OPINION

Expanding scope of violence in Colombia

By Kevin A. Turner

Colombia's seemingly endless quest for peace compels swift action on the part of newly inaugurated President Alvaro Uribe. While forceful action is more precisely what President Uribe promised in his campaign, his misguided decision to further engage the civilian population in armed conflict is likely to intensify and prolong Colombia's suffering.

By recruiting and arming 20,000 Colombian peasants and enlisting at least another 5,000 as covert government agents, two initiatives launched recently, the Colombian government has effectively turned each citizen into a direct target for the rebel and paramilitary factions. Furthermore, by providing arms and rudimentary military training to more Colombians, the Uribe government risks perpetuating and diversifying internal armed conflict.

There is no doubt that the situation in Colombia grows increasingly desperate. Efforts by former president Andrés Pastrana toward nonviolent conflict resolution were by all indications a failure. His concession of a demilitarized zone the size of Switzerland to the largest of Colombia's outlaw organizations, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo, or FARC, rebels, seemed only to facilitate an increase in the intensity of their operations. Negotiations with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN, crucial to this group's frequent extortion of Colombia's oil and mining conglomerates, faltered. Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or AUC, a third outlaw organization created by private individuals to combat the insurgent groups, never entered into negotiations and is widely considered to be in collusion with government forces.

The result of this malaise is a societal environment characterized by indiscriminate massacres, forced displacements and brutal assassinations, kidnappings and torture. Weekly, many in the international community are called upon to increase in military capability and action to combat the outlaw organizations in conflict with the civilian population. The brave souls that enlist and are assigned National Police identification numbers risk not only their lives but those of their families. The FARC's ability to uncover confidential information is renowned.

They have become infamous for researching private bank accounts and subsequent creation of roadblocks to kidnap specific individuals for ransom. The Washington Post, in fact, might as well have revealed the name of the civilian informant they recently interviewed after providing his hometown, profession and revealing the fact that he was recently kidnapped and held for ransom for exactly 30 days. Additionally, the personal cell phone issued to each citizen-turned-informant is highly susceptible to either FARC, ELN, or AUC tracing.

President Uribe should include the civilian population in the struggle for peace. Indeed, the most effective advances toward peace in the past year have been the nonviolent blockades and stand-ins initiated against the FARC and AUC by violence-exhausted communities.

Alternative development programs and economic and social reforms aimed at peasant populations would solidify and extend support for democracy, thereby promoting faith in Uribe's administration, and further isolate its antagonists. International support in the form of financial and technical aid for development programs followed by guarantees of security for disarmed rebels would enhance prospects for sustainable peace and prosperity.

Unfortunately, the desperation of Colombia's present condition dictates dramatic measures. In the search for peace, however, President Uribe must consider the long-term implications of distributing more weaponry and legitimizing the targeting of civilians.

Will these measures provide an atmosphere of negotiation and resolution? I doubt it. There is a much greater likelihood of their expanding Colombia's scope of violence.