

A partial vision of Colombia?

Indeed these pages will not give a complete view of this country, one which is very appealing on so many levels.

This is simply a collection of photographs and numbers which depict real situations- usually seen in the Colombian and international media- surrounding the humanitarian situation in the country.

But it is important to be aware of these numbers and circumstances in order to grasp the complexity of the problem which faces us: the liberation of thousands of hostages still being held in Colombia, and on a more general level, to provide solidarity to the countless victims of violence in the country.



Colombia has a population of almost 44 million, the vast majority of whom, as was the case of Europe's citizens a few decades ago, dream only of peace and reconciliation.

It is a nation like so many others which has shone on the international stage in differing areas including art, literature, science and sport...

Unfortunately there is another reality, one often difficult to admit, which tarnishes the image of the country. In order to fight this other reality we must first recognize it, get to know and understand it.

Colombia : a stunted democracy.



Colombia, which is twice the size of France, has incredible natural and human resources. It is however, a country populated by poor people: 15,000 people own more than 61% of the country's wealth and 55% of its 44 million inhabitants earn less than the minimum wage.

It is a country where the people give off an air of happiness, but it is also a country where violence reigns. Fifteen thousand murders are committed each year, which is the primary cause of death among male adults. There are an estimated four thousand hit men operating in Colombia who work for those involved in the drug trade.

This follows on from Colombia being the world's largest producer of cocaine (300 to 70 tons per year) – and a surge in heroin production: some seven million US dollars of dirty money, often laundered in our territory!

Although officially Colombia has a free press, the county has the highest number of assassinated journalists in the world: at least 114 have been killed between 1985 and 2006. These killings are carried out by drug traffickers, paramilitary and guerilla groups and they largely go unpunished.

In spite of everything Colombia is officially equipped with all the formal trappings of a democratic regime; it is in fact the oldest democracy in South America. But can a country where corruption is endemic and permeates all levels of the state, where the judiciary struggles to maintain its independence and where a bloody armed conflict has been raging for 50 years, really be a genuine democracy?

Ingrid Betancourt: hostage for more than six years.



Ingrid Betancourt was held hostage by the FARC guerilla movement since February 2002 and was freed on July 2nd 2008 as a result of an operation mounted by the Colombian secret service. Only the official version of this event is in the public domain at present.

Ingrid's captivity gave rise to a new awareness of the Colombian situation; she put a face and a name to more than 3,000 kidnap victims whose fate previously seemed to bother few, even within Colombia itself.

The mobilization that occurred in relation to Ingrid Betancourt's case posed a political problem. The question of responsibility and of negotiation arose, but above all it was a humanitarian problem, one which required widespread solidarity and support to address it.

More than 3,000 kidnap victims in Colombia.



This is a real humanitarian and political scandal: thousands of men, women and children –sometimes babies- are still victims of kidnapping in Colombia at this moment in time.

The media campaign resulting from Ingrid Betancourt's case gave a false impression in Europe of this plague afflicting Colombia. Many here thought that the kidnap victims were political hostages for the most part, and that they were generally held by FARC guerillas.

In reality, apart from a few exceptions, all the kidnap victims are purely held as 'economic' hostages. They are abducted by criminal gangs or by one or other illegal armed group, and will only be released when the families pay a ransom, which is often exorbitant.

It is believed that currently FARC and ELN (another Marxist guerilla group) are holding between seven and eight hundred hostages. The remaining victims were abducted by criminal groups and their kidnappings are not politically motivated. Between ten and twenty per cent of kidnap victims are less than 18 years old.

The testimony given by those who have been freed, and in the case of the 'political' hostages held by FARC through the proof of life videos released by their kidnapers themselves, clearly shows that in almost all cases hostages are held in appalling conditions. They are malnourished, deprived of medical attention and sometimes chained like animals or forced to endure cramped conditions for long periods of time.

The 'exchangeable' hostages.



Politicians, elected representatives, military personnel and figures of public authority make up a group of captives whom the FARC guerilla movement (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) is using as a bargaining chip. Their freedom is offered in exchange for the release of several hundred imprisoned guerilla fighters.

At the time of Ingrid's kidnapping in February 2002 there were 61 'exchangeable' hostages in captivity. Since then some have succeeded in escaping while others have died from tropical diseases and from neglect. Some others were killed during rescue attempts by the Colombian army or were killed by their captors.

Since the beginning of 2008 many of these hostages have been liberated following the intervention of President Chavez of Venezuela and the Colombian opposition senator Piedad Cordoba. Fifteen of them, including Ingrid Betancourt, were freed in July 2008 as a result of an operation mounted by the Colombian secret service.

The remaining civilians who were part of this particular group of hostages were freed in February 2009. However FARC are still holding a number of military and police personnel whom they consider to be prisoners of war. As of September 2009 they number 22 individuals and include the two longest held hostages: Pablo Emilio Moncayo and Jose Libio Martinez, both in captivity since December 21st 1997.

In September 2009 the representative to Colombia of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights declared that 'the use of kidnapping as an instrument of war, the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of hostages and prolonged captivity could be considered as crimes against humanity'.

The only hope for families: a humanitarian agreement.



Until February 2009, the 'exchangeable' hostages held by FARC consisted of both political figures such as Ingrid Betancourt, and prisoners in uniform from the ranks of the military and police forces.

In the case of the latter, guerilla fighters, soldiers and policemen, organizing a prisoner exchange could be seen as a straightforward application of International Humanitarian Law. Many such prisoner exchanges have already taken place in the past in Colombia between the government and the guerilla movement.

But this type of exchange could never involve political hostages who were civilians. Since 2008 with the impetus injected by the Colombian senator Piedad Cordoba and the group of intellectuals "Colombianos por la Paz", all political hostages held by FARC have now been liberated without an exchange having taken place.

However at this moment in time, the conclusion of a humanitarian agreement unfortunately seems very unlikely. FARC have showed a willingness to negotiate and have dropped many of their initial conditions (the creation of a demilitarized zone) but the government still refuses all talk of negotiations and demands that the FARC guerillas free all their prisoners on a unilateral basis and without any exchange of prisoners.

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Armed conflict which has lasted more than 50 years.



This internal conflict which results in ten of thousands of victims each year does not take the form of co-ordinated battles, rather it has its roots in deep social and material inequality, in a culture of violence and in the practice of out of date politics.

It is a war which denies its true character. According to President Uribe who, post 9/11, aligned himself with the 'anti-terrorist crusade', 'it is not a question of armed conflict in Colombia but of a straightforward terrorist threat'.

It is not a question of a civil war, but of a war waged against civilians. They are the main victims of the conflict between the guerilla fighters, the Colombian army and the paramilitary groups.

It is above all a dirty war in which all the armed protagonists, both legal and illegal, violate the principle of differentiating between combatants and non-combatants to the detriment of the lives and the dignity of the civilian population.

The guerilla movement of the extreme left.



At the beginning of the sixties they protested against the established social and political order of the day and were advocating revolution. However they have not taken into account the geopolitical changes which have occurred worldwide since that period.

They fund themselves principally through kidnapping, racketeering and extortion; a large part of their income coming from the taxes that they impose on the drug trade.

The main groups are FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) who kidnapped Ingrid Betancourt and who are still holding several 'exchangeable' hostages and ELN (National Liberation Army).

Even if FARC have recently endured some devastating blows (the death of their historic leader Manuel Marulanda, the execution inside Ecuador of Raul Reyes, their international spokesman, by the Colombian army and equally the spectacular liberation of Ingrid Betancourt, the three US hostages, all freed along with 11 others in an operation carried out by the Colombian secret service) they are still a serious force to be reckoned with and are well entrenched in the country.

Extreme right-wing paramilitaries



Set up originally by large property owners and drug traffickers, they controlled 60% of drug trafficking in Colombia. They are in effect an auxiliary of the army used to carry out the “dirty war” against rebel forces, and are, according to Amnesty International, responsible for 70% of Human Rights infringements in this country.

To date they have admitted 21,000 murders (of opponents, left wing militants, trade-unionists, natives and rural people...), and about 2,000 communal graves have been found. This is a drop in the ocean of acts of violence in Colombia, according to Human Rights protection organisations that think that the figures should be nearer 70,000 victims.

In 2005, a “Justice and Peace” law, proposed by President Uribe and heavily criticised by many human rights organisations, guarantees them a high level of impunity in exchange for demobilisation.

Since then, there has been a renewal of paramilitary activity with similar elements seen in the early 80’s; drug trafficking, extortion, summary killings, land - theft with forced displacement of people and intervention in the management by the State.

Paramilitaries have made their way into the political life of Colombia: in 2008 the “para-politics” scandal broke, that involved about 80 members of the elected Assembly- and about 90% of these were associated with President Uribe – who are now being pursued or sentenced for their paramilitary links.

Security Forces



Strongly supported by the USA and beneficiaries of a military budget representing in 2007, 6.1% of the Gross National Product (one of the highest ratios in the world – it was 3.6% in 1999), the security forces are, nearly half a million strong, the most important and best equipped armies in Latin America.

In Colombia, all parties, both legal and illegal, have been responsible for Human Rights violations. Unfortunately, this is also true of certain units in the Colombian army, who have often had dubious links with left-wing paramilitary groups.

Colombian NGOs have regularly condemned “rapes”, “murders” and “unlawful killings” carried out by the army against the native people of this country.

In 2009 the scandal of “false positives” came to light: security forces kidnapped people, made them put on military rebel uniforms and then killed them “simply” to show that the Army was waging the “war against terrorism”.

According to the official line, these were “isolated cases” that should not be blamed on the army. In June 2009, Philip Alston, the special UN investigator on unlawful killings, clearly accused the Colombian Army of having systematically killed civilians and of not having admitted the “extent” of the problem. He states “the number of cases, their geographical locations and the number of military units involved indicate that these killings were carried out more or less in a systemic manner, by a significant number of army personnel”.

More than four million displaced



Since 1985, more than four million people have been forced to leave their home under pressure from armed groups – mainly paramilitaries, but also guerrilla forces and the Colombian army. More than half of all displaced civilians are children.

The numbers continue to rise: in 2008, 380,000 new cases of displacement were registered. According to a recent report from Amnesty International, Colombia ranks second in world rankings in the number of displaced people, almost on a par with Sudan.

There is a significant number of afro-Colombian and native people among the displaced. In many cases, abandoned lands were immediately “taken over” to plant, illegally, but with State complicity, huge plantations of African palm-oil on the communal ancestral lands belonging to native afro-Colombian communities.

The programme for “rural resettlement” that the government set up is in danger of allowing “demobilised” paramilitaries to maintain their grip on millions of hectares of land they have stolen.

Hundreds of thousands of people must now choose to remain far from their homes, or return and live with the very people who tortured, raped or killed their relatives.

Thousands of “disappeared”.



According to Amnesty International, “while the vast majority of Latin American countries have overcome the sad story of disappearances, Colombia continues to be the only country where forced disappearances are ongoing and periodic”.

The number of people who have “disappeared” in Colombia in recent years is higher than one would think. In 2000 3,500 cases of “disappearances” were investigated. In 2008 the number rose to 15,600. The International Federation of Human Rights leagues and other NGOs now talk about more than 30,000 cases.

Arrested by the police, army or paramilitaries because of their social or trade union activities or their work on behalf of human rights or alleged support for the guerrilla, these people then disappear without trace. Currently it is thought that one forced disappearance is carried out every second day.

Another type of “disappearance” has recently come to light : the “*false positives*”. In 2009, enquiries were carried out into a thousand cases involving nearly 2000 people kidnapped by the security forces, then killed after having been made to put on rebel uniforms.

Human Rights Defenders threatened



Everywhere in Colombia, even in the most remote regions, human rights defenders go about their work bravely. Thanks to them, it has been possible to have many human rights violations committed in the country brought to the attention of the public.

But in order to discourage them a climate of fear been created. These activists are the target of many threats, acts of intimidation, defamation campaigns, etc. Most of these attacks are carried out by some members of the security forces and by their paramilitary allies; other atrocities have been committed by the guerrilla.

In March 2009, Amnesty International questioned Colombian authorities, accusing them of using the country's justice system of blocking the lawful work of human rights defenders who are regularly threatened, attacked physically and taking proceedings which were groundless. Their attackers are rarely brought to justice. These attacks are aimed at gagging and preventing the reporting on human rights violations and on the links that exist between security and paramilitary forces.

These attacks are a feature of the conflict that has been going on in Colombia for over 40 years. In a one year, 2008, more than 10 human rights defenders and 46 trade unionists were killed.

Native people; persecuted



Colombia's native population numbers about one million, with 18 ethnic groups with less than 200 members and 18 others with less than 500. These people are facing extinction and are also victims of a struggle for their land and its resources,

and are targeted by all the country's armed groups: military, paramilitary and guerrilla.

This violence is not only the result of activities linked to the sale of guns or drugs. Their lands are coveted in order to set up bio-fuel and mineral projects and they are subject to forced displacements through such tactics as massacres.

Attacked by the army that forces them to co-operate in the fight against the FARC, murdered by FARC who kill them because they co-operate with the army, persecuted by paramilitaries paid by political and economic interests, and hounded by drug traffickers and arms dealers, the native population often have no other choice but to leave their villages.

However, laws that have been inserted into the constitution have been put forward to improve their lot. They state that the native peoples have control of the zones where they live (reservations) and that the land and what's beneath it belongs to them.

But the State itself violates the Constitution and is frequently one of the private illegal groups responsible for attacking native groups with the agreement and even the hidden permission of the State, in order to dispossess them of their lands and its resources.

Rape as an instrument of war



In Colombia, all those who are armed : government security forces, paramilitary and guerrilla groups, use sexual violence as an instrument to intimidate and terrorise women.

Women are killed, persecuted, tortured and forced to bear guns, just like any other man, but they are also victims of barbaric forms of sexual violence that have become widespread in the armed conflict, in which rape has become the norm and a very effective weapon.

A lot of women refuse to accuse anyone formally of these crimes because they dread the revenge, the shame and they even fear for their own lives and those of their relatives. As well, the complete lack of confidence in the Colombian justice system means that even those women who would wish to lodge a complaint are prevented from so doing.

Following pressure by Women's Human Rights organisations, the State opened an inquiry into 183 cases of sexual violence against women in the Colombian conflict. However, when one considers that about two million women have been displaced in Colombia, one in five of whom was forced to leave her home because of sexual violence, one can estimate that there could probably be about 400,000 cases of sexual crimes committed in the country, that remain largely unpunished.

The "Peace communities"



Some people living in country communities who were caught in the cross-fire between armed parties (guerrilla, paramilitaries, army) took the path of non-violence, over ten years ago, and are supported by NGO action groups, both

from Colombia and abroad.

Faced with the confiscation of their lands, with attacks on their natural habitat and culture, they came together as communities to protect their non involvement in the conflict and to open a path to democracy and peace.

The peace communities who live in a self-sufficient manner, today number more than 5000. But their member have often paid dearly for their principled position; these "non-violent communities" have been for years targeted by Colombian security forces, paramilitaries and the guerrilla.

The most well known of these communities, that of San Jose de Apartadó, was set up in March 1997. Since then, more than 170 of their members have been killed or have been victims of forced disappearance. In 2009, the community commemorated the fourth anniversary of the killing of eight of their members, on 21 February, 2005. The judicial inquiry found that security forces and paramilitaries were involved in these murders.