

Colombia *factsheet*

country profile

Population¹

41,662,073

Geography

In South America, bordering Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru

Size

1,138,910 sq km, slightly less than three times the size of Montana

Languages

Spanish; numerous American Indian languages

Religion

Roman Catholic 90%

Ethnic Groups

Mestizo (mixed indigenous and European descent) 58%, White 20%, Mulatto (descendants of former African slaves) 14%, Black 4%, mixed Black-Amerindian 3%, Amerindian 1%

Colombia is among the top 10 oil-producing countries. But despite enormous wealth from mineral and agricultural resources, two-thirds of its population lives in poverty—11 million in extreme poverty—giving Colombia one of the most unequal distributions of wealth and land in the world.² The civil conflict that has raged

for 50 years is deeply rooted in the political, social and economic inequalities prevalent in Colombian society. This violence is the primary cause of one of the most massive civilian displacements in the world, with estimates that nearly 3 million citizens, primarily from rural areas, have been forced from their homes since 1985.³ The conflict has been further fueled by the drug trade, as Colombia produces about 90 percent of the world's cocaine and nearly 70 percent of the heroin consumed in the U.S., making it a major target of U.S. counter-narcotics activity.⁴ Following a three-year unsuccessful peace process under the former Colombian administration, the current government

favors a military solution to the conflict, although civil society groups are struggling to craft alternatives.



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Status of Women

Colombia has ratified major international and regional human rights treaties that limit discrimination against women and has enacted several laws that aim to guarantee women's equality. Nevertheless, discrimination against women in Colombia persists and often takes the form of gender-based violence, which is especially prevalent in the ongoing conflict.

Women have been involved in Colombia's 50-year internal conflict as victims, combatants, supporters of armed groups and as peacemakers. Women and girls account for more than 55 percent of the nearly 3 million Colombians displaced by the violent conflict since 1985.⁵ Due to their traditionally domestic role, displaced women are often less prepared than men for the socio-economic crisis of displacement. Most of the displaced are forced to leave rural areas, finding little use for their agricultural skills in cities. Many find it difficult to generate income outside of the informal sector and experience a high rate of poverty and deprivation as a result.

Displaced women and girls face additional risks, including violence perpetrated by armed combatants. Paramilitary and guerrilla forces often use violence, such as rape and sexual slavery, as tools of repression. State protection against the targeting of civilians and internally displaced people is scarce, thus, much violence goes officially unreported and unpunished. Displaced populations often lack basic services, which particularly impacts women in the area of reproductive health care. Cuts in government resources and personnel have forced individuals to rely on services provided by nonprofit groups, which are limited in capacity. Domestic violence in displacement is another concern, as 52 percent of displaced women experience domestic abuse compared to 20 percent of women in the general population.⁶

Despite the challenges, women's local and national groups have been organizing for peace throughout the conflict. An increase in this activity in

the early 1990s, however, made women activists targets of repression by guerilla and paramilitary forces. By 2002, 17 percent of assassinated and disappeared Colombian leaders and activists were women.⁷ Although the official peace process in Colombia is currently stalled, women's groups continue to present alternatives to violence, carve out "peace zones," unite diverse groups and demand that the voices of civil society be heard in future negotiations.

Brief History

Indigenous tribes populated what is known today as Colombia long before the arrival of Spanish explorers.⁸ Starting in 1499, conquistadors, administrators and Roman Catholic clergy began settling in what became present-day Colombia. Spaniards founded Santa Maria la Antigua del Darien in Columbia in 1510, the first permanent European settlement on the South American mainland. Colombia finally gained independence from Spain in 1824 after a period of armed struggle.

The history of Colombia is characterized by the competition between groups of civilian elites. These elites, which have dominated the spheres of influence in the country, derive their status from a social hierarchy dating from the colonial period where those of Spanish origin were thought to be superior. Unlike many Latin American countries, Colombia's post-independence history has seen very little in the way of military rule. Nevertheless, despite civilian control of the military and government, Colombia has a long history of violent political conflict. The early confrontation was between dominant political parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, which clashed over various governance issues. Larger-scale conflict erupted at the end of the 19th century in what came to be known as the War of a Thousand Days.

Following this period, the Conservatives retained power until 1930, and cooperation with rivals helped to generate major economic growth and industrialization. Liberal reformists came into power in 1930, instituting an

ambitious social agenda that included agrarian reform that threatened Conservative interests, which were generally allied with large landowners. The assassination of a populist Liberal politician in 1948 sparked riots in the capital that left 2,000 people dead and spread to rural areas where the government had limited control. The next 18-year period, 1948 to 1966, known as *la violencia*, included clashes between groups ostensibly acting in the name of the two parties. This period resulted in an estimated 200,000 casualties and 2 million people displaced from their homes. The main guerilla groups, including ELN (National Liberation Army), EPL (Popular Liberation Army), and FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), emerged at this time. While these groups emerged both to protect rural communities from widespread violence and to promote certain populist ideologies, they gradually became dependent upon criminal activities including kidnapping, drug trafficking and violence against civilians, and any legitimate political goals faded.

Paramilitaries also emerged at this time in response to the government's inability to provide security, attempting to establish themselves as defenders of the population against guerilla groups. Despite their claims and initial popularity among some segments of the

Footnotes

- 1 "Colombia." CIA World Factbook, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications>.
- 2 "Special Report: Civil Society Under Siege in Colombia." United States Institute of Peace. February 2004, <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr114.pdf>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 "Understanding Colombia" Series-The Impact of the War on Women: Colombian Women's Struggle." U.S. Office on Colombia. January 2004, <http://usofficeoncolombia.org/insidocolombia/women.htm>.
- 7 "Colombia 2003: Displaced and Desperate: Assessment of Reproductive Health for Colombia's Internally Displaced Persons." Reproductive Health

population, the paramilitaries have been involved in criminal activities since their inception and are responsible for much of the murder and violence in the conflict. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, military counterinsurgency operations attempted to stem guerrilla activities and often cooperated with paramilitary groups. Although such cooperation is now officially outlawed, the government still faces accusations of working with paramilitary forces as part of its counterinsurgency campaign.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Colombian conflict became increasingly complex with a flourishing arms- and drug-trafficking market, expanding control of territory by armed groups and increased targeting of civilians by all armed combatants.⁹ Growing citizen frustration led to a campaign to initiate negotiations. Former President Andres Pastrana began talks in 1999 with FARC, the largest guerilla group, but the talks did not result in a ceasefire agreement. Nonetheless, various civilian groups, including groups led by women, struggled to maintain a voice and a presence in the process. Although the national dialogues collapsed in February 2002, the war resistance movement continues on a local level.

President Alvaro Uribe, who has held office since August 2002, will not consider negotiations with rebel groups before a ceasefire. His administration

currently favors an aggressive military solution to the conflict, in addition to other programs such as incentives for the surrender of illegal combatants. Also since August 2002, new U.S. legislation lifted restrictions on the type of aid that could go to Colombia. Previously limited primarily to counternarcotics funding, increased U.S. aid has begun flowing to the Colombian government's campaign against guerilla and paramilitary forces. Although Colombia's rate of murders, kidnappings and displacement has dropped since Uribe took office, many observers believe that an end to the conflict remains a long way off.

The Economy

From the late 1970s until the mid-1990s, economic growth helped to reduce the percentage of Colombians living below the poverty line from 80 to 60 percent, and those in extreme

poverty from 45 to 21 percent.¹⁰ During this period, public resources were allocated to improve primary education and basic health care, among other areas. During the second half of the 1990s, however, Colombia experienced its most severe economic crisis since the 1930s, greatly hampering the country's progress in poverty reduction. Poverty levels actually increased, especially in urban areas. Particularly vulnerable groups include displaced populations, of which women are a majority; Afro-Colombian populations; children; and households that do not own a home and are headed by the unemployed, young, or low-skilled. In 2001 in urban Colombia, women over age 17 represented 53 percent of the population, but 59 percent of those in poverty and 17 percent of those in extreme poverty. Female-headed households comprised 25 percent of the population, but 59 percent of those in

Response in Conflict Consortium, http://www.rhrc.org/pdf/co_rh.pdf

8 Historical information in this section is from "Country Case Studies." Library of Congress, <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/>.

9 "In the Midst of War: Women's Contributions to Peace in Colombia." Women Waging Peace. April 2004, <http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/articles/ColombiaExecSummary.pdf>.

10 "Memorandum of the President of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Finance Corporation to the Executive Directors on a Country Assistance Strategy of the World Bank Group for the Republic of Colombia." World Bank Group. December 24, 2002, [http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/lac/lacinfoclient.nsf/5996dfbf9847f67d85256736005dc67c386babdf67beaf8385256cb00063628e\\$FILE/complete.pdf](http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/lac/lacinfoclient.nsf/5996dfbf9847f67d85256736005dc67c386babdf67beaf8385256cb00063628e$FILE/complete.pdf).



poverty and 20 percent of those experiencing extreme poverty, revealing the disproportionate challenge women face as household heads.

Despite relative economic prosperity since independence, in terms of gross domestic product, Colombia experiences a high rate of unequal wealth distribution. The political system has historically favored the minority of the population that has accumulated land and wealth. While this inequality is only one among many factors that has created an environment conducive to conflict, it is an important one. Over the years, as employment, social and health problems rose while a small segment of the population prospered, and the government was seen as failing to address socio-economic inequalities, rebel groups became more successful at recruiting among the disaffected. Thus, economic prosperity, accompanied by programs aimed to improve social indicators and reduce inequality, are important elements in achieving national reconciliation and lasting peace.

In an effort to address poverty and underdevelopment as root causes of conflict, churches, non-governmental organizations and local and regional governments, with the assistance of international donors, have begun designing and implementing programs to address basic human needs. Projects include building schools and community kitchens, employment generation, credit programs and developing economic alternatives to illegal crop cultivation. In many instances, however, groups working on such projects face tremendous obstacles, including lack of

support from the federal government and the physical risks of operating in conflict zones.

Human Rights

The armed conflict—and the narcotics trafficking that both fuels and prospers from it—remain the primary causes of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Colombia. Right-wing paramilitary groups and leftist guerrilla groups are primarily responsible for the high level of human rights violations committed against civilians in this conflict. Government security forces, while responsible for a relatively small percentage of such abuses, have nonetheless been accused of some violations and of instances of cooperation with and support of illegal paramilitary forces that target guerrilla groups.

The U.S. Department of State's 2003 Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Colombia states that paramilitaries were responsible for thousands of civilian deaths during the year. The National Police registered 23,013 homicides during 2003, many of which were politically motivated. Paramilitaries in some neighborhoods continued to carry out "social cleansing" with the killing of prostitutes, drug users, vagrants and the mentally ill. Religious leaders and activists also faced harassment, threat and sometimes murder, generally for political, rather than religious, activities. Labor leaders remain significant targets for abuse nationwide, and instances of threats against and murders of public school teachers were reported in 2003.

Other violations include forced

disappearances; kidnapping, both for ransom and political reasons; arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly of social activists, labor leaders and human rights defenders; torture and other cruel punishment by police, military and guerrillas; and illegal surveillance of civilians. Women who have publicly acted or spoken against human rights abuses have been targeted from all sides of the conflict—by paramilitaries and government security forces that accuse them of supporting guerrillas and by guerrilla groups who view them as siding with their enemies. Rape, mutilation and forced sexual bondage are among the weapons used throughout the conflict to generate fear among women and silence their campaigns for rights.

The government has pledged to combat the violence and human rights violations that have plagued Colombia's citizens for decades. However, government measures to improve the security conditions in Colombia have led to accusations that civil liberties have been suspended and that legal democratic activities, such as labor organizing, have been restricted. In the context of the global war on terrorism, the government has pinned the label of "terrorist" on groups that defend human rights and may be engaging in legitimate social activity. Similarly, religious leaders have expressed concern that those who promote dialogue with armed militants as an alternative to military solutions to end the conflict have also been labeled as terrorists by the government. Human rights groups and the government continue to have divergent views on the progress being made to reduce human rights violations.

