

Conflict & Security

Uribe's People: Civilians and the Colombian Conflict

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As countries around the world take up the anti-terrorist cause, some policymakers in the United States and abroad have come to view Colombia's conflict in a singular light. While Colombia's history of violence has long been attributed to insurgents representing political grievances, as well as the business of drug trafficking, during the past year, the Colombian and U.S. governments have increasingly characterized Colombia's security problems as a matter of terrorists and criminals confronting a state ill-equipped to defend itself and establish authority. New Colombian president Álvaro Uribe Vélez has promised to tackle Colombia's terrorist violence and establish state command over the nation's territory once and for all. His policies have been radical, but they are not entirely novel: not only do they jeopardize basic rights, but they could, in fact, provoke even more violence. As more countries crack down on terrorism and insurgency, often with outside aid, the Colombian case suggests that unchecked, aggressive security measures can have unpredictable and possibly frightening consequences.

On August 7, 2002, Uribe became the president of Colombia in the midst of this brutal conflict, which can be traced back decades. That conflict today has become a turf war fought by two leftist guerrilla organizations against the Colombian state and officially outlawed right-wing paramilitary organizations, which are often allied with the Colombian armed

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forces. Inseparable from this clash is Colombia's prominent role in the international drug trade, its world leadership in kidnappings and assassinations, the internal displacement of 1,000 of its people per day, a murder rate ten times that of the United States, and impunity as old as the country itself.¹

The guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) have

wealthy and middle-class Colombians who lack confidence in the state's security forces and legal system to protect their interests, the AUC poses as serious a threat to Colombian civilians and their tenuous democracy as do the guerrillas.

In their quest to fill the vacuum of state authority and to establish control over territory, all three groups carry out selective assassinations, commit massacres, intimidate entire communities,

Under this new plan, civilians could be *participating* in the conflict more than ever.

their origins in the early 1960s, while the paramilitary United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), an umbrella organization, came together in 1996. The U.S. State Department regards all three forces as terrorist organizations.

The guerrillas' Marxist ideology has dimmed over the years as their political cause has become overshadowed by their military operations, which have often targeted civilians. In July 2002, for example, the 18,000-member FARC announced that it would consider all of Colombia's 1,098 mayors and other municipal officials as military targets if they did not renounce their positions. The FARC is also in the process of accumulating hostages for what it hopes will be a massive prisoner exchange with the government. Like the FARC, the 4,000-member ELN is involved in kidnapping, extortion, public bombings, and sabotage, all the while relying heavily on child soldiers.

The paramilitary AUC has tripled in size since 1998 and now counts as many as 15,000 members in its ranks. Bankrolled by the drug trade as well as

and forcibly displace unarmed civilians by the millions. Because the mushrooming conflict was largely confined to the countryside, urban Colombians have been able to ignore it for years. That detachment may be changing, however, as the FARC and the AUC have begun to recruit young people from shantytowns on the outskirts of major cities such as Medellín and Bogotá.²

President Uribe came to power on a platform that promised to end the conflict by making it too expensive and painful for the guerrillas to continue their fight, and ultimately force them to the negotiating table. Uribe argues that although civilians already bear the brunt of the violence, they must assume a more active role in security issues as an act of solidarity with the Colombian state. As part of this vision to provide so-called "democratic security" to embattled Colombians, Uribe has employed three strategies: creating special security zones by invoking emergency powers that enable him to rule by decree; training part-time soldiers to serve in areas without a police presence;

and forming a one-million-person network of civilian informants.

There are, however, serious questions regarding how democratic these methods are and how much security they will ultimately provide. Human rights advocates argue that some policies violate international humanitarian law by blurring the line between civilian and combatant. Instead of cooperating with the government, civilians under this new plan could be participating in the conflict more than ever. Some analysts, moreover, claim that the measures will not weaken subversive guerrilla elements, but that they may instead harm innocent and apolitical civilians with whom the insurgents quietly surround themselves.³ Such contingencies create a considerable risk of the measures turning sour, bringing unintended and punishing consequences to an already battered nation.

Emergency Powers and Decrees.

On August 11, four days after his inauguration, President Uribe cited security concerns and declared a "State of Internal Unrest." An emergency power written into the constitution, this measure cedes unusually strong powers to the president, and allows the state to carry out arrests, searches, and wiretapping without warrants. One recent decree (#2002) permits the creation of special areas—"Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones"—in which military commanders have certain judicial and police powers, overriding those of elected civilian authorities. Within these zones, the mobility of civilians is limited, individuals without personal identification can be held for twenty-four hours, censuses are conducted to determine where people work and live, and restrictions are placed on the presence of foreigners and jour-

nalists. Two such zones have already been created; one of them is in the province of Arauca, where the U.S. government is poised to send \$98 million to protect an oil pipeline used by Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum.

Although a state of internal unrest was last invoked in 1995, states-of-emergency are hardly new to Colombia. In fact, for most of the last fifty years, Colombia has been governed under various extraordinary measures. Critics argue that such measures have not stopped the guerilla insurgency or common crime, but that they have instead led to serious human rights abuses by contributing to the military's preponderant role in matters of internal security.

Last year's controversial "Security and National Defense Law" attempted to create areas very similar to the Rehabilitation Zones, but it was struck down by the Constitutional Court in April 2002. Prominent human rights groups, such as the Colombian Commission of Jurists, have condemned the latest law, calling it "unfocused, useless, and dangerous."⁴ Amerigo Incalerra, from the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights office in Colombia, has also weighed-in against the zones. He has argued that they fail to distinguish between combatant and non-combatant, allow for little judicial control of the military, and guarantee neither due process nor the presumption of innocence.⁵

President Uribe responded by saying, "Here, there is a lot of criticism when actions are taken to overcome the violence and a lot of silence when violence takes over everywhere in Colombia without anyone standing up to it."⁶ Uribe is convinced that he can outrun the past,

claiming that his policies are stronger than history's heavy hand.

Peasant Soldiers. During the presidential campaign, Uribe stated his intentions to nearly double the number of professional, combat-ready soldiers to 100,000; increase the number of police to 200,000; and eliminate the obligatory draft by 2005. Yet, Colombia is weathering the most difficult economic conditions since the 1930s, and sufficient funds are currently unavailable for such plans. In order to quickly and cheaply establish state presence in lawless zones, the government is recruiting 15,000 "peasant soldiers" through the normal military draft to support the regular armed forces by March 2003. After three months of military training, all peasant soldiers will return to their hometowns to act as soldiers during the day and spend nights under their own roofs. The government believes it can train 100,000 such soldiers within four years.⁷

According to Vice President Francisco Santos, who has been entrusted with designing the government's human rights policies, the peasant soldiers will function as "national guards" in 450 of Colombia's 1,098 municipalities (186 of which currently lack police). Each of these municipalities will have garrisons of 100 troops, forty of which will be peasant soldiers. According to Santos, the government is evaluating whether these soldiers will bring their weapons home with them or whether they will leave them at the local garrison.⁸ In either case, peasant soldiers will not enjoy the protection of military or police facilities when they are off-duty, making them more vulnerable than regular soldiers. In fact, because they will serve in the towns where state presence is weak-

est, they could be exposing their families to attacks by illegal armed groups.

Eduardo Pizarro, a prominent Colombian social scientist, has described these soldiers as "second-class conscripts" and "cannon fodder." He questions whether it is possible to professionalize the armed forces while taking shortcuts like the creation of peasant soldiers. He points out that similar efforts in Guatemala and El Salvador were the cause of those countries' worst episodes of violence.⁹

Eduardo Cifuentes, Colombia's Public Ombudsman—a state human rights institution independent of the government—says, "soldiers are trained to act collectively. They belong to units under a commander, they have protected institutional living quarters, and they have permanent systems of prevention. If these peasant soldiers are going to be in their homes, it will be very difficult to organize an effective response in the case of an attack which, in a guerrilla war, is by surprise."¹⁰

Network of Collaborators. Perhaps President Uribe's most ambitious and most alarming measure is the creation of an informant network of one million civilians, which will function as the eyes and ears of the police and military. This network is expected to work as a result of its sheer size. President Uribe asserts, "If we have one, two, or ten [informants], sure they'd be killed. But if we have thousands or tens of thousands, then they would stand together and say, 'They'll have to kill us all.'"¹¹ According to news reports, there are already thousands of participants in the majority of Colombia's provinces.

Although the participants receive only a small stipend for helping with intelligence gathering, they could also receive

payoffs of up to \$2,500 for particularly important tips that prevent attacks or lead to arrests. Tens of thousands of dollars have already been distributed in a program that the government calls "Reward Mondays," which originally featured informants in ski masks receiving thick wads of bills from military commanders in live, televised, public ceremonies. These ceremonies, however, were scrapped after arousing pointed criticisms from editorial boards, intellectuals, and politicians.

Antanas Mockus, the mayor of Bogotá, called these ceremonies a "grotesque spectacle," and he further stated his intention to prohibit the informant networks from operating in his city. Mockus argues that addressing the city's securi-

Colombian lexicon today. These militias were often created by landowners and right-wing politicians to kill and forcibly "disappear" political opponents and leftists, as they benefited from cozy relationships with local governments, the police, and the military.¹³ In the past two decades, emerald mafias, drug traffickers, and cattle ranchers have also financed death-squads.

While governor of Antioquia province in the mid-1990s, Uribe was a proponent of legal rural security cooperatives called the Convivir. The Convivir allowed armed civilians to patrol and gather intelligence under the control of military commanders, and due in part to Uribe's support, nearly seventy were established in Antioquia, as were hun-

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ty problems requires both professional police and respect for international humanitarian law, and he maintains that citizens should cooperate with the authorities not out of greed, but out of civic duty. Like many other critics, he also warns against double-agents who would use the reward system for their own personal enrichment.¹²

Colombia has a troubling history of civilians supporting military operations, both legally and illegally. For decades, hundreds of private militias with varying local missions have conducted some variety of "social cleansing" in defense of privileged citizens. The most notorious militias of the 1940s and 1950s, *los pajaros*, *los contrachusmeros*, and *las chulavitas*, remain part of the

dreds more nationally.¹⁴ By Uribe's own admission, however, illegal paramilitaries infiltrated the Convivir in Antioquia, and recently declassified documents confirm that high-ranking Colombian military officers knew there was a great danger of Convivir units becoming paramilitary outfits.¹⁵

It would be an extraordinary challenge to avoid replaying that scenario today at the national level as a result of the paramilitaries' explosive growth, budding sympathies from the middle class, and well-documented links with elements of the Colombian military.¹⁶ The prospects for violence are all the more real given Colombia's history of private retribution and countless vendettas. People seeking revenge against others for personal rea-

sons may label their enemies as insurgents, criminals, or terrorists in order to see them arrested or even killed.

Mary Robinson, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights specifically criticized Uribe's proposal to recruit civilians, calling it a clouding of the distinction between soldier and civilian. In a letter to Uribe on August 26, 2002, she wrote that such measures "can contribute, within the context of generalized violence and a degradation of the conflict, to the civilian population becoming involved in military operations or exposed to risk situations."

But Uribe and his cabinet refute such criticism by arguing that tackling terrorism requires civilian teamwork, and that the appropriate oversight procedures are in place to prevent the network from going awry. They claim not only that Colombian institutions have changed, but also that citizens have accepted the moral challenge of enabling the state to do away with violence.

Yet, it is also fair to say that Colombians have an uneasy and unstable relationship with authority. A Colombian political analyst recently argued that the country needed a memory-eraser so that people could begin anew, without the baggage of historical resentments and animosities. Months later, having forgotten her previous statement, she declared that Colombia needed a memory-enhancer so that people could not forget, and would be forced to confront the horrors committed by their own hands.¹⁷

Senator Antonio Navarro Wolff—an ex-guerrilla leader and former minister of health—seems to share her skepticism of a newfound sensibility or historical awareness in Colombia.

He argues that the network of informants "will wind up being armed," and that "nobody will be able to control one million armed civilians. They will wind up shooting their political enemies, the people they don't like, the man who gets their daughter pregnant."¹⁸

Indeed, there are indications that such will be the future of these programs. In the large cities, some of the nation's 180,000 already-armed private security guards will play a special role in the networks. As Uribe has argued, "One thing is arming one million bandits. But it's another thing entirely to arm ordinary citizens, private security firms, neighborhood security groups, and civil defense organizations so they can support the military."¹⁹ It is worth remembering that the *Convivir* also began unarmed, but the government soon began illegally distributing weapons to its members.²⁰

Defense Minister Marta Luc a Ram rez has stated that there will be a "very rigorous" selection process to determine the participants, and promised that their names will be kept "absolutely confidential."²¹ But Vice President Santos has said that there will be no background checks on participants.²² Given the country's deep-seated conflict and the fact that the irregular armies number roughly 37,000 troops, a vetting process seems a minimal precaution to protect citizens from overzealous, corrupt, and violent participants.

Conclusion. President Uribe's taste for bold security measures is understandable given Colombia's astonishing levels of violence. Ruling by executive decree, sending the poorest to the front lines of the war, assigning civilians

police duties, and granting the military additional police powers just might, as the government claims, mark a turning point in the conflict.

With a few unfortunate turns however, his measures could also open the nation's oldest wounds and uncork Colombians' most violent urges. The nation's blood-spattered history suggests that these security policies are difficult to control and are, in fact, part of the reason that Colombia remains so violent today. Colombians continue to mete out justice privately, thus undermining the rule

of law and their own security. Without a professional police and military that truly respect human rights and a judicial system that addresses pervasive impunity, Colombia's conflict will only worsen. In the worst-case scenario, Uribe's "democratic security" project could morph into a slaughter on a scale yet unseen in modern Colombia, surpassing even its infamous mid-century civil war, a fifteen-year killing spree known simply as *la Violencia* that left 200,000 dead. It is, perhaps, that war's legacy that Uribe and all Colombians are still fighting.

NOTES

1 There is a growing body of academic literature on Colombian violence. Some of the best recent English-language works include the following books: Bergquist, Charles, Ricardo Pe aranda, and Gonzalo S nchez eds., *Violence in Colombia 1990-2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001); Rold n, *Mary, Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia, 1946-1953*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); and Richani, Nazih, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002).

2 Steven Ambrus, "Taking Aim at the City," *Newsweek*, 18 February 2002. John Otis, "Colombian Cities Now Targets of War," *Houston Chronicle*, 11 June 2002. Scott Wilson, "Urban Anti-Rebel Raid a New Turn in Colombian War," *Washington Post*, 24 October 2002. Tod Robertson, "Colombian Cities Under Fire as Old War Takes New Turn," *Dallas Morning News*, 4 November 2002.

3 Gustavo Gall n of the Colombian Commission of Jurists, interview with author, Washington, DC, 17 October 2002.

4 Comisi n Colombiana de Juristas, "El decreto 2002 de 2002: Un r gimen desenfocado, peligroso e in til de restricci n de derechos," October 2002.

5 "Colombia Makes ex-Army Boss a Provincial Governor," *Associated Press*, 1 October 2002.

6 "ONU advierte riesgos por medidas de excepci n," *El Espectador*, 2 October 2002.

7 "Campesinos armados." *Semana*, 30 August, 2002.

8 Francisco Santos, interview with author, Washington, DC, 16 September 2002.

9 Eduardo Pizarro, "Los soldados campesinos: un adefesio," *El Tiempo*, 9 September 2002.

10 "Campesinos armados," *Semana*, 30 August 2002.

11 Frances Robert, "Colombian Leader Installs Citizen Spies," *Miami Herald*, 9 August 2002.

12 "Encapuchados son grotescos," *El Tiempo*, 18 September 2002.

13 See Rold n, *Blood and Fire*.

14 According to the Colombian Defense Minister in August 1997, there were 414 Convivir chapters throughout the country. That same month, according to the national Convivir president, there were 728 units. Independent analysts claimed there were more than 1,000.

15 The National Security Archive of George Washington University acquires U.S. State Department documents through the Freedom of Information Act. See <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>.

16 See Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Washington Office on Latin America, *Colombia Human Rights Certification IV Briefing Paper*, September 2002. Available at <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/americas/colombia-certification4.htm>.

17 Colombian political researcher, interview with author, Bogot , April and July 1998.

18 "Armar civiles es una p sima idea," *El Espectador*, 12 August 2002.

19 Karl Penhaul, "Front-Runner's Tough Talk Plays Big in Colombia," *Boston Globe*, 22 May 2002.

20 *War Without Quarter: Colombia and International Humanitarian Law* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1998).

21 "Red de informantes se transforma en red de cooperantes de las Fuerzas Armadas," *El Tiempo*, 10 September 2002.

22 Francisco Santos, interview with author, Washington, DC, 16 September 2002.