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NEWS RELEASE

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Agent Green: New US Bioweapons Threat on Colombia

US Legislators Renew Calls for Bio-Attack on Illicit Crops

(*Austin and Hamburg, 17 December*) – As the United States prepares to invade Iraq under the banner of destroying that country's alleged biological weapons programs, US legislators are making new threats to use biological weapons in Colombia's civil war. The weapons are pathogenic strains of fungi designed to kill drug crops. Ascendant Republicans in the US House of Representatives, supported by the US Department of State, lead the push.

The Sunshine Project is alerting governments and nonprofits that a new effort is required to stop the US from waging biological warfare in Colombia. This effort should include action by the Biological Weapons Convention, the principal treaty against biological warfare. The ramifications of the US bioweapons plan are global. If it proceeds in the Colombian conflict, pressure to use anti-crop bioweapons will quickly extend to other countries of Latin America and other world regions, particularly Asia.

US Congressional Testimony: At a hearing on Friday of the Committee on Government Reform of the US Congress, Florida Representative John Mica, a senior drug policy legislator, repeatedly pushed for the US to move ahead with biological warfare in Colombia. According to Mica, the time has come for the US to mount an attack. "*We have to restore our... mycoherbicide,*" said Mica in reference to the biological agents, "*things that have been studied for too long need to be put into action.*" He added, "*we found that we can not only spray this stuff, but we can also deactivate it for some period of time... it would do a lot of damage... it will eradicate some of these crops for substantial periods of time.*"

In response, US Ambassador to Colombia Anne Patterson stated that she thought that the US had already tested anti-crop biological agents in Colombia. She later retracted the statement, saying that it was made under duress. Patterson's Department of State supports using bioweapons on Colombia. Rand Beers, the Assistant Secretary of State for narcotics, pushed bioweapons during the Clinton Administration. Beers still serves under George W. Bush. In 2001, the US defended the plan at the Biological Weapons Convention, where US Ambassador Don Mahley said it is needed in order "*to fight the Medellin Cartel*", an anachronistic reference to a criminal organization dismembered by Colombian police a decade ago.

Aid with Biological Warfare Attached? Mica may be preparing to repeat an old trick - inserting language in legislation to require use of bioweapons in order for Colombia to receive US money. The Committee on Government Reform's hearing was on Plan Colombia, Bogotá's controversial military-political strategy for national pacification. The US is almost alone in funding Plan Colombia's military side, and Bogotá's armed forces are highly dependent on US dollars and equipment. The US' 1999 funding package for Plan Colombia required testing of biological weapons. When international protest erupted, the provision was waived by President Clinton, who cited biological weapons proliferation concerns (see *Background*, below). But administrations have since changed in both capitols, opening the possibility that, this time around, Washington may be more aggressive and Bogotá more receptive.

Global Ramifications: The potential use of biological eradication agents in Colombia is of global importance. Many other countries have problems with illicit crops. US officials have repeatedly said that their biological strategy is global. That is, the agents are intended for use in many countries. The US exercises particular power over Colombia because of its heavy dependence on US aid. If it is

successful there, pressure will mount to use the strategy in other countries, doing immense damage to arms control and with ecological and human effects that are likely to be severe.

Appearing with Colombia on the US target list is Afghanistan, the major producer of opium poppy for heroin. Afghanistan's opium poppy crop is recently resurgent. Also on the firing line are other countries with coca and opium poppy production in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Latin America. The US has a huge illicit cannabis crop; but efforts to use the agents there were quashed by environmental regulators from Representative Mica's own state of Florida.

International Action: For Colombia, the bioweapons plan resurfaces at an inopportune time. Colombia is presiding over the UN Security Council and is under fire for its decision to give the US an early copy of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction declaration. Critics link the decision to recently increased US military aid to Bogotá. With Colombia's willingness to differ with the US in question, US proponents of biological eradication are pressing their advantage. Ignoring the colossal hypocrisy of promoting US biological weapons in the midst of the Iraq showdown, they are taking advantage of Colombia's stressed diplomatic position to press for biological escalation of the Colombian conflict.

A venue for action to stop a biological attack will be next year's meetings of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). The BWC prohibits international transfers of bioweapons and equipment, yet the US is seeking to create a biological conflict in South America as part of what it says is a global approach. Some of Colombia's neighbors, including Ecuador and Peru, have acted by passing national laws and regulations to try to preempt US bioweapons pressure like that exerted on Colombia. How can other countries and regions defend against export of this and other biological weapons?

Agent Green Background: The US plan is to use airplanes to spray massive quantities of crop disease agents (specially formulated pathogenic fungi) in efforts to eradicate opium poppy and coca crops. Critics say that the plan proposes illegal acts of biological warfare, poses major ecological risks in the world's 2nd most biodiverse country, and will increase the human damage of a failed eradication policy. The agents have been developed by the US Department of Agriculture in Beltsville, MD, and – by two others with US government funding – a private company in Montana and a former Soviet biological weapons facility in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The lead agents are types of *Fusarium oxysporum* (to kill coca and cannabis) and *Pleospora papaveracea* (to kill opium poppy). Their ecological and human health safety is very poorly tested, and they are known to impact non-target species.

The fungi are designed to be more powerful than the chemical agents currently used for the same purpose. Termed 'mycoherbicides' by supporters, they are better known as "Agent Green", as the Sunshine Project dubbed them. Proponents say that their goal justifies the agents; but as the history of the South African Apartheid regime's bioweapons reveals, claims of law enforcement ends can conceal heinous biowarfare plans. If Agent Green is used anywhere, it will legitimize agricultural biowarfare in other contexts. Reasoning in a similar manner as the US, others might prepare a biological attack on the US tobacco crop, which poisons millions worldwide, or those opposed to alcohol might target grapes or hops. Opium poppy, cannabis, and coca are also cultivated for legal industrial and pharmaceutical purposes, and by indigenous peoples and traditional farmers for reasons unrelated to narcotics. These uses of these crops are also threatened.

In a 1999 Plan Colombia aid package worth \$1.3 billion, the US Congress required Colombia to test the bioweapons in order to receive aid. The bioweapons testing was opposed by civil society worldwide. Under pressure, the UN Drug Control Program – which had supported the effort – disassociated itself (*in the Andes only*). The European Parliament rejected the strategy in a resolution adopted by a 474-1 vote. Latin American governments staunchly protested, including an appeal to UN Secretary General Annan. With fury mounting, President Clinton waived the requirement, citing bioweapons proliferation concerns. Colombia then rejected proposals to test the agents, citing environmental risks.

A review of arms control, human, and ecological dangers of Agent Green can be found on the Sunshine Project website in Backgrounder #4, *Risks of Using Biological Agents in Drug Eradication*. Detailed information can also be found at www.mycoherbicide.net, a website dedicated to the issue.