

# Colombia

## An Ageless WAR



**Since September 11 the US has shifted its policy from fighting drugs to battling subversives. But Colombia is rapidly descending into a civil war and a US intervention, some critics say, could only lead to the “Vietnamisation” of the whole Amazon region. OLGA YOLDI writes.**

**S**ick and tired of violence and disenchanted by four years of failed negotiations, Colombians gave Alvaro Uribe a resounding victory in last August's elections. But on the day he was sworn in as the new President of Colombia, the guerrillas welcomed him by firing mortars at the presidential palace, signaling the start of a more intensive period in the 50-year-old conflict.

Political violence is nothing new in Colombia. In 1958 the United States sent a CIA team to evaluate the situation in that country, where, over ten years a low intensity conflict known as *La Violencia* had brought more than 200,000 deaths. The CIA agents said that the country, due to social inequality, widespread lawlessness, poverty and the absence of state authority in rural areas, risked "genocide and chaos." Although the agents doubted that the local elite would do anything to improve the situation, the CIA team recommended a number of nation building measures to the US Secretary of State and Colombian President Alberto Lleras. Washington agreed to assist Bogota to reform its justice system, implement land reform and eliminate guerrilla insurgency.

Only some security recommendations were implemented however, and the conflict never really ended. It became perpetuated and part of the Colombian reality. Today, thanks to a persistent social inequality, a guerrilla insurgency and an ineffective government, a large-scale war over drugs and oil is being fought with the assistance of the US.

Uribe, a lawyer educated at Oxford and Harvard, former mayor and governor, whose father was killed by the rebels, and who has himself survived four assassination attempts, swept into office on a hard line platform. The president promised Colombians to take the war to the guerrillas with an expanded military campaign and restore "democratic security". At the same time the Bush administration asked Congress to allow Colombia for the first time to use military hardware, intelligence and training to combat guerrilla groups and its paramilitaries as well.

Stopping these rebels will not be easy. Colombia's new President faces three opponents: an 18,000 member insurgent group, called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym FARC); a 12,000 member right wing paramilitary umbrella group, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC)

and a smaller leftist insurgency, the National Liberation Army (ELN), that boasts 5,000 men.

The **FARC**, founded in 1964, is America's oldest and most powerful insurgency. According to historian David Bushnell, the FARC originated as an outgrowth of self defense forces established during *La Violencia* in the communist rural enclaves. Its supreme leader was the legendary *Tirofijo*, a man who was pronounced dead more than once but always reappeared. From its original stronghold in the Upper Magdalena Valley, the FARC eventually gained control of other parts of the country, where it served as protector of peasants. Today the FARC continues to control large rural areas traditionally neglected by the state.

"We represent those Colombians that have carried on their shoulders the weight of an entire history of marginalisation and violence in their land, because of social inequality and economic structural adjustment programs imposed from the outside," says FARC's Commander Raul Reyes. The FARC wants to build socialism and become a player in Colombian politics. "In Colombia there are no freedoms for political groups that oppose the ruling system. The politicians do not represent the interest of the Colombian people," Reyes adds. The FARC sees Alvaro Uribe as a president who will continue privatisation and who will follow faithfully the neoliberal policy directed by Washington and the formulas issued by the International Monetary Fund.

The **ELN** was inspired by the Cuban revolution of Fidel Castro, who helped it with training and logistics. This armed group, which was founded by a Christian priest whose mission was bringing justice to the poor, has been weakened in the last few years and recently held secret meetings in Havana with Colombian government officials to explore possible peace talks.

Both FARC and ELN target members of the Establishment: mayors, soldiers, politicians and finance themselves through kidnappings and war taxes.

Both groups have been accused of human rights violations and treating civilians brutally, but it is the **AUC**, whose forces number 10,000, that poses the greatest threat to Colombia. The paramilitaries are loathed and feared by its victims, which include human rights workers, activists, journalists and unionists. The AUC is responsible for at least seventy five per cent of all

human rights violations in Colombia, including massacres of suspected FARC supporters. They have links with the military and tend to act with total impunity. Although paramilitaries have a long history in Colombia, the AUC was formed in the early 1980s, initially as drug protection gangs and then as anti-guerrilla forces. It is the fastest growing military force in the country and aims to take over key areas, sectors of the police and the Congress. It derives most of its own financing from drug lords, wealthy farmers and business interests threatened by the FARC.

All three groups appear on the US State Department's list of terrorist organisations. According to Colombia's network RCN, the Justice Department has obtained indictments against several FARC and AUC leaders on drug trafficking charges. While both organisations have acknowledged collecting taxes from coca growers they have denied facilitating the export of cocaine from Colombia.

Surprisingly, in the midst of this chaos and violence, Colombia remains a democracy. "It is a place where democratic practices coexist with the mass murder of many of its citizens, especially outspoken activists and thinkers, and this schizophrenic national life is becoming more and more difficult to sustain," writes Julia E Sweig in her article "What Kind of War for Colombia?"

Colombia is now the world's homicide capital. Last year 4,000 people were killed and as a result of war about 30,000 people have lost their lives in the last ten years. Colombia has the third highest number of internal refugees in the world: 2 million, (after Angola and Sudan) and 57 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. More than 3,000 Colombians and foreigners were kidnapped in 2001. The FARC and ELN were responsible for sixty percent of the cases and there were similar numbers of civilians who disappeared without trace.

According to a recent Amnesty International report on Colombia, the armed groups were responsible for the arbitrary and deliberate killings of civilians, journalists, indigenous Colombians and politicians. They targeted civilians for opposing their policies or exposing their abuses. Meanwhile 80 per cent of the cocaine consumed in the USA and Europe comes from Colombia.

Because of drugs, paramilitaries, guerrillas and a collapsing state, Colombia's war is worsening. "A purely military approach to the crisis will not

solve the problem, what we need is peace with social justice" says Manuel Diaz, a refugee now living in Australia. "The state will never gain peace through arms. It will never defeat the guerrillas this way, the only outcome will be a blood bath". Unfortunately, a military approach seems to be the kind of strategy Uribe is pursuing. And Bush with his new resolve to fight terrorism around the world, seems fully determined to accompany Uribe in this journey.

## **DRUGS AND TERROR**

Many critics question why should Bush cross the line between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency, as a strategy, was abandoned after the Reagan years, when he provided support to the Contras against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and involved his government in a brutal campaign against the leftist rebels in El Salvador. However, now Bush seems to be ready to embrace it again. Why the shift? "For one thing, there is now a widespread consensus that drug eradication in Colombia, long the centerpiece of American narcotics policy has failed" Sweig writes.

It has not only failed, but drugs continue to be central to the Colombian civil war. As long as demand for drugs continue to grow in the USA and Europe, Western addicts will continue to provide an endless supply of revenue to the warlords.

According to Political scientist, Hernando Gomez Buendia, there are 40 million drug addicts in the US and western world. "Yet the US anti drug policy has not changed at all since the 1973 Nixon administration." Raul Reyes says. "Since then the aim has been to destroy the evil at its root and those roots happen to be outside the US borders." As anti-drug czar, Lee Brown said "It is easier to go to the hive than to catch the bees as they fly over the US." Easier and less traumatic for a society used to solving its problems outside the US borders.

However the US government hasn't always had a clear narcotics policy. As Colombian journalist and researcher, Alonso Salazar points out, "the US tolerated heroine traffic in the Golden Triangle in Asia when the funds became handy to fight communist guerrillas in Vietnam and CIA agent, Oliver North, traded with cocaine to finance the activities of the Contras in Nicaragua."

But with millions of drug addicts, the US has

now taken a hard line on drugs and in an effort to eradicate coca production the US sprayed toxic herbicides, known as *Fusarium Oxisporum fungus*, over 500,000 hectares of coca crops. This proved to be disastrous; not only did the fungus destroy the coca, but it also contaminated the land, the water, destroyed food products and caused health damage to residents living near plantations. It is ironic that since fumigation coca production has increased. The spraying has rendered much land unusable, causing hunger and displacement. Since crop substitution failed and no development alternatives were offered, families were forced to migrate to other areas of the Amazons only to plant coca again. According to the *Washington Post*, this year the US has called for 300,000 acres of drug crops to be sprayed, up 30 percent from last year.

But drugs are difficult to fight. It is not only Colombia producing them, they have also returned to Bolivia and Peru and other countries. The UN Narcotics Board states that 12 countries in the world depend on the narcoeconomy and 27 third world countries participate in drug trafficking. According to Gomez Buendia, there are hundreds of laboratories in the US and Europe, and 20 million people make a living from drug trafficking in the US, an industry that generates \$600,000 million per year that circulate in the international financial system. A study conducted by Noam Chomsky found that most of the money, however, remains in the US. It is estimated that only \$4,000 million enter Colombia every year.

The US believes that drug eradication will deprive the armed groups of their power and main funding sources. They have spent more than \$2 billion on Colombia since US Congress first approved funds for the controversial Plan Colombia in 2000. The plan made Colombia the third largest recipient of US foreign "aid" after Israel and Egypt.

In addition to providing helicopters, intelligence and other military assistance, Plan Colombia also includes military training. Congress is about to approve \$439 million for counternarcotics and development; \$35 million to support an anti-kidnapping police effort and \$98 million to train a brigade that would protect the Colombian Occidental pipeline, in the department of Arauca, which ELN attacks periodically.

Some of the additional funds such as the \$625m Andean Regional Initiative programs can now be

used on war, mainly to strengthen the army.

The US congress has been supportive of President Bush's requests, but critics question his new definition of Colombia civil war as a "terrorist battle", since neither the FARC nor the ELN pose a direct risk to the US.

### THE QUEST FOR PEACE

Like Uribe, former Colombian presidents Belisario Betancour and Andres Pastrana led a brave and lonely effort to find a peaceful solution for Colombia. In 1999, in a gesture of good will Pastrana granted the FARC a safe haven, known as *Zona de Despeje*, and sought assistance from the US for Plan Colombia to address the most pressing challenges (development, judicial reform and coca eradication). Pastrana also requested US support for the peace process, but when the FARC killed three North American nationals they decided not to participate.

An independent commission presented a report to both parties with proposals to agree to a truce, to combat paramilitary forces, and put an end to kidnappings, but talks stalled as government rejected FARC demands. "I repeatedly asked the FARC to define who they are," Pastrana wrote. "The FARC's political wing could not sit at the peace table, while its terrorist wing waged war against Colombian society. They are not interested in peace." He concluded, "peace would do away with their lucrative drug and kidnapping business."

Negotiations have been difficult because of the mutual distrust both parties have of each other. This is particularly the case after 5,000 people linked with FARC through the Patriotic Union were killed by government death squads during the peace efforts of the 1980s, when the FARC announced its intentions to participate in democratic politics.

Pastrana did not seem to have a clear and defined negotiation strategy, did not launch into any serious reform, and neither did he confront the paramilitaries. However, through a well orchestrated diplomatic effort, he did manage to revitalise US engagement with Colombia that led to a \$1.3 billion program that, according to Julia Sweig, was hastily drawn up in English on the back of a napkin on an airplane.

Saving the country from collapse will require Uribe to reinvent Colombia and embark on a

radical reconstruction of the country. Colombia has lost control of half of its territory, forty thousand illegal armed combatants are constantly challenging the social order and government legitimacy has been eroded due to its inability to crush the insurgency or address the country's social problems. The justice system is in shambles and so exposed to bribery and intimidation that a high percent of crimes are never prosecuted.

The 52,000 professional soldiers that constitute the Colombian army need to be expanded and conscription laws changed. At the moment only young men without high school certificates are obliged to join the army.

Early in his presidency Uribe declared a state of emergency, imposed a new tax on wealthy citizens to help finance the armed forces and launched a Civilian Spies Network. In an effort to deprive the guerrillas of the civilian support they need for supplies, intelligence and logistics, he declared special combat zones in several parts of the country and obliged rural residents of war zones to have travel permits.

"His strategy may be politically appealing," writes Sweig, "but his plan fails to address the deeper, crippling social and political causes of Colombia's civil conflict." Human rights organisations argue that these new measures will be carried out at the expenses of fundamental civil rights.

The most controversial of all these initiatives is the Civilian Spies Network, aimed to assist the under funded intelligence services. Informants will be provided with a mobile phone and will only be paid for tips that lead to arrests or other tangible successes. The guerrilla has already labeled the civilian spies "a network of snitches" meaning that those whose anonymity is compromised can expect to die.

The Network will inevitably drag civilians into the conflict and may lead to an increase in violence. Uribe invented a similar initiative while he was the governor of Antioquia where he helped create the Civil Defence Units to offer protection to civilians in conflict areas where the police never intervened. The units arbitrated local disputes and administered justice as they saw fit. Unfortunately, most of these units began taking the law into their own hands and ended up becoming murderous paramilitaries.

Both the civil defense units and the civilian spy network are controversial simply because civilians are compelled to shoulder responsibilities that

belong to the state, leaving them exposed and endangering their lives.

So far Uribe has not requested military assistance in the form of troops from any country. However last July, the Brazilian newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*, revealed plans to create a UN multinational military force to fight Colombia's guerrilla groups. Citing the Brazilian Defense Ministry and comments made by Chilean army colonel, Jose Miguel Pizarro, the *Jornal do Brasil* claimed that Chile's war academy has been studying a plan since January that calls for 2,600 troops from the US, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador and Peru to intervene in Colombia's conflict, under the auspices of the UN. Pizarro claims that the intervention could take place in January 2004, after Uribe's military offensive has placed the country's leftist rebels on the defensive.

According to the *Washington Post*, the US has also lobbied unsuccessfully the Organisation of American States to establish requirements that call on the regional body to create a multinational force to intervene wherever democracy is threatened. Last November, Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld revealed plans for a new US proposal for closer coordination between the US, Canada and Latin America in the war on terrorism. "I am not here to press Latin American countries to do anything," Rumsfeld said at a news conference. "It is up to each country to do what they want to do." Some Latin American governments however may be skeptical about Washington's motives.

## NEGOTIATING CHANGE

It is unlikely the conflict will be resolved by military means. Defending and rebuilding the Colombian State will require at least a decade long commitment of major diplomatic effort, a massive investment in economic development, humanitarian assistance, as well as a commitment for social and political reform. All these initiatives will mean high financial and political costs that no Colombian government has ever been prepared to assume. Neither have the wealthy and powerful classes been prepared to make any sacrifices. Tax collection up until now only constitutes about 10 percent of the GDP and the defense budget averages 1.35 percent, lower than other countries in conflict in Latin America. The question is how far is the Colombian ruling class prepared to compromise for the sake of peace?

Uribe has announced that he wants to negotiate and has even asked for UN mediation,

however he has narrowed the negotiation agenda to disarmament and re-incorporation of the rebels into Colombian society, terms the FARC will probably reject. The FARC has repeatedly said that both the liberals and conservatives in Colombia have a history of refusing to share political space with anyone else, and, until a change takes place in the political culture negotiations will fail. They said they will begin talks after government troops leave the departments of Caqueta and Putumayo and social and political reforms are included in the agenda. However, the FARC objects to any negotiation between the government and the paramilitaries, since no political status was ever granted to the AUC. This complicates things even further for the government since the AUC has become a powerful force that command 30 percent of support in the Colombian congress.

Before negotiations begin it is imperative that the government provides permanent security throughout the country. At the moment civilians in war zones are facing increasing levels of violence and human rights abuses by all parties of the conflict. According to Peter Romero from the *Washington Post*, clashes between guerrillas and paramilitaries are rare. "More often than not, both groups move into villages and towns and through informers, seize and execute real or imagined supporters of the opposition ...Violence by one group becomes a powerful recruitment poster for the other." A humanitarian agreement to keep the civilian population out of the war is needed urgently and needs to be an essential ingredient of any negotiation.

Unless some sort of compromise is reached between all parties soon, it is likely the war will escalate in the coming years. At present the Colombian state would need vast amounts of resources to provide a minimum security throughout the country. Counterinsurgency specialists in the US have stated that to eliminate or weaken rebel groups, the government should be able to provide about 10 soldiers for each guerrilla. This is impossible to carry out with the 52,000 professional soldiers that constitute the Colombian army, therefore vast resources would be needed to increase it and, most importantly, to make the necessary social reforms that will lead to peace.

Although until the late 1990s Colombia had one of the highest growth rates in the region, Uribe has warned that it could move into significant deficit this year. Since he came to power he has

made considerable efforts to raise revenue. He is expected to raise \$800 million through the new tax imposed on rich citizens. The passing of the Andean Trades Preferences Act could potentially lead to development and employment creation and, the Cano Limon oil pipe protection proposal could also generate \$430 million in oil revenue for the government.

Julia Sweig suggests that Uribe could in fact seize the opportunity to enforce the Asset Forfeiture Laws, passed by the government of former President Ernesto Samper, which could allow the government to seize millions of acres in fertile agricultural land from drug lords who purchased them in recent years. "This would allow Uribe to implement a desperately needed land reform." She writes.

It will be difficult to solve Colombia's crisis without the cooperation of its neighbours. One of the failures of Plan Colombia was not to involve Latin American governments in its development. At the moment the borders with Brazil, Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador and Peru are vulnerable areas where weapons smuggling, violence, kidnapping and lawlessness are pervasive. Uribe might need to involve regional governments in his peace efforts since the spillover of the conflict has in fact extended to neighbouring countries and may soon be affecting the entire Andean and Amazonian region.

One of Uribe's characteristics as a leader is his determination to face the challenges: "We will die if we must, but we have to recover peace," he said in introducing his plan. "If we don't act with enthusiasm and energy, we just will not succeed." In his speech delivered during his inauguration as President he made reference to Francisco de Paula Santander and Simon Bolivar, the two founding fathers of the Colombian nation. He described their struggle against colonial domination and their attempts to build a nation based on freedom, unity, equity and social justice. Ironically Bolivar did not live to see his dream come true. At the end of his life, he abandoned his presidency physically ill and worn out by power struggles. He had lived long enough to see the complete disruption of his vision and to utter one final cry of despair: "He who serves the revolution ploughs the sea."

Let us hope that a different fate will await Alvaro Uribe. ■