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Colombia: 35 Years and Still Struggling

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Colombia: 35 Years and Still Struggling

The civil wars in Colombia have caused the deaths and disappearances of many innocent victims. Guerrillas, insurgent groups and paramilitaries are all fighting to find peace, yet peace seems far away.

by Jenny Lange, MAIC

"I was nine when it happened. I worked with Papi in the fields. We had just cut down a vine to weave a basket when my friend stepped on a mine. He died, and the mine opened my stomach. My Papa wrapped a towel around my stomach. I must have been unconscious because I have no memory of that. He told me about it at the hospital after I had had surgery." A young Colombian boy remembers his traumatic encounter with a landmine in Colombia. Encounters like these happen too often in Colombia, due to civil war. Landmines have been used by all fighting groups in Colombia to devastating effect. Theguerrilla fighters and paramilitaries. The exact amount of landmines is unknown; some estimate over 80,000. The placement of the landmines is also unknown, yet they continue to take the lives of many innocent victims. In many areas, farmers would rather leave their crops to be lost than to walk to school and gain an education. The civil war in Colombia has been devastating and long, and the end is not in sight.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, Colombia suffered three major periods of conflict. The first, la violencia, was a result of a divided political system and involved a protracted but limited civil war. The second was the "war" against the Colombian state launched by Pablo Escobar of the Medellín cartel and other various drug traffickers. The third, and possibly the most dangerous eruption of violence, involves around the current insurgencies, especially that of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Many contemporary news accounts label the conflict a "thirty-five year old civil war," basing its origin on the official formation of several guerrilla groups in the mid-1960's. However, the roots of the principal guerrilla group, the FARC, date back to the peasant armed self-defense movements formed between 1948 and 1958 during the period of la violencia. The FARC and other guerrilla groups have been known to use landmines as a principle source of terrorism and continue to use the mines today against many innocent civilians, harming lives, education and the economy in its tracks.

La Violencia

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Colombian politics was dominated by the Liberal and Conservative parties. The Liberal Party, led by Simón Bolívar, fought against the Conservative Party, led by those who favored the Spanish monarchy. The war continued on and off until 1903, when the Conservatives were able to defeat the Liberals and install a new government.

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Conservative parties whose influence was felt throughout the whole country. Differences in ideology between the Liberal and Conservative elite echoed throughout Colombians society, many times resulting in outbreaks of violence that placed the Liberal and National parties against each other. Conservative candidate Laureano Gomez won the presidential election in 1950, after two high-ranking members of the Liberal party were assassinated in 1949. Gomez considered Liberal military offensive against the peasant Liberals, known as the War of Villarica. It was during this offensive that the armed self-defense movements formed, later to be known as the FARC.

**The FARC, Guerrillas and Cocaine**

FARC is the most powerful guerrilla group in Latin America comprised of 17,000 members, which is more than the Colombian government, and is accountable for numerous deaths. It is the only guerrilla group with peasant roots that pre-date both the National Front and the Cuban Revolution. Other guerrilla groups, such as the Popular Army of Liberation (EPL) and the Army for National Liberation (ELN), were all movements led by urban intellectuals. Initially, the FARC was concerned with the socio-economic issues of peasantry and poverty, but it is believed that the traditional insurgent group has grown into a traditional criminal or drug trafficking organization.

Naturally, the FARC leadership denies all involvement in drug trafficking. Yet their strategies are known between the drug traffickers and FARC guerrillas. The most prevalent relationship is one in which the FARC utilises the drug trafficking business, providing protection in return for money or payment in cocaine. Yet, others argue that FARC is not only involved in protection of drug cultivation areas and laboratories, but includes the transportation of drugs and chemical precursors and in some cases, direct control of cocaine producing laboratories. Rand Beers, Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, argues that the FARC and the ELN, the other major insurgent group, “are receiving pure cocaine in payment for services provided to the drug traffic, and reselling it” to Brazilian criminal organizations in return for armaments. Evidence has shown that the FARC is attempting to wield its base of arms suppliers. Despite an estimated annual income of $500 million (U.S.), FARC purchases significant amounts of weapons with cocaine, FARC leaders say they will continue to use money from illicit drugs, not only cocaine but heroin and marihuana, to finance their escalating war.

Half of Colombia’s territory is now controlled by the Marxist guerrilla in league with cocaine growers and drug traffickers. This controlled territory is spilling over into neighboring countries with reports of guerrilla incursions into Venezuela, Panama and Ecuador, as well as sightings of coca and poppy plantations in Peru operated by Colombians. These guerrilla groups are guilty of using landmines throughout the country. One reporter visiting Colombia and studying the social strife zone “Coca profiteers fuel Colombia’s war just as surely as extortion and kidnaping. And much of the fighting going on in Colombia is no more than a struggle over who gets to control the money flow.”

**The Threat of Landmines**

Nearly all major guerrilla groups have publicly acknowledged that they not only use but also manufacture AP mines. The Colombian Armed Forces have identified and denounced the production of AP mines by Colombian guerrilla groups. Most of these mines are homemade, using cheap and easy to find materials. According to the Colombian Army’s Press Agency, in the past few years there has been an increase in the use of homemade antivehicle mines by guerrilla groups. The antivehicle mines are manufactured with gas, oxygen or refrigerating cylinders.

AP mines are also manufactured and used by cocaine, poppy and marihuana growers to protect illegal drug crops, and to keep the Army and others away from their laboratories and stockrooms. Information collected by the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines (CCBM) indicated that at least 135 of Colombia’s 1,650 municipalities are mine-affected. The 135 municipalities cover a total area of 145,000 square kilometers or 13% of the national territory.

Colombia’s Armed Forces reported that 52 mines placed in San Jose de Samapuy department were discovered on February 28, 2000. The mines were found along village paths, around the school and football field and near the radio transmission station on Granada Mountains.

In November of 2000, two land mines were discovered outside a town hours before a U.S. senator and the U.S. ambassador were scheduled to visit. Though the U.S. officials were not the intended targets, they could have been victims to the mines.

One author reported on the incidence of landmine victims: “In their attacks, guerrillas employ methods that cause avoidable civilian casualties in violation of international humanitarian law, including the use of landmines and gas canister bombs packed with gaspowedder and shrapnel.”

Colombia signed the Mine Ban Treaty on December 3, 2000, but has not yet ratified it. Other attempts to legally control the production and use of landmines have been implemented. Colombia voted in favor of the December 1999 UN General Assembly resolution supporting the Mine Ban Treaty, and participated as an observer in the First Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty in Maputo in May 1999.

**Conclusion**

Some fear that the likely outcome in Colombia is “status quo,” complete with corrupt officials, black marketers, narco-traffickers and of course, the insurgents. The country’s never-ending cycle is far from ending, and the population continues to live in fear. More has to be done for the country besides stopping the drug cartels. The problem’s roots reach back to the 1960s when the conflict began.”

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