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Intelligence Report

Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis

23 November 1999

Colombia: Emigration on the Rise (U)

Summary

Colombia is experiencing a rise in emigration, especially among the urban upper and middle classes, according to [Redacted] press reports.

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- *Recent trends suggest that the weak economy is a key factor driving the departures, although concern about growing violence is also a consideration.*
- *Perceptions by Colombia's urban upper and middle classes of increased insecurity could become a more important factor encouraging emigration if the insurgents remain intransigent in peace talks with the government or if they escalate the level of violence.* [Redacted]

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Colombian emigration will probably continue unabated for the foreseeable future, given that the economic recession may only now be bottoming out.

- *Since a sizable number of Colombians who emigrate head for the United States, Colombian visa overstays and illegal migration may grow in importance as issues for US Government agencies.* [Redacted]

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Information from a variety of sources indicates Colombia is experiencing a rise in emigration, especially among the upper and middle classes.¹ [Redacted]

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- Colombian authorities report a 20-percent increase in the number of passport applications this year. [Redacted]
- [Redacted] other foreign embassies—most notably Canada’s—are also experiencing a dramatic increase in the number of visa applications. [Redacted]

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Colombians emigrating to the United States tend to be urban middle- or upper-class professionals arriving by air and overstaying their visas. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the US Border Patrol have not seen any increase in the number of Colombians caught trying to cross into the United States over land, a method that is often the recourse of the poor and desperate. [Redacted]

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The Economy: A Key Driver (U)

The poor state of Colombia’s economy appears to be the primary “push” factor for emigrants:

- According to a recent Gallup poll, 37 percent of urban Colombians cite the lack of economic opportunities as the primary motivation for leaving the country, with insecurity and violence—which includes crime as well as the insurgent war—coming in second.
- Urban Colombians managed to cope with high levels of violence—mostly resulting from criminal activity—during several decades of good economic performance and prospects. The recent economic downturn has chipped away at the financial security of city dwellers, however, and has probably led them to change their expectations for the future. [Redacted]

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¹ At the same time that Colombia is experiencing increased emigration, it must also deal with an increase in internally displaced persons. Internal refugees are typically peasants who are forced by paramilitary and insurgent violence to flee to the cities and join the ranks of the urban poor. [Redacted]

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This report was prepared by the Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Latin American Regional Issues Manager, APLA, [Redacted]

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Anecdotal reporting indicates Colombian emigrants are gravitating to countries with robust economies:

- In a recent poll carried out in major urban areas, 30 percent of respondents expressed a desire to emigrate to the United States, 12 percent to Canada, and 7 percent to England.
- Only 3 percent expressed any interest in emigrating to neighboring Venezuela, and none expressed an interest in going to Ecuador, both of which are in poor economic health. [Redacted]

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Colombia's Economy Stumbles (U)

Colombia is suffering its worst economic performance since the 1930s. Domestic and international pressures, such as high interest rates and low export prices, last year ignited a recession that may only now be bottoming out:

- GDP dropped by about 7 percent in the first half of 1999 as compared with the same period in 1998, and the government estimates that the economy may contract by as much as 4 percent for the year as a whole.
- The deteriorating economy has wreaked havoc in the financial system—restructuring could cost 6 percent of GDP, according to private estimates—and fueled an increase in the unemployment rate to a record 19.8 percent.

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Violence: A Contributing Factor (U)

Perceptions of rising crime and political violence have also contributed to the surge in emigration. The overall level of violence has gone up somewhat this year as compared with 1998 [Redacted] but most of the fighting occurs in the countryside far removed from the major urban centers where about 80 percent of the population lives—including most Colombians who emigrate. Recent high-profile kidnappings of 43 wealthy urbanites on a commercial flight and the abduction of 150 affluent citizens from a Cali church have heightened urban residents' perceptions of the security threat, [Redacted] and underscore the vulnerability of Colombians, even city dwellers far removed from the actual fighting.² [Redacted]

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² Lack of progress in peace negotiations with the insurgents probably has also contributed to public perceptions of a worsening security situation. [Redacted]

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Outlook (U)

Prospects for the economy and the security situation suggest that the conditions that encourage emigration will persist—or even worsen—in the near term:

- Because employment tends to lag behind growth, the economy will remain a key driver in emigration even after a recovery begins later this year, at the earliest.
- Perceptions of urban middle- and upper-class Colombians that security has eroded may become a significant factor in emigration if insurgent violence escalates or the insurgents remain intransigent in peace talks. A breakdown of the already fragile peace process would signal to would-be emigrants the potential for increased violence.
- Since a sizable number of Colombians who emigrate head for the United States, Colombian visa overstays and illegal migration may grow in importance as an issue for US government agencies.

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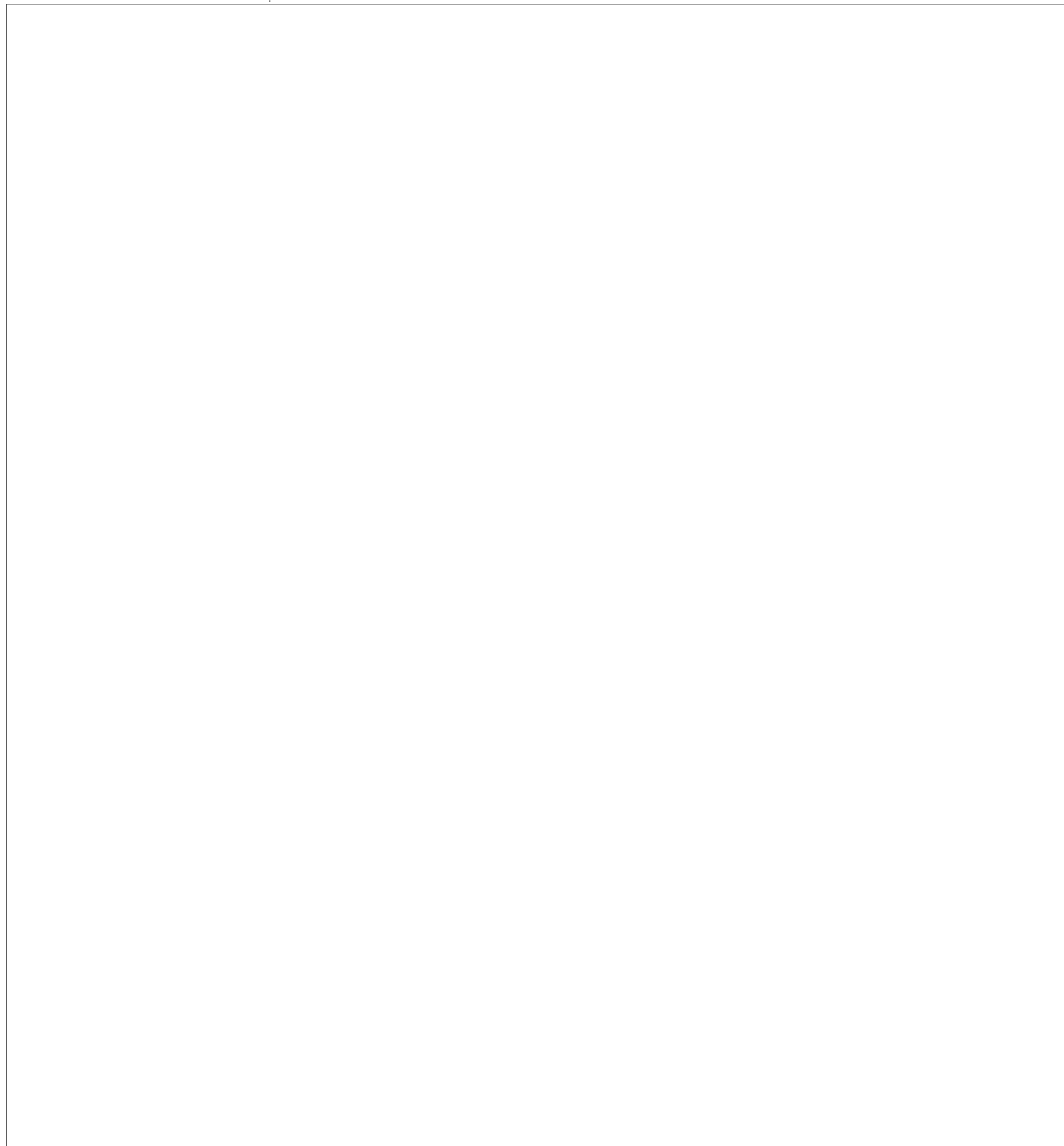
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