

Rachel's Environment & Health News

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by Rachel Massey*

In July, President Clinton signed into law a \$1.3 billion aid package to step up the "war on drugs" in Colombia and neighboring countries in South America. Of this sum, \$860 million is designated for Colombia itself, mainly as aid to the military.[1] For three decades Colombia has been torn by civil war, and the Colombian military has a well-documented record of human rights abuses including disappearances, arbitrary detentions, kidnappings, and torture of civilians.[2, pg. 20] The U.S. Congress made its "drug war" military aid dependent upon the Colombian government improving its human rights profile, but in August President Clinton waived this requirement so that funds could begin to flow south. This month Mr. Clinton may waive the human rights requirements once again so a second installment of aid can be released.

For a number of years the U.S. has sponsored herbicide spraying in Colombia, intending to curb illegal drugs at their source. Starting in January 2001 under U.S. oversight, the Colombian government will escalate its "crop eradication" activities, in which aircraft spray herbicides containing glyphosate to kill opium poppy and coca plants. Glyphosate is the active ingredient in the well-known herbicide called Roundup. Opium poppy and coca are the raw materials for making heroin and cocaine.

Representatives of Colombian indigenous communities recently traveled to Washington, D.C. to explain how they have been affected by spraying that has already occurred. Glyphosate, they said, kills more than drug crops -- it also kills food crops that many rural Colombians depend on for survival. In some places, the spraying has killed fish and livestock and has contaminated water supplies. One photograph from a sprayed area shows a group of banana trees killed by herbicides; nearby a plot of coca plants remains untouched.[3] Sometimes the spray also lands on schoolyards or people's homes. Many Colombians say they have become ill as a result.[4]

According to the NEW YORK TIMES, in one case several spray victims traveled 55 miles by bus to visit a hospital. The doctor who treated them said their symptoms included dizziness, nausea, muscle and joint pain, and skin rashes. "We do not have the scientific means here to prove they suffered pesticide poisoning, but the symptoms they displayed were certainly consistent with that condition," he said. A nurse's aide in the local clinic said she had been instructed "not to talk to anyone about what happened here." [4]

The U.S. State Department denies that there are human health effects from spraying glyphosate on the Colombian countryside. A U.S. embassy official in Colombia told the NEW YORK TIMES that glyphosate is "less toxic than table salt or aspirin" and said the spray victims' accounts of adverse effects were "scientifically impossible." [4] A question-and-answer fact sheet published by the State Department says that glyphosate does not "harm cattle, chickens, or other farm animals," is not "harmful to human beings," and will not contaminate water. The fact sheet asks the question, "If glyphosate is so benign, why are there complaints of damage from its use in Colombia?" and answers: "These reports have been largely based on unverified accounts provided by farmers whose illicit crops have been sprayed. Since their illegal livelihoods have been affected by the spraying, these persons do not offer objective information about the program...." [5]

But medical reports link exposure to glyphosate herbicides with short-term symptoms including blurred vision, skin problems, heart palpitations, and nausea. Studies have also found associations with increased risk of miscarriages, premature birth, and non-Hodgkins lymphoma. Formulations in which glyphosate is combined with other ingredients can be more acutely toxic than glyphosate alone.[6, pgs. 5-8] Monsanto, a major manufacturer of glyphosate-based herbicides, was challenged by the Attorney General of New York State for making safety claims similar to those now being repeated by the U.S. State Department. In an out-of-court settlement in 1996,

Monsanto agreed to stop advertising the product as "safe, non-toxic, harmless or free from risk." [4,6]

Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, a vocal critic of the "drug war" military aid, visited Colombia last week. During his visit he was treated to a demonstration of aerial crop eradication, in the course of which the Colombian National Police managed to spray Senator Wellstone himself with herbicides. According to the Minneapolis STAR TRIBUNE, this accident occurred shortly after the U.S. Embassy in Colombia circulated materials explaining that the spray was guided by "precise geographical coordinates" calculated by computer. Colombian police said the accident had occurred because the wind blew the herbicide off course.[7]

Both common sense and scientific studies tell us that wind can be expected to blow aerially sprayed chemicals off course. For example, a 1992 study in Canada calculated that a buffer zone of 75 to 1200 meters (243 to 3900 feet) could be needed to protect non-target vegetation from damage during aerial spraying of glyphosate.[8] And a 1985 article on glyphosate says, "damage due to drift is likely to be more common and more severe with glyphosate than with other herbicides." [9]

Proponents of the "war on drugs" would like us to believe that the more acres of South American countryside we spray with herbicides, the fewer North American children will fall prey to drug pushers. But studies show that herbicide spray campaigns are ineffective at stemming the flow of drugs. So long as there is a demand for drugs, someone somewhere will supply them. Therefore crop eradication programs simply waste tax dollars. Furthermore, a 1999 report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), a federal agency, concluded that crop eradication efforts to date have failed.[2, pg. 16] According to the GAO, the U.S. State Department escalated its support for aerial spray campaigns in 1996, and during the 1997-98 period, over 100,000 hectares (254,000 acres) of the Colombian countryside were sprayed. But during this same period, net coca cultivation in Colombia increased 50 percent.[2, pgs. 16-18]

On the other hand, tackling the drug problem within the U.S. by reducing drug use can succeed. A study by the RAND corporation found that drug treatment programs for cocaine users in the U.S. are 23 times as cost effective as efforts to eradicate drugs at their source.[10] And yet, according to a 1999 U.S. government report, the majority of Americans needing drug treatment went untreated between 1991 and 1996.[11]

If dousing the Colombian countryside with herbicides is not an effective way to diminish the drug problem in the U.S., it is worth asking what drives our government's enthusiasm for this costly and destructive approach. One explanation is that the "war on drugs" is a pretext for policies that have little to do with drugs. Several U.S. industries stand to gain from U.S. intervention in Colombia's civil war. The Occidental Petroleum Corporation, for example, lobbied hard for the "drug war" military aid; and U.S. companies that manufacture the military helicopters used in Colombia were major supporters of the aid package.[12]

Waging an ineffective "war on drugs" abroad also helps to divert attention away from the political role of drug policy within the U.S. A recent report by Human Rights Watch, an organization that monitors and documents human rights abuses throughout the world, says that drug control policies within the U.S. have been the primary driver of this country's incarceration crisis, in which the prison population has quadrupled since 1980. The U.S. now has more than 2 million citizens behind bars. Rates of conviction and imprisonment are much higher among nonviolent drug offenders who are black than among their white counterparts.[13] Thirteen percent of black men in the U.S. -- more than one in ten -- are not allowed to vote because they are in jail or were previously convicted of a felony.[14]

Without the rhetoric of "fighting drugs," U.S. officials would have to admit to the American public that we are intervening in another country's civil war -- bringing back memories of Vietnam and other disastrous failures of U.S. foreign policy. Unfortunately, the analogy to Vietnam is appropriate as U.S. military involvement in Colombia deepens. During the Vietnam war, the U.S. defoliated and contaminated Vietnam's forests with Agent Orange, a herbicide composed of the chemicals 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T and routinely contaminated with the carcinogen dioxin. American veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange suffer elevated rates of diabetes and certain cancers, and veterans' children have elevated rates of major birth defects (see REHW #212 and #250). Under the banner of the "war on drugs," in Colombia once again we are waging a toxic war against another country's unique ecosystems and the health of innocent civilians.

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[1] See <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aid>.

[2] U.S. General Accounting Office Report to Congressional Requesters, "Drug Control: Narcotics Threat from Colombia Continues to Grow." GAO/NSIAD-99-136 June 1999. Go to http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces160.shtml and search for the report by number.

[3] See <http://www.usfumigation.org>.

[4] Larry Rohter, "To Colombians, Drug War is Toxic Enemy," NEW YORK TIMES May 1, 2000, pgs. A1, A10

[5] U.S. State Department, "The Aerial Eradication of Illicit Crops: Answer to Frequently Asked Questions," Fact sheet released by the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, November 6, 2000, available at http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/colombia/fs_001106_faqs.html

[6] For a thorough review of glyphosate's adverse effects, see Caroline Cox, "Glyphosate (Roundup)" Herbicide fact sheet, JOURNAL OF PESTICIDE REFORM Vol 18, No. 3 (Fall 1998), updated October 2000, available at <http://www.pesticide.org/factsheets.html#pesticides> or from Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, Eugene, Or.; Tel. 541-344-5044.

[7] Rob Hotakainen, "Colombian Police Spray Herbicide on Coca, Wellstone," Minneapolis STAR TRIBUNE December 1, 2000. Available at <http://webserv5.startribune.com/stOnLine/cgi-bin/article?thisSlug=WELL01&date=01-Dec-2000&word=hotakainen>

[8] D. Atkinson, "Glyphosate damage symptoms and the effects of drift," in E. Grossbard and D. Atkinson, editors, THE HERBICIDE GLYPHOSATE (London: Butterworth Heinemann, 1985), pgs. 455-458. ISBN 0408111534.

[9] Nicholas J. Payne, "Off-Target Glyphosate from Aerial Silvicultural Applications, and Buffer Zones Required around Sensitive Areas," PESTICIDE SCIENCE Vol. 34, 1992, pgs. 1-8.

[10] C. Peter Rydell and Susan S. Everingham, CONTROLLING COCAINE: SUPPLY VERSUS DEMAND (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1994), ISBN 0-8330-1552-4, pg. xiii.

[11] Office of National Drug Control Policy, 1999 NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL STRATEGY, Table 27, p. 130. Available at <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/policy.ndcs.html>

[12] Sam Loewenberg, "Well-financed U.S lobby seeks relief from Drug Wars," LEGAL TIMES February 21, 2000, available at http://www.forusa.org/panama/0300_columbianaid.html

[13] Human Rights Watch, PUNISHMENT AND PREJUDICE: RACIAL DISPARITIES IN THE WAR ON DRUGS, March 1999, summary available at http://www.hrw.org/hrw/reports/2000/usa/Rcedrg00.htm#P54_1086 or at <http://www.drugwarfacts.org>.

[14] Mary Gabriel, "13 Percent of Black Men in America Have No Vote," REUTERS November 3, 2000.