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Colombia, Ecuador and Two Plans: An Overview of the Colombian Conflict and Colombian-Ecuadorian Relations

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Bilateral relations between Colombia and Ecuador are frequently put to the test. Two deaths resulting from Colombian military incursion into Ecuadorian territory in March 2007, the recent discovery of the bodies of at least eight Ecuadorians in mass graves in Colombia, and the detention of nine members and affiliates of the FARC in Ecuador are but a few of the manifestations of the spill-over of the endemic violence in Colombia into Ecuador.

The principal internal actors that constitute the changeable geometry of the Colombian conflict are the Colombian state; two left-wing guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC by its Spanish acronym) and the National Liberation Army (ELN); the right-wing paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC); as well as numerous drug cartels. The conflict's international reach in terms of drugs, violence and refugees explains the involvement of external forces, including mainly the United States, making Colombia the third largest recipient of US aid. There are other international non-state actors, however, which form part of the equation, such as multinational oil companies. There has also been evidence of members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) lending support and expertise to the FARC. In broad terms, the Colombian conflict can be understood by means of three interrelated analytical concepts: Firstly, the loss of the state's monopoly of violence, referring to the Weberian prerogative of the sovereign state to use and dispense force as a way to guarantee the rule of law. This is most evident in the development of paramilitary units such as the AUC, founded to ensure the security that the state failed to provide. According to a recent report by the International Crisis Group, new armed groups of this sort are emerging, especially



after the AUC has entered in a process of disintegration since 2003. Many of these new groups are intimately tied to the drug business in Colombia and the New Generation Organisation (ONG) in Nariño is an example of this. Secondly, the Colombian conflict is a war over the control of resource, both legal, such as oil, and illegal, principally in the form of coca cultivation and the drug trade. The revenues from drug production form the primary source of income for the guerrillas and are estimated to generate hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Guerrillas also seek to attack the state's resource complex, for instance through repeated bombings of the Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline which has produced annual losses in the realm of USD 430 million for the Colombian state. Thirdly emerges the infraction of Colombian state's territorial sovereignty which at few points in its history could claim complete control of its territory. A striking example of this are the *despejes*, or demilitarised zones that were ceded to the FARC in 1998 as part of an attempt at appeasement under President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002). The *depeje* effectively created a "state-within-a-state" in which a parallel local government was set up, complete with its own judicial system and police force. The *despeje* strategy proved a fiasco, however, as the FARC failed to cooperate and violated previously made agreements regarding the suspension of coca cultivation and military operations in the zone.

Plan Colombia was conceived in 2000 under the then Colombian President Pastrana and financed by the Clinton administration. 75% of the total funds of USD 1.3 billion were earmarked for military training and counter-narcotics operations and to this day the Plan hinges upon the fight against drugs. Strategies include voluntary eradication, agricultural alternatives, and the aerial fumigation of suspected drug plantations with pesticides. The Colombian government recently informed that 1600 ha of coca had been eradicated manually in belt stretching 10km along the



Colombian-Ecuadorian border. Funding and training for the Colombian counter-narcotics is provided by the United States. As part of the tight collaboration between Colombia and the US on this issue, Colombia has also committed to the controversial practice of extradition, turning over 137 individuals to the US since 2000 to face narco-terrorist charges. Social development programmes complement the Plan, including projects targeting families and education, employment and traineeship programmes, improvement of physical infrastructure and the strengthening of public institutions and civil society.

While Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has warned that the conflict in his country could destabilise other Latin American countries and has used this argument to rally the support of his neighbours, Ecuador and other countries see this danger as a reason precisely not to become actively involved in the Colombian conflict. Ecuador feels drawn into what it perceives to be an external conflict and is grappling with the “collateral damage” of Plan Colombia. Alejandro Suárez, Ecuadorian ambassador to Colombia, has stated that “an adequate recognition of the problems that Plan Colombia and its military dimensions have brought upon Ecuador is our most important demand towards Colombia”.

The contagion of the conflict manifests itself in three areas: the flow of refugees and migrants, the contagion of actual violence, and the controversy surrounding the fumigations of coca plantations. The situation is most acute in Ecuador’s northern provinces Esmeraldas, Carchi and Sucumbíos where institutions are weak and poverty and unemployment coincide with the largest proportion of Colombian refugees in the country. Most communities in these areas lack basic services and



levels of education are among the lowest in the country, with an 8.5% illiteracy rate and only 9.9% of the population in higher education in Sucumbíos, for instance.

Ecuador has always had an ambivalent relationship with the large number of Colombians seeking refuge from the violence and persecution across the border. Since 2000, Ecuador has received 44,400 applications for refugee status of which 12,800 have been granted, almost all of which are of Colombian origin. Hosting around half a million Colombians, the largest refugee population in Latin America, of which almost half reside in the three northern provinces plus Imbabura and Orellana, Ecuador has been lauded by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as a model country in its treatment of the refugees. At the same time, socio-economic strain, competition in the labour market, high rates of crime and entire communities infiltrated and dominated by FARC, makes Ecuadorians increasingly uneasy the Colombian presence in their country and has resulted in a largely negative perception of Colombians in society.

Second is the spill-over of violence into Ecuadorian territory. This takes the form of accidental or deliberate military incursions into Ecuador, and the trespassing of guerrillas trying to take shelter in the neighbouring territory. Although Colombian guerrilla groups have repeatedly stated that they harbour no intentions of expanding their activities into Ecuador, at a national level the US military base in Manta is seen by some as compromising Ecuador's neutral stance in the conflict, making it a target for guerrilla violence. Other forms of violence include targeted murders (Esmeraldas, Sucumbíos and Carchi have some of the country's highest homicide rates) as well as the extortion of "mafia-style" protection fees. The presence of the guerrilla in Ecuador is a source of great insecurity for Colombian refugees who, afraid to expose themselves as Colombians and risk continued persecution, decide not to take



advantage of the assistance offered by the Ecuadorian state and international organisations. Guerrilla-paramilitary-army warfare has also led to the internal displacement of Ecuadorian populations in the border area.

A third major point of contention is the Colombian government's insistence to eradicate coca plantations in the border regions with Ecuador using Glyphosate which, usually sprayed from aircrafts, enters Ecuador via wind and water. Concerns not only include the "balloon effect" in which the eradication of coca in Colombia simply leads to the displacement of coca production into Ecuador, but also environmental and public health consequences for Ecuadorian communities. In reaction to Uribe's decision to resume fumigations at the end of 2006 after a year of suspension, Ecuador retracted Ambassador Alejandro Suárez from his post in Bogotá for four months earlier this year. The American company producing the pesticide DynCorp insists that Glyphosate is innocuous to human health; the same company which in 2002 received a contract from the US government putting it in charge of the administrative and logistical support functions of the US military base of Manta. One of numerous claims against the company is one filed by the Latin American Association for Human Rights (Aldhu) on behalf of 10,000 Ecuadorian citizens which has been resumed by a US court. The claim blames the death of four children in 2002 as well as numerous cases of illness on the effects of Glyphosate fumigations. Other allegations include evidence of miscarriages as well as severe damage to legal crops and livestock, jeopardising entire livelihoods. A UN Human Rights Council mission in May 2007 by the special rapporteur on the right to health Paul Hunt has found "credible and reliable evidence" that the fumigations impair the physical and mental health of local residents, appealing to Colombia to suspend the fumigations. Colombia has indicated its willingness to pay reparations in cases where proof of the damage can be delivered.



After labelling President Alvaro Uribe's Plan Colombia "militarist, bellicose and violent", Ecuadorian head of state Rafael Correa recently launched "Plan Ecuador" as an alternative response to the problems besetting the northern frontier region. With its ambitious aspirations to promote a "culture of peace", boost security and reduce poverty, the government has pledged to invest USD 135 million in the five northern provinces of Esmeraldas, Carchi, Sucumbíos, Imbabura and Orellana, hoping to double this figure with the help of the international community. The plan has already received the approval of the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, while Canada and South Korea have signalled financial support. Plan Ecuador aims to enhance the presence of state institutions in the North and strengthen the security and justice system in an effort to reduce crime and other illicit activities. The Plan encompasses projects to improve social infrastructure and improve the North's socio-economic development and infrastructure by raising employment and providing support to small- and medium sized enterprises. Human rights issues, assistance to the displaced population and environmental matters are also on the agenda. Finally, the Plan's objectives include the protection of the sovereignty and integrity of the Ecuadorian state and its bilateral relations with Colombia. Plan Ecuador is explicitly non-military, although it is likely that the Ecuadorian army will have a substantial role to play in its implementation, as will many of the UN and other international organisations already present in the North. With a time horizon until 2018 the success of the Plan critically depends on financial commitments by international donors.



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