

Colombia's best hope



While guerrillas and paramilitaries grab global attention, ordinary people are taking peace into their own hands

By Adrienne Wiebe and Bonnie Klassen

Colombia has the dubious distinction of being the only country in the Americas identified by the Project Ploughshares *Armed Conflicts Report* for 2010¹ as experiencing armed conflict. For over 50 years, this country of rugged mountain ranges and tropical lowlands has suffered from a complex, and seemingly perpetual, internal armed conflict.

The key players in this multifaceted armed conflict are the state and its military apparatus, various left-wing guerrilla

groups, drug cartels, right-wing paramilitary groups, the U.S. government, and international corporations with strategic economic interests in Colombia. According to Nelson Berrio,² a Colombian peace and human rights activist, although drug trafficking was not a root cause of the armed conflict, it is now a critical factor: “The money produced by drug-trafficking in Colombia is what continues to feed the players in this conflict: the government, military, guerrillas, and paramilitary.”

The guerrilla movements reached a peak of strength and popular support in

ABOVE: Indigenous children from the Embera people, displaced by armed conflict, play in Rio Suchio, Colombia.
Mark Garten/UN

the 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, there were several unsuccessful attempts to achieve a negotiated peace between the guerrilla movements and the government. Since then, the strength and popularity of the guerrilla groups have declined rapidly, largely because the general population is disillusioned with the unending violence and instability and by the guerrillas' use of kidnapping and drug trafficking to finance their operations.

The administration of President Uribe (2002-2010) rejected any possibility of a negotiated peace and, with U.S. support, undertook to overcome the guerrillas militarily. The strategy has had some success in terms of decreasing the strength of the insurgents and the territory they control, although the price has been extremely high in terms of displaced people, deaths, and cost. President Juan Manuel Santos, the former Defence Minister, was elected in June 2010, and has continued the previous government's goal of military victory over the guerrilla forces.

The biggest losers are 45 million ordinary citizens, rural communities, and the environment. But it is with the ordinary citizens, the "losers," that the best hopes and possibilities for peace in Colombia are emerging.

Colombia has been the focus of U.S. attention in Latin America for the past several decades. Initiated in 1999, the infamous Plan Colombia originally proposed by Colombian President Pastrana included social aid and institutional reform. However, in negotiations with the U.S., it quickly became essentially a program of counter-narcotics and military aid. In October 2010 the U.S. announced that Plan Colombia would be ending and that a "High-Level Partnership Dialogue" would advance the U.S.-Colombia relationship.

The Canada-Colombia relationship is also in transition. Until last year, Canada

was a significant recipient of refugees from Colombia. Now Canada is in the process of signing a free trade agreement with Colombia, implying that peace and democracy have returned to the country, so Canada will no longer be accepting as many refugees. The free trade agreement has led to a rapid increase in Canadian corporate interest in Colombia, mainly in the oil, gas, and mining sectors.

"It is time to confront our history, empower ourselves and search for the mechanisms."

While political and military efforts to end the war in Colombia have been unsuccessful, the potential for highly profitable investment in Colombia is creating international pressure for an end to the armed conflict. In fact, according to a recent news article, the armed conflict has ended, and Colombia is now relatively stable politically and open for business. According to Robert Doyle of Medoro Resources, a gold exploration company operating in Colombia, "the country has become a mecca...for the next big find. A lot of people have discovered that Colombia is a great jurisdiction for mining.... It has a good, clean, democratic government" (Gordon & Rocha 2011).

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2010), Colombia has the largest internally displaced population in the world. CODHES (2010), a nongovernmental monitoring agency, estimates the total number of internally displaced people at 4.9 million,³ or about 10 per cent of the total population of Colombia. Each year, 250,000–350,000 people are displaced from their homes, mostly in rural communities threatened by guerrilla or paramilitary groups (CODHES 2010). Afro-Colombian and indigenous persons



Sewing Dreams of Peace

In an exercise to heal and recover, a group of women in Mampuján, Colombia, calling themselves Women Sewing Dreams of Peace, create textile quilt tapestries that depict the suffering of their community.

Photo: Charlie Geiser

are disproportionately over-represented. Most settle in the larger cities, but between 500,000 and 750,000 Colombians have fled to neighbouring countries, where they are largely invisible and unassisted.

When rural residents abandon their communities because of the violence, a form of “disaster capitalism” occurs. Powerful economic interests convert abandoned land to large-scale agriculture production, such as African palm plantations.

The situation for Colombia’s majority poor has been exacerbated by the decades of armed conflict. According to 2007 data, 16 per cent of Colombians live on less than \$1.25 per day, the international definition of extreme poverty (UNDP 2009, p. 176). Although the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line fell from 60 per cent in 1995 to 45.5 per cent in 2009, income inequality grew in the same period. In fact, Colombia now has one of the highest levels of income inequality in Latin America (World Bank 2010).

The increasing gap between the haves and have-nots is also evident in land tenure. In 1984, 4 per cent of landowners possessed 31 per cent of the land. In 2009, 4 per cent of landowners possessed 70 per cent of the land (World Bank 2010).

Clearly, five decades of violent conflict have created a climate of distrust and fear in Colombia. The social fabric of society

has been critically torn. Communities are fragmented and polarized. Youth feel that they have no future, so they choose to “live well but short lives” and turn to gangs, drug trade, and the armed groups, legal and illegal. The conflict has eliminated much of the social leadership of civilian society. A significant number of widows and women head households. And Colombia continues to have one of the worst human rights records in the world (Amnesty International 2010).

The decades of armed conflict and destruction of communities have created environmental as well as social damage. Fumigation of illicit drug crops has damaged agricultural land, as have chemicals used in growing coca. The shift from small-scale peasant farming to large-scale plantation agriculture, mining, and energy resource development also degrades the land.

Building peace from the ground up

“International attention is on the key players, such as the government, guerrillas, and the paramilitary, but not on the ordinary people,” according to Ricardo Pinzon, Executive Director of MEN-COLDES, the Colombian Mennonite Foundation for Development.⁴ Yet, these ordinary people, involved in countless grassroots actions, may be the best hope for peace.

“A culture of violence has taken root in Colombians,” according to Ricardo Esquivia (2010, pp. 11-12), Director of Sembrandopaz, a community peacebuilding organization in the northern coast region. “In order to ensure that these cycles are not repeated, we have to work to transform this culture of violence into a culture of peace.... Based on this principle, various organizations from different sectors have united and joined forces to build peace from the perspective of transforming a cul-

ture of violence into one that privileges more peaceful and sustainable relations.”

The strategy aims to rebuild the social fabric of communities, creating spaces for dialogue and joint action by bringing together various elements, including Afro-Colombians, indigenous peoples, women, displaced people, farmers, young people, various church groups, teachers, and municipal officials.

“In response, the churches and religious institutions of Colombia have been working to transform the realities of injustice and violence with seeds of hope, justice, and durable peace through different sectors of society at local, regional and national levels,” according to Alejandro Perez, Coordinator of Seed. In this program of Mennonite Central Committee 12 young people from all over the Americas work for two years in reflection, service, and advocacy throughout Colombia.

In October 2010 the UN Development Programme sponsored a Peace Exposition in Bogotá. Over 80 regional initiatives for peace presented their work and were able to exchange experiences, strengthen alliances, and share tools in the work for peace.

Colombians have begun to declare their communities zones of peace. The rural community of San Jose de Apartadó en Antioquia was destroyed by military attacks twice in 1997. With the support of international observers, it has rebuilt itself as a community of peace. The Teusaquillo neighbourhood of Bogotá and the municipality of Soacha have declared themselves “Territories of Peace” (JUSTAPAZ 2009).

Displaced communities are also asserting their rights through the new Victims Law. They are holding President Santos to his promise that people will be able to return to their lands. Ten years ago, when residents of Mampuján were displaced, that part of Colombia was highly con-

flicted. In April and May 2010, official hearings were held with community members and paramilitary leaders. As a result, reparations, including land and financial compensation, were awarded to the community. Unfortunately, reparations have not yet been made (Lester 2010).

Over the past couple of years, the women of Mampuján have been working on their own process of recovery and healing, through the creation of textile quilt tapestries that tell the story of their community and its displacement. These Women Sewing Dreams of Peace (Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz 2010) say, “It is time to confront our history, empower ourselves and search for the mechanisms.... We start by showing that women not only know how to cook, wash, sew, and look good, but we are also smart, prepared to heal others with our best weapons: love and faith.” □



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Notes

1. For more information about the conflict and its background, please see Project Ploughshares *Armed Conflicts Report*. www.ploughshares.ca.
2. Personal interview with Nelson Berrío, Bogotá, October 20, 2010.
3. This figure is cumulative over the last 25 years.
4. Personal interview with Ricardo Pinzon, Bogotá, October 27, 2010.

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