

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN COLOMBIA

ISSUE

Colombia has faced serious internal problems in recent years, including a war with drug traffickers and a persistent internal guerrilla conflict. It 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. In 1991, there were over 30,000 violent deaths. In the first half of 1992, human rights organizations recorded 19 cases of torture, 89 kidnappings and 33 disappearances. Three judges investigating links between drug cartels and the 1990 murder of a presidential candidate were all killed despite being given special protection. The extent of unemployment and rural poverty fuel the drug trade and the violence associated with it. The major actors in the violence and killing in Colombia are the guerrillas, the military, paramilitary and self defense groups and criminal organizations involved in the drug trade. Cooperation between guerrillas and drug traffickers is on the increase. Civilians are victims of intimidation, extortion and disappearances. Torture is sometimes used to extract information. Some prosecutions have been pursued with a few individuals in the army and the police being found guilty.

Since his election in 1990, President Cesar Gaviria has strived to reduce violence and to improve the human rights situation. A new and very liberal constitution was approved in 1991. Several guerrilla groups were persuaded to abandon their arms in favour of normal political life. The Fiscalia General was established to verify complaints and ensure that they are brought before the courts. The office of Defensor Del Pueblo (Peoples' Defender), a sort of human rights ombudsman, was created and human rights were further entrenched. It operates in conjunction with the Procuraduria (Attorney General) which has responsibility for the legal protection of human rights. Finally, limitations were placed on the Government's ability to invoke state of emergency legislation; the current measures are being reviewed by Congress. A position prohibiting extradition was adopted with regard to drug traffickers, encouraging many to submit to justice. A national security strategy on violence was developed and a civilian Minister of Defense was appointed.

Despite these reforms, the two main guerrilla groups (the Army of National Liberation and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) rejected the olive branch extended by the Government. In June the Army of National Liberation (ELN) announced a "total war" against the government's economic policies and threatened to attack state institutions, multinational corporations and the media. Since then, the ELN fulfilled its threats by blowing up oil pipelines, ambushing and killing police and destroying installations at Medellin's airport. Other rebel groups have followed suit. In response, the Government declared that it would not participate in talks again unless they were clearly aimed at true