

18 July 2005

### 1. Introduction

This Key Documents was produced by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Home Office, for use by officials involved in the asylum / human rights determination process. The Key Documents identifies general background information about Colombia from a variety of recognised sources. The material identified concentrates on the issues most commonly raised in asylum / human rights claims made in the United Kingdom and is not intended to be exhaustive. None of the documents identified contain any Home Office opinion or policy.

The Key Documents provide a signpost to the source material, most of which is readily available in the public domain. For Home Office users, the Key Documents provide direct electronic access to each source referred to in the document, via a link on the source numbers in the index and list of sources. For the benefit of external users, the relevant weblink has also been included, together with the date that the link was accessed.

As noted above, the source documents identified concentrate mainly on key human rights issues. For background, some basic information about Colombia, extracted from the Country Profile on the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office's](#) website.

### 2. Basic information

**Full Country Name:** The Republic of Colombia

**Area:** 1,141,748 sq km

**Population:** 44m

**Capital City:** Bogotá (population: 6.9million)

**People:** Colombia is an ethnic melting pot in which some 60% acknowledge that they have mixed Spanish/indigenous roots, 20% claim direct European descent, 18% are of Afro-Colombian origin, and 2% belong to indigenous communities. There are tiny Christian and Muslim Arab minorities, small and declining Jewish communities in the major cities, and a small group claiming Romany roots.

**Language:** Spanish with some isolated pockets where indigenous languages remain in use.

**Religion:** Predominantly Roman Catholic, with some evangelical influences in parts of the country.

**Currency:** Peso

**Major political parties:** The two major political parties are the Liberals and the Conservatives. President Uribe stood for the 'Primero Colombia' movement (dissident Liberal). In addition, there are the following parties: Polo Democrático, Movimiento Cristiano, Movimiento Nacional Progresista (MNP) and recently some small independent parties are emerging. The Conservatives opted not to field a candidate in the 2002 Presidential elections.

**Government:** Democratically elected representative system with a strong executive.

**Legislature:** Bicameral Congress; 102 member Senate and 165 member Chamber of Deputies are both directly elected for four-year terms.

**Head of State:** President Alvaro Uribe Vélez

**Foreign Minister:** Carolina Barco

**Membership of international groupings/organisations:** Colombia is a member of the Andean Community, UN, G3, Organisation of American States (OAS), Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), Latin American Economic System (SELA), Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the Caribbean Development Bank, Andean Development Corporation (CAF), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) amongst others.

### Geography

Colombia lies entirely within the tropics, but climate and land use vary greatly according to altitude,

ranging from the arid low-lying Guajira peninsula in the north-east and tropical lowlands of the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, to the bleak pastures of the Andean páramo (high moorlands). The Andes' western, central and eastern cordilleras (mountain ranges) run parallel south-west to north-east. The physical geography means that large areas are very sparsely populated.

## Recent History

**Mid-1960s** Colombia's two main guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN), are established.

**1974** M-19 guerrilla group is formed.

**1978** Cesar Turbay (Liberal) elected President. He conducts tough counter-insurgency campaign.

**1980s** Medellin and Cali drug cartels consolidate their control of the drugs trade. Paramilitary groups, hired initially for self-defence purposes, emerge as a significant force.

**1982** Belisario Betancur (Conservative) becomes President. Takes first serious steps towards a negotiated settlement of guerrilla conflicts.

**1985** FARC establishes political party, Patriotic Union (UP), but paramilitary death squads kill thousands of its members over the next decade. M-19 takes over Palace of Justice in Bogotá; army recaptures building, but over 100 are killed including 11 senior judges.

**1989-90** Big increase in drug-related violence. Medellin Cartel, opposed to extradition, assassinates Luis Carlos Galan, favourite to win Liberal Party presidential nomination in 1990 and kills 200 policemen in Medellin. President Barco (1986-90) appeals to international community for support in his struggle against narco-traffickers.

**1990** After long and difficult negotiations, M-19 guerrillas demobilise and establish a democratic political movement.

**1991** Constituent Assembly (with former-guerrillas well represented) drafts new constitution.

**1991-92** Various rounds of peace talks between government of President Gaviria (1990-94) and FARC and ELN guerrillas fail to make headway.

**1993** Pablo Escobar, infamous head of Medellin drug cartel, killed by police in Medellin.

**1994-1998** Administration of President Samper (Liberal) dogged by drug-related corruption scandals. But progress is made in dismantling Cali-drug cartel. FARC and ELN guerrillas show little interest in negotiating with Samper government.

**1998** Andres Pastrana (Conservative, but standing as an independent) wins Presidential elections.

**2002** President Pastrana breaks off three-year old peace talks with FARC, and terminates their demilitarised zone. Peace talks with ELN break down and attempts to restart them stall.

**2002** Alvaro Uribe (dissident Liberal, standing for independent Primero Colombia Movement) wins Presidential elections. Inaugurated 7 August, amidst a mortar attack perpetrated by the FARC.

**2003** Formal peace talks between the Government and the AUC initiated in July, seven months after the United Paramilitary Groups (AUC) announced a unilateral ceasefire. This agreement commits the AUC to demobilise completely by the end of 2005, although observance of the ceasefire is very patchy.

**2004** A further agreement between the Government and the AUC is signed in May, providing for a 'location zone' of 360 sq km in Santa Fe de Ralito. A single negotiating committee is established, with paramilitary leaders in the zone granted amnesty from arrest or extradition for the duration of the process. The Organisation of American States (OAS) undertakes to monitor the demobilisation and verify the AUC's compliance with the ceasefire agreement. By year end, some 5,000 AUC members had collectively demobilised.

**2005** Negotiations between the AUC and the government continue, and a legal framework to accompany the demobilisation process causes contentious debate in Congress.

## Politics and recent events

### Political Background

Executive power is exercised by the President (assisted by a Cabinet), who is elected for a single, non-renewable four-year term by national elections (although the possibility of Presidential re-election is currently being debated, see ELECTIONS below). Legislative power is vested in two chambers, consisting of a Senate (102 members elected for four years) and the House of Representatives (165 members elected for four years). The country is divided up into 32 departments and one Capital District. The 1886 Constitution was reformed by a Constituent Assembly in 1991.

Two major political parties - the Conservatives and the Liberals - have traditionally dominated Government, alternating in power over the last 130 years. The only period of military rule in the 20th Century was from 1953 - 1957. The 2002 elections, however, confirmed that the two

traditional parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, no longer totally dominate political life. Congress is now learning how to handle coalition politics following the success of a number of independent candidates, and representatives of political movements. Horacio Serpa, the official Liberal Party nominee, was the only 2002 Presidential candidate with a national machine behind him; and his running mate was a declared Conservative. The winner was a dissident Liberal, and right wing in outlook. The other candidates came from a mix of 'movements' and 'groupings'. But for the first time there was a clearly identified candidate of the democratic left, Luis Eduardo Garzon. His movement was too recent to be classified as a party at the time. But the fact that a left winger ran (and survived) is one of the most encouraging signs to emerge from a convoluted electoral process. Luis Eduardo Garzon has since been elected as the Mayor of Bogotá in the regional and municipal elections in October 2003. This has led many to believe that the democratic left can now be regarded as a viable alternative to the traditional parties.

A key feature of the country's democratic system has been its resilience. This is reflected in the strong tradition of elected civilian Governments broken only twice, for a cumulative total of less than five years of non-civilian rule, since the founding of the Republic in 1819, giving the country the longest democratic legacy among Latin American countries.

In the mid-1960s two main guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN), were established. Successive Presidents have had to face the consequences of internal armed conflict. The previous President Andres Pastrana's programme focused on peace processes with all the guerrilla groups, the fight against corruption, fiscal and political reform, an expansion of the state's role in education and health, better income distribution and poverty reduction, and job creation. Under 'Plan Colombia' the previous Colombian Government produced a drugs strategy which included targets to reduce the cultivation, processing and distribution of drugs by half from 2000-2005. The strategy, now adopted by the current government, also reinforced existing judicial measures to hit drug traffickers and confiscate assets and tackles the interconnected problems of violence, social and economic inequality, and abuse of human rights.

### **Recent Political Developments**

President Pastrana's peace process with the FARC was in increasing difficulty in the early part of 2002. It nearly came to an end in late January, but on 20 January 2002 was saved by an agreement to work urgently towards a ceasefire. Following that agreement, the FARC increased their attacks on security forces and the civilian population. The hijacking on 20 February 2002 of a domestic airline by the FARC, resulting in the kidnap of a Colombian Senator, led to the decision by President Pastrana on 20 February 2002 to end the peace process and terminate the demilitarised zone.

President Alvaro Uribe was inaugurated on 7 August 2002. His stated focus upon taking office was security, drug interdiction and economic reforms in the form of a National Development Plan. The Plan includes reforms to the political system, justice and public administration. A Referendum on many of the key issues in this programme was held on 25 October 2003. It covered a wide range of topics from corruption, government finances and political reforms. The Referendum all but failed, due partly to the complexity of its questions. But the Government undertook to press on with its proposed reforms by way of normal legislative means.

Security policy under President Uribe is based on a number of strands, including an increase in manpower and funding for the police and armed forces; the expansion of state presence to every municipality in the country; the establishment of units of 'peasant soldiers'; and a strategy - known as 'Plan Patriota' - to challenge the FARC in its strongholds in the south of the country.

The government began discussions with the AUC paramilitary group in July 2003 aimed at the complete demobilisation of the organisation's fighters. To facilitate the talks, a 'location zone' was established in Santa Fe de Ralito in May 2004, where paramilitary negotiators are exempt from arrest or extradition for the duration of the talks. So far, around 5,000 paramilitaries have demobilised collectively as part of this process. However, a number of obstacles continue to dog the talks, including disputes over the legal framework for demobilisation and reintegration of fighters, ongoing links with the illegal drugs trade and possible extradition to the US.

### **Elections**

The last Colombian Congressional election was held on 10 March 2002. Senators were elected from a single national constituency and Representatives from departmental constituencies. A real

range of candidates were elected with a new left-wing party, Social and Political Front (now the Polo Democratico), doing well. The results confirmed that there are no longer major parties in Colombian politics.

The first round of the Presidential Elections was held on 26 May 2002. A second round run-off, necessary if no candidate gets more than 50 percent of the votes, was in the event not needed. President Uribe secured 53% of the vote.

Regional and municipal elections also took place the same weekend as the Referendum on 26 October 2003. Significant results include the election of the left wing alliance Democratic Pole Party candidate, Luis Eduardo Garzon, as Mayor of Bogotá. Other left wing victories include the new Mayor of Medellin and the new Governor of Valle de Cauca.

The debate about the possibility of Presidential re-election took up a substantial part of Congress' time in late 2004, and the Constitutional Court is currently revising this proposal.

## **Economy**

Despite years of drug and politically related violence, the economy is diverse and relatively advanced. Crude oil, coal, coffee and cut flowers are Colombia's principal legal exports.

Colombia has emerged from the crisis of 1999 when the country was affected by instability in Brazil and South East Asia. A contraction in output of 4.3% in 1999 has been followed by increases in each of the subsequent years. In 2003, GDP growth reached 3.75% and in 2004 it stood at 3.9%. For 2005 the official projections estimate a 3.8% GDP growth.

Whilst the Government of Alvaro Uribe has moved to strengthen the country's macroeconomic stability and improve its long term potential, there are some concerns, especially over the servicing of its external debt. In addition, the hoped-for reforms in the areas of taxation, pensions and labour laws have all taken a back seat to political posturing in the debate over Presidential re-election.

Whilst the well publicised security issues in Colombia can be a deterrent to companies to do business there, many well known companies operate there and do so very profitably. Security, by and large, tends to be a manageable risk. More problematic to most businesses operating there, however, is often instability of the legal and tax frameworks, to which frequent changes are made, therefore making medium to long term planning very difficult.

### **Basic Economic Facts**

**GDP:**US\$ 80.9 billion(2004)

**GDP per head:**US\$ 1,817 (2004)

**Annual Growth:**3.9% (2004)

**Inflation:** 5.5% (2004)

**Unemployment:**11.7% (2004)

**Major Industries:** Oil, Mining, Construction, Financial Sector, Manufacturing, Transport and Communications.

**Major trading partners:** US, Venezuela, other Andean Countries, Mexico, Brazil and China.

**Value of UK exports:** to Colombia £104m (Jan to Nov 2004)

**Value of UK imports from Colombia:** £271m (Jan to Nov 2004)

## **Human Rights**

The human rights situation is a main cause of concern for many human rights organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the international community. The situation remains grave. The internal armed conflict is estimated to have caused the deaths of more than 2000 civilian deaths in 2004. Only about 10% of violent deaths in Colombia are linked to the conflict, but the country also suffers high levels of common criminality, much of it linked to the drug trade. Colombia has the world's worst record for kidnappings. Though numbers decreased in 2004 (1159 compared to 2200 in 2003) they remain alarmingly high. There were a reported 20,011 homicides in Colombia in 2004. There is a major humanitarian crisis in Colombia; a total of 137,000 Colombians were displaced in 2004, although some local NGOs believe the figure to be much higher. The most reliable estimates suggest the total number of internally displaced persons may be around 2.9 million, with some 60% of them under the age of 14. Some of the most vulnerable

groups include the Afro-Colombians, the indigenous communities and women.

## **Health**

In Colombia more than 13.6m people live in rural areas. However, 5.4m of them do not have any water supply system and 8.2m do not have sanitary units or sewage treatment. Regarding water quality, the situation is worse, with just 1.5m of them receiving treated water.

The health sector underwent considerable reform in the 1990s. Law 100 of 1993 established a social security system. The aim was to ensure universal health coverage through a mix of contributory and subsidised health schemes using both the public and private sectors. By the end of 2004, 14.7 million people were covered by the contributory scheme and 15.4 million under the subsidised programme. But adequate funding is a problem.

Colombia has significantly reduced the population growth rate from 3.1% per year in the early 1960's to currently 1.53%. Life expectancy and infant mortality rates are above the Latin America average.

**Life expectancy:** 71.43 years at birth

**Under 5 Mortality rate:** 21.72 per thousand

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