American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research

March 2004

Latin American Outlook

Facing Up to the Conflict in Colombia

By Mark Falcoff

Anyone who follows the Latin American news—even out of the corner of one eye—must be aware of the fact that Colombia, one of South America's largest and most strategically and economically important nations, has been bogged down for more than a decade in a seemingly intractable civil conflict. The term "civil war" is a misnomer in this case, to the extent that it suggests that roughly equal forces are confronting one another. The Colombian case is less dramatic than this but far more complex. On one hand there is the Colombian state and most ordinary citizens—some 40 million of them; on the other, two guerrilla groups, the most important of which, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), can count on roughly 17,000 armed militants. The failure of the Colombian state to provide basic security from the guerrillas, particularly in rural areas, led during the last two decades to the more or less spontaneous creation of the so-called Autonomous Defense Forces—paramilitary forces, or "paras," for short—whose ranks today number 13,000. While the FARC and other self-styled guerrilla formations claim to be fighting for a Marxist revolutionary project, their ideology is largely decorative. In fact they are thugs for whom violence is a way of life and has been for many years. They specialize in kidnappings and murders. The FARC alone has kidnapped more than a thousand people—politicians (including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt), soldiers, and police, presumably to win release of about five hundred militants captured by government forces. What makes the FARC an enduring phenomenon is not that it enjoys much popular support, but that, because it engages in drug trafficking on a monumental scale, it is perhaps the most economically self-sufficient insurgency in the history of Latin America.

Mark Falcoff is a resident scholar at AEI.

Approaches to the Conflict

One important school of thinking holds that the current Colombian crisis is largely, if not entirely, the product of age-old social injustices. From this premise it follows that once inequalities in Colombian society are eliminated or at least significantly ameliorated, the violence will more or less cease automatically. This hypothesis is particularly dear to certain kinds of Europeans, who take the declarations of the guerrillas at face value, or perhaps merely cannot face the possibility that violence can sometimes be met only with counter-violence. This belief has lately inspired the European Union to establish "peace missions" intended to contribute to the dialogue for peace by strengthening the voice of civil society and democratizing local institutions. The first such mission was launched in March 2002 with a generous grant of 43 million euros. The second was activated last December with another 33 million euros.

In addition to strengthening civil society, these peace missions are supposed to generate alternative development strategies and address deficiencies in health, education, water resources, and waste disposal. While no doubt all of these projects are valuable and praiseworthy, it is far from obvious that the deficiencies they seek to remedy have anything at all to do with the genesis or development of the guerrilla movement. Again, one can hardly fault the European Union for wanting to contribute to

Colombian development, but if one accepts the basic premise that inspires the project in the first place—namely, that the conflict is "about" poverty and inequality rather than a raw quest for political power—given the sheer size and complexity of Colombia, this approach might well absorb the totality of the European Union's aid budget for the entire Latin American continent for many years to come.

Yet another school of thinking claims that the guerrillas are tired of fighting and want to negotiate a peace agreement. If they have failed to do so, its advocates suggest, it is because the government has not provided sufficient guarantees for them to lay down their arms. While the latter is arguably true—given the anomic nature of violence in Colombia, the scores waiting to be settled, and the inability of the government to control all of the elements of civil society that are currently armed—the former is plainly preposterous. The guerrillas have no incentive to demobilize, since they have achieved remarkable success for their limited objectives, which are to confuse and divide international opinion about Colombia, to enrich their coffers through ransom money and drug trafficking, and to keep the forces of order perpetually off balance. Through their links to various human rights organizations (about which more below), they have also done a fair job of making it difficult for Colombia's friends, particularly the United States, to provide sufficient security assistance to permit the government forces to prevail quickly and decisively.

It is not as if the "peace process" approach has not been given a chance. It was attempted during the last decade under the presidency of Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) without success. By the end of his term, the guerrillas had made several celebrity trips to Europe and taken over roughly 40 percent of the national territory, but peace was no closer than it had been five years before. More than anything else, it explains why Colombians elected Alvaro Uribe (habitually referred to as a "hard-liner") as Pastrana's successor.

The strategy of President Uribe is largely military. He regards the guerrilla problem as a police and security question and has proceeded accordingly. So far the results are impressive; killings and kidnappings are down, some highways have reopened, and a few high-ranking guerrilla leaders have been captured. The president's approach currently enjoys the overwhelming support of the Colombian population, but his agenda has inspired a torrent of criticism from Europeans and from human rights groups. Both are particularly unhappy with Uribe's plans to amnesty the paramilitary groups if they lay down their arms, which they have agreed to do by 2005.

One indicator among many that the security situation has improved has been the sudden emigration of Venezuelan professionals and skilled workers to Colombia, fleeing the disastrous economic policies of President Hugo Chávez. (Ironically, in spite of Colombia's security problems, Venezuela's deepening economic and political crisis has also encouraged several important multinational companies, including Microsoft, Polar breweries, and Bayer pharmaceuticals, to concentrate their operations there rather than in Venezuela.) Another is an upturn in basic economic indicators: private investment rose by 17 percent last year; exports increased by nearly 8 percent, and the country's overall economic growth reached nearly 4 percent, almost double the previous estimate. Anne Krueger of the International Monetary Fund, for one, holds that the current Colombian government has made "commendable progress in carrying out a strong economic reform program aimed at faster economic growth and improved social equity" (*M2 Presswire,* January 13, 2004). There seems to be a direct link between improved security, improved economic performance, even—dare one say it?—improved social equity. It would be surprising if there were not. Colombia's moderately successful economic performance underscores an important truth: if civil peace could be restored, the country would undoubtedly be at least as successful as Chile.

Human Rights Concerns

None of this seems to make much difference to many sectors of the international human rights community, for which Colombia is a lush garden of horrors to be lovingly explored (and exploited). This is not to underestimate the humanitarian crisis through which the country is passing. By their very nature, wars are destructive of human life and economic infrastructure. In the case of Colombia, in recent years more than two million people have been displaced from their homes, the largest such population in the world after Sudan and Angola. Most are Afro-Colombians or Indians who are now beyond the reach of all public services; some 250,000 alone have fled toward the Ecuadorian frontier. Another 300,000 have left Colombia altogether—to Venezuela, the United States, or elsewhere.

The central point of controversy is not, however, the refugee issue but rather differences over what is happening in remote towns and villages where the war against the

FARC and its allies is taking place. Many human rights organizations regard the Colombian government as insufficiently concerned with punishing abuses committed by its own armed forces, as well as complicit in those committed by the paramilitary forces. To this end they are lobbying intensively in Europe and the United States to limit, restrict, or eliminate security assistance to Colombia, at least until it prosecutes paramilitaries and ends what it regards as impunity for military officers who fail to observe humanitarian guidelines. President Uribe has a radically different view: he regards many of his critics as "cowards" when not indeed "terrorist sympathizers."

It is difficult if not impossible for outsiders to evaluate charges about events that have taken place (or alleged to have taken place) in distant and remote locales, all the more so when both sides are brandishing statistics to justify their policy objectives. However, a recent analysis by the U.S. embassy in Bogotá strongly suggests that many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in Colombia employ a methodology that automatically weighs against the local government and cuts excessive slack to the rebels. Much of the problem turns on definitions.

For example, one of the major Catholic-affiliated groups, which goes by its initials, CINEP, claims that there was a sensational 400 percent increase in the number of arbitrary detentions during the first nine months of the Uribe presidency, but "arbitrary" includes "legally authorized arrests of protesters occupying state property, detentions of suspicious persons during urban combat operations, and warrant-based arrests of civic activists and union leaders suspected of supporting guerrillas." Indeed, the embassy points out, many NGOs regard *all* detentions carried out by military forces in areas reclaimed from the guerrillas to be illegitimate, in spite of the fact that such detentions "were authorized by law and, unless outstanding arrest warrants were discovered, usually lasted a maximum of 36 hours."

More disturbing still has been the tendency of many groups to consider as "human rights violations" *only* those abuses committed by state-sponsored actors, which here would include not merely the military but rather gratuitously all of those committed by the paramilitary forces as well. The embassy concedes that the government of Colombia may underreport violations (though the more serious ones are more likely to be reported). On the other hand, the NGOs "undoubtedly overreport violations, since they rely heavily on unsubstantiated claims that may be subject to manipulation." For example, the Colombian Commission of Jurists, another NGO, "defines deaths of combatants in hostilities as human rights violations" *prima facie*. They may indeed be, but surely not in every case. By this definition, rather conveniently, the number of violations between July 1, 2002, and June 30, 2003, doubled. Perhaps not coincidentally, this same period brackets the recapture of territories willingly conceded in the 1990s to the guerrillas by President Pastrana in the vain hope that they would come to the negotiating table.

To be sure, many NGOs operating in Colombia may well make a contribution of sorts in spite of themselves. They force the government to take human rights seriously—and to the extent that this happens, it deprives the guerrillas of fresh grievances upon which to draw popular support. If the government can do a better job of subduing the guerrillas, the rationale for the existence of the paramilitaries will disappear. Finally, to the extent that they succeed in restraining the United States from taking a more central role in the conflict, the NGOs give the lie to the guerrilla's claim that their war is against American "imperialism" rather than against an elected civilian government.

What Foreigners Can Do

Colombia has been troubled by political violence for more than fifty years. In the 1940s and 1950s the conflict more nearly resembled a civil war than it does today, with partisans on each side brandishing the banners of the country's two major political parties—as caricatured, for example, by Gabriel García Márquez in his internationally acclaimed novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The present situation is also different in its international dimensions. Both figuratively and geographically, Colombia is a crossing point for drugs, terrorism, gunrunning, and international criminality. The United States and Colombia's neighbors, and even some of the major European countries, have a strong interest in the restoration of order and the strengthening of legality there—as well as the serious respect for human rights in the midst of conflict. Colombia's success in this regard does not depend entirely, or perhaps even significantly, on outside assistance, though such assistance would doubtless be welcomed. The greatest contribution foreigners can make is to grasp the essentials of the situation on the ground and be on their guard against ideological special pleading.