

Update on the Colombian Crisis
for the
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[Note: this text is an update of the March 2003 Report on Plan Colombia published on the CfHR website, and is to be seen as a supplement to that document rather than a replacement.¹]

Colombia, a country of some 45 million, continues to be torn apart by armed conflict, mostly in rural areas. By any measure, the violence has reaped a horrific harvest. According to some estimates, over the last 15-20 years more than 350,000 Colombians have died as a direct result of the conflict,² and another 2.9 million people have been internally displaced, more than 800,000 of them children.³ Only Sudan and Congo have more internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁴ In the first trimester of 2005 the Colombian nongovernmental Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) reported 62,000 new IDPs, 10 percent more than the same period in 2004.⁵ Put another way, during this period eleven people were murdered and 688 displaced daily due to violence related to the armed conflict.⁶ During the same period 2,110 Colombians fled the country, joining the hundreds of thousands who have already left.⁷ According to CODHES a contributing factor in the IDP-international refugee ratio are the attempts by Colombia's neighbors to seal their borders.⁸

Internal security has recently improved in some cities and rural areas. Although Colombia remains the kidnapping capital of the world (in 2004 about 1,500 people were kidnapped, many by the two guerrilla armies⁹), earlier kidnapping rates were significantly higher. For example, 3,372 people were kidnapped between July 2001 and June 2002.¹⁰ Current President Alvaro Uribe Vélez's (2002-2006) image of being a leader who is tough on security has contributed significantly to his popularity: at times his rating in opinion polls reaches 70 percent.¹¹ (Note that these polls do not include the many citizens without telephones, the internally displaced, or those who reside in rural zones of heavy conflict.) Extensive violence continues to characterize the southern part of the country.

Colombia enjoyed almost continuous economic growth until the late 1990s, up to then avoiding the debt crisis that bedeviled so many other Latin American nations. A highly skewed income distribution continues to exacerbate the crisis: in 2004, 59 percent of the population lived in poverty.¹² Rates are substantially higher in rural areas.

The chronic problem of one legislative body after another, and one administration after another being riddled with scandals and corruption continues. Articles regularly surface in both the U.S. and Colombian press about officials being censured or forced out of office.¹³

Plan Colombia

Developed by former President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) and the Clinton administration, Plan Colombia was implemented on July 13, 2000 and scheduled to end in 2006. The Plan's main purpose is to eradicate illegal drugs. Additional goals are to end the country's 40-year-old armed conflict and promote economic and social development. In any given year, between 68 and 75 percent of the aid package has gone to the military and police.¹⁴ Although the Plan envisions that a significant part of its funding would come from the international community, the U.S. has been the most significant contributor by far. The centerpiece of Plan Colombia, the "push into southern Colombia," has been carried out by the Colombian Army's Counter-Narcotics Brigade, composed of two new counter-narcotics battalions added to one created in 1998-1999. The Brigade provides protection for the planes fumigating coca crops in the department (province) of Putumayo.¹⁵

Following 9/11 a discourse of "terrorism" increased throughout U.S. government policy statements, press conferences, and language supporting proposed legislation. The Bush administration designated as terrorist organizations the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), both leftist groups, and the rightist United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). A supplemental appropriations bill passed in 2002 explicitly spoke of using funds appropriated for anti-drug projects for counterterrorist purposes, canceling a policy during the Clinton administration that banned any non-drug intelligence being shared with the Colombian government. Plan Colombia's mission would henceforth include fighting illegally armed groups. Eradication came to be described as a way to cut off one of the illegal combatants' sources of funding, and thus a counter-terrorist strategy. The guerrilla armies were increasingly described as "narco-terrorists."

The Plan's mandate also came to include protection of the Caño Limón pipeline in the northeast part of the country, partly owned by Occidental Petroleum.¹⁶ In late spring 2001, then-U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson met with representatives of the Colombian government and Occidental to draw up a plan that would eventually cost U.S. taxpayers \$100 million for beefed-up oil fields security. The State Department justifies these expenditures by saying the U.S. government is acting in the interests of national security.¹⁷

On May 15, 2005 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that Plan Colombia, which had cost the U.S. more than \$3 billion (another source gives a figure of 4 billion in the past 5 years), was over.¹⁸

Obviously people disagree about many issues related to Plan Colombia, for example, whether the Colombian government is winning the war against illegal armed actors, all of whom fund their activities by involvement in the illegal drug trade, or whether U.S. Colombia policies are helping to win the war on drugs. One impediment to evaluating the Plan's success stems from its framers' failure to formulate a clear endgame strategy.

In July 2005 the U.S. House of Representatives authorized \$734 million for the Andean Counterdrug Initiative. Although these funds were approved, and a proposed amendment that would have cut \$100 million in military aid to Colombia failed to pass (189-234), Plan Colombia

and the administration's Andean policy were the most hotly debated items in the entire Foreign Operations Appropriations bill.¹⁹ Criticisms included the program's failure to reduce the amount of cocaine on U.S. streets, the lack of improvement in human rights, the Plan's inadequate attention to development aid, the inhumane nature of the aerial spraying program, and the fact that the U.S. is supporting a government that championed the grossly inadequate Justice and Peace law, which regulates the demobilization of the paramilitaries (see below).

It appears to be the case that the government's ongoing peace process with AUC, involving demobilization of 3,000 troops (out of 20,000) has not touched the paramilitary drug networks. There are signs that former archenemies, the rebels and the paramilitaries, are working together due to shared drug-trafficking interests. According to Colombian army statistics, during 2004 the two groups barely engaged in battle. If such alliance-building continues, the country is entering a new phase in the war.²⁰

Aerial spraying has not only continued, President Uribe's anti-drug policy has increased the number of airplane sorties, as well as intensified the concentrations of the herbicide in the formula being sprayed. Despite numerous protests in both countries Uribe has remained adamant: spraying will continue, a stance the U.S. Congress and White House endorse. Although a small portion of Plan Colombia specifically targets the small coca growers to help develop alternative crops and aid growers who have been displaced, the Uribe administration has promoted language designating this peasant population as criminal, and increased the severity of penalties.²¹

Although the Bush administration claims that, because coca production decreased nearly thirty percent during 2001-2004 the eradication program is a success, such dramatic results seem to have had little impact on the availability and price of cocaine on U.S. streets.²² Other expert sources, including a U.S. government task force and the United Nations, have challenged these findings, and suggested that cocaine production has actually increased.²³ Despite Uribe's efforts with record levels of fumigation, the number of hectares (114,000) under cultivation in 2004 was "statistically unchanged," according to a report written by the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP).²⁴ The steady numbers are probably due to a step-up in replanting.²⁵ (See the comment in the March 2003 CfHR Report about Monsanto's directions on boxes of Roundup Ultra—the fumigant used for the spraying [generic name glyphosate]—instructing that replanting can occur in as little as two weeks.) Reports from the Washington Office on Latin America that cite the ONDCP's own data argue that price, purity and availability are incontrovertible evidence that Plan Colombia's eradication strategy is not having the desired effect.²⁶

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) claims that coca cultivation in the Andean region (Colombia, Peru and Bolivia) overall increased by 3 percent in 2004.²⁷ The Peruvian Defense Minister complained that his government detected 37,000 new acres under coca cultivation, a byproduct of US antidrug efforts in Colombia.²⁸ Based primarily on this data, in June the House Appropriations Subcommittee rejected a \$150 million request in military and police aid.²⁹

Violence

Colombia is no stranger to major upheavals that result in thousands of deaths. The War of a Thousand Days in 1899-1902 was the last and bloodiest conflict of the 19th century, and during the period known as La Violencia (1946-1966) more than 200,000 died.³⁰

Forced displacement is a prime indicator of the intensity of violence. According to CODHES 2004's rate in Colombia increased 38 percent over 2003's.³¹ The Colombian daily *El Tiempo* reports that the government auditing agency found that only 30 percent of the nation's IDPs were receiving government aid.³² In May 2005 the UN World Food Program and the International Committee of the Red Cross issued a joint report concerning the dire situation of Colombia's IDPs. Their data revealed that the average income of these families is only 42 percent of the legal minimum wage, which means that almost the entire income must go for food, housing and public services.³³

Kidnappings continue at unacceptably high rate: according to a Colombian government report, FARC earns considerably more money from kidnapping and cattle theft than drug trafficking.³⁴

The alarming growth of land mine use greatly increases the casualty rate, in particular civilians'. Between 2000 and 2003 the rate increased fivefold, giving Colombia the third-highest in the world (only Afghanistan and Cambodia have more).³⁵

After a year of relative quiet, in late 2004 the Colombian government concluded that FARC and ELN were weakening as a result of "Plan Patriota," a military offensive that employed 18,000 soldiers and cost \$100 million in U.S. military assistance. However, the string of deadly attacks conducted by FARC beginning in January, 2005 suggests otherwise: 300 soldiers were killed between the beginning of the year and the end of June.³⁶ In sum, despite the Uribe administration's claims that FARC was growing weaker, subsequent major attacks have indicated that what had appeared to be a strategic retreat has ended.

Clearly the country is not close to a cease-fire, despite President Uribe's increase in military operations against illegally armed groups and his several attempts, beginning in June, 2004, to conduct peace talks with the ELN—which fell apart in April.³⁷

In Nov. 2004, two leading Colombian government human rights agencies concluded that from 1994 to 2003 10,174 people had been killed in massacres perpetrated by the paramilitaries. This figure does not include the individual assassinations.³⁸

As part of a peace process begun in 2004, the Uribe government worked to propose legislation that would demobilize the paramilitary death squads. The AUC, whose membership is estimated to range from 12,000 to 19,000, agreed to demobilize and disband by the end of 2005.³⁹ In late 2004 three paramilitary leaders addressed a session of Congress, their visit arranged by several legislators who openly supported their demand that, if they agreed to demobilize their forces they would face no jail time nor extradition.⁴⁰ (The best-known commander, Salvatore Mancuso, maintains that the paramilitaries control at least 30 percent of Congress.) William Wood, the U.S. ambassador, called the scene scandalous.⁴¹ On Jan. 18, 2005, José Miguel Vivanco, director of Human Rights Watch Americas, stated that "there is a real risk that this

demobilization process will leave the underlying structures of these violent groups intact, their illegally acquired assets untouched, and their abuses unpunished.”⁴²

Passed by the Colombian Congress on June 22, 2005, this legislation, which has been strongly supported by the Bush administration and Ambassador Wood,⁴³ provoked withering criticism of the Uribe administration from the U.S. Congress, the UN, rights groups, and foreign diplomats.⁴⁴ Various human rights nongovernmental associations (NGOs) have pointed out that the law’s loopholes would permit commanders to avoid extradition on drug-trafficking charges, keep their ill-gotten gains and ensure that part of their army remains intact.⁴⁵ In a July 2005 editorial, the *New York Times* suggested that the law should be called the “Impunity for Mass Murderers, Terrorists and Major Cocaine Traffickers Law.”⁴⁶ The International Criminal Court’s request for information to determine whether the tribunal should investigate further also damaged the Uribe government’s image.⁴⁷ Even several Colombian allies of Uribe rejected the law; in June 2005 Congresswoman Gina Parody stated that “This will give benefits and impunity to perpetrators of the worst crimes, and we get nothing in return.”⁴⁸ The success of a bill like this vividly demonstrates the paramilitaries’ political power. On June 7, 2005 President Uribe admitted in public for the first time the links between Congress and the illegal armed groups.⁴⁹ The U.S. Congress did not agree to provide funds needed to put the new law into effect.⁵⁰

Within Colombia the nature of the conflict is heatedly debated. President Uribe has long maintained that Colombia doesn’t have a war, not even something that could be called an armed conflict; rather, the country is facing terrorist assaults carried out by criminals.⁵¹ One reason the Uribe administration formally asked U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan to remove UN special representative James LeMoyne, head of a mission seeking an end to the conflict, was precisely that LeMoyne has maintained that Colombia’s violence stems from an armed conflict, not simply terrorism.⁵² Although the distinction may appear merely semantic, in fact it allows the Colombian government to play down the country’s economic crisis. Characterizing the armed conflict as terrorism allows the government to deny political status to those illegal armed actors it chooses not to negotiate with, while at the same time eases its struggle to have the paramilitaries recognized as actors it can negotiate with. Characterizing the conflict this way allows Uribe to make statements like “one doesn’t combat terrorism with negotiation, but with exercise of authority.”⁵³ Also, if the nature of the problem is terrorist atrocities, then International Humanitarian Law is a non-issue. Finally, Uribe says that because Colombia is a democracy, no violent actions against the state could ever be legitimized (as opposed to a case in which armed combatants seek to overthrow a repressive totalitarian government), and so the appropriate discourse is clearly one that speaks of terrorist threats rather than armed conflict.⁵⁴

Such statements are extremely controversial; they led the country’s leading weekly magazine, *Semana*, to title a cover story “Yes, Mr. President, there is a war.”⁵⁵ The International Committee of the Red Cross, the highest international authority on these matters, has made a categorical statement that the country is experiencing an internal armed conflict.⁵⁶ Most experts refer to the conflict as a civil war.

However we want to characterize it, the conflict is in its fifth decade and currently shows little sign of abating.

Certain towns have declared themselves “peace communities,” meaning they want no armed combatants, legal as well as illegal, within town limits. None of the armed actors accept such arrangements, and all accuse these towns’ inhabitants of siding with the enemy. The most famous peace community, San José de Apartadó, in the province of Antioquia in the northwest part of the country, suffered a massacre on Feb. 21 and 22, 2005 that took the lives of eight victims. According to witnesses the attack was carried out by soldiers who identified themselves as members of the 17th Brigade of the Colombian armed forces.⁵⁷ Despite military leaders claiming that the army had nothing to do with the massacre, most commentators accepted the villagers’ account that the military was responsible. President Uribe stated that residents of San José had links to FARC.⁵⁸ Many condemnations of the murders followed, including a letter sent by a group of twenty-eight U.S.-based NGOs. A letter signed by thirty-two members of the U.S. Congress expressed “great concern” for the safety of the community.⁵⁹ This most recent attack joins a long list of attacks on the community: more than 150 murders have been committed since the Peace Community was founded in 1997, but only two perpetrators are in detention. Following the massacre, most residents chose to leave rather than remain in a town flooded by the National Police.⁶⁰

Human Rights⁶¹

An extremely significant characteristic of the Colombian conflict is the high proportion of civilian victims.

Journalists continue to be threatened, attacked, and killed. The group Reporters Without Borders has called Colombia the hemisphere’s most dangerous country for journalists, and the Committee to Protect Journalists lists Colombia as the 3rd most dangerous in the world, behind only the Philippines and Iraq.⁶²

Lawyers have also been intimidated and killed, in particular those in the NGO Lawyers’ Collective.

The Vatican considers Colombia to be the most dangerous place on earth for Catholic priests.

A 2003 Human Rights Watch report stated that Colombia’s armed groups are among the worst violators of international norms against the recruitment and use of child soldiers. An estimated 11,000 child soldiers were reported, 80 percent of them belonging to FARC or ELN.⁶³

Colombia is the world’s most dangerous country for union organizers and their families.⁶⁴ A total of 2,100 union members have been killed since 1991. Virtually none of the killers of these leaders have been prosecuted and convicted.⁶⁵ 94 killings took place in 2003. (Note that a staggering 222 were killed in 1996.) Right-wing paramilitaries carry out the vast majority of slayings. Five lawsuits have been filed in U.S. courts accusing companies like Drummond and Coca-Cola of hiring paramilitaries to intimidate and, if necessary, kill trade union leaders working in these corporations’ subsidiary companies. Coca-Cola’s earnings dropped eleven percent in the first half of 2005, due, perhaps in part, to protests following the assassination of several union workers at the company’s bottling plants in Colombia.⁶⁶

According to the U.S. Department of State, prominent human rights NGOs in Colombia and the government hold “drastically divergent understandings of the human rights situation,” something that continues to deepen “already profound mutual suspicions.”⁶⁷ During a trip to Colombia in May, 2005, the current UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, designated the embattled UN human rights office in Colombia “a model,” due to its strong field presence and close observation capacity—characteristics the Uribe administration has seemed to resent.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, President Uribe has repeatedly denounced human rights NGOs such as Peace Brigades International, Fellowship of Reconciliation, and Amnesty International for “obstructing justice.”⁶⁹ Protests criticizing these statements have been mounted from many sectors in the U.S. and internationally, arguing that such comments endanger human rights workers by putting them at risk for retaliation by paramilitaries. Incontrovertible evidence exists that paramilitaries are responsible for the bulk of assassinations of human rights activists.

All human rights groups working in Colombia call for a reevaluation of US government policy.

Although the illegally armed groups are the worst violators of human rights by far, in an annual report for 2004 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) said that Colombia’s “critical” human rights situation was also the result of members of the state security forces torturing and murdering civilians.⁷⁰ In 2005 Amnesty International found an increase in extrajudicial executions carried out by the armed forces,⁷¹ also pointed out in the UNHCHR report.⁷²

An additional concern is the high level of impunity and the government’s failure to effectively sever links between the military and paramilitaries.⁷³

In July 2005 pressure was brought on Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to withhold Colombia’s human rights certification “until further progress is demonstrated” (stated in a letter to her signed by twenty-one Senators),⁷⁴ but the certification went through on Aug. 1, 2005.⁷⁵ (The State Department’s annual “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices” for 2004⁷⁶ cites Colombian government statistics that show “significant improvements” in several human rights indicators.)

Indigenous Communities

As pointed out in the March 2003 CfHR Report, indigenous people suffer disproportionately from the conflict, in part because they live in rural areas, in part because they own some of the most intensively fought-over territory, and in part because, being poor and seeking to remain neutral, they tend to be seen as the enemy by the armed actors. Some 700,000 indigenous people belong to 84 distinct ethnic groups. The National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) estimates that 156 natives were killed in 2004 as a result of the conflict, three times the national average.⁷⁷ Amnesty International reports that although indigenous people represent only 2 to 3 percent of the country’s total population, they make up 8 percent of its displaced, numbering in the tens of thousands.⁷⁸ Others estimate a higher percentage of indigenous IDPs.⁷⁹

Some of the groups that have been hit especially hard include the Nasa and Guambiano living in Cauca province, the Wayúu in the northeast, the four Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta groups near the Caribbean coast, the U'wa in the northeast, and the Emberá-Katío in the northwest. In addition to the conflict, the latter group has faced major displacement caused by construction of a mega-hydroelectric project, Urrá, in their territory. Additional threats come from logging and illegal colonization. A shocking number of this group's leaders have been threatened, disappeared, tortured, and murdered.⁸⁰ UNHCR and other humanitarian groups describe appalling conditions faced by this group and the neighboring Wounaan, some 4,000 in all. The situation is so dire that some indigenous teenagers in this region, despairing, commit suicide: between March 2003 and Nov. 2004, fifteen young Emberá-Katío and Chami people (out of a total of 3,000) killed themselves (with as many as 25 additional attempts).⁸¹ If indigenous communities resist displacement, as do some 3,200 natives living along the Bojayá River in Chocó province, they face blockades that prevent food, medicine and other vital supplies from coming in, as well as constant harassment, intimidation and worse.

The groups in the mountainous regions of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta have suffered enormously from the violence. Like other communities elsewhere in the country, the Kogui, Arhuaco, Wiwa and Kankuamo are threatened by the guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the army. FARC has carried out executions and kidnappings of leaders from each of the four communities, forcibly conscripted community members, and forced families to hand over cattle and crops. The rightist militias carry out torture, extortion, killings, and rapes—as well as food blockades imposed by both the army and paramilitaries trying to force the rebels from their mountain strongholds.⁸² Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta groups own land desired for development purposes—in this case plans for an aqueduct for irrigating lowland plantations and cattle ranches.⁸³ The Kankuamo have been the hardest hit: over 100 of them murdered since 2002.⁸⁴ As has happened elsewhere, militarizing the countryside has not brought security: out of a total of 13,000 Kankuamo, 1,000 are IDPs. Following an eight-day tour of Colombia, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, has not ruled out calling what is happening to the Kankuamo genocide.⁸⁵

The U'wa drew international attention in 1998 when they vowed to commit mass suicide if Occidental Petroleum drilled for oil in their territory. Occidental began test drilling in 2000, but after a three-year battle the corporation canceled its plans. The U'wa continue to be harassed by ELN and the army.⁸⁶ More recently other oil companies, including the government-owned Ecopetrol, have conducted test drillings.⁸⁷ Many Colombians side with the oil companies.⁸⁸

The Nasa (also known as Páez), located in Cauca province and numbering about 100,000, have also been especially targeted. For example, beginning on April 14, 2005 the community of Toribío was subjected to bombardment by FARC for nine days, which resulted in deaths of both Nasa and soldiers. When finally routed by the army, FARC attacked neighboring Jambaló, then Tacueyó. FARC's notoriously inaccurate mortars, constructed from household compressed propane gas cylinders, violate International Humanitarian Law.

Here are some additional, random examples of the misery the nation's indigenous communities have recently experienced (source: ONIC). Three Emberá-Katío leaders were killed on Dec. 6, 2004.⁸⁹ Two Wiwa leaders were killed in mid-January 2005 (a total of seven indigenous leaders

were killed that week alone). Two Wayúu leaders were killed on Feb. 3, 2005.⁹⁰ Four members of the Kogui pueblo were disappeared by paramilitaries, reported on Feb. 11, 2005. On Feb. 13, 2005 FARC kidnapped and killed a Nasa leader. On April 28, 2005 ONIC reported the forced disappearance of an Emberá-Katío leader. In May 2005 seven members of the nomadic Nukak Makú tribe were injured by mines placed by the Colombian army.⁹¹ This group is at great danger of disappearing entirely, as are a number of Amazonian groups.⁹²

Throughout the country the courageous responses of indigenous communities to being caught in the crossfire have received considerable attention from the Colombian and international press. Seeking to rid their territories of all armed combatants—guerrillas, soldiers and paramilitaries—and in accordance with the remarkable amount of autonomy granted to them by the 1991 Constitution, many indigenous communities have requested that their neutrality be respected. But neither the government, guerrillas, nor paramilitaries accept such requests.

Following the demobilization in 1990 of an indigenous guerrilla organization known as Quintín Lame, the Nasa resolved to oppose the presence of all armed actors in their territory.⁹³ They developed a campaign of pacific civil resistance: beginning in the late 1990s Nasa organized an Indigenous Guard (*guardia indígena*), whose members are unarmed, save for ceremonial staffs.⁹⁴ The guard currently numbers about 7,000 men and women.⁹⁵

One example of government rejection of claims of autonomy and self-determination were the arrests soon after the attacks on Toribío and Jambaló of twelve residents, accusing them of collaborating with FARC, as well as arrest warrants issued against 200 Nasa. Following the detentions Nasa leaders stated that “These detentions justify the fear that we Nasa had that should we resist and refuse to leave our territory, subsequently we would be accused by one side or the other and suffer massive detentions.”⁹⁶ The Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC) and the Indigenous Authorities Association from the North of Cauca (ACIN) protested, arguing that the accused were being targeted because of a campaign the organizations had organized earlier that called for a public vote on the free-trade agreement being negotiated between Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and the U.S.⁹⁷ On Oct. 29, 2004, in six mostly indigenous municipalities in Cauca, 98 percent of 50,000-60,000 voters had voted “no” to the free-trade agreement.⁹⁸ In July, 2005 CRIC and ACIN categorically stated they would refuse to obey new laws intended to lease concessions on waters, forestry and plains to private corporate interests.⁹⁹

Although sometimes coming at a high cost, Nasa resistance has had some spectacular successes. One example was the rescue by 400 indigenous guards of the mayor of Toribío, Arquímedes Vitonás and Gilberto Muñoz on Sept. 7, 2004, following their kidnapping by FARC.¹⁰⁰ As a consequence of these courageous actions, Nasa communities have won the acclaim of the United Nations, and have secured funding from various international governments and NGOs. They also were awarded the Equatorial Prize from the UN, and the Indigenous Guard received the Colombian National Peace Prize.¹⁰¹

Another successful conclusion to an organized indigenous protest that received ample press coverage was the agreement the Emberá-Katío people signed with the Colombian government on April 8, 2005, after 159 consecutive days of a sit-in at ONIC headquarters. A special commission would be named to evaluate the effects of the Urrá dam, which had been built on

their territory ten years before, and to determine compensation and reparations. Also, plans for a second dam were scrapped.¹⁰²

A third highly publicized successful indigenous activity was the Oct. 29, 2004 march mentioned above, a “mobile congress” of 50,000-60,000 indigenous peoples, workers and campesinos. As is happening throughout South America, in particular in Bolivia and Ecuador, Colombian indigenous communities have mounted protests against neoliberal policies and legislation. This does not endear them to the Uribe administration. Participants voted to create an international tribunal, known as the Tribunal of Life and Justice, to examine and guarantee indigenous human rights.¹⁰³ In September 2004 nearly 40,000 Indians marched along the Pan American highway to Cali, protesting the violence directed at their communities, as well as the free-trade agreement.¹⁰⁴

Nasa leaders have announced a massive protest march to Bogotá to take place in October, 2005 to protest the armed conflict and call for a negotiated solution.¹⁰⁵

The Colombian press also regularly publishes reports of indigenous communities protesting aerial fumigation. They denounce destruction of food crops and negative health consequences, particularly in children.¹⁰⁶

In sum, Colombia’s indigenous communities continue to face grave risks, including, for some, the possibility that they will disappear as a distinct culture. A UNESCO study found that sixty-five Colombian indigenous languages are on the verge of extinction.¹⁰⁷ In April, 2005 UNHCR formed a mission to assess the situation of thousands of indigenous people displaced by fighting in southwestern Colombia—where Toribío and the other towns attacked by FARC are located. They found 3,500 IDPs, and predicted a total of 5,000 if the fighting continued.¹⁰⁸

Afrocolombians

Like Colombia’s indigenous people, Afrocolombians, 30 percent of the population according to some estimates, bear a disproportionate share of the violence. They constitute a majority of IDPs, estimates running as high as sixty percent. Afrocolombians are poor and mainly live in rural areas, some of which at present (in parts of Antioquia and Chocó provinces, for example) approach free-fire zones. While at times the sufferings of indigenous communities gain attention in the national media, Afrocolombians constitute a virtually invisible sector living in the rural zones of high conflict, and in the *zonas de miseria* surrounding urban areas, where the vast majority of IDPs are located.

The Future

Bluntly put, overall the future looks bleak for Colombian citizens. The conflict continues to take a horrendous toll. In addition, although neoliberal openings have benefited some Colombians (the country’s economy has expanded at least 1.5 percent a year over the past five years¹⁰⁹), many others have been further impoverished. Throughout Latin America the gap between the rich and poor is growing, particularly in rural areas. One percent of the region’s population owns 55 percent of all arable land.¹¹⁰

President Uribe may serve a second term; in Dec. 2004 the Colombian Congress approved an amendment to the Constitution that would permit him to run for re-election. A Sept. 2004 poll found that 74 percent would vote for Uribe.¹¹¹ Opponents are appealing.¹¹²

Given the intense criticism, both national and international, of the Justice and Peace law passed by the Colombian Congress on June 20, 2005, many observers hope the legislators will enact a much tougher law.

President Uribe should discontinue his tendency to comment unfavorably about jurists, journalists, union leaders, and human rights workers, who justifiably fear repercussions following accusations that they operate too closely with the guerrillas.

Finally, corruption and scandals will hopefully decrease, as well as the impunity that has, according to the U.S. State Department, remained at the core of the country's human rights problems.¹¹³

A note on sources: *InfoBrief*, produced and distributed by the U.S. Office on Colombia, is a weekly news summary of events in the U.S. and Colombia. *Colombia This Week* is produced by the ABColombia Group, Mezzanine 2 Downstream, 1 London Bridge, London SE1 1GB, United Kingdom (www.abcolombia.org.uk). *Colombia Forum* is an independent source of information produced and distributed by the ABColombia Group and the U.S. Office on Colombia. *Colombia Week* is published at www.colombiaweek.org.

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