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Letter

## Colombia on the mend

Friday July 9, 2004

[The Guardian](#)

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There is evidence available at

[rhul.ac.uk/economics/research/conflict/colombia](http://rhul.ac.uk/economics/research/conflict/colombia)

suggesting that hindering the Colombian war effort would place vulnerable people at risk (Letters, July 8). We have assembled a unique dataset on the Colombian conflict that contains virtually all the conflict events (there are more than 21,000 of them) from 1988-2003. It shows that in recent years the biggest killers of civilians have been the illegal rightwing paramilitaries with the leftwing guerrillas close behind.

All illegal armed groups in Colombia have compiled truly horrific records of violence. Government killings of civilians turn out to be a small fraction of those of the non-state groups, and have fallen almost continuously over the years. We have shown that from 1996 to 2002, both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries grew explosively and the conflict escalated to a peak. But since August 2002, when the present government took charge, things have improved considerably.

Our dataset indicates, for example, that the last two years have been the safest for civilians since at least as far back as 1988. Moreover, tentative negotiations with the paramilitaries have just begun that have some chance of removing many of them from the scene. There is also a possibility that the ELN, Colombia's smaller guerrilla group, might be willing to enter negotiations as well.

We think it would be a mistake for Britain to reduce its ties with Colombia at this critical moment.

**Jorge Restrepo**
**Prof Michael Spagat**
**Juan Fernando Vargas**

Royal Holloway College, University of London

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