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Colombia, Environmental Conflict

### **Colombia: After One Conflict Ends, Another Arises**

Colombia is a sovereign state primarily located in the northwest region of South America, with some territories extending into Central America. This country shares its northwestern border with Panama, its eastern borders with Venezuela and Brazil, and its southern borders with Ecuador and Peru. This South American country has a population of around 50.4 million, with most of the population largely concentrated along the Caribbean coast and the Andean highlands. The eastern lower lands of Colombia is responsible for close to 50 percent of Colombia's land area, yet is home to less than 3 percent of the country's population (World population view, 2019). Although Colombia is considered to be one of the top 30 most populated countries in the world, its population is not overly concentrated. The population density for Colombia is 41 people per square kilometer, making Colombia ranked 173rd in terms of population density. Colombia is also the third most populated country in all Latin America and is home to the third largest number of Spanish speakers in the world, after Mexico and The United States of America. The largest city and capital of Colombia is Bogota. Bogota is located near the center of the country and contains a population of 7.9 million people. This city is only one of the four cities in Colombia that exceeds a population of one million people. The other major cities are Medellin, Cali, and Barranquilla. After what has been almost 50 years of civil conflict, the leftist guerrilla group called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym FARC) signed a peace deal with the Colombian government to put an end to the FARC's jungle bases by disarming and demobilizing them. This has led to previously inaccessible areas to now be open for exploration. With new areas to explore has created a number of new environmental conflicts for Colombia, such as deforestation, illegal mining, and climate change.

Colombia is a country that is said to be devastated by war and blessed by nature. Colombia is home to the world's largest number of butterfly and bird species along with the second most in plants and amphibians. The forests, volcanoes, savannas, valleys, deserts, and snow capped mountain ranges give life to more than 300 ecosystems in Colombia. This makes Colombia considered to be the second most biodiverse country on the planet. This abundance of life has lived alongside with what had been a 52 year long war. Colombia's total land area is 113,891,400 hectares and it's estimated that 27% of the land is being used for agriculture. (Nations encyclopedia, NA) Colombia's unprecedented biodiversity provides it with a variety of viable exports. Bananas, rice, potatoes, sugarcane, cassava, oilseed, cotton, cocoa beans, and tobacco are just several of the many common exports. Colombia is also estimated to have over 167,000 cattle ranches in the country. In 2018, Colombia had exported around \$41.8 billion of goods around the world to places such as North America, Europe, and Africa with one of their largest commodities being coffee and spices. Coffee and spices make up 5.6% of Colombia's exports which also makes Colombia one of the bigger names in the coffee industry. Almost 20% of all the land cultivated in Colombia is used to grow Arabica beans used for coffee production. Other than agricultural commodities Colombia also is big on fuel exports such as Crude Petroleum and Coal Briquettes which makes up 57% of Colombia's export value. Colombia is the world's second largest coffee and flower cuttings exporter. Only 57% of the farmers in Colombia own any land at all. Farmers in Colombia only own 2% of its total land, leaving nearly 1 million landless rural workers. (New Agriculturist, NA) Colombia has experienced a five times increase in foreign trade over the last ten years. Colombia has also in 2018 increased its export value by 10.6% since the previous years. (Market Watch: Top 10 Colombian Exports and Imports, 2019)

A typical family lifestyle in Colombia can vary depending on social classes. In the lower class, it is common to live with not only your immediate family, but also your extended family. Some may move out of their parents home shortly after marriage, but it is common for Colombians to live with their family continuously. In the lower class, it is also common for people to have unplanned children due to the lack of contraceptives and sexual education. These families tend to live in smaller compact homes. In stark contrast, wealthier families not belonging to the lower class often reside in less cramped dwellings, only living with immediate family. These families tend to have a lower average number of children per household, and children belonging to these households are often more likely to receive a better education and eventually move out of their parents' home. Regardless of social class, the concept of family is valued in the Colombian culture very similar to other Latin American cultures. Colombian cuisine is very diverse and varies depending on the different regions. Certain regions of Colombia they have special delicacies such as roasted ants or guinea pig, however, other regions of the very same country would never consider eating anything of that description. The Colombian diet relies heavily on meats and less on vegetables. IAs in the United States of America, breakfast is viewed as an important meal. The typical Colombian breakfast usually consists of fruit juice, coffee or hot chocolate, fruit, eggs and bread. Lunch is looked at as the main meal of the day and often consists of an appetizer like a soup followed by the main course with rice and beans, then finally a sweet dessert. In most parts of Colombia, dinner is seen as somewhat more of a snack. However, in the bigger cities it is more common to see people eating heftier meals for dinner. Most families prepare food at home with groceries from local markets. On average the typical Colombian makes \$692 as their monthly salaries which is less than half of the global average. Families also have access to education but it is not common for them to continue their education after high school. Most Colombians also have access to toilets, electricity, phones, and markets. Colombia is also known for its quality health insurance, this country has some of the best healthcare at some of the lowest costs.

In Colombia the government runs on a presidential system which is a republic. Its government is similar to that of The United States of America in that it consists of executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Politics in Colombia involve mostly their two traditional parties, liberals and conservatives. The executive branch is made up of the President, Vice President, Council of Ministers, and Administrative Departments. The President is chosen upon an election where the general population votes to determine the best fit for the position to serve a four year term. As of 2014 it is mandatory by law in Colombia to vote. The president of Colombia's duties consist of things like appointing and removing Ministers to the Cabinet and signing various acts. The president also works with the governors of each department to ensure everything runs smoothly. The current president of Colombia is Iván Duque Márquez as of August 7th, 2018. The legislative portion of the government in Colombia is responsible for enacting different types of laws and policies which are carried out by their bicameral congress. Colombia's congress is made up of the Senate that has 102 members and the House of Representatives with 166 representatives which both serve 4 year long terms. (Pariona A. ,2017) Congress makes amendments for their constitution and makes sure that the executive branch follows public law correctly. The judicial branch is responsible for all the citizens having justice under the law and to provide the citizens with courts which is used to resolve conflicts. Colombia's government has 1 jurisdiction and 4 High Courts to oversee legal interpretation. The High Courts of this country are the Council of State, the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, and the Superior Court of Judicature. Colombia also has a variety of lower level courts where less serious issues are handled. These three branches make up Colombia's government. This three branch system has only been in effect since 1991 with the introduction of a new constitution.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army (also known by its Spanish acronym, NLE) were both founded in the 1960's shortly after a decade of time known as "La Violencia" which took place from 1948- 1958. This time was a time filled with political violence and a war between the Colombian Conservative Party and the Colombian Liberal Party. After this time ended what arose was something that some may consider far worse which were groups of communist guerrillas. These groups banded together to fight against the government. The FARC is one of the armed wings of the communist party and is composed of mostly militant communists and peasant self-defense groups while the NLE was similar but consisted of more students, Catholic radicals, and left wingers. Their main goal was to replicate something similar to Fidel Castro's communist revolution which took place during the mid 50's. The U.S State department had classified both groups as foreign terrorist organizations shortly after their creation. Although both groups have similar programs some believe the NLE's motives are a lot more probable and ideological than the FARC. Both oppose the privatization of natural resources as well as claiming to represent the less wealthy. Along with these groups came an abundance of crime. These groups used violence, kidnappings, and extortion as sources of leverage and income. One of the most high profile kidnappings that these groups organized was on presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt back in 2002 along with three U.S military contractors until 2008 when they were rescued. In the early 2000's Colombia supplied almost about 90% of the world's cocaine, in 2009 the U.S government reported that FARC was responsible for 60% of Colombian cocaine exported into the United States. (Colombia's Civil Conflict, NA) For years these communist guerrillas somewhat ran the country along with the government but recently this has come to an end due to the signing of the peace agreement between the FARC and Colombia back in 2016. Signing this agreement meant a lot of things but the main thing was that the FARC would put an end to their jungle bases, leaving tons of land previously guarded by the FARC open for exploration. Although ending this conflict was a great thing for Colombia it causes another issue to arise.

Deforestation is an issue Colombia has been having for the longest. Since the signing of the peace agreement in 2016 more than 40 soccer fields worth of forest is lost every day. Colombia has lost more than 1 million acres of forest since 2016 with the deforestation rate up 23% since the signing of the treaty. Colombia like the rest of the world is experiencing climate change, where temperatures are warmer and there is less precipitation but with addition to their deforestation problem this could possibly further dry out the climate and threaten the habitats of many vulnerable animal species. The connection between deforestation and food insecurity is that it can affect precipitation not only in Colombia but research shows it can even affect the US. A new climate simulation research has been conducted at Princeton University shows that rain and snowfall in the United States would be reduced significantly if the Amazon rainforest were completely deforested. The reduction in precipitation would lead to shortages of food and water, and a greater risk of forest fires. (Deforestation: A New Threat to Global Food Security. 2014) This isn't the first case where a post-conflict society that had deforestation challenges occurred. An example of this would be the southeast Asian country of Laos. During the Vietnam war a network of roads used by the Vietcong known as the Ho Chi Minh trail ran through the country of Laos. The Americans as a way of disruption decided to drop bombs and spray agent orange herbicide on the Laotian forest. This as well as other agricultural practices were responsible for the decrease of forest cover from 70 percent in the 1940s to less than 40 percent in the 1990s. The way Laos bounced back from this was by utilizing a very sustainable cash crop that grows in Laos rattan. This easy to grow non timber forest product has a global market of \$4 billion. Farmers in Laos now have a better income without deforestation. Laos has even set the target of 70% forest cover by 2020. This country had faced a similar issue to Colombia's and successfully turned it around. Now it's time for Colombia to find the right crop to help it move further.

Another big issue that came along with the signing of the peace treaty was illegal mining. Illegal mining has been occurring in Colombia for years, but recently after signing the treaty there was a spike in its occurrence. Due to illegal mining it's common to see its side effects on the environment which includes erosion, formation of sinkholes, loss of biodiversity, contamination of soil, groundwater and surface water. Illegal mining doesn't only affect the environment it affects the people as well. The Colombian government released a report that documented 1,126 cases of mercury poisoning from 2013 to 2015. Also toxicologist Federico Molina investigated most contaminated mining towns in the Antioquia Department in northwest Colombia and found levels of mercury in urine samples to be 300 percent to 400 percent above the permitted level. (Tomaselli W., NA) There has been some measures taken to counter the illegal mining, such as the Colombian government introducing laws that prohibit mining operations at altitudes between 3,000 and 5,000 meters and to protect the high-altitude ecosystems known as paramos. In 2018, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos pledged to invest \$23 million over 15 years to help protect the paramos that produce 70 percent of Colombia's potable water. Along with this Colombia also mobilized their Joint Task Force Hercules which is a 9,800-strong division of military and law enforcement personnel whose objective is to combat the illegal drug trade. Mobilizing the Joint Task Force Hercules meant they were able to also be responsible in preventing illegal mining.

Colombia is taking small steps to help battle against these environmental conflicts, whether is deforestation or illegal mining. Although we've seen some progress as time has continued Colombia still looking for that final piece that will help solve these conflicts. Colombia needs to look at other places that have faced similar conflict and learn from that. If Colombia could possibly find there cash crop like Laos did with rattan they would be able to utilize it for money that could go back into the country to help fight against the environmental conflicts.

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