

Colombia Covid Lockdown: Collapse of Healthcare, Social Crisis, Poverty

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As the confirmed Coronavirus cases in Colombia [reach](#) more than 880,000, the healthcare infrastructure in Bogota is crumbling and [according](#) to the president of the Bogota College of Medicine Herman Bayona, “We are close to collapse.” Bogota’s Intensive Care Units (ICUs) are operating at a 90% capacity, an indication of the city’s over-stretched and strained healthcare system. The Santa Clara Hospital, for example, is [assisting](#) 52 patients with only a 44-bed capacity. Ivan Duque Marquez, the president of Colombia, is adamant on re-opening Bogota and [considers](#) that “a lockdown is not the solution.”

The present-day shambolic structure of Colombian healthcare is an inevitable consequence of an all-pervasive implementation of neoliberalism. In 1993, Colombia had created the General Social Security System for Health (GSSSH) through the approval of Law 100. Through Law 100 of 1993, the [Colombian government](#) “introduced a social security system based on the managed competition model, which has been increasingly exported from the USA to low and middle income countries”. As Luz Stella Alvarez, J. Warren Salmon, and Dan Swartzman have [remarked](#), “international financial institutions and a variety of academics promulgated the U.S. model as desirable for all nations despite the evidence of its failings when confronting impoverishment, rising social epidemics, and a host of “neglected diseases” across the southern hemisphere”.

Colombia was no exception to the devastating influence of American health hegemony and the [violent repercussions](#) of the neoliberal health reforms attest to this fact: “Public health programs, including vaccinations, were dramatically reduced or eliminated, and there was a sharp increase in mortality rates nationwide. Preventable deaths in children under five rose dramatically, from four to 15 per 100,000 children. Many consider the health care crisis that began with the reforms and continues to the present to be the worst in Colombian history.” Public hospitals, which have an [indispensable role](#) in regulating the Covid-19 pandemic, “were defunded, rented out, transformed into for-profit health care institutions, or closed down” during the [neoliberal health reforms](#).

Ivan Duque Marquez, the current president of Colombia, is deliberately apathetic towards this historically situated health crisis and despite the economic exigencies of the Covid-19 pandemic he is actively facilitating the [enrichment](#) of banks. As per [“Colombia Reports”](#), out of the \$1.5 billion which Ivan Duque allocated for the health sector, only \$110 million has reached the Health Ministry and National Health Institute. This \$1.5 billion was part of the \$8 billion emergency fund of which \$996 million was used. More than \$636 million of the entire \$996 million has apparently gone to the banks, suggesting that government officials are busy helping the financial sector. In the recent years, one has witnessed the neoliberal integration of Colombia in the global regime of finance with international investments [increasing](#) from \$1,036 billion in 1994 to \$40,549.6 billion in 2013. The embezzlement and

the consequent use of health-related money in the financial sector can be considered a decisive step taken to bolster domestic banks and robustly financialize capital accumulation in Colombia.

The ongoing health crisis is only the tip of the neoliberal iceberg and the contagion of capitalism is impacting the entirety of the country. The Institute of Studies for Development and Peace [documents](#) how 95 social leaders have been killed during the Covid-19 pandemic (between March 6 and July 15). Moreover, [223](#) social leaders and 36 former FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas have been assassinated in 2020. Under Duque, the killing of social leaders and ex-FARC guerrillas has accelerated. Since Ivan Duque's election to power in 2018, [573 social leaders](#) and approximately [85 ex-FARC guerrillas](#) have been killed. Opposition to these systematic and strategized killings has been tenacious and even during the pandemic, Colombians are [protesting](#) and some have [marched](#) for 600km to vehemently agitate against state-sanctioned violence.

The current acceleration of a bellicose and violent campaign against revolutionary forces has its roots in the signing of the peace agreement in November 2016. One of the main reasons for FARC's acceptance of peace negotiations was its declining military capacity due to the implementation of Plan Colombia and the growing paramilitarization of FARC-dominated regions. Plan Colombia, a [\\$10 billion](#) aid program funded by USA and primarily managed by State Department's International Narcotics Control programme, heavily militarized Colombia's southern regions and pragmatically paralyzed FARC's organizational structure. This was done through two modalities: the privatization of violence and the re-configuration of operational architectures according to the necessities of asymmetrical warfare.

Firstly, USA enhanced the subversion of FARC guerrillas by privatizing and correspondingly, specializing violence. USA, for example, collaborated closely with Military Professional Resources Incorporation (MPRI), a private military company whose [aim](#) is politically aligned with imperialist ambitions: "MPRI's mission is to gather and employ the experience and talent of the top of the national resource of former military professionals, primarily in defence related areas, for the US government, and to assist foreign governments in converting their military into western models that support democratic institutions ." MPRI, along with having an overtly imperialist mission of re-structuring militaries as enclaves of western-styled brutality, also [specializes](#) in "hard-core defence related activities".

In 1999, the American government [awarded](#) MPRI with a \$4.3 million contract to seek the company's advice on warfare in Colombia. In 2000, MPRI was [provided](#) with \$6 million as a part of Plan Colombia to train the Colombian army. Apart from MPRI, Lockheed Martin, DynCorp, Arinc, TRW, Matcom, Air Park Sales, Integrated Aero Systems and California Microwave Systems were the other private military and security corporations assisting the asphyxiation of FARC guerrillas. In 2005, there were [600 private military contractors](#) like these on the Colombian soil, engaged in a ruthless battle against class conscious revolutionaries.

Secondly, USA, through Plan Colombia, re-organized the Colombian military and prepared it for exigencies of asymmetrical warfare. [USA](#) did this by "not only...funding this process [Plan Colombia] but also by integrating the operations and intelligence sharing of the army, navy, and air force....The US sent advisors, monitors, and military personnel to Colombia to oversee the process and conclude it successfully. These operational changes together with

real-time intelligence sharing offered by US satellites, planes, and drones allowed the Colombian military to gain a tactical advantage over the FARC". Through US-assisted modernization of the army, the Colombian government was able to kill three key leaders of FARC. Raul Reyes, a FARC commandant, was [killed](#) through Operation Fenix. Mono Jojoy, second-in command to Alfonso Canon, the top military commander, [died](#) due to a military air strike and lastly, Alfonso Canon too got [killed](#) in a gun battle.

Paramilitaries, [defined](#) as "armed groups, created and funded by wealthy sectors of society, with military and logistical support provided unofficially by the state", have augmented the omnipotent authoritarianism of US-aided Colombian army by establishing the everydayness of violence. While state-supported military attacks on FARC encampments are effective in themselves, paramilitaries solidify this culture of violence. Through a decentralized network of micro-aggressions, paramilitaries are able to create a perpetual atmosphere of slow violence, constantly destabilizing FARC organizational structures.

Slow or perpetual violence was achieved through guerrilla tactics (hit-and-run tactics, ambushes and sabotage) which FARC itself utilized in its counter-hegemonic fight against capitalism. Furthermore, paramilitaries are capable of constantly attacking FARC guerrillas because of their [collusion](#) with the state: Paramilitaries' "bases have often been in close proximity to those of the state military, and police have provided the illegal armies with weapons, equipment, uniforms and transportation services. Compared to other non-state armed groups, paramilitaries enjoyed more power within and protection from the state, and were able to influence the government via various forms of corruption".

The Colombian state is not the only apparatus funding the paramilitaries and in fact, agribusiness owners, cattle ranchers, drug lords and mining giants have proven to be a perennial financial fount for paramilitary operations. [Capital accumulation](#) "through drug-trafficking, extortion, collection agencies, and the appropriation of land all require the use of violence.... Those who accumulate capital, whether through legal or illegal means,... see the guerrilla as an enemy and consequently resort to violence whenever necessary and possible to neutralize the threat." Due to the need of eradicating the Marxist-Leninist redistributive campaign of the FARC, the Colombian bourgeoisie funded the right-wing paramilitaries and hence, contributed to the debilitation of the revolutionary organization.

As FARC's structural-organizational patterns enormously eroded, it was forced to enter into peace negotiations with the Colombian state. With FARC's [abandonment](#) of its controlled territories in February 2017 and [disarmament](#) in July 2017, there has been an [increase](#) in deforestation. In "NNPs [National Natural Parks] and NNRs [National Natural Reserves], 31 of the 39 PAs [Protected Areas] (79%) experienced increased deforestation in the post-conflict years....This translated into a dramatic and highly significant 177% increase in the deforestation rate between the two 3-year periods [3 years before and after Colombia's peace agreement with FARC]... resulting in 330 km² of additional loss of protected forest. In the biogeographical Amazon, of which FARC controlled vast areas, several parks suffered notably severe upswings in deforestation following the peace agreement".

In [Protected Areas](#),

"the governance vacuum left after FARC's official withdrawal from strongholds (Picachos-Tinigua-Macarena) has been filled by dissidents and non-state actors who have intensified disturbance. In Putumayo and deeper into the Amazon watershed... non-state actors moved into areas that were previously off-limits

by FARC mandate and cleared forests to start farms (e.g. cattle ranching) and speculatively acquire land.”

According to the [report](#) “Peace and Environmental Protection in Colombia”,

“there is a risk that the end of the armed conflict, though crucial for Colombia’s future, will trigger further plundering of natural resources. The withdrawal of the FARC’s armed authority suggests that...the constraint that kept many areas inaccessible will be lifted, opening the way for new populations to settle[in]former conflict zones and for infrastructure and legal industries such as agriculture, cattle ranching, mining, and oil exploration to expand into environmentally sensitive areas. These changes could lead to increased deforestation and water shortages”.

The environmental havoc brought about by FARC’s demobilization is one of the primary contributory causes behind the current large-scale social upheaval. As counter-hegemonic forces have withdrawn from resource-rich regions, the dominance of extractive capital has increased. In Colombia, [extractive capital](#) has a significant economic penetration and “between 2010 and 2014, foreign direct investment in mining amounted to about US\$7 billion (52 percent of total foreign investment) annually, up from 6 percent between 1995 and 1999”. The extractive economic program of Colombian neoliberalization had [included](#) the “liquidation of the state mining company, Minercol (along with the national mining union), and the sale of the state coal corporation, Carbocol, to a foreign consortium composed of Exxon Mobil, Anglo American, BHP Billiton, and Glencore International”.

Colombia, therefore, was being imperialistically peripheralized by multinational companies and was becoming a victim of the “paradox of plenty”. Meanwhile, FARC, with its Marxist ideological leanings, was presenting a subjectively enriched opposition against the unhampered rampage unleashed by marauding multinationals. Through a discourse of resource nationalism, FARC was able to highlight the revolutionary potentialities of the country’s resources which [comprise](#) of emeralds, silver, platinum, copper, nickel, natural gas and coal.

Simon Trinidad, a FARC commander and spokesman for the organization, [said](#) that USA targets FARC “Because the FARC is the only political organization that is in opposition to the Colombian oligarchy that keeps Colombians in poverty, misery and a state of underdevelopment. [The FARC] will make better use of the natural resources and provide jobs, health care, education and housing so 40 million Colombians can live well. Who are those that are opposed to these social, economic and political changes? They are the people who monopolize the riches and resources in Colombia. A small group that monopolizes the banks, industries, mines, agriculture and international commerce, including some foreign companies, especially North Americans.” Here, we come to know how FARC’s revolutionary ideology acted as a bulwark against the homogenous hegemony of pure imperialism and culturally fissured the concealed rapaciousness of capitalism.

With FARC left drastically debilitated, extractive capital is re-initiating a predacious program of mining and the rise in mining output confirms this fact. In 2016, Colombia’s [coal production](#) “surpassed 90m tonnes per annum (tpa) of coal production for the first time in its history, representing a 6.1% increase on 2015.” Guillermo Fonseca, the CEO of the Cerrejón coal mine in northern Colombia, [said](#) that “The new government [of Ivan Duque Marquez] has brought a breath of fresh air,”. According to Fonseca, Duque’s administration

is “showing important support for the private sector, hoping to strengthen it to reactivate the economy and the country. Now there are topics that we can raise that before were unmentionable because there was no political space in which to do so.” Fonseca implicitly referred to the fact that in the post-peace period, coal mining has got legal leeway and political freedom to freely trample on the rights of Colombian to self-manage their own resources.

Similarly, gold mining also witnessed resurgence with production [reaching](#) “1.99m oz in 2016, a 4.4% increase on 2015 and the second-highest level in history, beaten only by the 2.13m oz recorded in 2012”. Emeralds too saw an [increase](#) in production with the total mining output being “2.39m carats in 2016, a 10% increase over the previous year”. Colombians have begun protesting against this re-intensification of an unsustainable mining sector in the post-peace period and have espoused a radical resource nationalism to fight against the ideologically inert uniformity of imperialism.

As Colombia gets gripped by the ramifications of a violent peace process, it is becoming conspicuously clear that the 2016 imposition of peace was a geo-political strategy to outmanoeuvre progressive forces. Earlier, [FARC](#) “demonstrated not only that class-conscious support for revolution can be created in populations subjected to the utmost brutality by the forces of U.S. imperialism and the murderous Colombian oligarchy, but also that through solidarity and emancipatory fortitude successful armed revolutionary guerrilla warfare remains a viable option in contemporary geopolitics.” Now, the revolutionary organization is being steadily subverted as [paramilitaries](#) carry out state-supported violence and ex-FARC guerrillas get throttled due to the benumbing brutality of a bloody peace.

At the same time, the prospects of an organized class struggle are increasing. Reinforced extractivism, an agro-export crop production model combined with a rentier agrarian economy and cuts in corporate tax rates are converging to generate cross-country solidarity. According to a [report](#) produced by the Colombian Forjando Futuros foundation, 333 companies and 150 individuals are implicated in forcibly and violently evicting people from their rural lands. The Afro-descendent communities living in Alto Cauca have been facing a similar situation with dispossession [resulting](#) “from the norms that aim to enhance foreign corporate capital and large-scale mining projects. Accumulation by dispossession, in the case described here, has not only been shown to be coercive, but also legalised through a sophisticated structure of norms that has restricted the communities’ autonomy to decide over their resources and territory.”

As mining [expands](#), more dispossession is likely because “mining companies not only benefit from coercive land acquisition, they often require it.” All this will be [accompanied](#) with violence because “mining and oil companies are unable to rely on voluntary transactions to obtain the land necessary for their investments. The extractive development model requires dispossession and displacement. And the Colombian State has satisfied mining and oil investors’ requirements by giving priority to these sectors - allegedly, in the name of ‘public utility and social interest.” Due to this violent process of dispossession, a hunger pandemic would be unleashed as land for food crops gets progressively diminished and land for mining enlarges (currently, more than half of Colombia’s land comes is [covered](#) by hydrocarbons interests with 2.3 million hectares lying within production contracts, 25 million hectares under exploration and 47 million hectares available for future bids).

The hunger pandemic engendered by mining would get exacerbated by the [export-oriented rentier agrarian economy](#) of Colombia which leaves little space for crop production for

domestic consumption. Rural unrest and the re-surfacing of the agrarian question are coinciding with protests against [police brutality](#) and the 2019 [tax reform](#) package. The changes done by the reform package [include](#) “the progressive reduction of corporate income tax from 33% in 2019 to 30% in 2022, along with the repeal of a 4% surcharge on corporate earnings. It also provided for the repeal of the presumptive income tax, an alternative tax based on a percentage of net equity from 2018, which will fall from a rate of 3.5% in 2019 to zero by 2021.” Anger caused due to the corporatist tax reform has been supplemented by outrage against the brutal death of Javier Ordóñez, a 46-year old aeronautical engineer, lawyer, and father of two, who was pinned to ground by two police officers in Bogota and repeatedly tased with a stun gun as he [begged](#) “Please, no more, I can’t breathe”. Through the inter-mixing of rural unrest and urban protests, a critically charged class struggle is being started by the oppressed masses of Colombia.

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