

Colombia: Coronavirus in a Scenario of Humanitarian Crisis

Written by Raquel Araújo de Jesus

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RAQUEL ARAÚJO DE JESUS, MAY 18 2020

The world currently stands up to one of its biggest and most unprecedented challenges in terms of contemporary public health. The quick spread of the coronavirus around different regions and geographies, added to the absence of an effective vaccine or medicine able to fight the virus, puts new pressure on the governments, their health systems, as well as on the domestic and global economies. In this new context of pandemic crisis, as declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (BBB, 2020a), countries that already had previous vulnerabilities now deal with a new shade of instability. This is the case of Colombia, which is facing a pandemic in a scenario of pre-existing humanitarian crisis.

Historically, Colombia has been stage to one of the main, perhaps even the most, grave contemporary humanitarian crisis in the South American continent. Its history is marked by social and political disputes and, since the mid-twentieth century, by an armed conflict that has become more complex over the last decades due to its multiplicity of actors. They encompass illegal armed groups, both insurgents and counterinsurgents, guerrillas and paramilitaries, and drug trafficking organizations. Also, a set of political choices and decisions taken by the Colombian governments, most of it in line with the United States agenda for regional and global security, has added to the complexity of the conflict.

Colombia's former president, Juan Manuel Santos, made efforts of putting together a Peace Agreement with one of the most important guerrilla organizations in the country, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP, in Spanish). However, what has been noticed since the election of the new president Iván Duque Márquez in 2018 is a new upsurge in the armed conflict. As put by Ariel Ávila (2019), since the beginning of the peace negotiations most of the security indicators associated with the armed conflict had been decreasing. In his words,

[B]etween 2012 and 2018, homicides had been reducing by about 10 percentage points, forced displacement was barely 10% of what it had been during the hottest times of the war. The enforced disappearances had also fallen, the kidnapping was about to disappear, in short, the results were evident' (ÁVILA, 2019, p.503-504 *translated by the author*).

However, in Colombia, there has been no consensus on the Peace Agreement by the public opinion and by a significant part of the Congress. Moreover, since the election of Iván Duque, the opposition has accused the government of not respecting the Agreement. In fact, the new president denies the existence of armed conflict in Colombia, militarizes the territory and combats the armed groups that once more are framed as terrorists. This is a rhetoric similar to Álvaro Uribe's, a former Colombian president (2002-2010) whose ideas still exercise a lot of influence in the country. Moreover, 191 ex-combatants were murdered since the Peace Agreement was signed (EL ESPECTADOR, 2020a) and 98 social leaders were killed only this year, most of them afro-descendants, indigenous, ethnic minorities, and peasants (INDEPAZ, 2020). This violence generates a series of uncertainties to both dissidents and victims. Worsening this scenario, some spaces/regions that once were under the FARC-EP control are now a locus of new disputes by other illegal armed groups still operating in the Colombian territory as well as by FARC-EP dissidents (CODHES, 2018; ÁVILA, 2019). This situation is characteristic of the power vacuum of a State

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whose presence in marginal regions is still weak.

Meanwhile, the outcome of years of violence in Colombia is that almost nine million people were recognized and registered as victims, according to the Unit for the Victims Assistance and Reparation (UARIV, in Spanish) created within the framework of the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448/2011). Out of this total, around eight million people were internally displaced, which places Colombia as the country with the highest number of internally displaced people (IDP) in the world (UNHCR, 2019). Here, the most striking is that again, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, *Ibidem*), around 21% of the IDPs are afro-Colombians and 25.4% are indigenous. Additionally, the UARIV's databases points to the fact that around 50.1% of the victims are women. Thus, this article argues that the analysis of these data reveals what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) calls the ontological abyssal lines of the colonial/modern politics, this meaning the violent lines produced by a colonial, patriarchal and neoliberal modern system that segregates, marginalizes and subjects the otherness. In this sense, the new pandemic crisis acts highlighting these lines and deepening structural vulnerabilities in Colombia.

Running since March 25, Colombia declared a national lockdown (Decree 457/2020) to ensure the maintenance of the public order in terms of the public health emergency, with the government having implemented a package of economic measures (EL ESPECTADOR, 2020b). Also, given that the families who depend upon the informal economy become over vulnerable in a lockdown scenario, the Interior Ministry started an initiative called 'Colombia is with you' that aims to deliver one million food kits to vulnerable communities (MININTERIOR, 2020). Moreover, as identified by Ana María Ibáñez (2008), a significant part of the internally displaced people depends on the informal sector. Considering this, the Unit for the Victims is delivering food and personal hygiene kits to internally displaced families to face this quandary (UARIV, 2020); operations that may also be a puzzle in terms of logistics. However, what is still uncertain is what will be the effects of the pandemic crisis on a still unresolved armed conflict and, by consequence, what brutal impacts the conflict may have on its victims.

Thereby, one main challenge that the State needs to face is its structural debility in the fringes of the territory in terms of both institutional presence and infrastructure. As the document 'Impacts and Risks of Covid-19 on Peace and Conflict Dynamics' published by the Foundation Ideas for Peace (FIP) points out, 'if it is difficult for the State to arrive in a situation of 'normality', in the midst of the Covid-19 its absence and weakness could be even more notorious' (FIP, 2020, p.4). In addition, the document calls attention to a possible heterogeneous position of the illegal armed groups, inasmuch as this new coronavirus situation can be a window of opportunity for these actors to take or regain territory control.

On March 29, for instance, the National Liberation Army (ELN, in Spanish) declared a unilateral ceasefire due to the pandemic crisis, but on May 1st the organization resumed its activities by accusing the government of taking advantage of the ceasefire to regain control over territories, and of maintaining, moreover, joint operations with paramilitary forces (EL ESPECTADOR, 2020c). Notwithstanding, it is important to have in mind that as long as there is an ongoing armed conflict it becomes even more difficult to stop the spread of the coronavirus and to provide assistance to locals. In this new pandemic context, for example, the forced internal displacement of people, one of the darkest sides of the territorial dispute, also takes on a new aspect in terms of the Covid-19 propagation, exposing both victims and non-victims to hazard (CODHES, 2020).

Furthermore, the FIP document recounts that due to the deterioration of social and economic conditions, one can witness not only the deepening of pre-existing vulnerabilities but also the worsening of multiple types of violence, such as forced recruitment of children and teenagers in rural zones, an increase in the cases of sex trafficking and exploitation, as well as of intrafamily and gender violence, especially among the most vulnerable parts of society. In the departments of Cauca, Putumayo and Chocó, strongly hit by the conflict, the Corewoman Organization denounces that the coronavirus social isolation has affected the women in organizational, economic and political matters and that the levels of violence are increasing (EL ESPECTADOR, 2020d).

The proliferation of racist narratives is also noticed. On April 29, for example, the U'wa Association published a report denouncing the stigmatization they are suffering by the public opinion, as the U'wa communities are accused of being infected and of not respecting the lockdown measures (ONIC, 2020a). Another report published by the

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Black Communities Process (PCN, in Spanish) points to '[...] the precarious conditions for the effective enjoyment of the right to health access that ethnic communities possess in Colombia' (PCN, 2020, p.11), not to mention how it can be problematic to have access to clean water. According to the Master Plan for Water and Basic Sanitation (2018-2030), the water coverage is at 97.4% in the urban sector while in the rural area it is at 73.2%. Furthermore, of the 1,102 municipalities in the country, only in 529 the water received is suitable for consumption and not all of them receive water 24 hours a day. In terms of capital cities, in Riohacha, Santa Marta, Buenaventura, Quibdó, Mocoa, San Andrés and Leticia, for example, the water is available only for 8 hours per day (EL TIEMPO, 2020).

In a related note, Leticia, capital of the Amazonas department where about 60% of the population is identified as indigenous (ONIC, 2020b), currently has the highest coronavirus contamination rate in Colombia. The reasons here are two-folded: a porous border with Brazil, which lacks a joint containment strategy for the disease, and the region's structural vulnerability in terms of sanitation and health systems (BBC, 2020b).

In this way, it stands clear that, in Colombia, the coronavirus pandemic outbreak is not creating a new humanitarian crisis scenario. Instead, it is adding a new layer of complexity to a pre-existing conjuncture, deepening its previous vulnerabilities and corroborating with further social, political and economic instability. Considering the uncertain context, a post-pandemic scenario in Colombia is yet difficult to foresee. However, what becomes more evident as time goes by are the pandemic's harsh effects upon those who are historically inhabiting the other side of Boaventura's abyssal line and, as such, already deal with exceptionalities on a normal, or normalized, daily basis. Moreover, in order to overcome the spread of the coronavirus and, thereby, to protect the population, it is also clear that an ethnic focus ought to be taken; as the TEJAMA Association argues (ONIC, 2020b), it is fundamental to advance an intercultural approach that encompasses differential attention and communication strategies in a jointed initiative.

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