

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN COLOMBIAISSUE

Colombia has faced serious internal problems in recent years, including a war with drug traffickers and an ongoing civil conflict situation. There have been many reported cases of human rights abuses related to these internal problems and Colombia has been a focus of international attention due to the nature and extent of its human rights problems.

BACKGROUND

Despite its well established democratic political system, Colombia has experienced a great deal of internal violence in recent years. The assassination of three Presidential candidates prior to the 1990 elections underscored the seriousness of politically motivated violence. Most killings were manifestations of widespread social violence of which kidnapping, disappearances and extortion are also manifestations.

Since the election of Cesar Gaviria as President in 1990, the Colombian Government has taken a number of steps to reduce violence and to improve the situation of human rights in the country. The Colombian Government established a Constituent Assembly which revised the national constitution. Relevant changes included the establishment of the 'Fiscalia-General' which will verify complaints and ensure that they are brought before the courts, the creation of the office of 'Defensor del Pueblo' (Peoples' Defender), the placing of limitations on the Government's ability to invoke state of siege legislation (the Government lifted its seven year old state of siege this summer) , and the further entrenchment of human rights. The Government has also taken steps to encourage the pacification of groups engaged in violence. Thus it entered into negotiations with the remaining guerrilla groups in an attempt to stem the violence resulting from confrontations between the military and the guerrillas. (These talks are currently suspended). It also adopted a flexible position with regard to drug traffickers, thus encouraging many of the major traffickers to submit to justice. In addition, the Government took steps to improve the administration of justice, developed a national strategy on violence and appointed a civilian Minister of Defence.

The major actors in the violence and killing in Colombia are the guerrillas, the military, para-military and self defence groups and criminal organizations involved in the drug trade. The main violations of human rights have often resulted from confrontations involving these groups. Civilians caught in the cross-fire are often forced to flee their homes or are made victims of intimidation, extortion and disappearances. Torture is sometimes