

COLOMBIA PRIMER

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(Note: Although this report was written in 2003, it continues to provide a historic background and analysis of the ongoing events in Colombia.)

PART I

Colombia is a nation steeped in violence. Almost since inception, her people have been quicker with the sword than the pen. Unfortunately, this trend continues even today. To fully understand the violent situation in present-day Colombia, one must go back in history to the 1930s.

The Colombia of the 1930s was something more typical of Spain and the Old World, than that of the New World. Laws regarding land ownership particularly were still patterned on the ancestral system with peasants working for land barons. These peasants stood little chance, if any, of one day having a plot of their own to work and cultivate their own profits.

The political situation at this time consisted of two primary groups, the Liberals and the Conservatives. However, as the seeds of Communism began to germinate in enclaves around the world, the Colombian peasants, hungry for any ideology that would help raise them up in status a notch or two, embraced it immediately. As a result, two offshoots of the Liberal Party quickly emerged. The Communist Party was founded in 1930 and three years later arrived the National Unity of the Revolutionary Left, both eagerly awaiting all the prosperity this new Communism would bring.

With these new organizations, the notion of land reform spread like wildfire, quickly encompassing the entire country. As one can imagine, however, these newfangled ideas weren't so readily accepted by the elite and a power struggle ensued, rather peacefully at first. But by the 1940s, it was readily apparent to those with great dreams of a quick re-distribution of land titles, that mere talk just wasn't going to cut it. In 1946, the Conservatives regained power after a long and rather lackluster career of Liberals in power. What little land reform gain that was made was quickly erased by the new laws of the Conservatives, putting land and power solidly back in the hands of the elite. Protests began in earnest. These same protests turned to demonstrations, which turned to violence. And, as violence so often does, it polarized the various unions and political parties until sides were drawn up. Territories were being disputed and the whole political pot was headed for the proverbial boil.

And boil did it ever. In 1948 liberal land reform leader Jorge Eliaser Gaitan was gunned down in Bogotá and horrendous riots began before his body even hit the ground. What began that day was one of the most violent periods in the history of the Western Hemisphere as a civil war erupted between the warring factions. La Violencia lasted officially from 1948 to 1958, although some historians consider the period to last until 1964 and the birth of the guerillas. However it is figured, upwards of 300,000 Colombians died during this bloody political and geographical war.

In the midst of the senseless carnage of La Violencia, there were several noteworthy events. In the early 50s, the Colombian government, in an effort to get a handle on the wild liberals, began issuing arms to the Conservative peasants and other citizens. The Liberals, eager to flex their might against the government quickly founded an army of 10,000 men in the eastern plains of Colombia as a response. A William Wallace-like wave of inspiration spread like wildfire across the country and, within months, small anti-government militias had sprung up, much to the government's dismay.

Those in power saw the potential ruin of their country as imminent and in 1953 elected General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to the presidency. It was during this time that the violence had reached proportions large enough to pique the interest of the till-then quiet Uncle Sam. The U.S. was deep in the anti-communist phase of its history and, hot on the heels of McCarthy's allegations, was eager to back Rojas in Colombia. It was a simple way for the US to display its dogged determination to defeat Communism while at the same time not disrupting the sensitive political environment back home. The US rained money on Rojas and he used every penny in an attempt to bomb the liberal militias back to the proverbial

stone-age. Instead, they ran deep into the jungles of the south and east to avoid the planes overhead. There they formed small communities and began to eke out an existence and cultivate their hatred for the establishment. (Not too different from what was beginning in the US.)

The 1960s arrived and with it the counterculture - Colombian style! The small militias began to refer to themselves as guerillas. Castro took over every square inch of his island and the Cuban Revolutionary wave was in full swing. It was swallowed whole in the jungles of Colombia. Marxist-Leninist ideas began being adopted as an ideology by which to guide the Colombian revolutionary groups.

It seemed General Rojas could read the writing on the wall and didn't like what he saw. In 1964 he launched a particularly hellacious bombing attack on a few guerilla encampments and followed that up with a 16,000-man ground force. It was almost as if Rojas feel victory slipping away despite his best efforts and he fought with one last dying push. The army did take the guerilla camps but after they had all but been abandoned. About 43 of the die-hard guerilla fighters and two of their very young leaders escaped, and headed for the safety of the state of Cauca. This unsuccessful attempt by the government to annihilate the guerillas would be a watershed event in the sad history of the Colombian government's ineffectiveness in dealing with the guerillas. From that point until today, the government has been fighting an increasingly uphill battle with the guerillas.

The two young charismatic fighters that fled that day were Pedro Antonio Marin and Jacobo Arenas. Marin took the name Manuel Marulanda Velez. Due to his alleged prowess with firearms in battle, he earned the nickname "Tirofijo" or "Sure Shot". With Tirofijo now a seasoned veteran of several battles and the established leader of the main component of the guerilla forces, he began to think of the future, of organization and, some day, of legitimacy. It was from this thinking that he decided to name his rag-tag bunch of soldiers as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC. It was the first time the guerillas had any semblance of organization and the beginning of the biggest thorn in the side of the Colombian government that they have ever known. Although much fighting had taken place, war had now been officially declared and Colombia was pushed into a new and bloodier phase of its history.

PART II

The 1960s could almost be called the Guerilla Decade as several large groups were formed and rose to nation-wide prominence during these years. The FARC was founded in 1964. The same year, the Ejercito Liberacion de la Nacion (ELN) was established. (The ELN is currently--2003--the second largest guerilla group operating in Colombia. Estimated members 3-5,000.) Three years later the Ejercito del Pueblo Liberacion (EPL) came along but has since all but melted into some of the other larger groups. Throughout the 60s the guerillas formalized their philosophies and goals for attacking the bourgeoisie. It also became painfully evident during this time that the government of Colombia could do little against these subversive groups. The people began to lose faith in the administration and its leaders at the same time the guerillas were gaining in power and territorial influence.

Since a 1960s guerilla job didn't pay much, the starving revolutionaries quickly realized their most immediate priority was eating, not overthrowing any government. To raise money they began taxing local peasants at the same time they spouted their "for the common man" rhetoric to anyone who would listen. Typically it was just the peasants from which they were stealing that were subjected to the guerillas' grand philosophies of social engineering.

The 1970s brought a tremendous influx of new blood to the guerillas. Che Guevara's guerilla warfare philosophy was quickly embraced in the FARC and other camps. New recruits began pouring in and the FARC grew from 500 members in 1970 to about 3,000 in 1980. Also during this period many students and educated intellectuals joined the revolution and guerilla groups became havens for freethinking communists.

During the late 60s and early 70s another dynamic was evolving that would play a huge part in the upcoming decades. As the guerillas grew in number, they grew in territory, taking areas, expelling the legitimate government and setting up their own shop. Eventually enough people became sufficiently

enraged to do something. Thus began the birth of the paramilitaries, initially called "death squads" by many, as the very small handful simply attempted to systematically assassinate FARC leaders. These private militias, or paramilitaries, were disorganized and spread throughout the country. There was no central command; indeed, many groups did not know others existed. Most were financed by rich landowners that were less than thrilled about losing all their precious coffee plantations or cattle ranches to the FARC.

With the 70s in full-swing, the FARC growing and organizing itself (they even had ranks, manuals of conduct and bona fide esprit de corps items like a hymn and a mission statement), there was yet another development brewing back in the US that would forever change the face of Colombia, shaking it to its very foundations. Clapton even wrote a song about it.

Cocaine was nothing new in Colombia; the locals had been chewing the leaves, or placing it in tea, for a few thousand years. What was new, however, was the voracious appetite the United States managed to develop for the stuff almost overnight. The US took its first large snorts of the white powder in the 70s and never looked back. It became such a recreational sport that the United States now does an estimated 300,000-ton line each year! Although coca plants grew throughout the Andes mountains, the situation, both politically and geographically, was ripe in Colombia for the guerillas (among others) to capitalize on. Instantly, it became the world's biggest gravy train. The FARC seemed to have solved its hunger problems overnight. The paramilitaries found a way to raise money for much-needed weapons and those that were up until now politically neutral had just found their party - the Greenbacks.

Cocaine itself, long almost a worthless crop-somewhere way below coffee-became the country's number one export, with 80% headed straight to the US. Adding to the left-wing guerillas, the right-wing death squads and the center-wing impotent government, another group began to gain prominence in the country, neither hindered by Marxist ideas nor pesky things like consciences; these boys were pure capitalists - the Narco-traffickers.

Cities were built overnight in the jungle. Cars from Europe and the US were shipped in by the thousands. Mansions were built that would make Tony Montana blush. Airplanes and airstrips dotted the land. The DEA was nowhere in sight and the Colombian government certainly wasn't in a position to do much about it. The infamous Medellin and Cali cartels were in their infancy. Pablo Escobar (left) and Jorge Luis Ochoa, the leaders of their respective cartels, eventually made so much money they were listed as two of the top 20 richest men in the world by Fortune magazine in 1987. At one point Escobar even offered to pay off the entire national debt of Colombia.

Of course, with all this money came the overwhelming desire for more - even from the supposedly anti-capitalist guerillas. The same simple but very bloody circle started all over again. The FARC now taxed the narco-traffickers, who hired the paramilitaries to kill the FARC, who then in turn went harder after the narco-traffickers, who paid the paramilitaries, and so on and so on. Not to be outdone, the guerillas and paramilitaries each started their own coca operations to supplement their other income. Everyone was heading full-tilt into the next decade with no end to the money in sight. The "Decade of Greed" it would come to be called in the United States. The US couldn't hold a candle to the decadence prevalent 1,000 miles to its south. Judging by its past, Colombia was in for a time that could only be termed cataclysmic.

PART III

The 1980s. It wasn't just the "Greed Decade" up North; Colombia was more than doing its share of hedonistic living. A couple of events occurred in 1981 that would have a profound effect on the coming decades. Towards the end of the 70s, the FARC began to expand into yet another revenue-gaining venture: kidnapping. Guerilla leaders quickly realized that if a narco-trafficker was kidnapped, they could typically get a large ransom for the drug dealer. If the victim happened to be tortured a little, well then, the purse strings would fly open that much faster and that much wider. Police were rarely called and payments were usually quick and in US dollars. Then the unthinkable happened. The April 19th Movement (M-19) captured a high-ranking Medellin cartel member and instantly, the narco-traffickers realized that something needed to be done or none of them would be safe.

Obviously, the police were out of the question so the narcos began looking around for a solution. The only way out appeared to be those squads of hitmen formed to attack the FARC years ago. The Medellin cartels, most notably under Pablo Escobar, recruited and trained thousands of hitmen, called sicarios in Colombian Spanish. Their goal was to strike fear in the hearts and lead in the brains of as many guerillas as possible. They were very effective initially. The violence was unimaginable. Hitmen were after the guerillas. Drug dealers were fighting for territory. Guerillas were fighting the narcos and the paramilitaries. The government was fighting everyone and the morgues were more than filling up.

Another watershed event was the kidnapping of the father of one Carlos Castano in 1981 by the FARC. After paying a ransom, the family waited for the safe return of their father. The return never happened as Carlos' father was murdered by the FARC after they received the ransom payment. Carlos swore his hatred and revenge for the FARC and determined to join the paramilitaries. He was 15 years old.

Throughout his life Carlos made good on his promise to take it to the FARC: he claims to have personally killed over 50 of them. Eventually he rose in ranks through the paramilitaries until he united many of them in the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). Although his umbrella group eventually became the largest paramilitary organization in the country, it has never controlled more than 70% of Colombia's paramilitaries, illustrating that there are still many independent, autonomous groups operating. If the 80s were the glory days for the narcos, the 90s became the decade of the subversive groups. It was during this time that the FARC grew to be something feared by the Colombian government, not just a movement inflicting inconvenient attacks on fringe-element government facilities.

In the early 90s, both the government and the FARC initiated several ill-fated peace negotiations. All ended without success and eventually FARC violence increased. It is during these years that the FARC began to make demands of the government that actually influenced government decision making. In 1994, a few days after Horacio Samper became president, the FARC promised peace talks if Samper would pull the military out of La Uribe, Meta. Samper, desperate to make some headway in his inherited and seemingly hopeless problem, ordered General Bedoya, commander of the Armed Forces, to immediately withdraw government troops from Meta. General Bedoya didn't exactly agree with his recently elected boss and threatened a military coup if Samper continued to order the withdrawal. Samper was left between the FARC and an unruly military and made the precedent-setting decision to do absolutely nothing. Setting the tone for his entire presidency, he unwisely decided to allow the military, the FARC and the paramilitaries to fight it out among themselves.

With a disjointed government, little leadership and an apparent lack of a central command, the Colombian military achieved little success. The FARC however took advantage of their enemy, Machiavellian-style and as a result made their greatest advances ever in the mid-90s. In 1996, major FARC pushes began in Guaviare, Putumayo, Caqueta, Norte de Santander and Bolivar. In many of these places, the FARC completely killed, captured or ran off all police personnel, in essence setting up defacto guerilla governments in the vacuums left behind. Later, thrusts of government troops and paramilitaries were able to combat the FARC, stem the advancing tide and, in some rare cases, drive it back. For example, in the state of Cordoba, after several years of intense bloodletting, the paramilitaries drove the FARC out of the state almost completely. Of course, for the government, one problem was exchanged for another, but the average citizen seemed to fare better under the AUC.

The Pastrana years. In 1998, Andres Pastrana won the election largely on his promise to resume peace talks with Marulanda and his merry FARC marauders. In what Pastrana called a move of "good faith" (and everyone else just called "stupid"), Pastrana withdrew all government troops from an area in southern Colombia the size of Switzerland and simply gave it to the FARC. Pastrana's pipe dream was that the FARC would be content with their designated play area and leave the rest of Pastrana's country alone. However, to the contrary, the FARC simply used the "Despeje Zone" as a base of operations to continue their attacks on the Colombian people. This DMZ lasted until 2002, when it was painfully obvious, even to Pastrana, that the whole plan had backfired. He was left with flan on his face whilst the FARC had spent the better part of the last three years laughing all the way to their Swiss banks. In an effort to save face, Pastrana kicked out the FARC in 2002 just weeks before his term as president

finished and left the in turmoil country to his predecessor, Alvaro Uribe Velez. Uribe, who survived 14 attempts on his life while a presidential candidate prior to his election, immediately vowed to annihilate the FARC. One of his first acts upon gaining office was to declare a national state of emergency, officially making it open season on the guerillas. Uribe's hatred for the FARC runs deep. Like head of the paramilitaries, Carlos Castano, Uribe's father was murdered by the FARC even though the guerilla group had received the Uribe family's ransom payment. Activity on all fronts picked up immediately - guerillas, paramilitaries and government, with bombings making their way to previously "safe" cities such as Cartegena and Bogota. New lines were drawn and positions dug in as each side settled themselves in for the long future ahead. What's next? It is anyone's guess at this point but there are certain known factors in the middle of this morass of variables:

1. Plan Colombia. A multi-billion dollar aid package, initiated under President Clinton and expanded during the Bush Administration, pumping much needed dollars, equipment and expertise into the war-torn country. In January of 2003, U. S. Army troops began training on a newly U. S. funded base in the Colombian state of Arauca. Training is designed to prepare the Colombian military and police to better combat the drug and guerilla operations in the jungles.

2. Uribe. Uribe seems more than determined to continue use every available resource to combat the FARC. Peace talks are not even on the back burner at this point. Uribe has gone as far as creating a network of informants throughout the country to gather intel on the guerilla operations.

3. The FARC. Threatened by Uribe's steadfastness, they appeared scared for the first time in decades. This fear has fueled desperate attacks against the President in an effort to kill or deter him. No luck so far. As of this writing (01/03), there are an estimated 15,000 members in the FARC.

4. AUC. Carlos Castano recently resigned as the head of the AUC citing differences of opinions with the current management style of the various factors of his group. Additional information has recently surfaced in past weeks, confirming talks between Uribe's administration and the paramilitaries. Uribe has never been a strong opponent of them, possibly the old adage comes into play here, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." While the AUC has committed brutal acts of torture in their persecution of the FARC, they are still criminals, wanted for a multitude of crimes. Most troublesome is their tendency to kill prosecutors, judges and law enforcement officials who attempt to investigate the group. Their numbers stand at an estimated 18,000 members, although there is quite a bit of debate surrounding this figure.

As 2003 begins, there is a sense of anticipation in the air throughout the country. No one is quite sure what will happen but everyone expects something soon. Unfortunately, it appears that the violence born in the 1930s and 1940s seems to be looming on the horizon for at least the near future.

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