

Summer of violence grips Colombia, amidst drug-trafficking, Covid-19 and court cases

A summer of violence as we hadn't seen in 15 years, at the exact moment when Covid-19 literally exploded in the Country. It's the nightmarish scenario that has been afflicting Colombia in the last few weeks, while court cases, raising hopes of shedding light on many episodes of violence, awaken memories of a distant past, with the Uribe and Mancuso court cases hitting the headlines of political reports and newspapers at large. Thus while Colombia became the fourth Latin American country in terms of infections and coronavirus victims (the third in the last month after Brazil and Peru), with about 10 thousand new cases and hundreds of deaths per day, several armed groups still present in the country committed massacres in the most peripheral Departments. *According to data released by the UN, there were 33 verified massacres in the country until mid-August, with 7 to be ascertained.* According to news reports, at least 9 occurred in the month of August. A total of over 50 people died in the last attacks committed by various armed groups, ranging from FARC dissents to organized crime and drug trafficking rings. In particular, the murder of five Afro-Colombian teenagers on August 11, in the suburb of Cali, caused a sensation. Eight more youths were assassinated in the town hall of Samaniego (Nariño) on August 18. **The lockdown causes an increase in violence.** The peace agreement signed by the government and FARC 4 years ago now seems a distant memory. *But why now? Are the armed groups "taking advantage" of the pandemic to "settle the score"?*



. Jesuit, lecturer at the Javerian University, member of the "Fé y Alegria" movement, author of a recent article on the situation in Colombia for the journal "Civiltà Cattolica." The priest offers a twofold perspective: as a scholar of peace processes and as a resident in one of the traditionally "dangerous" municipalities in the country, La Macarena, in the central-eastern Meta Department. "In recent weeks there has indeed been an explosion of violence that involved numerous Departments: Cauca Valley, Cauca and Nariño in the southwest, Antioquia in the north, Catatumbo province (Norte de Santander) and Arauca in the east of the country. The first aspect to be considered is that these outbreaks of violence are not part of a national strategy, but rather reflect local dynamics. These fights are motivated by limited and specific interests, which primarily revolve around cocaine trafficking, but not only. We must also consider control of illegal mining activity, extortion, and other criminal operations. Furthermore, in all these places, once the scene of riots and carnage, FARC was once extensively present. Those who did not leave the guerrillas joined other groups. There was a gap that was immediately filled, giving rise to new conflicts. In fact, armed groups are still numerous: FARC dissidents, ELN guerrillas, paramilitaries of the Gulf Clan, pelusos (i.e. the recreated EPL, formerly a Maoist formation), other drug trafficking syndicates. Essentially, they are fighting for the control of the territory, inch by inch." Against this backdrop, the pandemic broke out causing a prolonged lockdown, often enforced with intimidation by armed groups replacing an absent State: "The lockdown was used by these groups to consolidate their position - continues Father Rodríguez - , but at the same time, the economic downturn also affected illegal activity. Thus, I assume, nervousness and aggressiveness increase and deals among criminal groups are more likely to be broken." In this situation, the most painful fact is that:

"The majority of the victims are civilians, innocent people: social and campesino leaders, university students, etc."

The priest voiced scepticism about the fact that the resurgence of violence stems from a reorganization of FARC dissidence, after a number of prominent leaders disowned the agreements and returned to take up arms: "It depends on the areas. I live in a municipality, La Macarena, where

the guerrillas rejected the agreement and continue to exert a strong control. Elsewhere, this is not the case". In any case, he adds, *"I am not entirely pessimistic as to the continuation of the peace process, not because of the efforts of the current government, but rather because of pressures by the international community of countries such as Norway, France, Spain, and even Italy, and in some ways the USA. Now, Uribe's legal problems are creating a new polarization, which also affects the crucial activity of the Truth Commission, chaired by Father Francisco De Roux, which certainly is not acting for political interests, but to record what has happened in Colombia over the past decades, standing on the side of the victims. Admittedly, we are bearing the brunt of the fact that many points of the agreement have not been enforced, primarily out of political will."* **Two "cumbersome" court cases.** Father Rodríguez thus mentioned the ongoing debate in the country. *While violence is rampant in suburban areas of the country, in Bogotá, newspaper headlines are equally divided between the updates on the Covid-19 and the two court cases of the summer.* Alvaro Uribe, a leading Colombian politician for the last twenty years, fervently contrary to the peace agreements, is under house arrest. He is accused of tampering with witnesses who accused him of creating paramilitary groups with his brother, Santiago Uribe. Meanwhile, the case of Salvatore Mancuso, Italo-Colombian founder of the Autodefensas unidas de Colombia (AUC), a group of right-wing militias disbanded officially in the South American country in 2005, upped tensions. Mancuso, implicated in a large international drug trafficking ring that also involved the Italian n'drangheta crime syndicate, and in numerous murders in Colombia (approximately 600), has recently finished serving 15 years in prison in the USA. Procedural flaws on the part of Colombia in requesting his extradition, were "leading" him to Italy, where he is also being requested to be deported pending judicial proceedings. This situation caused strong controversy in Colombia. The matter remains complicated and it is not excluded that the U.S., with a "political" decision, will have Mancuso take the road to Bogotá. *"At the moment – said the Jesuit Father - it seems to me that the Colombian authorities are putting on a pantomime. It is not clear whether the Government wants or doesn't want Mancuso here."* In fact, he would be an "inconvenient" witness: *"He was the leader of the largest paramilitary group in Colombia. After the agreement for the demobilization of the AUC, it served the State well to support the extradition of several leaders to the U.S, including Mancuso, on drug trafficking charges. Had they remained here, they could have reported on the links between the military and the political world, perhaps with the groups that could be traced back to Uribe".* That's why a "talking" Mancuso is viewed with some anxiety by the "strong powers" in the Country.

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