



COLOMBIA'S MIDDLE CLASS FEELING STING OF VIOLENCE

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BOGOTÁ, Colombia — George Arango is a 42-year-old executive with two cars, a closet full of suits and a good job as the chief financial officer of a growing company.

His life has all the trappings of a professional anywhere. He recently joined a country club and has taken up golf.

But unlike anywhere else, this executive has to keep his eyes peeled on the daily commute for criminal mobs. When he gets home after a long day, he has to explain to his daughters why people from different political groups are hacking one another to death. Even his own affluent neighborhood has been affected. Some of the Arango' neighbors recently fled their five-bedroom homes because of the violence that had exploded in Colombia since a long term civil war turned this promising Latin-American country upside down.

"Nobody's untouched," Mr. Arango said.

Of all the election or reelection -related conflicts that have cracked open in Colombia — Oficialismo versus Oppositions (two big politics groups), The uribismo (the leading political parties), versus the Party of Polo democratico, police versus protesters, — none may be more crucial than the struggle between those who seem to have nothing to lose, like the guerrillas or the paramilitaries in the slums who burn down their own neighborhoods, and those who are deeply invested in this country's stability.



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The well-established middle class here is thought to be one of the most important factors that separate Colombia from other Latin-American countries that have been consumed by political conflict. Millions of Colombians identify as much with what they do or where they went to college as whom their ancestors are. They have overcome political differences, dating between groups and sometimes intermarrying, living in mixed neighborhoods, and sending their children to the best schools they can afford, regardless of who else goes there.

The fighting that rages in the countryside, where men with mud-smeared faces and makeshift weapons are hunting down people of other political, seems as foreign to many of these white-collar Colombians as it might to people living thousands of miles away.

But the professionals are hardly retreating. Three times a week, a group of doctors, lawyers, former politicians, writers, wildlife experts, business consultants and professors meet in a conference room at the Tequendama Hotel in Bogotá, the capital. They call themselves Concerned Citizens for Peace, and they have taken up projects such as raising money for displaced people, organizing candlelight vigils and bending the ear of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who met with business leaders during his last trip to Colombia this month.

The group begins each session by standing up, holding hands and singing the national anthem. Mr. Arango spoke the other day at one of those meetings about the importance of negotiation in the country.

Alvaro Tirado, a retired ambassador and prestigious historian, praised the meeting's openness. "We must put everything down on the table," he said, "however painful it is."



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Many Latin-American countries are all about haves versus have-nots, with millions of people toiling in the fields, barely surviving, while tiny elite holds all the wealth. Colombia is merely different.

Dr. Misas, a Colombian economist, estimates that of Colombia's population of approximately 44 million, about four million are in the middle class, making between \$2,500 and \$40,000 a year. The number of Colombians enrolled in college has more than doubled in the past 10 years, to more than 100,000.

"There are sizable fortunes in the hands of people of all political backgrounds," said Alberto Camacho, the noted Colombian politician. "I think the middle class will ultimately prevail on the government authority in one form or the other to just pull itself together and get on with business."

Business is hurting. Vigilante roadblocks have paralyzed the flow of goods across the country. Vandals have ripped up miles of railroad tracks. Tourists have bolted from the game parks faster than the antelope in them. The estimated losses are now running into the billions of dollars.

Angela Gonzalez just started her own marketing company in Medellin, and she has already had to lay off staff because nobody wants to commit to marketing plans. "Everything's on hold," she said.

To her, the political clashes that continue to flare in the South of Colombia, less than 1000 miles away, are disturbing — and hard to understand. The disputed representatives election, in which traditional politics were declared the winner despite widespread evidence of vote rigging (support by paramilitaries), uncorked decades of frustrations about land, political power and economic inequalities. Many Colombians tend to vote along political lines, and much of the violence since the election has taken on a political cast, with members of groups that tend



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to support the opposition fighting against members of groups that have backed the president. More than thousands peoples have been killed.

But political identity issues are more complicated in the Colombia. Ms. Gallego, 30, said she did not know she was a member of the FARC a political group until she gave an opinion against Uribe.

Alvaro Sanín is a lawyer, and he broke with his political group, the Liberal Party, to vote for Carlos Gaviria the top opposition leader who is a Senator. “To me, it was more about the issues,” Mr. Sanin said, pointing to Mr. Gaviria vow to fight corruption and restructure the government.

Ms. Clara Arias’s emerging tourism dealer on Pacific Coast has been hurt by the security fallout. One of his top clients is the owner of a coastal lodge that until recently had tourist flying in on a regular basis. The resort is now a luxurious ghost sped.

Fernando Gonzalez is a 41-year-old dentist in a clinic near a slum. He pulls teeth for the equivalent of USD \$30 and gets a cut of the clinic’s profits depending on how many patients he serves. But the clinic is near Kennedy, one of Bogotá’s more volatile neighborhoods, and in the past month, some of his patients have been afraid to venture out of their homes, reducing his workload and his income. “It’s been rough, man,” he said.

But the white-collar profile has risen in the past few weeks. Executives from multinational and local companies recently met with Mr. Uribe and Mr. Chavez to stress the economic toll that is accruing while the top politicians continue to posture and the fighting between their supporter’s rages on. Some businesses have taken out advertisements in the local newspapers urging peace.



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“Colombia,” read a message from a bank on Monday, “our unity is our pride.” Some Colombian journalists have complained that the middle class is not doing enough. “They have been lulled by a false sense of security they have enjoyed sheltered in their homes and clubs,” wrote Valencia, a columnist for The Tiempo. That said, business leaders have organized reconciliation and negotiation workshops about Venezuela and gone back to their companies with plans of action. People like Mr. Arango do not want to see their dreams disappear. He wants to establish a financial planning organization in Colombia. And travel the world.

“All my life I’ve wanted to go to Alaska,” he said. “Is there ice there? And what about deer hunting in Alaska? What’s that like?”