ICNC International Center on Nonviolent Conflict

Colombia: Opposing Insurgents, Social Violence, and a Corrupt State (1990-present)

Anonymous
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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance

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Conflict Summary:

Colombia's 60-year armed conflict has created what has been characterized by the United Nations as the worst humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere. Acute levels of human rights violations and human rights abuses, attributed to the Colombian military and paramilitary and guerrilla factions respectively, have been accompanied by the forced displacement of approximately four million Colombians, including in particular indigenous and Afro-Colombian rural populations. This violence, linked as it is to drug production and trafficking, has been accompanied by ongoing and systematic violations and restrictions of the fundamental rights of particular sectors of Colombian society, including trade unions, indigenous movements and communities and human rights defenders. Colombian President Álvaro Uribe of the Liberal Party, elected initially in 2002 and subsequently re-elected in 2006—who at present enjoys broad popular support—has repeatedly stated that Colombia is not at war, but rather is a "post-conflict" country. Opposition to Uribe's claims states that, given the nature of the militarized state apparatus and public policies executed by his government and the ongoing hostilities between the military and the guerrilla, particularly the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), along with apparent indications of a recent resurgence of paramilitary groups, Colombia is still in the midst of an armed conflict.

With determinant U.S. military and economic support, President Uribe has launched an aggressive campaign against the FARC and the Army of National Liberation (ELN), resulting in some important achievements, including the substantial weakening of the FARC, reduction of the kidnapping rate and, in some areas, particularly urban Colombia, a reduction of previously acute levels of physical insecurity.

In this context, Colombian society appears not to have developed as a terrain of nonviolent struggle and both society in general and the state remain largely unmoved by civilian mobilization. The majority of Colombian society appears to support Uribe's stance of an all-out military effort to put an end to the activity of the FARC. Social mobilization has enjoyed differentiated acceptance within Colombian society, according to the demands that it has made and the social and political sectors that have sanctioned and supported it. Whilst massive demonstrations calling for peace and demanding the

release of the FARC's kidnapping victims influenced the national and international perception of Colombian grassroots mobilization during 2008 and 2009, and strengthened the broad social consensus against the FARC, there has been a notable absence of strategic mobilization of equal scale and impact around other urgent concerns, met as they have been with relative institutional closure and social invisibility. The themes of forced displacement, forced disappearances, state-sponsored human rights violations, the exclusion of indigenous peoples and poverty have remained inimical to Colombian society in general and nonviolent actors have been unable to wield an impact upon the Uribe government. The mass mobilization of indigenous peoples during the final months of 2008 around issues of land ownership, social exclusion and political autonomy were greeted with repression and accusations by the government of collaboration and collusion of indigenous leaders with the FARC, ultimately only precipitating a modicum of isolated social support. Strategic criminalization of collective action remains a critical tool utilized by the government, and collective mobilization around themes such as indigenous rights and trade union rights remains fragmented and subject to severe repression, as was the case with the 2008 march by indigenous leaders in the Cauca region.

Historical Background:

Conflict between the Liberal and Conservative parties shaped the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when political and economic tensions were manifest through violent conflict as well as being channeled through political participation in generally clientelist and corrupt local and regional networks of political parties. The Conservatives dominated political power until power swung back to the Liberals in 1930 (until 1946). In the 1950s, the forms of politically-based clientelist interest mediation that predominated collapsed and ceased to represent, even minimally, a space for the engagement of social actors in national political life. The assassination of prominent Liberal leader and reformist Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948 was one of the key catalysts that sparked the subsequent period of la violencia, between Liberal and Conservative forces, which resulted in 200,000 deaths.

During la violencia, a series of Marxist guerrilla organizations emerged, including the April 19th Movement (M-19), the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and the Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia (FARC). The emergence of these left-wing guerrilla groups plunged the country further into violence and instability. During this period, in 1958, the Liberal and Conservative parties agreed to establish and maintain the National Front, a power-sharing arrangement that would alternate control of the presidency every four years, and which lasted until 1974. The National Front was a creative agreement aimed at putting an end to the partisan violence, nevertheless it systematically excluded third parties (leftist political parties and pluralist coalitions).

The internal armed conflict between the State and the guerrilla groups escalated after the 1970s as actions by the distinct guerrilla factions held the state to siege in various regions of the country. Brutal violence was carried out by both military and guerrilla factions, resulting in extraordinary numbers of civilian victims, including from massacres, torture, extra-judicial executions, disappearances and forced displacement.

In this context, and particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, Colombia became one of the principal international centers for illegal drug production and trafficking. In the 1980s the power of the drug cartels was almost unchallengeable, as they perpetrated brutal political violence against any actors that opposed them. In 1987, an extradition treaty with the US was overturned by the Colombian Supreme Court in the wake of systematic attacks on Colombian justice operators. By the 1980s and 1990s, right-wing paramilitaries had formed at the behest of landowners and with the participation of drug-traffickers, in order to “protect” their lands and resources from the guerrilla whilst maintaining control of the illegal drug trade in the hands of the drug cartels (the Medellin and Cali cartels being the most notorious). The umbrella group for these paramilitaries was the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). In 1989, Presidential Candidate Luis Carlos Galan, a vocal supporter of extradition, was assassinated, provoking the reinstatement of the extradition treaty with the USA and the subsequent declaration of all out war by drug cartels against the government if the treaty were not lifted once again. Extradition was subsequently excluded from the new Constitution of 1991 by the Constituent Assembly.

In the 1990s, the armed conflict escalated, a consequence of the increasing ferocity of the paramilitary and guerrilla groups, including the guerrilla’s policy of kidnapping (approximately 2,787 people were kidnapped in 1999)

which left the civilian population, particularly indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups, in the firing line and increasingly implicated in the conflict. Brutal military counterinsurgency policy also targeted civilian populations, and civilians were the victims of egregious human rights violations and abuses, including policies of massacres of entire populations, precipitating acute levels of internal displacement.

In the second half of 2000, under President Pastrana, the U.S. government approved "Plan Colombia", including $1.3 billion to fight drug trafficking. In 2002, Alvaro Uribe was elected to office for the Liberal Party. His pledge of "mano dura" (hard-handedness) against the guerrillas contrasted with previous efforts to seek a negotiated settlement to the conflict, and he backed-up this promise by seeking increasing military spending and U.S. military cooperation. Through his policy of Democratic Security, Uribe has sought to regain control of Colombia through an increase in military numbers, operations and capacity and by increasing police presence through deployment throughout the country. Accompanying this process has been an increase in the eradication of illicit crops. Uribe has also controversially sought to precipitate civilian collaboration to put an end to the guerrilla, develop a peasant militia, and extend military powers to include policing powers. In this context, over the past seven years, whilst various important gains have been achieved, and the FARC has suffered severe military and political blows, individual liberties have been limited, serious scandals have emerged, such as parapolitics (the involvement of high-level politicians with the paramilitaries), and internal displacement has reached acute levels.

Strategic Actions:

Towards the mid-1980s, building on the relatively unsuccessful union, peasant, student and urban mobilizations that took place during La Violencia, a range of social actors emerged, including the indigenous movement, women's movement and other struggles focused more on identity and issue-based politics than exclusively on issues of class. During the 1980s, civil society sought direct participation in the distinct peace processes, a role that was adopted informally by the Permanent Civil Society Assembly for Peace in Colombia, established finally in 1998, and constituted by over 800 citizen organizations. Equally, whilst the issues that organizations took on developed and broadened, so the discourses of civil society organizations evolved from

class-based politics to a movement politics articulated through the framework of human rights, including political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights. Organizations of victims of the armed conflict later developed innovative discourses seeking to impact upon those rights enshrined in international humanitarian and human rights law.

Despite the activities of the Permanent Civil Society Assembly, social mobilization in Colombia has been fragmented and to date has had a generally minimal impact upon the actions, agendas and perceptions of the diverse parties to the conflict (the state, the paramilitaries, the guerrilla, the drug traffickers). Moreover, given the complexity of those actors engaged in the conflict, compounded by the influence and impact of drug producers and traffickers, nonviolent mobilization has thus far been unable to identify clear targets and to hold these actors accountable. Collective action has also had only limited influence in shaping the pervasive, but imprecise and divergent, discourses of "peace" articulated within in Colombian society. Everyone talks about peace, but few venture to define it.

With certain exceptions, the use of nonviolent action has been sporadic and fragmented and has lacked a unified strategy in Colombia. The two discourses that have had most impact have been the "No to the FARC" marches (1997-2009), and demonstrations and actions calling for peace and negotiations. The first such actions oriented in this regard were the mass pacifist actions, involving approximately 5 million people, in 1997 and 1998, and the vote for peace that brought together approximately 10 million 'voters'. Such actions did seek to address certain highly visible human rights violations, including the massacre of Trujillo (1986-1994), but have since been levied principally against the guerrilla, not focusing on those violations carried out by the state or military. Thus, there seems to be a tendency shared by many nonviolent organizers that they will not focus their mobilization on confronting human rights violations and anti-democratic practices by the state. Those organizations that do seek to hold the state accountable, such as the Colombian Commission of Jurists, have been subject to harassment and spying by State agencies, including the Department of Administrative Security (DAS).

Important incidents of strategic nonviolent action have taken place at the level of municipalities within Colombia, including in excluded

Afro-Colombian, indigenous and peasant communities, including the "peace communities". Many of these communities, including San José Apartadó, have mobilized as independent actors resisting cooptation into the illegal armed forces, and proposing alternative visions of peace and development. These experiences remain marginal, however, and have not extended to broader Colombian society as a while. These communities, shaped as they have been by an intimate relationship with social bases in diverse territories within the interior of Colombia, have articulated demands based upon nonviolence influenced heavily by Christian values, principles and discourse. Other resistance has been carried out by peasant communities against illegal armed groups at the local level, including the evasion of tax-tribute and avoidance of military service. For example, of particular note have been the actions of the indigenous people the Wayúu, located in the Guajira. Everyday forms of resistance carried out by the Wayúu have included the development of an internal economy. The Wayúu also threatened mass suicide in the face of the penetration of international petroleum companies into their traditional lands, an action that was successful in postponing the exploration of natural resources in Wayúu territory. In Colombia, given the lack of social and political networks and economic markets and the extreme lack of infrastructure in particular in the Pacific coast and indigenous communities, isolated semi-rural areas and communities have been able to persist. It has been within such communities, affected disproportionately by the conflict as they have been, that episodes of nonviolent action have taken place. Little of this mobilization has spread to urban Colombia, however.

A further important strategy has been that utilized by both the indigenous movement and the Afro-Colombian movement. Successful lobbying was carried out by the indigenous movement in the late 1980s, resulting in important and unprecedented recognition of indigenous rights consecrated in the 1991 Constitution. Since this process, there have been further significant experiences of indigenous resistance and episodes of nonviolent action, particularly in the Cauca (Southern Colombia) and in the mountains of Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast. In Cauca, as in other regions, indigenous movements have articulated struggles based upon indigenous peoples' individual and collective rights. As a result of mass mobilizations and social movement actions, indigenous groups in Cauca elected a governor, several mayors and members of the state legal system. However, after the mass mobilizations during the last months of 2008, during which several

indigenous people were shot dead by the security forces, indigenous activists in Cauca have become the target of military aggression, and several are now in hiding as a result of criminal charges brought by the Colombian state. Prior to this, indigenous peoples in the Cauca had been the victims of aggression by both guerrilla and paramilitary groups. The effectiveness of government repression in 2008 has demonstrated how nonviolent actions oriented towards the improvement of economic conditions, in particular land reforms, actions that are based upon a legal framework, have been of very limited success.

Popular civil strikes have been an important means of leverage for the most economically vulnerable sectors in Colombian society. In several Colombian cities, for example Bogotá, Cali and Medellin, and in rural municipalities, through non-cooperation with businessmen and political leaders, such sectors have gained greater access to public services (water, electricity, sewerage, education, health, etc.). However, these actions were of a very localized nature, and did not spread to the national level.
Disruptive direct action has also been used in the nonviolent rescue of hostages by indigenous peoples in the Cauca in August of 2004, when 400 indigenous people marched on San José Caguan, a community located within guerrilla territory, where they remained in a condition of non-cooperation until several of their relatives were returned by the guerrilla.

Ensuing Events:

The limited impact of nonviolent conflict in Colombia today has been shaped by a general weakness in elaborating the strategic dimensions of nonviolent action. In this regard, there has been a lack of deep understanding of the methods of nonviolent political action, as well as frequent miscalculations about the strengths and actions of adversaries. This deficit has generated gross errors, such as movements' general lack of specific functional goals, leading to abstract demands for "peace", a concept and goal shared by victims and perpetrators alike. Secondly, actors have not been adept at developing sufficient organizational strength, which requires participation in grassroots organizing, and more sustained collective action over time. In this regard, the link between grassroots organizing and leadership has been weak, and unity within and among groups has frequently been lacking. Movements have also been unable to generate secure consistent access to

resources, and have lacked the capacity to cultivate foreign aid and build influential allies and national and international networks. Of utmost importance there has been the lack of construction of national networks that are stable and self-sustaining. The fear of mobilizing, the invisibility of certain themes and the monopolization of collective action by anti-guerrilla and pacifist organizations have been key here, given that such groups have had access to resources, state-sanctioned support and the media.

In recent months, however, certain nonviolent action movements have achieved an increasing visibility and impact and have begun to pressure the state, achieving localized, though important, impact. For example, the national strike of justice operators (40,000 judges and other employees) throughout the country demanding an improvement in labor conditions, lasting for 4 months during 2008, gained important coverage and leverage. The actions of cane cutters and harvesters in recent years yielded similar results. Moreover, the important mobilization of indigenous peoples of Cauca has begun to demonstrate how organized collective action is not an impossibility in Colombia.

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