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Colombia : Sweet and Bitter

It was still dark as we drove to the airport just outside Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia. This South American country is next to Brazil and Mexico in importance in the hemisphere and is renowned for its bananas, coffee, narcotics and novel writers such as 1983 Nobel Laureate, Gabriel García Marquez.

Daylight was beginning to move across the rich green plateau, nestling in the Andean Mountains, which had so impressed the Spanish that the city was founded there in 1538. I was pleasantly surprised by many things in Bogotá; its cool invigorating climate due no doubt to its altitude which makes it a little higher than Mexico; and, of course, a distinctly European environment with very many welcoming restaurants around.

Belying widespread belief that this city of over one million people is largely composed of drug dealers, street thieves, prostitutes and abandoned children, I was discovering that the majority of Colombians live in closely-knit families who are hardworking and very appreciative of both the arts and intellectual pursuit. I was neither mugged nor robbed although I did take the precautions on the streets that friends had advised me, particularly to avoid conversations with those who may wish to greet me, as they may well be the pretext for assault.

However my visit was becoming hectic and nerve-shattering in other ways. I was on a mission together with some other people to inform ourselves on the situation of political violence which

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has dogged Colombian history during recent years.

As we neared the airport, I thought back on some of those events and of the meetings we were having with human rights workers, political and religious leaders and government officials.

There was a brutal civil war which started in the late forties between partisans of the Conservative and Liberal parties which left thousands dead. Scarcely had it ended in the late fifties when many young people desirous of building a new type society in Colombia, banded together in guerrilla groups initiating a violent political struggle which has now engulfed the entire country.

Government repression stepped up dramatically and the statistics for human rights violations are frightening; several thousand dead, one thousand disappeared and over five hundred political prisoners. Many commentators say that the Salvadorean war will appear as a storm in a tea-cup compared to what's brewing in this vast country of over thirty five million people.

State officials had enthusiastically informed us of the new winds for reform in the corridors of the Presidential Nariño Palace.

Belisario Betancur (BB for the popular media) was elected president in 1983 to succe the notorious Turbay Ayala whose wayward habits raised many an ecclesiastical eyebrow accustomed to certain propriety in holders of the office.

President Betancur announced his audacious plan to confront the country's ills. He would begin a process of dialogue and negotiation with the armed revolutionary movements now controlling much of Colombia. He would investigate crimes committed by the security forces and charge all those responsible including military

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officers. He would also implement a program^{me} for social and economic reform.

The wealthy with vested interests in the economy and^{the} drug trade were aghast at these new proposals. The military openly resented them and quietly organised their opposition. Many ab^{ove} all in the human rights community were very sceptical that the new president would have the sheer guts to push his programme through. After a meeting with his Justice Minister Lara Bonilla we also began to have grave doubts about Betancur's capacity to enforce change.

"Look", Minister Bonilla stared at us from across his spacious desk.

"One of those body-guards of mine you've met at the door could well assassinate me as I am prosecuting some of their officers for crimes such as murder"

We hadn't fully reacted to this extraordinary statement when the Minister reached up to a Library shelf and presented us with several documents.

"This is the latest death-threat I've got"

He handed us a letter which we began to examine very curiously. There was a toy motor-bike and cut-out letters pasted on to the paper sheet. On the lower corner of the page, we saw a close photograph of someone in a coffin.

"He was a judge, a very fine man and was shot only some weeks ago. The photo was taken during his funeral"

This young Minister, one of the most brilliant lawyers in the country, was evidently under great stress.

"This time, the MAS, the most powerful paramilitary group in the country with many members in the armed forces, really mean busi-



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ness. But I will not be intimidated."

By now we had arrived at the airport and boarded our flight. I recalled the scene at the Minister's office as we were traveling to the city that is reputedly the home of the MAS: Medellin. This city, next in size to Bogotá is one of the main centres of violence in the country but is also the world's drug capital where the international price for cocaine is fixed.

However as our flight eased out over the immense Magdalena river that crosses the country to the north, my thoughts were more directed to the hazards of landing in Medellin than to any reflections on human rights or drugs. The city is built practically in a canyon under high mountain ridges so the aircraft has literally to drop helicopter-style to position itself for landing on an extremely short runway. Happily my fears were in vain and soon afterwards we were becoming acquainted with a most beautiful city popularly referred to as 'Orchid Town' for the variety of flowers that bloom there.

Its people are traditional and fun-loving so that you really wonder how many have become involved in narcotics and violence. One can see evidence of the wealth around in a modern skyline with many financial institutions. However Medellin also can boast of some of the worst slums in Colombia where landslides are common occurrences during the rainy months.

But one senses a rare and ominous atmosphere about. Scarcely a night goes by without some bodies being found, killed either by the police, paramilitaries, guerilla groups or private gangs. On one weekend they were eighty victims mostly petty thieves, or vagabounds. The usual number is around twenty and some

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killings are political as I discovered later on that night.

Jaime, the younger son of the family I stayed with overnight was attending University but was also active in solidarity work with Nicaragua. A few months previously he was arrested by the police near the campus but the following day his mutilated body was eventually found in a rubbish dump near his home. The police version is that Jaime had been released earlier so they disclaim all responsibility for his death. But his father has no doubts about the crime and, ignoring advice to be prudent and careful, has begun court proceedings against the police officers involved.

In Colombia and in Medellin their story is a familiar one and I was deeply moved. That night the family showed me an album they had collected as a memorial of the case and I have never been as impacted by any other testimony. One message of sympathy was so striking that I copied it in my note-book.

"We must not permit Jaime's brutal death to torment us in any way. He would not wish that to happen" said the careful handwriting which I later learned, on inquiry, was from his girlfriend.

"My God," I thought, "What strength!"

Our host for the visit to Medellin was a family doctor, Hector Abad Gomez and we had a meeting in his home with the local human rights committee which Doctor Gomez chaired. Among the small attendance was another medical practitioner Dr. Leonardo Betancur and they were all most committed in the struggle against violence in the area.

Jokingly Dr. Betancur explained to us that he receives so many death-threats that he becomes concerned when they no longer arrive.

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"It may be that after so much words" he said, "Those guys mean action after all"

The group provided us with many stories of the killings and disappearances and informed us of how they were mobilising against such a wave of violence. In one incident a student was tied to a tree where he was then shot.

Their general attitude however was one of optimism that the new policy of implementing justice and building for peace might just be successful. When we returned later to Bogotá that same day for a panel discussion on human rights, the main speaker of the evening Senator Parejo Gonzalez argued much along those same lines, so much that we could leave Colombia with some peace of mind.

Now looking back on what I've written and which happened in 1983, a current up-date on the people I've mentioned is astonishing to say the least.

President Belisario Betancur was the object of a public indictment in the Colombian Congress in 1986. During the take-over of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá by some thirty guerrilleros, he had ordered the Army to assault the place and they reduced it to rubble with many people being killed during the attack. The President of the Supreme Court who died together with the majority of other judges in the attack, had appealed to the President to call off military action. As it was, he refused even to speak with him on telephone or radio. Investigations afterwards have suggested that most of the people who died as a result of the fire-power of the military. That whole tragedy which took place in October 1985 certainly put an end to his policy on pacification.

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Justice Minister Lara Bonilla was shot dead by assassins on motor-bikes in Bogotá in 1984. Investigations have pointed out that his bodyguards were very slow to react.

Senator Parejo Gonzalez replaced him as Minister and carried on the same struggle to bring justice to the country. The Medellin Narcotic Ring swore his death. He finally had to resign in fear for his life and was assigned as Ambassador to Czechoslovakia. It was felt that at least in Prague he would be safe. How wrong they were. In 1986 he was shot by a gunman and although he has survived, he now suffers from grave disabilities. He was given a special tribute by the Recent United Nations Conference on Drugs celebrated in Belgrade.

Recently in August 1987, Doctors Abad Gomez and Betancur were going to the funeral in Medellin of the President of the local teachers' union. They were shot on by two men who rode up to them on motor cycles and died immediately. As usual the Government has promised investigations.

It is indeed a sorry day for Colombia to see so many fine people become the victims of the very violence they have tried so hard to combat. I would say they are the voices crying in the wilderness. Colombia's present president Virgilio Barco seems to be quite contented to resort to former policies and ignore the serious situation around him. As for the international community most nations are resigned to turn a blind eye to covert state killings. There is the odd voice raised in protest but little effective action. It is about time that the human rights of people in countries so beautiful as Colombia be effectively guaranteed. We are indeed all responsible.