



>> MODERN CONFLICTS
HOME PAGE

>> CONFLICTS MAP

>> CONFLICTS TABLE

>> PERI HOME PAGE

Colombia (1964 -)

The ongoing internal armed conflict in Colombia began in the mid-1960s but its origins can be traced to land policies that date from the colonial era, to *La Violencia* of the 1940s and 1950s which pitted Liberals against Conservatives, and to the virtual absence of the state from large portions of the Colombian countryside.

In the early 1960s, southern liberals formed the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In the north, a Cuban-style revolutionary guerrilla group called the National Liberation Movement (ELN) formed at roughly the same time. Supported by poor peasants, these two groups fought Colombian police and military forces. By the 1980s FARC had expanded throughout Colombia. The smaller ELN remained in the north where it could extort money from the international oil corporations operating in the region. Paramilitary groups, initially fostered by the state and encouraged by large landowners, battled the guerrillas; paramilitary groups were legal until 1989, when they were outlawed because of their human rights violations and links with drug traffickers. Several paramilitary groups joined together in the mid-1990s as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). It is widely believed that the paramilitaries have shared intelligence and collaborated in attacks with the Colombian military; paramilitary infiltration of the Congress and security apparatus caused a burgeoning scandal for the government beginning in late 2006.

Both the FARC and AUC have used child soldiers and have perpetrated massacres of civilians in villages where they suspect disloyalty. Throughout the 1990s most human rights abuses were attributed to the paramilitaries. Both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries are deeply involved in the drug trade, supplementing earnings from narcotics with income from extortion and kidnappings.

Alvaro Uribe was elected president in 2002. Bolstered by U.S. military assistance, he increased military spending and attacked the FARC as well as drug cartels. The Uribe government has recruited informants, trained peasant militias, and granted police powers to the Colombian armed forces. Meanwhile, the government has been negotiating unsuccessfully with both the guerrilla groups for an end to the war. The AUC entered into peace talks with the government in 2002, but the process of demobilization has been fraught with difficulty.

Print Resources

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Richani, Nazih (2002) *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Online Resources

BBC. *Country Profile: Colombia*.

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Human Rights Watch (2001) *The "Sixth Division": Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia.*

Timeline

1948 - Liberal Mayor of Bogota assassinated, starting *La Violencia*

1958 - *La Violencia* ends, leaving 250,000-300,000 dead

1965 - National Liberation Army (ELN) forms

1966 - Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) forms

1978 - FARC lifts ban on coca and marijuana production

1998 - Andrés Pastrana elected president, begins peace talks with guerrillas, grants FARC safe haven in the southeast

2000 - U.S. approves military aid under "Plan Colombia"

2001 - negotiations resume; Pastrana extends safe haven; FARC releases police hostages; government and FARC sign San Francisco agreement intended to lead to ceasefire

2002 - peace talks break down and Pastrana ends safe haven; Uribe elected president

2003 - U.S. Special Forces train Colombian military, protect oil pipeline

2003 - rightist AUC and government begin peace talks

2005 - exploratory peace talks with ELN begin in Cuba

2006 - Uribe wins second term; detains paramilitary leaders accused of undermining the peace process