Violence in Colombia, 1990-2000: waging war and negotiating peace
edited by Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez G.
Wilmington, DE, Scholarly Resources Books, 2001

Contents

Preface
Chronology

Chapter 1  Introduction: Problems of Violence, Prospects for Peace
Gonzalo Sánchez G.

Chapter 2  Violence, Power and Collective Action: A Comparison between Bolivia and Colombia
Rodrigo Uprimny Yepes

Chapter 3  The Constitution of 1991: An Institutional Evaluation Seven Years Later
Ana Maria Bejarano

Chapter 4  Drug Trafficking and the National Economy
Mauricio Reina

Chapter 5  The Equivocal Dimensions of Human Rights in Colombia
Luis Alberto Restrepo M.

Chapter 6  From Private to Public Violence: The Paramilitaries
Fernando Cubides C.

Chapter 7  Victims and Survivors of War in Colombia: Three Views of Gender Relations
Donny Meertens

Miguel Angel Urrego

Chapter 9  The War on Paper: A Balance Sheet on Works Published in the 1990s
Ricardo Peñaranda

Chapter 10  Waging War and Negotiating Peace: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective
Charles Bergquist

Documents
Part 1  Aspects of the Constitution of 1991
Part 2  Colombian Intellectuals and the Guerrillas
Part 3  Human Rights
Part 4  Platforms/Negotiating Positions of the Armed Contenders
Part 5  U.S. Military Aid
Part 6  Labor
Part 7  Drugs
Part 8  A Call for Peace

Appendix  A Comparative Statistical Note on Homicide Rates in Colombia
Andrés Villaveces

Chapter 1  Introduction: Problems of Violence, Prospects
for Peace

Gonzalo Sánchez G.

In this introductory chapter, Gonzalo Sánchez assesses how the phenomenon of violence has changed during the decade of the 1990s. He shows how complex and intractable the violence has become, how it is now an international problem, not simply a national one, and how, despite all the obstacles, it might be overcome. The chapter introduces, and traces the connections among, each of the subjects explored in detail in the other chapters of this volume.

Chapter 2

Violence, Power and Collective Action: A Comparison between Bolivia and Colombia

Rodrigo Uprimny Yepes

One of the limitations of studies of the violence in Colombia—a limitation common to country-specific studies in general, be they of Colombia, the United States, or any other country—is that they rarely place their subject in comparative context. Comparison can have the virtue of demonstrating that what we take for granted in interpreting one country’s history is in fact problematic. In the essay that follows, Rodrigo Uprimny shows how comparison can help us to clarify the causes of the violence that has characterized Colombian history since the mid-twentieth century. By comparing the stories of Colombia and its Andean neighbor Bolivia, Uprimny argues that the violence in Colombia cannot be explained as a simple function of poverty, social fragmentation, or the drug trade. Instead, he contends, Colombia’s violence seems to be a result of several other factors, central among them the inability of working people to develop powerful collective organizations able to transfer social demands into the political arena. That inability, in turn, helps to explain the enduring power of Colombia’s two traditional parties, a feature of the nation’s politics emphasized in virtually all the chapters in this book.

Chapter 3

The Constitution of 1991: An Institutional Evaluation Seven Years Later

Ana Maria Bejarano

In December 1990, in a climate of crisis following a bloody electoral campaign that witnessed the assassination of three presidential candidates, Colombian voters approved the idea of calling a Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution for the nation. The Assembly produced a document
that sought, in the words of its preamble, « to strengthen the unity of the Nation, and ensure its people life, community [convivencia], work, justice, equality, knowledge, liberty, and peace within a democratic and participatory juridical framework that guarantees a politically, economically and socially just order. » Clearly, the lofty goals of the new Constitution have not been realized in the years since its promulgation. The State today is less in control of hte nation than it was at the start of the 1990s, and the achievement of a peaceful, democratic, and just national order seems even more remote today than when the Constitution of 1991 was put into force.

Still, as Ana Maria Bejarano argues in this measured assessment written in 1998, it would be a grave mistake to dismiss the Constitution of 1991 as a meaningless exercise in utopian politics. This is true first, because it expressed the aspirations of many Colombians and addressed the widespread dissatisfaction among them with a political system dominated by the two traditional parties and viewed by many as hopelessly unrepresentative, corrupt, and clientelistic, and second, because aspects of the Constitution, particularly the articles dealing with fiscal and administrative decentralization, political representation for ethnic and religious minorities, and citizen control over the States, have had significant (and often unexpected) consequences for Colombian political life. (A sampling of these articles is included in the Documents section of this book).

Bejarano stresses the weakness of the Colombian State as a primary cause of the failure of the Constitution to realize its framers’ expectations. She also shows how the absence from the Constituent Assembly of representatives of the largest guerilla groups, the paramilitaries, and the military restricted the reforms and compromised their implementation. For example, the Constitution studiously avoids the question of major economic or agrarian reform and does not address military issues.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the failure of the Constitution to realize its democratic and participatory potential obeys a feature of Colombian politics addressed again and again int he essays in this book and in the 1992 volume, Violence in Colombia : the continuing electoral weakness of third parties. That has allowed the two traditional parties to continue to dominate the political scene, especially Congress, which is charged with implementing the reforms called for in the Constitution.

Chapter 4

Drug Trafficking and the National Economy

Mauricio Reina

The general perception of people outside Colombia is probably that the enormous income from the drug trade has been a tremendous boon for drug-trafficking Colombians and for the nation’s economy as a whole. Although the former is undoubtedly true, the latter, as Mauricio Reina argues here, is
problematic. Illicit income from drug trafficking, Reina shows, has had complex and surprisingly negative effects on the Colombian economy, the most destructive among them being its impact on the interest rates. Until the end of the 1990s, however, the Colombian economy continued to grow, continuing a twentieth-century trend that often distinguished the nation from most of its Latin American neighbors. (Colombia escaped the debt crisis of the 1980s, for example, which devastated the economies of Mexico and Brazil and other Latin American countries and led regional economists to speak of a «lost decade» in Latin American development). But beginning in 1998, the economy began to falter, and by 1999 it was in full recession. Official unemployment reached 20 percent during 1999, the highest in the Americas, while preliminary statistics indicated a growth rate for that year of minus 5 or 6 percent.

The economic crisis was the result of several factors, including the neo-liberal «opening» of the economy, in progress throughout the 1990s, which devastated broad sectors of Colombian industry and agriculture thus exposed to the competitive pressures of the world market. The cumulative and worsening effect of the violence, which took its toll on productive investment, both foreign and domestic, also seems to have played a major role, as Reina notes here. But it is the corrosive effects of the illicit drug trade, the focus of his analysis, that may have done the most to weaken the vitality of the Colombian economy over time. Coinciding with serious peace negotiations between the government and the guerrillas, the economic crisis seemed to complicate prospects for the major economic and social reforms. Who, many asked, would pay the bill?

<back to top>

Chapter 5

The Equivocal Dimensions of Human Rights in Colombia

*Luis Alberto Restrepo M.*

In this hard-hitting critique of the way human rights are understood and defended in Colombia and elsewhere in the modern world, Luis Alberto Restrepo, a philosopher at the National University in Bogotá, spares almost no one. Elites and common folks, paramilitaries and the guerrillas, human right activists and passive citizens, foreign and national observers, and the governments of Colombia and the Western powers—all come in for criticism. Restrepo argues particularly that human rights defense aimed primarily at government violators and their allies on the right, while ignoring the abuses of guerrilla insurgents, is misguided, dishonest, and counterproductive. He argues his case by following the development of the concept of basic human rights from the time of the French Revolution to modern times. (Readers can supplement Restrepo’s discussion by referring to the material in Part 3 of the Documents section.)
Chapter 6

From Private to Public Violence: The Paramilitaries

Fernando Cubides C.

How does one analyze a clandestine organization, especially when one is an academic whom that same organization assumes to have leftist sentiments hostile to it? Here Fernando Cubides takes on that challenge by deconstructing the pronouncements of the paramilitaries themselves. He infers quite a lot from these statements about the historical evolution of these groups, the attitude of Colombians (including academics) toward them, their internal organization, motives, and ideological commitments. He finds, for example, that in opposing the leftist guerrillas, the paramilitaries have paradoxically come to mimic them in important ways. He also shows how, in contrast to the guerrillas, their public political platform was constructed after they came into being and was meant to rationalize and justify acts that began as private vengeance. Unlike many analysts, however, Cubides takes the paramilitaries’ earnest proclamations in defense of the Constitution of 1991 seriously. And he cautions that paramilitary power is a fact of life in Colombia that will only go away when the force that called them forth, the leftist guerrillas, is also eliminated from the political scene. Readers can consult a paramilitary proclamation with many of the characteristics analyzed by Cubides in Part 4 of the Documents section of this book.

Chapter 7

Victims and Survivors of War in Colombia: Three Views of Gender Relations

Donny Meertens

In this pioneering study, Donny Meertens explores some of the ways gender relations have structural the violence in Colombia. She first looks at the meaning of political violence toward women during the «classic» Violence of the 1950s and 1960s and compares it to the situation today. She then analyzes how today’s violence affects men and women differently. She shows that women are still less likely than men to be killed in the violence, but they are increasingly being displaced by it. Persons displaced by the violence, estimated at 1.5 million in Colombia by the end of the 1990s, face difficult challenges in putting their lives back together. Meertens finds that men and women bring different skills and expectations to that struggle and shows that they experience different kinds of successes and failures in their efforts to build a new life.
Chapter 8


Miguel Angel Urrego

Taking his title from Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel, Love in the Time of Cholera (1988), Miguel Angel Urrego emphasizes the negative implications of the Colombian left’s embrace of armed struggle for unions, popular organizations, and political parties contending for democratic reform. In effect, the primary victims of paramilitary violence have not been the guerrillas but peaceful unionists, members of legal leftist political parties such as the Union Patriotica, and human rights activists, academics, and journalists critical of either the government, the guerrillas, the drug mafias, or the paramilitary groups themselves. Thousands of such people –leaders in the civil struggle for peaceful social change- have been murdered in Colombia in recent decades. In almost every instance, their killers go unpunished, and often it is uncertain which of the armed actors is responsible for their deaths.

Urrego also emphasizes the negative impact that neo-liberal politics –the lowering of tariff barriers and other impediments to free trade, the privatization of public services, and the reduction of State involvement in the economy and society generally- has had on unions and popular organizations. These policies, urged on the Colombian government by the United States and major international financial institutions, have widened the gap between rich and poor and created severe balance-of-trade problems for Colombia for the first time since the world depression of the 1930s. By 1999, these policies, coupled with levels of violence that finally seemed to frighten even the most risk-taking investors (including drug traffickers), had plunged the economy into full recession and, as noted by Mauricio Reina in Chapter 4, brought the official unemployment rate to an astounding 20 percent. Even so, Urrego shows, recent years have witnessed militant union actions and combative regional mobilizations in protest of government policies. How labor and popular groups can have an effective voice in peace negotiations, however, remains unclear.

Chapter 9

The War on Paper: A Balance Sheet on Works Published in the 1990s

Ricardo Peñaranda

This overview of the literature on violence published in Colombia during the 1990s complements Ricardo Peñaranda’s earlier review of the historiography of the Violence, which appeared as the concluding chapter of Violence in
Colombia (1992). In both of these essays he argues that in recent decades academic study of violence have been closely tied to a political project: to banish violence by understanding it. In the contemporary period, this tendency has carried scholarship out of the narrow realm of the academy into the center of public debate on the current crisis. The quality of the scholarship dealing with the violence, as we hope the chapters in this book demonstrate, is one bright spot on the horizon of a nation being torn apart by a frightening and seemingly uncontrollable crisis.

Chapter 10

Waging War and Negotiating Peace: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective

Charles Bergquist

In this concluding essay, Charles Bergquist draws on his earlier study of the country’s greatest nineteenth-century civil war (Coffee and Conflict in Colombia: Origins and Outcome of the War of the Thousand Days, 1886-1910 [Durham, NC, 1978 and 1986; Medellín, 1980; Bogotá, 1999]) and his comparative analysis of twentieth-century Colombia’s labor and the left (Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia [Stanford, CA, 1986; Bogotá, 1988]) to compare the crisis facing Colombia at the end of the nineteenth century with that confronting the nation today. He focuses, in particular, on prospects for peace, contrasting the position of the Liberal insurgents who laid down their arms at the start of the twentieth century with that of the Marxist insurgents involved in peace negotiations today. The essay links some of the themes of this volume to the historical concerns that animated our earlier edited work, Violence in Colombia (1992), and summarizes elements of the essays and documents in this book by emphasizing the kinds of reforms that a successful contemporary peace process may entail. The final part of the essay speaks to the question of how people outside Colombia, particularly US citizens, might contribute to the peaceful resolution of the crisis.

Documents

Part 1

Aspects of the Constitution of 1991

As noted in Chapter 3, the Constitution of 1991 is a long and complicated document containing a panoply of reforms, many of them designed to protect basic human rights and democratize the Colombian political system. The few articles presented here are only a sampling of those reforms. Spanish readers interested in the Constitution as a whole, and commentary on each of its 380 articles (and 60 transitory articles), can consult Alfredo Manrique Reyes, La Constitución de la Nueva Colombia: Con comentarios y concordancias.
Colombian Intellectuals and the Guerrillas

The Letter of the Intellectuals

In November 1992, a distinguished group of Colombian intellectuals (writers, artists, journalists, lawyers, and academics) published the following open letter addressed to the umbrella group (Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar) of the Marxist-inspired guerrilla movements operating in the country. The intellectuals argued that armed struggle was no longer relevant and that in continuing the war, the revolutionaries were betraying their original ideals and bringing unmitigated disaster to the nation. Many of the signatories had originally sympathized with the guerrillas, believing that armed struggle, as the Cuban example seemed to show, was a viable path to socialism. The Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Gabriel García Márquez, to give one example, was a close friend of Fidel Castro and an active supporter of his regime in Cuba. Nicolás Buenaventura, for another, was a long-time member and activist in the Colombian Communist party. The publication of this document thus marked an important turning point in public opinion; henceforth, the guerrillas would be deprived of some of their most influential supporters. The document was published in the leading newspaper, *El Tiempo*, on November 22, 1992.

The Guerrillas’ Reply

Ten days after the publication of the intellectuals’ letter the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar (CGSB) responded. The Coordinadora’s letter was sent to major Colombian papers, but only the newspaper of the Colombian Communist Party, *Voz*, published it in its entirety. The guerrilla leaders argued that armed insurrection was a path imposed on the Colombian people by an Establishment that historically had systematically terrorized and sought to eliminate all political opposition.

A Response to the Guerrillas

On December 22, 1992, Gonzalo Sánchez, one of the authors of the intellectuals’ original letter, wrote the following commentary on the guerrilla’s response. Published in the left-liberal Bogotá daily *El Espectador*, his article sought to emphasize what he felt were positive aspects of the guerrillas’ response, but he also elaborated on many of the intellectuals’ original criticisms.

The differences between the intellectuals and the guerrillas outlined in this exchange continue to divide Colombians, particularly those on the left, to this day. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that in the years since the exchange, the guerrillas have lost much of the moral high ground and the support they once enjoyed among a broad sector of Colombians, especially professors and
students at the nation’s universities.

The reasons for the decline in support for the guerrillas outside the areas they actually control are many, and most are discussed in some detail in the essays in this book. Suffice it to say here that the guerrillas have lost much public support not so much because of what the intellectuals say about them, but because of what they do. Few Colombians condone kidnapping, for example, and many others are aghast at the economic and ecological impact of systematic destruction of the nation’s oil pipelines. These, and other criticisms, are developed in Sánchez’s commentary, which also includes an eloquent plea for a negotiated peace based on important reforms.

A Letter from the ELN to « Progressive » Academics

The writers, artists, academics and professionals referred to by Colombians (and Latin Americans in general), as intellectuals probably play a larger and more influential role in national political life than do their counterparts in the United States. The previous documents in this section reveal, for example, how interpretations of the nation’s history, in particular, are often used to justify contemporary armed insurrection as well as opposition to it. Academics in Colombia continue to be considered important potential allies by elements of the guerrillas, as illustrated in the following undated letter sent to certain « progressive » university professors in mid-1999 by an « Urban Front » of the ELN? The letter discusses the issue of different and competing understandings of history and society, and notes some positive dimensions of academic investigation and debate. It insists, however, that the analysis developed by the ELN is based on ethics, revolutionary humanism, and « a scientific understanding of society », this making it difficult to see how alternative interpretations, no matter how well documented or persuasively argued, could modify their own understanding.

The centrality of academics in the current violence in Colombia is also revealed in the growing incidence of assassination attempts against them. Academics in Medellín and other cities outside Bogotá have often been targets in the past. In late 1999 this kind of violence hit Bogotá when two university professors well known for their studies of Colombian history and violence, Dario Betancourt and Jesús Antonio Bejarano, were killed, and another, Eduardo Pizarro, a contributor to Violence in Colombia (1992), was seriously wounded. At this point, however, although theories abound and many in the academic community suspect the paramilitary right, no one knows for certain who was behind these acts.

<back to top>

Human Rights

Human Rights Abuses : A 1999 Report

Human right abuses have long been widespread in Colombia, but during the
In the 1990s they reached unprecedented levels. Perpetrators included the armed forces, the paramilitaries, and the guerrillas. We know as much as we do about these abuses because of the courageous efforts of many Colombian human rights groups such as the Intercongregational Committee for Justice and Peace and the Colombian Commission of Jurists, and the concern of international organizations such as Amnesty International.

For a long time, however, as Luis Alberto Restrepo argues in Chapter 5, most human rights organizations inside Colombia and abroad focused their primary attention on the human rights abuses of the State. In Colombia, much attention centered on massacres of rural people by paramilitary forces, often with the collaboration of the military, who claimed their targets were guerrilla sympathizers. Meanwhile, many human rights organizations ignored or downplayed the human rights violations of the guerrillas. In recent years, however, this has begun to change. The following excerpt, from the 1999 World Report of Human Rights Watch (New York, 2000), provides a balanced account of the recent record of human right abuses by all sides in the Colombian conflict and assesses efforts by the Bogotá government to protect human rights more effectively.

An Account of a Kidnap Victim

Colombia has the highest incidence of kidnapping in the world. Many of the kidnappings are the work of leftist guerrillas who defend the practice as a means of waging war and who depend on ransom money as a primary source of income. The following testimony makes a powerful case that kidnapping violates the most elemental human rights. It is taken from a work by Colombian historian Herbert Braun. The voice of the victim is Braun’s brother-in-law, Texas oilman Jake Gambini. Following months of captivity in 1988 in a remote guerrilla camp, and despairing of progress in seemingly interminable negotiations between the guerrillas and his family, Gambini began a hunger strike that eventually sped up the negotiations and led to his freedom. Following his liberation, Gambini returned to the United States. It was never established for certain which guerrilla group had held him captive.

Platforms/Negotiating Positions of the Armed Contenders

The Government

Since the 1980s, Colombian governments, with greater or lesser degrees of commitment, have endorsed the idea of negotiation with the guerrilla movements as a way to end the armed conflict. That policy, as detailed in Chapters 1 and 3, led to peace pacts with the M-19 and other smaller guerrilla groups in the early 1990s, and to the important political reforms of

Government efforts to effect a negotiated settlement with the two largest guerrilla groups, the FARC and the ELN, were stymied throughout the 1990s. At the end of the decade, however, as described in more detail below, serious negotiations began between the government and the FARC; and, by the start of the year 2000, negotiations with the ELN were also under way. These developments were made possible due to significant concessions made by the government, the most important of them a willingness to create demilitarized zones in areas of traditional guerrilla influence. Government military forces were to be withdrawn from these zones, and the zones were to become the sites of formal negotiations. Renewed government commitment to peace negotiations at the end of the 1990s not only reflected the growing power of the guerrillas. Within official circles there was also growing concern that the high levels of violence in the country were threatening the viability of the economy, and the integrity of society and the State itself.

The following document, disseminated in late 1999 by the government of Andres Pastrana, suggests the complexity of the issues involved in the government’s position and reveals the extent of the pressures, both international and domestic, facing the government at the start of the twenty-first century. Called Plan Colombia, it was part of the administration’s efforts to explain its negotiating position vis-à-vis the guerrillas, demonstrate its commitment to an international « war on drugs », and secure large-scale infusions of foreign economic assistance to reactivate the economy and strengthen the State. Although the document stresses the need for a negotiated settlement with the guerrillas, it is silent on the question of the fundamental economic and social reforms historically demanded by the guerrilla groups as a condition for peace.

The FARC

Throughout the 1990s the negotiating position of the FARC, the largest guerrilla group in Colombia, has been based on twelve points enumerated in the following document, an « open letter » sent by the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar to Congress on January 25, 1992.

In 1998, following years of ineffectual on-and-off talks between the government and the FARC, newly elected president Andrés Pastrana began an intensive effort to start serious negotiations with the guerrillas. The government made a major concession to the FARC, declaring a huge area in southeastern Colombia a zone of disengagement, which was cleared of government forces and left under the control of the FARC. Finally, on October 24, 1999, in the context of national demonstrations in which millions of Colombians pleaded for peace, negotiations began that many people hope will produce a viable peace accord between the government and the most important guerrilla group.
The ELN

The ELN, whose complete name is the Union Camilista-Ejército de Liberación Nacional, is the second largest of the Colombian guerrilla groups. The ELN is often called a «single-issue» faction because of its militant stance on the need to nationalize the petroleum industry and its strategy of winning that demand by blowing up oil pipelines and kidnapping and sometimes assassinating oil company officials and technicians. Over the years, however, the ELN has developed a comprehensive platform and negotiating stance. In general terms, it continues to endorse the twelve points outlined by the Coordinadora Guerrillera in 1992 and reproduced above. But its position has been elaborated and refined in a series of documents made public in subsequent years.

An effort to synthesize the ELN’s position is contained in the pamphlet «La paz sobre la mesa» (Bogotá, n.d.), prepared in 1999 by the Colombian Commission for National Conciliation, the Colombian Delegation of the International Red Cross, and the magazine Cambio 16 (the pamphlet also provides policy statements for the FARC and the much smaller guerrilla organization, the EPL). Parts if that synthesis—those dealing with national sovereignty, drug trafficking, and petroleum policy—are reproduced here. Readers will note a more strident tone and radical content in some ELN positions compared to those of the Coordinadora/FARC.

Paramilitary Groups

As detailed in Chapter 6, paramilitary groups, of self-defense groups as they prefer to call themselves, developed into a powerful armed force in Colombia during the 1990s. The document reproduced below, circulated in mid-1997 by the largest and most influential of these groups, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), justifies the need for self-defense organizations and claims an equal place in any negotiations between the government and the guerrillas. Although the document is repetitive and its prose often convoluted, it gradually reveals the mindset, strategy, and tactics of a potent new actor in the conflict.

Since circulating this document, the AUC, under the leadership of Carlos Castaño, has developed increasingly sophisticated policy statements on all the subjects, from human rights to agrarian reform, addressed by the guerrilla groups in their own program statements. (Readers of Spanish can sample more recent policy declarations of the AUC in «La paz sobre la mesa», cited above in the ELN section). In general, the AUC adopts a nationalist, procapitalist, but reformist stance on these questions. It is critical of the neoliberal economic policies of recent governments, of the monopoly of the two traditional parties on political power, and, most of all, of the ineffectiveness of the State and of its failure to uphold the Constitution. Despite its rhetorical support for human rights, the AUC, like the guerrilla groups often relies on force and terror to achieve its goals.
In addition to the internal forces engaged in the Colombian conflict, there is the growing presence of an external actor, the U.S. government. Military aid to Bogotá, justified by Washington as part of the effort to reduce the flow of narcotics to the United States, has grown rapidly in recent years, reaching almost $300 million annually by 1999. That made Colombia the third-largest recipient of U.S. military aid in the world (after Israel and Egypt). In January 2000 the Clinton administration announced plans to dramatically increase the level of that aid to more than $1 billion for the next biennium, a level of support which, if approved, will significantly alter the balance of contending forces in Colombia.

U.S. military aid is a highly controversial issue, both within Colombia and the United States. Criticism centers on the efficiency of, and the motives behind, Washington’s « war on drugs », on the human rights record of the Colombian military, and on the appropriateness, given the nature of the conflict and the state of current peace negotiations, of massive infusions of U.S. military aid. The following two documents illustrate a range of opinion on these issues within the United States. The first is President Clinton’s statement, released on January 11, 2000, announcing the new level of aid for Colombia. The second is a press release issued on the same day by the Center for International Policy and the Latin America Working Group, a Washington-based coalition of some sixty human rights, religious, and other organizations opposed to increased military funding for Bogotá.

Labor leaders and activists have long been a primary target of violence in Colombia, international groups monitoring these abuses estimate that more than twenty-five hundred labor activists have been assassinated since 1987. Many union leaders have been accused by right-wing forces and government officials of ties to subversive groups and drug traffickers. Such accusations are especially aimed at leaders of the powerful left-wing unions in the strategic petroleum- and banana-export sectors. The selections below illustrate the gravity of the threats facing Colombian labor and the growing international pressure for the protection of labor rights in the country today.

A Lawyer Defends Jailed Petroleum Unionists

On February 27, 1998, a noted lawyer, Eduardo Umaña Mendoza, circulated a document in Colombia and abroad that denounced the repression of leaders of the Union Sindical Obrera (USO), the oil workers’ union. Reprinted below are the introduction to the document and its last two paragraphs. In the
introductory material, Umaña denounces the widespread judicial abuses that have accompanied the efforts of the Colombian government to combat the guerrilla insurgency and crack down on the drug trade. In the penultimate paragraph he provides information on threats to his own life. The core of the document, not reproduced here, is a long, minutely detailed legal brief in which Umaña uses court documents from the proceedings against the oil workers to substantiate his general charges.

The son of Eduardo Umaña Luna, who coauthored the most influential book ever written on the Violence (*La Violencia en Colombia* [Bogotá, 1962]), Eduardo Umaña Mendoza was a long-time defender of political dissidents, trade-unionists, and relatives of the « disappeared ». On April 18, 1998, a little over six weeks after distributing the document excerpted here, Umaña Mendoza was assassinated by unidentified assailants in his office in Bogotá.

**The Killing of a Union Leader**

On December 23, 1999, César Herrera Torreglosa, a leader of one of the important banana workers’ unions, Sintrainagro, was assassinated in Ciénaga, Magdalena. Violence against banana workers has a long history in Colombia and is intimately connected to major developments in national life. Ciénaga was the site of the infamous massacre of hundreds of banana workers and their families by the army during a major strike against United Fruit in 1928. The massacre contributed to the fall of the Conservative regime and the ascent to power of the Liberal party in 1930; helped launch the political career of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who investigated it before the Colombian Congress; and inspired the most powerful scene in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the world-famous novel of Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez.

At the time of his death, Herrera Torreglosa’s union was engaged in contract negotiations with the banana employers’ association, AGUARA, which includes transnational firms that have inherited the role United Fruit once played in the oldest of the Colombian banana zones. (The newest zone, in the region of Urabá, lies on the north coast some four hundred kilometers to the southwest of Ciénaga; since the 1980s, as detailed in chapters 1 and 9, Urabá has been the scene of some of the fiercest struggles between labor and capital and between guerrilla and paramilitary forces in Colombia.) The document below, a press release from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), was put on the internet by the Colombian Labor Monitor (http://www.prairienet.org/clm), an important source for the country’s labor news.

**U.S. Labor and the Colombian Crisis**

During the Cold War decades the leadership of the largest U.S. labor confederation, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) uncritically supported the foreign policy of the U.S. government. Like the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions,
in which it played a decisive role, the AFL-CIO opposed Communist-led and Communist-influenced labor organizations and generally supported the international capitalist agenda of the government of the United States. This began to change by the late 1980s, as U.S. labor began to realize that the expansion of U.S. manufacturing corporations abroad was steadily eliminating jobs and eroding the strength of industrial unions, and as the Soviet Union entered into crisis and the Cold War came to an end. During the 1990s the U.S. labor movement became increasingly critical of the neo-liberal economic agenda of successive Washington administrations and its leaders became more vocal supporters of workers’ rights and democratic reform both at home and abroad.

These new commitments were dramatically revealed during the protests that disrupted the Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in late November and early December 1999. In alliance with radical environmentalist and progressive church and community groups, unionists paralyzed the largest port of the most trade-dependent U.S. state, joined in demonstrations calling for cancellation of the Third World debt, and helped shut down the commercial core of the city in protest over free-trade policies that the demonstrators believed threaten the world environment and labor standards. It would be a mistake to overemphasize the radical implications of U.S. labor’s current position, however; the leadership of the AFL-CIO remains beholden to the Democratic party, whose leaders continue to push the neo-liberal agenda at home and abroad.

In the following letter, addressed to the Secretary of State, the current president of the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney, expresses concern over violations of labor and human rights in Colombia. The letter provided a good overview of the current situation in Colombia and U.S. policy toward that nation from the perspective of a moderate labor leader.

<back to top>

Documents

Part 7

Drugs

Readers of this volume have seen how central the drug trade is to violent crisis facing Colombia today. Escalating demand for illegal narcotics, especially in the United States, and increasing production of coca leaves and poppies in Colombia have been accompanied by the growth of powerful, ruthlessly violent criminal organizations engaged in processing, transporting, and selling cocaine and heroin abroad. Using their enormous profits, drug traffickers have corrupted Colombian politics and at times declared war on the State itself. As detailed in Chapter 4, drug money has also helped destroy the vitality of the nation’s economy. Drug money has led to the concentration of land ownership in areas of traditional agricultural production in northern and western Colombia, and to rapid destruction of tropical forests by coca-growing small holders on the agricultural frontier in the southern and eastern parts of the country. Drug profits contributed to the rise of the paramilitary right and have helped make the leftist guerrillas rich and increasingly well
armed.

Under tremendous political and economic pressure from the United States, Bogotá’s drug policy has waged an escalating “war on drugs”, emphasizing the reduction of production over that of demand, and repression of producers, traffickers, and users over efforts at crop substitution, education, and rehabilitation. Key to these efforts in Colombia are two controversial policies, extradition and eradication. The first has cost Colombia dearly as drug traffickers vulnerable to deportation to the United States have periodically unleashed bombing campaigns against the State and innocent civilians in attempts to force the repeal of extradition. The second relies on aerial spraying of the powerful herbicide glyphosate (known commercially as Roundup). Despite its widespread use—and large-scale damage to the Colombian ecosystem—aerial spraying has not reduced the production of coca, which more that doubled between 1992 and 1998.

The abject failure of U.S. drug policy is widely recognized in Colombia today, and even political moderates, as the following two documents from the mainstream Liberal daily El Tiempo illustrate, are challenging its basic premises. The first is the lead editorial for October 8, 1999, while the second is a column by the respected journalist, Daniel Samper Pizano, published on November 10, 1999.

Documents

A Call for Peace

The vast majority of Colombians want peace and for years have been expressing that desire through a variety of established organizations – political parties, unions, church and community organizations, even theater groups. Recently, new organizations whose sole purpose is to urge an end to the war have appeared, the largest and most influential being Colombia Libre. On October 24, 1999, Colombia Libre organized the largest peace demonstrations yet seen in that country; several million people took the streets in Colombian cities and towns and many thousand more demonstrated in major cities around the world. The demonstrations were scheduled to coincide with the long-awaited opening of peace negotiations between the government of President Andrés Pastrana and the FARC in La Uribe, Meta. Many on the left did not participate in these demonstrations, which were organized by Francisco Santos, scion of the traditional Liberal family that directs El Tiempo. Others applauded the idea but believed that the armed contenders would pay little heed to marchers in the streets. Be that as it may, the demonstrations were impressive for their size, the range of social groups that participated, and the commitment of those who attended.

The following document, a large paid advertisement that appeared in the newspaper El Espectador on October 10, 1999, is an example of the publicity that preceded the march. The text was accompanied by a gruesome photograph of a massacre.
Appendix

A Comparative Statistical Note on Homicide Rates in Colombia

Andrés Villaveces

In this brief study, Andrés Villaveces breaks down statistics on homicide in Colombia and compares them to homicide rates in other countries in the Americas. The data confirm the extraordinarily high rates of homicide in Colombia in recent years. Villaveces then compares homicide rates in the United States and Colombia during the twentieth century, finding that both countries experienced two peaks of greatly increased homicide rates. In Colombia, only one of these may be drug related. In the United States, however, both coincide with efforts to prohibit the consumption of substances declared illegal: alcohol in the 1920s and early 1930s, and drugs such as cocaine in the 1980s and 1990s.