

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum

“Peace building in Colombia: the challenges of the elections”

April 11, 2006

The April CPRF focused on peace building in Colombia and the challenges of the elections. The speakers gave insight into the nature and evolution of the current situation in Colombia and addressed the upcoming presidential elections and the possible implications for Colombia's future. Speakers were Dr. Cynthia J. Arnson, Director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Phillip McLean, Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Adjunct Professor at the Elliott School, George Washington University.

The speakers explained the numerous issues concerning paramilitary groups that have influenced the policies of the Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's Administration and the peace process as a whole. The paramilitary groups, originally created by the government, are now moving more towards criminal syndication and heavy drug trafficking, causing the government to take action against them. While laws and provisions in 2005 have helped to demobilize some groups and individuals, the question of the current demobilized status was raised. The speakers pointed out the inability of combined US and Colombian efforts to decrease coca plant production and hinder the flow of arms to the guerrilla groups such as the FARC. It was noted that the desire for talks in Cuba is a reflection of flexibility within these groups and the government to move away from open armed conflict.

The history of collaboration between paramilitary groups and the government signifies a degree of alarm in terms of the ability of such groups to infiltrate the government on various levels and essentially usurp power. The reforms of the Uribe administration to strengthen its military are undeniable, however the effect on helping to solve the problem is negligible. The FARC has since retreated to its rural stronghold after a yearlong attempt to thwart drug trafficking, arms flow, and the overall organization of paramilitary groups. The continued detention of hostages by these groups from countries worldwide and recent US indictment against members of the FARC over 25 million dollars from drug trafficking has complicated the issue. The speakers described the peace process as fatigued and questioned when both sides will move past talking and follow through. The Uribe administration has made some progress. There have been efforts to expand the social benefits to everyone with increased tax revenue. The decline in homicides and crime generally is something that people are grateful for, but there is still a long way to go. The lack of violence doesn't mean peace.

The speakers recommended that the peace process be allowed time and that the US continue to apply pressure in order to keep the process on track. A preventative approach of accountability and follow through was advocated for. Reforming the judicial system and setting up a solid system of law and order is needed to make rebel groups responsible for their actions and to stop the high crime rates.