

Scherlen, Allan. Review of *The "Sixth Division": Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001), *Counterpoise*, 6:4 (October 2002): 43.

BOOK REVIEW

The "Sixth Division" Military – Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia NY: Human Rights Watch, 2001. 101p ISBN 1-56432-265-3 paper \$10.00

It is probably not surprising to *Counterpoise* readers that as the scope of the so-called "War on Terrorism," continues to pivot and widen, Colombia is increasingly drawn into focus as a target of potential U.S. military action. The American public generally receives, at best, a confusing picture of the complex political situation in Colombia. Sensationalized films such as "Collateral Damage" and misleading political pundits do little to provide a balanced understanding of the Colombian situation. It is all-important, therefore, that primary source reports by groups such as Human Rights Watch be made available to general readers [See Human Rights Watch website at www.hrw.org to access their reports].

The Human Rights Watch report, *Sixth Division" Military – Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia*, offers detailed evidence of incidents when paramilitary groups, referred to in Colombia as the "Sixth Division," worked closely with Colombia military and police, often with official government units profiting from their connections with the paramilitary. During the time under examination by the report, the paramilitary was treated by Colombian army and police units as a legitimate allied force and operated virtually unchecked, even though it committed most of the human rights violations in Colombia.

According to the report, some members of the Colombia government publicly denounced the actions of the paramilitary, but essentially nothing was done by the government to lessen the insidious ties between the paramilitary and Colombian army brigades. Instead, the government of President Andres Pastrana and the U.S. administration played down evidence of this cooperation. *Sixth Division* documents how the U.S. government has, in the face of these destructive ties and human rights violations, continued to support security assistance to the Colombia military. (Colombia has become the third largest U.S. foreign-aid recipient after Israel and Egypt, receiving \$ 1.6 billion in mostly military aid over the two years preceding the report.)

Sixth Division includes numerous excerpts of interviews and is well footnoted. It contains six "Box Statement" appendices that have, among other documents, excerpts from other reports, a summary of the Leahy Provision which forbids aid by the U.S. to any foreign military unit which commits gross human rights violations, and a reprint of the U.S. Public Law related to conditions for assistance to Colombia.

Unfortunately, the report does not contain an index and the illustrative photographs are all placed at the end of the report rather than within the text. Nevertheless, this primary document, dealing with a Latin American country some U.S. policy makers seem dead set on making the next stop on the "War on Terrorism" tour, is highly recommended for all public and academic libraries seeking to provide their constituents with some important background information.