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FOR: SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

FROM: Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs
(Mr. Peter W. Rodman, (b)(6))

JAN 20 2004

SUBJECT: "THE ECONOMIST" REPORT CARD ON COLOMBIA

You have asked about benchmarks to measure progress in Colombia. One benchmark might be the increasingly favorable tone of the media in reporting on improved security.

- This leader from last week's Economist magazine might interest you.
- It's a report card on President Uribe at mid-term, with statistics on terrorist activity, decline in overall violence, and recent kills/captures of terrorist leaders.

The article attributes Uribe's success to two factors:

- 1) The security build-up, which, in large degree thanks to US support, has allowed the military to take the offensive.
- 2) The government's effort to "recapture territory and establish a presence throughout the country." That's a backhanded tribute to your concept of "Effective Sovereignty" vs. *ungoverned spaces*.

To which I would add that a key element of our success has been Uribe himself.

Attachment: As Stated



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Colombia's security policy

You do the maths

By Gillian Trawling
From The Economist 30 January 2004

AFP



Despite its shortcomings, President Uribe's security push has achieved some promising results

Get article background

AFTER months of effort by Colombian agents aided by the United States, Ricardo Palmera (above) was finally arrested in Ecuador on January 2nd. Mr Palmera, whose *nom de guerre* is Simón Trinidad, is the most senior leader of the FARC, Colombia's main rebel group, to be captured during its long war with the government in Bogotá. His capture is a symbolic victory for President Álvaro Uribe; and partly because of America's help, there have been many other (if less dramatic) gains.

If ending Colombia's violence were simply a question of numbers, then 2003 offered many reasons for hope. Jorge Alberto Uribe, the defence minister since November (no relation of the president), has his own tally. Last year, over 16,000 suspected members of the country's two leftist guerrilla groups, and of its right-wing paramilitary vigilantes, either surrendered or were killed or captured. That amounts to more than half of the three irregular armies' estimated total strengths. Keep this up, and they will soon be wiped out: "It's mathematics," says Mr Uribe.

If only. Colombia will remain a violent country for years to come: the drug trade will see to that. Yet the president's "democratic security" policy has indeed notched up some impressive results. Colombia's overall murder rate fell to around 50 per 100,000 people in 2003—still high by international standards, but the lowest figure since 1986, according to Fundación Seguridad y Democracia (FSD), a Bogotá consultancy. For the first time in recent years, the number of new internal refugees caused by the violence fell substantially, to 156,188. According to new government figures, there were a mere 2,043 kidnappings in 2003, down from 2,986 in 2002.

Meanwhile, the security forces have been busy: they fought more than 2,300 battles with the irregular armies (up from 1,338 in 2002), losing 523 dead while killing 2,980, according to FSD figures. And a massive campaign of aerial spraying has cut the cultivation of drug crops, on which the rebels rely for income.

Behind the figures lies a big security build-up, supported by American aid totalling around \$2.5 billion since 2000. President Uribe's strategy has two main elements. First, the armed forces have taken the offensive. In the second half of 2003, the army and air force did much damage to FARC units in north-western Colombia, around Bogotá and Medellín. They killed or forced the surrender of half a dozen mid-level guerrilla commanders. This has helped to blunt FARC's efforts to mount an urban bombing campaign.

Second, the government is attempting to recapture territory, and establish a presence throughout the country. A plan to expand the police was completed last month, with contingents placed in all 158 municipalities that lacked them when the president took office in August 2002—no small matter in a country more than twice the size of France. In some places, the police are being backed up by a new force of local part-time "peasant soldiers".

The omelette and the broken eggs

Ordinary Colombians feel safer, and, partly as a result, the economy is reviving. GDP grew by an estimated 3.2% last year, the best posting since 1997. Juan Carlos Echeverry of LatinSource, a New York-based consultancy, points out that the capital flight of recent years has now been reversed, and investment and imports of capital goods are both growing.

Yet this progress is not without flaws; and it is too early to be sure that it is irreversible. The government has yet to hit FARC where it would hurt most: its longstanding bastions in the south and east, in departments such as Meta and Caquetá. This is where the guerrillas have their training schools, weapons factories and arms dumps, and garner some support from the local population.



Mr Uribe, the defence minister, points to recent combat in Putumayo, a FARC stronghold in the south. A shake-up in the armed forces has brought generals to the two top posts who spend more time in the field than at their desks. And Congress last month approved a new anti-terrorism law that gives the army judicial powers, of arrest and search, as well as phone-tapping. Mr Uribe insists that the powers will be temporary (the law expires in four years), will be used only against "terrorism", and will be subject to congressional oversight. But human-rights groups say they will lead to an increase in torture and forced disappearances. Any such heavy-handedness will carry political, as well as ethical, risks. The president already faces criticism for a hasty effort to give an amnesty to right-wing

paramilitaries, who have a murderous past and links to some army officers.

Perhaps the weakest part of the security strategy is its approach to the civilian population in guerrilla areas. In a downbeat recent report, the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based watchdog, lamented the government's lack of a rural-development strategy, and concludes that "lasting gains against the insurgents will be difficult, if not impossible, unless rural communities see clear and immediate benefits in the government campaign." A hefty commission organised by the Council on Foreign Relations in New York this week made some similar points.

Minister Uribe admits that "the social touch" is important. But boosting local government, schools and hospitals is expensive. And while the president remains very popular, he has stumbled recently. A referendum in November on fiscal reforms, promoted by him, failed when too few Colombians voted. To reduce the resulting fiscal gap, the president asked Congress to approve tax increases. It did so, but different ones, including a wealth tax.

If the president is no longer omnipotent, that is no bad thing. The main thrust of his security policy is sound, but it needs to be refined if the undoubted progress towards making Colombia a peaceful democracy is to be consolidated.

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