



COLLEAGUES FOR THE AMERICAS SEMINAR SERIES
"A Conversation with the Commander of the Colombian Army"

January 27, 2003

Featured Guest: General Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle

INSS hosted General Carlos Ospina, Commander, Colombian Army on January 27th for a seminar focused on the current posture of the Colombian Army, its recent changes and major challenges, and factors affecting the army's role in U.S.-Colombian relations. This seminar was one of a series conducted by INSS on a monthly basis. Following the discussion, Gen. Ospina, a 1994 graduate of the National Defense University's National War College, was inducted into the NDU International Fellow Hall of Fame.

General Ospina outlined his government's political-military approach to combating the serious national threat posed by two armed groups of narco-guerillas, the larger FARC and the ELN, a challenge which is complicated by the existence of aggressive, illegal, armed narco-paramilitary groups. He emphasized the following issues:

· **New Approach.** Until recently, the political-military challenge faced by the Colombian Army was not well understood, either in Colombia or the United States. Key to the new approach now used by the Colombian government and military is an appreciation for Maoist insurgency, in particular the doctrine's pursuit of political aims using psychological and military means crafted into a phased strategy that, in Colombia, is financed by kidnapping, extortion and drug trafficking. With the resources of drug trafficking, the narco-guerillas (and paramilitary groups) can place less importance on popular support. Until 1998, the Colombian Government and its military thought only in terms of public disorder and narcotics trafficking, failing to appreciate the political nature of the war and the narco-guerrilla strategy. Colombian leadership, both military and civilian, had to reform its mindset, organization for war, and strategic approach. By doing so, over the last four years the Government has been able to gain the operational initiative.

- **Temporary Combat Lull.** Colombia's primary insurgency group, the FARC, currently is in a military lull characterized by more frequent attacks on civilians, intensified international mobilization, and efforts to increase their control of the drug trade. The lull is not expected to last long. Attacks directed at the armed forces are expected to resume.
- **Focus on New CoGs.** The Colombian Army focuses on affecting two centers of gravity (CoGs). In 2003, offensive operations will be conducted to regain control of rural and urban territory from the illegal armed groups and deny their ability to receive drug-based funds to sustain their forces and implement their plans. Greater efforts to expand Bogotá's territorial control will compliment actions to destroy guerrilla base areas and capture their senior leaders. In addition, the Army also defends the population and critical national infrastructure, including key road networks across the country.
- **U.S. Military Assistance.** The need for U.S. military assistance has not dissipated, especially with recognition that the conflict meshes with the forces of drug trafficking. From the United States, the Colombian Army needs help with mobility (Blackhawk helicopters), training, intelligence, and moral support, which Gen. Ospina described as a powerful weapon in his country.
- **Links to Social Policy.** General Ospina also emphasized that President Uribe's approach links military policy with social policy. According to Gen. Ospina, international observers often minimize what Uribe is trying to accomplish in the latter area, which in reality receives 85 percent of the government's funding under Plan Colombia. The bridge between the two is greater citizen involvement.

The June meeting in the INSS Colleagues for the Americas Seminar Series will feature Mr. Dan Fisk, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central American Affairs and take place on Monday, 23 June 2003. For more information, please contact Minas Khodagolian, NDU-INSS, (202) 685-3849, email: khodagolian@ndu.edu.

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