

There has already been a significant spillover of the armed conflict in Colombia. The contraction of the Colombian government's authority has facilitated the spread of guerrilla, paramilitary, and drug trafficking activities to neighboring states.

### **PANAMA**

With highly permeable land, sea, and air borders with Colombia, a well-developed financial and commercial infrastructure (including the Colón Free Zone, the second largest in the world), and negligible security forces, Panama has become a critical node in the Colombian narco-traffickers' and guerrillas' support structure. Drugs transit Panama from Colombia for transshipment to the United States and Europe, while arms and supplies move the other way. Outside of major towns, the Panamanian authorities have lost control of the southernmost province of Darién, bordering on Colombia, which has effectively become an extension of the Colombian northwestern theater of operations. According to Panamanian sources, two battalion-sized FARC fronts, the 57th and 58th, operate in Darién, and the FARC maintains a major logistics and support base in Panamanian territory near the Colombian border. The narco-traffickers and guerrillas have also developed a support infrastructure in small ports on the Atlantic coast of Panama that enables them to move drugs, arms, supplies, and personnel by sea.

Panamanian security forces—a national police force that includes a specialized component with rudimentary light infantry training, and air and naval services—are no match for the heavily armed Colom-

bian guerrillas. Panamanian strategy is to maintain a presence in the main towns in Darién province to provide static protection to the population, but without attempting to control the border (an impossible task in any event, given the difficulties of the terrain) or to confront the guerrillas that operate on the Panamanian side of the border.

The Panamanian air service is composed of a squadron of light transport aircraft (Casa 212s, BN2 Islanders), a squadron of UH-1H helicopters donated by the United States and Taiwan, and a training squadron (Chilean T-35s). The air service can operate only in daytime and below a ceiling of 10,000 feet. It has no close air support, air monitoring, or air interception capabilities. The air service is outclassed by the opposition, which employs higher-speed fixed-wing aircraft (ranging from Lear jets to Cessna 172s) and helicopters with extended range.<sup>1</sup>

The Panamanian naval force relies mostly on 63-ft to 105-ft patrol boats (donated by the United States) with average speeds of 15 knots and some captured fast boats. As in the case of the air service, the naval force's boats are no match for the fast boats used by Colombian narcotraffickers and guerrillas, which are capable of speeds of up to 50 knots and have greater maneuverability and shallow-water capabilities.

U.S. and Panamanian observers agree that the Panamanian security forces would not be able to protect the Canal—or Panamanian sovereignty over large swaths of its territory—if the Colombian guerrillas launched a determined attack. The constraints on a guerrilla move against Panama or the Canal are largely political: first, the current arrangement works for the guerrillas and they have no apparent incentive to overturn it. Second, the Panama Canal is now controlled by Panama and an attack on the Canal would be considered an attack on Panama rather than on the United States; third, the main users of the Canal are South American countries, which would be the most severely affected by its closure. However, a change in the situation in Colombia—for instance, if the Colombian government succeeded in putting real pressure on the guerrillas—could

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<sup>1</sup>Reportedly, these helicopters can be flown without refueling from Colombia to Guatemala, roughly the distance from Washington, D.C., to Miami.

change the guerrillas' calculations. In that scenario, the FARC could move into Panama in a major way and threaten the Canal and other strategic U.S. interests.<sup>2</sup>

## VENEZUELA

Venezuela is a critical country for U.S. and Colombian security interests. Not only is Venezuela one of the world's largest oil producers—with proved reserves of 73 billion barrels of oil and as much as 1.3 trillion barrels of extra-heavy oil, including bitumen—it is an important regional actor whose international and domestic policies can have a significant and possibly decisive impact on the conflict in Colombia. From their own perspective, Venezuelans believe that, as a neighbor with a long, guerrilla-infested border with Colombia, their security is directly bound with that of Colombia. The Venezuelans are also concerned about the large-scale illegal migration of Colombians to Venezuela and the development of transborder links between criminal networks in both countries.

About one third of the Venezuelan armed forces are deployed on the border with Colombia in an effort to seal the border against undesirable elements. Venezuelans complain that the Colombians are not doing enough to control their side of the border,<sup>3</sup> although the Colombians point out that they have insufficient forces to control the border and fight the insurgency. The Venezuelan armed forces are actively engaged in antinarcotics operations, but there are indications that they have adopted an avoidance strategy toward the guerrillas. Complicating this picture is Venezuela's political revolution, which brought to power Hugo Chávez—a former Army officer and a leader of a 1992 coup attempt. Chávez' authoritarian tendencies and links to Fidel Castro and the Colombian guerrillas have raised concerns about the direction of his government and the future of democracy in Venezuela, straining relations with the United States.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The sources of this review of Panama's role in the Colombian crisis are discussions with Panamanian national police, air service, and naval service senior leaders and Panamanian political leaders and security analysts, Panama City, April 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Discussion with senior Venezuelan military officers, Caracas, April 2000.

<sup>4</sup>Chávez has taken steps to distance the Venezuelan armed forces from the U.S. military. He has forbidden overflights of Venezuelan territory by U.S. aircraft on regional

Chávez has sought to play an active role in the diplomacy of the Colombian conflict, but his initiatives are viewed with suspicion by Colombians, who question his motives and accuse him of intervening inappropriately in domestic Colombian affairs. There is no evidence that the Chávez government is giving material support to the Colombian guerrillas, but weapons captured from guerrillas in 2000 turned out to have come from Venezuelan army stocks, leading to a protest by the Colombian authorities.<sup>5</sup> In November 2000, the Colombian press reported that the ELN operates an office in Caracas and ELN representatives meet regularly with Chávez and his inner circle. According to the same reports, a high-level Venezuelan military officer met clandestinely with FARC leader Marulanda in FARC-controlled territory in Colombia to arrange for the release of Venezuelan cattlemen held by the FARC and negotiate a non-aggression agreement.<sup>6</sup>

The United States, therefore, cannot assume that Venezuela will cooperate in efforts to strengthen the Colombian government vis-à-vis the guerrillas. However, Chávez' relationship with the Colombian guerrillas is a double-edged sword. He may be able to provide political support for the guerrillas, perhaps in the guise of peacemaking, but overt support could generate a hostile regional and international reaction and perhaps undermine his position at home, particularly with the private sector and the military.

## ECUADOR

In unstable Ecuador, already the victim of cross-border raids from Colombia, there is fear that the Colombian guerrillas and drug traffickers could move in force across the border and perhaps join forces with local dissidents. Pro-FARC mayors have taken office in some of the northern Ecuadorean cities, including the provincial capital of Lago Agrio. A group named the Revolutionary Armed Forces of

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antinarcotics missions; ordered its navy not to participate in the multinational 2000 UNITA exercise, the first time in 42 years that Venezuela did not take part; and ordered its air force to pull out of Red Flag, only one or two days before the exercise was to begin.

<sup>5</sup>"El silencio sobre las armas," *Venezuela Analítica*, July 24, 2000.

<sup>6</sup>"La mano de Chávez," *Cambio*, November 21, 2000.

Ecuador has launched a propaganda campaign against Plan Colombia in northern Ecuador.<sup>7</sup> The 29th, 32nd, and 48th FARC fronts operate in Nariño and Putumayo, Colombian departments bordering on Ecuador, and Ecuadorean troops and suspected Colombian guerrillas have clashed well within the territory of Ecuador.<sup>8</sup>

In response, Ecuador has increased its presence on the border with Colombia<sup>9</sup> and plans to increase development spending by \$300 million over the next four years in the bordering provinces. The Ecuadorean government plan is to create a social and economic “buffer zone” and prevent the spread of coca cultivation to the Ecuadorean side of the border. The Ecuadoreans are also concerned about the influx of refugees. At an October 23, 2000, press conference in Washington, Ecuadorean Foreign Minister Heinz Moeller stated that Ecuador recognizes its international obligation to accept refugees, but wants mechanisms to ensure the return of refugees to Colombia and that the refugee camps do not become bases of operations for drug traffickers and guerrillas.<sup>10</sup>

Ecuadorean authorities coordinate with the Colombian government regarding the common threat from guerrillas and narcotraffickers. In August 2000, the new Ecuadorean president, Gustavo Noboa, traveled to Bogotá to ask President Pastrana to keep the Quito government informed of military operations in southern Colombia so that the Ecuadorean army could prepare for incursions across the border.<sup>11</sup> Ecuador formally supports Plan Colombia and cooperates with the United States’ regional counter-narcotics effort. It granted access to U.S. aircraft on antidrug surveillance and intelligence missions to a forward operating location at the Ecuadorean air force base in Manta—an action that the FARC described as a “declaration of war.”

<sup>7</sup>“Colombia’s Creeping War,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2000.

<sup>8</sup>Echandía, pp. 48–50; “Ecuador Troops Mount Search for Kidnappers,” *Financial Times*, September 15, 1999.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Downes, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup>Heinz Moeller, press conference, National Press Club, Washington, D.C., October 23, 2000.

<sup>11</sup>“Neighbors Worry About Colombian Aid,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2000.

Nevertheless, the Ecuadoreans fear that counter-narcotics operations in southern Colombia could simply drive the drug producers and traffickers across the border into Ecuador. The Ecuadoreans point out that their armed forces gained valuable experience in jungle operations during the conflict with Peru in the Cenepa river basin in 1995, but that the military is badly in need of equipment, specifically fast river boats, helicopters, and communications and night-vision equipment.<sup>12</sup> Under the U.S. assistance package to Colombia and the Andean region, Ecuador is to receive \$12 million for drug interdiction and \$8 million for alternative agricultural development. Estimated military and police equipment requirements range between \$30 and \$40 million.

## BRAZIL

Brazil, a rising continental power, also has an interest in controlling the activities of guerrillas, narcotraffickers, and other non-state actors across its extensive Amazonian frontiers with Colombia. Maintaining control of the border in the Amazon region is a high security priority for Brazil, but it is also a daunting challenge because of the vast distances, low population density, lack of infrastructure, and the difficulty of maintaining surveillance and stable settlements in the area.<sup>13</sup> Clandestine flights through Brazilian airspace are a daily occurrence and Brazilian and Colombian authorities have dismantled 16 jungle landing strips near the border.<sup>14</sup> Brazil's long-term response to its security dilemma in the Amazon region has been the ambitious *Sistema de Vigilancia de Amazonia* (SIVAM). Still in development, the system will have radar and airborne early warning (AEW) cover for this vast area.

The Brazilian attitude toward Plan Colombia is ambivalent, like that of other states bordering on Colombia. On the one hand, the Brasilia government would see its security interests threatened by the collapse of the Bogotá government's authority and has expressed support for Plan Colombia. On the other hand, like other neighboring

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<sup>12</sup>Moeller, press conference.

<sup>13</sup>Edmundo Sussumo Fujita, "The Brazilian Policy of Sustainable Defense," *International Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 3, July 1998, p. 582.

<sup>14</sup>"Brazil Fears Fallout of Drug Crackdown," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2000.

states of Colombia, it is concerned that the military operations associated with Plan Colombia will drive refugees, guerrillas, and drug traffickers across the border into Brazil. In September 2000, the Brazilian armed forces launched a three-year plan named Operation Cobra to increase its presence on the border with Colombia. The Brazilian government announced that it planned to deploy 6000 troops to the triple border region, where Colombia, Peru, and Brazil meet.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Colombia's crisis has developed into a serious security concern for its neighbors. Panamanians feel helpless to prevent the use of their territory by Colombian factions. Ecuadoreans are conscious of the vulnerability of their country's vital oil installations in the Oriente, within striking distance of the Colombian border, and fear that the Colombian drug-production problem could metastasize in Ecuador. All are concerned about refugee flows from Colombia. A further deterioration of security in Colombia would pose a serious threat to the security and stability of neighboring states and drive a greater regionalization of the conflict. So far the response of most of Colombia's neighbors, as noted above, is to try to insulate themselves from the consequences of the Colombian conflict. However, efforts to control the borders are unlikely to be successful, given the remoteness and inaccessibility and the lack of government infrastructure in much of the border area.

The widening of Colombia's conflict would severely test the viability of the existing regional security architecture and of U.S. leadership in hemispheric security institutions. The states most threatened by the spillover of the conflict would seek U.S. assistance and leadership. Others could try to work out an accommodation with the guerrillas. The United States would be confronted by the choice of leading a coalition-building effort to stabilize the regional environment, letting events take their course, or deferring to initiatives led by other parties (for instance, Brazil) and accepting a commensurate loss of regional influence.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.