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[Frames version](#)

▶ [english](#)
▶ [español](#)

Field Reports **Insight** **Reference** **Maps** **Comment** **Newsbank**

[Faces of civil war, as seen by correspondent Steve Nettleton](#)



[Analysts, experts & correspondents examine the crisis in Colombia](#)



[Organization Profiles](#)
[Key Players](#)
[Timeline](#)
[Issues](#)
[Photo Archive](#)

[Areas of Control](#)
[Regional Relations](#)
[Colombia Statistics](#)

[Communiques](#)
[Chat Series](#)
[Message Board](#)

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[Video Archive](#)
[News Archive](#)



"The population, compelled to take a stance in a war it resists, is intimidated, threatened."

Laura Garces

The dynamics of violence

Colombia's history of internal warfare is complex and often misunderstood, and one must question whether just throwing more money into the conflict is the answer

By *Laura Garces*
Special to CNN.com

A political scientist, Laura Garces has worked extensively on U.S. international affairs and is the author of the book, "The Globalization of the Monroe Doctrine." She has lived in the United States since 1988 and has taught at Rutgers and Johns Hopkins universities. For the past two years she has been concentrating on the cultural and social dynamics that fuel conflicts and currently is studying the situation in Colombia. She holds a doctorate from the University of Lausanne, Switzerland.



Originally formed to protect villages from guerrilla attacks, paramilitaries are responsible for the majority of atrocities in Colombia, according to human rights agencies

(CNN) -- Colombia's geography, deeply fractured by the Andes and dense forests, impaired the formation of a homogeneous nation. Communities developed independently and often in relative isolation. The eradication of most of the indigenous cultures likewise hindered social homogeneity. On the other hand, Colombia's openness to the Pacific on the west and to the Caribbean on the north made possible an early inclination for smuggling.

Insufficient revenues from taxes and trade accounted for the sparse presence of the state in many areas. In other Latin American nations, the capitals dominated politics. In Colombia, numerous mid-sized cities rivaled the presence of central power.

In the first half of the 19th century, elites emerged among the privileged classes and formed rival coalitions: the Liberals and the Conservatives. Notwithstanding

their differences, the basic goals of the parties were identical -- assuring stability in their exercise of power.

Both feared the rise of a dictatorship, and unlike their counterparts in neighboring countries in the 20th century, they shunned the military. The largely illiterate peasants, who constituted most of the population, did not represent a threat at least until the late 19th century and were manipulated at will by each party's paternalistic rhetoric.

Given the physical absence of the state in many areas, expediency demanded that peasants seek the protection of the local boss, or *gamonal*. Party affiliations substituted for nationalism, cutting across classes. People directed their energies toward partisan issues, since Colombia was never involved in a prolonged external war.

La Violencia, an unresolved civil war



Relatives of a kidnapping victim take part in a protest march in Bogotá in June 1999. Kidnapping for ransom became an important revenue source for guerrillas when aid from Communist countries dried up at the end of the Cold War.

In the first century of its existence, Colombia was not a particularly violent country, compared to its neighbors. There was no decisive struggle that changed the political game. What happened is that as the two parties struggled for power, social issues were neglected. Movements of unrest were more often co-opted, exploited and reintegrated, mostly into the Liberal Party, than were brutally suppressed.

A civil war broke out in 1946 when Conservatives won the presidency and began reprisals against their rivals. Coalescing with previous unresolved agrarian episodes of unrest, the war accelerated in 1948 with the assassination of populist leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan. Perhaps as many as 300,000 people died before the war ended in the mid-1960s, hence the name La Violencia.

After the brief dictatorship of Gen. Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957), Liberals and Conservatives responded to the disorder by creating a "national front" government whereby the two parties would share power and alternate the presidency. This sharing of power by the elite factions persists to this day.

Continuing unrest triggered successive administrations to invoke a "state of siege" that gave them exceptional powers to govern. Simultaneously, citizens started arming themselves, and the state gradually lost its monopoly of force.

This privatization of defense began in the 1950s and emanated originally within the parties. The private armed groups, however, were unable to suppress the roots of protest that doggedly survived within various insurgent affiliations.

In the mid-1960s, several leftist guerrilla groups arose, offering a presence in spots where the state was absent. They relied initially to a large extent on foreign aid from Communist countries such as Cuba. When those sources dried up at the end of the Cold War, the guerrillas increasingly resorted to kidnapping as a source of revenue.

In the 1980s, the rash of kidnappings by the guerrillas induced a backlash among landowners, merchants and others that resulted in the emergence of the paramilitaries. The overwhelmed armed forces were often accused of collaborating with them.

In their determination to extinguish guerrillas, the paramilitaries introduced large-scale killings. Revenues came from protection they offered landlords, businessmen and [drug lords](#), the latter having emerged in the 1980s as potent forces.

A conflict altered by drug money

The emergence of the drug lords in the late 1970s drastically adulterated the conflict's political character. They insinuated themselves into political venues (mainly to fight extradition to the United States) and added the corrosive effect of drug money to the traditional client system, bringing about widespread corruption and increasing impunity.



Government workers spray herbicide on coca fields. Despite the government's efforts, the number of acres of coca in Colombia has tripled since 1992, the year the fumigation projects began.

The [FARC](#) joined in the lucrative spoils of the drug trade by also offering protection to the large estates of the drug lords.

This tacit abandonment of land reform, a key component of the guerrillas' revolutionary program, marked a breaking point. The socio-political movement then became just one more element in the struggle for power within the state.

Violence gradually became endemic. Recent studies estimate that a large portion of the homicides are not politically motivated and are only indirectly related to the conflict.

The population, compelled to take a stance in a war it resists, is intimidated and threatened. UNICEF reports that children as young as 8 are forced into the ranks of the guerrillas and the paramilitaries. War-torn areas breed economic distress for the peasantry, causing massive population displacements, mostly of women and children under the age of 5.

A Brookings Institution report estimates that more than 1 million people were displaced between 1985 and 1998, a process that continues. They are hostages to a conflict that perpetuates itself without mercy, and in which each protagonist competes for territorial control of the most vibrant economic areas, since violence manifests itself in the country's richest, not poorest, regions.

Peace negotiations, initiated by President Belisario Betancur after 1982, had setbacks. In 1998, the presidential elections amounted to a plebiscite for peace. [Pastrana](#) has been successful in restoring Colombia's credibility abroad and in garnering financial assistance, both from the United States and from Europe.

Plan Colombia, which includes \$1.3 billion in U.S. aid, provides funds mainly to eradicate coca crops. Large numbers of Colombians resent this kind of intervention.

NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) protest that insufficient funds are planned for the defense of human rights and for social initiatives. Scientists and environmentalists argue that spraying herbicides to eradicate the coca will lead to ecological ruin.

Drug specialists question the feasibility of developing alternative crops in the poor soil where coca thrives. Some argue that the spraying begun in 1992 has not prevented the tripling of the coca acreage.

Finally, one should discuss the merits of fighting the drug problem unilaterally and not within a regional context.

The targeting of Mexican drug production in the mid-1970s largely brought about an increase of marijuana and coca production in Colombia. Recent successful efforts in Peru and Bolivia have had similar effects. Colombia's neighbors fear an exodus of people that probably will accompany eradication of the coca crop.

It remains to be seen, therefore, whether the Colombian conundrum will yield to current efforts of the international community.

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