

Testimony by Rand Beers before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
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Senators Cornyn and Feinstein, Members of the Caucus, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss narcotics issues in the Western hemisphere. As you know, it is a subject which I have worked on and thought about for over 30 years since I first served on the NSC Staff in May 1988 under Colin Powell and Ronald Reagan.

Today, I want to focus first on Colombia, then expand the discussion to Latin America more broadly, and end with a discussion on Central America.

As you are well aware, despite the successes of Plan Colombia, the takedown of the Medellin and Cali Cartels, and the combined work of US and Colombian law enforcement and militaries, these efforts have been set back in recent years by a variety of factors. The demise of the two main cartels has led to smaller and more numerous Colombian trafficking organizations, and the successor organizations have adapted using lessons learned from studying successful law enforcement actions, making subsequent law enforcement efforts more challenging. The trafficking organizations have expanded their illegal activities to other areas such as illegal mining, making them more resilient. The coca growers have moved their cultivation to denied areas such as national forests and indigenous protected areas to avoid aerial eradication. And more recently, the effort by President Santos to make peace with the FARC led to the cessation of aerial eradication and FARC encouragement of a major expansion of coca cultivation so that the growers could receive greater compensation from the government's planned voluntary eradication efforts following the Peace Agreement.

The clearest measure of this setback provided by ONDCP is the more than doubling of coca cultivation in Colombia from the low point in 2012 of 78,000 hectares to 209,000 in 2017 and the even more dramatic increase in potential cocaine production over the same period from 220MT in 2012 to 921MT in 2017. Again, according to ONDCP, the trend of annual increases in Colombian coca production directly relates to greater cocaine use in the United States, resulting in both an increase in overdose deaths and other crime and violence associated with the drug trade. The number of new cocaine users in the United States has increased by 81% since 2013 and overdose deaths involving cocaine have more than doubled during that same timeframe. When cocaine was used in some combination with opioids, overdose deaths increased 110%.

While these numbers are depressing, while the problem is compounded by Venezuela imploding next door, sending a massive flow of refugees across the border, Colombia still is stable with reasonably strong institutions, and the U.S. can still contribute. A combined effort, however, will require significantly increased and sustained activity in Colombia.

The Peace Agreement represents an opportunity, but the government has yet to devote the resources to offer campesinos reason to give up coca. The notion was a stipend for voluntary eradication by individual communities together with the provision of agricultural assistance for alternative crops or other economic activity, the delivery of health and education public services, and a transportation network to move economic products to market. For those communities unwilling to eradicate their coca and for those individuals cultivating coca in the national forests and indigenous areas, forced eradication was to occur. But implementation, always a challenge across the large rural growing areas, has been slow to non-existent. And expectations on the part of the campesinos for assistance far outpaced the government's ability to deliver, even under the best of circumstances, and without a communicated strategy of how and when implementation was to occur and progress on the ground to point to, the plan seemed like another undelivered government promise.

The Plan Colombia effort, with initial planning beginning in 1999, was a U.S.-Colombian agreement to tackle the problem together. The sterile debate over whether it was the producing or consuming countries' responsibility to solve the problem was put aside. Colombia agreed to increase its efforts against the traffickers and the FARC and paramilitaries engaged in the drug trade, and U.S. agreed to a major assistance program to equip the military and the police to go after the traffickers, to provide economic assistance for an alternative development program, to help strengthen the judicial system and to build strong human rights protections. The Plan succeeded in its major articulated goal of a 50% reduction in coca cultivation in five years, and over the longer term with peace agreements with the paramilitaries and the FARC, the major combatants were removed from the field. However, U.S. assistance was reduced, and Colombian efforts regarding drug trafficking and alternative development were as well. As a result, the campesinos in the rural areas were generally left to fend for themselves, and coca remained their most viable cash crop. The obvious lesson is that drug trafficking, like crime in general, requires a continuous effort and that enforcement action alone provides only part of the solution.

It is important to note that the situation in Colombia today is different than when Plan Colombia was conceived in 1999. Colombia is not on the verge of collapse or likely to turn into a narco state as some suggested then. Equally important, our bilateral relationship is strong, deepened by two decades of cooperation. The question on the table is whether our two

countries are prepared together to commit to the sustained effort and resources necessary to again tackle this problem.

Colombia, however, is not unique with respect to the drug issue in Latin America. Coca is also grown in Peru and Bolivia, though at much lower levels and not primarily destined for the U.S. Many believe that Brazil is the globe's second largest consumer of cocaine, but cocaine and other drug use exists throughout the Western Hemisphere at varying levels. And the movement drugs to market and the drug business of drugs within countries have increased crime, corruption and violence in most countries in the region.

Looking at a particular subregion as a case study of this phenomenon, I want to move now to an area particularly affected by the drug trade and for the last five years particularly significant to the U.S. for different reasons, namely the Northern Triangle of Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. While this region has occupied our attention as a result of illegal migration, it is important to look at the underlying drivers of that migration to better understand the nature of the problem.

The drug trade has moved product to the U.S. and Canada through the Northern Triangle countries for some time. To facilitate the drug movement, the traffickers paid their local facilitators in product not cash. The product was then sold locally, creating and expanding a market in the subregion which in turn led to further crime corruption and violence in a vicious reinforcing cycle. Compounding this problem, the U.S. over the last several decades has returned gang members, both legal and illegal migrants who had been involved in drug trafficking and other crime in the U.S, to their home countries which were unprepared to absorb them. This has further exacerbated the instability in these countries, creating and expanding a gang culture in already vulnerable communities.

The murder rates in this subregion are among the highest in the world, El Salvador has the highest rate, Honduras is second and Guatemala is fifteenth. Crime rates generally are similar with Honduras having the third worst rate in the world and El Salvador ninth by one authority. Corruption is equally serious. Together these factors inhibit and disrupt economic activity, and poverty is widespread. Honduras and Guatemala are among the poorest countries in the hemisphere. Out migration is a natural response, and the U.S. is a logical destination, a place with large immigrant communities from the region already present.

Without action within each of the three countries the situation in the region will remain turbulent. Stronger enforcement activities offer part of a solution, and the Colombian National Police have worked with us to strengthen local law enforcement institutions in the past. However, what has happened in Colombia reminds us that better law enforcement alone will

not resolve the underlying conditions. Again, in the recent past, we have also undertaken economic assistance in the same communities where we have assisted in strengthening law enforcement, an assistance combination designed to reinforce each other. And again, we have not persisted.

In conclusion, these two examples help highlight the challenges the drug trade presents to the region and to the U.S. They also point out that U.S. assistance in any form requires a cooperative partner, that law enforcement is an essential element in dealing with drug trafficking but not sufficient, and that when law enforcement is combined with other forms of U.S. assistance, the U.S. and its partners stand the best chance of success.