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## Colombia

**One and a half steps forward, one back**

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AFP

**Less violent, but still far from the unchallenged rule of law**

IN AN election in May, Álvaro Uribe will seek a second four-year term as Colombia's president. His claim is a simple one: his tough security policies have transformed the mood of a country racked by the violence of three illegal armies, and made it safer. Many Colombians seem to agree: Mr Uribe's approval rating in the opinion polls stands at 70%. They suggest he may win 55% of the vote in the election. Yet progress in Colombia is never easy. As the year began, Mr Uribe's government faced a setback on one front, disappointments on another, and a small breakthrough on a third.

The setback was inflicted by the guerrillas of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). On December 27th, some 300 of them killed 29 soldiers in the group's deadliest attack since Mr Uribe came to power. The soldiers had been guarding workmen eradicating coca—the raw material for cocaine—in La Macarena, a national park. In response, Mr Uribe ordered more eradication squads and troops into the park, and vowed to eliminate all the coca there. Days later the FARC rejected an offer by the government to talk about an exchange of prisoners. The FARC holds scores of hostages, including Ingrid Betancourt, a politician with dual French and Colombian nationality. "With Uribe there will be no exchange," said the FARC.

The disappointments concerned a messy peace arrangement under which the 20,000-strong right-wing paramilitaries of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) were supposed to lay down their arms by the end of December. Only 14,000 have done so, and the deadline has been extended to February 15th. The big doubt is whether the paramilitaries will really disband, or will intimidate their way into politics, a fear voiced by the American ambassador last month.

The paramilitaries are notorious for two things: massacres of civilians they consider sympathetic to the guerrillas, and their close links with the cocaine trade. Demobilisation has not been straightforward. The AUC's chiefs worry that Mr Uribe will extradite them to the United States to face drug charges, although the government has tacitly agreed not to. Talks stalled in October after one of them, Diego Fernando Murillo (aka "Don Berna"), was arrested, accused of ordering the murder of a politician. Only in mid-December did the largest AUC grouping, the Central Bolívar Block, begin to demobilise when its leader, Iván Roberto Duque (aka "Ernesto Báez"), and 2,000 others handed over their guns. This group controls much of Colombia's coca crop. The other AUC groups are also heavily involved in drugs.

Under a controversial law passed last year, nearly all the paramilitaries will be given an amnesty. Prosecutors were supposed to vet all the demobilised fighters, and bring charges against any leaders accused of serious crimes. In practice, little has happened, partly because the government did not issue the necessary regulations until December 30th.

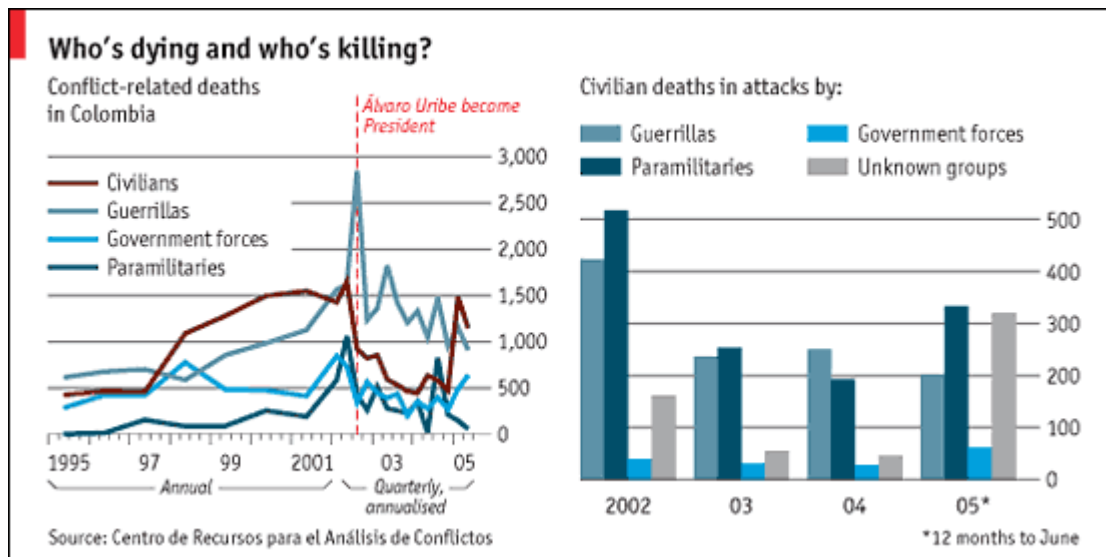
Those paramilitary leaders who were supposed to be confined to a safe part of the country while their legal position was clarified appear to be roaming free. Prosecutors have not yet made much progress in seizing their ill-gotten assets. Many Colombians fear that the paramilitaries will use intimidation and bribery to influence the congressional election due in March. Two of their leaders have boasted that the AUC controls 30% of the existing Congress.

The government's peace commissioner recently admitted that a programme to help paramilitaries into civilian life had been inadequate. Only 460 have been given jobs. The interior ministry reports that 123 former fighters have been killed and 223 have been arrested for such activities as extortion and robbery.

Improvised though it has been, officials argue that getting the paramilitaries to demobilise is an essential step towards ending the fighting in Colombia. A conflict "with 30 years of roots doesn't end with a decree," says Eduardo Pizarro, a political scientist who heads an official reconciliation commission. "It's not going to be paradise. We are going to have a continuation of crime. But that's normal."

Better news for the government is that the National Liberation Army (ELN), the smaller of the two leftist groups, with some 3,000 guerrillas, has agreed to start formal peace negotiations after exploratory talks in Havana last month. Officials want to apply the same legal framework to the ELN as it has to the paramilitaries. It is not clear whether the ELN will accept.

Mr Uribe can point to a sharp fall in violence since he took office. The murder rate in Colombia last year fell to its lowest level in two decades. Kidnappings have also dropped sharply over the past few years. Even so, some trends are worrying.



Researchers at CERAC, a think-tank in Bogotá, who have compiled detailed data on the conflict, say killings of civilians by paramilitaries rose in the first six months of last year—despite the peace process (see chart). They reckon that the AUC was responsible for many of the killings whose perpetrators were officially unknown. These were no longer large-scale massacres, but individual murders. Mainly as a result, CERAC (whose findings are available at [www.cerac.org.co](http://www.cerac.org.co)) reckons that only about 10% fewer civilians were killed in the conflict in the first half of last year than in the six months before Mr Uribe took power. But they stress that conflict-related deaths amount to no more than 15% of all murders in Colombia—a much lower figure than some human-rights groups claim.

Despite last month's FARC attack, CERAC found little evidence of a sustained guerrilla resurgence, but notes that conflict continues across wide areas of rural Colombia. If he gets a second term, Mr Uribe still has much work to do to consolidate the improvement in security that was the main achievement of his first term.

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