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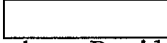
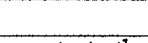
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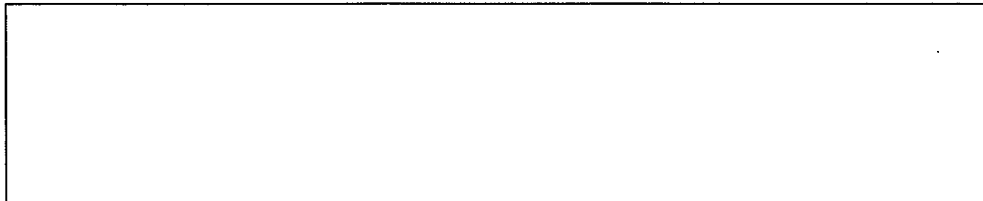
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Colombia: Questions and Answers on Serpa, Counternarcotics, and Insurgency

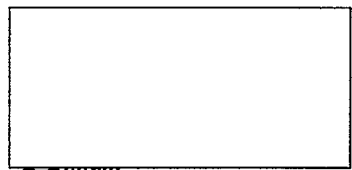
1) What are the potential implications of a US decision regarding Horacio Serpa's visa?

Presidential candidate Horacio Serpa—widely described as a seasoned politician whose charismatic, populist style; campaign smarts; and knack for manipulating his media image make him the “man to beat” in the upcoming presidential election—would probably spin any US decision regarding his visa to suit his near-term political goal of becoming Colombia's next president:

- A renewal of his expired US visa would probably give a boost to Serpa's efforts to portray himself as having resolved his difficulties with the United States, especially in the wake of the widely publicized *Newsweek* article that speculated about US evidence linking Serpa to narcotics-related corruption. Serpa has told  that he is concerned about high negative ratings stemming from his ties to President Ernesto Samper. With a US visa, however, he could probably convince undecided voters that his presidency would not be a rerun of Samper's largely discredited administration and that, if elected, he could work with the US Government. Indeed, Serpa—who criticized the United States during much of Samper's tenure—has recently moderated his tone, privately telling  that he places priority on reducing bilateral friction. Probably to demonstrate that he is sincere about advancing key counternarcotics initiatives, he is trying to attract US allies in the antidrug fight to his campaign team. He has reportedly asked National Police Chief Serrano to join his ticket as vice-presidential candidate.



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- Serpa appears equally poised to lash out against the United States to minimize the potential negative impact to his public image that would result from a US decision to deny him a visa. He deftly performed damage control following the *Newsweek* article, strongly denying any wrongdoing and demanding to be shown the evidence against him. Serpa's public reaction is likely to be particularly harsh in view of the recent Colombian decision to drop a narcotics-related corruption investigation against him.¹ If Serpa carries it out as artfully as he has in the past, this tack would probably result in at least a short-term boost in the polls.
- In the event Serpa is elected, denial of the visa would, at a minimum, be seen as a US rejection of Serpa and would complicate bilateral relations in at least the early months of a Serpa government. While Serpa would probably conclude the United States aimed to publicly humiliate and undermine him—and could take steps antithetical to US counternarcotics interests if elected—he is described by US diplomats as a pragmatist and therefore would probably weigh carefully the tangible benefits and associated costs before determining what a longer term position toward the United States should be.

Would a renewal or denial on Serpa's visa significantly influence the campaigns of other candidates? Who other than Serpa would be affected by a US decision on his visa?

While a renewal or denial of Serpa's US visa would probably have only a marginal impact on the campaigns of other candidates, they probably would prefer that the 'Serpa visa question' not become a campaign issue at all:

- None of the leading candidates would benefit from a decision to grant Serpa a visa. More important, some candidates will undoubtedly lose potential voters to Serpa—particularly Colombians leery of a continued contentious bilateral relationship with the United States—if Serpa is able to portray himself as acceptable to the United States.
- How the presidential contenders react or are affected by a decision to deny Serpa a visa depends on Serpa's success in playing the nationalist card. A decision to deny a visa would allow presidential candidates to highlight Serpa's ties to the

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scandal-plagued Samper administration. However, if Serpa is able to stir up nationalist sentiments and popular support—as he did following the *Newsweek* allegations—his opponents' potential gains could evaporate quickly. Indeed, the other candidates may join Serpa in denouncing the United States for an action popularly perceived as US unilateralism and interference in Colombian domestic politics. Pro-US candidates—such as Sanin or Valdivieso—might take the opportunity to warn Colombians about the consequences of electing a scandal-plagued president, but they would also probably criticize the United States for interference.

How would other countries in the region react to a US decision to deny Serpa a visa?

Regional leaders would probably lament the decision and accuse the United States of "intervention" in Colombian affairs, but they probably would not make a big issue of it. A denial decision could give momentum to a regional initiative to create "multilateral" approaches—instead of alleged unilateral US evaluations—toward transnational problems like narcotics trafficking.

2) How would another decertification affect Colombian internal politics and willingness to pursue counternarcotics measures?

A third decertification would probably spark a round of anti-US sentiment in Colombia at a time that presidential and Congressional campaigns in Colombia are just getting under way. As noted above, candidates—particularly Serpa—would probably play on nationalist fervor in defending Colombia's counternarcotics record and portray the country as a victim in a heavy-handed, unilateral US process:

- While the certification issue is unlikely to be a major factor boosting or undercutting the political standing of any individual presidential candidate, decertification will almost certainly become a topic of debate during the campaign and could prompt candidates to increase their anti-US rhetoric in order to curry favor with their domestic audience.
- Foreign Minister Mejia told that she believed Colombia "has earned" certification in view of its recent counterdrug performance and cautioned that decertification would only increase anti-Americanism.

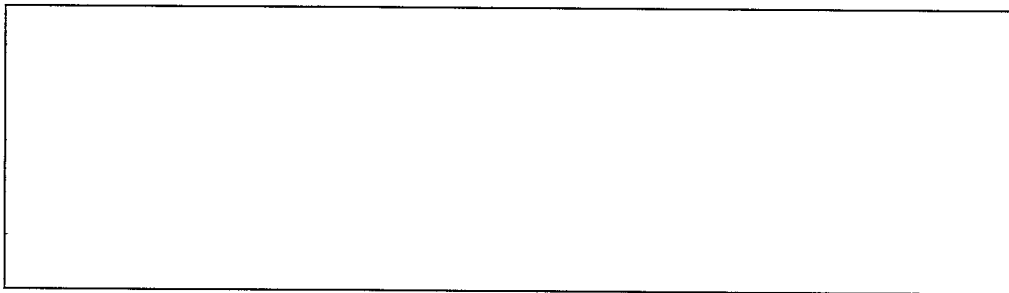
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Continued decertification (without a national-interest waiver) would probably further sour relations with the Samper administration, which leaves office in August but not significantly affect Colombia's counternarcotics performance:

- Samper would probably seek to stir up anti-US sentiment and make the alleged unfairness of US actions a major campaign issue.

Regardless of whether Colombia is certified or decertified, the Samper government will continue to fall short of the mark on full and effective implementation of key counterdrug measures, although a precipitous decline in actual cooperation does not appear likely:



Over the longer term, another decertification would probably only slightly erode Colombian inclination to cooperate with the United States on counternarcotics; the actual decline in cooperation would probably be negligible. Government officials who have paid only lipservice to advancing bilateral counternarcotics initiatives would likely claim vindication. However, Colombians—in the police, military, and private sector—who have worked closely with the United States to develop and meet counterdrug goals would feel demoralized, a factor which could affect their willingness to cooperate on counterdrug issues in the future:

- In a recent press interview, National Police Director Rosso Jose Serrano—widely regarded as a staunch US counternarcotics ally—asked Washington not to politicize the certification process, adding that a third decertification would be unfair and affect the morale of his men and their willingness to achieve counterdrug objectives this year. In the wake of the 1997 decertification, Serrano publicly expressed his disappointment, although his frustration did not diminish his commitment to pursue narco-traffickers, according to US diplomats.

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Such concerns aside, the Colombian government probably recognizes the intrinsic value of many counternarcotics programs and will seek to avoid actions that could thrust relations with the United States into a deep freeze.

How would another decertification affect regional perceptions of US policy?

Regional leaders would almost certainly make public statements expressing their opposition to the US certification process—which many view as a form of US interventionism. Regional unhappiness may even come to the fore during the Summit of the Americas in April, where some governments will reportedly press for "multilateral" approaches to cross-border problems like narcotrafficking. However, most Latin American leaders—more concerned about their countries' own pressing problems—are unlikely to allow the matter to significantly damage relations with the United States.

3) What incentives do various sectors of Colombian society have to begin a peace process, and what would change people's perceptions of those incentives?

The Government. Virtually all Colombian presidents over the past decade or more—including Ernesto Samper—have made at least one serious attempt during their tenure to engage the guerrillas in talks, undoubtedly with the goal of securing a place in history as the president who ended the insurgency. Although Samper has made several attempts, his government has been widely perceived as lacking the necessary legitimacy and political capital to build public support and make tough, potentially unpopular decisions. Moreover, his efforts have foundered as a result of the absence of a realistic military strategy with adequate resources that could bring the guerrillas to the negotiating table, a failure to formulate a comprehensive vision of what a peace agreement might look like (much less how to achieve one), and poor internal coordination and staff work.

Civil Society. Civic leaders also have stepped up efforts in recent years to try to advance peace talks in Colombia. Church officials, business elites, and humanitarian groups who are anxious to stop the violence and reduce human rights violations have offered their services as mediators and in some instances have been successful in engaging the guerrillas—particularly guerrillas who have refused to talk to the government but agreed to work with nongovernmental groups. So far, however, the efforts have yet to product significant results:

- Last June, Colombia's four top industrialists who have financial incentives to actively promote a peace process—a government study estimated that violence

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causes more than \$3 billion per year in losses—publicly offered unspecified support and cooperation for a peace process. However, one of the businessmen subsequently told [] that he doubted the Samper administration had the political capital or that the guerrillas had the inclination to talk in the near future. Like most other actors, the industrialists probably believe that talks will not get off the ground until a new president takes office in August, if then. []

Such initiatives notwithstanding, urban and affluent Colombians lack a consensus on the urgency to start talks:

- Several [] argue that Colombian elites and urban residents—relatively insulated from political violence that is rife in the countryside—are “in denial” about the seriousness of the guerrilla problem and are instead more preoccupied with crime, the economy, and other urban issues. Their physical and social separation from political violence contributes to a false sense of security and inadequate understanding of the dimensions of the insurgency problem.

What incentives might the guerrillas and paramilitaries have to enter a process?

The Guerrillas. The two main guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), also appear to have little incentive to begin talks at this time. These groups are stronger and better financed than ever; are active or in control of larger areas of territory; and are widely perceived in Colombia to be on the offensive. []

[] However, guerrillas might be more inclined to start talking if they felt in a weakened position—as a result of financial or military setbacks—or if they believed they had scored sufficient gains—either on the battlefield or in propaganda wars—to take the opportunity to extract concessions from Bogota. []

Overall, the guerrillas' actions suggest they are motivated by factors ranging from greed to a genuine desire for radical social change. Even though the baser motives may impel many to join guerrilla ranks, the government's inability or unwillingness to address the issues that gave rise to the insurgency more than 30 years ago—grinding poverty, the concentration of land ownership in a few hands, sharp income inequality, and government neglect of rural areas—undoubtedly inspires some others. Even if

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FARC and ELN members seek political and social change, they apparently have not projected a coherent strategy beyond their own supporters on how to achieve them:

- The millions of dollars generated by the guerrillas' illegal enterprises—which, according to a press report, allows them to pay their fighters three times more than the Colombian Army pays its troops—have undoubtedly attracted opportunists. Moreover, narcotics-related protection activity, kidnapping, and extortion have become a way of life for many guerrillas, who probably have few other skills.
- The upper echelons of the FARC and ELN—most of whom joined the organization years ago when ideology was the driving force of the movement or who are part of a second generation of guerrilla families—are probably more focused on political objectives than are the newer recruits. These objectives, articulated in the political platforms of the FARC and ELN, include earmarking 50 percent of government spending for social welfare, implementing land redistribution programs, and ensuring state control over natural resources, including the oil and coal sectors in which US firms are well represented.

Isolated reports over the last several years suggest deliberations in the guerrillas' ruling bodies have exposed splits between those who wish to engage in talks and hardliners who want to pursue the military struggle. We do not know the stance on talks of powerful troop commanders—such as FARC commander Jorge Briceno Suarez (alias 'Mono Jojoy') and ELN Domingo Lain front "Commander Alexis"—which undoubtedly will be a key factor in determining whether the FARC, ELN, or both groups pursue the negotiation route.

Should the guerrilla leaders agree at some point to negotiate with the government, experience with both the FARC and ELN suggests that these groups would be able to form a delegation that would negotiate in good faith. Guerrilla leaders could probably impose the terms of an agreement on most of the rank and file, but some fronts would undoubtedly choose to continue illicit and violent activities:

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- The most serious challenge to internal discipline is likely to come from fronts that earn significant revenues from illicit or violent activities—particularly the FARC.

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southern bloc and the ELN's Domingo Lain front—and are unwilling to cease their lucrative enterprises.

- Even when some of the smaller, poorer guerrilla groups demobilized in the past, small bands of hardcore fighters sometimes refused to disband and either formed splinter groups or joined other guerrilla groups. []

Job training programs and security provisions are two key requirements for a successful program to reintegrate guerrillas into society. It is not clear if the industrialists who are calling for peace talks or multinational energy companies would be willing to offer assistance or job programs as part of the process of demobilizing and reintegrating the guerrillas into society, as the ELN has called on them to do. The FARC would be particularly anxious to ensure the security of demobilized members as more than 3,500 members of an overt political party formed by the FARC in the mid-1980s have been assassinated to date. []

A successful peace process would also require the participation of virtually all major guerrilla groups and factions. It may survive challenges from small splinter elements, but broad participation would be necessary to prevent those who choose to demobilize from being attacked by those who refuse to. More important, major paramilitary groups would have to demobilized to lessen the likelihood that they would target demobilized guerrillas. []

The Paramilitaries. Colombia's most notorious paramilitary leader, Carlos Castano, claims that, if the guerrilla problem were solved, there would no longer be a need for paramilitaries and the groups would disband. The agendas of the paramilitaries, however, appear to go beyond defending their various patrons against guerrilla attacks and include using violence and intimidation to acquire real estate, aggressively defending the interests of drug traffickers, and expanding their influence over new territory:

- Castano has demanded that he be allowed to participate in talks, but the FARC has refused to conduct negotiations with him. In order for talks to be successful, however, a formula—perhaps involving parallel negotiations—would have to be developed to include all armed groups. []

Would a 'frontier' policy help the government resolve the conflicts?

Bogota is unlikely to be able to impose authority over rural areas it has long neglected without investing political and financial capital simultaneously over an extended period, perhaps even decades. During the 1990s the government has tried to shore up

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political authority and revitalize rural areas by holding direct election of mayors and other local officials and by sharing central government revenues with localities, as provided for in the 1991 constitution. The implementation of these and other programs, however, has been hindered by corruption, incompetence, and the diversion of local government funds to guerrilla coffers as a result either of intimidation or willful collaboration. Despite all these problems, prospects for success of any new initiative along these lines would increase if coupled with other good-governance measures.

What role might other countries, including the United States, play in promoting talks?

The international community could potentially provide important support to a peace process, but only if both sides change stances and demonstrate real political will for peace. Bogota seems interested in receiving assistance—albeit on its own terms—from a group of friends. Last November Samper asked Cuban President Fidel Castro, for example, to urge the guerrillas to engage in peace talks. Countries such as Venezuela and Mexico—where the government and guerrillas met during the last rounds of talks in the late 1980s and early 1990s—are also likely to be key players, along with traditional allies such as Spain and Costa Rica. The United States is not well placed to play a role in facilitating talks at this time due to its poor relationship with the Samper administration and its labeling of the guerrillas as terrorists.

For their part, the guerrillas and paramilitaries have been more standoffish toward outside help. Although prodding by their longtime hero Castro, sympathetic European groups, or some Central American governments may pique some interest in talks, the guerrillas' financial self-sufficiency limits the leverage of external actors:

- Politically, the guerrillas may be more receptive to approaches by respected members of Colombian civil society, such as the clergy, or local representatives of international humanitarian groups such as the Red Cross.
- In terms of international actors, the United Nations—which is probably perceived as impartial—might be able to play a role. As long as former Colombian President Gaviria is head of the OAS, that organization is not likely to be perceived as impartial by the guerrillas, as indicated by the ELN's kidnapping—and subsequent release—of two OAS election observers in October. It seems doubtful that any foreign group has influence over the paramilitaries, who, even more than the guerrillas, tend to look inward.

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Among the triggers that could heighten the pressure for US involvement would be an attack on US officials or US-manned facilities—including remote radar sites—by the guerrillas or, in a less likely scenario, the paramilitaries; an upsurge in attacks that have a deleterious impact on US counternarcotics interests; or a larger, more serious spillover of violence across Colombia's borders that prompt Panamanian or Venezuelan calls for US intervention. []

4) To what extent is the Colombian Government willing and able to rein in the paramilitaries and end or reduce the human rights violations they commit?

President Samper has publicly blasted the paramilitaries and pledged that he would make every effort to capture key personnel. In November 1996, Defense Minister Esguerra announced that the government would offer a nearly \$1 million reward for the capture of paramilitary leader Carlos Castano. Officials recently renewed the pledge and added their intention to capture several other paramilitary leaders. Some of the lesser known paramilitaries have been captured, but the notorious Castano—who continues to give press interviews despite a request by Samper that the news media stop publishing his incendiary remarks—remains at large. []

Castano and other paramilitary groups appear to have curried favor with politically powerful elements of Colombian society and with the military, including Major General Ivan Ramirez. As a result, the willingness of the government to take on some of the most powerful paramilitary leaders is questionable, even though Samper is probably sincere in his condemnations of their massacres:

- [] who attended a meeting among paramilitaries and their supporters in northern Colombia, reported his surprise at seeing some otherwise respectable citizens in attendance.
- Many cattle ranchers, for example, who make their livelihoods in isolated rural areas where guerrillas are active, have long endured kidnapping and extortion at the hands of the guerrillas and are using paramilitary groups to fight back.
- For its part, the military's efforts to fight the guerrillas often coincide with, but are not identical to, those of the paramilitaries. As a result of this confluence of interests, military commanders—who are often short of troops, supplies, and transport and feel that the civilian government does not adequately support their efforts or appreciate their hardships—often turn a blind eye to the activities of paramilitaries or in some cases actively assist them. []

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However, the military almost certainly could do more to discipline officers identified as working with the paramilitaries. The lack of effective disciplinary action could be interpreted by some officers as tacit approval of such ties. [redacted]

Even if the government were to make a crackdown on the paramilitaries its highest priority, the ability of the security forces to reduce or eliminate the abuses caused by the groups in the near term is poor. The government has little influence over the paramilitaries; the only leverage Bogota has is the legal authority—but not always the capability—to arrest them and the power to grant or withhold recognition of them as quasi-political actors worthy of inclusion in peace talks:

- There are thousands of paramilitaries spread across increasingly wide swaths of territory; the military has not shown an ability to contain—let alone reduce—guerrilla activity in recent years and would be equally unlikely to get quick results against the paramilitaries.
- A few military officers may have limited influence over their paramilitary counterparts, but the trend line is toward increasingly independent paramilitary groups that put the interests of their sponsors before those of the military or other government entities. [redacted]

The attitudes of various paramilitary groups toward Bogota probably vary somewhat according to their sponsors. While most probably go out of their way to avoid clashing with security forces, others have clearly demonstrated a willingness to attack government officials who act contrary to the wishes of their patrons. The most egregious recent incident occurred on 3 October 1997, when paramilitaries acting on behalf of a trafficker killed 11 security and judicial officials in Meta Department who were seizing assets from a trafficker. [redacted]

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