Colombia's Chimera: Reflections on Human Security and Armed Violence

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Introduction

This short article frames the concept of human security in relation to Colombia, a country whose populations' safety is compromised on a daily basis by armed violence. It is going to address two issues. The first is the concept of "human security" itself – an expression well known to the readership of CCHS. The article briefly considers the conceptual dimensions of human security with reference to the recently-published Human Security Report, which itself raises some challenging questions. The second section considers "human security" in the Colombian context. While a narrow optic of human security that privileges violence and violence prevention is essential, we argue it still needs to be sufficiently broad so as to account for both criminal and conflict-related violence, and not just war-deaths (direct and perhaps indirect), as is often implied in policies designed under the human security framework. The framing of human security in relation to violence prevention - in all its forms - is an essential point of departure for policy initiatives to have a meaningful impact on people's lives.

Part I. Human Security

The concept of human security, articulated in broad brush strokes in the 1994 UN Development Programme Human Development Report, is a relatively open-ended and flexible normative fulcrum around which interests have been articulated and policies advanced by a range of states, NGOs, and international organizations. It is more than an academic construct: Canada, Switzerland, Austria, Norway, South Africa, Thailand, Japan and others have infused their foreign and development policies around the idea of putting "people" – their safety and wellbeing – more fully into the picture.

In the most general terms, "human security" prioritizes the basic rights and needs of individuals for safety and security. In this sense, it is not a new idea. President Franklin Roosevelt signalled the now-common catchphrase for human security in the 1940s with the idea of "freedom from fear". This has subsequently become the mantra of a growing advocacy coalition of academics, practitioners and diplomats.

From a human security perspective, sovereignty is thus not just premised solely on the protection of borders, but also on the protection of civilians – including in some cases, from their own predatory government and state structures. Seen from this perspective, the UN Secretary General's expression of "dual sovereignty" acquires some resonance. More recently, the Canadian-sponsored "responsibility to protect" and "protection of civilians" doctrine that has recently been moving its way up the UN Security Council Agenda,

also captures some of the moral and political implications of the concept in (re)defining states' obligations towards their citizens.

While much has been written on the subject from a theoretical perspective, little empirical work has actually been carried out to demonstrate how the norms associated with promotion of human security are translated into concrete policy practices, or to determine whether a changed policy framework actually makes a different in the safety and security of people and communities (Muggah and Krause 2006). Of course, there is a considerable amount of analysis that focuses on the policy diffusion of the concept of "human security", but much less designed to assess the outcomes of policies designed around it.

The recent Human Security Report, produced by the Human Security Centre at the University of British Colombia has also sought to tackle this problem, by developing an empirical foundation for assessing the concept of human security. The primary focus of the Human Security Report (and many other writings) has, however, been on an extreme variant of human security, notably "war" and its "direct consequences". Predictably, given this framing of the concept the authors of the report chose as one of their key indicators "conflict deaths" (and, at least in this edition, direct conflict deaths). Leaving aside the immense and long-standing methodological challenges of establishing credible "death" figures in war, a subject to which we shall shortly return, the report found that more than 20,000 people had been killed per year in the early twenty-first century, down from the much higher tolls of direct war deaths of the Cold War era.

The drop was attributed to, among other things, UN interventions and peace operations that had bolstered "human security". There are of course problems of validity and inference with the conclusions of the report, notably its causal assumptions that UN peace operations are a major "cause" of this decline in direct conflict deaths. That said, it did speak to a widely-held conventional belief: human security is most imperilled by war, and conflict deaths are the best proxy of measuring its rise or fall. This sadly brings us to the subject of Colombia, which challenges this view in fundamental ways.

Part II. Human Security in Colombia

Colombia has been experiencing a civil conflict for more than forty years, and has experienced periodic bouts of armed violence throughout the previous century. Its most horrific episode was actually in the 1940s – a period popularly referred to simply as "La Violencia" – in which 80,000 to some 400,000 people were reportedly killed in a violent blood letting between opposing political parties.

The effects of the latest conflict have been no less disturbing. Since the late 1960s Colombia has lived through a guerrilla conflict of relatively low intensity. This conflict intensified by the mid-nineties and peaked in 2002. Research carried out by Jorge Restrepo and Michael Spagat suggest that since 1988, close to 39,000 people have been killed in attacks and clashes between

state forces, illegal paramilitary groups, and guerrilla groups, of which currently active are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the much smaller National Liberation Army (ELN). This represents at least 10 per cent of the total conflict death toll reported by the Human Security Report - roughly 2,200 people killed each year in violent armed conflict with a similar number injured. A majority of these deaths and injuries are among combatants.

But as appalling as this toll is, it is not the whole story. By a wide margin the greatest burden of armed violence in Colombia comes not from conflict, but from organised crime (including narco-trafficking) and petty violence. Since 1979, more than 475,000 people have been violently killed in so-called "crime", most of them young men.

In a country of around 45 million, 19,000 to 22,000 victims per year have made Colombia the most violent country in the world for several years running. This violence is a primarily urban phenomenon, with the large cities of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla accounting for more than a third of the total (Restrepo et al, 2005; Villaveces et al 2000). Conflict violence, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly rural and, for this and other reasons, must be treated differently (Restrepo et al, 2006a). The human security agenda should be broad enough to tackle both types of violence simultaneously as we do below.

Although homicidal violence (criminal and conflict-related) still accounts for close to 18,000 deaths per year in Colombia, the situation has improved compared to the recent past. Coinciding with President Uribe assuming office in 2002 and the controversial demobilisation of paramilitary factions, most human security indicators, notably the homicide rate and conflict killings of civilians, have improved substantially.

The improvement in these indicators is linked to innovative municipal urban renewal programmes, proactive gun control policies strongly enforced in some cities, crime prevention activities and the launch of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of the illegal paramilitaries grouped under the umbrella organisation of the AUC (United Self Defence forces of Colombia). Although violent death rates in Colombia are still among the highest in the world, there have been substantial gains in the last few years. However, in a worrisome development for DDR, the rate of paramilitary killings of civilians has doubled in the first half of 2005.

Despite the distinction we have made between "conflict" and "criminal" violence, it is often extremely difficult, if not impossible, in practice to separate "conflict" and "crime" in Colombia. Both guerrilla and paramilitary groups engage actively in crime to fund their war against each other and the state (for the guerrillas). There are insidious and overlapping linkages with fuzzy boundaries between narco-trafficking, gun procurement networks and corruption. Thus, even a war-focused human security agenda must extend its sites to criminal-conflict links as the second human security report is expected to do.

Both criminal and conflict organizations predate resources. Colombian guerrillas fund their war against the state with kidnapping, extortion, land and livestock theft, corruption of local budgets, and, of course, narco-trafficking. Paramilitary groups behave similarly with relatively more emphasis on narco-trafficking and with weaker tendencies to reinvest their earnings into the conflict.

However, despite links between criminal and direct conflict violence, their spatial and temporal patterns indicate that crime-related deaths outnumber direct plus indirect conflict deaths by a wide margin (Restrepo et al 2006). The human security impact of an individual killing does not depend on whether or not it is conflict-related; men, women and children experience real and perceived insecurity from both conflict and crime. But policy approaches for reducing crime (largely urban) and conflict (largely rural) violence are likely to differ considerably.

Statistics collected by the Small Arms Survey and CERAC from the DANE (national statistics department), the National Police, and office of the Medical Examiner (Medicina Legal) indicate that firearms are used in 60 to 90 per cent of these deaths, conflict or crime-related. Though Colombia has some of the strongest firearm legislation in the world, and comparatively transparent manufacturing, import and export procedures, this astronomically high rate of firearms deaths is virtually unrivalled in almost all countries except Brazil and South Africa. In fact, gun control enforcement is uneven but we observe drops in homicidal violence at times and places where enforcement of the existing gun control regime is enhanced. There is also anecdotal and survey evidence that "cultural change" initiated by city authorities have affected perceptions and attitudes towards guns, coinciding with reductions in armed homicides.

Males constitute about 90-92 per cent of all Colombian gun victims. Gun deaths are the single largest cause of either natural or external death for males. This is a phenomenon we see all over the world; young men are overwhelmingly both the perpetrators and the victims of war and crime. Quite apart from the trauma they cause, these deaths have a big impact on the economy as they generally come at the beginning of workers' productive lives, immediately after they have finished their socially subsidized educations. We have calculated that an astounding 342,000 years of productive life (YPPL) have been lost in the past few years, with a strong reduction in life expectancy among Colombian males

Guns are thus a key contributor to human insecurity. In Colombia, there were more than 706,000 guns officially registered to civilians, foreigners and companies in the past decade. While this is low in comparison to other countries in the Americas, Colombians are arming themselves in greater numbers. Moreover, related to the stringent possession and carrying rules, there are also many illegal weapons – between 800,000 and 1.3 million (Restrepo et al 2006). Interestingly, most illegal arming appears to be with criminal intent, as people with legitimate security concerns and at high risk have been generally willing to bear the high costs associated with obtaining a weapon legally. Criminals, on the other hand, tend to avoid legal gun

acquisition channels as criminal statistics show that most gun-related crime is committed with non-legal weapons.

Another critical issue here is that while illegal paramilitaries, the guerrillas and the army hold sophisticated weapons, this is actually a minor figure when compared to civilian arms holdings. Thus, civilian disarmament is probably one of the single most significant potential contributors to human security in the country.

Overall, one cannot reduce a discussion of human security in Colombia to a function of conflict deaths. In Colombia – as anywhere – this narrow optic misrepresents what human security concerns are for people in their daily lives. In many areas of Colombia, criminal violence dwarfs political and conflict-related violence and both need to be addressed if people are to be "freed from fear." If we restrict our "human security" optic to situations of large-scale violent conflict, we not only miss the real security concerns of many people, but we may also neglect a vast array of creative and potentially successful interventions for violence prevention and reduction.

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