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Colombia

Paramilitarisation

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After a decade of human rights abuses, the situation in Colombia is getting even worse. Human rights organisations say that 1996 "will go into history as the worst year for Colombia in terms of human rights" [1] The country now has more than 920,000 internally displaced people: more than the combined refugee population of Zaire, Burundi and Rwanda. At the centre of the declining situation is the state's use of paramilitary groups as a central component of its repressive strategy.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/fe10.jpg>]

Between 1970 and 1979 there were 59,378 homicides in Colombia, of which 1.4% were political assassinations. Between 1980 and 1989 the number of murders rose by 134% to 141,232. Of these 11,043 (7.8%) were political. In other words, there were more than ten times as many political assassinations in the 1980s, compared to the previous decade. In the first half of the 1990s there were 11,471 political assassinations, slightly more than the total for the preceding ten years.

In February 1995, the European Conference on Human Rights in Colombia calculated that "since 1988, on average, seven people are assassinated on a daily basis for political reasons and a further three are killed in combat as part of the internal armed conflict. Every second day a person is 'disappeared' and another is killed through 'social cleansing'. Arbitrary detentions are frequent and torture is endemic. Since 1986, approximately 20,000 people have been killed for political reasons or presumed political reasons.,and 600,000 have been forced to flee from their homes in order to protect their lives. These statistics outdo by far the 17 years of military dictatorship in Chile". [2]

Seventy percent of these violations can be attributed to the armed forces, organisms of state security and the paramilitaries, and 30% can be attributed to the insurgent groups and the militia.

Deteriorating situation

An openly militarist mentality is abroad in the Colombian state and society, to such a degree that we can talk of the resurrection of a constitutional dictatorship. The space won for democratic ideas, such as controlling the state's ability to declare states of emergency and repress social conflicts or our ability to subordinate the military to civilian control or institutionalise measures to protect our rights which have been threatened, is increasingly reduced.

This is certainly the conclusion to be drawn from the government's proposals for the reform of the 1991 Constitution in respect of human rights. On the one hand there are a series of proposals about the character and use of states of emergency, which taken together go against the Commission of Human Rights and what has been stipulated by the American Convention on Human Rights. In general, they want the state of emergency to have a more permanent character and to remove the constitutional controls on its declaration and they also wish to give the military unlimited rights to judicially investigate civilians.

In the period covered by the last state of emergency, November 1995 to November 1996, Special Zones of Public Order were created. Amongst other things this now permits the military and the police to restrict the right of free movement and residency as well as allowing them to make arrests and house searches without a warrant. [3] The crushing effect of these measures in the east of the country can be clearly seen:

"The demonstrators were treated as wartime enemies, which manifested itself in acts of vandalism by the army, such as the dynamiting of a road, the mass arbitrary detention of more than 400 people, the restriction of food supplies, the subordination of mayors and governors to the authority of the military commanders and the intimidation and destitution of a judge who dared to defend the rights of the people who were being subjected to a military siege." [4]

Also there have been proposals made by the military which have been blessed by certain sectors in parliament, in an attempt to strengthen the military. Amongst the proposals are the abolition of the power of the public prosecutors and the Attorney General to investigate members of the armed forces, as well as trying to institutionalise the power of the forces of the state to detain anyone suspected of disturbing public order for seven days without an arrest warrant. Meanwhile, there is the creation of "National Militias" (civilian support groups for the army).

The paramilitary strategy

We are not just dealing with a simple attempt to promote death squads as just another mode of repressive operations. In Colombia "paramilitarism" is a series of factors which taken together form a *strategy* promoted by the military to carry out a counter insurgent war against any form of opposition with the aim of protecting and encouraging the expansion of the latifundias (plantations).

Paramilitarism takes shape from the moment that the military assumes a determining role, expressed by a certain politicisation, in favour of a particular social group; and when the participation of civilians in repressive tasks supposedly reserved for a specialised institution is encouraged.

In other words, paramilitarism constitutes a deformation of the rule of law. It is a hidden, underground strategy. Starting from a "legal" position (state power) the powers-that-be resort to illegal actions, in such a manner that there is no proof or public record, on the basis of which their activity can be monitored, evaluated or challenged. Their techniques of covering up can be so good that the puppet appears to be a totally autonomous being. But this charade is only possible thanks to the perverse skills of the "ventriloquist".

The November 1996 Human Rights Watch report sums up the Colombian experience of paramilitarism, and places it in a clearer perspective:

"The military-paramilitary association forms part of the current Colombian reality. Human Rights Watch has been able to prove that the collaboration between military intelligence, military commanders at division, brigade, battalion level and the paramilitaries continues as envisaged by Order 200-05/91 (Secret plan for the reorganisation of Colombian military intelligence). Basing ourselves on our interviews with witnesses and ex-members of the network, investigations by the Government and the abundant material compiled by human rights groups and journalists; we believe that the staff of the Colombian armed forces continues to organise, encourage and mobilise the paramilitaries in a hidden war against those suspected of supporting the guerrillas." [5]

In 1978 the paramilitary group Triple A (Anti-Communist American Action) emerged. In reality, Triple A was directly associated with the Military's Charri Solano Intelligence and Counter Intelligence Battalion BINCI. At the beginning of the 1980's the paramilitary group MAS was integrated into the process of repression and counter insurgency, in the area of Magdalena Medio.

According to the office of the High Commissioner for Peace there is now a paramilitary presence in 450 municipalities. In the North West of Colombia, the paramilitaries are the dominant armed force. And they no longer

act in a dispersed manner. At their head is the ACCU (Self Defence Groups of Cordoba and Uraba) led by Carlos Castano.

In the middle of 1996, the paramilitary "Self Defence Movement of Colombia" held its third National Summit. Apart from refining its criteria for capturing suspected guerrillas and kidnapping their relatives, delegates reaffirmed their identity.

"The guerrillas know that the paramilitary phenomenon is irreversible. They know well how hard we have hit them. But our movement continues to be outside the law and politics, despite the fact that many of our collaborators, administrators, helpers, financiers and orientators take part in political activity. The discrediting of the Samper administration presents us with a magnificent opportunity to increase our work as combatants of the anti-subversive struggle. One could say that the operational incapacity of the armed forces due to the pressure of human rights organisations and other institutions such as the Attorney General's Office and the Public Prosecutors places us in the vanguard of the struggle." [6]

The explosion of violence in 1996 carries three lessons. There is an "almost perfect" correlation between the reduction of abuses directly attributable to the forces of the State and the increase in abuses directly imputable to paramilitaries. The paramilitaries' political statements in recent months confirm their aim of establishing themselves as the third force in the Colombian conflict, alongside the regime and the leftist guerrillas. There are also signs of a sustained offensive to pressure the population in many areas to elect mayors sympathetic to the paramilitaries in the forthcoming (October 1997) municipal elections.

[1] Gallon, Gustavo. Autoritarismo en Ascenso. Comision Colombiana de Juristas, 1996, p.i

[2] Coordinacion Belga por Colombia. European Conference on Human Rights in Colombia.

[3] Decrees 717 and 900.

[4] Gallon, Gustavo. Op. Cit., p.3.

[5] Human Rights Watch. Colombia. The Networks of Assassins in Colombia. The military-paramilitary association and the USA, Washington, Nov. 1996, p.7.

[6] Mimeographed Document. III Cumbre Nacional Movimiento Autodefensas de Colombia, p.6-7.