

President Biden and Vice President Harris,

We are a diverse group of academics from the United States, Colombia and other countries, spanning multiple disciplines, but united in our scholarly focus on drugs, security and environmental policy. We write to share our deep concern at the recent news that your administration has decided to support Colombian President Iván Duque's misguided campaign to restart aerial spraying to target illicit coca crops.

By backing fumigation, your administration is implicitly endorsing former President Trump's damaging legacy in Colombia. It was your predecessor who, shortly after taking office, intensified demands on our country to resume spraying with glyphosate, which has been shown to pose significant health and environmental risks to affected populations. Indeed, glyphosate is being curtailed or banned globally as scientific studies show that exposure to the active agents causes cancer, miscarriages, and respiratory illness, among other grave consequences. The decision by the Trump administration to redouble pressure on the Colombian government to restart aerial spraying has challenged the Colombian Constitutional Court's decision to suspend the aerial fumigation program, after the latter acknowledged the adverse, unintended consequences associated with the practice.

Ironically, aerial spraying is singularly *ineffective* at eliminating coca crops: studies have shown that crops exposed to glyphosate are subsequently replanted with a probability of 36%. Even where crops are not replanted in formerly-sprayed areas, aerial fumigation tends to result in the spatial displacement of cultivation to nearby areas, or to areas where spraying cannot legally be carried out, such as national parks. An alternative approach -- voluntary crop substitution -- features a replanting rate of 0,2%. Aerial spraying is also far more costly than other approaches: while estimates vary, it is likely that aerial spraying costs approximately US\$19,000 per hectare sprayed and to reduce cultivation by 1 hectare between 33 and 45 hectares would have to be sprayed. While the more effective crop substitution approach costs around US\$10,000 per cultivator family.

Fumigation also causes severe environmental destruction, contributing to deforestation and biodiversity loss in the vulnerable ecosystems of the Amazon and the Andes. The environmental toll of the practice has been devastating, resulting in soil damage, destruction of licit agricultural crops upon which farmers depend for their livelihood, as well as contamination of precious water sources. Irreversible impacts on wildlife also cannot be ignored. Situated in environmentally strategic areas, including the buffer zone of the Northwestern Amazon Rainforest, the best preserved expanse of this ecosystem, spraying threatens flora and fauna far beyond the specific sites where it occurs. Working together with coca communities to build sustainable, legal economies is not only the right thing to do, it is critical to protecting

the world's largest carbon sink, without which there is little hope in slowing down, let alone reversing, the devastating effects of global climate change.

The spirit of the 2016 Colombian peace agreement, backed so fervently by the Obama-Biden administration, saw no room for aerial fumigation, relegating forced eradication to a strategy of last resort when all other voluntary substitution strategies had failed. Voluntary strategies are not only cheaper and more effective, but also more humane, protecting the livelihoods of Colombia's most vulnerable populations and its most precious natural resources.

Backing aerial spraying couldn't have come at a worse time. The recently-announced decision sends an unfortunate message to the Colombian people that your administration is not committed to abandoning the ineffective and damaging war on drugs internationally, even as your administration takes bold steps to mitigate its multiple impacts on Black, Indigenous, and people of color in the United States. Just as your administration has sought to adopt a public health approach to drug policy at home, rather than a punitive tack, we strongly encourage you to do the same abroad, in your bilateral relations with Colombia.

Echoing the December 2020 report of the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, on which several members of your team participated, we urge you to reconsider your support for aerial spraying. According to this bipartisan Commission, the United States-backed Plan Colombia was a counternarcotics failure, largely due to its excessive emphasis on fumigation. In addition to the aforementioned negative effects, forced eradication was found to have further undermined state legitimacy in some of the most vulnerable regions of the country. In keeping with these findings, we encourage you to signal to the Colombian government the need to prioritize voluntary crop substitution, alongside development-based approaches to generating economic opportunity in areas deeply affected by illicit economies and violence. Only by offering economically precarious Colombian farmers reasonable alternatives to coca cultivation -- not by destroying their economic opportunities and the natural resources upon which they and the broader population depend -- can we hope to mitigate some of the harms caused by the drug trade and the punitive approach to drugs that has historically characterized the United States' relationship with Colombia. It is long past time to turn the page on a hardline, prohibitionist approach. Your administration, proudly the most diverse in American history, has the moral leadership to lead on this issue.

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