

Colombia at a Glance



Area: 1.2 million square kms (compared to 9.9 million square kms in Canada) divided into 32 departments (*equivalent to provinces or states*).

Capital: Bogotá [Population: 6,158,000 (1999)].

Geography: The Andes cross Colombia from north to south in three ranges. North of the Andes, the swampy delta of the Magdalena River opens up, leaving flat coastal lowlands to the west, along the Pacific coast. To the east, plains covered by jungle and savannas extend downward to the Orinoco and Amazon Rivers. This diversity results in great climatic variety -- from perpetual snows on Andean peaks to tropical Amazon rain forests -- and enormous biodiversity.

Population: 42.8 million (2001) - Third most populous country in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico. Urban population increased from 57% in 1951 to 74% by 1994. Most people inhabit the Andean region.

Ethnic composition: Ethnic diversity is the result of the intermingling of Indigenous Peoples, Spanish colonists and Africans. About 2% can be identified as fully Indigenous on the basis of language and customs.

Language: Spanish (official) and dozens of Indian languages.

Religions: 93% are Roman Catholic.

Poverty: 60% live below the poverty line (82.6% in the countryside).

Income distribution: The wealthiest 20% have 52% of the nation's income.

Land distribution: 53% of land is in the hands of 1.08% of the population.

Employment levels: Unemployment doubled from 10.6% in 1991 to 20.5% in 2000, while 37.6% of those with jobs earn less than the minimum wage.

Economy: Coffee is the main legal export, followed by bananas. Rich mineral resources are also exported, including petroleum, coal, copper, nickel, gold, platinum, silver, emeralds. Colombia is the 10th biggest supplier of oil to the U.S.

Government: Republic with bicameral Congress (102-seat Senate and 163-seat House of Representatives), directly elected for 4-year terms. The President is chief of state, head of government, and supreme commander of Armed Forces.

Elections: Presidential elections were held in May 2002. Abstention levels were higher than normal with 54% of voters not participating. Hardliner Alvaro Uribe Vélez won with 53% of votes, taking over from Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002).

Main Political Parties: Conservative Party; Liberal Party; Social and Political Front (a new party supported by trade unions and social organizations that placed third in the 2002 presidential elections).

Armed Groups: Two largest insurgent groups are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN). In recent years, diverse paramilitary groups or death squads, often acting with support of state agents, have joined forces in the United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (AUC)

Violence and Dislocation: Political killings and disappearances rose from an average of 10 per day in 1988 to more than 20 per day in 2002. The internally displaced population has risen to more than 2 million people (up from 200,000 in 1992)

Impunity: An estimated 97% of all crimes go unpunished, with even higher rates for politically motivated crimes.

U.S. Military Aid: U.S. military aid has increased six-fold since 1997 to \$1.5 million per day in 2002, making Colombia the third largest recipient in the world.

Sources: Contraloría General de la República, New Internationalist, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, U.S. Department of State