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## "PLAN COLOMBIA" -- CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

LONDON, August 25, Graphic News: WHEN U.S. President Bill Clinton meets Colombia's President Andres Pastrana on Wednesday, in the Caribbean coast resort of Cartagena, there will only one item on the agenda: narco-trafficking.

In June the U.S. Congress agreed to grant $1.3 billion in military aid to help war-torn Colombia battle drugs and Marxist rebels. "Plan Colombia" firmly establishes the Andean nation as the largest recipient of U.S. aid after Israel and Egypt.

Since Clinton was elected president in 1992, Colombia's cocaine production has soared 750 percent to some 520 metric tons per year. The country is now supplying a cocaine market worth $52 billion on the streets of the U.S. and Europe, posing a risk to regional stability and a national security threat for the United States.

Officials blame the huge rise on the estimated 22,000 Communist rebels who reap up to $500 million a year from the drug trade to fund their three-decade-old uprising to topple the state, a war that has cost 35,000 lives in just the last 10 years.

Though the billionaire capos and the private armies of the Medellin and Cali drug cartels have gone, they have been replaced by a guerrilla army far more powerful and violent than the cartels -- the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The FARC's 17,000-strong rebel army now hold some 40 percent of of the country. Its territory is mainly in the southern states of Caqueta and Putomayo, which are best suited to grow coca, the raw ingredient of cocaine.

FARC now controls almost three quarters of the land where coca is grown. Little of the profits from the drug trade filters down to the impoverished jungle farmers of Putumayo. While a kilo of cocaine sells for $100,000 on the streets of America, a kilo of coca base is worth $1,000 in Putumayo -- and that is then "taxed" by the FARC to support their rebel war.

Plantation owners and local leaders opposed to FARC have turned to the ultra-rightist "para-military" United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) for protection.

Based in the Putomayo town of Puerto Asis, AUC members walk openly with guns in their belts. It is into this region that the troops of "Plan Colombia" will operate.

Though some aid will go to schemes to promote alternatives to coca, most will be used to fund the army -- under the plan the number of U.S. military advisers in Colombia is expected to double to around 500.

From the border town of Tres Esquinas three new battalions, deploying 60 U.S. Blackhawk helicopters and backed by a group of 83 U.S. Special Forces, will support Colombian national police sorties to spray herbicides and burn coca fields and drug-processing laboratories carved out of the jungle.

The FARC have denounced the plan saying it is a thinly-veiled intervention by the United States. Over the past 12 months the FARC has embarked on a military build-up and are believed to have acquired man-portable anti-aircraft missiles as well as 10,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles, smuggled over the border from Peru.

U.S. officials insist the aid is directed at crippling the drug trade but Consuelo Ahumada, professor at Bogota's Javeriana University, sees the aid as just another vehicle for long-standing U.S. intervention in Latin America.

"In 1990, the United States stopped looking on Communism as the great threat and refocused its sights on the drug trade," she said. "The drug war has become a pretext to intervene in countries like Colombia."

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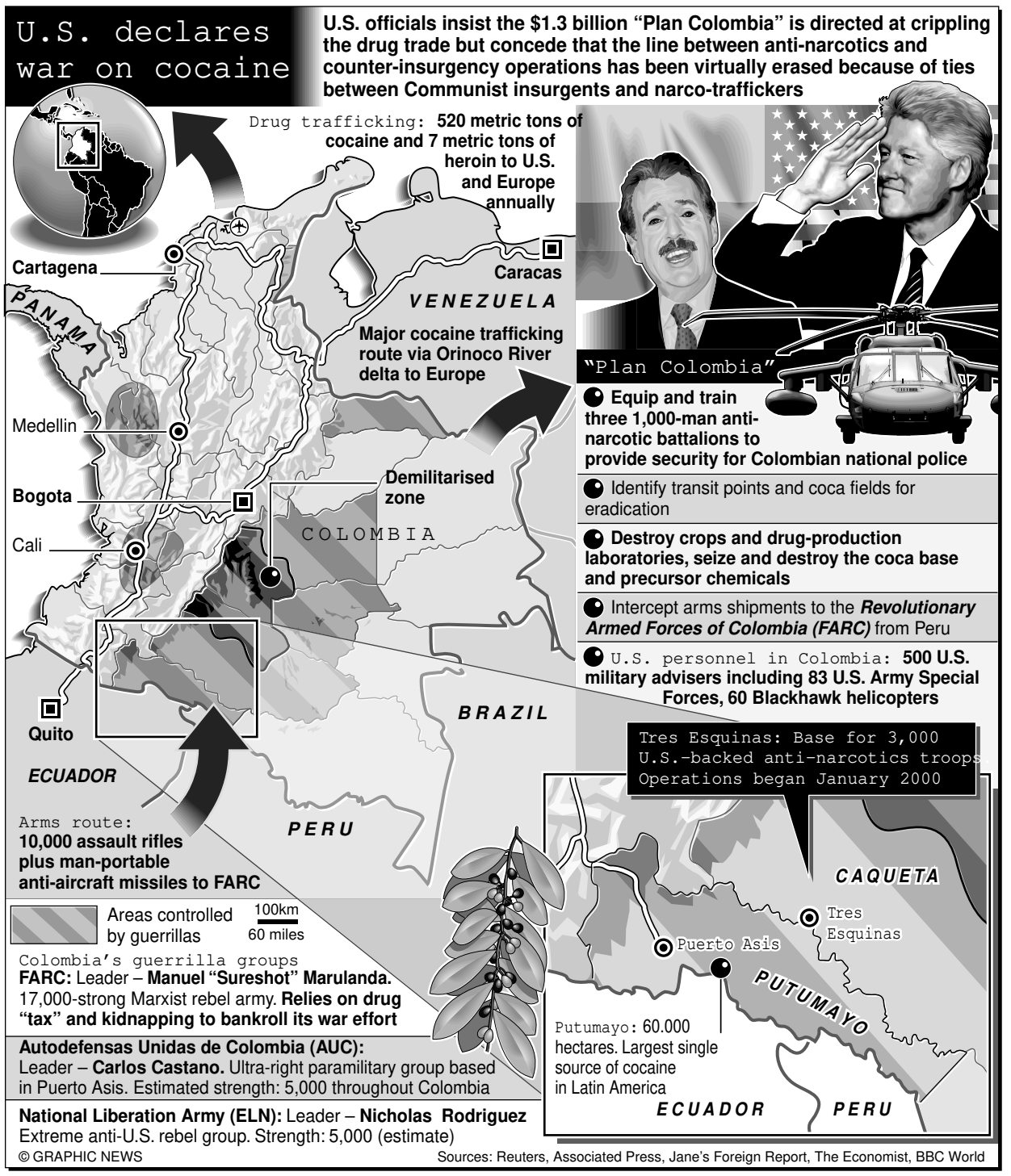
Sources: Reuters, Associated Press, Jane's Foreign Report, The Economist

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