

Explaining violence against civilians in the Middle Magdalena Valley, Colombia (1996-2004)

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The problem

Forced displacement, killings, plunder and various forms of abuse against civilians have been a common occurrence in recent armed conflicts across the world, especially in Asia and Africa but also in Colombia. So common, that some observers see them as unproblematic—just another feature of the landscape of war. If that is ever to change, we surely need to understand the factors and mechanisms behind such violence.

In Colombia, leftist insurgencies, born in the 1960s, and counterinsurgent paramilitaries, created in the 1980s, grew and strengthened during the 1990s. Key to their expansion was the income they derived from the production of coca and cocaine, which peaked in 2000. As armed conflict escalated, civilians suffered the consequences—by the mid 2000s, nearly 3 million people had been displaced by violence.

How to explain such levels of violence?

The literature

Some possible explanations:

1. Civilians were 'caught in the crossfire'—violence was just an unintended side effect of war.
2. Civilians were punished or coerced to ensure they collaborate with one side or another—violence was just another way to increase control and achieve victory.
3. The factions were not be interested in victory or political goals but in exploiting, extorting, plundering and displacing civilians for economic ends. Armed conflict and organised crime became virtually undistinguishable.
4. Civilians may have acted opportunistically, accusing each other of collaboration, prompting attacks against their own local, personal foes.

The case

Colombia is often seen as a typical example of the dire effects of criminalisation of armed conflict and some scholars have argued that the involvement of insurgents and paramilitaries in the coca economy accounts for the rising level of violence against civilians. In other words, it is seen as a case that confirms explanation No. 3 above.

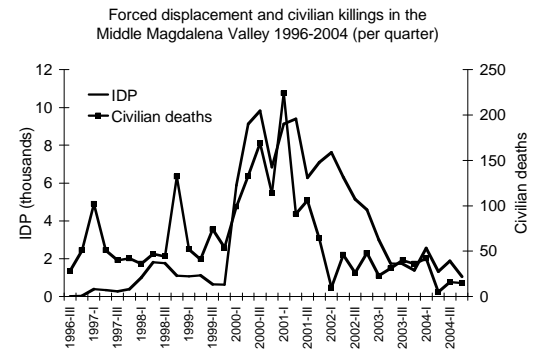
To explore whether this was the case I studied an outbreak of violence in the Middle Magdalena Valley, in northeast Colombia, where leftist insurgencies, right-wing paramilitaries and government forces have been clashing for at least 20 years. In 2000-2001 armed conflict and violence escalated. At the same time, coca-cultivated areas in the region reached a peak of 10,000 hectares.

Data and sources

Dataset on armed conflict and killings, based on CINEP's reports; official databases on kidnappings, displacement, economic and demographic variables; newspaper reports and secondary sources; and interviews with key informants in the region. The data covered the period 1996-2004.

Findings

The figure below shows the steep increase in violence against civilians in 2000-2001.



Sources: Author's dataset, based on CINEP's reports; official displacement registry (SUR).

The data also show that:

1. Unintended violence against civilians was marginal—less than five per cent. Most killings were deliberate.

Using cross-section regression analyses of data from 43 *municipios* I found that:

2. Civilian killings were most likely in conflict areas rather than in resource-rich areas—including coca-cultivated areas.
3. Insurgents and paramilitaries were more likely to kill civilians in areas with a previous record of enemy activity than in any other areas.

In interviews and visits to the field I found that:

4. Controlling the coca paste market did not entail massive violence—its production is labour-intensive and less vulnerable to eradication when done by independent farmers in small plots.
5. Insurgents and paramilitaries played a significant role in local politics through alliances with local elites and social organisations, reflected in elections and social protests against some government measures.
6. Although some civilians (individuals, communities, organisations) supported and sympathised either with insurgents, paramilitaries or the government, they did not play a major role in promoting violence or in targeting victims.

Conclusion

Violence against civilians was aimed at increasing territorial and political control—it was not an effect of the criminalisation of armed conflict. The involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities does not necessarily lead to further violence against civilians or entails a de-politicisation of armed conflict.

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Notes

Comments welcome on g.a.vargas@lse.ac.uk Two papers based on this research can be found at <http://bit.ly/aavGCH> and <http://bit.ly/cl0Z21>