

# What's Going on in Colombia?

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The conflict in Colombia has established itself as the longest and one of the most complex armed conflicts in the world. Since colonial times, the country's history has been marked by violence, a racist violence that has led to extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth. This inequality in Colombia persists to this day and is a central point in the numerous violent clashes.

Between 1985 and 2018 alone, over 450,000 people were killed in the context of the conflict. 90% of them were civilians. In total, about 20% of the population became direct victims of the conflict. Over one million people fled Colombia between 1982 and 2020. Nearly 8 million people were internally displaced within Colombia during this period. In total, 121,768 people fell victim to violent kidnappings.

## What Are the Reasons for the Conflict?

Currently, Colombia ranks the worst in terms of unequal land distribution in Latin America, followed by Peru and Chile. Only 1% of landowners cultivate over 80% of the agricultural land throughout the country, while the remaining 99% share only about one-fifth of the land. The extreme concentration of land in the hands of a few and the associated conflicts over land access and ownership are central factors contributing to the ongoing armed conflict in the country.

Since colonial times, the concentration of vast land areas in the hands of a few has been the norm. These ownership structures have been maintained and established through violence, and the violent displacement of small farmers has become commonplace in Colombia over the past centuries. As a result, the vast majority of the rural population, including historically marginalized indigenous and Black communities, has been dispossessed, leading to the impoverishment of large segments of the population. This cycle of poverty has solidified over generations. Any attempts to change these conditions have been met with violence and brutally suppressed by those in power.

Part of the country is considered relevant only in terms of its natural resources. This has led to a development model based on extractivism and the violent enforcement of policies favoring this model. Social leaders and communities who resisted this development model and defended their territories have become victims of numerous human rights violations.

## A Country of Internally Displaced Persons

At the end of 2021, Colombia ranked 3rd among the countries with the most internally displaced persons in the world, after Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. There are around 8,000,000 internally displaced people in Colombia.

## Who Is Responsible?

Both state and illegal armed actors bear responsibility of this, but so do large landowners, cattle ranchers and large agricultural business owners who have appropriated millions of hectares of land through threats, forced purchases and massacres.

The majority of displaced people came to the country's major urban centers, largely without the support of state institutions. As a result, slum-like neighborhoods with extremely poor living conditions have gradually emerged on the outskirts of cities, where residents lack access to basic rights such as food, healthcare, and education. Young people growing up under these circumstances, marked by a lack of opportunities, often choose a life of crime.

## **Reasons for the Persistence of the Conflict**

The reasons for the ongoing conflict lie in the lack of political will to implement measures for fundamental changes that would lead to a fairer distribution and access to resources and basic rights. There is a powerful economic and political elite that resists democratic opening. They combat social and political processes challenging their privileges by any means necessary, both legal and illegal. Left-wing sectors, activists, trade unionists, human rights defenders, as well as students, indigenous peoples, and Afro-Colombians who organize politically to demand their rights to participation, have been systematically persecuted, criminalized, and murdered for decades.

In addition, the drug trade emerged in the 1970s, involving various actors in the conflict. Drug trafficking became part of the war economy, and gradually, a culture of organized crime took hold in the country, introducing brutal practices. While the drug trade is not the root cause of the conflict, it has been a key factor in its escalation and expansion.

## **Actors of the Conflict**

Numerous actors are involved in the Colombian conflict. It is sometimes difficult to draw clear boundaries between the various actors. Often, the lines between these actors are blurred, and in many cases, members switch from one group to another. Both legal and illegal armed actors are responsible for severe human rights violations.

### **The Guerrillas**

The founding of the guerrillas is connected to social, economic and political exclusion and the lack of spaces for political participation. There were numerous guerrillas in Colombia throughout the 20th century. The most well-known among them are the FARC-EP, the ELN, the EPL, and the M-19. They are all left-wing guerrillas, most of whom were founded in the 1960s and 1970s.

#### **Different Groups, One Struggle**

The guerrillas shared an ideological commitment to the anti-capitalist struggle and formed the National Guerrilla Coordinating Board Simón Bolívar in the 1980s. The FARC-EP, ELN, EPL, M-19, Quintín Lame Armed Movement, and the Revolutionary Workers' Party (PTR) collaborated for almost a decade.

## **Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP)**

The FARC-EP was founded in 1964 as a peasant self-defense group. It had a Marxist-Leninist ideology and its military strategy consisted mainly of guerrilla warfare. Its beginnings lie in the liberal guerrillas of the 1950s. The founders of the FARC were farmers who, in the face of violence, repression, and displacement, came together as a guerrilla group to fight for their rights. Their goal was to redistribute existing wealth. The FARC was active throughout the country. By the early 2000s, the FARC controlled about 40% of the national territory, and in 2007 had around 18,000 members. The FARC was the oldest guerrilla group in the world until it signed a peace treaty with the Colombian government in 2016, laid down its weapons and began the process of reintegration into civilian life. The former FARC founded the FARC party and was renamed Comunes in 2021.

However, a minority of FARC members subsequently took up arms again and founded the guerrilla group "FARC-EP", the second "Marquetalia" in response to the government's non-implementation of the agreement and the systematic murder of former guerilla fighters. These groups are known as dissidents.

The Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN) was founded in 1965 under the influence of the Cuban Revolution (1959). Their ideology was nourished by Christian elements of liberation theology. In contrast to the FARC, which has a strong vertical and centralised structure, the ELN is very decentralised. The ELN is associated with a more urban, student and trade union milieu. The main goal of this armed group is to influence the local and regional powers. The ELN mainly attacks infrastructure facilities in the oil industry and mining. Currently, the ELN has around 2,500 members.

## **The M-19 (19th of April Movement)**

The M-19 was founded in 1970 as a result of a declared presidential election fraud that took place in the same year. It differed from other subversive movements because it was primarily an urban guerrilla group, with many of its members coming from an academic middle-class background. It identified itself as an anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist movement. After a peace agreement in 1990, they formed the political party Alianza Democrática M-19. Some notable politicians, including the current President of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, were members of the M-19.

## **The National People's Liberation Army (EPL)**

The EPL (National People's Liberation Army) was founded in 1966 and had a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology. The majority of its members laid down their arms in 1991 and founded the Esperanza, Paz y Libertad party.

## **The Paramilitaries**

Paramilitarism is not just an armed actor. It is a military, political, and societal right-wing extremist project that has been largely driven by the assassination of left-wing politicians and social activists. It has close connections to drug trafficking and drug cartels. Paramilitarism is the most violent actor in the Colombian conflict and is responsible for the majority of human rights violations.

Paramilitary structures emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, as the armed wing of the Conservative Party. Paramilitary groups expanded in the 1980s under the guise of counterinsurgency. They served as private armies of politicians and large landowners, defended the preservation of economic, political and social privileges, sought the expansion of private property and revenues through land grabbing and murder. They enforced territorial control through the eradication of opposing armed groups and a violent form of social control.

In the 1990s, the various paramilitary groups joined forces and created the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Around 30,000 AUC fighters laid down their arms between 2003 and 2006 as part of a demobilisation process. However, many of its members regrouped into post-paramilitary groups, the so-called BACRIM (criminal gangs). They operate as drug cartels under various names, such as Águilas Negras, Autodefensas Gaitanistas (AGC), Clan del Golfo, Los Rastrojos or Los Caparros. The demobilization of paramilitary groups has been heavily questioned.

## **The State**

The state plays a significant role in the development and perpetuation of the armed conflict in Colombia. Historically, it has systematically employed illegitimate violence to stop democratization processes. It is responsible for numerous human rights violations and has always portrayed them as collateral damage of the "fight against terrorism".

The Colombian state, through its actions and omissions, has tolerated the development of paramilitarism. It bears a structural responsibility for the emergence of paramilitary structures. Various governments, political elites, and the military have cooperated with paramilitarism over the past decades, downplayed its significance, and provided justification for its actions. In connection with the statements made by paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso before the Transitional Justice for Peace, a lot of information was cited about the assassinations and massacres, as well as about the creation of new armed paramilitary blocs with state support, funding and cooperation. Drawing clear boundaries between paramilitarism and the state can be difficult.

One of the worst systematic human rights violations by the state is the eradication of the left-wing party Union Patriótica (UP) after its founding in 1985. Furthermore, the Colombian state is accountable under the law for the extrajudicial execution of at least 6,402 civilians, which were violently carried out by the army between 2002 and 2008. Additionally, numerous individuals were deceived and captured, murdered, and later presented as guerrilla fighters killed in combat.

## **The Civil Society**

Civil society has also played an important role throughout the history of the conflict. Collectives, organizations, local councils, social leaders, students, teachers, workers, etc., are fighting for their rights and resisting in the territories. They have also made the conflict and

the corresponding dimensions visible. An active militancy of civil society was brutally crushed by the state and paramilitaries. More than six thousand members of the Unión Patriótica (UP) alliance were murdered, including presidential candidates. This crime was officially declared a crime against humanity, but remains unpunished to this day.

## **Entrepreneurs and Big Landowners**

Big business owners, landowners, and cattle ranchers have directly participated in and benefited from the Colombian conflict. In particular, social groups that had accumulated land and property have enriched themselves or gained political power through dispossession, economic activities related to the armed conflict, and the drug trade. In the official hearing on the Contribution to the Truth before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) in April 2023, former paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso confirmed the cooperation of national and multinational companies such as Coca-Cola, Postobón, Bavaria and Ecopetrol with the paramilitaries to carry out the assassination of trade unionists or acquire land. Similar agreements have been reported involving operators of palm oil, banana, sugarcane plantations, and mines.

## **Mafia Structures and Drug Cartels**

In the 1970s and 1980s, drug cartels were mainly concentrated in the cities, the most famous being the Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel. They co-opted the Colombian state and collaborated with paramilitary groups. They are responsible for a large number of political persecutions, murders and expulsions. These cartels were dissolved in the 1990s, but after this time the cultivation of coca plantations increased enormously. After the collapse of the cartels, new groups have emerged, some of which have relocated their activities to Central America and Mexico.

The involvement of the guerrillas in the drug trade was primarily related to the production process of cocaine. The guerrillas financed themselves by charging fees for guarding illegal crops, taxing laboratories and using illegal runways. The paramilitary groups have had a direct link to drug trafficking since their collaboration with the Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel in the 1980s. Drug trafficking serves as a source of funding for both guerrillas and paramilitaries in the armed conflict.

## **Internationalization of the Conflict**

The Colombian conflict can only be understood when placed in a global context. This context of the Cold War and the anti-communist struggle and resistance in various parts of the world not only provided ideological references and economic resources but also exerted significant pressure from the beginning of the conflict, which contributed to its escalation.

The state's claim of communist influence in the uprisings of April 11, 1948 made it possible to give a real dimension to the so-called communist threat in Latin America, demonstrating the need for a continental anti-communist policy. In line with US geopolitical goals, it was believed that the USSR and communism posed a serious threat to Western and Christian civilization. A system of intergovernmental anti-communist alliances was developed, consistent with the Truman Doctrine and officially coordinated through the Pan-American

system, the OAS, the Inter-American Treaty on Mutual Assistance (TIAR) and the Alliance for Progress (Alianza para el progreso), launched in 1961. Colombia was the only country in the region, in addition to severing diplomatic relations with the USSR, to break off relations with Cuba when the revolution triumphed. (Ramírez, 2004, 183; Rodríguez 2005; López-Meneses, 2017; Ojeda Awad, 2014)

The Armed Forces of Colombia were trained at the School of the Americas in the United States from the point of view of national security and the internal enemy, as a result of which internal social conflicts were considered exclusively as a result of the penetration of international communism. After the end of the Cold War and the National Front in Colombia, the anti-communist struggle in Colombia took on alarming dimensions. Within this framework, an extremely violent atmosphere was created in which paramilitaries, in collaboration with state forces and with US funding, carried out the extermination of over 6,000 communist militants and fighters of the Colombian Communist Party (PACOCOL), its coalition of social movements Unión Patriótica (UP) and the allied guerrillas and peasant groups.

Both internal and external actors have sought two types of international collaboration: firstly, political support and recognition from abroad, and secondly, military and logistical support in the war. On an international level, Colombia holds high geostrategic and economic relevance. It has coastlines on both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans and shares a border with Venezuela, a country that has been a thorn in the side of the United States since the late 1990s. Colombia allows the operation of nine U.S. military bases on its territory and has been a constant ally of the U.S. and Europe with its right-wing, neoliberal government, as well as a representative of their economic interests in Latin America.

A change in the political and economic system in favor of the majority would have a direct impact on the neo-colonial logic of exploitation between the United States, Europe and Colombia. For this reason, counterinsurgency was vehemently supported by the US and its allies not only financially, but also with training, military support, logistics and strong media propaganda.

In 2000, under the government of Andrés Pastrana, the "Plan Colombia" was agreed with the United States. 71% of the funds provided went to the military and police. Plan Colombia has been widely criticized for its ineffectiveness and disastrous impact on human rights, health and the environment. The latter was affected, among other things, as a result of the massive use of the herbicides glyphosate.

### **Is Germany Involved?**

Germany also has economic interests in Colombia. Germany is Colombia's fifth-largest trading partner and the largest trading partner within the EU under a free trade agreement since 2013. Most recently, in spring 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz and then-Colombian President Iván Duque agreed to increase the import of Colombian coal to Germany. This is Germany's way of replacing a portion of its demand for Russian coal.

### **At Whose Expense?**

The largest coal exporters in Colombia have committed numerous human rights and environmental violations, which mainly affect the communities living in the mining areas. After the electoral victory of Gustavo Petro Colombia's first left-wing president in June 2022, he announced a move away from fossil fuel extraction in the country.

Venezuela and Ecuador are important allies in resolving the armed conflict in Colombia. All countries in the region have repeatedly expressed their support for the peace process with the FARC and the associated benefits for the stabilisation of the region. Petro's government officially resumed relations with Venezuela after he took office. In November 2022, the Colombian government resumed peace negotiations with the ELN guerrillas in Venezuela.

## **Timeline: The History of the Conflict**

### **Chronology of the Conflict**

#### **Timeline: The history of the conflict**

It is difficult to give a specific date of the beginning of the Colombian conflict, because its historical causes go far into the past, to the time of the Spanish colonial period.

#### **1948 — 1957 - La Violencia**

1948 Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitán was assassinated in the capital Bogotá. Gaitán was a left-liberal leader and enjoyed great popularity among the impoverished population. After his murder, numerous nationwide protests and social unrest took place, to which the government responded with violence. The murder of Gaitán intensified a pre-existing confrontation between the country's liberal and conservative forces. The Conservative government had a political police force; on the other hand, liberal self-defense groups of peasants emerged who took up arms to defend themselves against conservative state repression. Around 300,000 people died during this time. This period is known as La Violencia (The Violence).

#### **1958-1974 – The Frente Nacional and the Formation of Guerrillas**

The first paramilitary groups appeared in the region in the 1930s. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Chulavitas were consolidated with state support to wipe out the liberal population, and the Pájaros were promoted by big landowners to protect their lands from the emerging guerrillas. At the same time, in the 1970s, the Colombian government continued to promote the arming of civilian groups in order to combat the strong armed insurgency. The military, police, and intelligence began the fight against insurgent groups by adopting the National Security Doctrine in the context of the Cold War. Their goal was to eliminate the "communist threat."

#### **1958**

In 1958, the Liberal and Conservative parties made a pact of non-aggression. They agreed to take turns in the country's government for the next 16 years. This division of power was a pact between the country's elites. An important part of the political spectrum was thus excluded from political participation. Since the democratic channels of political participation were blocked, some peasants, marginalized sections of the population and the political left chose the path of armed struggle in order to make their political voices heard and fight for their fundamental rights.

## **1964**

### **Operación Marquetalia and the Formation of the FARC-EP**

In 1964, the Operación Marquetalia took place. The government attacked so-called "independent republics" made up of peasants, some of whom belonged to liberal self-defense groups. After this attack, various large guerrilla groups formalized in response to state violence and the subjugation of the oligarchies. Its central political goal was agrarian reform in favor of small farmers. In that year, the Marxist FARC-EP guerrillas, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army were founded.

## **1965**

### **Formation of the ELN**

In 1965, the ELN guerrilla (National Liberation Army) was formed. Its ideological basis was liberation theology, a revolutionary theological current. On January 5, 1965, the ELN carried out its first military action and captured the city of Simacota in Santander. Here the group publishes the "Manifiesto de Simacota" (Simacota Manifesto), in which it publicly announces its existence.

## **1967**

### **Formation of the EPL**

In that year, the EPL (Popular Liberation Army) was formed.

## **1970**

### **Formation of the M-19**

In 1970, after electoral fraud in the presidential elections, the left-wing guerrilla M19 (mostly urban) was founded in protest.

## **1984 – 2002**

### **Paramilitarism, Failed Peace Attempts and Eradication of the UP**

In the 80s, paramilitarism gained strength and is responsible for most of the deaths in the conflict. At the same time, the drug cartels emerged. In particular, the Medellín cartel and the Cali cartel became very strong. They worked together with paramilitary groups and are responsible for a large proportion of the politically motivated killings in the country. In this decade and the following decade, the systematic political persecution of opposition members in Colombia increased rapidly. This persecution is to be understood as a tool of institutional exclusion. It has affected and continues to



affect various types of political opponents; from members of left-wing guerrillas and left-wing parties, to human rights activists, trade unionists and journalists, to peasant leaders and artists. This persecution was carried out by drug cartels, paramilitary groups and state structures in connection with the adoption of the "doctrine of national security".

## **1984**

### **La Uribe - Agreement**

In 1984, the FARC and the government of President Belisario Betancur signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement to advance peace negotiations. This one is known as the Acuerdo de la Uribe.

## **1985 — 1988**

### **The Eradication of the Unión Patriótica (UP)**

In the course of the peace negotiations, the left-wing political party Unión Patriótica (UP) was founded in 1985. Disarmed members of the FARC, but also civilians from various left-wing currents became part of the party. After the surprisingly positive election results, a strong political persecution began against this party. Between 1978 and 1990, three UP presidential candidates were assassinated, and most of the survivors were forced into political exile. In total, nearly 6,000 members were murdered or victims of enforced disappearances. The extermination of the Unión Patriótica is classified as a crime against humanity and remains unpunished to this day.

## **1985**

### **Occupation of the Palace of Justice**

In 1985, members of the M-19 guerrillas occupied the Palace of Justice in Bogotá. They wanted to lead the government to honour agreements made by taking civilians, including judges, hostage. As a result, the Colombian army reacted disproportionately violently and stormed the building, with no regard for civilians inside. This resulted in 98 deaths and 11 disappearances. The occupation and violent storming of the Palace of Justice have not been finally dealt with to this day.

## **1990**

### **Peace Agreement with the M-19 Guerrillas**

In 1990, the M-19 guerrillas laid down their arms. They founded the Alianza Democrática M-19 (Democratic Alliance M-19) party, of which numerous members - including a presidential candidate - were murdered and assassinated. Also this year, the camp of the FARC "Casa Verde" was bombed by the Colombian army. This attack, together with the systematic murder of the members of the UP, led to the failure of peace efforts.

## **1991**

### **The Constitution of 1991**

In 1991, a new constitution was adopted, advanced by progressive forces and students. It replaced the previous constitution of 1886 and was an important step for the country. Among other things, Colombia was recognized as a pluriethnic state, and concrete rights for indigenous and Black communities were established.

**1993**

#### **Murder of Pablo Escobar**

In 1993, mafia boss Pablo Escobar was murdered.

**1997**

#### **Formation of the Right-Wing Paramilitary Group AUC**

In 1997, the right-wing paramilitary group AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) was founded. It was the union of already existing paramilitary groups under one name. The paramilitaries are mainly responsible for the violence in the country.

**1998**

#### **Failed Peace Negotiations in Caguán**

In 1998, peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP took place again. The peace negotiations failed in 2002 due to non-compliance with agreements and the limited ability of the government to give in to the need for structural change and thus move the negotiations forward.

**2000**

#### **Introduction of the "Plan Colombia"**

In 2000, the "Plan Colombia" was agreed between the Colombian and U.S. governments. The U.S. provided military and financial support over \$2,000 million. Plan Colombia was an agreement that, behind the curtain of the fight against drug trafficking, embodied a bloody fight against the insurrection and caused countless victims.

**2002-2010**

#### **The Uribe-Vélez Era and the Politics of "Democratic Security"**

The period between 1996 and 2008 is the period with the highest number of deaths and human rights violations in Colombia's history. About 75% of the total victims of the conflict fall on this period, when the war and violence against the civilian population intensified with the expansion of paramilitarism and Uribe's "policy of democratic security". To this day, Uribe Vélez and his followers vehemently deny the well-documented, systematic links between paramilitarism and state structures.

**2002**

#### **Uribe Is Elected President**

In 2002, the landowner Álvaro Uribe Vélez was elected president of Colombia. He ruled until 2010. Between 1995 and 1997 he was governor of the department of Antioquia. Located in the northwest of the country, Antioquia is a region where paramilitary forces have consolidated. More than 200 criminal cases are pending against Uribe in the context of the formation and financing of paramilitary groups. His election campaign and his subsequent presidency were marked by a discourse of the "hard hand against terrorism". This discourse reduces the armed conflict to a terrorist threat from the FARC guerrillas. It should therefore be defeated politically and militarily by all means - including with the help of the paramilitaries.

## **2006**

### **The Pseudo-Demobilization of Paramilitarism And "Parapolitics"**

In 2006, the disarmament of the paramilitaries took place under the government of Uribe Vélez. This disarmament was strongly criticized. The disarmament law provided for prison sentences of a maximum of eight years for former members of the AUC. Most of them stayed in prison for only 2 years. The focus of the testimonies before the prosecution was on individual actions and thus concealed systematic patterns of violence. The commanders of the AUC were extradited to the United States, where they were convicted of drug trafficking offenses. Those responsible for serious human rights violations did not have to answer to Colombian civil society for their crimes and therefore did not contribute to finding the truth. Moreover, after the disarmament of the paramilitaries, new armed groups were very soon formed, which acted in the same way. 2006 was also the year in which connections and pacts between paramilitary groups and politicians became known.

## **2008**

### **Extrajudicial Executions of Civilians**

In 2008, it was revealed that between 2002 and 2008, the Colombian armed forces murdered at least 6,402 civilians, portraying them as guerrillas killed in combat. During the government of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, an incentive program for military personnel was developed. Through a treacherous reward system, the soldiers who killed the most guerrillas received promotions, vacation days, or money. The military, in collaboration with paramilitary groups, sought out young people in rural areas of the country and in marginalized urban areas, kidnapped them with promises of work, murdered them and subsequently dressed them in guerrilla uniforms. The victims were mostly poor youth, street dwellers and people with disabilities. The family members then founded the organization MAFAPO (Mothers of the Falsos Positivos from Soacha) and since then have been fighting against impunity and for a historical memory of these crimes.

## **2010-2022**

### **The Peace Agreement: Change in Sight?**

The peace agreement between the former FARC guerrillas and the government addresses the issue of land ownership and distribution as a central aspect of the conflict. The first point of the agreement provides for a comprehensive agrarian reform and land redistribution, which has not yet been fulfilled. In addition, a

transitional justice system consisting of three institutions was agreed. These are the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, for the judicial reappraisal of the conflict, the Truth Commission, for the historical reappraisal of the conflict, and the Special Unit for the Search for Forcibly Disappeared Persons, which was supposed to find out what happened to the more than 120,000 forcibly disappeared people in the country and where they are.

The disarmament of the FARC does not mean the end of the conflict in Colombia. Paramilitary groups such as the Águilas negras, the Gulf clan, drug cartels, the ELN guerrillas, FARC dissidents and the state itself continue to be responsible for threats, murders, persecution and displacement.

## **2010**

### **Juan Manuel Santos Was Elected President**

In 2010, Juan Manuel Santos was elected President of Colombia. During the Uribe government, he had been Minister of Defence. As a candidate, Santos campaigned for continuity of Uribe's policies, including the ideological interpretation of the armed conflict as a terrorist threat from the left.

## **2010**

### **The Land Restitution Act**

In 2010, the law on the restitution of land and compensation of victims was adopted. The aim is to give millions of displaced farmers their land back. Land restitution is progressing slowly. Many beneficiaries were again threatened, expelled and murdered by paramilitary groups after land restitution. In various investigations and court cases, alliances and connections between paramilitary groups and livestock farmers' associations, large national and international corporations in the agricultural, mining and energy sectors have been proven.

## **2012**

### **Peace Negotiations in Havana**

In 2012, the first peace negotiations between the Santos government and the FARC - EP began in Havana, Cuba.

## **2016**

### **The Referendum Against Peace**

In 2016, the peace negotiations were successfully concluded. A referendum was held in which citizens are to decide whether to accept or reject the agreement. After a propaganda campaign by right-wing political forces against the agreement, it was narrowly rejected by 50.21%. After consultation with the opponents of the agreement, some points were modified.

## **2016**

### **The Signing of the Peace Agreement**

On 24 November 2016, the agreement between the FARC-EP guerrillas and the Colombian state was signed. Then President Juan Manuel Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this. Under his government, peace negotiations with the ELN guerrillas also began, which were suspended under the Duque government (2019).

## **2018**

### **Beginning of the Duque Government**

In 2018, the right-wing Iván Duque was elected president of Colombia. The Duque government tried to boycott the implementation of the peace agreement. From 2017 onwards, the number of murders, massacres and displacements increased again: between November 2016 and November 2021, 1,270 social leaders and 299 FARC signatories of the agreement were murdered, 250,000 people were displaced, and 179 massacres were committed between January 2020 and November 2021.

## **2019 — 2021**

### **Social Revolt**

In 2019 – 2021, nationwide general strikes against the Duque government took place in the country. The massive social mobilization led to a social confrontation with the neoliberal system of Colombia. The state reacted with violence and repression, and the media stigmatized the revolt. In 2021, 80 protesters were murdered and hundreds imprisoned as part of the protests. Most of them were between 17 and 26 years old.

## **2022**

### **The Historic Pact: The Government of Hope**

In 2022, left-wing presidential candidate Gustavo Petro won the presidency with the "Historical Pact" alliance. He is the first left-wing president in the history of Colombia. Francia Márquez, an Afro-Colombian lawyer, environmental activist, former gold mine worker and domestic worker, was elected as vice president. The new government recognises the conflict and its structural causes. It is prioritising the implementation of the peace agreement and is already planning land reform.

## **2022**

### **Publication of the Report of the Truth Commission**

In June 2022, the final report of the Truth Commission was published. The report examines what has happened in Colombia in the context of the conflict over the past 60 years and also gives an explanation of the reasons for the continuation of the conflict.

## **2022**

### **Continuation of Negotiations With the ELN**

In November 2022, the Colombian government and the ELN guerrillas resumed peace negotiations. These are currently taking place in Caracas, Venezuela and are progressing rapidly. An initial agreement has already allowed some indigenous communities to return to their territories.

## **2023**

### **Inter-American Court of Human Rights Condemns the Colombian State for the Eradication of the UP party**

More than 30 years of litigation and waiting came to an end on 30.01.2023. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemned the Colombian state for the annihilation of more than 6,000 members and fighters of the Patriotic Association, a left-wing political party that emerged from the peace negotiations between the government and the now-disbanded FARC guerrillas, violently wiped out in the 80s and 90s. The state must take various measures, including the erection of a memorial in memory of the murdered, as well as the annual introduction of a day of remembrance for the members of the UP.

## **The Geography of the Conflict**

The Colombian conflict is not uniformly spread across the national territory and has developed specific dynamics depending on the region. Certain territories have historically been more affected by violence than others. In general, the conflict originated in rural, peripheral and border regions and has since been fought out much more strongly there than in the cities. 63.5% of the victims lived in rural and peripheral areas. There are several reasons for this.

On the one hand, the state is highly centralized and has only a limited presence in the rural zones of the country. Its presence in rural areas has historically been of a military nature. This facilitated the expansion and control of irregular armed forces, who in certain cases acted as substitutes for the state. Many young people join armed groups because of violence, lack of prospects and precariousness.

In the geography of the conflict, we can observe how the intensity of the conflict increases as we approach areas of the country that have more natural resources, as well as the regions with a strong concentration of soil for monocultures, extensive livestock farming and, since the 1980s, illegal crops such as marijuana, coca and poppies. There, tensions between large landowners, large national and international corporations, farmers, local communities, the state, paramilitary groups and guerrilla groups are the order of the day. They are fighting for territorial control and defending their strategic interests.

### **Areas of high conflict intensity**

In fact, strategic corridors have emerged throughout the territory of Colombia that play an important role for armed actors, as they provide access to other countries, to areas of legal or illegal exploitation of natural resources, or to areas of illicit cultivation that are the basis of the war economy and the groups that gain control over them, provide significant

benefits. This interactive map, based on information from the Colombian Truth Commission, lists and describes the current strategic corridors.

### **The strategic corridors of the conflict**

Historically, the economy has been based on livestock farming and peasant cultivation of cassava, sweet potatoes, corn, rice, bananas, tobacco, coffee and avocado.

However, economic interests related to monocultures and large-scale mining have gradually destroyed traditional economies. The Serranía de San Jacinto has also been used for the production of alkaloids, to set up storage facilities and even illegal drug laboratories. The spread and development of guerrilla fronts in the north of the Caribbean, especially in the Sierra de San Jacinto, is due to the need to control pensions that allow the financing of structures and the consolidation of social bases. At present, drug trafficking facilitates the continued existence of armed structures and the entry of paramilitary groups, especially the Clan del Golfo and the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC).

#### **Sierra Nevada y Perijá Highlands, Guajira – Connection with the Caribbean Sea**

There are 19 indigenous reserves and 36 collective territories of Black communities in this area. Drug trafficking in the country began in these areas. This encouraged the emergence of private armies dedicated to the cultivation and trade of the product. Within the framework of the armed conflict, the struggle for control of the proceeds of the legal and illegal economy that developed in the corridor led to the emergence of guerrillas and the subsequent entry of paramilitarism from 2006.

#### **Catatumbo**

This strategic corridor is named after the river of the same name. The first appearance of the state in this area was in the form of police and military. Their goal was to secure oil production and in the course of this they attacked the indigenous groups in the area.

In the 1970s, the EPL and ELN guerrillas came to the territory. In the 1980s, the ELN guerrillas consolidated themselves as the strongest actor in the region. It infiltrated associations of oil company workers. In the 1990s and 2000s, various paramilitary groups came to the region.

#### **Nudo de Paramillo – Connection with the Urabá Gulf**

In this corridor is the Paramillo National Park. Its strategic geographical position favors the connection by rivers and land with the Bajo Cauca in Antioquia, the Uraba Gulf, the Bajo Atrato in Chocó, the border with Panama and the Magdalena Medio. Economic projects have been developed in the region, including extensive livestock farming and the banana industry. Since the late 1970s and 1980s, the EPL and FARC

guerrillas have entered the region. In the late 1980s, drug traffickers bought up land on a large scale and created private security armies. Between 1998 and 2005, the paramilitaries came to the region. They were financed by ranchers, large landowners and traders.

### **Darién Mountains– Connection with Central America**

This corridor connects the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, as well as the region with Panama, Central America and the Urabá Gulf. Due to this, this zone is a strategic territory for armed actors.

In the XX century and until the 1970s, logging companies came to the region. This marked the beginning of the conflict in the region. From 1970 to 1992, the guerrillas EPL, FARC-EP and ELN entered the region, as well as drug traffickers and paramilitary groups. Between 1992 and 2001, the FARC used this corridor for trade, and the paramilitaries expanded and allied themselves with the state. They fought the guerrillas and expelled people from their lands in order to build large-scale economic projects and to drive their political project. Currently, there are various agro-industrial projects in the zone. Paramilitary groups are present there, as well as FARC dissidents and the ELN guerrillas.

### **Pacific Coast of the Chocó – Connection With the Pacific Ocean**

The maritime connection facilitates the trafficking of weapons, drugs and human beings. The corridor connects the region with Panama, Central America, the Darién Mountains, the Baudó Mountains, the coasts of San Juan and Buenaventura.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Medellín and Cali cartels were present there to smuggle cocaine into Panama and Central America, as well as weapons and money. The FARC-EP came to the region in the 1980s, the ELN guerrillas in the 1990s and the paramilitary in the mid-1990s, with the aim of controlling the routes of drug trafficking towards Panama. For some years now, the paramilitary group AGC has been present there, controlling the various routes of cocaine smuggling that meet in this region on the way to Panama and Central America.

A current method of smuggling is the use of speedboats. In the region, "white fishing" has become famous, young people look for packages of drugs floating in the sea, which are thrown away by the drug traffickers when they are intercepted by the marines.

### **Western Mountain Range and Baudó Mountains – Connection With the Pacific Ocean**

This corridor connects the western mountain range with the Baudó Mountains. In the 1980s and early 90s, the Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel were present in the Chocó to control the drug trade there. Between 1980 and 2000, the FARC-EP was sporadically and discreetly present. In the 90s, the ELN guerrillas came to the region, and in 1996, the paramilitary group ACCU. They initially came at the request of the mine operators and traders to found a paramilitary group in the center and south of Chocó and controlled the drug trade. After the disarmament of the paramilitaries in 2005, other paramilitary groups formed in the region and became increasingly



involved in the cocaine trade. Since 2005, the region has no longer been a hub of distribution, but has become a coca leaf cultivation area. Between 2016 and 2019, the ELN guerrillas dominated revenues from gold mining, logging and drug trafficking. The fighting for control of the corridor between the armed actors has led to a serious humanitarian crisis for the inhabitants of the region.

### **North of the Caucas – Connections with the Pacific Ocean**

In this territory there are 18 indigenous reserves, as well as 42 collective territories of Black communities. Even before the conflict, the communities had suffered territorial losses due to major projects such as the La Salvajina dam and sugar cane plantations. This sub-region has become a strategic corridor due to illegal mining and drug trafficking. Since the 1960s, however, it has been a historic retreat for the ELN, EPL, M-19 and FARC guerrillas. At the end of the 1980s, the FARC-EP and the ELN guerrillas were present there. Since then, the region has been a strategic corridor for the import of weapons, food and supplies, as well as a safe haven for armed actors. In the 1990s, the number of coca plantations increased, as did the drug and arms trade. In 2000, the paramilitary group AUC entered the zone and controlled coca leaf cultivation and mining.

### **Central Mountains and Cañón de Las Hermosas**

This region is home to the Las Hermosas National Park, whose inhabitants are mainly farmers, Afro-Colombians and indigenous people. This corridor is considered the birthplace of the FARC, which over time began to promote poppy cultivation and regulate the illegal economy. In 1999, the paramilitaries came to the region to gain control of the drug trafficking value chain. In those years, drug cartels came to the region to launder money by buying land.

### **South of Cauca and North of Nariños – Connection With the Pacific Ocean**

It is a strategic corridor because it connects the Cauca region with the Pacific coast of Nariño and crosses the Pan-American Highway, one of the most important roads in the country that connects the interior of the country with Ecuador and the south of the continent. The smuggling of illegal goods is exceptionally easy here. That is why armed actors have always fought for its territorial control. The FARC-EP and the ELN came to the region in the late 1980s. In 2000, the paramilitary groups came to the region. Since then, the conflict in the region has intensified. After the disarmament of the paramilitaries, new paramilitary groups such as Los Rastrojos, Organización Nueva Generación, Águilas Negras, Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia and the Clan del Golfo are also present there. At present, the ELN guerrillas and FARC dissidents are also present.

### **South of Nariños – Connection with Ecuador**

This region crosses the Pan American Highway, which connects to Ecuador, and also connects Ipiales and Tumaco with the Pacific Ocean. This corridor is of great interest for deforestation, gold mining, oil extraction and palm monoculture.

In the mid-1990s, the cultivation of coca plants began in the region. Currently, Nariño is ranked 2nd among the states with the most coca-growing areas in Colombia. After the signing of the peace agreement in 2016, the war for dominance over drug trafficking routes has intensified here.

### **South of Colombia – Connection with Peru and Brazil**

The Putumayo River, which marks the southern border of the country, flows through this corridor, which consists of the states of Putumayo and Amazonas. This territory is connected by numerous rivers, which facilitates the connection of the Amazon region with Ecuador, Peru and Brazil. The majority of members of indigenous groups live in this territory.

Rubber, furs, wood, gold and oil were mined in this area. Until the 2016 peace agreement, the FARC-EP had the supremacy of territorial control in the region. Since 2021, mixed illegal groups have emerged.

### **Bajo Caquetá – Connection with Brazil / Mirití, Paraná and Apaporis**

This corridor is jungle-like and isolated, with difficulties in access and mobility. It is home to endangered species such as pink dolphins and manatees, which have always been protected by indigenous peoples.

This corridor, which forms the very edge of rural Colombia, is attractive to various actors who have used it for decades to expand the cultivation of illegal drugs and drug smuggling. The Peruvian armed group Sendero Luminoso in the 1990s and the FARC-EP were present in the corridor throughout. Between 1998 and 2002, the presence of the FARC-EP in Bajo Caquetá increased as a result of the failed peace talks with the government in San Vicente del Caguán.

### **Guaviare River – Connection with Venezuela**

This corridor is located in the south-east of the country. This corridor connects Colombia and Venezuela through its numerous rivers. Due to its geographical location, this subregion is a strategic corridor for the cultivation, processing and trafficking of cocaine, the exploitation of minerals, and the arms and gasoline trade. At the end of the 1970s, many people came to these areas from outside. It was then that the cultivation, processing and trade of coca and marijuana began there. In the 1980s, the growth of illegal coca cultivation was a source of funding for armed groups such as the FARC and paramilitary groups.

### **Vaupés River – Connection with Brazil**

Due to its connection with Brazil, it is a region that has always been contested between the guerrillas and the state security forces. The FARC-EP was the armed group with the strongest control in this corridor. It controlled the routes, production and circulation of economic goods mainly related to illegal cultivation, arms trafficking and exploitation of mineral resources. In response, the first narco-paramilitary armies emerged there in 1982. From 2003, the offensive of the security forces within the framework of the policy of democratic security had a strong impact

on the region. These military operations and their consequences seriously endangered the survival of the ethnic peoples living there.

### **Region of the Plateau – Connection with Venezuela**

This corridor is bordered to the north by the Meta River, to the south by the Guaviare River and the Orinoco River, which forms the Colombian-Venezuelan border in the department of Vichada.

### **Cocuy National Park**

This corridor makes it possible to cross old roads in distant areas and connects the Magdalena River with the eastern plains. Around 21,879 members of indigenous peoples live in this area. There are 35 indigenous reserves with around 558,079 hectares. The first guerrillas to arrive in the region in the late 1970s was the ELN. The FARC arrived in the region in the early 1980s.

## **Current Situation**

Peace in Colombia is nowhere to be seen after the peace agreement. In the first half of 2022 alone, over 70,000 people were displaced within Colombia. Since the conclusion of the peace negotiations in 2016 until the end of July 2022, 1,334 activists and 327 former FARC fighters have been murdered in Colombia. Particularly at risk are people who politically oppose mining, energy and agro-industrial projects, as well as municipal representatives who demand the enforcement of their social, cultural and economic rights in their communities.

Almost six years after the agreement, the level of implementation is less than 10%. There is also a serious problem of underfunding the agreement. In recent news reports from the new government, it has been reported that there has been a serious misappropriation of peace funds under the Duque government, which were intended for a period of ten years and were spent for other purposes within four years.

The election of left-wing President Gustavo Petro in 2022 fills the country with hope for structural changes that pave the way towards sustainable peace. For this, a fairer distribution of resources is fundamental, as well as the protection of human rights and the environment as well as a departure from the neoliberal system and its social distortions. As part of the "total peace" law, the Petro government wants to re-establish contact with all armed actors still active and conduct peace negotiations with them. The law was passed in the first hundred days of the new government, as well as a tax reform. The implementation of the peace agreement is a top priority and will be accelerated.

In the first year of the government of Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez, major reforms were proposed in the areas of pensions, labor, taxes, and healthcare. The mass media, large private pension funds, private healthcare providers (EPS), and big corporations created a narrative of fear and rejection towards these comprehensive reforms. The opposition, led by supporters of Álvaro Uribe and supported by powerful economic actors, called for the

overthrow of the democratically elected government, referring to the current efforts as a "soft coup." On June 7, 2023, nationwide mass mobilizations were called for to defend the proposed reforms, demand their passage in Congress, and fight back against media manipulation and disinformation. A massive mobilization took place across the country, explicitly supporting the reforms.

Throughout one year of governance, Colombia has also pursued an intensive international agenda, establishing cooperative relationships with African countries, Spain, Portugal, and numerous Latin American countries. Colombia has once again become an official member of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and is actively engaged in the regional integration agenda.

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