

Colombia Factsheet

- Colombia is the northern-most country of South America, with ports on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. It is rich in natural resources, with an abundance of oil, natural gas, coal, nickel, and emeralds. Its agricultural riches include coffee and flowers, and there are vast forest and river resources.
- Colombia has been subjected to a long-running conflict between leftist guerrillas and government forces. Dissident right-wing paramilitary squads, drug trafficking gangs and common criminals also contribute to the complex unrest that has plagued the South American nation. Some argue that the root of the problem is the struggle to control land – 30% of the land is in the control of right-wing, paramilitary drug traffickers.
- According to UN figures, Colombia ranks second for countries worst affected by internal displacement.
- In a population of 43 million, 64% of the population live below the poverty line. Poverty and large scale internal displacement, due to conflict, threaten many Colombians' food security. Threats to rural populations by illegal armed groups increasingly restrict movement and limit access to markets and agricultural land, and consequently food and other goods.
- Colombia is home to 4 million internally displaced persons, the second highest in the world (after Sudan). The highest rate of displacement since 1985 occurred in the last four months of 2008, despite negotiations between the government and the paramilitary groups. More than 270,000 people were forced from their homes because of the violence, meaning an average of 1,500 people fled daily. Since 2009, turf wars over coca crops in the border region of Narino have intensified and many thousands of people have been displaced, some across the border to Ecuador. Internal displacement overwhelms existing services; both locals and displaced people suffer.
- Colombia has a high number of killings – some 2,500 to 3,000 a year; four decades of armed conflict; and grave violations of humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch estimates that 200,000 people were unlawfully killed between 1998 and 2003. Drug-related violence is the second largest cause of death, after cancer. Approximately 97 percent of the crimes go unpunished.
- There is an inequitable distribution of wealth with two-thirds of the population living in poverty, while a small portion has an exorbitant amount of wealth. These economic injustices exacerbate the conflict.
- Church members are also among the 4 million people who have been forced to flee. A recent Mennonite publication, "A Prophetic Call," compiled by MCC partner organizations Justapaz and the Commission for Restoration, Life and Peace documents more than 300 violations against church leaders in 2007. Other community activists – indigenous leaders, leaders of displaced people, human rights and other activists are also targeted – in 2002, 184 trade unionists were assassinated.

Sources; World Food Programme, Medecins Sans Frontieres; BBC, Human Rights Watch, Justice for Colombia

A 2010 Lenten Study compiled by the World Council of Churches, the World Student Christian Federation and the World YWCA <http://women.overcomingviolence.org>.