

pearances against candidates, serving mayors and councillors; a high degree of intolerance towards opposition parties and movements; and procedural irregularities and violations of the right to presumption of innocence.

The narrative on aspects of international humanitarian law addresses such issues as the use of civilians as "human shields" by combatants seeking to protect themselves from enemy fire, indiscriminate attacks on populated areas, damage to civilian property, massacres, and the use of landmines by all parties over the course of 30 years of conflict which now pose serious and, at times, lethal dangers to the civilian population.

Referring to attacks on civilian property, the Office acknowledged that not all attacks against civilian property are covered by the humanitarian norms set out in Protocol II Additional to the Geneva Conventions, but expressed its concern at the systematic practice of acts of this nature. The report refers to attacks on oil pipelines by insurgent groups that cause oil spills which seriously damage agricultural areas, sources of drinking water and inhabited areas and cites information provided by the People's Advocate indicating that there were 636 attacks on oil pipelines by guerrilla groups between 1986 and 1996 which, in two cases, resulted in the loss of life.

Commentary is also provided on attacks against public installations such as power stations, attacks against medical professionals and facilities, the extrajudicial execution of civilians who assisted injured guerrilla fighters, and the recruitment of children under 15 years of age by various parties in the armed conflict.

Concerning economic, social, and cultural rights, the report notes that there had not been a capacity in the Office to carry out a detailed follow-up on these rights and that no complaints of violations of these rights were received. The report nonetheless includes observations based on a "joint country evaluation document" prepared by the UN agencies in Colombia, referring to, *inter alia*: the almost complete lack of a tradition of effective social protection and inadequate integration of the social fabric; the lack of a collective awareness of the universal nature of economic, social and cultural rights or of the social obligation to avoid discrimination in the ability to exercise them; the fact that the level of poverty affecting a large part of the population is cause for concern; a lack of effective social protection to guarantee a minimum level of subsistence in such areas as housing, food, education and health care, as well as a healthy environment; the fact that income distribution in Colombia is among the most uneven in Latin America, with the richest 25 per cent of the population earning 30 times more than the poorest 25 per cent; the fact that Colombia is one of the few countries in Latin America where income distribution has worsened in this decade; the fact that the national illiteracy rate is 10 per cent and very unevenly distributed, with the rate being as high as 25 per cent in some regions; and, the fact that, compared with other countries in the region, expenditure on primary and secondary education is proportionally much lower than on higher education.

The report notes: there is a high level of discrimination in the delivery of health care on the basis of the income and employment status of health care users; continuing problems related to access to housing despite the system of housing purchase subsidies; the high rates of interest on housing loans as another restriction on access to housing, as well as the high levels of speculation in the prices of urban land; the fact that basic services such as drinking water and sanitation are scarce, particularly in rural areas, although the hydro network has been expanded; the high rate of unemployment in 1997 (12 per cent); the number of children and young people who work, estimated at nearly 2.5 million children under 18 and nearly 1 million under 14, with long working days and remuneration below the minimum legal wage; the continuing steady deterioration in the environment and the depletion of natural resources; water and air pollution on an enormous scale; a lack of a broad awareness of the need for the protection and rational use of natural resources; and the abandonment of large tracts of farming land because of the violence, affecting access to and availability of food.

The section of the report addressing what are considered "particularly serious aspects" of the situation of human rights and international humanitarian law refers to the paramilitary phenomenon and the "Convivir" associations which were declared illegal in 1989 but for which no provision was made in terms of dismantlement. The report states that during 1997, the action of the paramilitary groups continued to spread throughout the country and to areas under guerrilla control, resulting in terror among a civilian population faced with selective executions and massacres, torture, disappearances, illegal checks on identity or travel, and restriction of access to food and medicine. The report then states that on the basis of the complaints received and observation of the phenomenon in the field, the Office's view was that a considerable number of the acts of violence by the paramilitaries are carried out with the tolerance, if not actual complicity, of public servants, particularly members of the armed forces and the National Police.

The report notes that the problems raised by paramilitary groups and their activities are compounded by the existence of groups of armed civilians who are legally authorized to carry out activities similar to those of the armed forces and police. Special Decree No. 356 of 1994 established "special private security and vigilante services" (Convivir) and authorized them to ensure their own security in high-risk areas and to use combat weapons. The report notes that the "Convivirs" have been stripped of that name but it remains difficult to distinguish between the activities of paramilitary groups and those of certain "Convivir" associations. The report also notes that the Office received reliable information referring to the participation of known paramilitaries in "Convivir" associations, some of whom have arrest warrants outstanding against them. The associations have operated in some places with the exclusive and irregular support of governors of departments or military commanders and criminal investigations into their activities have dealt with