



Colombia: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021

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Colombia's close alliance with the United States has been forged over 20 years from an enduring security and counternarcotics [partnership](#) initiated under Plan Colombia and Peace Colombia. These strategies helped end a five-decade internal armed conflict that killed some 260,000 Colombians and displaced millions. Targeted violence still grips the country, complicated by a steep economic contraction of [6.8%](#) due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Many Members of Congress continue to focus on priority aspects of the U.S.-Colombia relationship: close collaboration on security and countering illicit drugs that are destined mainly for the [U.S. market](#); trade, energy, and other forms of cooperation; and Colombia's human rights record and social investment policies to foster post-conflict stability. Illicit cultivation of coca peaked in 2019 but remains at historically high levels, and Colombian cocaine is one driver of an [overdose crisis](#) in the United States.

Colombia presents a paradox for some observers. On the one hand, Colombia's reckoning with its long, drug-fueled conflict continues to divide the country. On the other hand, Colombia's innovation in addressing its security challenges, such as receiving nearly 2 million Venezuelans fleeing their crises-ridden country, points to Colombia's continued capacity for regional leadership.

Peace Accord Developments and Human Rights Concerns

Colombia's 2016 peace treaty with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) resulted in the demobilization of 13,000 insurgents and the transformation of the FARC from a leftist guerrilla army to a political party. The party, now called [Comunes](#), temporarily holds guaranteed seats in Congress. The peace accord also established a transitional justice court, called the JEP by its Spanish acronym, to identify and punish crimes committed during the conflict. Often hindered by controversy, the JEP produced in early 2021 two significant indictments of grave human rights crimes:

- In [late January](#), the JEP ruled that eight top former FARC leaders, including two sitting in the Colombian Congress and the FARC's former supreme leader, were guilty of war crimes related to kidnapping and hostage abuse. The accused former combatants indicated they would [accept](#) the charges, affording them access to alternative sentencing of 8 years rather than a 20-year prison sentence under "regular" justice.

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- In February, a JEP [investigation](#) concluded the Colombian Armed Forces (mainly the Army) had killed 6,400 Colombian civilians, who were then falsely presented as enemies killed in combat. These so-called *false positive* murders were [double the number](#) recognized in prior military and civilian court cases. The JEP's initial finding is that the murders took place mainly from 2002 to 2008, when U.S. foreign assistance was at its highest.

President Iván Duque, elected in 2018 from the conservative Democratic Center party, campaigned as a peace accord critic, although he embraced consolidating “[peace with legality.](#)” Many Colombians have protested what they view as his government’s lackadaisical peace accord compliance, while others have questioned the former FARC’s role in Colombia’s democracy. Anti-violence efforts by the Duque Administration, including protecting social leaders after the FARC’s demobilization, have received external [criticism](#). Since the peace deal was ratified, nearly 260 demobilized FARC fighters, allegedly under government protection, have been killed. In its [2020 annual report](#), the U.N. High Representative for Human Rights found [133 social leaders](#)—including human rights defenders and ethnic Colombians, such as indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders—were killed in 2020, among 500 murdered since the peace accord was signed. In addition, the U.N. report found 292 people died in massacres in 2020, following a steady rise in mass killing events in recent years.

An additional challenge for Colombia is that it has taken in more than 1.7 million refugees and migrants who [have fled](#) Venezuela since 2018. In February 2021, the Duque Administration unveiled a program for Venezuelans living in Colombia, offering [a decade](#) of temporary protection with access to health care, work permits, and other social services and, according to the government’s decree, [a path to citizenship](#). Hailed by many humanitarian leaders as [a major innovation](#) to address migration crises regionally and globally, others cautioned the Colombian government’s surprising move could imperil the Duque government if citizen demands for health and economic assistance fail to be met as Colombia attempts to recover from the pandemic.

U.S. Policy and the 117th Congress

Congress has provided [about \\$12 billion](#) in bilateral aid to help implement Plan Colombia and its successor strategies since FY2000. Congress generally has supported such aid, though, at times, it has diverged on whether U.S. assistance should be weighted toward counternarcotics and security or toward development, peace, and human rights. Congress appropriated more than \$461 million for bilateral aid to Colombia for FY2021 in the omnibus [legislation](#) for foreign operations (P.L. 116-260), marking the highest level of bilateral assistance appropriated in a decade.

The Trump Administration’s focus in U.S.-Colombian relations was largely on containing impacts from Venezuela and reducing drug flows. In August 2020, the Trump Administration announced a new U.S.-Colombian [initiative](#) to bring funding from several U.S. agencies to leverage investment in rural, marginal areas to spur Colombia’s post-pandemic recovery. Several policy analysts [predict](#) Colombia’s relations with the United States under the Biden Administration likely will [remain close](#). However, U.S. policy may be shaped by Biden’s stated regional aims of democratic strengthening through building the rule of law and protecting human rights, potentially opening areas of tension.

Some Members of Congress are focused on Colombia’s regional role in security and drug interdiction, as well as its leadership in coping with the failing state of Venezuela on its northern border. Others remain concerned about human rights and delayed peace accord compliance, especially surrounding the government’s efforts to establish a [comprehensive state presence](#) in rural zones to curb criminal and armed group expansion, including dissident guerrilla groups. Congressional oversight of U.S. assistance to Colombia’s [antidrug efforts](#) may consider the effectiveness of traditional measures, such as a [planned restart](#) of widespread aerial eradication of coca, or alternative approaches, such as prioritizing voluntary

eradication and alternative development, which some analysts [maintain](#) is the only strategy to sustainably lower drug supply.

For more, see CRS Report R43813, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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