

Reaping the Food Potential of The Colombia-Venezuela Plains

by Maximiliano Londoño Penilla, President, Lyndon LaRouche Association, Colombia

To effectively combat narco-terrorism, produce sufficient food for our needs, generate exportable surplus, and to physically integrate the various geographic regions of our countries by rail and water corridors, is once again the common agenda of what we might informally identify as the Presidents Club of the nations of Ibero-America. It is this process which U.S. economist Lyndon LaRouche, a longtime promoter of great infrastructure projects, has described as the new and necessary phase of “replacing narco-terrorists with farmers,” to put an end to the modern forms of opium warfare used by the British empire to lay waste our nations, inundating the United States and Europe with cocaine and opium derivatives.

In combination, the Colombian and Venezuelan plains represent some 50 million hectares, of which 15 million could be cultivated with relative ease. Presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Alvaro Uribe of Colombia recently agreed that through navigation of the Orinoco Basin rivers—in particular the Orinoco and the Meta rivers—and with railway corridors, it will be possible to transport grain grown on the Colombian and Venezuelan plains, in the amount of at least 60 million tons a year. Thus, the goal urged by Schiller Institute chairwoman Helga Zepp-LaRouche, to double worldwide food production and eliminate hunger from the face of the Earth, could be achieved in this region.

Putting such an “Operation Manna” into effect would be a mortal blow to the drug trade that flourishes, in the absence of the legitimate state government, in vast areas of Colombia’s Orinoquia and Amazonia regions. Currently, the rivers are practically the only available means of transport in the region, and the costs of rural river transport are stratospheric, because gasoline—which is also used as a solvent in the production of cocaine—has been hoarded by the narcos who, with their super-modern, very expensive 40-horsepower outboard motor boats, have come to domi-

nate and control these isolated regions of Colombia’s national territory.

The successes of Colombia’s military and police, led by President Uribe, have generated a wave of optimism, which has contributed to bringing back to the discussion table the question of the physical integration of Ibero-America’s nations, from Mexico to Patagonia. President Uribe accepted Venezuelan President Chávez’s proposal to integrate their two nations through a Colombian-Venezuelan rail line. This would consist of two main trunk lines, one would come down from Panama and run along the Caribbean coastline from Cartagena in Colombia to the city of Maracaibo in Venezuela. Another would originate in Venezuela, passing through the border city of Arauca, and crossing the Colombian provinces of Arauca, Casanare (Yopal), Meta (Villavicencio), Guaviare, Caquetá (Florencia), and Putumayo, and from there into Ecuador (**Figure 1**).

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula announced that his country would invest in the rehabilitation and expansion of the Carare railroad. Lula said that he wanted to make Brazil’s dream of a route to the Pacific Ocean into reality, by connecting to the river transport system of the Amazon and Putumayo rivers, through a corridor that would reach the Pacific via the Colombian port of Tumaco.

Tunnels Speed the Way

Apart from the highway that joins Puerto Asís, Mocoa, Pasto, and Tumaco, the most efficient transport design would be a railroad corridor going from Puerto Asís on the Putumayo River, to the port of Tumaco, via a tunnel constructed at the level of the Eastern Central mountain range. The tunnel would follow the ravine opened by the Patía River across the Western mountain range, and arrive directly at Tumaco. In this way, the route would not have to ascend the mountains to reach Pasto, and then descend again to the port.

FIGURE 1
Colombia: Great Rail Projects



The proposed rail projects, in the blueprint stage for decades, will unite the Colombian nation, and prepare the way for necessary infrastructure development.

In addition, if another tunnel could be built that would go from southern Huila province, crossing the eastern range, and reaching Florencia in Caquetá province, it could connect the central railway coming down from the port at Santa Marta, with the Colombian-Venezuelan railroad that would travel along the eastern foothills of the Andes.

A third tunnel, the Ibagué-Armenia Tunnel, would facilitate crossing the central mountain range, significantly reducing the travel time between the major cities of Bogotá and Cali. Although these two cities are only

500 kilometers apart, it currently takes a bus between 10 and 12 hours to make that journey by highway, because one must first descend from Bogotá (located atop the eastern mountain range at 2,600 meters above sea level), down to Ibagué, and from there ascend the central range, and then descend again to the Cauca River valley where Cali is located.

The stretch between Ibagué and Armenia (barely 100 kilometers) takes three hours to drive, because the bus has to climb up and then down the central range.

This trip will become easier when construction is finished on the Line Tunnel—whose test, or pilot tunnel was recently inaugurated by President Uribe. The 8.6-kilometer Line Tunnel is located just under the summit of the central range, and will shorten the Ibagué-Armenia stretch by half an hour.

The highest part of the central range is known as La Línea, or Line—thus the tunnel's name. In this section, the grade of the highway is so steep that many vehicles overheat and get stuck on the side of the highway, because of the excessive strain on their engines. For decades, there has been a project to cross the central mountain range at base-level between Ibagué and Armenia; this would be the ideal Line Tunnel.

There are those who argue that such tunnels are too ambitious, that they are too long, that they are neither technically nor financially feasible. This is anti-scientific pessimism. Although it is true that

the three proposed tunnels are relatively long, one must remember that other countries, like Switzerland, have developed great technical capabilities in this work, and could be consulted for their expertise.

Currently, the Swiss are building a rail tunnel through St. Gothard Pass, which will be 57 kilometers long, longer than Japan's Seikan rail tunnel, which is now the longest in the world at 53.9 kilometers. The Loetschberg Base Tunnel, at 34.6 kilometers, is currently the longest in Switzerland and the third longest in the world. The second longest tunnel in the world is

currently the Chunnel (50.3 km) which unites France and England under the English Channel.

Intermodal Transport

President Uribe has insisted that the large amount of food that could be produced in the Colombia-Venezuela Plains could be transported by means of rail corridors and the water corridors of the Orinoco and Meta rivers. This would mean taking advantage of the vast agricultural potential of the Orinoco Basin region, which today is wasted because enormous expanses of land are used for extensive cattle-raising. Instead, meat production should take the form of intensive ranching within fenced areas.

In addition to navigation of the Meta and Orinoco rivers, the rail corridor should extend from the foothills of the Andes, through Villavicencio, and connecting San José del Guaviare, Puerto Inírida, Puerto Carreño and Yopal, as well as the corresponding cities and ports on the Venezuelan side. Thus, there would be an efficient intermodal transportation network for goods and passengers, year round, combining rail, water, and highway links.

President Uribe has correctly insisted that these development and transport corridors, as well as the region's energy integration (electricity networks, gas and oil pipelines, and so on) should extend both northwest to Central America and Mexico, as well as to the south, as far as Argentina.

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Bring the Trains Back to Colombia!

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The history of the railroads in Colombia begins with the Panama line (at the time, part of Colombia), which joined the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in a project of worldwide importance. Built between 1852 and 1855, it was 80 kilometers long. It became a prosperous business, whose profits were used to finance the construction of other railroad lines.

The Panama Railway also inspired a major drive for the construction of railroads, starting in 1890, when Colombia joined the project of the Pan-American Railway, which was later promoted by U.S. President William McKinley. This railroad was to have run the entirety of North and South America. Because of its central geographic location, several branches were to have originated in Colombia: the western one, to run parallel to the Pacific Coast; the central line, to connect Panama, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil on one end of the branch line, and Argentina on the other; and the eastern one, to join Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Surinam, and French Guiana, and then run down the entire Atlantic Coast, including Brazil and Argentina.

Colombia's railroads had their heyday from 1915 to 1950, when a large percentage of both cargo and passengers was moving by rail. Cargo transported by rail went from 773,366 tons to 3,289,797 tons, and the number of passengers increased from 3,518,687 to 13,361,753. At the same time, the total number of functional rail kilometers grew from 1,350 to 3,139, peaking at 3,462 kilometers in 1960.

Since that time, rail has "gone downhill": For example, in 1975, there were 4,217,466 passengers and 2,438,520 tons of cargo transported, a decline of 68% and 30%, respectively, from the levels of 1949. During that same period, the Colombian population tripled, from 8.7 million to 25 million inhabitants. Today the situation is even worse. Colombia has a mere 2,000 kilometers of active rail line, and nearly 45 million inhabitants.