

## Iron fist politics in Colombia: A panorama of destruction



During the last decade many Latin American countries have resorted to *mano dura* (iron fist) politics and militarisation to combat crime, drugs and subversion. The high number of killed, injured and displaced persons in Colombia is a testimony of the failure of the iron fist policy with regard to in a crucial aspect of security: developing cultures of respect. When making policy in response to illegal groups' violence, does using the same violent strategy allow for constructive social engagement? Does it break cycles of violence? While the villains' death makes for a peaceful ending in comic books, in Latin America it reproduces violence. It is urgent to reimagine heroism and restore "enemies" their human dignity.

### SECURITY POLICIES IN LATIN AMERICA

In response to high rates of crime, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Brazil, Mexico and Colombia have designed security policies based on the use of military force. Just as the superhero *Iron Fist* eradicates evil in the Marvel comics world, these security policies attempt to create peace through the physical and political extermination of illegal armed groups. In Colombia for instance, the government decided to win the war against drugs and subversion by military means. According to official reports, over 15,000 members of non-state armed groups and more than 4,000 army soldiers have lost their lives between 2002 and 2008 (Colombian Ministry of Defence; Codhes 2008) and 5 million people are internally displaced (Norwegian Refugee Council 2011).

### FROM "INTERNAL ARMED CONFLICT" TO "WAR ON TERROR"

The government has traditionally defined the Colombian conflict as a war between the state and the communist guerrillas, but this changed radically since the 1980s. The expansion of drug cartels and the creation of paramilitary groups increased the complexity of the conflict. The number of war actors proliferated and intricate connections amongst them emerged. Violence rates rose to the highest in the world, and civilians became the main victims of the illegal armed groups and the armed state forces (Echavarría 2009, *Doing gender in the midst of war*, Journal of Peace Research 2).

Influenced by the US reaction to the attacks on 11 September 2001, the naming of the Colombian conflict went from "internal armed

**Direct Violence:** Verbal or physical aggression harming the body, mind or spirit of others or the self.

**Structural Violence:** Political repression and economic exploitation supported by structural segmentation and marginalisation.

**Cultural Violence:** Aspects of culture – not entire cultures – like religion and ideology, language and art, empirical and formal science that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence via, for instance, stereotypes, myths and beliefs that fuel discrimination.

(Galtung 1990, Cultural violence)

conflict” to “war on terror” in 2002. Changing the name had practical effects, because “the conflict’s name carries its own reading on the war causes and implies using certain methods for conflict transformation while necessarily excluding others” (Echavarría 2009: 55).

While “internal armed conflict” implies belligerent status for guerrillas and paramilitary groups, “war on terror” deprives so-called terrorists of all political status. Consequently, the use of state force to execute terrorists becomes legal because it is considered self-defence. Hence, negotiations are not an option. “We do not engage in dialogue with terrorists,” insisted the Colombian Minister of Defence last year (W Radio, 23 August 2010).

**RESULTS OF THE MILITARY EFFORT**

According to the Colombian government, the military effort has been successful and the government refers to the fact that more than 15,000 members of illegal groups have died in combat since 2002. Last September, the general commander of the Colombian army said:

*We could be guided by the statistics: the [guerrilla group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or] FARC narco-terrorists came to have 22,000 members and now have less than half that amount. We hope that this curve continues to descend with the efforts being made by the Government. As a result of the offensive pressure from our troops, we are getting a good number*

*of demobilized, caught and killed in military operations (El Espectador, 10 September 2011).*

The war effort has cost dearly in terms of human lives lost, and also has proven very expensive for Colombians. In 2010 for instance, Colombia was the Latin American country allocating the most money to military spending in relation to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at 4.1 per cent, the World Bank reported. When including the money needed for state reparations to victims, amongst other defence costs, the number goes up to 6.5 per cent of the GDP (Codhes 2009).

Official reports use the concept “executed” when guerrillas, paramilitaries and gang members die in combat, and the word “assassinated” when army soldiers die in combat. Colombia is a democracy committed to human rights treaties; however, the life of a hero and villain is not worth the same. The rights to life and equality admit exceptions under Iron Fist politics. On average, seven Colombians die in combat every day.

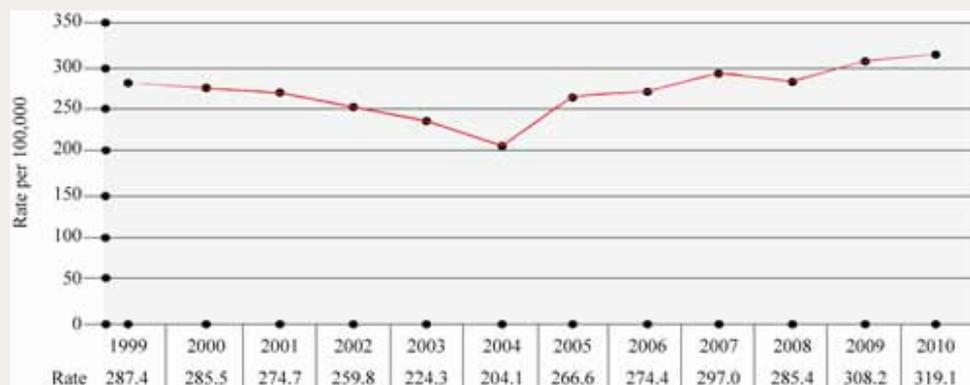
Some cases under investigation of assassinations are not included in the official report. “The scandal of the false positives” refers to the assassination of thousands of civilians murdered by the army, who were then dressed in rebel uniforms or given guns. They were then presented as guerrillas or paramilitaries killed in combat. This allowed units to fabricate results, and officers to gain promotion and public recognition (BBC news 2009). The army has already taken

Table 1: Official figures of individuals affected by the armed confrontation. Colombia, 2002-2008

Total subversive executed	12,713
Total paramilitaries and criminal gang members executed	2,602
Total members of the state forces assassinated	3,948
Total arrested	49,523
Injured - state armed forces	11,488

Adapted from: Colombian Ministry of Defence. Period 2002-September 2008

Figure 1. Rate of interpersonal violence per 100,000 inhabitants. Colombia 1999–2010



Source: Adapted from: Colombian Institute of Forensic Medicine, Report Forensis, 2010

responsibility for some of the cases. In 2009 the Colombian army launched a TV and radio campaign called “heroes in Colombia do exist” (*Los héroes en Colombia sí existen*) referring to soldiers who courageously fight terror.

#### ENEMIES: WHO ARE THEY?

The Colombian security discourse has created two main political identities: the terrorists “they” and the group of good Colombians “us” (Echavarría 2010, *In/Security in Colombia*). The category “terrorists/them” comprises all members of non-state armed groups, and also sectors of civil society who dissent from the pillars of the security policy. For instance, in February 2011 Nobel Peace laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel criticised the rights violations taking place in Colombia within the frame of the security policy. In response, the former president of Colombia accused him of “serving Colombian terrorists” and filed a court case against him (Eurapapress 2011). Like Esquivel, a number of professors, journalists and activists have been given similar labels. The discourse “us” versus “them” has created a fanatic social separation. The “other,” the “different,” the one who may disagree with the norm is becoming synonymous with “enemy.”

#### GROWING INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

In Colombia, the number of bombs, massive kidnappings and other “loud” forms of political violence by guerrillas and drug cartels has decreased since the security policy started in 2002. At the same time, new studies reveal an increase in the use of violence to solve daily interpersonal conflicts. In February 2011, the political magazine *Semana* published an article titled “Intolerance” posing the question: “Colombians increasingly solve their daily conflicts by using guns and knives, what is going on?”

Interpersonal violence has not only increased but also expanded from capital cities to smaller urban centres. The number of unionists and indigenous persons assassinated has increased since 2007, and also offences such as robbery, sexual assault and domestic violence increased substantially from 2004 to 2010 (CNP 2010, *Seguridad Democrática: balance de ocho años*; Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal 2010, *Forensis*).

#### EMERGENCE OF TOTALITARIAN FORMS OF HEROISM

In August 2011 the Colombian president was asked about the increasing levels of interpersonal violence in urban centres. He claimed the new type of violence was a residual effect of the “*success of the security policy*” to combat terror (El Tiempo 10 November 2011; italics added).

Contrary to this analysis, an increase on violence may be a response to various complex factors, including the security policy’s “us” versus “them” language, and moral justification

of violence as valid political action that the policy teaches by example.

The growing interpersonal violence may be a response to an understanding of “peace” as an ideal future status and not as an attitude in the present. The culture of intolerance denounced by *Semana* magazine relates to



the stigmatisation of persons and groups and their labelling as “enemies.” The security discourse influences a change in attitude in the community and shapes the way individuals relate to each other. Earlier this year the Minister of Defence said, “The order given by the president to military commanders and police forces is *raging, raging and raging* against the terrorists, to remove them completely from Colombia (Caracol Radio 12 August 2011; italics added).

The identification of soldiers and military leaders as “heroes” also plays a role in constructing an image of the use of deadly force as a valid tool for solving social and interpersonal conflict. Public rewards for killing “enemies” reproduce absolute truths about good and evil in a society and contribute to an understanding of violence as a problem of the individual, disconnected from dynamics of poverty, lack of opportunities and marginalisation.

In cases such as Colombia, the security paradigm creates totalitarian forms of heroism based on the use of violence rather than respect for human rights and dignity. For instance, not long ago the Colombian president celebrated the success of a military operation, which caused the death of the FARC guerrilla’s political leader. He said, “Our heroes have changed the history of the country for the better (El Tiempo 5 November 2011).

#### PRACTICES OF DEHUMANISATION

The practice of celebrating death and displaying wounded corpses in mass media has led to forbidden and hidden processes of mourning, since the bodies of the “illegal” are dehumanised, merely linked to anti-

State personnel processing corpses of persons fallen in combat with the armed forces, September 2010. Source: EFE

**Direct Peace:** Kindness and good to the body, mind and spirit of the self and others.

**Structural Peace:** Freedom of expression, dialogue, integration, participation and solidarity.

**Cultural Peace:** Legitimation of cultures of respect and social inclusion via religion, ideology, language, art, universities and media.

(Galtung 1990)

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values. Thus, mourning “their” death has become suspicious and politically incorrect. Not even relatives dare to claim the bodies. As a consequence, indifference towards violent deaths has become the norm. The high number of killed, injured and displaced persons in Colombia is a testimony of the failure of the iron fist policy in a crucial aspect of security: developing cultures of respect and trust.

Acts, which used to be considered atrocious and illegal, are today considered essential for national peace. The youth in Colombia receive the message that killing is heroic and that

## The challenge is to break cycles of violence and to facilitate constructive social engagement beyond dual identities.

some individuals are born evil and deserve to die. The Colombian case finds resonance in other Latin American countries and also in the global North. Legal institutions adapt to the us-them discourse, and implement sophisticated exceptions to the principle of non-discrimination. For example, declared states of emergency under security paradigms allow the exclusion of “terrorists” from the category “human.” They have no longer a right to have rights. Their provoked death does not count as homicide any longer.

Non-state armed groups use violence as political or economic means and thus inflict suffering in many. In fact, many civilians and state representatives in Colombia have been victims of the conflict themselves. War inevitably brings suffering to everyone. Facing this panorama of destruction, the suggested analysis is: when

designing public policy in response to violence from non-state armed groups, does using the same violent strategy allow for constructive social engagement? Does it break cycles of violence? Protracted armed conflict show that, in the case of Colombia, it does not.

### IN SEARCH OF ALTERNATIVES

Colombia has lived through armed conflict for more than five decades and seen human rights abuses by all parties to the conflict. If aiming to stop cyclic violence, peace needs to be addressed as substantially different from pacification. The political and physical elimination of persons and groups is in itself structural and cultural violence. If nonviolent policymaking continues being postponed until all enemies have been eradicated, it will never happen. As long as individuals are different from one another, they can imagine enemies.

Besides an iron fist policy, another option is to imagine communities in a web of relations that include the so-called enemy. It is possible to be guided by a radical principle of inclusiveness supported by public institutions. Colombia and other Latin American countries need to rethink what it means to live in a democracy besides holding periodic elections. It is urgent to publicly reject armed structures as productive enterprises – to discourage the systematic use of deadly force by state and non-state armed forces and start legitimising dialogue, inclusion and radical respect for the right to life.

### CONCLUSION

If security policymaking continues its current course in Colombia and generally in Latin America, public institutions will reach a point much closer to totalitarianism than democracy. The withdrawal process has already started. The challenge is to break cycles of violence and to facilitate constructive social engagement beyond dual identities. For that purpose, it is essential to re-dignify each person’s humanity and to make policy accordingly. Peace needs to be addressed as substantially different from pacification.