

COLOMBIAISSUE

In tandem with steadily increasing activity by illegal armed groups, the human rights situation in Colombia deteriorated further in 1998.

BACKGROUND

There is cautious optimism that Colombia's nascent **peace process** will in the medium term have a positive impact on human rights in Colombia. However, it has come to be accepted by all parties that it is unrealistic to negotiate a cease-fire at this time, and in fact all of Colombia's principal illegal armed groups (FARC, ELN and paramilitaries) stepped up their activities in 1998, making it the most violent year in modern Colombian history.

Kidnapping represents the most frequent abuse of human rights and international humanitarian law committed by the **guerrilla**. Increasingly, the rebels kidnap not just for the purpose of financial extortion but as a means of exerting pressure on local politicians. 2216 Colombians were reported kidnapped in 1998, a 30% increase over 1997. Of these, 1800 were for "economic reasons" (ransom), and the rest for political ends. At the time of Congressional elections, in early 1998, the guerrilla made a point of targeting elected politicians and candidates for political office. The number of foreigners kidnapped was 42, (cf. 34 in 1997), among them two Canadians. The ELN created enormous environmental damage with its ever-increasing attacks on pipelines and was responsible for one attack (Machuca) that left 80 campesinos dead in a resultant fireball. The FARC began using unconventional weapons of high and indiscriminate destructive power and launched attacks on locations of no evident strategic value (e.g. Mitú), apparently with the aim of kidnapping or killing as many police as possible.

In spite of these activities, illegal right-wing **paramilitaries** represent the principal source of major abuses. The paramilitary movement is growing and is increasingly coordinated; "fronts" have sprung up in regions far from the movement's original stronghold in Córdoba. NGOs place the blame for major human rights abuses as follows: Police/Army 7.5%; paramilitaries 70%; Guerrilla 22.5%; with the trend continuing towards increased abuses by the paramilitaries and decreasing abuses by state agencies. Just as peace talks between the government and the rebel FARC began on January 7 1999, paramilitaries launched an unprecedented rampage of violence leaving over 130 civilians dead in 72 hours. The principal targets of the paramilitaries are civilian peasants perceived to be sympathetic to the guerrilla.

The **impunity** with which the paramilitaries operate is particularly worrying. Responsive measures by the government to the wave of violence in January have yet to have any effect. There does not appear to be a concerted strategy of support for the paramilitaries at the highest levels of the military, but there have over the past year been many instances of suspected collusion at local levels, and sins of omission are frequent. More positively, arrests of paramilitaries are becoming more common; most of these have come as a result of investigations by the Attorney General (Fiscalía).

In 1998 the plight of **human rights and union activists** reached a crisis level. A number of prominent human rights lawyers and a senior union leader were assassinated. The kidnapping