

COLOMBIA: POLITICAL VIOLENCE, THE DRUG WAR, AND MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS

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US policy makers and others frequently tout Colombia as the “most stable democracy in Latin America”. However, behind this facade of democracy lies a history of horrific levels of political violence, repression, and terror.

Colombia has had the most homicides of any country in the world since 1988: 74 per 100,000 people in 1996. Political violence accounts for 13% of the homicides committed in Colombia, and the motives for many others are suspected to be political. There were 3,173 people killed for political reasons in the year between Oct. 95 and Sept. 96. (Comision, pg. 3) During the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, between 1973 and 1990, there were 2,666 documented political murders and disappearances. While still a horrible figure, it is impossible to ignore that there are more politically motivated murders committed *annually* in Colombia than were committed under the 17 years of Pinochet in Chile. (Giraldo, pg. 18) These levels of political violence make a farce of the West’s proclamation of Colombia as “Latin America’s oldest and most stable democracy.”

Why has this bloodshed gone largely unpublicized in the US and the rest of world? Colombian and US elites, who finance much of the political repression, are both profiting from it. The greatest cause of the violence in Colombian society is the tension between the exorbitant levels of wealth of the few and the horrible poverty of the masses. In Colombia, the top 3% of the elite own more than 70% of the arable land while 57% of the poorest Colombians struggle to subsist on 3% of the land. 40% of the population is in absolute poverty, meaning that they cannot meet their basic needs while 18% are considered to be in absolute misery, not being able to meet their nutritional needs. A society with this level of inequality necessarily has two characteristics: 1) large powerful structures that serve to maintain this inequality and 2) organized dissent by the poor. Often the uprising will be violent, but there will likely be non-violent rejection of the status quo as well. Once the gap between rich and poor becomes this immense, violent repercussions are all but inevitable. This is the picture of modern day Colombian society.

The players in the violence in Colombia consist of the following:

Military

The Colombian Military has the worst human rights record of any military in the world. It has been deeply involved in political violence in Colombia for over a century. In 1989, the Colombian Minister of Defense publicly stated that the Colombian Armed Forces were to embark on a “total war” in the political, economic, and social arenas against the “insurgent war to control the popular elements and manipulate the masses.” Through this strategy, the Colombian military could target anyone they determined was under the psychological, physical, or ideological influence of the “subversive elements” in Colombian society. (Giraldo, pg. 9) This new doctrine widened the latitude of the “popular elements” against which repressive measures could be taken. Organizations such as labor organizations, indigenous organizations, opposition political parties, peasant movements, intellectuals, religious organizations, and neighborhood organizations all became military targets. The repression took the form of counterinsurgency warfare against those sectors of the civilian population perceived as supporting the guerrilla insurgency.

However, as the repression grew and the US relationship with the Colombian government became more involved, citizens and business interests began to pressure the US government about the abuses. The US in turn put pressure on the Colombian government. In order to keep the massive amounts of money and training the Colombian military and police received from the US, they had to clean up their act. Beginning in the early 1990’s, the Colombian militaries began a series of processes to “externalize” political repression so that the repressive apparatus was still in place but not

publicly in the hands of the Colombian military. The paramilitaries became a perfect tool for this need.

Paramilitary

Since the beginning of the civil war in Colombia, wealthy landowners, ranchers, and businessmen have banded together to protect their land, assets, and lives from the *guerrilleros*. They eventually paid armed men to protect their assets and take revenge if necessary. In 1994 the Colombian government passed a law legalizing these paramilitaries, designating them “Rural Safety Coops”. The purpose of the law, ostensibly, was for people to “provide for their own security in areas of high risk.” Practically, the law has lent legitimacy to “private justice” and has encouraged groups of civilians to take up arms against sectors of the population that are less politically or financially powerful.

By encouraging formation of paramilitaries, the government makes it seem that the proportion of political murders, disappearances, and tortures attributed directly to the military has decreased in the 1990’s. The same volumes of political murders are being committed, but the perpetrators now disguise their affiliation. The paramilitaries use “self defense” to justify all of their violent actions. They kill, disappear, and torture persons they suspect to be guerrillas or to know someone who is guerrilla. Those considered *guerrilleros* or those who sympathize with the subversive (cause) will be detained and executed. Murders by the militaries and the paramilitaries have led to tens of thousands of internally displaced peasants in Colombia—refugees in their own country. (C B, pg. 4)

Besides receiving legal backing from the Colombian government, the paramilitaries receive financial backing from businessmen, trade organizations, cattlemen, oil companies, and drug traffickers. In return, they protect the interests of these organizations against “agitators”, whether armed guerrillas or peaceful peasants. The paramilitaries also receive logistical support from the military through the local battalions. They often provide transportation, weapons, and other supplies to the paramilitaries. In May of 1998, in Barrancabermeja, a band of paramilitaries arrived one Sunday afternoon in several Army trucks and conducted a three hour search for 36 men, whose bodies were later found outside the town tortured and dismembered. During the entire three hours of the Barrancabermeja round up, no police or military were seen in the city. There were reports that they had actually set up roadblocks outside of the city, to prevent those sought from leaving. The paramilitaries often receive impunity in the legal system, with many of their cases being dismissed or otherwise tied up in the legal system. (Supply, pg. 4)

One of the most powerful paramilitaries is the Autodefensas Unidas de Cordoba y Uraba. Carlos Castano, a known drug trafficker and wealthy landowner, heads up this paramilitary. He declared that civil and human rights organizations are considered military targets by the paramilitaries because of their connections with “subversive” ideologies and organizations. In January of 1999, the AUCU conducted a reign of terror through towns in 6 different provinces, killing 150 civilians, burning homes and businesses, and terrorizing other inhabitants of these towns. These attacks were revenge for an earlier guerrilla attack on the AUC headquarters. (Economist, Jan 16, 1999) The Colombian government has been successful through paramilitarization in “outsourcing” the political repression previously conducted by state forces. However, the paramilitaries’ main target is often, if indirectly, the guerrillas

Guerrillas

The guerrilla movement in Colombia originated more than 50 years ago from the ten-year period called *La Violencia*, in which over 200,000 people were killed. This violent response to attempts to organize opposition political parties lead to the formation of guerrilla groups as part of the

community resistance organized by the Colombian Communist Party. The Patriotic Union (UP), a party founded in 1985, achieved some limited electoral successes. However, within 2 years of its founding, 3,000 of the UP’s candidates, elected officials and supporters had been assassinated, effectively ending the Union Patriotica. (NACLA, pg. 38) Thus, the virtual elimination of any opposition political parties has spurred the formation of guerrilla groups.

The two most prominent guerrilla groups in existence today are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Although their tactics differ somewhat, their demands are very much the same. Their professed reason for fighting is to ameliorate injustices against the poor of Colombia. Their demands included agrarian reform, the redistribution of wealth, and the end to unchecked free market policies. These demands, while just, are unlikely to be given freely by the Colombian government or the business interests that drive it.

The main activities of the guerrillas are taking over villages and taking suspected paramilitary sympathizers captive, kidnapping wealthy members of Colombian society, protecting coca growers, and bombing oil pipelines. The guerrillas, as a result, control a substantial amount of land in Colombia, including a recently demilitarized area the size of Switzerland. They protect the inhabitants of the regions they control from paramilitary and military aggression and in turn take a cut of profits from the main economic activity there, whether it be coca cultivation, cattle raising, or plantains.

One of their main forms of generating revenue is the kidnapping of landowners and ranchers for ransom. In 1996 alone, they kidnapped over 580 persons. The fear of kidnapping actually motivated the formation and funding of paramilitary groups by wealthy landowners. The guerrillas commit a substantial amount of violence, much in direct and indirect response to government or paramilitary violence. Although this violence cannot be condoned, the government has left little other space for reform efforts.

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History of Coca Agriculture

Coca is a fairly new introduction to Colombia, having arrived about 20 years ago. Previously, Colombia was a processing station for coca grown in Bolivia and Peru, where coca leaf has been used for centuries. However, the history of coca cultivation dates back to the 1940’s. Motivated by a market for rubber for WWII, the Colombia government eagerly laid the infrastructure to extract rubber from the jungle. Once the war ended, the rubber tapping stations were abandoned. In the 1960’s, to avoid land conflicts resulting from the civil war, the government further promoted the colonization of the jungle. In the 1970’s, agricultural extension agents promised and delivered great yields of corn and rice. With the cost of shipping to the nearest port being prohibitively high, these products sat and rotted on the docks. However, in the 1980’s, blonde men appeared bringing seeds to this devastated area preaching that if peasants grew what they brought, they would not have to worry about markets. (Weisman, pg. 9) In this way, coca has made the colonization of the jungle economically viable. Today, a coca grower can earn up to \$2, 500 dollars a year for one hectare of coca, compared to one twentieth of that if they plant plantains or other agricultural products.

Drugs and Colombian Society

Despite the fact that the US government characterizes the guerrilla groups in Colombia as “narcoguerrillas,” virtually every part of Colombian society is deeply involved in the drug trade. It is true that the FARC protects coca growers from fumigation. However, the paramilitaries are deeply involved in the drug trade. Carlos Castano, the head of the AUC, is a known drug trafficker, as are many of the financiers of the paramilitaries. It is ironic that one of the US main allies in the “Drug War”, the Colombian military, is involved in the drug trade as well. In 1998, US officials found a half-ton of cocaine and several kilos of heroin aboard a Colom

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bian Air Force plane in Florida. (Economist, Nov 28th, 1998) In addition, many high level officials in the Colombian military have been found to be involved in the drug trade. Considering the involvement of virtually every sector of Colombian society in the drug trade, the US involvement on the side of the Colombian military and police in the “Drug War” is flawed and hypocritical.

US Involvement in Colombia

The US involvement in Colombia dates back to the beginning of this century. The US has trained more than 30,000 Colombian soldiers at the US Army School of the Americas, more than any other country in Latin America. Between 1984 and 1992, we trained 6,844 Colombian soldiers under the US International Military Education and Training Program. CIA strategists have assisted Colombian military intelligence. (Giraldo, 15) We have continued this training despite the Colombian military being cited as the worst human rights abuser in the world.

Besides training, we are giving huge amounts of military aid to the Colombian military. We gave \$80 million and \$88.6 million in the 1997 and 1998 respectively, and in 1999, we will give the Colombian military \$289 Million dollars. (NYT, 12/1/98) Ironically, this money is supposedly being given to fight the “drug war”, although it is apparent that the Colombian military is as involved in the drug trade as are the guerrillas they fight.

This money is actually used to fund a counterinsurgency

war against Columbia’s peasant population. US Drug Czar General Barry McCaffrey announced last year that the US is willing to help combat not only “drug traffickers but also the ‘guerrillas’.” (NACLA, pg. 35) He has also complained that more “flexibility” is needed in funding, so that funding can be used directly in counterinsurgency efforts. US funding and training of the drug war is doing little to combat drug traffic and much to help the Colombian military and right wing paramilitaries terrorize peasants in their war against the leftist insurgency.

Multinational Interests in Colombia

Colombia is one of the poorest countries in Latin America, despite the fact that it is extremely rich in natural resources. Poverty persists along with the exploitation of natural resources in Colombia because profits from the extraction of oil, timber, and minerals goes to the elite few of Colombian society and to multinational corporations. Preserving the status quo of Colombian society is beneficial to both these players. Therefore, it is in their interests to stop any dissent or attempts at reforms. Multinational corporations have been essential to the funding and support for paramilitary and military group involved in counterinsurgency warfare against the population.

Occidental Petroleum, British Petroleum (now BP-Amoco) and, until recently, Shell Oil have many interests in Colombia. These companies have been involved in the repression of those opposed to the profits of Colombia’s oil not being invested in the region.

The FARC and the ELN consider foreign companies that exploit Colombian natural resources as military targets. Consequently, the Occidental Petroleum pipeline has been bombed 40 times in the past year. (Economist, 7/11/98) In 1996, 6 people from the El Morro, Casanare, site of a new British Petroleum installation, were killed for protesting groundwater contamination from BP’s activities there. BP hired a private British security company to train the Colombian police in counterinsurgency to protect BP’s installations. Occidental Petroleum recently renounced their contract on the entire Samore oil block for a smaller area after members of the U’wa indigenous group threatened mass suicide. In Southern Bolivar, goldmining multinationals have sponsored campaigns of terror by the paramilitaries, killing and displacing hundreds of people. The Embera Katio indigenous community have been terrorized by paramili-

tary groups (AUC) since they began their protest campaign against the construction of a hydroelectric dam that would disrupt the migration of the fish that are their food source and displace hundreds of people. In December of 1998, paramilitaries entered the community, killing 6 people and disappearing another 10. They threatened a massacre unless the dam was allowed to go ahead.

Conclusion

The human rights situation in Colombia is a complicated one with many different groups fighting for control over the people and natural resources of Colombia. The paramilitaries and the Colombian Army work in complicity to silence any opposition or perceived opposition to the existing economic and political system in place in Colombia. Violent repressive tactics are perpetrated against “subversives” to achieve this goal. The guerrillas also commit violent acts to achieve their aims. Both sides of the decades long civil war in Colombia have continued to escalate the levels of violence in an attempt to win the upper hand in the conflict. However, poor peasants remain the main casualties of the political violence in Colombia.

The role of the US government and corporations in this violence is undeniable. We have trained tens of thousands of Colombian soldiers at the US Army School of the Americas as well as increasing our military aid to Colombia to \$289 million in 1999.

This must be stopped! Write to your Congressperson and insist that they support HR 732 introduced 2/11/99, calling for the closing of the School of the Americas. Demand an end to US funding to the Colombian military until we find out how our money is being used. ☑

For more information, the following web sites are helpful:

Official School of Americas Watch Web Page
<http://www.soaw.org>

Colombia Support Network Web Page
<http://www.igc.apc.org/csn/index.html>

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