

SCOPE AND DIMENSIONS

Colombia is currently the world's principal producer and distributor of refined cocaine, the vast majority of which (70 percent) is exported to the U.S. market. In 1999, the country refined approximately 520 metric tons of cocaine, representing roughly 80 percent of global production.¹ The narcotic is typically produced in a three-stage process. Coca leaves are first crushed and boiled with limewater and kerosene to produce coca paste. This is then mixed with sulphuric acid, potassium permanganate (sulphur dioxide can also be used), and ammonium hydroxide, filtered, and dried into a cocaine base. The amalgam is finally dissolved in acetone to form a white precipitate of cocaine hydrochloride (CHCl), which is trapped (generally by straining), dried, and pressed into bricks for shipping.² The refined

¹U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 1999*, Washington, D.C.: 2000. The figures put out by the U.S. State Department are generally recognized as the most comprehensive and accurate available. It needs to be noted, however, that the figures used in the data are theoretical, representing estimates of total potential production on the assumption that all available crops are converted into finished drugs. Since these approximations do not make allowance for losses resulting from refining inefficiency, bad weather, disease, or interdiction, real totals are almost certainly lower than the figures in the State Department's annual report. Nonetheless, they serve as useful mean reference points in a given statistical range.

²"Crack" is a derivative of cocaine that began to appear in the 1990s. It is made by mixing CHCl with baking powder, soda, and water to form a cake that is then cooked until a hard substance is formed. This is then broken down ("cracked") to reveal crystals of pure cocaine hydrochloride that are processed into small crystals about the size

narcotic is usually snorted through the nasal passages, although it can also be injected intravenously.³

Traditionally, most of the primary base used for Colombian cocaine production was imported from Peru and Bolivia. However, this has changed over the last few years—largely as a result of the U.S. “air-bridge” strategy (see The U.S. Response, below)—with Colombia now primarily responsible for all stages of the cocaine production process, including initial harvesting. Reflecting this, by 1999 the country had registered a net increase of over 28 percent in its overall coca cultivation to 122,500 hectares, continuing a trend that started in 1997.⁴ U.S. Department of Justice officials expected this base to translate into a 50 percent increase in overall refined cocaine exports during 2000.⁵

In addition to cocaine, Colombia is the Western Hemisphere’s largest producer and distributor of refined heroin.⁶ This narcotic is synthesized by boiling morphine base (itself a derivative of the dried, chemically altered sap of the opium poppy)⁷ with acetic anhydride.

of raisins, which are then smoked (known as “freebasing”). The psychotropic and physiological effects of cocaine and crack cocaine are the same, but the intensity and duration of each can differ. Crack always gives a fast, intense high, sometimes lasting only a few minutes. Cocaine, when taken intravenously, gives an intense high similar to that of crack. When it is snorted, the high is less intense, though of longer duration.

³“Cocaine Production, Manufacturing Methods, Equipment Used, Chemicals Needed. Drug Information for DARE Officers, Parents, Teachers, Students and Researchers.” <http://www.mninter.net/~publish/COKE/index2.htm>.

⁴U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 1999*. See also, “Lack of Air Support Hindering Drug War,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2000; “A Muddle in the Jungle,” *The Economist*, March 4, 2000; “DEA: Colombian Cocaine Production Up,” *CNN Interactive World Wide News*, January 18, 2000. It should be noted that coca production in Peru has once again started to rise.

⁵Testimony by William Ledwith, Chief of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency’s International Operations, before the House Government Reform Committee, Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources Subcommittee, Washington, D.C., February 15, 2000.

⁶In global terms, however, less than 2 percent of the world’s opium and refined heroin comes from Colombia, with most production taking place either in the “Golden Triangle” of Southeast Asia or the “Golden Crescent” of Southwest Asia.

⁷Opium gum is produced by mixing and boiling the sap of the opium poppy in lime water. The resulting white precipitate is drawn off, reheated with ammonia, filtered, and boiled again until it is reduced into a brown paste. This is finally dried in the sun to form morphine base.

Sodium carbonate is then added to the mixture, causing an amalgam to collect and solidify. The mixture is collected and purified with ether and hydrochloric acid to form standardized Number 4 heroin, which, because it is water soluble, tends to be taken intravenously.⁸ In 1999, U.S. State Department estimates showed Colombian poppy cultivation to be 7500 hectares, a crop capable of producing roughly eight tons of refined heroin.⁹ As with cocaine, the main target for the bulk of this opium derivative is the United States, currently accounting for 65 percent of all shipments that are exported from Colombia.¹⁰

Traffickers use several methods and routes to export cocaine and heroin to the United States, which remains the largest and most reliable market for the Colombian narcotics trade. A large percentage of the shipments is trafficked through Central America (primarily Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador) or flown up the central Pacific coast to Mexico, which acts as the main gateway for the North American market.¹¹ Most consignments are then moved into the United States by syndicates based in the Tijuana, Gulf of Mexico, and Ciudad Juarez border regions, many of which have gained a reputation for smuggling expertise after years of running illegal alien operations into Texas and California.¹²

A second passage runs northeast to Florida, either directly or via Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, or the Lesser Antilles. This route was used extensively during the early 1990s, but was then by-passed in favor of the Mexican conduit after successful interdiction operations in the Eastern Caribbean. In the last two years, how-

⁸Frontline, "The Opium Kings: Transforming Opium Poppies into Heroin," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heroin/transform/> (no date available).

⁹U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, 1999.

¹⁰Ledwith testimony; "Colombia Seizes 30 Percent More Cocaine, Heroin in 1998," *CNN Interactive World Wide News*, December 19, 1999; "Clinton Plans to Seek US\$1.3 Billion to Stem Colombian Drug Flow," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2000.

¹¹Up to 70 percent of illicit drugs that enter the United States are smuggled through Mexico.

¹²International Institute of Strategic Studies, "International Drug Trade," *Strategic Survey*, 1997/98, Oxford University Press, London, 1998, p. 249; "Major Suspect in Drug Trafficking Arrested in Mexico," *CNN Interactive World Wide News*, March 12, 2000; "Drugs Flood in from Mexico," *Washington Post*, November 29, 1999.

ever, there once again appears to have been a return to the Caribbean passage as a result of heightened Mexican counter-narcotics efforts. This ability to adapt to changing threats and opportunities reflects the inherently dynamic and “hydra-like” quality of the contemporary Colombian drug trade.¹³ In recent years, West Africa has also emerged as an increasingly important trafficking transshipment point for the United States as well as for Europe and secondary destinations in South Africa (particularly Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg).

THE MAIN PLAYERS

Prior to 1994, the Cali and Medellín cartels dominated virtually all aspects of the Colombian drug business, which then focused more or less exclusively on cocaine. However, since the death of Medellín kingpin Pablo Escobar in 1993, as well as the capture of leading members of the Cali inner circle, control of the country’s drug trade has become dispersed. Newer, less-structured, and “flatter” organizations now appear to be in the ascendancy, most of which operate in small, autonomous cells that are linked via Internet chat rooms and cellular phones protected by the very latest in encryption technology.¹⁴ Unlike the previous cartels, these “boutique” groups typically contract out the majority of their jobs to specialists who work on a job-to-job basis rather than as part of an integrated structure.¹⁵

The new syndicates have also increasingly diversified their operations into opiates, reacting to growing consumer demand in the

¹³Discussion with Dr. Bruce Bagley, University of Miami, February 11, 2000. See also Ledwith testimony; Peter Zirnite, “The Militarization of the Drug War in Latin America,” *Current History*, 97/618, 1998, p. 169; Phil Williams, “The Nature of Drug-Trafficking Networks,” *Current History*, 97/618, 1998, p. 157; “Drugs Flood in from Mexico,” *Washington Post*, November 29, 1999.

¹⁴This is very much reflective of the general “network” organizational paradigm that has been developed by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt. See John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *The Advent of Netwar*, RAND, MR-789, 1996.

¹⁵Discussion at USSOUTHCOM, Miami, February 10, 2000. See also Ledwith testimony; Peter Chalk, “Heroin and Cocaine: A Global Threat,” *Janes’ Intelligence Review*, p. 11; Geopolitical Drug Watch, “A Drug Primer for the Late 1990s,” *Current History*, 97/618, 1998, pp. 150–151; “New Cartels Hold Tech Advantage,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 1999.

United States for higher-grade heroin that need not be injected intravenously. By offering the drug at a lower price than traditional Southeast Asian suppliers, the Colombians have successfully managed to capture much of the lucrative U.S. heroin market, as well as cater to a growing generation of poly-drug users who take opiates to cushion the severe crash that typically follows a cocaine high.¹⁶

U.S. authorities admit that they have only limited operational intelligence on the groups that now dominate the drug trade in Colombia, attributing this to the groups' less-structured nature. Of most concern is the fact that these transient syndicates necessarily lack the operational "footprints" of more established organizations, which has made it far harder for law enforcement authorities to build an accurate picture of dimensions, intentions, and capabilities. The irony is that changes in this direction have largely been driven by law enforcement successes against the larger and more visible Cali and Medellín cartels. As the Paris-based Geopolitical Drug Watch Group observes: "The immediate effect of [past] repression was to disorganize the networks. But by making a virtue out of necessity, these large organizations quickly realized that decentralized structures are much less vulnerable and began the process of transforming themselves accordingly."¹⁷

The clearest window into the changes surrounding Colombian drug structures came in late 1999 when Operation *Millennium*, a joint U.S.-Colombian venture, successfully disrupted the activities of the Alejandro Bernal group. During the course of 1999, the DEA estimated the syndicate had been responsible for shipping 20 to 30 metric tons of cocaine every month to the United States, working in conjunction with the Mexican Ciudad Juárez-based cartel. Following the operation, however, U.S. and Colombian intelligence sources conceded that the Bernal group did not appear to be a single entity but rather an amorphous organization into which several other

¹⁶U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 1999*; Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, *Australian Illicit Drug Report 1997-98*, Canberra, 1998, p. 34.

¹⁷Geopolitical Drug Watch, p. 151.

smaller cells fed and contracted, sometimes for single, one-off operations.¹⁸

This ad hoc, disaggregated quality of the contemporary Colombian drug trade effectively means that the arrest of Bernal and his associates¹⁹ will not have much impact on the overall flow of cocaine into the United States. As one Colombian counter-narcotics official conceded at the conclusion of *Millennium*: Following the arrest of Bernal,

we [now] estimate there are several hundred small cartels operating in an atomized fashion. Several of those groups fed into the organization we dismantled. But there are several other people out there as big as Bernal, who can put loads together from small organizations, and we don't even have them identified.²⁰

As discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, the country's major guerrilla organization, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); right-wing paramilitary organizations; and, to a lesser extent, elements of the National Liberation Army (ELN) also play important roles in the Colombian drug trade.

IMPACT OF DRUG TRADE ON COLOMBIA AND THE REGION

The cocaine trade has brought about what some have called a "demographic revolution" in Colombia. Economic opportunities created by production, processing, and marketing of coca products attracted large numbers of migrants to the coca-growing areas of southeastern Colombia. In the Caguán area, in the southern FARC-controlled "demilitarized zone," the drug trade has attracted a large floating population, many of whom accept FARC guerrillas as the

¹⁸Ledwith testimony; see also "Drug Cartels Hold Tech Advantage," *Washington Post*, November 15, 1999; "Major Arrests Sabotage Colombian Drug Network," *Washington Post*, October 14, 1999.

¹⁹The operation also resulted in the indictment of Fabio Ochoa-Vasquez, one of the former leaders of the Medellín cartel, along with 30 other defendants.

²⁰Quoted in "Drug Cartels Hold Tech Advantage," *Washington Post*, November 15, 1999.

main guardians of their newfound “narco-economy.”²¹ This development has expanded the social base of the guerrillas and complicated counter-narcotics efforts in the area.

The heroin and cocaine trade has fueled high rates of drug-related crime and violence. During the 1990s, the country was repeatedly wracked by bomb attacks, kidnappings, and shootings designed to intimidate government officials and coerce changes in policy, particularly with regard to extradition of suspected Colombian drug traffickers to the United States.

Interfactional fighting, both within and between cartels, has also been a common feature, reaching a zenith in 1993 when a virtual civil war broke out between Pablo Escobar and a rival vigilante group, *los pepes*. Overall, it is estimated that drug-related violence currently accounts for a high proportion of the country’s 30,000 annual murders, one of the highest homicide rates of any country outside a war zone and more than double the number of murders recorded in the United States during 1998.²²

Politically, the impact has been rampant corruption, undermining both governmental legitimacy and executive authority. Heroin and cocaine remain the most lucrative commodities on the black market. Estimates of the valuation of the illegal drugs sold in the United States vary widely. By one gauge, the 520 metric tons of cocaine that Colombia produced in 1999 could, at an average retail street price in the United States of one hundred dollars a gram (or \$100 million per metric ton), have netted as much as \$52 billion—more than the gross domestic product of many nations. Even if only a fraction of these revenues returns directly to the drug syndicates as profits, overall earnings would remain in the hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars.²³

²¹Camilo Echandía Castilla, *El Conflicto Armado y las Manifestaciones de la Violencia en las Regiones de Colombia*, Presidencia de la República de Colombia, Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, Bogotá, 2000, p. 79.

²²See figures in the *Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976–1998*, <http://www.oip.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/city.htm>.

²³U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 1999*.

Revenues of this magnitude have given the various syndicates involved in the Colombian drug trade a virtually open-ended capacity to corrupt.²⁴ This was perhaps best reflected by the enormous loss of international and domestic legitimacy that befell the Colombian government after it became apparent that drug syndicates had helped finance the 1994 election campaign of President Ernesto Samper.²⁵

The drug trade has also affected wider Andean stability. Colombian cartels and narco-insurgents now routinely cross over into the adjacent territories of Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, exploiting poorly monitored border regions for safe havens as well as to facilitate the regional movement of drugs. Narcotics have played their part in helping to stimulate a growing cross-frontier migration and refugee problem. The Colombian government's inability to secure its borders has severely complicated Bogotá's regional relations, particularly with Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama.²⁶

IMPACT OF THE DRUG TRADE ON U.S. INTERESTS

While these invasive socio-political effects have generated growing concern in Washington, it is the consequences of the Colombian drug trade on the United States itself that are stimulating most American interest. Crack and cocaine sales drive much of the coun-

²⁴See, for instance, United States Commission on National Security/21st Century, *New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century*, Phase I Report on the Emerging Global Security Environment for the First Quarter of the 21st Century, September 15, 1999, p. 108.

²⁵Arlene Tickner, "Colombia: Chronicle of a Crisis Foretold," *Current History*, 97/616, 1998, p. 64; *Europa World Year Book*, "Colombia," Europa Publications, London, 1999, pp. 1006–1007. In January 1996, former defense minister Fernando Botero testified that Samper was aware his campaign had been financed by contributions of approximately US\$6 million from drug traffickers. Following the revelations, the United States began to identify Colombia's drug problem directly with President Samper and work toward his departure from power.

²⁶Gabriel Marcella and Donald Schulz, "Colombia's Three Wars: U.S. Strategy at the Crossroads," SSI, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, March 5, 1999, pp. 13–16; Bruce M. Bagley, "The Evolution of Drug Trafficking in Colombia in the 1990s," unpublished paper provided to authors, February 2000, pp. 12–13; Michael Shifter, "The United States and Colombia: Partners in Ambiguity," *Current History*, 99/634, 2000, p. 53; and "Civil War Displaces 1 Million Colombians in Five Years," *CNN Interactive World Wide News*, February 22, 2000.

try's drug-related violence as rival gangs compete for lucrative sales territory and addicts steal to feed their habit. Major metropolitan centers such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Washington, and Miami have been especially hard hit, where drugs have played an important role in accelerating already serious levels of social decline and inner-city decay.²⁷

Heroin and cocaine have also had a serious health impact in the United States. Although cocaine and crack use gradually declined during the 1990s, some 5.7 million Americans were estimated to be taking the drug in 1999 (compared to 7.7 million in 1990 and 6.6 million in 1995). In the same time frame, there has been a rising trend in the use of heroin, which has witnessed a 15 percent increase in demand since 1990. More problematic, there has been an escalation in multiple-drug use, with law enforcement authorities increasingly reporting seizures of packs containing both heroin and cocaine (commonly known as speedballs). The consequences of this combined substance abuse have been severe, contributing to a surge in emergency room admissions.²⁸

During the 1990s—a decade in which Colombia emerged as the main source for the two drugs in the United States—Washington spent an average of \$57.7 billion every year on law enforcement, interdiction, educational, rehabilitation, and health-related programs designed to stem the flow of heroin and cocaine and manage their effects. The budget for international drug control operations in FY2000 amounted to approximately one and a half billion dollars. If one were to add indirect losses brought about by the use of these narcotics, including curtailed job opportunities and decreased workplace productivity, overall economic costs would be far higher. As the Office of National Drug Control Policy observes, this financial burden is shared by all of society, either directly or indirectly through higher tax dollars.²⁹

²⁷U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, 1999.

²⁸Total hospital cocaine-related admissions, for instance, rose from 80,355 in 1990 to 172,014 in 1998, while those associated with heroin more than doubled from 33,884 to 77,645 during the same period. Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy*, 2000, <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov>, March 1, 2000.

²⁹*Ibid.*

THE U.S. RESPONSE

Since 1993, U.S. external counter-narcotics interdiction efforts have essentially concentrated on tackling the problem at its source, in Colombia. Prior to this, most of Washington's initiatives had been directed toward stopping cocaine as it moved through the Mexican and Caribbean transit states. The shift in focus, which was formalized in Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 14, was precipitated by the reasoning that since no other alternative existed for production and refining, this represented the weakest link in the overall cocaine industry chain.³⁰

Between 1994 and 1999, efforts were aimed at augmenting the counter-narcotics capabilities of the Colombian National Police in addition to attacking the so-called air-bridge that connects crop growers in Bolivia and Peru with refiners in Colombia. Two rationales underscored the twin approach. First, better law enforcement training, aimed at sound investigative techniques and criminal prosecutions, was seen as the most effective way of countering the drug lords and undermining their operations. Second, it was assumed that if air shipments of coca were disrupted, the overhead costs for the Colombian refiners would rise, generating price increases that would inevitably be passed onto U.S. consumers, thereby reducing the street demand for cocaine.³¹ Revelations that the Cali cartel had financed President Ernesto Samper's 1994 presidential election campaign led the Clinton administration to decertify Colombia from U.S. counter-narcotics assistance and aid between 1996 and 1997. However, police and air interdiction support was maintained on the grounds that it was a critical component of wider counter-drug efforts in the Andean region.³²

³⁰Zirnite, p. 169.

³¹U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 1999*.

³²In 1986, the U.S. Congress amended the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to include a provision that for a major drug-producing and/or transit country to have its counter-narcotics credentials certified, the President must certify that it is actively seeking to control the production/flow of drugs within its borders, either on its own or in conjunction with the United States. In certain cases, a country may be granted certification, notwithstanding its failure to meet this criterion, on the grounds that it is vital for national security interests. This happened with regard to Colombia in 1995, allowing the overall flow of U.S. aid to remain unaltered that year. Between 1996 and 1997, however, the country was fully decertified, which with the exception of counter-

Despite some tactical successes in reducing coca production in Peru and Bolivia, the overall impact of the police/air-bridge strategy has been limited if not counterproductive. If air interdiction has been successful in reducing the number of coca flights from Bolivia and Peru, it has merely prompted Colombian refiners to grow their own base material, causing a major boost in indigenous leaf cultivation. More seriously, the air-bridge strategy has given the drug producers an incentive to diversify into opiates, with syndicates increasingly seeking to offset commodity production disruptions in one area by expanding operations in another. This development has both exacerbated and further complicated the overall Colombian drug problem.³³

These consequences have caused a shift in U.S. counter-narcotics efforts to an explicit emphasis on support for the military's counter-narcotics operations. The aim, according to official rhetoric, is a "full court press" on all trafficking organization members and critical nodes to completely disrupt [and] destroy their production and shipping capabilities."³⁴ The new policy tools emphasized in this absolute "war on drugs" are equipment transfers, crop eradication, and militarized counter-narcotics training—details of which will be discussed in Chapter Six.

The United States has also stressed the necessity of increased crop eradication in its revamped counter-narcotics strategy, to be carried out by the Colombian National Police once crop-growing/refining regions have been secured by the military. Current projections call for 80,000 hectares to be sprayed (largely in Putumayo), which, if achieved, will bring the annual total to roughly 65 percent of the area currently thought to be under cultivation.³⁵ Fifteen specially de-

narcotics support to the National Police, essentially froze all American assistance for the two years.

³³Discussion with Dr. Bagley; see also Zirnite, p. 170; "A Muddle in the Jungle," *The Economist*, March 4, 2000; and "A New War," *The Economist*, January 15, 2000.

³⁴Cited in Zirnite, p. 168. See also Michael Shifter, "Colombia at War," *Current History* 98/626, 1999, pp. 120–121.

³⁵29,000 hectares of coca fields were reportedly destroyed from December 2000 to February 2001. *Financial Times*, February 20, 2001. The total area under coca cultivation in Colombia was estimated by the U.S. Department of State at 122,500 hectares in 1999. Other estimates are higher. It is perhaps worth noting that crop fumigation and eradication rarely represent a permanent solution to drug production.

signed fumigation aircraft are due to be transferred to Colombia in 2001, augmenting the eight planes already in action. The Black Hawk and Huey helicopters that have been earmarked for Colombian counter-narcotics duties will provide protection for these aerial herbicidal missions.³⁶ This counter-narcotics strategy that targets the coca fields in southern Colombia is referred to as the “Southern strategy” or the “Drive to the South.”

Crops are either grown in new areas or reseeded in the same plot once soil microbes have decomposed the coca and poppy herbicides—a cycle that typically takes a year to complete. See “We’re Targeting a Colombia That We Don’t Fully Understand,” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2000; “The Andean Coca Wars: A Crop That Refuses to Die,” *The Economist*, March 4, 2000; and “Spraying Doesn’t Stem Illegal Drug Crops in Colombia,” *CNN Interactive World Wide News*, February 21, 2000.

³⁶Bagley, “The Evolution of Drug Trafficking in Colombia in the 1990s,” p. 16; U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 1999*; “A Muddle in the Jungle,” *The Economist*, March 4, 2000; “The Andean Coca Wars: A Crop That Refuses to Die,” *The Economist*, March 4, 2000; “Spraying Doesn’t Stem Illegal Drug Crops in Colombia,” *CNN Interactive World Wide News*, February 21, 2000; “Colombia Expects Peasants to Fight Cocaine Removal,” *CNN Interactive World Wide News*, February 4, 2000.