Conference Summary:

_Hemispheric Perspectives: The Situation in Colombia_

_By Tyler Hahn*_

On April 18, 2007, The Center for Latin American Issues of the George Washington University, in collaboration with the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, held the fourth event of its colloquium series “Hemispheric Perspectives”. Entitled “The Situation in Colombia”, the conference featured Dr. Rafael Pardo, noted author, academic, politician, and former Defense Minister of Colombia, who presented his paper “The Situation in Colombia”. (To access Senator Pardo’s paper, click here). Moderated by Norman Bailey, a panel that included commentators Dr. Gabriel Marcella, of the US Army War College, and Professor Philip McLean, of The George Washington University, provided remarks to the presentation.

In his presentation, Dr. Pardo argued that the situation in Colombia, one which is marked by conflict, struggle, poverty, and ineffectual government, is most significantly related to and influenced by illicit drugs. From its former position as a minor producer of coca, Colombia rose to its position as the world’s largest provider of coca due to the aggressive and effective enforcement of anti-drug policies in Bolivia and Peru during the 1980s, which encouraged the cultivation of coca

*Rafael Pardo stresses a point in his presentation.

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in countries with less effective law enforcement. As coca production grew, the Colombian government successfully began to target its own domestic cartels for dismantlement. In place of the Colombian cartels, Mexican cartels took over distribution. By the 1990s, the drug-trade had an entirely new structure and drug trafficking had reached unprecedented levels in Colombia.

In 2000, Plan Colombia was devised and implemented in response to the new structure of the drug-trade. The plan’s intention was to control the cultivation of coca in Colombia, thereby controlling las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the leading narcoterrorist group in Colombia, and other revolutionary groups which fund themselves through drug trafficking. The plan was designed to diminish the supply of alkaloids available in the markets, and in so doing to increase consumer prices, discouraging new consumers from using cocaine. The plan set a goal of reducing coca production by 50% in six years.

Plan Colombia utilized a variety of tools in combating the drug trade, including fumigation, eradication, interdiction, and encouraging social action. Fumigation, while initially successful in reducing coca cultivation, has since proved to provide diminishing returns in eradication. Furthermore, despite the reduction in cultivated coca, street prices of drugs remained constant in the US and European markets. This implied that drug cartels had stocked supplies of cocaine, which they supplied into the market in order to maintain price stability during the reduction in coca supply due to Plan Colombia. Plan Colombia achieved some regional success in Colombia, most notably in Putumaya, but failed in reducing the street-price of cocaine and thereby the drug-trafficking revenue to paramilitary groups.

Pardo offered a number of proposals to address the problem of illicit drugs. He argued that the drug problem in Colombia is one highly affected by the incidence of poverty, and by economic and social disparity in the country. To address these concerns, the government needs to invest in and encourage regional development. Secondly, Pardo offered that fumigation should not become an “indefinite-use tool” as it is expensive and offers decreasing marginal returns. The end-goal of fumigation should be the collapse of the coca market, not minimal increases in
cocaine prices in consuming markets. Finally, Pardo recommended that a national guard force which would act as an intermediary between the military and police forces and the population be created to assist in controlling those areas retaken by the government from the guerillas and paramilitaries, and where coca production is most problematic; the end result being a transition from illegitimate non-state military presence (i.e. paramilitaries and guerillas) to a legitimate state presence which would offer reassurance and security.

Dr. Gabriel Marcella proposed that academics and policy makers involved in anti-trafficking efforts are looking at and addressing the symptoms of the larger problem of the weak Colombian state. The state has a small and ineffective military force with little capacity for providing for the public safety. Colombia is trying to build a democratic state in war-time, and needs to expand and reinforce its armed services in order to effectively address its inextricably related security and drug-trafficking problems.

Professor Phil McLean suggested that the fundamental problem in Colombia is the weak state, and the preference in Colombia for a weak state. McLean stressed the multi-faceted nature of the situation and problems in Colombia require Colombia to take action, and asserted that the US role in Colombia is a supportive one. US policy should aim at assisting Colombia in solving its own problems.