Chaos in Colombia: Can the drug-funded war be stopped?

by Chris Herlinger in the November 6, 2002 issue

Though it is hard to imagine the situation in Colombia getting much worse, church leaders and human rights groups are warning that the violence is in fact increasing, and that a “dirty war” like the one in El Salvador in the 1980s and in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s is likely to erupt.

Colombia’s human rights record is already among the most dismal in the world. Some 3,500 Colombians are murdered in political-related violence annually; 40,000 have been killed in the past decade. Colombia has the second largest number of displaced persons in the world: nearly 2.5 million, second only to Sudan.

So far the crisis in Colombia has not captured the attention of the American public or of mainline churches the way the crises in Central America did in the 1980s.

“I think we can expect a growing movement, but you have to build it first,” said Barbara Gerlach, cochair of the Washington-based Colombia Human Rights Committee and a leader of a recent mainline church delegation to the country. The National Council of Churches, Church World Service and a number of Protestant denominations have issued statements calling for the defense of human rights in Colombia and have raised concerns about increased U.S. military spending in Colombia.

A particular target of criticism is Plan Colombia, the nearly $2 billion U.S. aid package which the U.S. and Colombian governments say is intended to eradicate Colombia’s illegal drug trade and bolster the country’s social services and infrastructure. Critics contend that Plan Colombia is actually a military aid measure to help the Colombian government battle the guerrillas.

The World Council of Churches in September urged the U.S. to end its military assistance to Colombia, called on the country’s new president, Álvaro Uribe, to overturn a recently declared state of emergency, and demanded that leftist

guerrillas end their threats to civilians. The escalation of the Colombian conflict, the WCC warned, threatened all of Latin America.

Why hasn't Colombia attracted more attention? One obvious reason is that the looming threat of war with Iraq and the U.S.'s continuing response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, have overshadowed every other concern (though there is a link—one of the results of the "war on terror" is the expansion of longstanding U.S. military assistance programs to Colombia and other countries). Another reason is that Colombians are not entering the U.S. illegally the way Salvadorans did 20 years ago, so there has not been an equivalent "sanctuary movement" for immigrants to the U.S.

Furthermore, churches in Colombia do not fit the "progressive" model that North Americans found in Central America—though there are many progressive Catholics and Protestants who are risking their lives for the cause of peace.

Gerlach said it would be a mistake to portray Colombia's Roman Catholic and Protestant churches as conservative. "There are elements doing incredible work at the grass roots," she said. Still, Colombia does not have a galvanizing figure like Archbishop Oscar Romero. One U.S. relief official who has traveled to Colombia described its Roman Catholic leaders "as tired and beaten down—I don't experience the church in Colombia like I did in Nicaragua or El Salvador in the 1980s."

In Nicaragua, said Oscar Bolioli, former director of the National Council of Churches' office on Latin America, "you had a revolution that succeeded, and the church was a part of that. You have none of those components in Colombia." Ecumenical unity has also proven elusive in Colombia, and only a very small number of Protestant churches there have ties to mainline denominations in the U.S.

But the main difficulty in raising concern about Colombia is the sheer complexity of the conflict. "Colombia is six times larger than El Salvador and is six times more complex," Gerlach said. Colombia's strife does not yield easy solutions.

Human rights organizations have criticized all of the military forces fighting in Colombia—the Colombian military, right-wing paramilitaries, private armies and two left-wing guerrilla movements. Perhaps the most pointed criticism is directed toward the Colombian government for its ties with the right-wing paramilitaries, groups that are particularly prominent in rural areas.

“You don’t know who is shooting the bullets,” said Bolioli.

All sides in the conflict are also sullied by their ties to the drug trade. In fact, drug profits are behind the continued strength of Colombia’s leftist guerrilla movements, particularly the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or the FARC, as it is known by its Spanish acronym. Unlike guerrillas groups in previous Latin American conflicts, which were forced to pursue peace negotiations in part because their military positions were not sustainable financially or logistically, the drug trade has allowed the FARC to become self-supporting, observers say. It has also made the FARC impervious to outside influences, and the result is an unusually dogmatic and doctrinaire rebel force, isolated even from radical leftists.

In other words, this is a war in which there are no good guys.

“It’s a tough sell,” said Susan Ryan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) disaster and refugee ministry, who has pressed the issue of Colombia within her denomination. “People in the United States perceive it as a situation where drug lords are running the country.”

Others go even further: Donna Derr, who oversees international emergency response programs for Church World Service, has heard some in U.S. churches say they agree with U.S. policy in Colombia. They argue that “the U.S. is doing what it has to do” because of the pernicious effects illegal drugs are having on the U.S. (Colombians make a similar argument but invert it: the rapacious demand for illegal drugs in the U.S., they argue, is tearing apart Colombia’s social fabric.)

If Americans perceive the problem in Colombia almost entirely in terms of illegal drugs, they may also perceive it as an ongoing, exhausting and unexplainable war that seemingly has no end. Ryan recently visited a museum at the Geneva headquarters of the International Red Cross and was struck that no other country showed up as frequently on a list of conflicts in the last century as did Colombia. “How many years can you go again and again to your constituents and say there is a war and assistance is needed,” she said, “but absolutely nothing seems to change?”

Derr said the issue goes “beyond ‘compassion fatigue’: people have lost a sense of what the need is in Colombia.”

“Colombia has achieved the status of ‘the unanswerable question in South America,” she said: “It has all the troublesome dynamics—power, money, drugs, poverty,

displacement, war between rebel groups and the government. There seem to be no good choices."

The sense of frustration is also apparent among Colombians, particularly those who work in peace and justice movements and who now find themselves fighting a tide of popular sentiment favoring Uribe's call for war. Some of them compare being a Colombian to being a passenger on the Titanic.

"We have a new captain who is convinced he can make everything work," human rights activist Jorge Rojas said shortly after Uribe's August 7 inaugural, an event marked by a guerrilla attack in Bogotá that killed 22 people. "In front of us is a giant iceberg—the guerrillas—who think they can sink the ship without consequences for those on board. And then there are the passengers, who just want to get off the ship."

Despite an amazing capacity for gallows humor, grit and sheer ingeniousness and stealth, the Colombians I know are worn out: their day-to-day lives are becoming increasingly difficult. Faring even worse are those in rural areas who have found themselves displaced three times: by the military, by the guerrillas and by the U.S.-funded aerial fumigation of coca plants, the source of cocaine. (One of the effects of the spraying is to kill not only coca but vegetables, further impoverishing poor farmers who depend on coca for their income.)

A relatively minor example of the day-to-day difficulties: I found that a guerrilla bombing had closed a key section of the road from Medellín to Manizales, in the nation's lush coffee belt. The Colombian passengers and taxi driver with whom I shared a car just shrugged. There was little left to do but take a much longer route over what might be termed a more challenging roadway.

Once in Manizales I asked a friend and college administrator I had not seen in more than a year how people were coping. Because of an increase in street crime, she said, many feel trapped in their homes; because of the fear of kidnapping-for-ransom by the guerrillas (another way the rebels make money) many Colombians are afraid to leave their cities. Was she afraid to travel outside of Manizales? No, her salary was not high enough to warrant much worry; if she were kidnapped, whatever ransom her family could pay would be negligible. "I'm not worth enough," she said, laughing.

When I first visited Colombia in late 2000, occasional government-sponsored television announcements lauded the need for peace and the ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the rebels. These are no longer aired. Current announcements hail the importance, even primacy, of the military. Colombian academics and intellectuals routinely note how Colombia has become a “laboratory of war” and the ways Colombians are becoming inured to the violence surrounding them.

Given such a hardened environment, it is hardly surprising that in the May presidential election Uribe was able to capitalize on widespread anger, particularly about the guerrillas. Uribe’s campaign slogan, “Mano Firme, Corazón Grande” (Firm Hand, Big Heart), struck a chord in a nation weary of four decades of war and anxious after outgoing President Andrés Pastrana called off peace talks. Many Colombians felt Pastrana gave away too much to the rebels—his government had earlier ceded an area the size of Switzerland to them—and saw little that had been achieved: the kidnappings and killings only worsened.

But “war in Colombia cannot be won with more war,” said Ricardo Esquivia, a Mennonite peace activist and director of Justapaz—the Mennonite Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Non-Violent Action, based in Bogotá.

Esquivia chastised the U.S. for its aid to Colombia and compared it to extinguishing a fire with gasoline. The result? “The armed groups are stronger than ever, the army continues with its threats, the paramilitaries continue their massacres and the guerrillas continue their attacks,” he said.

While Esquivia and other members of the traditional peace churches have continued public efforts on behalf of peace work, including a well-publicized “Paz y Pan” (Peace and Bread) demonstration in Bogotá in late September, Rojas said that this may be a moment for Colombian churches and peace activists to recoup and do their work quietly. This is not the time, he suggested, for churches and peace groups to make noisy prophetic stands about peace; there is very little political space in which to do that anyway.

Rojas and Esquivia are both realists: they know the political situations in Colombia and the U.S. do not bode well for a sudden policy change in either country.

“Yes, Colombia is experiencing a pro-war euphoria right now because we have not seen the results from the peace process,” Rojas said. “It may be many more months

before we go back to the negotiating table. But in any event, we have to prepare for that.”

How long could such a process take? Gerlach said the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá believes it may take 15 to 20 years to resolve the Colombian conflict—an opinion stated with some pride by embassy officials, she noted dryly, since the war in El Salvador, a much less complicated affair, took 12 years to settle.

Of course, that prediction assumes that the factions actually want a settlement. At times it seems as if Colombia may never break free from the grip of its violent past, a cycle of violence hauntingly portrayed in the fiction of the Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. But it would be an egregious insult to Colombians to say that their country is somehow “destined” to be violent or that their society is violent “by nature.”

Some U.S. church officials privately ask a pointed and painful question: What is gained by the parties in settling a war that keeps the military armed, paramilitaries protected, an economic elite secure and ideologically rigid Marxist guerrillas in control of much of the country?

Possibly little. But many people in Colombia— activists like Rojas and Esquivia—have staked their lives on their impassioned belief that Colombia deserves something better. “People bet on peace and it failed; now they are betting on war,” Rojas said. “I understand that. But at some point, it’s going to be necessary for us, as members of church and civil society, to say: ‘Stop this war from bleeding Colombia.’”