

# U.S. contractors thrive in Colombia

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

U.S. defense contractors are receiving nearly half the money allotted by Washington to fight cocaine trafficking and leftist rebels in Colombia, throwing into doubt their mission to train Colombians to replace them.

When U.S. defense contractors were first hired by the U.S. government in 2000 to help the Colombian government under the multibillion-dollar Plan Colombia aid package, American officials assumed the contractors would be gradually replaced as they trained Colombians.

But a recent State Department report obtained by The Associated Press shows more U.S. aid going to private companies, igniting criticism of the spending in Congress.

"We need to be working ourselves out of a job in Colombia but these contracts are creating dependency on U.S. contractors and are not helping build a sustainable or peaceful Colombia," said Congressman Sam Farr, a Democrat from California.

Colombia, the largest recipient of U.S. aid outside of the Middle East and Afghanistan, is in the midst of five-decade civil conflict that pits rebels against far-right death squads and the government, a battle in part funded by the world's largest cocaine industry.

The State and Defense departments spent about \$300 million on private contractors in 2006, just under half of the roughly \$630 million in U.S. military aid for Colombia, the largest recipient of U.S. aid outside of the Middle East and Afghanistan.

In 2002, private contractors got about \$150 million of the roughly \$400 million destined for Colombia's security forces.

The past decade has seen a major increase in U.S. government use of military contractors around the world, with billions spent in Iraq and Afghanistan. But it was in Colombia that the policy got its trial run.

"The drug war in general, but Colombia in particular, was the testing ground for the use of military contractors," said Adam Isacson, an analyst with the liberal Center for International Policy think tank.

Last year, Falls Church, Va.-based Dyncorp International Inc., whose pilots fumigate coca fields with armored crop dusters, took in \$164 million for work in

Colombia, according to the recent State Department report, or a quarter of all aid destined for Colombia's military and police. That was double what Dyncorp got in 2002.

Bethesda, Md.-based Lockheed Martin Corp., which does much of the maintenance for Colombia's air fleet, saw the value of its contracts more than triple over the same four years to about \$80 million.

Critics already were questioning the effectiveness of U.S. aid in Colombia. Despite record drug eradication efforts - the bulk of it carried out by the contractors - a U.S. survey earlier this month found coca planting in Colombia rose for a third consecutive year in 2006.

Now they are asking why private U.S. companies are still performing functions they were supposed to be training Colombians for.

"The Colombians should assume more responsibility," said Patrick Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who chairs the Senate subcommittee on foreign aid. "With the right training they could do the job better and cheaper."

Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said Colombia wants to "take more control of Plan Colombia. We think we can do it cheaper and more efficiently."

Dyncorp did not return telephone calls seeking comment and a spokesman for Lockheed Martin referred inquiries to the State Department.

A 2002 report detailing Dyncorp's mission explained that a "primary responsibility" of contractors was to train Colombians, but that such training would occur some time in the future. Virtually identical language was used again in the report for 2006.

A U.S. Embassy statement suggested that the figures could be misleading. It said some projects have grown without an increase in costs because "the Colombian army is taking more responsibility for their systems." But increased eradication missions have left little time for training, the State Department said.

Some contractors have come under fire. In 2003, leftist rebels killed an American contractor whose U.S. surveillance plane crashed and captured three others, who remain captives.

Outsourcing has extended even to helping rescue them.

Last year, a Lockheed Martin subsidiary earned some \$50,000 for "in-country support to the continuing investigation and activities associated with the safe, speedy recovery, and return of the three American hostages."