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# Colombia: Conflict and Civil-Military Relations

## *Strategic Insights*, Volume II, Issue 3 (March 2003)

by [Thomas C. Bruneau](#)

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### Introduction

One year after the formal end of the failed peace process which had been initiated by President Andres Pastrana in 1998, it is possible to "take stock" of the situation of conflict in Colombia and the prospects for the future. The government of President Alvaro Uribe, who took office on August 7, 2002, is seeking to end the conflict by fighting the terrorists to force them to negotiate. To reach this point required serious modifications in domestic and international politics. Pursuing this strategy will require ongoing changes in domestic politics, including in Colombian civil-military relations.

### Violence and War on Many Fronts

While terrorism is clearly the greatest threat to Colombia, it is but the most serious manifestation of a general situation of violence, social and economic deterioration, and absence of the state in much of the country. Before citing some of the gory data, let me put a personal touch to this reality. The author participated with other Center for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR) colleagues in a seminar in October 2002 on the topic of national security and military strategy which was held at the Tequendama Hotel in downtown Bogota. In December the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) exploded two bombs at this hotel, but luckily with relatively modest results. The author, again with a CCMR team, while participating in a conference on the topic of national security in July 2002, went to dinner at the El Nogal club in Bogota. On 7 February, the day after the author departed from Bogota on the most recent CCMR trip, FARC set off a car bomb in the club's garage that killed 32 and injured 168. These relatively close brushes with terrorism are not exceptional; CCMR is not constituted of thrill seekers. It is just the way it is in Colombia today—it should be noted that Bogota is safer than most other Colombian cities, let alone the rural areas.

I think the most balanced and objective document summarizing the current situation of violence and other pathologies is President Uribe government's so far unpublished National Security Strategy (*La Seguridad de la Solidaridad: Politica de Defensa y Seguridad Democratica* Bogota February 2003). Following are some of the data the document presents. In 2001, more than 2000 unarmed civilians were assassinated by terrorists (1060 by the guerrillas of the National Liberation Army [ELN] and FARC and 1028 by the paramilitaries.) In the same year 200,000 civilians were forced from their land due to threats and terrorism. In the first nine months of 2002, 121 politicians or public officials were assassinated, more than 500 mayors threatened with death, and many have been forced to leave their towns thereby losing contact with their constituents.

The terrorists have also focused on Colombia's infrastructure. Many roads, even between major towns, are unsafe due to guerrilla roadblocks. In 2001 the petroleum infrastructure suffered 170 attacks, costing

the country \$520 million. In the last 15 years the oil pipelines have suffered 950 attacks by the ELN and FARC. The electricity infrastructure has also suffered: since 2000, 1178 electric pylons have been destroyed. The drug traffic in Colombia is huge, and helps finance the terrorists of the left and right, and is connected to money laundering and arms traffic. There is, in short, a generalized situation of violence and social pathology.

At his most recent briefing at the U.S. embassy in Bogota the author was informed very persuasively by the regional security officer that Bogota is the homicide capital of the world. The average per year of homicide in Colombia is 25,000. In addition, kidnapping in Colombia is not only a criminal enterprise, but like drug trafficking, is also a tool used by the terrorists. In 2001 more than 2000 Colombians were kidnapped by the guerrillas and the paramilitaries (1923 and 262 respectively.) Kidnapping is used not only for finance but also to intimidate the government in that those kidnapped include 145 political leaders and public officials, among them a presidential candidate (whom the author met during an earlier CCMR seminar), 16 mayors, 27 council members, a governor, and 18 deputies. Five deputies remain captive.

In short, Colombia is a maelstrom of terrorist violence, homicide, kidnapping, drug and arms trafficking, and overall social and economic deterioration. Colombia's violence is abetted by a lack of any government presence in nearly half of Colombian territory. The violence perpetrated by terrorists and by the legitimate use of armed force is but a small part of the total violence within the Colombian society.

### **Governmental Strategies and the Role of the United States**

In line with his campaign platform, when President Andres Pastrana took office in mid-1998 he embarked on a peace process with the ELN and the FARC. President Pastrana received support from the international community, including the U.N., EU, U.S. and other states towards this goal. Unfortunately, not only did the peace process go nowhere, it led to a very unfortunate situation. It was clear, to at least the author from the beginning, that the peace process with the FARC could not succeed. The FARC had absolutely nothing to gain from serious peace negotiations. While at their founding in the 1960s they may have had some element of ideology, by the 1990s and the end of the Cold War nothing remained but seeking for power and survival. There was nothing the Pastrana government could give them that they did not already have.

In my view, the Pastrana government wasted four years, and maybe most serious, the ill-conceived peace process resulted in the growth of the paramilitaries. Since the state's security forces—the armed forces and the national police—were either not present or not allowed to deal with the guerrillas, paramilitary organizations grew as something like illegal vigilante bands to fill the vacuum. Ultimately they too came to depend on funding from the drug traffic and kidnapping. Much of the violence over the past three years or so has been due to battles for towns, transit routes, and supporters among the guerrillas and the paramilitaries. In the process, this total of approximately 25,000 terrorists, with something like 5% public support, has been able to hold Colombia, with a population of 42 million and armed forces and national police totaling 290,000, at ransom.

Near the end of the Clinton Administration the U.S. government agreed to support what came to be called Plan Colombia. In line with this plan, the United States would provide \$1.3 billion over two years in security assistance and development aid, the latter to include support for alternative crops and social assistance. This was a very polemic issue in the United States, both among the interested public and in the Congress, as the specter of "another Viet Nam" was continually raised. Consequently, legislation required that the security assistance could be used only in counter-drug training and equipment, and not for counter-terrorism. This was obviously not a sustainable distinction, and could be understood only in terms of the dynamics of U.S. domestic politics.

## **The Election of Alvaro Uribe and New U.S. Government Policies**

By early 2002 it was obvious to all that the peace process was going nowhere. The ELN and FARC upped the pace of attacks on the security forces, blew up oil and electricity infrastructure, kidnapped public officials including deputies and a presidential candidate, and killed hundreds of unarmed civilians who were unfortunate enough to be caught in the crossfire with the paramilitaries. In this context, a political outsider, Alvaro Uribe, running on a law and order platform, captured the public imagination and rode to victory in an unheard of first round election in May 2002. There was, in short, a major political shift due to the population's awareness that peace could not come through negotiations prior to a serious struggle with the terrorists. The Bush Administration and the U.S. Congress, in the vastly different context of post- September 11, was also ready for a change. Consequently, in mid-2002 the Congress approved the so-called "expanded authorities" whereby U.S. supplied training and equipment could be used not only in counter-drug efforts but also counter-terrorism. The relations with the United States have continued to strengthen with frequent meetings between Colombia and U.S. officials including President Uribe visiting President Bush in Washington twice and Secretary of State Colin Powell visiting Bogota in early December 2002. The President's budget for 2004 includes some \$565 million for Colombia, and the negotiations to resume the air bridge denial, suspended since April 2001, were completed in early February of this year. The United States is also now providing training and other support to guard the major petroleum pipeline, which is indicative of the expanded U.S. involvement and support for the Uribe government.

## **The Uribe Government's Strategy and Civil-Military Relations**

It must be emphasized that Colombia is a democracy and has been since at least 1958. Consequently, the military does not determine policy in Colombia. However, for at least four decades the civilian politicians have left the whole area of security to the public security forces. The armed forces have traditionally been trained, equipped, and oriented towards traditional territorial defense; and not towards fighting guerrillas. During the Pastrana administration the situation was particularly complicated since the armed forces could not initiate actions against the guerrillas in certain regions. Consequently, as noted above, the paramilitaries emerged to fill a vacuum left by the public security forces.

Today the Uribe government sees the biggest problem in Colombia as the complete absence of the state in huge areas of the country, and a shortage of state legitimacy due to the state's lack of response to armed insurgents as well as common criminals. To achieve what the government refers to as effective sovereignty and democratic security, they have elaborated the first-ever national security strategy. To achieve their goals they have set a series of tasks which include: strengthening the military and police forces, reform of the conscription service, strengthening the intelligence system, promoting civilian cooperation, destroying the logistic and financial systems of the terrorists, and protection of the economic infrastructure.

Through its national security strategy the Uribe government seeks to establish the presence and legitimacy of the state. That is, it is working on the effectiveness of the state by identifying solutions to the multiple problems of Colombia. Uribe's administration is seeking to be effective by actually implementing these plans. It is doing this through aggressively pushing for constitutional reforms that will diminish the size of congress, free up resources to fight the war, and eliminate some legal restrictions on state actions. These reforms are being pursued in a democratic manner, which also seeks to increase the legitimacy of the state. To implement the security dimensions in particular the public security forces will be expanded to 390,000 over 18 months. The government plans to increase the defense budget by 25%, and is finding the money by drastically cutting back on government spending in other areas.

The government is discovering that it is not easy to change strategies, to in fact make legal changes and aggressively fight the terrorists. President Pastrana attempted legal reforms, including in the security and defense arena, and was not successful. It remains to be seen if the Uribe government will be more

successful in holding a referendum, and winning it, by mid-2003. The arena of civil-military relations is complicated. As noted above, while Colombia is a democracy, in fact the civilians have left all issues of national security to the armed forces and the police. Today, in seeking to actively pursue the fight against the guerrillas, the Uribe government is encountering some passive resistance from the military in regard to reforms in civil-military relations. So far, however, relying on U.S. support, and developing momentum, the government has been reasonably successful in pursuing its strategy of military reform and fighting the guerrillas.

### **The Immediate Future**

Today, six months into his four year term of office, the Uribe administration has taken the initiative politically and militarily. Already, in late January, the government began negotiations with the paramilitaries. It seems likely that the government will also negotiate with the relatively isolated and weak ELN. If these negotiations are successful, then the government can direct greater attention to the FARC. The problem is, the FARC knows that this is a do or die situation and will put all of its efforts into stopping the government's momentum. They know that the U.S. government is committed to Uribe, and that the Europeans are less ingenuous than previously regarding the value of negotiations. The FARC will, therefore, do everything it can to stop President Uribe and those around him to halt the momentum. Indeed, they prepared a major attack on him at the time of his inauguration on August 7, 2002, but most of the rockets did not ignite. The FARC has received training in urban terrorism from foreigners, including the IRA. The recent El Nopal bombing is precisely the kind of attack through which they probably plan to stop, through death or intimidation, Uribe and his government. Obviously, a government is more than one man. But the big question is: could the programs and strategy of the Uribe government persist without the leadership of Uribe himself? It took this long before a politician understood what was involved in the Colombian conundrum, and was elected by the people to deal with it. This is an extremely critical time in Colombian history. The state will either successfully assert its sovereignty over the country, and continue to consolidate democracy in all areas including civil-military relations, or the sad litany of terrorism and homicide will continue.

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