

Colombians in Canada: Contexts of Departure and Arrival

Prepared by Wei Wei Da for the Latin American Research Group

2002

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I. Context of Departure

a. Number of Incoming Population, Time Periods, and Peak Flows

There has been a significant increase in numbers of refugee claimants from Colombia since 1998 (See Table 1, 2, and 3). A social profile of refugee claimants from Colombia, 1989-2002

Table 1. Refugee Claimants from Colombia by sex, 1989-2002

Year	Male	Female
1989	31	25
1990	44	35
1991	45	33
1992	24	26
1993	39	24
1994	48	34
1995	46	25
1996	35	40
1997	46	44
1998	154	129
1999	338	316
2000	636	621
2001	869	784
2002	1068	954

Source: Elmagraby, Sambia. 2002. Figures on refugee claimants from Salvador. Statistics on Refugees, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa

Table 2. Refugee Claimants from Colombia by age group, 1989-2002

Year	0-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-65
1989	1	1	2	1	3	9	12	11	8	3	1
1990	0	4	5	4	7	13	18	13	10	4	1
1991	1	7	0	6	7	21	14	10	7	2	2
1992	1	0	1	4	8	11	10	7	2	3	1
1993	4	3	4	7	6	15	7	10	2	1	2
1994	4	4	6	5	13	20	10	6	5	4	2
1995	8	4	1	4	8	16	13	4	4	7	2
1996	10	3	3	11	8	15	13	6	4	0	0
1997	14	4	2	10	17	19	10	10	3	1	0
1998	41	17	21	23	51	55	32	19	11	5	3
1999	102	47	65	85	100	79	75	48	16	17	8
2000	207	87	124	170	148	157	154	100	46	30	16
2001	317	133	134	172	240	225	187	117	55	34	23
2002	414	143	186	265	255	282	227	127	46	28	24

Source: Elmagraby, Sambia. 2002. Figures on refugee claimants from Salvador. Statistics on Refugees, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa.

Table 3. Refugee Claimants from Colombia by marital status, 1989-2002.

Year	Single	Married	Widowed	Divorced	Separated
1989	21	25	1	4	1
1990	26	45	0	3	2
1991	42	29	0	1	5
1992	22	22	1	0	4
1993	34	26	1	1	1
1994	43	27	3	4	3
1995	21	44	1	2	2
1996	35	33	2	2	2
1997	44	30	0	5	5
1998	143	115	1	9	4
1999	340	234	11	12	19
2000	628	457	31	37	35
2001	836	657	22	32	29
2002	1052	824	25	51	41

Source: Elmagraby, Sambia. 2002. Figures on refugee claimants from Salvador. Statistics on Refugees, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa

b. State policy that Contribute to Displacement

Colombia was independent from Spanish rule in 1819, and was one of three countries that emerged from the collapse of Gran Colombia in 1830 (the others being Ecuador and Venezuela). The nation became a republic in 1886. Since then the country has been dominated by Liberal and Conservative Parties whose leadership has been drawn from traditional elites. Colombia had experienced various forms of violence and human rights violation in its history. A 40-year insurgent campaign to overthrow the Colombian government escalated during the 1990s, under-girded in part by funds from the drug trade. Modern Colombia has been marked by various forms of violence, as well as by corruption among its high-ranking authorities, insurgencies, and drug cartels.

Human Rights Violations

Human rights violations have soared to an unprecedented level. In 1999, for example, there were about 3,000 kidnappings and 25,000 murders; in 2000 the number of kidnappings rose to 3,162. In the past decade an estimated 35,000 have died and about 1.5 million have been displaced, 308,000 in 1998 alone. In addition, from 1997 to 2000, 34 mayors were assassinated and 100 others were kidnapped (Karatnycky, 2001). Human rights violations are also racialized. Indigenous peoples have long been victims of various forms of violence. Over the past century much of the violence was legislated and protected by law. Indigenous peoples were not only forced to leave their homeland to live in the jungles, but they were also deprived of their spiritual beliefs and were forcibly evangelized. Conflicts between the FARC-EP (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army), a major guerrilla group, government, and the paramilitary death squads have been the central source of human rights violations in the last century and continue in the 21st century. FARC – EP has also been involved in drug production and trafficking (Haggart, 1997; Johnson, 2000; KARIOS, 1999).

Children’s situation has also deteriorated. More than 900,000 children under the age of 14 are living in unacceptable conditions. Child abuse and deprivation of basic human rights are apparent. Children are not only the victims of violence, but are also actively involved in various violence and conflicts (Karatnycky, 2001). According to Orellana, Thorne, Chee and Lam’s (2001) study on transnational childhood, they indicated that children helped constitute and reconfigure transnational social fields and transnational practices, and in turn, shape the contours of particular childhoods. There is also an increase in number of children who involve in violence and conflicts.

Drug generated violence has increased. Colombia is one of the largest Cocaine producing countries in the world, with illegal drug plantation increasing by 20%; drug traffickers own a significant proportion of the best agricultural lands. Paramilitaries and guerrillas are both involved in the drug trade. Colombia supplies 90% of the cocaine to the US and the great majority of cocaine to the other international market (Karatnycky, 2001; North, 2001).

Impunity is also a key concern in Colombia where virtually every human rights violation escapes both prosecution and punishment (KAIROS, 2002). Current Colombia socio-

political system is described as a 'democratatorship' because it combines democratic and dictatorship characteristics (Ghosh, 1999).

Land Issues

Historically, land ownership is one of the most complex and pending issues in Colombia's history. It is not only an issue of who own the land, but also issues of race relations and human rights. Much of violence and conflicts had been generated over the land ownership between the Indigenous peoples and the government. Before the Spanish arrived the sixteenth century, there were about four million Indigenous peoples living in Colombia. By the late of eighteenth century, their population had reduced to less than one fifth of a million. Land ownership is bipolarized. Colombia has more than 800,000 indigenous inhabitants. The Natives have fought for their land ownership for several centuries. In spite of an agrarian reform implemented by the Liberal president in the early 1960s, little has changed. According to the Colombian National Administrative Bureau of Statistics, in the early 1990s peasants make up to 88% of its population, but they owned only 14% of the land. Moreover, it is estimated that half a million peasants and Indigenous peoples are landless. The Indigenous peoples are often the targets of violence (Bulletin of Justice and Peace, 1993; ICCHRLA, 1999; KAIROS, 2002).

Economic Constraints

Colombia's economy suffered from weak domestic demand, austere government budgets, and a difficult security situation. The new government will face economic challenges ranging from reduction of unemployment rate, which was 17% in 2001, and pension reform etc. Population below poverty line is high, such as 55% in 2001. Colombia is continuously looking for support from international community. Its external debt reached \$39 billion in 2001 and its currency exchange rate with US has gone up every year from 1:1,140 in 1997 to 1:2,275 in 2002.

Internal Displacement and its Potential Link to Cross Border Migration

From 1985 to the end of 2001, approximately 2.45 million Colombians, mostly peasants, were internally displaced, including about 342,000 who became displaced in 2001. Most people fled to urban centres within the country. There were about 105,000 Colombians who were living in refugee status in neighbouring countries (Karatnycky, 2001).

The start of widespread of US-funded fumigation in Colombia is expected to destabilize the southern department of Putumayo, which cause tens of thousands of people fleeing to northern Ecuador.

The internally displaced are crossing into Ecuador and Venezuela, while an increasing number of professionals are migrating to Canada, the US and European countries for refuge (Haggart, 1997). Many Colombian refugees went to neighbouring countries, including about 5,500 in Costa Rica, 4,100 in Ecuador, 900 in Panama, and a few hundred in Venezuela. During the year of 2001, a total of 12,860 Colombians applied for asylum in countries outside the region, including 7,603 in the United States, 3,533 in European countries, 1,627 in Canada, and 97 in Australia and New Zealand. Since the late 1990s, tens of thousands of Colombians have traveled abroad every year with tourist

visas (particularly to the United States) only to remain in those countries once their visas have expired. Colombia has created 1.2 million refugees (Karatnycky, 2001).

Organizations in the Home Country to Help Displaced People

The Inter-congregational Commission of Justice and Peace was founded in 1988 with 30 Catholic provincials. It includes 53 religious congregations throughout the country. The Inter-congregational Commission has offices in seven cities and their functions include:

- Collection of information
- Denunciation, assuming cases on behalf of victims
- Reflection and motivation (conducting workshops etc)
- Education
- Solidarity playing active role through hostel and various forms of assistance to victims and their families.

From 1988 to 1993, the Commission has helped many displaced people and victim of violence through hostels, medical and psychological assistance for their resettlement. (Bulletin, 1993)

II. Context of Arrival

a. Canadian State Policies

Colombians Are a Recent Group to Canada.

1. Number of Visa Offices and Staff in Country/Region

Bogota, Colombia. Its service lines include immigrants, workers, visitors and students, and it is responsible for applications from Colombia and Ecuador. Information about staffing in the Visa sections is not available from public source.

2. Rate of acceptance for refugee claimants from Colombia

Refugee claimants from Colombia have the highest rate of acceptance. According to Statistics Canada, acceptance rate was 50% in 1999, 67% in 2000, 78% in 2001 and 77% in 2002.

CIDA has spent about \$15m - \$20m a year to run programs in Colombia. Canada also made contributions to UN programs in Colombia (Canadian Press Newswire, 2000).

b. Civil Society Reception

Canada-Colombia Solidarity Campaign

In October 1997, a delegation named Fact-finding and Solidarity Mission was the first Canadian trade union to visit Colombia. The mission was organized by the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America (ICCHRIA). The delegation was composed of members from ICCHRLA, the Canadian Auto Workers, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, the Canadian Labour Congress, the union for Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace workers and a United Church

Observer Reporter. As Haggart (1997) indicated, Colombia's war on drugs and guerrillas is more truthfully a war against teachers and union activists. According to ICCHRLA, about 253 trade unionists were killed in 1996. Upon returning to Canada, the delegation met with Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy who was willing to work on this case and also asked Canadian Embassy officials to visit union activists to protect them. The ICCHRLA played an important role in lobbying the Canadian government to take measures to help bring an end of violence and improve human rights issues in Colombia (ICCHRIA, 1999).

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Internet Resources

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<http://tao.ca/~ccsc/fascistlist.htm>

http://tao.ca/~ccsc/sept14_2002youth.htm

<http://tao.ca/~ccsc/agrarianmobilization.htm>

<http://tao.ca/~ccsc/>

http://tao.ca/~ccsc/sept7_2002ukcse.htm

http://tao.ca/~ccsc/3_septemvilizacionjuvenil.htm

<http://www.kairoscanada.org/>

<http://www.refugee.org/wrs2002.cfm>

<http://www.cic.gc.ca/ref-protection/english/links-liens/index.htm>

<http://www.web.net/~ccr/fronteng.htm>

<http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/indexrsp.html>