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Colombia: A Violent Backdrop (U)

A strategic stalemate between the Colombian Government and the country's array of violent actors--guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug traffickers, and other criminals--is prompting talk of peace, but a settlement is not near.

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Violent heritage

Colombia has a long history of civil war and partisan bloodletting, but political violence has tripled since 1982. The list of firsts is depressing: one of the world's highest murder rates, the world's highest kidnapping rate, a growing number of internally displaced persons, etc. (C)

Paradoxically, Colombia also boasts one of the region's oldest democracies. Although often formalistic and exclusionary in practice, Colombia's political system as recently as 1991 was able to produce a new Constitution designed to promote institutional accountability and responsiveness and broader popular participation. Implementation by the drug-tainted Samper administration has been halfhearted--and an indirect cause of political violence that threatens democracy and inhibits full realization of the promise of the 1991 Constitution. The resultant incomplete democracy fuels further violence. (C)

The proximate causes of chronic violence include: expulsion of peasant farmers from small plots as drug traffickers buy up large amounts of land; a high concentration of wealth; a tendency to settle disputes violently because the country lacks effective dispute settlement mechanisms; the lack of a state presence in vast rural areas; and an ineffective, corrupt judicial system that grants impunity to purveyors of both political and criminal violence. (C)

Colombians, especially the three-fourths who live in cities far from the massacres and warfare being waged in the countryside, have adapted to the violence. Urbanites are more concerned about crime, unemployment, traffic congestion, and the high cost of living. The political and economic elite view the conflict as primarily a rural, military problem and have learned to live with the personal costs of the war; i.e., kidnappings, extra security and business costs, and restricted lifestyles. (C)

Guerrillas

Colombia's primary guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN), together field about 10,000-15,000 fighters. They control about 13 percent of Colombia's 1,070 municipalities, where they act as a de facto government, and are active in two-thirds of the country. The descendants of Marxist insurgencies founded more than 30 years ago, these groups have survived in the post-Cold War era by replacing foreign support with substantial income from the narcotics trade, kidnapping, and extortion. Although the guerrillas--the FARC especially--are heavily involved in protecting drug crop cultivation and some processing, they have not formed a new "cartel." (C)

The major guerrilla groups are loosely allied but rarely cooperate militarily and occasionally compete politically. Well armed and increasing in numbers, the guerrillas are executing attacks requiring sophisticated planning and coordination of hundreds of widely scattered fighters. (C)

Guerrillas have expanded their influence through a combination of political action and selective terror. Local officials are co-opted, intimidated, or eliminated. Guerrilla strategy consists of an ambitious growth plan, expansion in as many areas as possible, gradual encirclement of the major cities, and destruction of certain economic infrastructure such as oil pipelines. (C)

The guerrillas find fertile recruiting grounds among unemployed, disaffected peasants and their children who have no prospects and nothing to lose. Political support for the guerrillas is limited largely to the 300,000 peasant farmers growing illicit crops to whom the guerrillas provide protection. This lack of a popular base was demonstrated during the October 1997 local elections, when a higher-than-usual voter turnout, especially in urban areas, rejected the guerrilla electoral sabotage strategy and voted overwhelmingly for a peace initiative. (C)

Some argue that Colombia's insurgents are criminals who long ago lost touch with their revolutionary origins and have slipped into banditry, having no better way to earn a living. However, the FARC and ELN leadership profess commitment to a political agenda (albeit vague), thereby suggesting that they can be induced to negotiate, if brought under significant military and political pressure by a coherent government counterinsurgency strategy. The guerrillas will not settle for demobilization and "reinsertion," with vague promises of democratization, having witnessed the extermination of the FARC's legal wing, the Patriotic Union (UP) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the political marginalization of demobilized M-19 and EPL guerrillas. (C)

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Military

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Perceptions by the elites that their interests are not directly threatened result in the problem's being left to the military and police rather than being treated as a national priority demanding a comprehensive political-military strategy. The weak Samper administration--preoccupied with survival and constantly at odds with a scornful military--has launched a "peace initiative" only at the point of political exhaustion. (C)

Despite having a budget that is relatively large by Latin American standards (3.2 percent of GDP in 1996), the military has been unable to overcome deficiencies in air mobility, intelligence, communications, training, and logistics. The military and police use static defense to control urban and strategic economic sites like oilfields, and occasionally launch unsustainable offensives into

guerrilla-controlled territory. The initiative, however, lies with the guerrillas, who can choose the time and place of attacks, forcing the military to be reactive. (C)

Although human rights violations attributed to the military have declined, [redacted]

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Paramilitaries

Paramilitaries in their current guise originated in the early 1980s, with large landowners and the armed forces helping organize what were originally legal "self-help" groups to ward off rural insurgents. The legal status of these groups has changed over the years, but the term today is commonly used in reference to both legal organizations called "convivirs," and a variety of illegal groups dedicated largely to eradicating guerrillas. Paramilitaries, using tactics that amount to little more than murder, account for [redacted]

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The largest and most deadly of the illegals is the 2,000-plus strong Peasant Self-Defense Group of Cordoba and Uraba (ACCU) led by the notorious Carlos Castano. It has systematically expanded its area of operations in recent months to include the territory surrounding Bogota and the eastern plains and jungles. Typically, paramilitaries enter a new area and massacre a group of suspected guerrilla sympathizers. Residents then flee, and a new self-defense group is formed from among those who remain in the newly "cleansed" area. Such tactics increase guerrilla strength by pushing into guerrilla ranks some peasants with nowhere else to go. Direct military engagements between guerrillas and paramilitaries are rare. Rural peasants suffer as each side wages war on the other's real or perceived supporters, and the military increasingly becomes a bystander to the carnage. (C)


Despite an official military policy of treating paramilitaries as criminals and offering rewards for the capture of paramilitary leaders, many officers turn a blind eye to paramilitary activities in their areas of responsibility. Certain officers, including the 1st Division's Commander, Gen. Ivan Ramirez, and some elements of the Bogota-based 20th Intelligence Brigade, actively collaborate with paramilitaries by providing intelligence and other support. Though the paramilitaries will not necessarily be included in any eventual direct peace negotiations, their power is undeniable, and some mechanism to deal with them must be included in a settlement. (C)

Drug traffickers

Drug traffickers and other criminals contribute to the overall climate of violence, although their political activities typically are limited to issues where they have a direct stake (e.g., extradition). Traffickers have violently expelled peasant farmers from their extensive land holdings, funded paramilitary groups, provided a substantial part of the guerrillas' budget through payoffs, flooded the country with arms, and trained and equipped a veritable army of assassins. They have corrupted government, military, guerrilla, and paramilitary officials alike. Interested almost solely in protecting their business activities, they will resist counterinsurgency actions or peace settlement components that threaten those interests. (C)

Prospects for peace

The prospects for peace in the foreseeable future are poor because all the major actors view the costs of war as bearable. Serious peace negotiations will not take place until a government with broad public support and political legitimacy makes ending the war a priority. Such a government will need the full backing of the political and economic elite and must develop a comprehensive political/military strategy to seize the battlefield initiative from the guerrillas and force them to the negotiating table. Once conditions ripen, foreign governments and international organizations will be able to play an important facilitating role. Until that time, non-Colombian parties can help by monitoring the human rights situation, and perhaps fostering academic and social forums to stimulate confidence-building measures and understanding among the parties. (C)



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