

# Foreign Policy In Focus



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## Colombia

by Carlos M. Salinas

Colombia, an oil exporter and leading producer of coffee, is rich in resources. It is also plagued by violence (homicide being the leading cause of death among males), leads in producing cocaine entering the U.S., and is an increasingly important source of heroin. Although violence is often blamed on Colombia's large-scale drug trade that dates from the mid-1970s, politically motivated killings predate this considerably.

Colombia has been ruled for decades by two political parties, Liberal and Conservative, whose power struggles have resulted in major civil wars and regional conflicts. Their last major conflict, La Violencia (from 1948 to 1953), left 145,000 dead. Residual violence from 1953 until 1960 added more than 20,000 deaths.

### Key Points

- Although violence is often blamed on the drug trade, the roots of violence run much deeper. A multiplicity of actors create a veritable kaleidoscope of violence.
- Since 1987 more than 25,000 noncombatant civilians have been murdered or have disappeared.
- Pervasive violence is the result of highly inequitable distribution of wealth, with some sectors in deep misery.

The current conflict pits the government against two major guerrilla forces, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Other guerrilla forces such as the M19 have demobilized and attempted to integrate themselves into the legal political process. However, hope for the transition of armed guerrillas into unarmed political movements and parties has been undermined by the continuing killings of activists and officials of the Patriotic Union

party (UP), created in 1985 out of supporters of FARC and leftwing parties. To date, more than 2500 activists and officials of the UP have been killed.

Thousands die in combat, but the brunt of the killings is suffered by the civilian population as the belligerent forces avoid each other, targeting instead each other's perceived civilian supporters. Since 1987 more than 25,000 noncombatant civilians have been murdered or made to "disappear" mostly by the security forces and their paramilitary allies. Torture often precedes killing targeted victims, who include perceived or actual government opponents: human rights defenders, lawyers, judges, peasant activists, trade unionists, teachers, students, and those who live in areas of guerrilla activity. For their part, the guerrillas target those

suspected of collaborating with the armed forces or the paramilitaries.

Colombian military strategy is to deprive the guerrillas of support in the countryside. In practice, this means indiscriminate and illegal killings of civilians by the armed forces and by well-equipped and well-trained paramilitaries that operate in heavily militarized areas and coordinate their operations with the army. In recent years, paramilitary killings have escalated dramatically. This has resulted in massive internal displacement and refugee flows into Panama. For their part, guerrillas also kill noncombatants, contribute to displacement, and hold hundreds of hostages, including three U.S. nationals of the New Tribes Mission.

In urban areas, guerrilla-linked militias and police-linked death squads target political activists and those labeled socially undesirable: vagrants, street children, thieves, homosexuals, and prostitutes. Drug traffickers' violence has targeted police, judges, lawyers, journalists, editors, and politicians (including high-level officials and Presidential contenders) who dare oppose their operations. With their new wealth, drug traffickers have become large landowners and thereby come into direct conflict with guerrillas and peasants. These drug traffickers sometimes collaborate with the armed forces in creating and financing paramilitary death squads.

This violence is not the result of competition over scarce resources. Colombia has a moderate population density and abundant resources. But wealth is not distributed equitably. The bottom third of the population has an income share of less than 10% while the top third has an income share of close to 70%. Land is concentrated in vast tracts although coffee production appears to be more equitably distributed. For those in misery, drug trafficking and political struggle are attractive options.

In 1997 the war in Colombia intensified, with FARC and the ELN launching a series of high-profile attacks against the army. In September 1997, shortly after the government proposed peace talks with FARC, the Colombian Army launched its largest offensive of the decade. Meanwhile, both guerrillas and paramilitaries announced that they will prohibit electoral campaigning in areas they control by politicians they oppose.

According to the State Department's *Congressional Presentation Document for Foreign Operations FY98*, U.S. policy toward Colombia seeks to "reduce the flow of cocaine and other drugs from Colombia into the United States," "strengthen the democratic institutions of Colombia against the corrupting influence of narco-trafficking," and "promote the protection of human rights." These objectives appear to place democracy and human rights on an equal footing with the counterdrug struggle. In practice, however, counterdrug operations predominate.

Counterdrug efforts—supported directly by U.S. military and other forms of aid—have not strengthened democratic institutions or improved respect for human rights. U.S. counterdrug programs have, for example, assisted the development of Public Order Courts that are designed to combat terrorism and narco-trafficking. In reality, they eviscerate due-process guarantees. Rather than supporting human rights, the U.S. government has provided counterdrug aid to Colombian military units implicated in gross human rights violations. Also part of U.S.-supported counter-narcotics operations is the defoliation of large tracts of forest and farmland with chemical agents. Counterdrug agents indiscriminately spray fields, livestock, and people.

The U.S. counterdrug program in Colombia continues a long history of U.S. support for the country's armed forces and police. Since the 1960s the U.S. has supported Colombia's counterinsurgency operations in the name of fighting communism. This support has included training at the U.S. Army School of the Americas at Fort Benning and the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, in-country training through advisers and Special Operations Forces, and International Military Education and Training (*See In Focus: Military Training in Latin America*). In addition, the U.S. has supplied the security forces with arms, munitions, and equipment.

Since 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell and then-President Bush declared drug trafficking a national security threat, Colombia has been the number one recipient of U.S. military aid in the Americas. Until recently, the Colombian Army did not deny that its priority was fighting guerrillas, not drug traffickers. To this day, not a single Colombian military unit is dedicated exclusively to counternarcotics operations. Instead the military lends occasional assistance to the Colombian National Police's counterdrug operations, while continuing to focus on fighting the guerrillas.

Since the early 1980s the U.S. government has promoted the theory of the narcoguerrilla in Latin America. In recent years Colombian army generals have also advanced the concept that drug traffickers and guerrillas are part of the same operation. Those supporting continuing U.S. military aid to Colombia also refer to the narcoguerrilla threat. But this is essentially a false argument. Drug traffickers and guerrillas have separate identities and goals.

It is true, however, that drug traffickers and guerrillas often operate in the same regions and have converging

interests. Many guerrilla fronts tax drug trafficking operations, just as they tax anyone in areas they control. Thus some fronts protect the fields of traffickers. But for protection, traffickers also get the help of members of the Colombian security forces. If one is going to advance a narcoguerrilla argument on the basis of sometimes converging interests, one should also advance the narcomilitary and narcopolice hypotheses. Drug traffickers are highly opportunistic and will work with anyone willing to advance their interests. However, some guerrilla operations, such as kidnapping, put the guerrillas and large drug traffickers in direct conflict, particularly when the drug lords are directly affected. As a result, drug traffickers sometimes finance paramilitary groups and death squads to target actual or perceived guerrilla supporters.

The U.S. government has sent mixed messages to the Colombian government and military. In the 1996 and 1997 annual reviews of the drug control efforts of drug exporting countries, the U.S. "decertified" Colombia, declaring that it has not sufficiently cooperated with U.S. officials to halt the flow of drugs. Yet the U.S. has stepped up the counternarcotics assistance programs. While the State Department has reported widespread human rights violations by the police and military, the country's security forces rely on extensive U.S. military aid.

In 1996 Congress passed the Leahy Amendment, which prohibits the State Department from using its counterdrug aid to support military units implicated in human rights violations. Yet documents obtained from the U.S. Embassy in Bogota show that the U.S. had given such aid to units implicated in such violations, contradicting State Department officials who have assured the U.S. Congress and human rights groups that the U.S. was not aiding units implicated in human rights violations. In fact, of thirteen offending units identified in a 1994 Amnesty International report on Colombia, twelve had received U.S. aid.

Reacting to increased publicity about the extensive human rights violations in Colombia, the Clinton administration has extended the Leahy prohibition to all U.S. agencies, including the Pentagon, providing counternarcotics assistance to Colombia. It also obtained an agreement with the Colombian government that provides for the tracking of U.S. counterdrug aid. At the same time, however, the U.S. has expanded counterdrug aid, approving more than \$115 million for the fiscal year that ended on October 1, 1997. Of this \$115 million, \$85 million came from the Defense Department and \$30 million was from the State Department's counterdrug program.

## Key Problems

- In general, U.S. drug policy has not been supportive of either democratic institutions or human rights protection.
- Since 1989 Colombia has been the number one recipient of U.S. military aid in the Americas, although until recently the Colombian Army did not hide the fact that fighting the guerrillas was its real priority.
- The narcoguerrilla thesis is essentially a false but necessary argument for those who support continued assistance to the Colombian Army.

The following steps must be taken to chart a new policy direction for U.S.-Colombian relations.

## 1. Help Colombia end the war.

The belligerent parties have had no real incentives for ending the war. The current conflict is based on pervasive misery and wealth disparities and is complicated by the number of actors. The U.S. should encourage a neutral third party to convene the principal actors, namely the government and the guerrillas. For its part, the U.S. should firmly encourage the Colombian government, especially the Colombian military, to move in good faith toward a negotiated solution. Those in the military opposed to a negotiated solution should not be given any U.S. aid.

## 2. Encourage the aggressive dismantling of all paramilitary structures.

It is very clear that many paramilitary groups work in close coordination with the Colombian security forces. The U.S. should condition any continued relation with the Colombian military on paramilitary dismantling. Cattle ranchers and other rural landowners supporting the paramilitaries should be considered pariahs and denied visas for travel to the United States.

## 3. Aggressively and transparently enforce the Leahy Amendment.

If there is to be any military aid whatsoever, it needs to be carefully screened and monitored because of the frequent participation by Colombian security forces and their paramilitary allies in human rights violations. Thus the Leahy Amendment should be vigorously enforced. The U.S. embassy should gather information about the Colombian military units slated to receive U.S. aid. The State Department should clarify which units have received U.S. aid and which units it is considering aiding so that information can be provided about their human rights records.

4. **Reevaluate its source country strategy.**  
As long as coca crops command higher prices than other crops, peasants are going to grow them. But the peasant output is probably minuscule compared to the fields of drug traffickers, which apparently are rarely touched. Regarding peasants, the U.S. should encourage crop substitution alternatives that make economic sense. This may mean crop subsidies and investment in infra-

structure. One of the many casualties of drug policy has been accuracy. No one likes drug-related violence in the streets of either the U.S. or Colombia. But a good solution is not going to be found by finger-pointing or grandstanding. There should be a rational discussion of the options by Congress and the Office of National Drug Control Policy, with broad citizen input that allows all alternatives and evidence to be aired.

## 5. Promote the rule of law by removing support from those benefiting from impunity.

Even if the war ended, human rights violations would not automatically end. Violations will end with the prosecution of violators. Any official benefiting from impunity should not receive U.S. assistance. The final objective of a counterdrug strategy is to achieve respect for the rule of law, i.e. the observance of drug laws. But if counterdrug efforts are themselves lawless, they in effect tell people that law is not what matters, power is what matters. Also, those breaking one set of laws may be tempted to break other laws.

Finally, any intelligence officials or agents implicated in violations should be handed over to the Colombian authorities (not military courts) for criminal prosecution. Any payment to those implicated in violations is immensely counterproductive and morally indefensible. Furthermore, the U.S. practice of protecting intelligence sources and methods should not shield anyone from prosecution.

## 6. Evaluate policy based on its impact on the Colombian people.

Options that should be discounted are those that harm people anywhere. The children of Popayan are no less important than the children of Peoria. All policy should be evaluated based on its effect on civil liberties and human rights. If an option contravenes basic rights, it should be discarded. After all, policymakers combat the drug trade because they believe the drug trade is harmful to people. But if the alternatives proposed are equally harmful—as unfettered support for the Colombian security forces or or unchecked court systems such as Colombia's Public Order Courts clearly are—then other alternatives are needed.

*Carlos Salinas is the Advocacy Director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the Washington Office of Amnesty International USA. This paper covers a wider scope than that organization's mandate and does not necessarily represent Amnesty International's views.*

### Key Recommendations

- The U.S should promote a negotiated end of the war with the help of a neutral third party.
- Washington should condition its military to military contacts on efforts to dismantle paramilitaries and should deny travel visas to anyone advocating them.
- The U.S. should enforce the Leahy Amendment, seeking input from all sources of information and publishing the findings.

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**Editors**  
Martha Honey (IPS)  
Tom Barry (IRC)

**Production**  
Grant Moser

**Communications Director**  
Erik Leaver (IRC)

#### Orders and subscription information:

**Mail:** PO Box 4506  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506  
**Phone:** (505) 842-8288  
**Fax:** (505) 246-1601  
**Email:** resourcectr@igc.apc.org

#### Editorial inquiries and information:

<b>IRC Editor</b>	<b>IPS Editor</b>
<b>Phone:</b> (505) 388-0208	<b>Phone:</b> (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232
<b>Fax:</b> (505) 388-0619	<b>Fax:</b> (202) 387-7915
<b>Email:</b> resourcectr@igc.apc.org	<b>Email:</b> ipsps@igc.apc.org

**Website:** <http://www.zianet.com/infocus>

# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

**Colombia Human Rights Committee**  
PO Box 3130  
Washington, DC 20010  
Voice/Fax: (202) 232-8148  
Email: colhrc@igc.org

**Amnesty International USA**  
**Colombia Coordinator**  
c/o AIUSA Washington Office  
304 Pennsylvania Ave., SE  
Washington, DC 20007  
Voice: (510) 482-0944  
Email: ppaz@igc.org  
Websites: <http://www.amnesty-usa.org>  
<http://www.amnesty.org>  
Contact: Paul Paz y Miño

**Washington Office on Latin America**  
400 C St. NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
Voice: (202) 544-8045  
Fax: (202) 546-5288  
Email: wola@igc.org

**Human Rights Watch**  
1522 K St. NW  
Washington, DC 20005  
Voice: (202) 371-6592  
Fax: (202) 371-0124  
Email: hrwdc@hrdw.org

**Colombia Desk, Inter-American Affairs Bureau**  
**Department of State**  
2201 C St. NW  
Washington, DC 20520  
Voice: (202) 647-3338  
Fax: (202) 647-2628

**Colombia Program, International Narcotics and**  
**Law Enforcement Affairs Bureau**  
**Department of State**  
2201 C St. NW  
Washington, DC 20520  
Voice: (202) 647-8727

## Publications

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National Centrum Voor  
Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, *El Terrorismo de Estado en Colombia* (Brussels, Belgium: Ediciones NCOS, 1992).

*Colombia Bulletin: A Human Rights Quarterly*  
(To subscribe, send e-mail to:  
mlopez@igc.apc.org).

## World Wide Web

**Colombia Support Network**  
<http://www.igc.apc.org/csn/>

**Federation of American Scientists Arms Sales Monitoring Project**  
<http://www.fas.org/asmp/>

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<http://www.igc.apc.org/pbi/colombia.html>

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<http://www.semana.com.co>

**El Tiempo newspaper**  
<http://www.eltiempo.com.co>

**El Espectador newspaper**  
<http://www.elespectador.com.co>

**Radio Cadena Nacional**  
<http://www.rcn.com.co>

**University of Texas**  
<http://www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/colombia/>



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