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Colombia suffers highest level of armed violence

By Andy Webb-Vidal in Caracas
Published: April 5 2006 16:06 | Last updated: April 5 2006 16:06

Colombia suffers one of the highest levels of armed violence in the world, although there has been a significant improvement since 2002, according to a joint report by the Conflict Analysis Resource Center and the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey.

Between 1979 and 2005 more than 475,000 people were killed by the use of firearms through crime, organised and petty, and the ongoing conflict between the government and guerrilla groups. Most victims have been young men.

The report concentrates on measuring the impact of armed violence on human security. It also describes the production, trade, use, and trafficking of arms in Colombia and the regulatory framework in the country.

The World Health Organisation has reported that in 2000 the primary cause of death worldwide was ischemic heart disease (12 per cent) while homicide was in 22nd place (0.9 per cent). In Colombia, small arms and light weapons are the first cause of death: firearm deaths, 92 per cent of them homicides, accounted for 14 per cent of total deaths in 2000.

The impact of firearms has grown considerably over the last 25 years: from 3 per cent of total deaths in 1979, when detailed records began, to a peak of 15 per cent in 2002.

The variation in total deaths followed the variation in firearm deaths very closely. While international attention has focused on the civil conflict, the main threat to security in Colombia is actually posed by criminal violence. The civil conflict has claimed just over 38,800 lives since 1988, whereas the total number of firearm deaths since 1979 has reached 475,000.

The findings showed a sharp contrast in the locations of conflict versus criminal deaths; conflict deaths occur predominantly in rural and isolated areas whereas criminal deaths are concentrated in urban areas.

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