



Colombia

A Risk Assessment Brief

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Background

Colombia has a long history of violence, human rights abuse and civil unrest. In the late 19th century, the Spanish colonial ruling class divided into two political parties: the federalist liberals and centrist conservatives, marking the beginning of a long and heated political battle.

In 1899, a liberalist revolt ignited the war of 1,000 days which claimed over 100,000 lives. Half a century later, the popular liberal leftwing politician Jorge Elcicer was murdered, sparking a five-year civil war, costing the lives of over 250,000 people.¹

Violence was curbed as the Liberals and Conservatives reached power-sharing agreements in the early 1960's, yet social disparities and an ineffective legal system led to the emergence of an independent guerrilla movement. In the mid-1960's two major armed guerrilla groups were formed: the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN).² In reaction to the increase of rebel groups and guerrilla mobilization, paramilitaries were created, financed by wealthy landowners, and often supported and training by the Colombian military. The majority of them identify themselves publicly and collectively as the United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (AUC).

The escalation of the armed confrontation in the past decade has inflicted serious human costs and prompted the government to initiate peace talks with the opposing guerrilla groups. Yet recurrent acts of systematic violence by all armed actors has shown little sign of abating, driving Colombia further into a serious humanitarian, political, economic and social crisis

Main Actors

Internal

- **Colombian Government:** Colombia is a presidential republic. The new constitution passed in 1991 ensures each president serves a four-year term and is not eligible for re-election.

Colombia Time-Line

1948-1958 – (La Violencia)
Government-armed Conservative peasants and the National Police fight against peasants backed by the Liberal and Communist, over 250,000 killed in civil war.

1958 - Conservatives and Liberals form National Front join to end the civil war; all other parties are banned.

1965 - Leftist National Liberation Army (ELN) founded.

1966 - Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is formed.

1970 - National People's Alliance formed as a left-wing counterweight to the National Front.

1971 - Left-wing M-19 guerrilla group emerges.

1984 - Campaign against drug traffickers stepped up.

1985 - Eleven judges and 90 other people killed after M-19 guerrillas force their way into the Palace of Justice; Patriotic Union Party (UP) founded.

1993 - Pablo Escobar, Medellin drug-cartel leader, shot dead.

1998 - Andres Pastrana Arango (Conservative) elected president and begins peace talks with guerrillas.

1998 November - Pastrana grants FARC a safe haven in the south-east to help move peace talks along.

2000 July - Pastrana's "Plan Colombia" wins almost US\$1 billion in mainly military aid from the US to fight drug-trafficking.

2001 February - The FARC return to peace talks.

2002 February - Pastrana breaks off three years of peace talks with FARC rebels after hijacking of an aircraft.

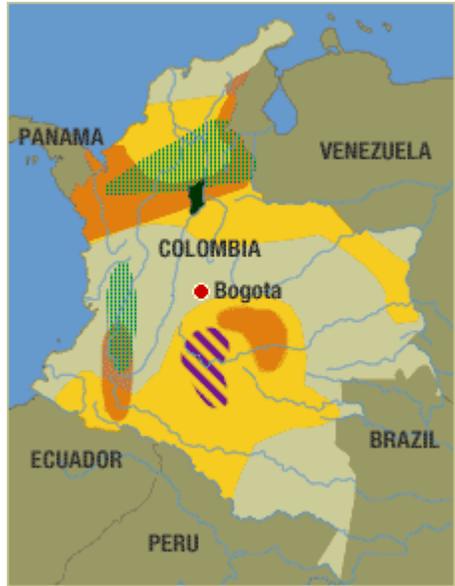
2002 June - FARC rebels warn more than 100 town mayors to quit or become assassination targets.

2002 August – Independent candidate Alvaro Uribe is sworn in and declares a state of emergency.

¹ J. Mark Ruhl, *Colombia Armed Forces and Society*, Syracuse University, 1980, p. 16

² *Ibid*, p. 23

- President Uribe – Elected in May and took office in August, immediately declaring Colombia a state of emergency and increased spending on Military.
 - Political Parties – Colombian politics has always been dominated by the *Partido Liberal* (Liberal Party) and the *Partido Social Conservador* (Social Conservative party).
- **Colombian Military:** There are more than 100,000 soldiers outnumbering the opposing rebel forces by 5-1. Most are undereducated conscripts from Colombia's poorest sectors, working with little training and poor wages. Military service is compulsory for all men except students and lasts for 12-18 months.³
- **Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC):** A rural based guerilla movement with 16,000 members, concentrated primarily in Southern Colombia and on the Venezuelan border.
 - **National Liberation Army (ELN):** A rural based left-wing guerilla movement with 5,000 members, concentrated primarily in Magdalena Medio and oil producing regions.
 - **United Self-Defence Units of Colombia (AUC):** An organization of right-wing paramilitary groups under the leadership of Carlos Castaño with 5,000 members.



Source: Center for International Policy

External

- **United States:**
 - In 2000, President Bill Clinton announced that the US would give \$862 million of aid for "Plan Colombia." This plan initially listed wide-ranging reforms in every area of public life in Colombia.⁴
 - The majority of aid money goes towards destroying the coca and poppy fields. Of the \$862 million in aid, \$600 million has gone directly to the Colombian armed forces.⁵

Contributing Conflict Factors

Economic

- **Unemployment:** Between 1990 and 2000, the unemployment rate doubled from 10 to 20 percent.⁶ Lack of jobs or means of obtaining income served as an incentive to engage in drug trade or join clandestine organizations such as FARC.

³ "Addressing Violence and Conflict," World Bank Report, <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/strategies/review/semseries/colombia.pdf> (accessed Sept. 28 2002)

⁴ "Colombia Overview," The Center for International Policy, <<http://www.ciponline.org/facts/co.htm>> (accessed Sept. 28. 2002)

⁵ *Ibid*

- **Trade imbalances:** Severe current account deficits in mid-1990s reduced export opportunities for Colombian firms, increasing dependence on imports, resulting in capital outflows and reduced employment opportunities.⁷

Political

- **Newly elected President:** Alvaro Uribe Velez was elected in August 2002 and followed up on his election promise by doubling Colombia's military budget.⁸ This continued the military escalation on all sides of the conflict.
- **U.S. Policy towards Colombia:**
 - American involvement in Plan Colombia was met with animosity, particularly by rural Colombians whose legitimate crops were destroyed through initiatives to decrease cocaine production.
 - Heavy U.S. stake in Colombian oil resources is perceived as a threat to national sovereignty, generating armed resistance in rural areas.

Inequalities

- **Wealth Distribution:** The inequitable wealth system of Colombia has given popular support to the left-wing insurgency movement. Colombia has the ninth most inequitable wealth structure in the world, with a gini coefficient of 57.1.⁹
- **Land Distribution:** Colombia has one of the most inequitable land ownership structures in Latin America. This leaves small landowners with the market-pressure of growing high-priced, illegal coca. The land inequality also lends popular support to FARC and ELN, as many see revolution as the only way to alter land distribution.

Poverty

- The government's lack of social service provision in rural areas has led many of the country's poorest to join with the revolutionaries. Moreover, the poverty levels in the urban centres have contributed to the high murder rate and an overall culture of violence.

Human Right Abuse

- Colombia has the highest kidnapping rate in the world and a murder rate of 77.5 per 100,000.¹⁰ The central targets for acts of violence are political leaders, trade unionists, media personnel and human rights activists.

Drug Trade

- The drug trade is intimately involved in fuelling Colombia's conflict as all sides obtain revenue from coca production. The production of drugs has also undermined government and police forces' legitimacy by making them targets for violence and bribes.

⁶ Colombian Department of National Statistics (DANE), "National Survey of Homes," tables 67-10. <http://www.dane.gov.co/Informacion_Estadistica/Empleo/Tasa_de_Desempleo/tasadesetasa_de_desempleo.html> (accessed Oct. 1, 2002)

⁷ DANE: "Balanza Comercial."

<http://www.dane.gov.co/Informacion_Estadistica/Comercio_Exterior/Balanza_Comercial/balanzaacbalanza_comercial.html> (accessed Oct. 1, 2002)

⁸ Interview with President Uribe during CBC's "America's Forgotten War" documentary, aired Wednesday, September 18, 2002

⁹ United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report, 2001" http://www.undp.org/hdr2001/indicator/cty_f_COL.html, (accessed Sept. 29, 2002)

¹⁰ United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, "Conflict in Colombia," <www.unhcr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/> (accessed Sept. 22, 2002)

Environmental

- While thousands of acres of coca have been eradicated with the use of an herbicide glyphosate, it has also destroyed food crops, contaminated water supplies and affected the health of civilians inhabiting targeted regions.¹¹

Internal Displacement

- Since 1985, guerrilla violence and paramilitary campaigns have forced nearly 2 million Colombians to flee their homes.¹² Most seek refuge in shantytowns surrounding Colombia's major cities or overcrowded camps in border towns, living in unsanitary conditions, with malnutrition and little opportunity for education or employment.

Potential Peace Factors

International Economic Linkages

- **Foreign Direct Investment:** Inflows increased almost six fold between 1991 and 1998.¹³ In 1995, US FDI accounted for 55.7 percent, while that from other Latin American countries accounted for 21.7 percent.¹⁴
- **Economic liberalization:** Colombia received \$5.6 billion from privatization between 1990 and 1997. Unemployment rates are now beginning to decline as a result of increased opportunities.¹⁵
- **Economic growth:** Gross Domestic Product doubled between 1991 and 2001, despite downturn in late 1990s.¹⁶

History of Democracy

- Despite the presence of a prolonged civil war for the past 40 years, Colombia maintains strong foundations for democracy. Although tainted by coercion and corruption, the framework of democracy is present in Colombia and may be of benefit in creating stability in the country and a tool for peace.

Education

- Levels of education (Primary Education enrolment, 85%) and literacy rates (Adult Literacy rate, 91.5%) show there is high potential for the continued augmentation of education, reflecting a positive step towards peace.¹⁷

¹¹ Andrew Selsky, "Plan Colombia: Herbicide Spraying Killing Food Crops, Pastures," CommonDream Newscenter, <<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines01/0123-03.htm>> (accessed Sept. 22, 2002)

¹² Human Rights Watch, "War Without Quarter," 1998: United States, p. 205

¹³ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP): "Foreign Direct Investment in Latin America: Current Trends and Future Prospects," p. 165 <http://www.unescap.org/itid/publication/chap5_2069.pdf> (accessed Oct. 6, 2002)

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.168

¹⁵ World Bank privatization database, 1999

¹⁶ World Bank Group: "Colombia at a Glance", *Country at a Glance Tables*. <http://www.worldbank.org/cgi-bin/sendoff.cgi?page=%2Fdata%2Fcountrydata%2Faag%2Fcol_aag.pdf> (accessed Oct. 6, 2002)

¹⁷ United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report, 2001" <http://www.undp.org/hdr2001/indicator/cty_f_COL.html> (accessed Sept. 23, 2002)

Legislation

- In 2000, the “Programme for the Protection of Journalists and Social Communicators” was established reflecting a positive step towards the promotion of accurate media and communication strategies, and the protection for threatened media workers.¹⁸
- In 1999, the government introduced legislation that prohibited the recruitment of children under the age of 18 into the armed forces and condemned the forcible recruitment of children into paramilitary and guerrilla groups.¹⁹
- In 2001, the Six-Point Plan was put forward by the government to address the issue of growing paramilitary groups.²⁰

Scenarios

Worst Case

1. Insurgent forces expand, become stronger and increase their criminal activities.
2. Escalation of civil war resulting in massive human casualties.
3. Deteriorating political conditions cause outside actors to liquidate their assets in Colombia, plunging the economy into recession.
4. Neighbouring countries close borders with Colombia to stem increasing refugee flows.
5. State failure.

Best Case

1. Immediate ceasefire by all armed actors and mediated negotiations occur including the government, FARC and the AUC.
2. Government develops a transparent and effective mechanism to distribute foreign aid towards social and economic development programs.
3. Government introduces legislation, which provides economic incentives to farmers in order to support crop substitution and market alternatives.
4. Development and protection of accurate media and communication strategies.
5. Internal refugee crisis is assuaged by land reform initiatives which contribute to the redistribution of wealth, alleviating the societal stratification tensions.
6. Further cooperation between the Colombian authorities, international bodies, and NGO’s.

Most Likely

1. Escalation of violence following Uribe’s pledge to destroy guerrilla movements, and FARC’s call to increase insurgency violence.
2. U.S. aid to Colombian government for Plan Colombia continues.
3. Growing exports result in lower unemployment in urban areas, drawing influx of displaced farmers from rural land into major cities.

¹⁸ “Political Murder and Reform in Colombia,” Americas Watch. United States.1992, p.103

¹⁹ “Forced recruitment of children under 15 years of age,” 2002, <<http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Colombia>> (accessed Oct. 3, 2002)

²⁰ “Colombia Information Menu,” <<http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Colombia>> (accessed Oct. 2, 2002)

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