



Colombia: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021

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Colombia is a key U.S. ally in Latin America and a long-term security partner. Colombia's prominence in illegal drug production prompted the United States and Colombia to forge close counter-drug ties. Plan Colombia, a U.S.-Colombian program that began in 2000, focused initially on counternarcotics and later on counterterrorism, laying the foundation for an enduring partnership.

Hard-hit by waves of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) infections in 2020-2021, Colombia has faced multiple challenges, all while attempting to recover from a pandemic-driven 6.8% economic contraction in 2020. These challenges include (1) spikes in coca cultivation and [cocaine production](#); (2) violence against human rights and other social activists; (3) mass anti-government protests in mid-2021 that lasted nearly three months; and (4) instability spilling over from Venezuela, including the migration of some 2 million Venezuelans fleeing their homeland's crises.

For [some](#) Members of Congress, priority aspects of the U.S.-Colombia relationship are close collaboration on security and on [countering illicit drugs](#) destined mainly for the [U.S. market](#). For others, human rights concerns predominate, including accountability for abuses committed during Colombia's decades-long internal armed conflict and more recent human rights violations.

Post-conflict Security, Human Rights, and Venezuelan Migrants

Colombia's 2016 peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) resulted in the demobilization of 13,000 insurgents and the FARC's transformation from a leftist guerrilla army to a political party. Neither the government nor the rebels have upheld all their commitments under the agreement. Some guerrillas, known collectively as *FARC dissidents*, have recently rearmed.

President Iván Duque, elected in 2018 from the conservative Democratic Center party, campaigned as a peace accord critic. Many Colombians have protested what they view as his government's lackadaisical peace accord compliance. Others have blamed the former FARC, FARC dissidents, and now Colombia's largest insurgent group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), for ongoing insecurity.

The 2016 peace accord established a transitional justice court, known as the JEP (based on its Spanish acronym), to identify and punish crimes committed during the conflict. In February 2021, a JEP [investigation](#) concluded the Colombian Armed Forces (mainly the Army) had killed [6,400](#) Colombian

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civilians who were falsely presented as enemies killed in combat. Human rights groups consider the so-called *false positive* killings a [grave abuse](#) and view the Duque government's criticism of the JEP and underfunding of its operations to be unacceptable.

After the peace accord was ratified in late 2016 and the FARC demobilized in rural zones, the government struggled to replace insurgent control with a [comprehensive state presence](#) to curb criminal competition and armed group expansion to fill the power void. Murders of social, ethnic, and labor leaders and of land rights and environmental activists often occurred in remote, ungoverned parts of the country. Colombian groups and international bodies such as the U.N. have [criticized](#) the Duque administration's efforts to protect social leaders.

In spring 2021, a proposed tax increase sparked widespread protests for several weeks, even after the Duque administration modified and then withdrew the tax increase. Public grievances mushroomed to include slow implementation of the peace accords, police brutality against demonstrators, economic inequality, crime, and corruption. Although many protested peacefully, blockades and vandalism by some demonstrators resulted in an estimated [\\$3 billion](#) of damage to the economy. Domestic and international monitoring groups condemned riot police and law enforcement clashes with protesters, which resulted in [58 deaths](#) and thousands of injuries. In June, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [denounced](#) Colombian law enforcement's excessive use of force. In September 2021, the Duque administration successfully passed through Congress a significantly revised tax reform, which generated little public opposition.

Colombia has received more than 2 million refugees and migrants from neighboring Venezuela. In February 2021, the Duque administration unveiled an innovative program offering Venezuelans who entered before January 2021 [a decade](#) of temporary protected status. By September 2021, nearly [1.3 million Venezuelans](#) had registered for access to health care, work permits, other social services, and [a path to citizenship](#). President Duque said his government has a [moral duty](#) to legalize migrants escaping a dictatorship. However, Venezuelans, previously welcomed in Colombia, have become the focus of rising xenophobia, due in part to hardships imposed by the pandemic.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Response

Since 2000, the U.S. government has provided [about \\$12 billion](#) in bilateral aid to help implement Plan Colombia and its successor strategies. At times, congressional views have diverged regarding whether U.S. assistance should be weighted toward counternarcotics and security or toward development, peace, and human rights. The Trump Administration's focus was largely on containing Venezuela and reducing drug flows. The Biden Administration's regional aims of strengthening democratic institutions to build the rule of law and protect human rights likely will drive bilateral relations. Despite occasional areas of tension, the Biden Administration has signaled it will maintain close relations with Colombia.

Many Members of Congress have praised Colombia's leadership in promoting a democratic transition in Venezuela and its humanitarian response toward migrants fleeing the country. Nevertheless, given the significant amount of U.S. support to Colombia's police over many years, [some Members](#) have questioned continued funding until police actions against demonstrators are fully investigated.

Congressional oversight of U.S. assistance has continued to consider the efficacy of Colombia's [antidrug efforts](#). A long-standing but continuing debate is whether to support traditional supply control measures, such as the [Duque administration's restart](#) of widespread aerial eradication of coca, or alternative approaches, such as prioritizing voluntary eradication and alternative development, as favored in the peace accord.

In FY2021, Congress appropriated more than \$463.3 million in bilateral aid for Colombia. The Biden Administration's FY2022 budget request includes \$460.2 million in bilateral aid for Colombia. The

House-passed foreign aid appropriations bill for FY2022, H.R. 4373, would provide \$461.4 million and stipulates that 30% of funding under the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and Foreign Military Financing accounts would be obligated only after the U.S. Secretary of State certifies that Colombia met certain human rights conditions; for the first time, counternarcotics aid under INCLE would be subject to certain conditions.

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