Cocaine state: Seeking peace in Colombia

by Dean Peerman in the June 16, 1999 issue

Like ancient gaul, Colombia can be said to be divided into three parts. After several decades of undeclared civil war, leftist guerrillas dominate much of the southern part of the country. Much of the north is in the hands of right-wing paramilitary groups backed by wealthy landowners (though the leftists have a piece of this region too, near the Caribbean coast). Both the rebel insurgents and the rightist militias are involved in drug trafficking—a highly lucrative enterprise, Colombia being the world's principal producer of cocaine and a major provider of heroin. The beleaguered central government is literally central, occupying what might be called, without much exaggeration, an urban median strip.

As often happens in such situations, a lot of innocent civilians have been caught in the crossfire. Many such victims are killed simply because they are suspected of sympathizing with the enemy. Colombia has more than a million internal refugees who have fled their homes to save their lives, and more than half of the refugee families are headed by women whose husbands have been murdered or "disappeared." Some of the displaced have fled to neighboring countries. Though the parallels are imprecise, Colombia is a kind of Latin American Kosovo.

Colombia has a long history of political violence, much of it the result of bitter rivalry between the elite-controlled Conservative and Liberal parties. One period of bloody civil strife—called *la violencia*—was sparked by the assassination of Liberal leader Jorgé Eliécer Gaitán in 1948; lasting a decade, it descended into sheer criminality and cost some 200,000 lives. It was ended by a bipartisan power-sharing agreement—the National Front—that required a constitutional amendment and was operative for 16 years. But while interparty peace finally prevailed, the economic and social problems at the root of the conflict still went unaddressed, and the marginalization of the masses persisted—a situation that paved the way for the guerrillas, the drug cartels and the paramilitary groups.

In Bogotá and other cities, the wealthy live in fear of being kidnapped for ransom; according to the North American Congress on Latin America, at least half of the world's kidnappings occur in Colombia. (Ransom money is a secondary source of income for the guerrillas.) The country's homicide rate is 15 times higher than the high U.S. rate, yet only 3 percent of homicides are ever prosecuted. The annual total of violent deaths has been close to 30,000 in recent years in this population of 36 million. Last year there were 201 separate massacres, according to *Colombia Bulletin*, a human rights quarterly.

In regions where paramilitaries and guerrillas are vying for control, both sides have been ruthless and unrelenting, but the former have used scorched-earth tactics, burning and bombing villages. Human Rights Watch says that 76 percent of human rights abuses in Colombia are committed by the paramilitary forces, and even the U.S. State Department, in its 1998 annual human rights report, acknowledged that right-wing death squads were responsible for 70 percent of Colombia's political murders. Those death squads often operate with the cooperation and connivance of the army.

Self-designated peace communities—towns that have declared themselves neutral and have asked all participants in the country's war not to enter—have hardly remained immune to the violence. Last April 4 the northern peace community of San José de Apartado was attacked by paramilitaries; claiming that they were after guerrillas, they killed town leader Anibal Jiménez (in front of his children) and two others. Three days later a 150-member militia assaulted the nearby peace community of Villahermosa; after slaughtering the livestock and taking all the food and money they could find, the marauders abducted ten leaders and reportedly killed them all, beheading some of them.

The guerrillas and the paramilitaries seldom have direct confrontations, but occasionally they make incursions into each other's territory. For example, in July 1997 a 100-member paramilitary force took the southern town of Mapiripán. After torturing and killing 30 villagers they believed to be guerrilla sympathizers, they left their victims' heads hanging from lampposts as an intimidation tactic.

In such a chaotic and murderous political climate, to be a human rights defender or a relief worker—or even a church leader—is risky business indeed, and in some parts of the country it is downright suicidal. In Colombia "there is a clear, coordinated strategy of targeting anyone involved in the defense of human rights," according to

an Amnesty International spokesman. In late January, following the assassination of two human rights activists and the kidnapping of four others, Carlos Castaño, head honcho of the largest paramilitary organization, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), issued a collective death threat against all such activists, accusing them of being linked to the guerrillas. More recently, a similar threat was directed by paramilitaries in the Urabá region against several humanitarian agencies working there, including Oxfam UK and Christian Aid. More than 30 human rights defenders have been killed by the death squads in the past two years.

Churchpeople have fared no better. In 1995 the Evangelical Confederation of Colombia formed the Commission on Human Rights and Peace to aid victims of violence. Since that year, according to *Christianity Today*, "at least 21 evangelical pastors and more than 100 congregational leaders have been murdered." Most of the church's casualties have been at the hands of rightist militias. But just last month in a daring raid in an affluent section of the western city of Cali, about 30 guerrillas belonging to the National Liberation Army (ELN), the country's second-largest rebel force, abducted a Roman Catholic priest and more than 140 churchgoers during a Sunday mass. Eighty-four of the hostages, including 21 children, were later released in nearby mountains. For his unauthorized efforts to win the release of the remaining kidnapping victims, the government declared German-born Bishop Emilio Sthele "persona non grata" and "a national security threat."

Also, the rebels can be just as trigger-happy as the right-wingers. The ELN killed a bodyguard of one of those churchgoers. And in March three activists from the U.S.—Terence Freitas, Ingrid Washinawatok and Lahe'ena'e Gay—were murdered by members of the main guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Ironically, these three were supportive of some of the guerrillas' goals, though not their methods. FARC spokesman Raúl Reyes did apologize for the "mistake," claiming that though the three U.S. citizens had entered U'Wa Indian territory "without authorization," the middle-rank field commander who executed them also acted without authorization.

Last summer the corrupt, scandal-ridden and narco-connected administration of President Ernesto Samper came to an end with the election of centrist Andrés Pastrana. Although Pastrana has a plethora of problems to deal with—a floundering economy, high unemployment, a growing fiscal deficit, the devastation of the recent earthquake, to name a few—he seems sincere in his desire to make the peace

process his paramount concern. Certainly he is tenacious. FARC founder Manuel ("Sureshot") Marulanda shunned peace talks last winter out of fear for his safety, or so he said. But thanks to Pastrana, negotiations are under way again, giving a glimmer of hope to the war-weary Colombian people.

Pastrana hopes to wean campesinos away from coca-growing with crop-substitution measures, and FARC has said it could endorse such a program if it were accompanied by adequate social investment. Some observers doubt that the guerrillas would actually forgo their huge drug profits. But even if they would, alternative-crop policies, to be successful on a large scale, would require considerable outside aid—and so far the U.S., Colombia's big benefactor, has been slow to deliver aid of that kind.

U.S. *military* aid, however, has been massive; Congress anted up a whopping $289 million just for this year. Under current law, such aid is to be used only for antinarcotics work, not for counterinsurgency, but such law has not always been adhered to (just how effective in crop eradication are helicopters armed with 20mm cannons?). In any event, Colombia's coca production has increased, not decreased, during the years of generous U.S. arms shipments. In the view of many Colombia watchers, all that military hardware just helps prolong the warfare. As for the CIA, its activity in the country has been inconsistent at best; there is evidence that while some CIA units have fought the drug trade, other units have assisted paramilitary groups caught up in that same trade. Perhaps the primary reason for U.S. interest in Colombia is fear of spillover destabilization; after all, the country lies between the Panama Canal and Venezuelan oil, both of which are considered to be strategically vital.

However fervent his hopes for a negotiated settlement with the guerrillas, President Pastrana has already suffered some setbacks. On May 20 paramilitary warlord Castaño, just to show how miffed he was at not being invited to the peace talks, arranged to have a prominent senator, Piedad Córdoba, kidnapped as she was leaving a clinic in Medellín. And inevitably, the president's hardline critics have accused him of making too many concessions. FARC has insisted that Pastrana crack down on the paramilitaries, and, to the consternation of the right, he has begun to do so. Recently Defense Minister Rodrigo Lloreda announced that two brigadier generals had been removed from active service; both of the generals reportedly had links with the rightist militias. A third general was later arrested for the same reason. Also, a paramilitary-operated cocaine processing plant was destroyed by the police.

But one concession—a land-for-peace deal—was too much for Defense Minister Lloreda himself; he resigned in protest, along with several other senior officers. The southern region that the president last fall designated as a temporary "demilitarized zone" (i.e., under FARC control) is to remain "demilitarized"—no army troops allowed. In granting what amounts to a partitioning of the country, Pastrana was simply recognizing a reality. Nonetheless, his decision is not one that he could have made easily or lightly. The territory in question is the size of Switzerland (though much of it is such wild jungle that no government has ever actually controlled it).

There are, however, some guerrilla demands—agrarian reform that goes beyond mere crop substitution, for example—that Pastrana is not likely to accede to. The army and the right would not stand for it. In fact, it remains to be seen whether they will go along even grudgingly with the demilitarization deal, which they regard as a giveaway. In that regard, earlier this month the Senate handed Pastrana a major defeat, declining to pass a bill that would have extended his authority to deal with guerrilla groups. The president must walk a fine line between the guerrillas and their campesino supporters on the one side and the military, paramilitaries, landowners, industrialists and right-wing legislators on the other. If peace ever comes to Colombia, it is sure to be by way of a long and arduous path.