genesis of the consolidation. Selecting regions for consolidation must be based on a military strategy that will destabilize enemy plans and positions.” Such criteria effectively make the guerrillas the determining factor in deciding which geographic areas should be first to benefit from a full state presence. They also make it more likely that such a state presence will be built, at least in its early



*Colombian Marines talk to a young woman at a local “tienda”*

stages, principally by the armed forces.

Santos's argument, however, is an apt description of the CCAI. At the national level, as we have seen, its Directive Council is drawn overwhelmingly from the security forces. Integrated Action zones are chosen according to recent guerrilla activity. And in these zones, the military plays an outsize development role and seeks frequent contact with the civilian population.

In fact, one of these programs' explicitly stated goals is to build communities' relationships with the military, as opposed to having the military create the security conditions necessary to allow communities to relate to the civilian part of the government. “Since the last reporting period,” notes a 2008 field report from USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives,

target communities increasingly have been willing to accept assistance with their commitments from the military. This growing willingness demonstrates an increasing level of confidence in the military, and the cooperation this confidence generates is making these relationships even stronger.<sup>48</sup>

It is not clear why improved military relationships with the civilian population are viewed as a central goal. Ultimately, the goal of a state-building program should be to make military contact with

the population infrequent and unnecessary, and to build citizens' trust in the police, the justice system, and other civilian government institutions. A fluid relationship between soldiers and citizens is only important if, in a counterinsurgent environment, the military is relying on the population as a source of intelligence. The goal of Integrated Action, at least as it is portrayed, is to get past that insecure phase quickly in order to go about the work of building a state presence.

That early phase, however, is proving difficult to overcome. The security situation in La Macarena is grave, and worsening this year, despite triumphal language from the U.S. and Colombian governments. It is notable that Integrated Action has brought security to the town centers of the Vistahermosa / La Macarena zone, particularly the municipal "county seats." However, security conditions are far from established beyond this handful of towns. The entire La Macarena program is still mired in an incipient phase in which an abnormally large security-force presence must protect the population and civilian government agencies.

Nonetheless, the armed forces in both regions are going well beyond protection, performing duties that normally correspond to civilians, particularly development and humanitarian programs. As *Semana* magazine noted in a recent article praising the model, "While the consolidation strategy is civilian, the military has a protagonistic role, from the engineer battalions that build highways, to the support for other Social Action tasks like the distribution of food and seeds."<sup>49</sup>

As discussed above, the most notable of these efforts are ambitious road-building projects: between La Uribe to La Julia, Meta, and between El Carmen de Bolívar and Chinulito, Sucre. The latter road deserves particular notice. This project, ambitious because of the rugged terrain it must cross, has been left entirely up to the Marines even though improved security has left the zone mostly "green."

Non-governmental critics of the model have expressed strong concerns about the military's dominant role and the likelihood — or reality — of human rights abuses. The Colombian human

rights group MINGA is an example:

The main risk of this strategy is that it is being developed in zones with high levels of confrontation and armed-group presence, where the civilian population is viewed as being at the service of the armed forces (with the risk implied by tying civilian non-combatants to any of the armed groups), in which civilian subordination to military power is in evidence. ... It can be said that, in this model, mayors and council members don't work mainly for the civilian population, but instead respond to military coordination in the main issues of local governance. Among these are the distribution of food, emergency assistance, health and vaccination services, school recreation activities and training courses given by military personnel.<sup>50</sup>

For their part, USAID and its contractors face their own security challenge: the imperative that they not appear to be participants in an ongoing military operation. A 2007 USAID document recognized the need to maintain some separation from the Colombian military effort, but then went on to say, in as many words, that USAID is there to support the Colombian military.

The program needs, for security reasons, to maintain a credible space between program field staff and the Colombian military—while at the same time publicly including the military in the process as a representative of the State at events ranging from municipal assemblies to public inaugurations. Coming to a joint understanding on this point has required time and tact, but the process has helped build a strong positive relationship between the program and the Colombian military.<sup>51</sup>

A church official working in the La Macarena zone was not convinced that USAID has maintained a credible distance from the military effort. "For us, USAID and Southern Command are the same thing," he said matter-of-factly.

Where security is difficult, as in La Macarena, it is understandable that the military play an outsize role in projects to strengthen local government and guarantee economic well-being. But this role must be temporary, and there must be a clear commitment to hand non-military roles to civilian institutions as soon as security conditions exist. Where security conditions do not exist, government officials must desist from raising expectations with triumphal rhetoric about security gains.

Colombia, especially after its 1991 constitution,

has one of Latin America's stronger traditions of civilian control of the military and clear division between civilian and military roles. Integrated Action will be a dangerous failure if it weakens that tradition by giving the armed forces permanent non-military roles at the expense of civilian institutions, local government and civil society.

## Coordination among government institutions

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

The Integrated Action concept and the CCAI came from a series of discussions between Colombia's Defense Ministry and U.S. Southern Command. Beyond moving the model into the Social Action agency, including other government bodies in the CCAI Executive Committee, and stationing a few mostly junior staff from other agencies at CCAI and the Coordination Centers, it is not clear what more has been done to socialize the model among the civilian sectors of the government. Clearly, though, giving civilian agencies and ministries more of a leadership role than they have now would increase their sense of "buy-in."

At the national level, capacities and even willingness to participate are uneven. Cabinet ministries and other civilian state entities whose presence would be needed have not all jumped aboard at the same rate. This is in part due to low civilian government capacity. Central government agencies and especially local governments simply lack the experience and managerial know-how to "absorb" resources — which themselves often do not exist — and carry out ambitious development programs. Slowness to join the effort is also, however, due to unwillingness to respond to the

CCAI's requests for resources, which often occur on a very informal, ad hoc basis.

As a result, while the CCAI headquarters in Bogotá is universally described as a small but efficient office staffed by dynamic young officials who believe in the joint mission, in some cases those officials are operating with little political and financial support from the ministries they represent.

Many of the non-military institutions that are supposed to be governing neglected rural areas are not stepping up quickly. "[T]he civilian component of the state response can be slow and inefficient," USAID acknowledges, discussing strong administrative and even legal disincentives to joining a fast-moving, inter-agency structure like CCAI.

It is apparent that administrative rigidity is a factor hindering the GOC's ability to respond rapidly to opportunities as they arise. Difficulties arising in the transition zones provide clear examples. This rigidity is the consequence of 1) the normal bureaucratic processes inherent in any democratic government; 2) a history of corruption that has spawned layers of processes to combat that corruption; and 3) a political culture that is accustomed to using administrative infractions to punish political opponents. This rigidity manifests as an institutional reluctance to try anything outside of the clearly defined administrative box. To address this inflexibility, a "comfort zone" needs to be established where GOC employees are allowed to take small chances and adapt procedures so that processes can move forward in the transition zones where rapid and flexible responses are required.<sup>52</sup>

We came away concerned that CCAI lacks the high-level political backing necessary to take actions that challenge bureaucratic prerogatives. The Coordination Center did not appear to be a tool for the Uribe government's political machine. To the contrary, the worry would be the opposite: that this small office is held at such arms' length from the rest of "government as usual" that it may lack the political clout necessary to gain resources or to overcome opposition from reticent ministries, local officials or economic elites.

Another reason given for civilian agencies' reluctance to plunge fully into the Integrated Action model is the lack of a legal framework to give the CCAI statutory authority and permanence. The CCAI is a presidential initiative, not a legally con-



stituted entity of the Colombian government.

The March 2009 decree setting up a Directive Council and Executive Committee addresses this deficiency by giving the CCAI some legal standing. Still, it may not be enough to convince key government ministries to devote a greater portion of their often meager existing budgets to priority Integrated Action zones like La Macarena or Montes de María. The decree itself, meanwhile, expires at the end of President Uribe's term in August 2010.

It is too early in the Integrated Action programs' lifespan to grade civilian government agencies' contributions in the priority zones. However, we heard much praise for the National Park Service and the National Learning Service (SENA). Generalized concerns were expressed about the Interior and Justice Ministry and the Agriculture Ministry. The latter is a particular concern because of its responsibility for land titling, which has been proceeding with excruciating slowness in the Integrated Action zones. (See the Land Tenure recommendation below.)

Evaluating the performance of the Presidency's Social Action office — the civilian entity in charge of the CCAI — is more complicated. The enthusiasm and capacity among younger, technical staff at CCAI and in the Coordination Centers were very much in evidence. It is not clear, though, whether this enthusiasm is shared at the higher levels of this very political agency.

Some concerns we heard about Social Action included:

- A sense that the handoff of control from the Defense Ministry is not yet consolidated, and that within the rest of the government, Defense continues to be a more energetic backer of the Integrated Action program than Social Action, the program's nominal "owner."
- A sense that Social Action, as an entity with nationwide responsibilities centralized in the Presidency, is more inclined to devote resources to more populated areas where needs are more concentrated, such as the slums that surround Bogotá and other large cities.

- A sense that Social Action responds significantly to political criteria. Many of its programs, prominent among them "Families in Action" and "Forest-Warden Families," are quite clientelistic, as they distribute cash subsidies to grateful poor people. Viewed through the lens of clientelism and seeking political support for the government in power, the sparsely populated Integrated Action zones would be a low priority. They have few voters.

We heard no consensus on how to address these concerns. Social Action is a many-tentacled agency with a political focus, and moving the CCAI out of this structure could give it more autonomy. However, Social Action is also a powerful entity within the Colombian Presidency, and keeping the CCAI within the agency could give it added clout in any effort to increase civilian agencies' "buy-in."

Without such "buy-in," Integrated Action will quickly fail. Too much will be left up to the military, which for reasons discussed above is not the appropriate agency to carry out development, state-building and civil society-strengthening duties. In addition, civilian agencies that do participate risk finding themselves carrying out roles for which they have little expertise or experience. The National Park Service project with AgroGüéjar is an example: while the effort is admirable, it was troubling to see ecologists, working largely on their own, forced to take responsibility for a mass relocation program with ambitious community organizing and income-generation components.

## Consultation with communities

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

One of the most frequently expressed criticisms of Integrated Action and the CCAI — and a very serious one — is that it is a top-down, statist model. While communities are gathered at assemblies to choose income-generating projects and the like, the priority of Integrated Action is to build a stronger state presence. Far less empha-



sis goes to building an active, organized citizenry, reconstructing a tattered social fabric, and developing citizens' abilities to oversee and denounce government excesses.

We heard accounts of gatherings of community members to discuss both rapid-impact projects and longer-term development projects. According to these accounts, such assemblies often occurred with heavy military presence — in some cases, with U.S. military advisors in attendance. Mayors, council members, and church leaders have also tended to play leading roles. *Campesinos* indicated that it was difficult to air their own concerns in such an environment. This has particularly been an issue for women, who head a significant percentage of households.

In the Montes de María, where community organizations are stronger, the European-funded Peace Laboratory, the Development and Peace Network, and NGOs like the National Movement of Victims and Sembrándopaz now have several years of experience with a process that has been more “bottom-up” in design. They have put down roots in communities, and the Coordination Center must make every effort to reach out to, and learn from, them. The same goes for the region's other active civil society groups — especially the highly threatened and vulnerable victims' groups who most urgently need protection.

## Relations with local elites

*Recommendation: Do not seek out, but do prepare for, disagreements with elements of local political and economic elites, some of whom may have ties with illegal groups or plainly favor*

## *greater land concentration.*

A main goal of CCAI in Montes de María, as presented to us at the Cartagena Coordination Center, is the return of displaced people and victims to their communities and the creation of a political pact between the community and the local government. However, we learned that some large hurdles stand in the way of actually achieving this laudable goal. Emerging criminal groups threaten human rights and victims' leaders, land tenure is an incredibly difficult subject, and true buy-in and support from the local government are far from guaranteed.

The CCAI in Montes de María may encounter resistance from local political leaders. According to one staffer at the Coordination Center, “The major challenge is to sit down with the political class. The problem is not how to build the road for the community, it is how to change the attitude of the people.” This may indeed be the greatest challenge, as it requires taking on not only the issue of corruption, but also the perhaps even thornier issue of land tenure.

Unlike La Macarena, the Montes de María are not a “vacuum” of state presence. The area has been settled for centuries, not recently carved out of the jungle, and most ministries of the central government have long had a presence in municipal capitals and the larger town centers. Mayors and town councils hold actual decisionmaking power, control resources, and often have the backing of regional political machinery.

Granted, this state presence has rarely bothered to penetrate into the rural zones that make up most of the region's territory, leaving that up to the Marines. But where governance is concerned, the Montes de María is not a “blank slate” to the extent that guerrilla-controlled La Macarena is. There is an existing power structure, with its power ratified by elections. As it works toward its principal declared goal of returning displaced populations, the Montes de María Coordination Center must work with — or around, or even against — local and departmental governments.

The declared intention, of course, is to work hand-in-glove with local authorities. “In the consolidation zones, the primary civilian face of the

State is the municipal and departmental entities — a point on which the CCAI is clear,” notes an August 2009 communication from USAID. “Strengthening local governance capacity — especially at the municipal level — has been a fundamental PCIM [La Macarena Integrated Consolidation Program] focus and is now a primary focus in Montes de María.”<sup>53</sup>

The Coordination Centers seek to commit local leaders to their program through a series of “Political Pacts” in each municipality. As we have noted, though, Sucre and Bolívar have been hard-hit by the “para-politics” scandal. We obtained no smoking-gun evidence of current officeholders’ illegal activity. We note, though, that most are members of the same political groupings as the para-politicians who came before. As a result, even if they are not proven “para-politicians” themselves, they are likely to be representing the same sets of political interests and constituencies. And those constituencies have a record of being hostile to the interests of the small landholders and formerly displaced people of rural Montes de María. This concern is ratified by repeated testimony we heard about elected leaders’ utter lack of interest even in visiting communities of small farmers and returned displaced people.

Yet these are the elected officials with whom the Coordination Center — an entity dedicated to the viability of small farmers and the return of displaced people — must work. “They were voted in,” a U.S. official explained. “You do what you can and work with everyone.”

The way to deal with the challenge of reticent local officials, officials told us, is to offer training and support to build their own management capacities; to strengthen the justice system so that official wrongdoing can be denounced and punished; to work with all social sectors, not just the local government; and to maintain a constant monitoring presence and avoid giving them direct control of resources.

Local officials, we were told, are even expected to provide resources from their own treasuries in order to increase their “buy-in.” These officials, for their part, view this as an additional strain on

tight budgets. “They [the Coordination Center] ask for resources, but there aren’t any,” Sucre’s governor told us.

The Coordination Centers’ “political pacts” are being drawn up with local institutions as they currently exist. If these institutions represent interests that favor large-scale agribusiness, do not view displaced communities’ return as a priority, and may be one or two degrees of separation away from the paramilitaries themselves, their partnership with the Coordination Center must be a very uneasy one.

In the best of scenarios, the situation could pit the central government, allied with USAID and Southern Command, against a local landowning elite that seeks further concentration of wealth and opposes the return of displaced communities. This would be an unusual match-up.

The determining factor would be Colombia’s central government: will it ultimately back the technocrats of the Coordination Centers, or would it back local elites, which have been strongly supportive of President Uribe since his first candidacy? An unencouraging sign comes from the central government’s Agriculture Ministry, which has clearly favored the large-landholder model and has been notably slow to issue land titles either in La Macarena or the Montes de María.

## Land Tenure

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

Land tenure is of paramount importance in both zones we visited. The problem of land distribution in Colombia is not a recent one, nor is it simple. Many scholars cite it as one of the major factors behind the continuation of the conflict. Some of the CCAI’s chief stated goals — the return of displaced communities in Montes de María, the





CCAI Powerpoint indicates how the agency is wrestling with the complexity of land tenure

transition to legal agriculture in La Macarena — will require officials to take on the land problem energetically. What we saw and heard, though, indicates that this will be a monumental task, fraught with political challenges.

Any effort to restore displaced farm families to their original communities must immediately confront Colombia’s unjust and intricately complicated land tenure system. In rural Colombia, land is equal to power, and competition for its control has driven the conflict for generations. This is especially true in the Montes de María, with its semi-feudal tenant-farmer past, the unusual fertility of its soil, its location among highly coveted drug-trafficking corridors, its high rate of internal displacement, and the extremely rapid land-buying rush underway today.

Meanwhile, we heard numerous concerns from a wide variety of interviewees that the Uribe government, particularly its Agriculture Ministry, espouses a rural development model based on large-scale agribusiness with heavy foreign investment. These concerns have reverberated through Colombia’s media in late 2009, in the wake of a scandal involving large govern-

ment subsidies to very wealthy and influential landowners.

As small farmers have little role in this development model, the Agriculture Ministry may require strong outside encouragement to accelerate its issuing of land titles. Doing so may require increased technical assistance to ensure that titles are not going to individuals tied to armed groups or narco-traffickers.

Small landholders and returning displaced people will need active support from the state. The Montes de María Coordination Center’s

plans indicate that it hopes to provide that support, at least to the returning communities it has selected in four municipalities. But as discussed above, it is easy to imagine that the Cartagena-based Center might encounter fierce opposition from a constituency that is supposed to be one of its key partners: the local governments of the Montes de María.

The Coordination Center envisions “Municipal Committees for Attention to the Displaced Population” — bodies made up of the mayor, the mayor’s first secretary, the International Committee of the Red Cross, police, military, church and community leaders — as the main tool for adjudicating such local land disputes. These committees’ effectiveness varies widely across municipalities, however, and some mayors have not even bothered to convene them.

In La Macarena, on the edge of Colombia’s agricultural frontier, land was also a frequently cited concern. Much suspicion of government motives appears to stem from the belief that Integrated Action will lead to a “land grab” (“despojo”), displacing peasant farmers — most of them home-

steads without land titles — in favor of large landowners.

Some of the more conspiratorial residents note that forced eradication, mass arrests, the arrival of paramilitaries, and displacement are happening at the same time that large oil palm plantations spring up in significant numbers right outside the CCAI zones. They then conclude that large landowners want the existing population out of the picture so that they can more easily appropriate their land. For those who harbor these suspicions, which are easily spread by rumors, news that land values in the region are rising is reason for alarm, not celebration.

To counter these rumors and concerns, it is important that projects be small scale, including the formation of cooperatives, and accompanied by rapid delivery of clear land titles, in order to disabuse people of the widely held “land grab” notion.

## Actions that generate distrust

### Judicialization

*Recommendation: Minimize harm to community relations by halting overzealous mass arrests of civilians suspected of guerrilla collaboration.*

In the La Macarena zone, local leaders repeatedly expressed anger that state representatives treat them like drug criminals or guerrilla auxiliaries. While they are highly distrustful of the state, they are also concerned that the state doesn't trust *them*. The practice of mass or indiscriminate arrests, often as the first activity of newly arrived judicial-branch authorities, is hugely counterproductive to strengthening the state, and should be halted.

Overcoming distrust is a huge challenge in a region that has been FARC territory for decades, where much of the population was born into, and has never known anything but, life under guerrilla control. Most of the population appears to be open to having the state protect them and provide basic services. But a small handful of the population is indeed working with the FARC. This handful of people directly threatens the security of state repre-

sentatives in the region.

The Colombian government faces a difficult balancing act: separating the hardened FARC cadres from the general population in which they are mixed, without alienating that general population. Clearly careful intelligence work, respectful of basic rights, and winning the population's trust are key to this effort. But massively detaining social leaders is counter-productive, due to the reaction it inspires among the people whom they lead.

### Forced eradication

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

Forced eradication continues to contribute to distrust. When coca eradication — whether fumigation or manual — is not accompanied by immediate food security and other productive aid, the result may be positive from a counternarcotics standpoint (there is less coca, momentarily), but disastrous from a counterinsurgency or state-building standpoint. If manual eradicators — often the first visible face of the Colombian state — mistreat the farmers and their families, the damage is compounded.

When small-scale coca growers see their illegal crop destroyed, but are left with no short-term



possibility of staying fed, one apparently common result is that they simply replant coca, or move elsewhere and replant coca. Their resentment of the Colombian government may increase, causing them to align more closely with the armed groups that depend on their product.

The La Macarena Coordination Center claims to place a high priority on following up eradication with quick delivery of food security and development assistance. However, we heard complaints about months-long lags between eradication and the first delivery of promised aid. Indeed, a USAID document notes that the Fusion Center staff are grappling “with the lack of a GOC [Government of Colombia] post-eradication program.”<sup>54</sup> It is remarkable that no such program exists.

In some areas, such as national parks or wilderness zones, the Colombian government may prefer to discourage all permanent residence or agricultural activity. Here, a policy of eradication, whether forced or voluntary, is not enough. People residing in such zones must be relocated through a humane process that involves them in its planning. The National Parks experience in La Macarena deserves close observation.

### *Human rights abuse and displacement*

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

In La Macarena, local leaders characterized most military units as being on good behavior, making an effort not to mistreat the civilian population. However, there were some serious complaints, none of which have been possible to verify due to the zone’s security situation.

The main problem respondents discussed in the La Macarena zone was forced displacement. The emptiness of towns like Puerto Toledo and (we were told) some of the surrounding countryside owed in part to the collapse of the coca economy.

Many who grew or profited from coca in the zone have simply moved elsewhere.

But economics are not the only — and may not even be the main — reason why, as a Puerto Toledo community leader put it, “Many people have had to leave” recently. The zone has seen frequent combat since 2002, when the last peace process ended and the military re-took the FARC demilitarized zone. Then, in 2004 through 2006, it was a principal theater of operations for the large-scale *Plan Patriota* military offensive. Displacement occurred as people were forced out by fighting, or pressured by the FARC to vacate the zone.

While the Integrated Action effort seeks to win the population’s “hearts and minds” with a softer touch, people with whom we spoke said that many local residents, particularly community leaders, had left in order to avoid being detained as suspected FARC supporters. We were surprised to hear fear of the Prosecutor-General’s office (Fiscalía) cited as a generator of displacement.

In the Montes de María, the recent improvement in the security situation has meant a reduction in displacement and an opportunity for some displaced people to return. Still, we heard of recent displacement resulting from two scenarios: small landholders forced to sell their territories because of debts that went unpaid during earlier periods of displacement, and a handful of victims’ leaders forced to leave the zone in the face of threats from “new” paramilitary groups.

Other serious human rights complaints included:

- One case of a “false positive,” or civilian extrajudicially executed and later presented as a guerrilla killed in combat, during the second half of 2008. We were told that this case is already in Bogotá-based human rights groups’ databases. Since 2002, the Army’s 12th Mobile Brigade, active in the zone, shows up in these databases as the military unit allegedly responsible for the most cases of “false positives” in all of Colombia: 10 different cases with 19 victims, among them 12 in Vistahermosa municipality.<sup>55</sup>



- A perceived lack of will to confront paramilitary groups, whether Cuchillo's band in La Macarena or the various "emerging" paramilitary groups in the Montes de María.
- Military and paramilitary personnel patrolling together without insignias on their uniforms. U.S. and Colombian officials vehemently denied this charge.
- Four indiscriminate aerial bombings in Puerto Rico municipality in the first half of 2009, with no casualties.
- Blocking trucks carrying food aid to populations, and stealing some of it for themselves. Local human rights advocates reported raising this issue directly with the commander of the 12th Mobile Brigade.
- Aggressive behavior or harassment of civilians, including unfounded accusations of being guerrillas. This includes obligating civilians to "demobilize," even though they were not FARC members, using language like "either you demobilize, or we'll arrest you."

This latter accusation was leveled principally at the police, not the army. While army units have received some training in tactics to win the population's trust, the police — many of whose members have strong memories of being stationed alone, ever vulnerable, in the midst of guerrilla-controlled towns like those in the La Macarena zone — appear to require more orientation in community relations.

In the Montes de María, where Col. Rafael Colón's tenure improved the Marine Corps' relations with the population, it is also the police that face the most frequent complaints. These centered principally on allegations of petty corruption, tolerance of organized crime (including organized crime allegedly tied to local governments), and poor or nonexistent responses to common crime.

## The program's sustainability

*Recommendation: Focus more on the sustainability of the effort. Lengthen the timeframe beyond 2010. Integrated Action will not be credible to key constituencies — including civilian government agencies called on to take part in it — if*

*it is in danger of ending too quickly. Use added resources to move beyond short-term demonstration projects and commit to larger-scale efforts, especially infrastructure and basic services.*

Colombian armed groups have amply demonstrated their ability to out-wait and outlast military offensives and promises of development aid. We were told that many displaced persons fear returning, especially through a program run by the local government or military, since they saw few guarantees that they would not be displaced again by violence. This fear resonated in many of the meetings we held. People were wary of working with the state without a guarantee that this new program would continue for more than a few years, for fear of retaliation from illegal armed groups once the state — in their view, inevitably — disappears.

To convince citizens that "this time it will be different," it is essential to make clear that the CCAI is more than just a military occupation. Multi-year commitments for large civilian projects — including the construction of facilities for representatives of civilian government agencies — would do much to ease skepticism. A longer timeframe and a firmer legal status for this more civilian CCAI would also be necessary, as it is disingenuous to believe that any of the program's priority zones will have been "consolidated," and thus ready for handover to existing civilian government ministries, by 2010 or 2011. Yet for now at least, the March 2009 presidential decree formalizing the CCAI is set to expire in August 2010.

## CONCLUSION

Colombia is a very difficult country to govern. Getting it right will require an approach that measures success by more than just the criteria of counterinsurgency. Weakening the dominion of armed groups — and consolidating those gains in specific territories — is only an intermediate indicator of success.

Despite the often serious problems and shortcomings this report discusses, the Integrated Action effort has raised citizens' expectations in the zones we visited. We noted a very real desire to

live in an area governed by a proper state, to feel secure, to have title to land, and to take ownership of community planning processes.

Success, though, will require that citizens be convinced that a state — not martial law, not local politicians captured by elites, but a civilian-run state that enforces the law and provides basic services — is truly being established in the Integrated Action zones. This will require more than a few years of quick-impact projects. It means delivery of services and a constant state presence among communities that have never known one. It means a steady demilitarization of the effort, and a process that actively seeks, and responds to, organized citizens' expressed priorities. And it means a very long-term commitment.

Despite the program's flaws, it would do more harm than good to abandon or cease to support Integrated Action. But the model could go badly awry, with grave consequences, if it continues without a number of significant adjustments. In sum, as laid out in our recommendations, these adjustments would include the following.

- Civilianize the Integrated Action strategy as soon as security conditions allow it.
- Coordinate the disparate agencies, and give political clout to those charged with coordinating.
- Consult with communities about almost everything.
- Work with, but be prepared to say “no” to, local political elites.
- Act as quickly as possible on land tenure and property rights.
- Investigate and punish all allegations of abuse, corruption or predatory behavior.
- Make clear that this effort is for the long haul.

Finally, in a more conceptual sense, the U.S. and Colombian governments must decide what sort of “consolidation” Integrated Action seeks. Is this a counterinsurgency program, a counternarcotics program, or a state-building program?

Defenders of Integrated Action might argue that its brilliance lies in the manner in which it hybridizes these three strategies. Either they would

prioritize counterinsurgency, or they would argue that all three are equal components that reinforce each other.

That is often untrue, however. Counterinsurgency undermines state-building when government representatives alienate community leaders whom they suspect of guerrilla ties, when anti-guerrilla priorities take precedence over priorities drawn from consultation with citizens, or when the military simply assumes all governance responsibilities. Counternarcotics undermines both counterinsurgency and state building when forced eradication leaves *campesinos* hungry and angry at the government.

In our view, state-building goals must have priority over counternarcotics and counterinsurgency. The Colombian state is not an occupying power that expects to leave some day. Colombia's state can have no exit strategy: it must govern these territories forever. There is much to build.

The success of Integrated Action will not be measured by the number of guerrilla attacks or the number of hectares of coca eradicated. It will depend on the extent to which these strategies build a functioning, mostly civilian state in vast areas of Colombia that have never had one. If Integrated Action focuses on meeting that good governance standard, it will leave behind territories that are infertile ground for armed groups, narco-trafficking or organized crime. Govern well — with a full state presence and low impunity — and the guerrilla and narco-trafficking problems will fade.

If Integrated Action can do away with statelessness and impunity in lawless regions of Colombia, it would offer the world — and the planners of U.S. reconstruction development assistance, in Afghanistan and elsewhere — a promising model. Integrated Action is not there yet. But nor is a poor outcome assured. With important adjustments and corrections, a willingness to recognize failures and learn from frustrations, and close citizen monitoring of the programs' execution, what has been started could yet turn out well.

The Center for International Policy looks forward to continuing that citizen monitoring, in coordination with Colombian partners, in 2010 and beyond.

## ENDNOTES

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