

Six Groups Assail U.S. Effort to Limit Colombian Drugs

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Washington D.C. - Six leading U.S. advocacy groups issued a scathing report on Washington's antinarcotics aid program for Colombia on Thursday, just two days after the Bush administration certified the program had met the standards set by Congress.

The so-called Plan Colombia has fueled increased cultivation of coca and opium poppies elsewhere in the region, ruined forests and sparked growing violence, said the "Report Card" issued on the three-year anniversary of the \$2 billion U.S. aid program for Colombia's counter-drug programs.

"On human rights grounds, the judiciary and the rule of law, Plan Colombia has been a failure," said Eric Olson, advocacy director for the Americas at Amnesty International. "It's failed to drop the flow of drugs into the United States and it's dramatically increased the level of violence inside the country."

Amnesty was among the organizations that contributed to the "Report Card." The others were the U.S. Office on Colombia, the Latin America Working Group, the Center for International Policy, the Institute for Policy Studies and the Washington Office on Latin America.

Although the Bush administration on Tuesday certified that Colombia was meeting the human-rights and other requirements of Plan Colombia, Thursday's report alleged several failings:

* Despite a 15 percent decrease in the acreage under coca cultivation last year compared to 2001, the 2002 figure was still higher than the figure from 2000.

* Eradication efforts in Colombia are only shifting coca cultivation back to other countries, including Bolivia and Peru. In Bolivia, cultivation rose from 36,062 acres in 2000 to 60,268 acres last year. In Peru, cultivation rose from 84,227 acres to 88,920 acres.

* Plan Colombia has had no apparent impact on U.S. availability or use of Colombian cocaine. Supplies have remained steady; street prices have not risen.

Thursday's report, endorsed by House Democrats Jan **Schakowsky** of Illinois and Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, contrasts with other reports in March and May that hailed drug eradication efforts.

A joint United Nations-Colombian government study in March showed a 29.5 percent drop in coca fields in 2002, compared to the previous year. This year's CIA estimates show a 15 percent drop in the number of acres devoted to growing illegal coca crops.

In May, the White House announced that opium poppy crops, the source of heroin, also dropped 25 percent in volume in Colombia. The Office of National Drug Control Policy said the decline was due to the U.S.-sponsored herbicide-spraying program.

Critics said those studies do not measure the overall impact of the various problems tied to drug-trafficking faced by Colombia, including violence from armed leftist rebel groups and rightist paramilitary organizations allegedly protected by government security forces.

Schakowsky, who has traveled to Colombia, said the Bush administration has a "deeply flawed approach" to resolving the problems there, adding that Plan Colombia "has turned from counter-narcotics to counter-insurgency."