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Civil War and United States Involvement in Colombia

For 38 years the country of Colombia has been plagued by civil war and guerilla fighting. This makes it one of the longest running civil wars in it's hemisphere. Situated in the northern part of South America, it is a country four times the size of California in area. It is run democratically and has a gross domestic product of \$90 billion a year. Colombia has reserves of petroleum, natural gas and coal, but most of the population makes a living farming the land which fertile and temperate. Until about a decade ago, Colombia was well known for it's high quality coffee beans, but when world coffee prices dropped drastically, the farmers who formally relied on this crop for their livelihoods now find it extremely hard to survive. In addition to worrying about their livelihoods the people of Colombia are forced to live with violence everyday.

For the majority of it's history, Colombia has been very politically unstable. In the past, government corruption was common, as were political assassinations and hostile takeovers. Recently, the government has taken a more unified stance toward reforming the country. In response to past corruption in the government rebel groups formed in the 60's and began fighting the government using guerilla warfare and terrorism. Civilians were often caught in the middle of the violence, and forced to support these groups financially. The most influential of these groups are the FARC and the ELN. Later to protect themselves from these rebel groups, the AUC became a unified paramilitary organization. Although they claim their goals are protection, they have been responsible for countless crimes and abuses. It was estimated that last years alone 3,500 deaths were caused because of the conflict between these groups and the government.¹ Additionally, in 2001, the

FARC was responsible for 1,000 kidnappings, 187 civilian killings and 8% of political killings, and the AUC was responsible for 296 kidnappings, 1,015 killings, 100 massacres and 50% of political killings. The groups leaders do not deny the ruthlessness of their actions. These quotes, first from leader Jorge Briceño of the FARC, and second from Carlos Castaño, leader of the AUC, enforce the brutality of their intentions:

We have to grab the people from the senate, from congress, judges and ministers, from all the three powers (of the Colombian state), and we'll see how they squeal.

The methods the 'self defense' forces used to recover Urabá were no less violent and disgusting than those used by (Guerillas)...This should be absolutely clear! We copied the guerillas' methods and confronted them with the same tactics.²

It was also admitted by both groups that they are funded heavily by the narcotics industry.³

In a country already weakened by prolonged violence, Colombia has hit recent hardship economically as well. What was once a thriving coffee industry has become so deflated that more and more farmers turn towards illegal crops, like coca beans and opium poppies, to make a living. Until a decade ago coffee prices were as high as \$3 a pound, where now prices have dropped to 64 cents a pound. During the coffee boom farmers could afford to buy cars, washing machines and other luxury items. At that time coffee was the source of over half of the country's export income. Then coffee prices began to fall quickly when a worldwide agreement that held coffee prices stable, collapsed.⁴ Now farmers are turning to more lucrative opportunities when faced with the possibility of losing their farms. They grow coca beans, which are the base ingredient for cocaine. They are able to

earn much more growing coca than they are with coffee with the current prices of coffee so low. Last year the amount of coca grown in Colombia was estimated at 144,450 hectares.⁵ Colombia is the leading supplier of cocaine to the US and Europe, and according to American lawmakers, as much as 90% of the cocaine and most of the heroin sold on the street in the US comes from Colombia.⁶ This thriving market in the drug industry, presents many problems to both Colombia and the US. The US is affected greatly because Colombia has control of most of the cocaine and heroin that enters the country. While Colombia's government is forced to deal with the widespread criminal aspect that has evolved to greater strength because of coca cultivation.

Colombia has a well known history of human rights abuse, most of the recent offenses committed by well established leftist guerrilla groups and right wing paramilitaries. The government as well has been involved in human rights infringements towards its own country, but as the Colombian government, especially the military, is not very large, it has only a very small influence over political and social affairs in the country. Therefore, throughout the last 20 years, the Colombian government has relied heavily on the paramilitary groups to fight the rebel groups. The FARC, the ELN and the AUC are the three most important forces which need to be understood in order to better understand why the violence continues and why it has been going on for so long. All three have been acknowledged by the U.S. State Department as Foreign Terrorist Organizations for their long history of human rights abuses.

The FARC, an acronym for Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the ELN, standing for National Liberation Army, are the two most prominent and established rebel groups. Both were founded in the 1960's after a period of violence in the political

arena had been resolved. The ELN was originally comprised of students, Catholic radicals and left-wing intellectuals, and the FARC was started by communists and peasant self defense groups. Both groups were formed in opposition to the politically corrupt government of the time. The FARC, which has an estimated 18,000 members currently, is by far the more powerful of the two groups.⁷ It had control over about 40 percent of the country, mostly in the southeast. While the FARC claims to have objectives of protection for the peasants and the farmers of Colombia against the corruption of the government, in reality their actions prove otherwise. The FARC's actions are very detrimental to the peasant population of Colombia. They subsist on profits from drug trafficking, and levying high taxes on peasants and profits from ransom money they make from kidnappings. The taxes on the peasants are to pay for the FARC's "protection". If the peasants refuse to pay they face a threat of death.⁸ It is estimated that the FARC has an annual income of \$300 million. While their official objectives are political activism, they, unlike the ELN, have become more involved with drug trafficking because of its profitability.

The ELN is the more politically active of the groups, exerting much of its resources in terrorizing multinational corporations and oil companies, especially focusing on US owned companies like Occidental Petroleum based in Los Angeles.⁹ The ELN is the weaker of the two rebel groups having only about 4,000 members. The ELN makes most of its income from ransoms or taxes, like the ones that the FARC levy. Until recently they have not taken advantage of the profits from drug trafficking. They wage bombing campaigns on important oil pipelines and use extortion schemes. Their campaigns have been known to kill innocent civilians. The two rebel forces are in opposition, although the FARC is a much bigger threat to the ELN than vice versa.

Another group which is in direct opposition to the rebel militia groups is the AUC, United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, a right wing paramilitary group that began in the 80's with the proliferation of many smaller self defense groups against the leftist guerillas.¹⁰ It later became more unified and is now backed by wealthy land owners, drug cartels and the Colombian military.¹¹ The AUC, an organization almost as powerful as the FARC, having from 10,000 to 15,000 members, has in the recent past been relied heavily upon by the Colombian army. As the Colombian army was too weak to fight the leftist rebel groups on it's own, it allied with the AUC for strength. Both the Colombian government and the AUC have acknowledged the fact that the AUC gets much of it's income from the drug trade industry, including levying taxes on farmers, once again for their own "protection". Additionally Carlos Castaño, the groups leader, is on consideration for indictment by the US Justice Department for trafficking charges.¹²

In the past few years there has been some significant changes in the situation in Colombia. The violence has been escalating on all sides. There have been more reports of joint operations between the Colombian military and the paramilitaries, but there have also been more clashes between the governments armies and paramilitary troops and more paramilitary arrests. The guerillas have also increased their operations in the past year. In May of 2002, a new president, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, was elected on a very strict anti-guerilla platform and since then there have been increased attacks on civilians, especially members of the government. Guerrillas were quoted as saying "Our orders are to prevent all representatives of the state from functioning in every part of Colombia". They also sent deaths threats to mayors and other local government officials, resulting in over 200 resignations.

Another recent development is Plan Colombia, a US funded relief program designed to aid Colombia by eradicating coca fields and fighting terrorist groups in Colombia. The idea originally came from Colombia as a way to unify the different support programs that related to different aspects of the struggle. Now most of the funding comes from the US. The US began to contribute in July of 2000 when President Clinton signed a bill allowing for \$1.3 billion in assistance to Colombia. Since then the assistance package has jumped to \$1.7 billion. About 80% of the assistance will go directly to support the Colombia military in the form of training, and equipment such as Blackhawk and Huey helicopters as well as crop-dusting planes. The crop-dusting planes are used to spray coca fields with chemicals and the helicopters are for protection from the rebels and the paramilitaries who would try and shoot down the spray planes. There are 50 helicopters provided so far which also have the added benefit of transporting Colombian troops to hard to get to regions of Colombia to fight these narco-terrorists. Additionally the US has trained three elite battalions of troops to destroy drug laboratories and intercept drug shipments. The purpose of this military assistance is to use aerial eradication to kill coca crops and to use military operations to go directly after cocaine production centers run by groups such as the FARC and the AUC.¹³

Unfortunately Colombia is very large and many places are difficult to monitor and travel in because of dense rainforests and the rebels who have control of more than half the country. Although last year the aerial fumigation program destroyed 232,000 acres of coca, the CIA estimates the coca production actually increased 25%. According to Klaus Nyholm, the director of the U.N. Drug Control Program, growers are planting more potent strains of coca and irrigating the crops. Coca cultivation is now occurring in 32 states as

opposed to 12 in 1997. This big increase can be attributed to the trend of relocating and replanting when the crops are destroyed by fumigation. For many peasants it's a choice between starting over or starving. Nyholm says, "Fumigation kills coca, but peasants go deeper into the jungle, to cut down more forest and to continue planting crops." It seems that the benefits of the coca profits outweigh the cost of having to start over again. Given the increase in coca production and the increase in cocaine use in the United States¹⁴, it does not appear that plan Colombia is having the desired effect so far.¹⁵

Even though Plan Colombia does not appear to be having the desired effect it is important to keep in mind both the reasons for trying to eradicate coca production and the reasons why this goal is likely to be very difficult to accomplish. For one, the drug trade industry is one of the main sources of income for both the FARC and the AUC, the two groups responsible for the majority of civilian deaths, political killings and kidnappings in Colombia right now. Without funding from the drug trade these groups would be significantly weaker and smaller and would be much easier for the Colombian government to take care of. However, the reasons for the difficulty of this goal are mainly economic. Farmers in Colombia are facing great hardship financially and as long as there is demand for cocaine and heroin they will want to supply it. Colombia has expansive jungle and farmlands. When one farm is destroyed another can be built farther into the jungle where it is harder to find. As long as coffee growers are facing such low prices and other crops are difficult to cultivate, farmers will find it more advantageous to grow illegal crops even if it means having to deal with the guerillas and paramilitaries who tax them heavily and threaten them with violence. What's more, it is not just the coca growers who risk crop fumigation and the destruction of their farms. Even though Plan Colombia's crop

fumigation program focuses their attention on destroying only illegal crops, it appears that crop spraying planes are not just affecting coca crops. Aerial crop dusting with pesticides is not very accurate especially when used in areas where other crops are in close vicinity. Refugee Reports, an organization that focuses on defending the rights of refugees, reported this information after interviewing Colombian farmers from Puerto Guzman, an area where crop spaying has occurred:

They [farmers] told of the extensive damage they have experienced or witnessed. They said that the fumigation has destroyed fruit trees and vegetable crops. It has left the soil so contaminated that they are not able to re-plant their crops. The farmers added that contamination of streams and ponds has resulted in the widespread deaths of fish, and that farm animals are dying because of the toxic effects of the fumigation and contaminated water.

Several of the affected farmers said that they are convinced that the deaths of seven people, including several children, and the illnesses that many other local people are suffering are due to the fumigation. They want medical experts to come to the area to help them prove their claims. The Mayor of Puerto Guzman municipio told *Refugee Reports*, "There is much evidence of the effects of the fumigation. The affected people have given written declarations of these. But the [national] government doesn't listen. People are very frustrated because the government doesn't listen to them."

Hundreds of families have already had to abandon their farms due to the spraying. A teacher from Puerto Guzman said, "When the proposed massive spraying begins, tens of thousands of others will similarly be forced to abandon their farms. "Local people likely to

be affected told Refugee Reports that they are panic-stricken at the thought of losing everything they have worked all their lives to build, and of having to move to unknown areas where they do not know how they would survive. They equally fear being placed in camps for displaced people that they fear guerrillas or paramilitary groups would infiltrate and attempt to control.¹⁶

Given that the risks of this sort of spraying is so high and that the monetary costs of Plan Colombia are so high, it may be hard to understand why the US has pledged nearly 2 billion dollars to this campaign. Colombia is now one of the biggest recipients of foreign aid from the US.¹⁷ One reason, besides the fact that much of our drug problem is fueled by Colombia, is that we depend on Colombia economically for their energy, a market that has recently become very volatile in light of the uncertainty in the Middle East. Colombia has recently been declared a “strategically important country for the United States, among many other reasons, because it has ‘some of the largest untapped petroleum reserves in the Western Hemisphere’”, by the RAND corporation, a think tank used by the US military. Vice President Cheney has also noted in his National Energy Report that Colombia has “become an important supplier of oil to the United States.” The United states was Colombia’s biggest customer, consuming 85% of Colombia’s oil production in the year 2000. Their energy exports has now become Colombia’s most profitable legal export surpassing coffee when coffee prices plummeted in the early nineties.¹⁸

The US is not the only organization interested in Colombia’s oil. The Caño Limón – Coveñas pipeline, an important oil pipeline in Colombia has been attacked over 800 times by guerilla groups, mostly the ELN.¹⁹ It is partly in response to these continuing

attacks that the US is interested in eliminating these groups. Plan Colombia has specifically called for 800 million dollars to be used in defense of this oil pipeline.²⁰

It is clear that something must be done about the violence that has been ravaging Colombia for almost 40 years, but it is unclear whether Plan Colombia is the best solution. It is also clear that the United States has its own interests in mind when it pledged \$1.7 billion in relief to Colombia. We are relying heavily on military tactics and US troops have become more directly involved now than ever, as there are now 500 military personnel stationed in Colombia to train Colombians in counterinsurgency tactics. This has been a move by the US in facilitating more direct contact with guerilla groups rather than the anti drug-techniques we have focused on so far.²¹ While this conflict will not end soon, it is important that Plan Colombia be re-evaluated and more than the 20% of the aid, that is now allocated, should go to humanitarian and environmental aid. The US should look at the side effects of the crop spraying and find a better way to get rid of coca growth in the area. Worldwide trade agreements for coffee and other incentives for farmers to switch back to legal crops should be considered. And most importantly we should consider what exactly our goals are in the region and ask if our own goals are worth more disruption to the people of Colombia than has already occurred.

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- ¹ Scott Wilson , Washington Post, 16 Sept. 2002
- ² <http://www.hrw.org/backgroundunder/americas/colombia-table.pdf>
- ³ <http://www.hrw.org/backgroundunder/americas/colombia-table.pdf>
- ⁴ Marx, Gary, Chicago Tribune 20 Apr. 2003
- ⁵ <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/international/colombia.html>
- ⁶ John Otis, Houston Chronicle, 29 Sept. 2002
- ⁷ Van Dongen, Rachel, Washington Times 13 Aug. 2002
- ⁸ <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/groups/farc.html>
- ⁹ <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/groups/farc.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.colombiareport.org/fiftyyearsofviolence.htm#three>
- ¹¹ <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/groups/farc.html>
- ¹² Scott Wilson , Washington Post, 16 Sept. 2002
- ¹³ John Otis, Houston Chronicle, 29 Sept. 2002
- ¹⁴ <http://whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/cocaine/index.html>
- ¹⁵ John Otis, Houston Chronicle, 29 Sept. 2002
- ¹⁶ http://www.refugees.org/world/articles/fumigation_rr00_3.htm
- ¹⁷ <http://www.fff.org/freedom/0601d.asp>
- ¹⁸ <http://www.colombiaemb.org/energy.htm>
- ¹⁹ http://www.colombiaemb.org/Doc_ener/OP_Letter.pdf
- ²⁰ Scott Wilson, Washington Post, 9 Aug. 2002
- ²¹ Scott Wilson, Washington Post,

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