

Contemporary Challenges in Colombia: An Afro-Colombian Perspective

by

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Abstract

A testimony [edited by permission for JPAS] by Luis Gilberto Murillo-Urrutia before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere hearing on “U.S. – Colombia Relations” held April 24, 2007 in Washington, D.C. focused on armed conflict, recent political trends, Afro-Colombians and the armed conflict, environmental and natural resources, recommendations for a future U.S. Policy towards Colombia, counter-drug initiatives, and trade policy. The address argues that Colombia needs to be thoroughly evaluated and restructured to include issues that have been overlooked such as poverty, inequality, and the inclusion of historically neglected regions and disadvantaged groups, particularly Afro-Colombians and indigenous populations. And last, the most potent challenge concerns the need to clean the political and institutional system from the pervasive influence of drug traffickers and illegal armed groups in Colombia.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of this distinguished Subcommittee. My name is Luis Gilberto Murillo-Urrutia. I am Colombian and now serve as Senior Fellow on International Policy at the Phelps Stokes Fund, a nearly 100-year-old organization that seeks to promote justice through education and leadership in communities of color, globally.

I am very pleased to appear before this important Subcommittee. Let me first express my appreciation to members of this Subcommittee for their leadership and ongoing interest in Colombia. Also, I am grateful to members of the Congressional Black Caucus for their steadfast support to Afro-Colombians. As requested, my remarks this afternoon, from an Afro-Colombian perspective, will focus on my assessment of current U.S. policy toward Colombia, the Colombian government’s efforts to reduce violence and bring an end to the armed conflict, and the future of U.S. assistance to Colombia.

The Armed Conflict in Colombia

Colombia's current armed conflict has been going on for almost 50 years, though many would say much longer. This conflict is rooted in inequality, poverty, and the social, political and economic exclusion of disadvantaged social groups in extensive geographic areas of the country. In the last three decades these socio-economic and political conditions created an environment for drug trafficking to emerge as one of the main drivers of the Colombian crisis. The fighting between leftist guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), the right wing paramilitary, sometimes in collusion with the Colombian army, has caught most of the rural civilian population in the crossfire. Thus, thousands of Colombians have died as result of this conflict. Furthermore, the illegal fighting factions hold about 11,000 child soldiers with violence as the second leading cause of death for Colombian children ages five to fourteen years; therefore, the human suffering created by this armed conflict is irreparable and unacceptable.

In addition, Colombia has the second highest number of persons internally displaced by violence in the world, only second to Sudan. Thus, between two and three million people have been displaced by violence according to the UNHCR, while the Catholic Church's Social Ministry and the nongovernmental Consultancy on Displacement and Human Rights (CODHES) estimates, since 1985 that more than 3.5 million Colombians have been forced to flee their homes, farms, churches and communities – by violence. Hence, women, children, and marginalized ethnic and racial minorities suffer the most from displacement; and humanitarian assistance and aid to transition internally displaced persons (IDPs) into self-sufficient economic activity is far from adequate: a study by the Colombian government's Inspector General's Office and the Ombudsman's Office revealed that just 30 percent of households individually displaced between 1997 and 2004 and 8 percent of families displaced in large groups received emergency assistance. And as a result, the United Nations calls the IDP crisis in Colombia the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the Western Hemisphere.

Conversely, women experience violence in many ways because they are direct target of military and related actions, including sexual attacks; and they suffer when their husbands or sons, or increasingly their daughters are killed or injured in combat, with a large numbers of girls forcibly recruited by illegal armed groups, and forced into slavery-like conditions. Women and children are increasingly becoming the recognized face of poverty, violence, displacement and social exclusion in Colombia. And according to some statistics, more that 60% of internally displaced women are unemployed and near 80% do not have health insurance as 44% of women internally displaced have suffered from intra-family violence, 18% during the pregnancy.

Hence, the Colombian conflict is disproportionately affecting women as Colombian society look for ways to advance peace and attain the kind of security that will really protect them.

The Impacts of Plan Colombia and Recent Political Trends

U.S. policy towards Colombia has expressed itself mainly through the multiyear Plan Colombia (Andean Counter-drug initiative ACI) and the Andean Trade Preferences and Drug Enforcement Act. Plan Colombia was passed into law in 2000, with the stated objectives of strengthening democracy, promoting human rights and the rule of law, fostering socio-economic development, and reducing coca cultivation in Colombia. This plan has evolved from being an exclusive anti-narcotics package to an anti-terror strategy. The plan has had mixed results, and by some measures, the security situation has improved. Yet, the government maintains that the overall numbers of murders and kidnappings have fallen while nearly 200 of Colombia's 1,092 counties lacked a police presence in 2002, however, now all have at least a small contingent of police.

Despite these welcome gains, the stated objectives of Plan Colombia have not been achieved. A variety of deeply disturbing trends illustrate this point. For example, eradication through aerial fumigation of coca crops, the centerpiece of the U.S. counter-drug strategy in Colombia, despite an unprecedented aerial spraying campaign wherein coca cultivation has increased, instead of decreasing by 50% as projected. Hence, cultivation is spreading to new areas and returning to others previously cleared. This situation suggests that a decrease in acres planted in one province, or indeed in one country, is not a reliable indicator of drug policy success.

One major concern for Colombian society is the infiltration of Colombian institutions by illegal armed groups. There are multiple credible allegations of links between prominent national politicians, businessmen, and high-ranking military with paramilitary groups. And according to recent reports, there is serious body of evidence of collaboration between members of the Colombian parliament, governors, mayors, senior government officials, and paramilitary commanders. Apparently, these alliances orchestrated fraudulent elections and then went about infiltrating and stealing from hospitals and other public institutions while assassinating hundreds of adversaries. Thus eight prominent members of Congress have been jailed and many others are under investigation, including the speaker of the House. While these investigations are a good step, the United States government should press for real results, including suspension from their posts of those under investigation for very serious crimes, and arrests and convictions.

Moreover, a number of national and U.S. based companies has been accused of making payments to both paramilitaries and guerrilla groups. Recently, Chiquita Brands International admitted that it paid off a Colombian group on the U.S. terrorist list. This has spotlighted a practice once denied in Colombia. Also, several other U.S.-based corporations, including Atlanta-based Coca-Cola and the Alabama-based coal company Drummond Co., face civil lawsuits alleging their Colombian operations worked with an outlaw group to kill several trade unionists. This has focused attention on the payoffs that Colombian and foreign companies make to illegal armed groups fighting the country's 50-year-old civil war, especially in remote areas where they hold sway.

The government is carrying out an ambitious process of demobilization of paramilitary groups. Nonetheless, new paramilitary organizations are being created in many regions of the country, or old groups never demobilized are emerging with new names. This suggests that the structural conditions for the existence of these criminal organizations are not being addressed properly. Nor has the Colombian government been effective enough about fully dismantling paramilitary organizations. Therefore, it is essential that the U.S. and Colombian governments take seriously the continued threats to communities by the rearmed or never demobilized paramilitary forces, as the persistence of the internal armed conflict implies that there is not an easy military solution to the Colombian crisis.

Despite Colombian government efforts, the situation for the most vulnerable Colombians located in certain regions of the country has grown considerably worse. Both the Colombian and the U.S. governments in their rhetoric do not recognize poverty and inequality as central dimensions of the Colombian security problem. The meeting of Presidents George Bush and Alvaro Uribe with Afro-Colombian leaders in a recent trip to Bogotá confirms this proposition. However, government policy prescriptions—both Colombian government policy and U.S. aid-- have not done enough to address these factors.

As we have seen in other parts of the world, military means alone are not sufficient. You need to implement other political, economic, and social measures, and these measures need to be sustained over the long term. This brings me to the issue of Afro-Colombians as one of the best representative cases.

The Social and Economic Conditions of Afro-Colombians

Race and ethnicity in Latin America are a significant basis of social organization, status, and life chances. Racial discrimination is a determinant factor of socio-economic inequality and political marginalization. In this regard, Colombia is not an exception. According to the limited quantitative data available in 1998, the Colombian National Department of Planning stated that: “between 19 and 26% of the 44 million people in the country are African descendants.

The World Bank put this number between 20 and 25 percent. That is, between 8 and 11 million Afro-Colombians with 82% of that population living below the poverty line of about 3 dollars a day, compared to the national average of near 50 percent. This population earns \$500 USD per capita annually, compared to \$1,900 USD for non-blacks. 74 percent of Afro-Colombian employees earn less than the established legal minimum wage, and only 19% of Afro-Colombian households have electricity, potable water and sanitation facilities, compared to a 62% national average. In terms of health, 92 of every 1,000 Afro-Colombian children die during the first year of life, compared to the national average of 20.”

With regards to education, the situation is not better. According to a 2005 World Bank report, only 18.7% of the Black student population in the Pacific Coastal Region finished secondary school in 1997. Of those students, just 17.8% entered a university and only 2.8% finished. And a report released by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Colombian government stated that, if additional government efforts were not present, the largely Afro-Colombian area of Choco would need 30 years to catch up with today’s Bogotá, in terms of education and health indicators.

In addition, according to a recent study conducted by the Colombian Government’s National Institute of Family Welfare and the University of Antioquia, malnutrition is severe in Afro-Colombian communities. In the case of the Pacific Region, 33.7% of children under 5 years old, and 33.5% of women between 13 and 49 years old, suffer from anemia. Last week [March 29, 2007], Colombian society was shocked with the news that 37 children under 5 years of age had died of malnutrition since January this year. In short, Afro-Latinos in general and Afro-Colombians in particular are living in extremely difficult social, political, and economic conditions that prevent them from enhancing their talents, potential, and overall well being.

Afro-Colombians and the Armed Conflict: Implications for Development and Human Rights

As I mentioned before, the Colombian internal armed conflict disproportionately affects Afro-Colombians caught in the crossfire, as paramilitaries and guerrillas struggle for control over key drug and weapons smuggling corridors and economic assets with the most brutal massacres committed by paramilitary and guerrilla groups held in Afro-Colombian territories and regions. According to the National Association of Afro-Colombians displaced by violence, 40% of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Colombia were Afro-Colombians, especially in the department of Chocó and the Pacific Coast.

Recently, more than 8,000 Afro-Colombians were violently displaced in the Municipality of El Charco (Department of Narino) due to combats between FARC guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the Colombian army (47% of those displaced in El Charco are women).

Thus, many Afro-Colombians have sought refuge in neighboring countries like Ecuador , Panama , and even Costa Rica, and in 2002, 119 Afro-Colombians, most of them children, were killed inside a church by the leftist FARC in combat with right-wing paramilitaries.

The Afro-Colombian future is being killed in the municipalities of Tumaco and Quibdo, and Buenaventura, young Afro-Colombians are being recruited by illegal armed actors or killed. For example, in April 1, 2005 , twelve young Afro-Colombians, between 17 and 23 years of age, were killed by paramilitaries (see the photo below) in Buenaventura , Colombia 's busiest port city. In that Afro-Colombian city, bomb explosions and assassinations are a common event. Just last week, 10 people died in the latest bomb explosion. And according to some non-governmental organizations, over 2,500 young Afro-Colombians were killed between 2000 and 2005. Buenaventura well could be called "*the Baghdad of Colombia.*"

On a personal note, last January 10th, my dear uncle Elacio Murillo, who was a very well-known journalist and political activist was killed in cold blood by emerging paramilitary groups that controls the region of San Juan Baudo in Choco. This event was very painful for me and my family. Cases like this are common in Afro-Colombian regions throughout the country. Hence, Afro-Colombians do not feel more secured under democratic security policies wherein the security, human rights, and humanitarian situation in Afro-Colombian regions have deteriorated.

During the past decade, Colombia has been experiencing the paradox of, on the one hand, enjoying one of the most advanced constitutional frameworks for the empowerment of citizenship rights in general, and ethnic rights in particular; and on the other hand, suffering from the drawn-out effects of endemic violence and armed conflict. Thus the Colombian political armed conflict has severe negative impacts on ethnic groups, and especially with the isolated yet strategic location of Afro-Colombian collective territories that has made these areas suitable for illegal armed groups' military operations where in many cases guerrillas and paramilitaries in collusion with the Colombian army have used communities as human shield in their combat, and as a consequence, violating international human rights and international humanitarian law. And surprisingly, Afro-Colombians who defend their cultural and territorial autonomy have been classified as subversive and therefore persecuted, displaced, disappeared and murdered.

Afro-Colombians, Environmental and Natural Resources

At this point, descriptive information about the environment is necessary, in order to understand some of the drivers of violence in Afro-Colombian communities. Colombia ranks third in the world for the most biodiversity. It has 65 different types of ecosystems and 18 eco-regions. The diversity of its birds, amphibians, and vascular plants is unparalleled on the planet. With just 0.8 % of global land, it has 15 % of all known territorial species. Also, it has close to a thousand permanent rivers, making it the fourth largest water supply in the world.

However, this ecological wealth is disappearing for several factors: a) fighting factions in the armed conflict protect illicit and illegitimate extractive activities; b) Colombia is increasing dependant on extractive industries in order to finance its budget deficit; and this industrial sector is not well regulated, and even if it was, these activities could have destructive impact on fragile ecosystems; c) and to perverse incentives in the agricultural sector have created a gap between the actual vocation of the land and its use. This wealth of natural resources has the potential to play a central role in poverty reduction, economic development and a peaceful resolution of the conflict in ethnic territories, but at the same time it could fuel violence and human rights violations.

Historically, the Afro-Colombian struggle for justice and freedom has placed emphasis on culture and territory with land being a centerpiece of this struggle. Thus, in the 1991 Colombian constitution Afro-Colombian secured their cultural, territorial, and natural resources rights which allowed Afro-Colombian communities to control access to and management of natural resources according to their cultural traditions and the social and ecological functions of their territories via Law 70 of 1993, commonly known as The Black Community Law. As a result, Afro-Colombian communities have legal ownership of over 15 million acres of land in the rich Pacific Coast of the country, representing approximately 5% of Colombia's total territory.

These community collective lands are concentrated where most of the country's natural resources are located: tropical rainforest, biodiversity, water, oil, gas, and mineral resources, such as gold. For example, 60% of Colombian natural rainforest inventories are in ethnic territories (Afro-Colombian and Indigenous). The presence of this natural resource wealth on ethnic territories has led to conflicts with national and transnational entities.

Economic, military, and political interests are key factors in the displacement of Afro-Colombians from their collective lands. According to several reports, guerrilla and paramilitary groups in collusion with the Colombian army have displaced over 60% of the Afro-Colombian population from the collective territories.

For example 3,000 Afro-Colombians were displaced from the communities of Curvarado and Jiguamiando from their communal land in Choco (about 70,000 acres, equivalent to the urban area of Bogotá) and later the land was taken over by palm oil companies with the support of paramilitaries. And after intense advocacy, the Colombian government, in an unprecedented decision, committed to return the stolen land. However, this promise is far from completely fulfilled, so international donors need to press the Colombian government to keep its word.

Some analysts suggest that the violence in Afro-Colombian regions can be explained as part of the escalation and degradation of the armed conflict on the national level and the increasingly fierce competition for territorial control; as others add clear economic interest in the resource and development potential of those regions. The armed dispute over Afro-Colombian regions is not a coincidence; Colombia's natural resources have been one of the key factors in fueling today's armed conflict.

Furthermore, illegal armed actors control several illicit and illegitimate extractive activities in the oil, mining, timber, narcotics and agribusiness sectors which drive the loss of biodiversity to the almost 221,000 hectares of tropical rainforest deforested every year as a significant percentage of the rainforest destruction is happening to clear land for growing coca, palm oil, and cattle ranching. Even worse, the current environmental, security, and humanitarian situation have created serious negative barriers preventing Afro-Colombians from securing their rights to sustainable development.

The “Balloon” Effect of Plan Colombia in Afro-Colombian Areas

The regional focus of Plan Colombia in the South of the country, created a “*balloon effect*” that affects Afro-Colombian rural communities. The pressure of U.S.-funded aerial spraying on the Putumayo Department, moved coca crops further west and north to Afro-Colombian and indigenous territories. For example, in 2000, only 2 municipalities (counties) in the department of Chocó registered some sort of coca crops; today almost all 31 municipalities in the region have coca cultivation. This situation is destroying the traditional cultures of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, and we may say that in part, the current human security situation for Afro-Colombian communities is an unintended consequence of Plan Colombia.

It is very impressive that despite the difficult situation generated by the political violence, the Afro-Colombian social movements have continued to advance their political agendas. Many of these processes happen at the local and regional level as Afro-Colombians are increasingly assuming leadership over their destiny within a very hostile environment.

Hence, the creation of nation-wide organizations like the Afro-Colombian National Conference, the National Association of Afro-Colombians Displaced by Violence (AFRODES), the National Association of Afro-Colombian Mayors (AMUNAFRO), the Washington D.C. – based Afro-Latino Development Alliance, the Black Community Process (PCN), and the AFROAMERICA XXI-Colombia, are examples of a vibrant emerging trend which creates the momentum for U.S. policy to provide support for training emerging leaders, and the strengthening of current Afro-Colombian leadership as the United States now represents in global terms, a successful model for the inclusion of minorities into mainstream society, thus there is much the United States has to offer.

In short, there is a pervasive lack of attention to racial, ethnic, and sub-national dimensions in the analysis of the Colombian human security crisis, and U.S. policy towards Colombia because its a racially and ethnically structured country in which race is regionalized; therefore, race and regions should be central to any analysis of the Colombian crisis.

Recommendations for a Future U.S. Policy towards Colombia

Colombia is at a crossroads of profound transformations that can either go down the path of more impunity, violence and social injustice, or help create a more peaceful and just political, social, and economic system. Second, Colombia is also going through a difficult political storm thus the US should sustain its support for the country, but this Congress should in turn make it clear that Colombian authorities need to put their house in order and clean up the country's institutions infested by paramilitary infiltration, and seriously prosecute human rights violations at all levels with robust support to victims of the conflict.

No doubt that the Colombian political landscape is changing rapidly. To ignore this shift and their disturbing trends would be myopic. Thus, U.S. priorities must shift too, if Plan Colombia stated goals bolstering prosperity for all and reducing illicit drug production, strengthening human rights and the rule of law, and fostering peace are to be attained.

Paraphrasing Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, U.S. assistance to Colombia should focus on eliminating the most critical impediments to and catalysts for long-term country progress; helping Colombians to move toward peace, freedom, prosperity, and social justice.

And certainly, police and military assistance, with the highest human rights standards, is important to Colombian success, but it is not sufficient. On that note let me suggest some recommendations. The United States Congress should:

- Plan a Colombia – Andean Counter-drug Initiative (ACI):
- In the short run, shift the balance of the aid between the military and socioeconomic components. At least 50 percent of the aid should be allocated to the latter, through USAID. There is a need to respond to the roots causes of the conflict and drug trafficking. The U.S. government should scale up investment in the social and economic needs of the Colombian population in neglected rural areas.
- In the medium term, conduct a thorough evaluation of the impact of U.S. policy towards Colombia since 2000. This assessment should go beyond drug trafficking and counter-terrorism and include other components like poverty and inequality, peace building, human rights and humanitarian issues, environment, natural resources, and institutional building. This evaluation should be the basis for a new U.S. policy towards Colombia (a Congressional commission for that matter would be helpful).
- In the long run, define a specific pro-peace agenda that support Colombian society efforts to reach lasting peace through multiple negotiations. A starting point would be to provide support to paramilitary disarmament, demobilization, and re-integration, with tough conditions, to the peace process with the ELN and eventually negotiations of a humanitarian accord with the FARC guerrilla group.
- Make U.S. foreign policy toward Colombia consistent with the new realities on the ground and in the interests of United States and Colombian society. The paramilitary infiltration of the Colombian political system is a fact that needs to be confronted vigorously. The United States Government should give the highest priority to the provision of political and financial support to the judicial system in order to implement anti-money laundering and the justice and peace laws in order to effectively prosecute high profile cases of links between political, business, and military elites with drug traffickers and illegal armed groups.
- Fully recognize the magnitude of the Colombian humanitarian crisis, particularly in regions like the Pacific Coast with an extra effort to locate and completely identified those who disappeared or were killed by illegal armed groups.

And also, the U.S. government should drastically increase and improve humanitarian assistance, and expand protection, for internally displaced persons and refugees with aid to internally displaced persons (IDPs) as one of the most positive elements of the current U.S. aid program, and should be continued and expanded.

But the United States must use its leverage to insist that the Colombian government improve the national response to IDPs. Because it is important that basic assistance programs targeting IDPs include assistance to the urban poor living in the same areas as the displaced, and to ensure that such programs effectively meet their goals, leaders of IDP communities should also participate in the design and implementation of the programs.

Hence, the U.S. and Colombian government should:

- strengthen meaningful consultation with IDP leaders in development of overall policy. And within the framework of the paramilitary demobilization, there must be an effective mechanism to ensure the return of land or compensation to internally displaced persons.
- Expand and improve alternative development within a comprehensive rural development strategy, and end aerial spraying in order to address the crisis in rural areas (effective alternative development within a sound overall rural development strategy is the most reliable approach for sustainable, long-term results in drastically reducing coca cultivation).

During the last two years the Colombian government has scaled up manual eradication. Last year alone nearly 50,000 hectares were eradicated and they plan to eradicate 60,000 this year. Yet, manual eradication should not proceed before viable development alternatives are available. And any rural development strategy should be designed, implemented, and evaluated in a participatory way.

- Focus law enforcement efforts to combat illegal drugs up in the supply chain where profits are concentrated, that is, on interdiction, disrupting processing inputs, money laundering and trafficking, and destroying coca-processing plants. Aerial spraying has weakened the Colombian government's standing among populations accustomed to living alongside anti-government groups. It is a short-term fix with serious long-term costs, undermining rural inhabitants' trust in the state and increasing support for the illegal armed actors. Moreover, aerial fumigations are creating serious problems to the bilateral relations between Ecuador and Colombia.

- Encourage Colombian government to strengthen civilian authorities in rural areas (the strategy of state control over isolated areas is based on a military-only approach, without a plan for extending civilian government presence in areas long abandoned by the state).

The United States should also encourage the Colombian Government to plan for and invest in the extension of government services to rural conflict areas – including rural police, courts, schools, public health services, and infrastructure; effective delivery of rural development, health and education services would strengthen support for the Colombian state among the rural population. And in the long term, Colombia's major challenges of cutting drug production, permanently resolving the conflict and reducing violence can only be achieved through equitable, sustained rural development.

Also, I recommend including Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in the center of any debate about development, peace, and security. Thus the United States should specifically encourage the incorporation of historically excluded Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities into the design and implementation of rural development policies.

- Census data collection should be disaggregated by race to better develop public policy to address the needs of ethnic minorities.
- Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities' constitutionally-mandated control over their territories should be enforced. The communities' capacity to administer their territories should be strengthened. To that end, support leadership training and other capacity building actions for Afro-Colombian and Indigenous local governmental authorities and civil society leaders.
- The United States should also encourage and provide funding through the Afro-Colombian and indigenous authorities and organizations to complete the land titling processes and fully implement law 70/93 (the Black Communities Law).

Refugee and Asylum policies:

Reconcile refugee protection for Colombians and drug policy and security concerns. This is one of the most restrictive climates in the history of the international refugee regime. Such restrictions undermine the institution of asylum. The US Patriot Act of 2001 and the REAL ID Act of 2005 included the so called “*material support provision*” that has prevented thousands of persecuted refugees in need of protection to get asylum and resettlement in the United States . The interpretation of this provision and its waiver has prevented many eligible Colombian refugees, who fled the terror of FARC and paramilitaries, to be resettled or receive asylum status. This situation needs to be fixed. United States can ensure their own security while preserving and strengthening the institutions of asylum.

Encourage the U.S. administration to revisit the possibility of providing Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Colombians. Also, the U.S. government should stress with Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela that all refugee returns must be voluntary and should encourage them to work closely with the UNHCR to strengthen refugee and asylum policy for Colombians. The United States should increase its contribution to the UNHCR for Colombian refugee assistance.

Trade Policy and the U.S. - Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement:

Continue with a unilateral trade policy towards Colombia reflected in the extension of the Andean Trade Preferences and Drug Enforcement Act (ATPDEA). On August 24, 2006, President Bush notified the Congress of his intention to sign the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (CTPA). Some analysts argue that the labor and environmental safeguards included in the negotiated are insufficient or inappropriate. If not modified, the CTPA may benefit those in Colombia who obtained land violently and those criminal networks that may have infiltrated legal sectors of the Colombian economy. The CTPA should be carefully evaluated and negotiations need to be re-opened to include specific mechanisms to screen land and other productive assets that could be obtained through human rights violations.

Incorporate additional provisions that reflect the particular situation of Colombia under the current political and socioeconomic realities. There is concern that this agreement did not incorporate the particular concerns of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, given that they were never consulted.

Hence, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities maintain that the (CTPA) as negotiated will affect their ethnic and territorial rights, especially in the area of intellectual property rights (biodiversity and traditional knowledge), access to medicine, and labor standards (enforcement of anti-racial and gender discrimination in employment).

Make trade policy consistent with drug eradication and human rights goals. There has been little consideration of the agreement's potential impact on overall policy goals in Colombia. For instance, there is concern that the (CTPA) will generate an expansion of palm oil cultivation in Afro-Colombian territories, because there is evidence that palm oil companies, taking advantage of the vulnerability of Afro-Colombian people, have been taking over lands illegally.

Conclusion

U.S. policy towards Colombia needs to be thoroughly evaluated and restructured to include issues that have been overlooked. Poverty, inequality, and inclusion of historically neglected regions and disadvantaged groups, particularly Afro-Colombians and the indigenous, should be incorporated. Also, a new policy towards Colombia should reflect the new reality of a changed political and institutional context on the ground. And last, this policy should be mindful that the most potent challenge that Colombian society has at this point is the need to clean the political and institutional system from the pervasive influence of drug traffickers and illegal armed groups at all levels.

Thank you for the opportunity.

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- Editor note:** also see *El Choco: The African Heart of Colombia* at <http://isla.igc.org/SpecialRpts/SR2murillo.html>, a speech by the author.