THE INTERNAL ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

A REALITY OF IMPRECISE PARAMETERS

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT?

While the Colombian armed conflict is one of the longest in contemporary history, its origin is not universally agreed upon. Some claim that the war originated from the period of violent rivalry between traditional (liberal and conservative) political parties in the 1940s and 50s – in particular, from the assassination of the liberal candidate during the presidential election of 1948. Others argue that the conflict began in earnest during the 1960s when the first Marxist guerilla movements were formed.

Colombia continues to be a country marked by profound inequality. Limited access to resources and to the wealth derived from them contribute to a feeling of alienation in the poorest sectors of Colombian society – notably in rural areas – and help explain the emergence of rebel movements.

WHICH ACTORS ARE INVOLVED?

The conflict is distinguished by the multiplicity of actors involved. Over the course of time, state security forces including the army and police, several guerilla movements, so-called “self-defence” paramilitary groups, and criminal gangs involved in various trafficking operations (notably drugs, weapons, and persons) have all been in opposition to each other. Also implicated are these groups’ backers from the political and economic elites, whose support has aggravated and prolonged the conflict. The relationships between actors are further complicated by the mutable alliances which they periodically form.
03. WHEN WERE THE FARC FORMED?

The formation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the People of Colombia (known by their Spanish acronym of FARC-EP) is said to have been prompted by the events of 1964, when the regular armed forces launched their first major offensive against the autonomous zones which communist militants had seized from the state. The repressiveness of the army during this operation convinced many militants of the necessity of armed resistance. The FARC-EP was only formally founded in 1966, however.

04. ARE THE FARC THE SOLE REBEL GROUP IN COLOMBIA?

The FARC-EP are not the sole rebel group in Colombia. The National Liberation Army (ELN), which was also founded in the 1960s, remains active today in spite of having announced its intent to initiate peace talks with the government. There is a precedent of guerilla movements laying down their arms in favour of peace talks. For example, the Movement of April 19th (M-19) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) formally demobilized in 1990 under the auspices of the process which gave rise to the Constituent Assembly and the adoption of the Constitution in 1991 (which is still in place today). The FARC-EP is nevertheless the most powerful and organized insurgent group to lay down its arms.

05. WHO ARE THE PARAMILITARY FORCES?

The paramilitary forces are armed groups of civilians who were originally created by governmental decree in 1965 to aid the Colombian military in its counter-insurgency operations. Throughout the 1980s, the so-called “self-defence” groups grew increasingly powerful and began trafficking operations as well as extorting civilian populations accused of supporting guerillas.

The paramilitary phenomenon reached its peak at the turn of the century, when nearly all active units across the country were affiliated with the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC).

Paramilitary groups are responsible for the majority of serious human rights violations committed during the armed conflict. Several members of the police, the army, and the political establishment collaborated with paramilitary groups or permitted the violations to take place.

The Justice and Peace Law was adopted in 2005 under former President Alvaro Uribe’s framework of paramilitary demobilisation. The Law called on paramilitary members responsible for human rights violations to acknowledge their culpability and to contribute to the truth and paramilitary demobilisation processes in exchange for reduced sentences.

The past few years have seen an emergence of criminal drug trafficking gangs whose zones of operation correspond in large part with those of the AUC before its formal demobilisation. These gangs, which have perpetrated several attacks against human rights advocates, are widely considered to be comprised of former paramilitary members and leadership.
What are the armed conflict’s repercussions with regard to human rights?

For more than 50 years the Colombian armed conflict has caused a multitude of serious human rights violations which have affected millions of victims in various ways and which remain largely unpunished. Civilian populations - particularly in rural areas - are the most affected by the conflict which has lead to the death of over 200,000 people, of which 80% were civilians.

265,708 people murdered
Thousands of massacres of numerous victims
Over 46,000 cases of forced disappearance
6,827,447 displaced persons
Over 28,000 victims of kidnapping
10,964 killed or injured by anti-personnel mines
14,847 victims of sexual violence
7,964 forcibly-recruited minors
Over 9,800 cases of torture

*Sources: The National Centre of Historical Memory and the Victim Registry

The conflict is characterised by a significant regional disparity, having mostly been contested in rural areas. Cities absorbed millions of displaced persons and were the scenes of other types of violence. These repeated violations place civilian populations in situations of vulnerability and force them to search for refuge elsewhere. Colombia has the highest number of refugees of any Latin American country, and at more than 6 million people, the highest number of internally displaced persons in the world.