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Colombia: The Paramilitaries in Medellín: Demobilization or Legalization? Facts and Figures

40 years of armed conflict

Colombia's internal armed conflict has pitted the security forces and army-backed paramilitaries against guerrilla groups in a struggle for territory and economic resources.

Civilians have routinely been directly and deliberately targeted by the parties to the conflict. Violations and abuses committed against civilians have included extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detention, torture, "disappearances", kidnappings, forced displacement and sexual abuse. Civilians have been targeted in order to, for example, eliminate those deemed to be supporting the "enemy" or to create terror in order to "cleanse" territories of economic or strategic interest to the armed groups and their backers.

Parties to the conflict

Military and Paramilitaries

The paramilitaries have their origin in legal, civilian "self-defence" groups created by the army in the 1970s and 1980s to act as auxiliaries during counter-insurgency operations. Their legal basis was removed in 1989 but little effort has been made to disband them.

The AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia), the main paramilitary umbrella group, is believed to have numbered around 10,000 - 20,000 fighters prior to the demobilization process.

Their main role has been to carry out the "dirty war" tactics of the armed forces' counter-insurgency strategy, which is characterized by the systematic and widespread violation of human rights. The use of paramilitaries has helped the armed forces avoid increasing international pressure to respect human rights.

The armed forces continue to coordinate and support paramilitary structures as part of their counter-insurgency strategy. AI continues to document human rights violations by paramilitaries carried out with the support or acquiescence of the armed forces.

Although the paramilitaries announced a self-declared ceasefire at the end of 2002, and are engaged in "peace talks" with the government, they continue to commit widespread human rights violations against the civilian population.

Guerrillas

There are two main guerrilla groups in Colombia: the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) -- with around 20,000 combatants -- and the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) -- with some 4,000 combatants.

Over the last 40 years, the guerrillas have created extensive strongholds in many rural areas of the country where they effectively determine local government policies and exercise significant control over the local population. Since the 1990s, the FARC has sought to significantly increase attacks in urban areas, and civilians have increasingly borne the brunt of guerrilla attacks in these areas.

Guerrilla groups are responsible for repeated and serious breaches of international humanitarian law, including hostage-taking and the abduction and killing of civilians. They have also carried out attacks using disproportionate and indiscriminate weapons which has resulted in the death of numerous civilians.

Government

President Álvaro Uribe Vélez took office on 7 August 2002. On assuming office, President Uribe introduced a series of hardline security measures encapsulated in the so-called Democratic Security Doctrine. This sought to "consolidate" and "recover" territory from guerrilla control. But rather than boost the security of the civilian population, the Democratic Security strategy has made it more vulnerable than ever to abuses from illegal armed groups and the security forces.

The government is pursuing policies which are contrary to its obligations under international human rights law and repeated UN human rights recommendations. These policies are dragging civilians further into the conflict and strengthening impunity.

Human rights abuses

All parties in the Colombian armed conflict – the security forces, the paramilitaries, and the guerrilla – have routinely abused human rights.

In the last 20 years, the Colombian conflict has cost the lives of at least 70,000 people, the majority of them civilians killed out of combat, while thousands of others have been victims of “disappearances”, kidnappings and torture.

More than 3 million people have been internally displaced since 1985, with more than 280,000 in 2004 alone.

Despite a fall in certain indicators of political violence such as kidnappings and massacres, reports of extrajudicial executions carried out directly by the armed forces increased in 2004. Cases of “disappearances” and torture also remained high.

The paramilitaries, often acting in conjunction with the security forces, have been responsible for most killings, “disappearances, and cases of torture, while the guerrillas have been held responsible for most “politically-related” kidnappings.

Medellín

Medellín, the capital of Antioquia Department, is situated in north-west Colombia. It's the country's second largest city, with a population of over 2 million, and is a major commercial and industrial centre. Some of Colombia's wealthiest landowners and industrialists live in the city and the surrounding municipalities. The city is surrounded by poor hillside neighbourhoods in the peripheries. Many of these outlying areas lack basic public amenities, such as water, electricity and sanitation.

In the 1980s, Medellín became synonymous with the cocaine trade, and the ensuing violence resulted in the city having the highest per capita murder rate in the world. The presence of armed criminal gangs, many of whom were co-opted by drug-traffickers and army-backed paramilitary groups operating in the city, and of guerrilla militias, have ensured that, although killings have fallen since the 1980s, violence in Medellín

remains a serious problem.

The first guerrilla militias emerged in Medellín in the 1980s. The militias – made up mostly of youths, including children – were responsible for dispensing “justice” in the poor neighbourhoods by carrying out “social cleansing” operations against petty criminals, drug addicts and members of criminal gangs. Those who refused to stop their activities were either forced to leave the neighbourhood or killed. The militias also “taxed” local business in return for “protection” and kidnapped wealthy businesspeople to fund their activities.

The army-backed paramilitary group Bloque Metro emerged as a strong military presence in Medellín from 1998. By 2000, it had co-opted many of Medellín’s criminal gangs. By 2001 it was the dominant paramilitary group in the city. The paramilitary group Bloque Cacique Nutibara emerged soon after, and after a bloody dispute with the Bloque Metro emerged as the dominant paramilitary group in Medellín. In conjunction with the security forces, the paramilitaries have been responsible for the systematic violation of human rights.

The paramilitary demobilization process

The Colombian government has claimed that more than 8,000 paramilitaries have been removed from the conflict – out of a total of 10,000-20,000, depending on the source quotes – and that all remaining paramilitary combatants will be demobilized by the end of 2005.

Legislation

Members of paramilitary and guerrilla groups who are under investigation or have been sentenced in absentia for human rights violations, and who choose to demobilize, will be able to benefit from the Justice and Peace Law. This will grant them significantly reduced sentences.

Those members of illegal armed groups who are not under investigation for human rights abuses – who are the majority – have already benefited, or will do so, from Decree 128, which grants them de facto amnesties.

Public Document

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