

“The Colombian Holocaust”

An outline for reflection

“The truth is the action of eliminating lies.” Erich Fromm

It is not necessary to be a Colombian to feel horrified by the multiple atrocities of our conflict. As a Foreign Press Correspondent, I witnessed so many heartrending images, that on several occasions I limit myself to film them only looking through the viewfinder of the camera, trying to see them as fictitious images from an old black and white television set. Many things moved me to write this essay, but among all of them, there is one that has been determinant for the rest of my life. It is the image, imprinted on my brain, of one of the massive and recurrent massacres in Uraba, Antioquia, whose scenario could easily be that of Rwanda, Afghanistan, or Iraq, etc. In which a small child was shaking his father, begging him to wake up, while he lied dead riddled by the bullets of a rifle. Like many other times I could not help it but cry while I was doing my duty as a reporter, believing that this was my way of denouncing before the world our barbarism, without ever thinking that I was being used as a mercenary of the morbidity that enriches the big news agencies. The following text is my vision about our conflict:

Colombia is the only country in South America that has coasts both in the Atlantic as well as in the Pacific Oceans. It borders with Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, and Brazil. In the Caribbean Sea, Ocean whose waters flow over the Colombian continental territory, it also limits with Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In Colombia the situation is so serious that truth is indeed stranger than any fiction. The last century of political upheaval and violence, which unfortunately has forged Colombia as we know it today, has been neither gratuitous nor capricious. Rather, the stories coming out of Colombia in the present had their origins in a swirl of circumstances whose causes and effects continue to spin out of control.

Since the Spanish conquest, there has been a steady stream of violence. History books will tell you about the infamous Inquisition, the different slave rebellions, and the fight for independence which created the independent republic of “The Great Colombia” in 1821, which consisted of Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia all united into one single “country” by Simon Bolivar. Several years later, these five countries would separate and become Independent Republics. The civil strife between the liberal and the conservative political parties, which still handles the country today, began shortly after achieving independence. Between 1899 and 1902, around 60,000 to 130,000 people were killed during the civil war known as “The War of a Thousand Days”. Colombia lost Panama in 1903 as a consequence of the political divisions that occurred during this war, the sum of many political errors, the failure of France in the construction of the Panama Channel, and the President Theodore Roosevelt's machinations (investment of the project).

Still, under the conservative leadership of Rafael Reyes (1904-09), Colombia made progress and began to develop its infrastructure and economy. This was not without a cost as Reyes dissolved the congress and ruled as a dictator. Conservatives continued to rule and though not as restrictive as it had been under the Reyes regime, political unrest began to surface among the workers and the poor. This unrest, along with the economic crisis of the Depression, resulted in the peaceful transition of power to the liberal party in 1930.

During the 30's and up to post World War II, the Liberal government was successful in implementing worker's rights reforms, the separation of the church and state (removing the

Catholic Church as the State Religion and reverted with the signature of the “Concordat” in 1973), and changing private property rights to allow the government to regulate private property in the national interest. Still, the factions between liberals and conservatives and within the liberal party itself continued to simmer, finally boiling over in the unprecedented time of cruel and bloody violence known to Colombians simply as “*Epoca de la Violencia*” (“*The time of the violence*”).

The event which precipitated “*The time of the violence*” was the assassination of liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948. It seems that it was the result of a conspiracy orchestrated by the CIA in the “Pantomime Operation” with the participation of some liberal and conservative oligarchs. The political leaders pushed and promoted the bloody confrontation between people belonging to each political party creating a civil war. This era was characterized by executions, massacres, ambushes, lynching and selective murders. Every family has stories of family members, neighbors, or acquaintances that were murdered, tortured or disappeared during the years between 1948 and 1953. This assassination inaugurated an era of political crimes which continues today in Colombia with the addition of new groups such as the guerrillas, the paramilitary and the drug dealers.

Some incorporated to the guerrillas after witnessing atrocities committed against family members, neighbors, important personalities, or even themselves. Others joined with the dream of social reform struggling for the peasants. In short, the Guerrillas were created as groups of self-defense reacting to the atrocities that they had witnessed or experienced. Ultimately the army rose to power and in 1953 a coup put military leader General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in control. By then, 200,000 Colombians had been killed, although the elite of both the extreme liberal and extreme conservative parties were spared. In an attempt to bring an end to the violence, an agreement was reached and accepted for the disarming of 10,000 men by liberal guerilla leader Guadalupe Salcedo. Before the agreement could be acted on, Salcedo and his closest partners were assassinated in the capital; an act blamed on the ruling political class. Responding to the assassination of Salcedo, a group of peasants united to fight for an agrarian reform, calling for the defense of, and recovery, the peasant’s land. This group is a rural self-defense force headed by one of the oldest guerilla fighters on the planet, “Tirofijo”, who had himself witnessed many scenes of violence and injustice. The ideology of the rural self-defense force was easily filled after with communist ideas, contributed by intellectuals, students and unionists. Over time, this group became the “Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia” (FARC), which still stands strong today and fights to take control over the country as one of the leading Guerrilla groups in the contemporary Colombia.

“The Time of the Violence” supposedly would put an end, in 1958, to the creation of the “National Front” (Frente Nacional), period during which democracy suffered a great deal as the president would be chosen, “elected”, among a pack of candidates from the same political party every four years in which they would share all political offices. While sounding like a successful resolution to the years of torture and murder, the fact that there was never any sort of tribunal bringing those guilty of horrific crimes to justice, the grudges and hatred which was engendered during “*The time of the violence*” persisted today. Many who had been the operators of torture and genocide were not punished but rather rewarded as they became pillars in the new community of the “National Front”. Those in power, liberal or conservative were interested in protecting themselves and maintaining the status quo. Those who were “elected” then hand-picked governors, who in turn picked mayors, who picked police chiefs, judges, notaries, etc.

The bi-polar nature of the “National Front” included sharing power with the army. The army and elected officials co-governed through the figure of the “State of Place”, today called

"Interior Commotion", eliminating the possibility of a coup d'etat. In the absence of a true democracy, this monopoly of power granted military privileges and immunity which encouraged further social injustices. In the shadow of the Cold War, the US government took an interest in Colombia and its political and geographical accessibility to communism. Those Colombians who would benefit from the protectionism of the super power collaborated with the US, as did other Latin American countries, in the name of preventing the spread of communism. The joint power between the "National Front" and the army was not able to squelch the political aspirations of the guerillas. Encouraged by what they saw as the success of the Cuban revolution, new groups emerged as they saw an armed insurrection as their only means of success. The Popular Liberation Army (EPL) counted on the endorsement of China while the National Liberation Army (ELN) depended on the support of Cuba. FARC continued its fight for power with the support of the then Soviet Union. At times these factions clashed against each other, or established truces, or formed alliances, but always in conflict with the official government and its military forces.

In spite of the fact that the fight for the defense and protection of human rights has been a flag of the "Revolutionary Moral", some acts of murder called "adjustments" were made against informers or deserters of the revolution. In some cases, this was a response, an act of vengeance, against the detention, the murder, the torture, the violation or the disappearance of their own members by some agents of the state, and in other cases this acts of "adjustment" were the consequence of internal purges, the negative psychological effects, such as delirium, caused by war, or as a way of punishing and discouraging informants who worked for the enemy. The state agents who abused their own authority and committed criminal acts would sometimes act alone spontaneously or would commit serious acts of human rights violations against the opposition based on elaborate systematic operations such as the so-called "LASO", "CONDOR", etc. (for example the "Army Special Warfare" commanded by the General William P. Yarborough was in Colombia in 1962). And we can't ignore the fact that the increased violence was also a consequence of the "training" received by some members of the Colombian army as well as some state agents at the "School of the Americas" which belongs to the US, and which was created with the sole purpose of fighting communism in all its forms with great violence, something that contributed to, and increased, the horrors committed in this conflict. Ultimately the struggle for power deteriorated into a dirty war of unspeakable defiance and cruelty which continues to destroy the people and the future of Colombia today.

In the 1980's, during the presidency of Belisario Betancourt, a peace process with the FARC organization began, and the creation of the "Patriotic Union" political movement started as an attempt to demobilize guerilla warfare and give them a "fair chance" of participating in the electoral process of the country. Many who were not guerilla members, nor allied with the government, stepped forward with the hope of creating a third option. This new political option was virtually assassinated by some members of the government security agencies, the drug trafficker Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, and the Paramilitary bosses Ariel Otero, Henry Perez, Pablo Emilio Guarín, Fidel and Carlos Castaño, etc. The Patriotic Union was practically buried.

While the guerillas and international terrorists had their links at some times or another, it was not until the 1980's that guerrilla terrorist activity began to emerge in Colombia with the M-19 (Movement 19 of April). This urban group of guerilla was created by some dissidents of the guerrillas and other political factions such as the ANAPO which was founded by the military dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. Pinilla was still remembered and revered by the people at the end of "*The time of the violence*". He lost what would have been a sure electoral victory to probable fraud on April 19, 1970. The M-19 was founded by Jaime Bateman Cayón. This group was heavily influenced by the "Tupamaros" and the "Montoneros", from Uruguay and Argentina respectively, guerrilla groups. The M-19 was characterized by having a more

democratic structure than other guerilla organizations and it was the most popular insurgent group among the people. The first car bombs were used by the M-19 against energy towers, antennas of government transmission, etc. In order to sabotage the electoral bipartisan system. For the first time, the cities, not the rural landscape, suffered the hard blows of guerilla warfare, forcing the need for a peace process.

In the late 1980's, the presidency of Virgilio Barco made a new peace process in which the "M-19" turned into a new political party called the "Democratic Alliance" ("Alianza Democrática", A.D.). This new party had a determining influence in the writing and editing of a new constitution which was finalized 1991. Despite its influence and determination, the "A.D." lost its bid for the presidential elections in 1990 as its presidential candidate Carlos Pizarro was assassinated. Years later, Carlos Castaño, leader of the anti-communist forces "United Self-Defense of Colombia" ("Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia", "AUC"), assumed the responsibility for the murder. Other presidential candidates killed in Colombia are Luis Carlos Galán (Liberal) and Jaime Pardo Leal (Patriotic Union), supposedly, these murders were ordered by the drug lords Pablo Escobar and Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, respectively. The "Patriotic Union" presidential candidate, Bernardo Jaramillo, was supposedly murdered by order of Fidel Castaño ("AUC"). The Conservative presidential candidate, Alvaro Gomez Hurtado, was assassinated after an agreement reached between some members of the army and drug-traffickers, as consequence of a frustrated coup d'état. During this time, the use of terrorism was most exploited by the notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar, who demonstrated a new road for insurgents who still hold him up as a tactic political and military power.

The relationships between guerilla warfare and drug trafficking has had a long period of gestation. The first Colombian drug-traffickers of importance were the "Guajiros" who used maritime infrastructure for the importation of contraband merchandise and then added the exportation of marijuana. Through this business, the "Guajiros" obtained enormous economic power establishing the basis of an effective money-laundering scheme which is still used today.

In the meantime, Colombia became an important transit point for the flow of cocaine between Bolivia and the United States, creating the powerful drug cartels for which Colombia is famous. These cartels disrupted the supremacy of the "Guajiros", even in the territories they controlled such as Cartagena, Barranquilla and Santa Marta, though with some exceptions, displacing them. Initially, these new drug traffickers were dedicated to establishing clandestine airports in remote places for the refueling of airplanes carrying drugs. They put great effort into the growing business as well as into the creation of laboratories for the production of pure and homogenous cocaine. Soon, the growers, processors, and smuggler of drugs began to build warehouses for the storage of the new commodity. Thus opened Pandora's Box, Colombia was the world's center for transit, production, and market of cocaine, and later, heroine.

The vast majority of rural Colombians had neither land, money, access to adequate health care nor opportunities for education. Nor did they have transportation for the selling of their meager legal crops to live as farmers. The drug traffickers were able to exploit these truly miserable conditions to their advantage. The farmers, having no other choice, went into the deep forests and established "chagras." For the rural farmers it was very easy to sow something they did not know from the beginning and that later didn't matter. The traffickers would bring them the seeds and the tools necessary to harvest the plants and paid them more than what they would normally make from traditional crops; despite the egregious exploitation when one compares the ridiculous profits made by the cartels to the pittance paid to the workers. Also exploited by the drug cartels were the "mules", people who transported the drugs to the US and European markets in their luggage or in their own bodies. These "workers" were pursued and punished far worse than the bosses who earned millions of dollars by their labor. Those who reaped the

profits of the drug trade have been the intellectual authors of the deaths of thousands of persons all the while remaining in impunity.

Before the advent of the drug industry, rural Colombia was home to the guerrillas whose priority was the defense and development of the peasants. The guerrillas did not act against the drug-traffickers, and instead forged a mutually beneficial relationship. Initially, drug-traffickers would send out cocaine-filled airplanes which would return empty-ready for another flight. This "marriage of convenience" between the drug trade and the guerrilla warfare was consummated by the sending out of a drug-filled plane and the return with arms-laden. These weapons were then sold to the guerillas or provided protection for anti-drug operations done by the government. Thus began the strange and delicate relationship between the unconscionable wealth of the drug lords and the voice of those seeking political reform for the oppressed.

Some people on the left believed that drug-trafficking was a good weapon against the imperial US forces who were manipulating the anti-communism war across Colombia through the Colombian Army and its paramilitary friends, hence complying with the adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". Never considering that this relationship would open the door to international intervention. On the other hand, not all guerrilla groups, or their detachments, were in favor of "cooperating" with the drug traffickers in exchange of other warfare goods. The drug traffickers were very ostentatious, and due to their immense power and financial situation, they quickly became the focus of extortion and kidnapping not only by guerrillas but also by common criminals, finding themselves in the middle of various fires which brought them into the attention of the government security forces. The drug-lords were amassing more complex relationships, able to buy the protection of some politicians, government agencies and some subversive cells, corrupting the state base, the anti-communism and the Revolution in a new power relation.

With the increase of the conflict, and the power of the drug industry, many who had been involved with the anti-communist agenda preferred to create their own private armies of bodyguards. Many members of these private forces had long standing relations with both military and criminal organizations, having operated jointly in anti-extortion and anti-abduction operations in which police agents did the investigative work and private gunmen acted as executioners. A group of paramilitary known as Death to Kidnappers ("Muerte A Secuestradores", MAS) emerged from the abduction of Marta Nieves Ochoa, the sister of some leading cocaine mafia leaders, conducted by the M-19, enforcing their own methods of "justice". Ochoa was released after much pressure made by different human rights groups and a series of negotiations ultimately mediated by the Cuban government in a humanitarian act. The deaths of some 300 people occurred during this short period.

MAS continued operating mainly in the rural areas of the "Magdalena Medio", the mid-region of the Magdalena, annihilating anything that appeared to be "red", communist, without being given due process. In 1982, the regional mayor, representatives of Texas Petroleum Company, the local ranchers' committees, political bosses, shopkeepers and traders, agreed to finance MAS to assist the army in its fight against subversion. MAS was responsible for the murder and/or kidnapping of hundreds of social activists, and it operated in areas where the popular movements were the strongest. Likewise, the perpetrators of MAS would later disappear without experiencing due process for their acts. With this type of campaign, their sponsors earned themselves the sympathy of some sectors of the "establishment", both national and foreign, believing that by being MAS sympathizers they could buy the benevolence of the US and the Colombian justice system. When the Attorney General investigated MAS in 1983, 59 active military personnel were accused of belonging to it.

Before the rise of the drug based economy, the guerillas used other resources for their financial support such as commercial and bank robberies, extortions and abductions. With this success, they earned a great deal of money leaving aside their respect for human rights in the process and while attempting to finance their fight for the rights of the poor and the exploited. Within the rank of the guerillas was a belief that if the system had jails for their comrades, they would have their own "jails" for the oligarchs who could afford to pay a fee for their liberty. This bail money would then be invested in the revolution, in the acquisition of equipment, training of soldiers and to pay for new operations. The inhumane methods of sequestering "prisoners" and the rise of such incarcerations or executions, even after receiving payment, resulted in the development of Paramilitary branches such as the United Self-Defense of Colombia (AUC). This organization has among its ranks thousands of ex-officers, ex-soldiers and ex-guerrillas trained in Colombia by mercenaries from Israel, England, North America and Russia, fed and financed by the some members of the Colombian Army, drug-traffickers, landowners, businessmen, and its supporters, etc.

In 1984, another organization called the ACDEGAM was created in the region financing the training camps for paramilitaries by trainers from Israel, Germany, Britain and Australia (with the participation of "Ted", Dave Tomkins, Yair Klein, Melnik Ferry, Tzedaka Abraham, etc). In 1985, when more funds were needed, drug barons Pablo Escobar, Jorge Luis Ochoa and Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha (all local landowners) made generous contributions, at the same time that they participated in the financing of "Los Contras" in Nicaragua during the Ronald Reagan administration. The "MAS" were later replaced by the Self-defenses of the Middle Magdalena ("Autodefensas del Magdalena Medio"). Years later, the governments of Colombia and the United States united their forces with the "Calí Cartel", Carlos Castaño, the "AUC", and the self-defenses of the Middle Magdalena to knock down Gacha and Escobar in that was denominated the "Devil's Table" and "Los Pepes".

The left and popular movements were annihilated in Puerto Boyacá by the paramilitary groups who then moved on to other regions. According to the testimony of human rights activist Josué Giraldo (who was later assassinated by paramilitaries in 1996) Harold Bedoya Pizarro, the old chief of the Colombian armed forces, collaborated with drug baron Gacha to organize paramilitary groups in the province of Meta. The army's collaboration with the paramilitary is further revealed by the fact that they only operate where the military has a strong presence. Some paramilitary groups' headquarters are located next to army barracks.

The Paramilitary has grown to the point that it has become the most recent de-stabilizing force in the country, dedicated not only to combat guerrillas but also to the "dissuasion" of workers, farmers and natives from uprising through the use of the media. The television and radio stations broadcast horror through the images and stories of massacres to perpetuate a psychological war between the Paramilitary and the guerrillas. The Paramilitary has come to commit the same atrocities that they had set out to eradicate within the Guerrillas such as kidnapping, extortion, and massacres, but a more crazy intensity. Committing from they beginning a moral suicide across the use the genocide and massive extermination to whole person that they consider "Red". Become then both the Paramilitary and the Guerrillas groups furthermore selectively threatening, kidnapping and/or executing journalists, activists, politicians, religious workers, police officers and soldiers in defenseless state. The Paramilitary force has grown and risen to a power equal or greater than that of the guerrillas in a third of the time of their existence. Worse yet, they have become the true obstacle for a negotiated exit to the conflict, increasing the savagery and intensity of today's Colombia.

All of these circumstances have taken away Colombia's right to be communist, socialist, liberal, conservative, or of any other ideology. The risk of considering all political activity in the

country as being subversive or paramilitary is very high, forgetting that one thing is to promote rights and another is to promote violence. Instead the use of violence has been promoted to impose a particular position. In the political climate of Colombia, to defend political principles, to promote the peace or the protection of human rights, can become a death sentence. Practically, all rights in the UN charter have been violated up to the point in which men, women and children are being forced to join these groups under death sentence. The practice of such conscription is common in the more rural zones where each home is required to contribute one or more people for the "cause", converting these zones into independent military "states" whose law is ***“if you are not with us you are against us”***. Owing to this conscription, the armed forces have grown. Many combatants collaborate for political conviction, to make money, for survival or resentment with the enemy or the government, etc. Still many others participate to protect their family members, victims of a new form of abduction in Colombia. It cannot be forgotten that the military service in Colombia is obligatory, meaning that all men who have turned 18 are required to serve in the army, and most recently this law has extended also to women if the “circumstances call for it”. Since this is a legal practice of the State, it can be assumed that the enemy does the same thing. It is for this reason that the so-called “military successes”, the use of high technological weapons such as ghost airplanes with nocturnal and infrared viewfinders, and many other “high-tech-gadgets” that are now being used in other parts of the world such as Iraq by the first world nations, cannot be celebrated as "moral successes" when the "smart bombs" cannot differentiate between volunteers, real combatants, and forced fighters, those who are recruited by force. Even more serious and condemnable are the attacks that impact the lives of peasants and the indigenous peoples. The attacks made by guerrilla forces, paramilitary groups, the army, and the police do not affect solely actual combatants but more often than not anyone who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, this includes innocent and defenseless civilians, more commonly women, children and the elderly who are constantly being murdered, attacked, raped, abducted or confined to concentration camps deep in the jungles.

In light of these convoluted circumstances, the freedom of the press to report what is happening is critical. For this reason, it is particularly difficult to know the truth about what is happening in Colombia when express authorization by the President of the Republic and the High Military Command is needed to release any information by the "free" press. Some journalism stories are purposely distorted and turned into propaganda exaggerating or diminishing body counts to instill fear amongst the general public and to win yet another psychological battle. In this aspect of the Colombian war, truth is the first to be sacrificed, but sadly, the same thing happens all around the World.

The sacrifice of truth when reporting what is occurring in Colombia has in effect criminalized the entire society. Adding to this criminalization has been the unending persecution of those considered the public pillars of any moral society: lawyers, doctors, justice agents, rescue workers, journalists, priests and religious workers. These people who have chosen to practice their vocation in areas that have been most hardly affected by violence have often become true martyrs of their causes. As always, there have been some exceptions, those who have made money from the misery of others or who have sympathized with many of the crimes.

As if all of these was not enough, Colombia's relations at an international level have been disgraced, in particular those with the United States who looks upon Colombia with the sole purpose of promoting the war against narco-terrorism. On the one hand, the interests of some citizens, business people, institutions, NGO's, religious and ecological groups have been confused with the "Imperialist infiltration" of the politics of the US State Department or as allies of the subversion. On many occasions this has been the result of the ineptitude of the Colombian government to properly handle the situation, or by many of its officials who directly

benefit economically at the expense of national interest and to the detriment of the future of Colombia. Worse yet is the fact that some agents of the security agencies have exaggerated, makeup, or invented cases in order to receive promotions, rewards, bonuses, or public recognition for their "actions". They have gone to creative extremes, fabricating their own drug-rings, staging abductions and taking advantage of their investigative and intelligence resources through internationally funded operations such as the "Plan Colombia" for their own benefit. There is a lot of money to be made through the illegal sale of seizure items as well as the rewards of legal remuneration for confiscations. Such actions have damaged the prestige of drug enforcement institutions and have created distrust and confusion among the general public. This produced, in many people, the "moral justification" for participation in the criminal activities as another form of economic and social subversion.

On the other side the perception by the US government that many internal problems and social injustices in Colombia have made the country a risk to national security is not necessarily true. Nevertheless, there is a high degree of responsibility on the part of the different groups outside the law, who, with their actions have struck a nerve within the interests, institutions and citizens of the US and abroad, causing distrust and defensiveness, limiting the possibility of political rectification of many ideas which had remained obsolete since the end of the Cold War and have been radicalized with the terrorist attacks of September 11. It cannot be ruled out that within the public forces, the armed groups, and advisors and suppliers of weapons, there are elements that have created situations that promote the ideologies of armament, intervention, and terrorism. All of these have resulted in the marked reduction of tourism and international investors in Colombia. At an international level, it has created the widespread believe that all Colombians are "bad", and it has also promoted aberrant and discriminatory behavior against Colombians abroad. The international media and the entertainment industry have spread most of these false believes, and Immigration agencies around the world have become more drastic when dealing with Colombians.

Today, as it was fifty years ago, every family has a story to tell about how one of its members or acquaintances has been threatened, murdered, massacred, tortured or has disappeared. The natural and human resources of the country have been snatched for guerilla warfare, the paramilitary, agents of the State or common delinquents who are protected by the terror generated through conflict.

The number of businesses that have been forced to close, and the number of business people, investors and the amount of capital that have abandoned the country is incalculable. Today, Colombia has approximately ten percent of its population living out of the country; another ten percent are displaced within its own national territory as direct consequence of the violence. The economic statistics of a country rich in both human and natural resources are staggering: 25 million people live on less than two dollars a day; 11 million people live on less than one dollar a day; 3 million people are unemployed; 7 million people are employed but paid below minimum wage; 2.5 million children are working; 1 million peasants do not have land; 1,1% of landowners own 55% of the land; wealthy people earn 26.3 times more than the rest of the population who work for minimum salary or less; 75% of all commercial credit is lent to 2,000 persons in spite of the fact that there exists more than 1 million informal businesses, 12,000 formal factories and 208.659 commercial establishments; salaries have dropped 20% in the last two years (El Tiempo, Octubre 27 del 2002, "Colombia, un Estado lamentable").

Despite all of the images and reports made about the conflict in Colombia, the number of armed combatants among the different armed forces does not surpass more than 20,000 guerillas, 140.000 military and some 15,000 paramilitary members. In a country with over 42 million people, and with a territory twice the size of Spain or France, it is arrogant and uneducated to

say or to assume that all Colombians are “bad”. There are more ordinary people in Colombia trying to live and love like anyone else in the rest of world than people actively seeking to participate in warfare. Colombia is a country whose geography varies from desert to snow-covered peaks and volcanoes. It includes all climates with mountains, forests, and plains. its coasts border the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans; a country self-sufficient in petroleum and hydroelectric resources with the natural and human resources to guarantee sustainable economic and social development. Instead of enjoying its wealth of resources, Colombia has become the world’s pariah.

There are few countries that do not discriminate against Colombians. A common form of discrimination is the implementation of nearly impossible requirements to obtain visas for entry eliminating the possibility of immigration for political or economic reasons. This directly goes against the human rights mandate in the charter of the United Nations. There are a great number of Colombians that stand out around the world for their prestige. For example, scientist Dr. Rodolfo Llinas, head of the Neurolab of NASA and is a member of the French Academy. From the world of the arts, authors Alvaro Mutis and Nobel Prize laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez or the renowned painter, Fernando Botero. Formula 1 racer Juan Pablo Montoya. Latin Grammy winners Shakira, Juanes, Carlos Vives and Kike Santander. CNN's Angela Patricia Janiot and film makers John Leguizamo, Jorge Ali Triana, Sergio Cabrera and Patricia Cardoso, etc. The list of gifted and talented Colombians is very long, but still there are millions who have decided to stay in Colombia hoping that one day peace and freedom will come or who simply cannot leave the country due to the harsh immigration laws against Colombians worldwide.

It is necessary to protect the rights of all persons without distinction of any kind; religious, political, social standing and class. It is necessary that the new generations of Colombians, the children, grow up in a different culture than that of genocide. It is necessary to develop a culture of peace. It is necessary that the state guarantees a healthy religious, cultural, political, technological, economic and legal development of its citizens without discrimination nor the use of weapons and barbarism. It is necessary to understand that not all political or union activism, independent of its origin, creates violence. It is necessary that the world understands that the situation in Colombia is not exclusively a Colombian creation or responsibility but rather that many of the drug and weapon producing countries form part of the same chain of problems as well as the solutions. It is necessary that we all understand that in the present world, isolated and remote “situations” do not exist, everything has to a greater or lesser degree, global consequences. It is necessary among the human family that we all develop the capacity to find solutions to the problems which arise anywhere and at anytime in the world, including Colombia. This is the only world we have and we are all its citizens. Just as the States globalizes its economic and national security interests, there is a need to help to Colombia’s search solutions, with attitude democratic and respectful. Many alternatives exist to achieve this goal beyond the exclusive and unilateral repression of politics. Colombians are human beings too, they are the same as any other inhabitant of the planet, and are more than just a statistic or a lucrative business opportunity for the media and distributors of weapons and drugs.

“More than the acts of the bad, it horrifies me the indifference of the good ones” Gandhi.

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