



COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION KEY DOCUMENTS

COLOMBIA

Date of issue: 24 August 2006

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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 (<http://www.fco.gov.uk>) is also provided below.

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.

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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. On 22 July the Justice & Peace law is passed and becomes the legal framework to accompany the demobilisation process. The law is classed by its detractors as a 'law of impunity', as it makes many concessions to the demobilising fighters. Its defenders point to the need to eliminate fighters from the conflict, and regard it as a positive step.

2006 On Tuesday 18 April the Colombian Government announced that the demobilisation process of the AUC had been completed. It was reported that 30,150 paramilitaries had formally demobilised and that they had handed over some 17,000 weapons, 117 vehicles, 3 helicopters, 59 urban properties and 24,000 hectares of land, as part of the Law of Justice and Peace process. President Alvaro Uribe secures a second, four-year term.

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Politics and recent events

Political Background

Executive power is exercised by the President (assisted by a Cabinet), who is elected for a four-year term by national elections. 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.

The 2002 elections 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.

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 that 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 Alvaro Uribe's stated focus upon first taking office in 2002 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 and on 18 April 2006, after three years of negotiation, announced that the demobilisation process of the AUC had been completed. 30,150 paramilitaries formally demobilised as part of the Law for Justice and Peace (LJP) process, handing over some 17,000 weapons, 117 vehicles, 3 helicopters, 59 urban properties and 24,000 hectares of land. The LJP gives generous concessions to illegal armed fighters who voluntarily decide to demobilise, which has led its detractors to dub it the 'Law of Impunity', whilst others believe it strikes the right equilibrium required to obtain both justice and peace. In mid May a ruling the Constitutional Court tightened up some of the provisions of the LJP, particularly those areas relating to the rights of the victims.

Elections

President Alvaro Uribe secured a second, four-year term in elections held on 28 May 2006. It was the first time for over a hundred years that a sitting President had been able to be run for office for a second successive term. The debate on Presidential re-election took up a substantial part of Congress' time in late 2004, and on 19 October 2005 the Court finally ruled in favour of allowing re-election. The President was formally inaugurated into his second term in office on 7 August 2006.

Colombian Congressional elections took place on 12 March 2006, and President Uribe emerged with a substantial working majority in both Houses of Congress. One of the more surprising results of these elections was that a new (pro-Uribe) party came out ahead of the traditional Liberals and

Conservatives in the polls, thereby breaking a mould that goes back almost a century.

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Economy

Despite years of drug and politically related violence, Colombia has managed to maintain long-term sustainable growth and remains one of the larger economies in Latin America. 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 was 3.75%, in 2004 it was 3.9% and 2005 saw the biggest growth for over a decade at 5.13%. Inflation and debt are at manageable levels and unemployment is on a downward trend, although at 12.1% it remains high, together with high levels of under-employment.

Whilst the Government of Alvaro Uribe has strengthened the country's macroeconomic stability and improved its long term potential, the hoped-for structural reforms in the areas of taxation, pensions and labour laws have not yet materialised. In February 2006, the Colombians signed a Free Trade Agreement with the US which is expected to take effect from early 2008, if ratified by the US Congress. This is aimed at providing a stimulus for the economy, as business – both national and international – will look to capitalise on the immediate duty free access to the vast US market for 99.9% of all Colombian products that the agreement will provide. However, there has also been debate over whether the FTA will impact adversely on more sensitive sectors of the economy such as sugar, chicken and rice.

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\$ 124.4 billion. (est 2005)

GDP per head: US\$ 2,704 (est 2005)

Annual Growth: 5.13% (2005)

Inflation: 5.1% (est 2005)

Unemployment: 12.1% (2005)

Major Industries: Oil, Mining, Construction, Financial Sector, Agriculture, Manufacturing and Transport

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

Value of UK exports to Colombia: £117m (2005)
Value of UK imports from Colombia: £303m (2005)

Human Rights

The human rights situation is a key concern for many human rights organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the international community. In terms of a fall in the number of massacres, homicides and kidnappings, the situation has improved since 2002 under Uribe's Democratic Security Policy, and more recently as a result of the ongoing demobilisation process of the AUC. The situation remains serious, however. Illegal armed groups continue to target the civilian population and commit grave breaches of international humanitarian law. The use of anti-personnel landmines, forced recruitment of child soldiers, massacres, hostage taking, forced displacement, torture and acts of sexual violence continue to take place. The internal armed conflict is estimated to have caused the deaths of more than 2000 civilians in 2004, including local government officials, journalists, trade unionists and other human rights defenders. Between 2-3 million people have been displaced from their homes, with Afro-Colombians, indigenous groups, women and children being particularly affected.

The country also suffers from high levels of common criminality, much of it linked to the drug trade. Impunity remains a fundamental problem. The Colombian authorities are taking steps to tackle this and improve the human rights record of the Colombian security forces. However, there remain allegations of extrajudicial killings and links between the armed forces and paramilitary groups.

Health

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 1.6% in 2004.

Life expectancy at birth, total (years): 72.6
Mortality rate under-5 (per 1,000 births): 20.5

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