

Fanning the flames of Colombia's war

By Mike Tidwell

UNITED STATES drug policies in South America and US cities like Washington, D.C. — where I work as a drug counselor — are contributing directly to the violent narco-guerrilla conflict now escalating in Colombia. In a very real way, the US is arming both sides in the Colombian civil war while encouraging a rate of addiction to crack and heroin in the US that makes the Colombian war inevitable.

That's my observation after 10 years of working with homeless crack and heroin addicts and following US efforts to eliminate the source of drugs my clients consume. So I take special interest in

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the first-ever Washington summit of Western Hemisphere drug czars Nov. 2-4. It's doubtful, though, that the visitors from 34 nations, large and small, each dependent on US antinarcotics aid, will admit the full hemispheric failings of US drug policies.

US drug czar Gen. Barry McCaffrey, who is hosting the summit at the Omni-Shoreham Hotel near where many of my clients score drugs, will almost certainly promote continued military aid to the Colombian government, according to observers.

But doing so will only make matters worse. True, the US has recently succeeded in temporarily shutting down coca cultivation in Bolivia and Peru. But since demand for cocaine remains high among the addicts I work with

and others across the US, cultivation has simply shifted to Colombia, with prices climbing thanks to the reduction in neighboring supply. This shift has poured millions more dollars into Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which largely controls the drug trade there.

With increasing funds, the rebels are coming closer to toppling the Colombian government. To prevent this, the US now provides almost \$300 million annually in antidrug assistance to the government, including reconnaissance equipment and more than 200 military advisers.

Our policy, then, is to further militarize the Colombian government in order to combat rebel operations, which are expanding because of our antinarcotics policies. We're arming both sides.

Now, switch to the streets of D.C., where the same policy phenomena play out in slightly different fashion. I've seen this firsthand. The dealers at 14th and Park Road, for example, are local suppliers. They offer a product desired by users but deemed illegal and targeted by US government enforcement — the police and their increasingly militarized special narcotics units.

Targeting petty users and street dealers is the centerpiece of our war on drugs. So D.C. enforcement units raid, badger, arrest, and incarcerate the dealers at 14th and Park Road until the market collapses. But attacking local supply without addressing demand guarantees that drug markets and sales won't cease. They simply move to another block, momentarily untargeted by police. With more raids, they move again — and again. It's a mobile supply base, just like the one in South America — Peru to Bolivia to Colombia — made possible by unchanging demand.

Unfortunately, the relocation of this urban supply base often means the drug market enters a

previously unaffected neighborhood. The new market, by its sheer dominating presence, lures into the drug trade people on the block who otherwise would never have gotten involved. It also promotes addiction, hyper-exposing young people to crack as they now face five dealers on their way to the bus stop. The bottom-line result of our policies: Virtually every inner-city D.C. block is guaranteed, sooner or later, to have a drug market on its sidewalks, just as every Andean nation seems destined, sooner or later, to be the hemisphere's primary coca producer.

In D.C., as in South America, our policies also force both sides to arm themselves heavily. Dents in supply raise narcotics prices, guaranteeing big profits with which street dealers acquire powerful weapons. In response, 90 percent of all US cities above 50,000 people now deploy paramilitary drug units. Simply put, we are now arming our city governments the same way we arm the Colombian government.

But in the end, it is drug demand from which all ills evolve, from the thug shootings near the White House to the mass executions in the Colombian jungles.

Yet political demagoguery and neglect mean that US treatment programs accommodate only about 50 percent of hard-core users. D.C.'s treatment budget, for example, dropped 37 percent between 1993 and 1998.

Until we reverse this trend and seriously address drug demand at home, we will continue doing much more harm than good in the drug war — here and throughout the hemisphere.

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