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Canadian Foundation for the Americas  
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**The Norman Paterson School  
of International Affairs**

# **The Internationalization of the Colombia Conflict: Implications for Andean Countries**

**Ottawa, October 22-23, 2001**

## **Workshop Report**

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The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) is an independent, non-governmental organization dedicated to deepening and strengthening Canada's relations with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean through policy discussion and analysis. FOCAL's mission is to develop a greater understanding of important hemispheric issues and to help build a stronger community of the Americas

**The Internationalization of the Colombia Conflict: Implications for Andean Countries**  
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**Participants**

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**Background**

The workshop *Internationalization of the Colombia Conflict: Implications for the Andean Region* was jointly organized by the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (Carleton University), with the assistance from the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia<sup>1</sup>.

The workshop aimed to address significant knowledge gaps on the regional implications of the Colombia conflict. The spillover of the Colombian conflict into neighbouring countries is an acknowledged risk, but there is still inadequate information on the implications for individual Andean countries, and also for intra-regional relations and medium to long-term regional stability.

In addition, the workshop aimed to open a space for dialogue between experts from North America and from the Andean region, and between academic researchers, policy analysts and government officials. Participating in the meeting were over 20 invited experts from Canada, the United States, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela and Argentina.

The two-day workshop was comprised of four separate panels:

- Panel 1: Relations between the Andean Region and the international community
- Panel 2: Shifting regional relations
- Panel 3: Impact of the conflict on domestic politics
- Panel 4: Policy implications and options for international engagement in Colombia and the region

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<sup>1</sup> The conference was organized by Cristina Rojas, Assistant professor (NPSIA); Sharon O'Regan, Deputy Director (FOCAL); and Alvaro Camacho from the Universidad de los Andes.

## **Panel 1: Relations between the Andean Region and the international community:**

This panel discussed recent domestic developments in Colombia's internal conflict and the involvement of key international actors, notably the United States. The panel also assessed Bolivia's alternative development strategy as a possible model for the region and considered the internal conflict's importance for Canada.

### *Shifting Domestic Tides*

One of the most notable recent changes in the internal conflict is that Colombia's guerrilla forces have lost much of their momentum over the past year and a half. While they continue to control significant amounts of the country's territory, their capacity to make new gains has been reduced. Three main reasons for this change were suggested: First, the traditionally weak Colombian Armed Forces have improved significantly in recent months, with new strike and transport helicopters, satellite information access, and a growing professionalism within the military as a whole. Speakers suggested that the balance of power in the conflict might change in the coming years, with important implications for an eventual solution - either military or negotiated.

The second reason, a more troubling development, has been the increasing influence of paramilitary organizations, or '*autodefensas*', throughout much of the country. Authors of countless killings and massacres, these groups have made the conflict highly complex and difficult to manage. Many of these groups are closely linked to the military itself, although others have gained increasing independence in certain areas. While the international community has expressed serious concerns over human rights violations linked to the paramilitaries, participants noted that they have undeniably served to weaken the guerrilla in many areas, and are a key asset for an undermanned Colombian military.

Third, the guerrilla itself has shown signs of internal tensions and deterioration in overall co-operation. It was noted that the localized nature of financing activities, including drug trafficking, extortion and kidnappings, have led to increased independence for regional commanders to the detriment of the groups' overall coherence. This has been particularly evident in the case of the FARC. For its part, the ELN was deemed to have been more successful in maintaining organizational discipline.

With a few exceptions, most participants did not believe that these developments would lead to a greater drive for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Instead, speakers suggested that the Colombian Armed Forces might now expand their operations in search of military victory, a possibility that seemed highly unlikely a short time ago. For their part, although weakened, guerrilla groups are still well financed and have little problem in recruiting new members. Guerrilla leaders are also aware that putting down their arms and entering into public discussions would mean media exposure and serious personal security risks. Indeed, most participants were pessimistic that either side would be willing to make important concessions towards a peace deal in the foreseeable future.

### *A New International Climate*

Changes to the international order after the events of September 11 were identified as highly relevant to the Colombian case. Security has clearly become an issue of collective and global reach, and conflicts around the world are increasingly addressed within the context of the US-led 'War on Terrorism'. Recent resolutions at the United Nations have approved military action against terrorist organizations and measures to attack their networks of financing. Given that rebel groups in Colombia have been included on the US' list of terrorist organizations, participants agreed that this will have important implications for US involvement in the country. A symbolic change is the fact that US military officials have now become the normal spokespersons regarding policies towards Colombia.

While Colombia will likely be the subject of increased US attention in the post-September 11th climate, changes to the existing Plan Colombia are still to be defined. Meanwhile, the US is undertaking changes to assist Colombia's exports through the Andean Preference Act (ATPC), including new quotas for an expanded list of products. This will clearly benefit the national economy, and will likely lead to a renewed willingness to co-operate with US priorities in the region.

Participants also suggested that paramilitary organizations in Colombia would benefit from the new international climate, as their actions will likely be justified within the context of the 'War on Terrorism'. This could further weaken rebel groups' military position and negotiating power in the years to come. Increasing US pressure on countries to join their global coalition may also lead to a less sympathetic view of the FARC and its allies internationally. Mexico, for example, has voiced a willingness to reconsider its position vis-à-vis the guerrilla after the kidnapping of several Mexican nationals.

### *The Alternative Development Model: Bolivia's Experience*

The panel also included a discussion of the Bolivian case, in which an "alternative development" model was promoted by the US to deal with the country's drug trafficking industry. While many US policy makers believe that Bolivia symbolizes a successful case of a non-military solution to drug trafficking that could be applied to other parts of the Andean region, participants warned that the policy has failed in a number of important ways.

Bolivia's 'Dignity Plan', begun in 1998, has been undeniably successful in eradicating coca crops in the country. Still, speakers stressed that the country's economy has suffered under the plan, as no other industry has been able to generate comparable levels of income. Given the type of soil in Bolivia, along with the country's relative lack of skilled labour, technology, and access to markets, the loss of the coca industry has been a hard pill to swallow. The government, meanwhile, was deemed to lack the capacity and willingness to invest in infrastructure or human resources needed to promote other industries.

As Bolivia has fallen into recession, a situation made worse by the economic slowdown in Mercosur neighbours and the US, the hardest hit have been the peasants that once relied on coca

for their livelihood. Protests have grown, leading to increasing social unrest and political uncertainty. Meanwhile, participants feared that the military and police forces appear to be on a collision course with protest movements. Military harassment has become an increasing reality in regions home to major protests, with serious implications for democracy in the country

Participants argued against the application of the Bolivian model to other parts of the region, favouring instead a rethinking of the Alternative Development strategy. In particular, speakers argued for the strengthening of state institutions and their capacity to support development initiatives as a prerequisite to any major crop eradication campaigns.

### *Implications for Canada*

Speakers also stressed the importance of the Colombia case for Canada's regional objectives. Given Canada's recent prioritization of the Americas region in its foreign policies (i.e. through hosting the OAS General Assembly and the Summit of the Americas), Canada must address the region's greatest crisis. Indeed, it was noted that Canada's priorities (fostering a more peaceful, prosperous and democratic region) are directly threatened by the Colombian reality. Participants argued for a continued Canadian engagement in Colombia over the long run.

## **Panel 2: Shifting Regional Relations**

This panel focused on the Colombian conflict from the perspective of its neighbouring countries, notably in terms of the bilateral relations between Colombia and other Andean countries. Participants noted that the region has not been known for its political or security co-operation in the past, largely as a result of the significant cultural, economic, political, ethnic and social differences between Andean countries. At the same time, Andean countries are inextricably linked to the Colombian conflict, due to the war's contribution to overall political and military uncertainty and instability in the region. Given the relatively fragile regimes and governing institutions in the region, their vulnerability to potential spillover effects from the Colombian conflict is a topic of much concern.

Although Andean countries are clearly affected by the Colombia crisis, some participants were critical of what they saw as reactive, rather than proactive, actions and strategies adopted by neighbouring countries with regards to Colombia. Some felt that Andean countries seem primarily preoccupied with guarding their sovereignty against US involvement instead of working constructively towards peace in the region. Their limited participation in most international plans and engagements in the region were cited as proof of this lack of initiative.

### *Ecuador*

Speakers outlined three main concerns for Ecuador related to the Colombian conflict. First, Ecuador must deal with a rising number of armed actors operating within its borders as a result of the military spillover from Colombia. Second, growing numbers of refugees have crossed the border into Ecuador, bringing with them serious potential for a humanitarian disaster and an

additional strain on an already-battered national economy. Only 5 million dollars have been budgeted by the Ecuadorian government to address refugee-related issues, leaving participants to wonder whether the government is clearly aware of the situation, or able to adopt an appropriate response. A third issue of real concern is the transplantation of illicit crops and drug production to Ecuadorian territory as a result of eradication efforts in Colombia.

Despite these concerns, some participants felt that Ecuador has symbolized the general lack of initiative taken by Colombia's neighbours to participate in regional peace initiatives. They pointed to Ecuador's tendency to act unilaterally on security issues related to Colombia's internal crisis, including the growing militarization of the Ecuador-Colombia border. Participants lamented the lack of co-operation or joint initiatives on security issues, and called for the development of bilateral dialogue and policy-making on issues of mutual interest.

### *Venezuela*

Venezuela and Colombia have historically had a close relationship given their cultural and geographic similarities, and Venezuela has perhaps been the most important Andean player in the Colombia conflict. However, Venezuela's recent involvement has become a highly controversial affair given the diverging domestic and foreign policies and rhetoric adopted by the respective governments.

Most of the recent tensions surround Venezuela's current leader, President Hugo Chávez, whose "Bolivarian" vision of regional integration and anti-US position has clashed with Colombia's continuing co-operation with the US. Venezuela fears a loss of sovereignty in the region as a whole, particularly under Plan Colombia, which Chávez claims will bring further instability and violence. Another concern has been the lack of consultation with Andean countries during the Plan's planning. Meanwhile, Venezuela has established direct relations with guerrilla groups, much to the irritation of Colombian leaders. While Venezuela has generally co-operated with US anti-drug policies, tensions may also grow given the country's opposition to airspace interjection and radar systems called for under Plan Colombia.

The ongoing conflict clearly has important domestic implications for Venezuela. The country fears an influx of coca harvesting on its own land and the establishment of drug-processing laboratories within its borders. There is already evidence of a "transfer" of illicit crops to Venezuelan territory, bringing with it rising insecurity. To date, Venezuela has been used for money laundering, weapons shipping and drug trafficking, but the government fears that its territory could also become home to military conflict. In response, Venezuela has mobilized a significant military force along the Colombian border, and tensions remain high. Concerns in Venezuela have also been driven by its military inferiority to Colombia (made worse by Plan Colombia), resulting in a 50% increase in Venezuela's defence budget over the last three years.

In general participants expressed serious concerns over the lack of co-operation between the two countries, and an inability to develop common security policies. Many stressed the importance of ending bilateral tensions given their risk to regional stability and security, but few were optimistic that positions would change in the near future.

## *Peru*

Peru has also felt the effects of the Colombian conflict. Many Peruvians are now trying their hand in the cocaine-heroin industries both on their own land and across the border in Colombia, while ecological damage has also been significant as a result of regional crop-eradication efforts.

Participants stressed the need for a state policy on drugs issues in Peru. Although the total income generated from drug trafficking in Peru remains relatively low, the impacts of the drug trade on the country's weak state institutions are of growing concern. At the same time, speakers stressed the need for the policy to consider differences between US priorities and traditional practices in Peru, where coca leaf production and consumption are part of many average workers' lives, and where chemical eradication of coca fields remain forbidden. Participants noted that recent efforts to develop alternative crops for coca farmers have failed, and communication between policy makers and local farmers has been severely lacking. The importance of addressing the concerns of local farmers in Peru regarding crop eradication efforts was stressed.

### *Structural changes in drug trafficking*

Participants noted a number of important changes that have taken place within the illicit drug trafficking industry in recent years. As the traditional cartels (i.e. Medellin and Cali) have lost strength, cocaine production and distribution have fragmented into hundreds of smaller units, while total coca cultivation continues to grow. New actors have entered the picture, notably Mexican cartels serving as transition points from Colombia to US street distribution. The decentralization of the industry and the increasing number of players has made the 'War on Drugs' increasingly difficult to wage.

Adding to the difficulties for law enforcement is the changing profile of the average Colombian trafficker. Most now are young, educated, and less noticeable figures than the extravagant cartel leaders of the 1980s. Some participants also suggested that drug dealers have become less of a preoccupation for the government since they are less unified or politically charged. At the same time, however, participants warned that this anarchic system might actually constitute a greater obstacle to social stability than the more ordered system of the past.

### **Panel 3: Impact of the conflict on domestic politics**

This panel addressed the domestic impact of Colombia's conflict, with a particular reference to issues including income distribution, the situation of indigenous groups and gender relations. The panel discussion also identified key factors that have allowed for the development and perpetuation of the conflict, factors which must be addressed to bring greater stability to the country.

### *Effects of the drug industry on income distribution*

The drug trade was deemed to have a surprisingly limited *direct* impact on the economy, accounting for only five percent of the GDP and employing only between two and three percent of the country's agricultural labour force. Income from the industry was also felt to have relatively little impact on overall economic inequality, although the elite classes have generally benefited more from drug trafficking.

The *indirect* effects of the drug industry are considerably more important, as outlined in the panel presentations. First, the extensive money laundering linked to the drug trade has clearly benefited financial advisors and institutions, and as such has provided additional income to the elite class. Second, the demand for land to produce and store illicit drugs has raised land prices, thereby benefiting wealthy landowners and undermining the capacity of small farmers to acquire property. Third, the construction industry has benefited from the drug industry and employed a significant number of labourers, yet the industry's reliance on drug money makes it highly volatile and detrimental to the financial security of many workers.

Given these realities, the drug industry and its related activities have generally worked as a force for greater inequality and financial insecurity in the country. The impact of the drug industry on internal peace and security is also clear, bringing with it a host of concerns that have undermined economic prosperity in the country.

#### *Caught in the Crossfire: Colombia's Indigenous peoples*

Indigenous communities have struggled for collective land rights since the 19th century, and now own roughly 25% of the national territory through provisions in the 1991 Constitution. This makes the indigenous population an important social and political presence in the country, and participants noted the strong sense of identity that generally characterizes the country's indigenous peoples.

At the same time, the Constitution has fallen well short of resolving a host of difficulties facing the indigenous population in Colombia. Indigenous people continue to be highly over represented among the nations' poor, and generally inhabit areas of the country most affected by violence and social instability. They have become the targets of violence from all sides of the conflict, including the guerrilla, paramilitaries, and state forces, given the frequent association of indigenous peoples with delinquency or insubordination. These perceptions have had serious consequences for indigenous communities, and participants stressed the need to change general attitudes towards indigenous people, as well as a greater understanding of their highly diverse and heterogeneous nature. Colombian leaders were also encouraged to recognize the key role that Indigenous communities could play in the creation of a more democratic society.

#### *Gender Dynamics*

Speakers argued that violence is not an intrinsic element of Colombian society, but rather a reflection of a deterioration of discourse between groups in the country. The need to change the current perception of the "other" as a dangerous entity needing containment and repression is a

key aspect of any peace effort. An important element of this transformation, it was argued, was to ensure a greater voice for social actors traditionally left out of decision-making, notably women.

The discussion of gender issues also underlined an increase in the participation of women in military conflict and drug-related activities in the country, with a resulting rise in abuses committed against women. Speakers argued that women are deeply affected by the violent conflict in Colombia, often in different and more intense ways than men. According to panel participants, the effect of violence on women, and their participation in it, should garner more attention from academics and government policy makers, and should be taken into consideration in peace initiatives.

### *Is Colombia Different?*

Speakers also discussed key issues in Colombia that have fostered the proliferation of problems including drug trafficking, internal conflict, corruption, etc. The historical weakness of the Colombia state was generally felt to have served as a key catalyst for long-standing insecurity. In particular, the central government's inability to collect revenue from the national population has long undermined its capacity to govern effectively or to implement national policies. The lack of funds have also led to a relatively underdeveloped national infrastructure, further complicating efforts to foster national co-operation. The strength of the state has also been undermined by the highly fractured nature of national political parties. Political authority has generally remained decentralized, with the strength of local *caudillo* figures working as a force against overall social cohesion.

Speakers also noted that social institutions throughout the country are generally weak and fragmented, making the growth of common norms and the enforcement of rules very difficult. The country's army is a further point of weakness. The military has long been under-funded and undermanned, allowing for the growth and prosperity of revolutionary movements. Together, these factors have made Colombia a breeding ground for internal conflict and instability. Clearly, peace efforts must adequately address the many factors that have allowed for the perpetuation of civil conflict in order to bring change over the long run.

### **Panel 4: Policy implications and options for international engagement in Colombia and the region**

The final panel discussed a number of key areas and priorities for future international engagement in Colombia. In particular, participants stressed the need for grassroots democratization initiatives, a deepened dialogue on policymaking among regional actors, and a rethinking of drug policies. The discussions also outlined a number of key priorities for Canadian involvement, including expanded support for civil society organizations and a focus on multilateral co-operation.

### *De-militarizing the conflict*

*Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) – Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA)*

Many participants stressed the need for the international community to apply a more constructive, non-violent and long-term strategy to breed peace in Colombia. Many were critical of military-led solutions to the ongoing crisis, particularly those led by the United States. The idea of grassroots democracy building was a common theme during the discussions, with speakers stressing the need to support civil society actors in the country. Measures to increase dialogue and contact between various social actors were seen as essential to the fostering of a more open society as whole, and as an eventual springboard towards democratization and peace.

Participants were largely in agreement over the need to improve basic socio-economic conditions in order to develop a more secure and inclusive society. The issue of land reform, and the more equitable distribution of land in particular, were highlighted as an important means to allow for peasants to gain a greater voice in social policy-making. Also discussed was the issue of alternative crop development, an important need given the efforts to eradicate plants used to produce illicit drugs. Many peasants' farmers are dependent on income from coca farming, and anti-drug programs have left them highly vulnerable.

### *Building Good Neighbours*

Most participants felt that Colombia should increase its dialogue with other Andean countries to find a common ground on which policies could be made, and eventual support for a more regional approach to the conflict. Given the controversial nature of US policy-making towards the country, some felt that Latin American countries as a whole should strive for a common front in dealing with the crisis. For Andean countries, a number of joint policy measures were suggested, including: programs to replace fumigation of coca plantations by manual plant elimination; the development of coherent and long-term alternative development programs; greater research to identify new economic opportunities in the region; the establishment of mutual evaluation mechanisms on drug policy to replace US certification; and the creation of a widened space for civil society actors to take part in policy making.

### *Rethinking Drug Policy*

Integral too much of the workshop's discussion was the treatment of illicit drugs. Participants were largely favourable to a reconsideration of drug policy, including a shift away from the "demonization" of drugs that the US was seen to promote. Without explicitly suggesting a legalization of drugs, some participants argued in favour of identifying alternatives to strict interdiction measures, drawing from experiences in countries where laws have been softened and social programs focused on the demand side of the industry. Overall, participants felt that a greater dialogue between international policy-makers on the treatment of drugs in the region was of significant importance, and many were critical of the US' rigid position on the issue.

Participants agreed on the tremendous environmental and social hazards caused by the mass eradication of drug crops, both in terms of the pollution and contamination caused by fumigation, and income loss caused by a lack of revenue alternatives for farmers. Rethinking drug policies must include consideration of the serious impacts inflicted by current practices.

### *Canada's Role*

Participants stressed the need for Canada to remain open and willing to respond to new developments in Colombia. Given the unlikelihood of a solution in the short-term, realism and patience within Canadian policies are critical.

Most participants felt that Canada had the most to offer through efforts to strengthen Colombia's civil society organizations. Speakers stressed the importance of facilitating the work of human rights workers, indigenous leaders and environmental groups in Colombia by offering training, research expertise, financial support and institutional linkages with Canadian organizations. A key element of civil society support must be the creation of discussion forums among social and political actors in the country, an area where Canada may offer its expertise and "third-party" convening power. Discussion forums are essential to the development of effective strategies addressing alternative development, employment strategies, and environmental degradation. The importance of including civil society organizations within the peace negotiations themselves was underlined. Academic exchanges and linkages were also identified as an important means to deepen dialogue and develop Colombia's intellectual capital.

Participants also suggested that Canada should continue to focus on multilateral efforts and initiatives in Colombia, and as such, offer an alternative to the more heavy-handed, unilateral policy making of the US. These may include areas such as anti-corruption and state-strengthening initiatives. An important conclusion from the meeting was the need for deepened dialogue and co-operation between regional actors and Andean countries in particular, and Canada's convening power could prove to be a key asset in developing coherent strategies towards Colombia.

The workshop and the preparation and printing of this report has been made possible thanks to the financial support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canadian International Development Agency.

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