



Obstacles to Peace

Paramilitaries and U.S. policy stand in the way of ending Colombia's civil war

By Ana Carrigan

There are times in Colombia, and this is one of them, when the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse appear to have taken up permanent residence in this beautiful and tragic land. The Jan. 25 earthquake that devastated Colombia's coffee growing region was the worst since 1875. It's hard to fathom the catastrophic human consequences—"biblical," President Andrés Pastrana called them—that the recent earthquake left in its wake in the city of Armenia. The number of recovered dead—almost 1,000—dwarfed by the more than 2,000 people who disappeared and are not expected ever to be seen alive again; the homes of more than 6,000 peasant families destroyed; 35,000 homeless families; 250,000 people suddenly without jobs, or a roof, or any possessions or any means of supporting themselves. No one will ever know the sum of individual tragedies—the families, lives, plans and dreams—that lie, torn to shreds, buried beneath disaster statistics on such a scale.

Even before the earthquake struck this had been a nerve-racking New Year. Hope, absent for so long, has been riding high on Pastrana's commitment to ending the hemisphere's oldest insurgency war. So when talks between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were formally inaugurated on Jan. 7, and the national media and hundreds of national and international celebrities descended on the small, tropical town of San Vicente del Caguán to bear witness to history in the making, for one short and happy week it finally seemed possible that Colombia's yearnings for peace might be respected by those with the guns.

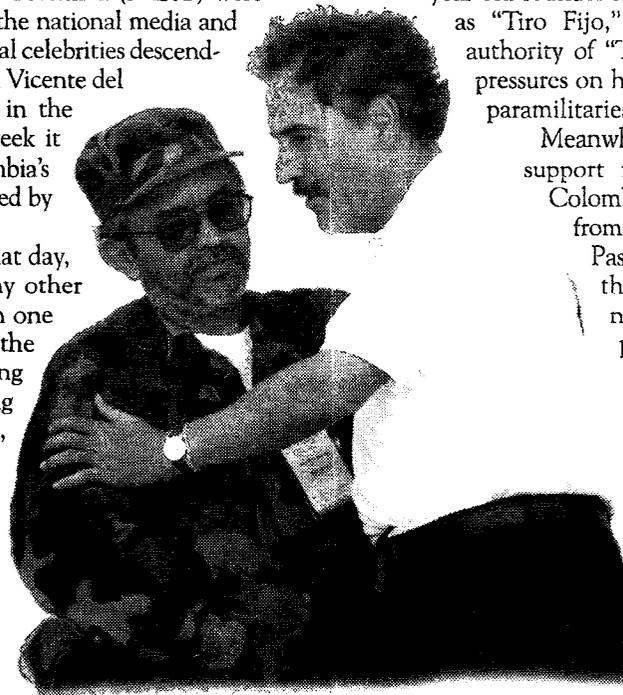
Yet elsewhere in Colombia on that day, new violence raged. As in so many other peace processes, opening talks with one side has enraged the other. Even as the people of San Vicente were dancing in the square to the ear-splitting music of Ivan and his Bam Band, flown in by the government from Bogotá for the post-inaugural celebrations, right-wing paramilitaries, acting on their threat to

sabotage the peace talks, went on a rampage. In undefended villages and rural townships, where local army and police sat out the killings in their barracks, the toll from dozens of massacres mounted. During the next four days, more than 150 people accused of guerrilla sympathies were slaughtered. The militarists in the FARC, who remain unconvinced that peace through negotiations will deliver the radical political changes for which they have fought their entire lives, froze the talks, pending government action to attack and disband the paramilitaries.

No one ever said peace negotiations in Colombia would be easy. First, there are two long-lived guerrilla forces—the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN)—with different priorities, constituencies, ideologies and methods, which have been fighting the state for more than 35 years. Within the last two years, the 15,000-strong peasant army of the FARC has won a string of military victories, and between them, the insurgents now control almost 40 percent of the national territory. Both forces, however, are split along generational lines. Within the FARC, the younger militarists, who believe peace can be imposed with their guns, are opposed to the policies of the would-be peacemakers, led by the FARC's legendary 68-year-old founder-leader, Manuel Marulanda, known as "Tiro Fijo," or "Sureshot." Fortunately, the authority of "Tiro Fijo" is still supreme, but the pressures on him to delay negotiations while the paramilitaries run amok are certain to increase.

Meanwhile, lacking more than rhetorical support from his generals—or from the Colombian rich, who hope to be "rescued" from the FARC by U.S. military aid—

Pastrana has been unable to deal with the greatest obstacle to peace: the nearly 10,000 heavily armed, well-paid (largely with drug money) right-wing paramilitaries. First formed 18 years ago by the army for counter-insurgency, the paramilitaries now act as the militarized arm of the Colombian far-right. In the countryside they carry out a scorched-earth policy against the guerrilla's social base that has created 1.3 million internally displaced refugees, while simultaneously "cleansing" the land for their financiers' ben-



Colombian President Andrés Pastrana embraces comandante Raul Reyes of the FARC at peace talks in San Vicente.

MARCELO SALINAS/AFP

efit. In the cities, they provide death squads to order. On Jan. 28, paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño announced the opening of "a second front in the war"—against nongovernmental organizations—when he sent thugs to seize the director and three staff members of the Institute for Popular Training (IPC), a highly respected NGO in Medellín. Castaño is holding two of the victims of the daylight raid as "POWs."

The paramilitaries seek political recognition and are prepared to murder their way to the negotiating table. Since, in accordance with the old adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," many senior and mid-level army officers and their troops continue to give the paramilitaries tacit protection and support, the paramilitaries now stalk the land like Frankenstein. Created by the state, this monster has escaped its control.

Finally, the insurgency and counter-insurgency are not the only wars in Colombia. Washington's "war on drugs," specifically its aerial drug eradication program, has not only failed to affect production of Colombian coca and poppy plants for the worldwide cocaine and heroin market by one iota, but it has created schizophrenic confusion in U.S. policy just when clarity and united, bipartisan support for the Colombian government's peace efforts is most crucial. Pastrana, who is trying simultaneously to end the insurgency and Colombian drug production, needs the collaboration of the FARC to eradicate the coca and poppy plantations. Since the coca growers are also the FARC's social base, further aerial spraying—which is funded by the U.S. Congress against the wishes of the Colombian government—threatens to erase the entire peace process.

By expunging the line between "counter-narcotics" and "counter-insurgency," the drug war has drawn the Pentagon into an ever-deepening alliance with the failed Colombian Army, and, by extension, with the murdering paramilitaries; it also has recruited countless young peasants into the guerrilla ranks. The growing relationship between the two armies, north and south—unaccompanied by demands either for sanctions against known paramilitary supporters in high command positions, or for obedience and execution of presidential orders to attack and disband the paramilitaries—risks further eroding critical civilian authority over the Colombian Army. As the warm relationship between the Pentagon Southern Command and the Colombian generals progresses, it is fair to ask why the "narco-paramilitary" consistently fails to make it onto the Clinton administration's list of enemies. U.S. interests would be better served if U.S. money, equip-

ment and training—now going to fight impoverished coca farmers and their "narco-guerrilla" protectors—instead were deployed to combat the drug-trafficking paramilitaries that are holding Colombia hostage.

Still, something new is stirring in Colombia. At long last, the population has decided—en masse—to repudiate the war. For the first time, a civic society has emerged, and civilian leaders are organized in regional and local peace commissions in every city, town and rural community nationwide. The long overdue debate over the kind of country Colombians want to construct from the embers of their terrible war has begun.

Pastrana is not the first president to try to end the political violence, but he is a new kind of Colombian leader: a centrist of courage, character, imagination and principle. He understands that achieving peace with Colombia's guerrillas requires more than a seat in Congress in return for silencing the guns. Pastrana knows that any durable peace will require confronting the root causes of the insurgency—land ownership and economic and social justice for the poverty-stricken peasants.

These are issues that have bedeviled Latin American societies since the beginning of this century, and which no Latin nation has solved. What makes Colombia such a fascinating country today is that at the ideologically exhausted end of the century, in the midst of their appalling carnage, Colombians are still actively searching for new answers to an intractable, age-old question: How do you construct a more just, more equitable society?

This is Pastrana's challenge. His decision to facilitate talks by creating a demilitarized zone the size of Switzerland in the tropical southeastern coca-growing region controlled by the FARC—in the face of opposition at home and in Washington—took political courage. It has paid dividends. Today, the DMZ is the only region in the country where there is no violence. Since the army and police withdrew last Nov. 7, only one person has died violently. An unarmed civic police force takes care of routine law enforcement in five small towns, and the civilian population and the local municipal authorities are collaborating peacefully with the FARC in an experimental, power-sharing arrangement. Even after the talks were officially frozen, the FARC and government negotiators met and reached agreement on the implementation of the first pilot programs for coca eradication, alternative crop development and reforestation of rainforest territory devastated by peasant colonizers.

Pastrana has extended the DMZ until May. His decision was opposed by the Colombian generals and the Republican right in the U.S. Congress. But the people of San Vicente, capital of the demilitarized region, terrified that any return by the army would bring paramilitaries in its wake, were greatly relieved. From the local perspective, so far, this experiment in co-habitation with the guerrillas is working just fine. ■

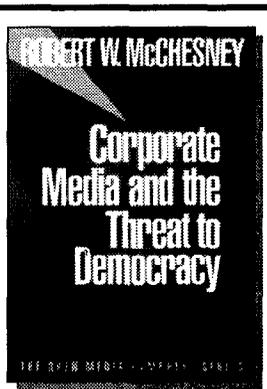
Ana Carrigan is the author of *The Palace of Justice, a Colombian Tragedy (Four Walls Eight Windows)* and is writing a new book for Verso on the search for peace in Colombia. Research for this article was funded in part by the investigative fund of *The Nation Institute*.

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Man of the People

President Hugo Chávez challenges Venezuela's political establishment

By Steve Ellner

When Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was elected in December, he proclaimed, rephrasing Walt Whitman, "I am a little bit of each one of the children who run, who dream, who die of hunger, of misery, today in this very instant in Venezuela."

Chávez, who took office on Feb. 2, has made a greater commitment to the poor than any president in the nation's history. His determination to achieve radical change has been put to a long and protracted test. As far back as 1982, he was part of a conspiratorial military group called the "Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200" in honor of the bicentennial of Simón Bolívar's birth. Inspired by struggles in Venezuelan history for social justice, they considered themselves a civil-military movement, though they lacked a clear vision of the type of democracy they wanted to achieve. "We always upheld the notion of the participation of the people," Chávez said recently. "We stressed political work in the barrios, with the peasants, workers, students and in the streets."

In February 1989, when mass riots broke out throughout the country because of deteriorating economic conditions, the military was forced to repress the civilian population and an estimated 1,000 people, most of them poor, were killed. Chávez's group held President Carlos Andrés Pérez responsible for the casualties, which included a member of the core group of military dissidents. Three years later, these junior officers, opposed to the government's corruption and neoliberal policies, staged a coup. But lacking support from the Air Force, the rebellion was crushed.

However, it generated a surprising degree of public sympathy and catapulted Chávez to center stage. After his release from prison in 1994, Chávez emerged as the Venezuelan politician who most fervently criticized the political establishment. He was clearly rewarded for this stance at the polls in December, pulling in 56 percent of the vote and trouncing the two main establishment parties, the formerly leftist Democratic Action (AD) and the right-leaning Copei. Although these two parties have dominated the political scene since the outset of democracy in 1958, together they scored only 9 percent of the presidential vote. Explaining this outcome, Ernesto Mayz Vallenilla, the founding rector of Simón Bolívar University, says, "In the deepest chamber of the Venezuelan people's soul, there exists an immense charge of rage and frustration generated by this party-dominated democracy run by a coterie of corrupt politicians."

Hugo Chávez (pictured with his wife, Marisabel) has made a greater commitment to the poor than any president in Venezuelan history.

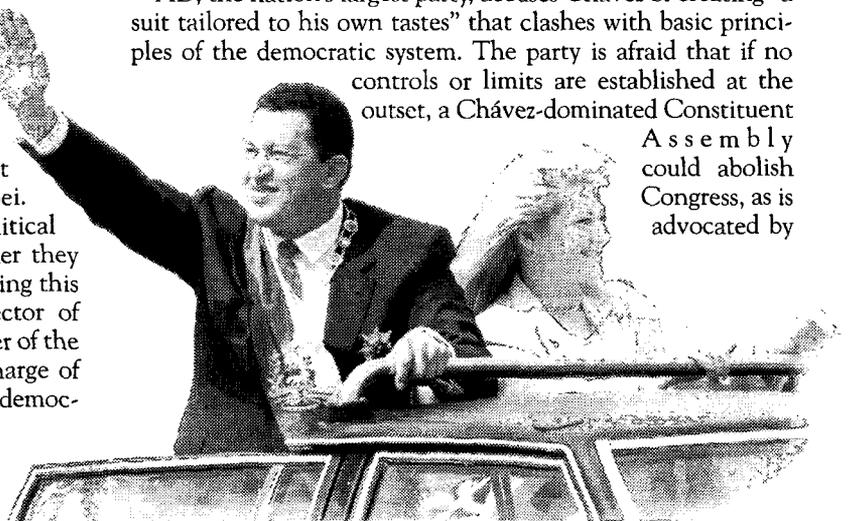
An expert in military strategy, Chávez carefully has defined his battlefield and chosen his foes. His battle cry is the convocation of a Constituent Assembly to overhaul the political system and supplant the political elite. When it comes to political reforms, Chávez has indicated that the sky is the limit. He is especially intent on revamping the legislative and judicial branches as well as organized labor and the armed forces, all of which have been thoroughly penetrated by the establishment parties.

During the campaign, the establishment parties staunchly opposed the Constituent Assembly, but now they recognize Chávez's victory as a mandate for the proposal. They insist, however, that Congress, not the president, formally convene the assembly and define its responsibilities. The day he took office, Chávez decreed that the proposal for a Constituent Assembly will be submitted to a popular vote and that, if approved, the executive branch will define its procedures and powers. Subsequently, Chávez announced that he will "promote and personally participate in" popular assemblies throughout the country to establish a set of priorities to serve as a guide for the Constituent Assembly.

The proposals formulated by his political allies include a unicameral National Congress, popular election of judges and direct elections for the top leadership posts of organized labor and political parties. Chávez also has called for granting military officers the right to vote and assume public positions. "We resolutely oppose the old system of voting for party-devised slates," says Ramón Castillo, a pro-Chávez former congressman from Caracas. "The delegates to the Constituent Assembly should be elected individually on the basis of their own merit, and a number of them should represent distinct sectors of the population."

AD, the nation's largest party, accuses Chávez of creating "a suit tailored to his own tastes" that clashes with basic principles of the democratic system. The party is afraid that if no controls or limits are established at the outset, a Chávez-dominated Constituent

Assembly could abolish Congress, as is advocated by



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