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Opinion

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LATIN AMERICA

U.S. must stand by Colombia

 BY MIKE SPAGAT
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After months of neglect, Colombia suddenly has appeared on the Washington radar screen as Congress gears up to debate the U.S. role in the Colombian conflict.

Last week, on the same day that the U.S. House Committee on Government Reform held hearings, Colombia's main guerrilla group claimed credit for the massacre of 34 peasants who were reportedly supplying its enemies with coca. But Washington must not conclude that the war is going badly. In reality, this gruesome event reveals a seriously weakened, but dangerously desperate, insurgency.

The United States has been pouring about \$700 million per year into the country under Plan Colombia. This program finances mainly the drug war, particularly aerial eradication of coca plants. But it has steadily shifted toward more-direct counterinsurgency support. Plan Colombia is expiring next year, so the United States now must redefine its Colombia strategy.

The Colombian strife has been dramatically transformed over the last two years. This is evident from a new computer database that my colleagues Jorge Restrepo and Juan Vargas and I have assembled over two years.

The main actors in the database are: government forces, two left-wing guerrilla groups -- the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) -- and the right-wing paramilitaries known as the United Self-defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The coffers of the guerrilla groups and the paramilitaries have swollen in recent years from diverse income sources that include drugs, kidnapping and extortion.

What do our numbers show?

- The ELN is a spent force. Its attacking activity has dropped precipitously since 2000 and now barely registers as a factor in the conflict. The group is approaching the government to start demobilization negotiations from a position of severe weakness.
- The paramilitaries have been the biggest killers of civilians in recent years. However, two years ago they were killing civilians at more than three times their current rate of about 20 per month. The present level is their lowest since 1988.
- Government forces are hammering the FARC. Our data show that the frequency of government clashes with the FARC has been at all-time highs for the last two years. And the ratio of government soldiers to guerrillas killed in these events reveals the best-ever performance by the military, with continuous improvement to boot.

The last two points are closely linked. Paramilitary activity exploded between 1996 and 2002 when the guerrillas seized an advantage. This was disastrous for civilians because of the paramilitaries' dirty fighting practices. But now that the government has regained the initiative, civilians are benefiting from the paramilitaries' decline.

Plan Colombia is working

Our data also show that the FARC has long had the upper hand in its clashes with the paramilitaries, raising an obvious question: Why should the paramilitaries remain in the field when they are hardly damaging the FARC and the government is? Indeed, the AUC is now in

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demobilization negotiations with the government.

Plan Colombia has helped Colombia achieve these results. Coca cultivation has been halved. This must be strangling the finances of the illegal armed groups just as Plan Colombia is peaking in potency. To let the illegal armed groups off the hook at this key stage would be the height of irresponsibility.

The United States should continue funding the eradication and interdiction programs that are already up and running. But it also should throw its support behind Colombia's efforts to propagate state presence nationwide, taking the ground away from the illegal armed groups. This requires a major expansion of police, justice and human-rights institutions.

When the state is present and takes responsibility for security, fewer people are killed, kidnapped or displaced. The present Colombian government is the most determined ever to rise to this challenge. The population stands squarely behind its approach, and the United States should, too.

Mike Spagat is a professor of economics at the University of London's Royal Holloway College.

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