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Colombia, Armed Conflict

### **The Civil War and Continuing Armed Conflicts Effect on Colombia's Food Supply**

Colombia is a country in the northern part of south America. It is home to 50 plus million people and is very diverse. Although Colombia seems to not have many outward problems it is different than it appears. Colombia seems to have three major challenges, including conflict, population increase, and dependence on international trade. The main problem is armed conflict. There has been an increased number of migrant Venezuelans in recent years, because of armed conflict. There was a 52-year civil war that ended in 2016, but it is still affecting the country. Some solutions have been proposed but very few have been enacted to help this country. Its problems not only affect the safety of civilians but their access to food and water especially in rural areas.

Colombia is a second world country and has some of the same comforts as Americans. For example, on average Colombians watch 2-3 hours of television each day. Colombia is a very Catholic populated country with over 90% in that religion and family is very important. Many families have 2-3 children. Colombia is about 80.78% urban and 19.2% rural. An average Colombian family in the urban cities have government funded education, affordable health care, and access to food and water. Food is bought in markets and they have 3 meals a day, lunch is the most important. Many jobs are in the manufacturing industry which has about 35% in that job force. My father lived in Colombia for a year and I asked him to give his overall takeaway from living there, he said this "My number one observation is that it appears that western civilization like the United States and other 1<sup>st</sup> world countries, have very badly influenced countries like Colombia and their economies and values, until they have become very messed up. For example, civilians in these Latin America countries have homes with no doors and dirt floors, but they do have tv's and speaker systems. In turn they have children running around with no shoes and don't have enough food and water. This isn't even just the rural communities but also the big cities. In these people's eyes it is more important to have something of value than provide for their families. And the 1<sup>st</sup> world countries are to blame for the bad influence they have had through media." This is happening everywhere in Colombia, even so the bigger cities and urban areas are much better off than the rural areas. In these rural areas 1 in 4 people do not have clean water to drink, in total that is estimated to be 1.4 million people. Out of the total population there is 1 in 50 people that don't have clean water. In rural areas many people work on small farms the average size 1 hectare, in comparison that would be the size of a sports field. The most popular crops are coffee beans, bananas, and cocaine. Because Colombia has such a diverse land area many different crops could be grown if only maintained. Colombia has coasts on both the pacific and Atlantic oceans, which is the only South American country like that. There have been plans to help bring in new crops and farmers, but because of armed conflict it has been very difficult.

In 2016, the longest war in the western hemisphere ended, Colombia's civil war against FARC. It spanned for over 5 decades after starting in 1964. FARC was the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and they fought for equality. They were mainly people from rural communities and were farmers. "Inspired by

the Cuban revolution in the 1950s, they demanded more rights and control over the land.” (BBCnews). The wealthier landowners saw FARC’s communist beliefs as a threat so that is why FARC took up arms. Throughout the years of war between 200,000 and 300,000 people were killed. Eventually in 2016 a peace treaty was signed, and FARC members were given the opportunity to go back into society and make a new life for themselves. Three almost four years later conflict is still going on and previously undisturbed FARC members are getting killed. In an article from late 2019, by Manuel Rueda, states that a past member of FARC named Luis Carlos Yunda was killed after starting a peaceful life in rural Colombia. Yunda had started a family and was working as a farmer when a gunman shot him dead on his farm. Luis Carlos Yunda is not the only one, about 120 men have been killed since the 2016 peace treaty was signed and no one can explain the deaths. Some of the deaths have been because of past fighters refusing to take up arms again to help new criminal groups, but others are just random. Investigations are hard to do in rural areas so none of the deaths have completely been investigated. These new criminal groups are starting to restart some charades that FARC used to run like cocaine dealing and are furthermore causing new havoc. An article by writer, Kyle Johnson, from International crisis group did research on the town Tumaco in rural Colombia and unveiled armed conflict involving a huge drug war. Colombian officials and politicians are trying to take control of this war, but there are problems they can’t solve from the capital. “More than 200 community leaders involved in projects like land restitution and the replacement of coca crops for legal crops have also been killed in rural areas since the peace deal was signed.” (Rueda). Plans for planting new crops to help boost the economy are destroyed and making life much harder for families who want to start regular farms. If families aren’t unemployed, they have some of the very few jobs or are involved in the drug war that encompasses much of rural Colombia. The selling of cocaine is some people’s whole livelihoods and they would have no income without it. Police have been sent from the capital, but they don’t want to interfere after seeing how badly it would affect the rural communities and individuals' lives. This drug war and the past FARC fighters’ deaths are causing uncertainty in many rural families who don’t want to get involved in politics and are starting to not trust the peace treaty. And why should they when their family members and friends are getting killed after rebuilding their lives and trying to help better their communities? The peace treaty also makes it hard for past FARC members to have their own farms and plant crops. They don’t receive money from the government to help them and some fighters are left with no choice but to turn back to illegal activities to get by and have food. Farms are mostly owned by wealthier owners who pay low rates for workers and don’t want to let people buy land from them for new crops especially when their crops are cocaine. The issues in Colombia all come back to the drug war and the armed conflict. There is continuous armed conflict going on that the peace treaty hasn’t stopped and is causing families to suffer, with the loss of loved ones, farms, homes and their source of income, leaving them no way to get food and provide for their families.

The conflict in Colombia and the drug wars seem to be nearly impossible for Colombian officials to solve, although they have tried. Some of the people involved with cocaine dealing and trading are indigenous peoples and the government isn’t allowed to touch their land. Criminal groups are fighting back constantly and killing people who try to abandon the growing of illegal crops. One question Kyle Johnson proposed in his research was this “how do you establish rule of law where almost everything is based on or controlled by illegal forces?”, and how do you? You would have to completely rebuild everything your economy is built upon to destroy the illegal forces. So how do you go about destroying people’s whole livelihoods and giving them a brand new one in payment? Johnson found that many people even in the drug industry are still in need of one basic thing, a way to get food. It is easy for the

government to say just destroy all the crops when they are living in a big thriving capital, but when they send troops in, it is heart wrenching for soldiers to destroy those crops when they see civilians need them to survive. To solve Colombia's issue the whole drug economy would have to be destroyed with a readily available alternative, that can solve unemployment. Additionally, the new criminal gangs and FARC dissidents would have to be punished for their crimes, but what they are proposing about social inequality should be addressed. From the research I have done the Colombian leaders have tried multiple methods to abolish the illegal drug trade, but their efforts have backfired. In October 2018, John Otis wrote an article about the many attempts to destroy the drug trade made by Colombian officials. In 1990 they tried spraying weed killer on the illegal crops and while it mostly worked it also destroyed beneficial food crops. After the plan didn't work the government stated that any farmer who was growing coca would be given compensation to start sowing different legal crops. Later, farmers realized if they continued growing coca, they would be given money to stop, where growing other crops the money subsidy would stop. As of 2018, it seems that the government is doing everything in their power to abolish the illegal drug trade. They have continuously been destroying crops even bringing in ground teams, but the new gangs have relentlessly fought back. "Since 2006, these attacks have killed more than 60 eradicators and wounded nearly 400 nationally, according to Colombian news reports." (John Otis) The government of Colombia is also strongly considering bringing back fumigation by air through drones which can be more accurate than planes. In addition, to the continuous fight of abolishing the drug trade the government is trying many methods of compensation to farmers for new crops. In the end, most farmers are still relying on coca crops, because it is like an "Insurance policy" (John Otis) After doing even more research I found two programs one with global affairs Canada and one through the government of Colombia. The program Instiglio is a nonprofit organization that has projects all over the world including a couple in Colombia. Their project titled *Empowerment of rural population in Colombia* is attempting to rebuild rural civilians' lives and "help small-hold farmers" adopt new crops such as cocoa instead of illegal alternatives and crops such as cocaine. They believe that adopting cocoa will highly benefit farmers and workers because it is such a wanted item in national and international trade and is legal. The program is run by Instiglio and is funded by the Canadian government. The government of Colombia would educate the people on why we need to sell and farm other crops, and to create a way to destroy all the drug crops, Instiglio would come in and offer the alternative. Instiglio proposed to do this program in 2017, and I am unsure if they are still going through with it. The other program I found was in an article by Jesus Quintana, from Inter Press Service News agency and it states that the government has a way they are trying to stop the inequality in Colombia. The ministry of Agriculture has launched a program called "El Campo Emprende" (Rural areas are enterprising). This program will benefit indigenous people, African heritage Colombians, women that are heads of households, and vulnerable average Colombian families. Their goal is to help civilians in the worst affected places from armed conflict, regain trust in the government, and provide a way for families to have jobs and food. With the information I have gathered from my research I believe these programs are great and will help rural communities grow and have access to food and necessities. The people would need to be educated on the production of drugs and why the country is no longer doing that. There can't just be the destruction of these crops, because people will just plant again and create even more armed conflict. As well, the farmers would need to be shown the different rates for legal crops such as cocoa or coffee beans and how much money they could receive to make it more appealing. "Commercial cocoa bean crop yields may vary from under 100 to over 3,000 kg per hectare (110 to 2,700 pounds per acre), with the world average being between 340 and 450 kg per hectare (300 and 400 pounds per acre)." (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica) One pound of cocoa is approximately \$16 U.S dollars so on average it would be 4,800 U.S dollars per acre. The low would be

\$1,760 and the high \$43,200. The cocoa tree takes only five years to grow and if given proper care can last for 30 years. "An acre of coca trees produced about a ton of coca leaves." (Jeffery Hays) One pound of coca leaves is sold for 32 cents in Colombia. One ton of coca leaves would be worth \$640 U.S dollars in Colombia. This proves that when bought from the source, cocoa is sold for more money than coca. I believe if Colombia better educated their people in rural communities and we combine these programs with the efforts of the Colombian government to destroy the illegal crops and drug trade most of the major problems will be solved.

The one issue with this plan is that it doesn't address the armed conflict. After reading the article "The Legacies of armed conflict on lasting peace and development in Latin America" written by Angelika Rettberg, I was able to find some ideas for eradicating the internal armed conflict. "Disenfranchised youth provide a steady supply of young people willing to enlist in criminal organizations." (Angelika Rettberg) this statement enlightened something in me. The ultimate source of the problems in Colombia all come down to education inequality. The rural communities are not given the same opportunities as the urban areas therefore causing conflict and uprising. The whole start of the 52-year civil war was the fight for equality in education and opportunities. To solve the armed conflict, we need to reach the core and give the people what they need. The government can start building up the rural areas and providing not only an alternate crop but education and healthcare in the rural communities. There could also be another peace treaty signed with the new criminal groups with an understanding on both sides of what can be done better. Maybe this is too idyllic, but I believe the root of the problem is education.

The final solution I have compiled is this, first the government completes the plan of eradicating all the illegal crops. Second, the program "El Campo Emprende" should continue, and propose that farmers should start producing cacao or other crops. It provides life changing ways for many different people to obtain jobs and ways to provide for their families and get food. Third, education needs to come into place, without this step the first two will be counterproductive. The building up of the rural areas and providing education for the farmers on the benefits of food crops, and general education for the children will bring to pass a more equal ground between the rural and urban areas. Fourth, the government should talk to the criminal gangs and explain their new ways to try and solve inequality. If they propose a peace treaty maybe the criminal groups will cease. Optimistically, these efforts would not only reduce inequality, decrease unemployment, abolish illegal drug production and armed conflict, and most importantly ensure families and people have food and water.

After learning about the lives of these people I can better understand what they are going through. With the solutions I proposed I believe if enacted it will greatly impact the people and make it easier for them to get by. It is important that we provide the way for people to have access to food and water and provide for their families. The suffering of these people should not go unnoticed. I hope that if these plans are implemented other countries can follow Colombia's lead and make a change as well. I have grown to admire these people and I have hope for the country of Colombia that it will rise to its full potential.

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