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Colombia

A turbulent panorama

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV341 - June 2002 -

Publication date: Saturday 15 June 2002

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Alvaro Uribe Velez was elected President of Colombia on May 26, 2002. In an article written before the election, Ricardo Ferrer and Mauricio Lazala examine the background to Velez's victory.

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Colombia has passed over into a stage of open war during a year in which the citizens elect their President and the Congress. But today's war is not necessarily the greatest of the problems facing the country: the main candidate for the Presidency has a dark past: Alvaro Uribe Velez has a reputation of participating in the dangerous games of the paramilitary groups.

In accordance with the bloody tradition of the Colombia's previous electoral campaign, the new President will be elected in the midst of gunfire. During the elections of 1990, the four candidates of the left were murdered, in public places. Now it is feared similar political violence will be repeated, but within the framework of a war that extends all across the country. In the current electoral campaign we already have a previously announced presidential candidate who has been kidnapped by the guerrillas. There are few leaders around who are known to be "clean" and there are few civil rights activists who have structured proposals to pull the country out of the crisis.

After three years and four months of peace negotiating about peace, the government has begun an open war against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Army of National Liberation (ELN), seriously intensifying this latest phase of almost five decades of armed conflict in this South American country. In this war-like atmosphere no voices can be heard promoting new negotiations. More authoritarian proposals are gaining political ground. For its part, the FARC-ELN makes it clear they will only negotiate with whoever the next government will be, and not with President Andres Pastrana. This implies that at least until August 7, Colombia will have a very intense war.

After the March 10, 2002 parliamentary elections, which were filled with irregularities, there was no a clear winner and the Colombian Congress ended up being more divided than ever. None of the parties of any of the presidential candidates have a majority in the Congress. The current dilemma is who is going to replace Pastrana. In the beautiful land of Colombia they only dream of the drums of war and few sing the hymns of peace.

Economic War

Already the impact of the war on the economy and the country's infrastructure is being felt. The Colombian guerrillas will continue adding to their war chests through kidnappings, extortion, drug and arms trafficking and the imposition of "peace taxes". At the same time the FARC will put into effect the lessons learned during the recent wars in Central America: fighters from the FARC and the ELN have participated in the Nicaragua and El Salvador conflicts. In addition they have maintained their relations with the guerrillas in Honduras and Guatemala. As will be remembered, in El Salvador, the Frente Farabundo Marti systematically applied the formula of "economic" war and used it in negotiating an end to the conflict. On the other hand, the FARC and the ELN's ferocious enemies, the paramilitaries, "Self-Defence Group of Colombia" (AUC), have enriched themselves through similar methods.

The failure of the peace process and the beginning of open war, makes it predictable Colombia will surpass its own record of an average of 37,000 people assassinated a year, with two million people displaced by the conflict, and almost a million people forced into emigrating, thousands of people forced into political exile, thousands more injured

and thousands more mentally ill.

But the least visible aspect of the war is the economic devastation. This latest form of the struggle includes frontal attacks on the country's infrastructure, especially transport highways and the electricity distribution system, with direct attacks on the large business monopolies and multi-national businesses, causing losses of billions of pesos.

Territorial Struggle

The guerrillas control almost half of the country, and half of the mayors of small and medium sized towns negotiate with these new local authorities to obtain approval for their municipal programmes. At the same time there is increasing activity by the death squads who are financed by the private landholders, the large business monopolies and some of the multi-national petroleum corporations. In the beginning, the training of the paramilitaries and the assignment of their targets was carried out by the military, but this crazy scheme got out of control. The present day death squads conduct their own business of carrying out massacres "to order" to extend the territories of the drug traffickers and the great landowners. In the middle is the civilian population. Civil rights and trade union leaders are dying by the score.

In the past, the battles between the army and the guerrillas took place in the jungles and in rural areas. Today the war is much closer to the large cities. The struggle is being intensified for control of the highways and supply routes to strategic regions such as the Bogota-Medellin-Cali triangle. Recent evidence of this can be seen in the widespread growth of militia groups (urban guerrillas) in cities such as Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Cartagena and Barranquilla. This was tragically underlined on Saturday April 6, 2002 when two powerful bombs exploded in the south-east city of Villavicencion, leaving twelve civilians dead. On Monday April 8, two car bombs exploded near Bogota, killing two police officers and causing several other injuries.

In this contest, the jewel in the crown is the Province of Antioquia where already an armed confrontation is taking place in the Aburra Valley (which includes Medellin) with a series of blockages on the highway that goes to the gulf of Uraba. Fighting is widespread in the valleys of the rivers Atrato, Cauca and Magdalena. Antioquia is one of the richest regions of Colombia and because of this all the guerrilla bands united in the struggle there are from outside the area. On the other hand, the candidate for the Presidency, Alvaro Uribe, the one with authoritarian proposals, belongs to this region and got his first support there.

International Implications

The conflict in Colombia has serious implications for its neighbours and might be extended to them. It should not be forgotten that Colombia has a strategic location on the continent, with coasts both on the Atlantic and the Pacific, with the mountains of the Andes and the Amazon jungle and, an immense maritime zone in the Caribbean. In this geo-political framework, the proximity of Colombia to Venezuela, which was recently shaken by serious political instability, and the closeness of Colombia to Central America, with its poorly resolved conflicts, merits special attention. The guerrillas of Central America were demobilized without the solving of the social problems of their countries. The social tensions there are still strong and with a little heat the fire of the battles there could be revived.

For its part, the United States has passed from a propaganda war to propaganda for war, within a framework of open intervention, (it may not be an accident that at this time the movie "Collateral Damage" is in circulation, a Hollywood production about the war in Colombia). After September 11, 2001, the United States added the FARC to its list of

"terrorist" groups, but in reality, the confrontation between the guerrillas and the troops of the Colombian army, financed and trained by the United States, has been going on since the 1960s. The generous new package of United States military support that the Senate in Washington has now approved for Colombia, better known as "Plan Colombia", is only the latest link in the chain of the United States' history of intervention in the country. While the policy of the United States to deal with the conflict is based on a military solution, the rest of Latin America and the European countries stake everything on social solutions for the country and a political way out of the crises.

Alvaro Uribe Velez

Alvaro Uribe Velez is the most likely candidate to win the Presidency on May 26, 2002. According to recent opinion polls in the newspaper *El Tiempo*, Uribe has the support of 59% of those intending to vote. But inevitably, Uribe will be faced with problems of governing and legitimacy. He carries a dark past, and until now, has been incapable of putting forward really viable proposals to deal with the current crisis. Early on, he attacked Pastrana's peace negotiations with the guerrillas and abandoned his own seat in the peace process, on the United Nations Organization (UNO) commission, which is made up of the more than ten countries who are friendly to the Colombian peace process. Moreover, consistent with his beliefs, Uribe Velez has stated that he supports United States' military intervention.

Colombia is in search of "clean" leaders for a civil society that is exhausted and is under pressure to choose a militaristic solution. The last years have been characterized by the absence of any trustworthy political leader. Into this panorama of uncertainty Alvaro Uribe Velez, a dissident in the Liberal Party, has made his appearance. He has had some success selling the idea that through the applying of a "strong hand", he can save the country from catastrophe. Alvaro Uribe stands for a war against the guerrillas but he offers no social options to his people.

His resume can have differently meanings, depending on who is doing the reading. In 1976 and 1977, Uribe was head of the Goods of Public Companies of Medellin and he led the land negotiations about the dam construction for the new Penol hydro-electric project and the moving of the population to the new village of El Penol by Uribe's Corporation. Supposedly this experience allows him to present himself to the voters as a good administrator. But the inhabitants of El Penol and Guatape in the east of Antioquia, all tell the same story, about the deaths and the disappearances they suffered during the negotiations about the land which was scheduled to be submerged. The Penol hydroelectric project was imposed on the people, rather than negotiated, and during its construction with many suffered forced exile, tear gassings and land expropriations.

In another part of his resume, Alvaro Uribe states that for a period he was Director of the Civil Aeronautics. But while in that position, he did not exactly distinguish himself by controlling drug trafficking at Colombia's airports. On the other hand, between 1995 and 1997, as provincial governor of Antioquia, he gave his support to the paramilitaries organized in the Private Vigilance Co-operative, "CONVIVIR", an organization condemned by the international community and by Almudena Mazarrasa, the UN Human Rights Commissioner for Colombia.

Several years ago, Alvaro Uribe's father was assassinated by the guerrillas. This experience left its mark on Uribe and as he gained political power he systematically attacked everything that had the appearance of being a social movement, whether it be groups of workers making demands, days of protests or groups who defend human rights. For Alvaro Uribe, all of these smelled of the guerrillas. Such policies generated support for him among big business leaders who are sympathetic to cutting wages, lowering pensions. They don't care much about labour stability or the lack of trade union rights.

The bloodiest shadow that is cast over Uribe Velez's personal history results from the events of 1997. During that

year, in Antioquia, in the area of the river Atrato, major massacres took place. These are well documented by journalists and human rights activists. These massacres of civilians were committed in the area under the jurisdiction of the 17th Brigade, under the leadership of General Rito Alejo del Rio Rojas, who is presently under judicial investigation. During the time in which these abuses against the civilian population took place, Alvaro Uribe failed to intercede on their behalf and failed to take any legal proceedings against General Rojas.

The AUC death squads have a special attraction to the jungles of Atrato because they can plant coca there, install cocaine- processing laboratories and take the cocaine out of the country via Panama. From May 1997 until May 2000 the AUC took over the town of Vigia del Fuerte for its base of operations. From there, its men controlled the river Atrato to where it entered into the gulf of Uraba. For three years the local authorities shut their eyes to the sight of the dozens of bodies which floated down the river. Evidence accumulated against General Rojas, showing the Colombian army's co-operation with the death squads in the regions of Cordoba, Uraba and the river Atrato. In his investigative reports, sent from the area of the river Atrato, journalist Ricardo Ferrer, one of the authors of this article, has confirmed the existence of this co-operation which has since been denounced by international organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

If General Rojas was the director of the massacres in Uraba and in the area of the river Atrato, the governor, Alvaro Uribe Valez, was the person who covered the crimes. They were impossible to ignore when the dead floated in the river Atrato every day, in full view of everyone: the death squads had given an order prohibiting the recovery of the bodies.

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Spirits are very high among some people about the possibility of negotiating a ceasefire or reducing hostilities during the rounds of voting in May and June when the President will be elected. In 1948, the presidential candidate, Jorge Eliecer Gaiten, was assassinated because he raised the banner for social reforms. Since then, thousands of politicians have died, victims of violent political intolerance and a culture of violent political exclusion. As mentioned, the Presidential elections of 1990 took place amidst bomb explosions and the murder of four Presidential candidates. In the same decade, the killing of more than 4,500 militants of the Patriotic Union, eliminated support for voices of moderation and liquidated that political movement.

Among the items on the list of Colombia's 2002 agenda is the government's war against the FARC-ELN, the election of a President and a new Congress, and George Bush's time-table for the anti-terrorism war. Pending is the government's offensive against the paramilitaries, but it is extremely doubtful that this will happen. For those people who are not aligned with those who promote the war, the only option must be that of intervening in defence of the civilian population to prevent the dreadful consequences of the options that the authoritarians could bring to Colombia. Already we have seen such results in other countries in Latin America such as with Fujimori in Peru. In the case of Alvaro Uribe, we still have time to prevent Colombia living through four more bloody years.

All the groups in the conflict have participated in multiple massacres in Colombia. With the announcement about the creation of an international penal court, it is possible that some day all Colombians who participated in this genocide will be forced to appear in front of an international judge. In the meantime, the economy is becoming devastated and the country, sadly, continues to fill up with more widows and orphans.