

COLOMBIA IN A NUTSHELL

GEOGRAPHY:

Colombia is the fourth largest country in Latin America after Brazil, Argentina and Mexico and occupies a land area of 1.14 million square kms, slightly larger than Ontario. It is located at the northwestern tip of South America and thus has extensive coastlines on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Upon entering Colombia the Andes mountains break into three separate ranges running south to north. As a result of this rugged topography the climate ranges from tropical lowlands and jungle to temperate altiplanos and snow-capped mountains.

Most of Colombia's 30.6 million people live on the mountain slopes, in the fertile valleys between the ranges, and on the savannah (altiplano) of Bogota. Life expectancy at birth averages 67 years and the adult literacy rate is 88 percent.

The major cities are the capital, Bogotá, with an estimated population of six million; Medellín, 2.5 million; Cali, 1.6 million; and Barranquilla, one million. For administrative purposes Colombia is divided into 23 departments (provinces), three intendencias and five commissariats (commonly known as the National Territories), plus the Special District of Bogotá.

POLITICS:

The Republic of Colombia won its independence from Spain in 1810. It has a presidential form of government with a division of powers among the executive, legislative and judicial branches similar to that of the United States.

The Executive Branch is headed by a President elected by popular vote for a four-year term. Immediate reelection is constitutionally prohibited. The President appoints Cabinet Ministers and Departmental Governors. President Virgilio Barco's term of office expires in August 1990.

The Legislative Branch is made up of a bicameral Congress of 112 Senators and 199 members of the Chamber of Representatives. There are two main political parties, the Liberals and the Social Conservatives. A small third party, the leftist Patriotic Union, was formed following peace talks between the Government and guerrilla groups in 1985.

Colombia has the oldest history of continuous guerrilla activity in the western hemisphere. Nevertheless, the country seems to have adapted to levels of violence which would be considered unusual elsewhere and its democracy has been relatively stable since the last military government left office in 1956.