



**REPORTAGE**  
Words and photographs Julia Horton

## Counting the human cost of Colombia's cocaine wars

Servio Cordoba lost half a leg to a landmine laid by guerrillas desperate to protect their precious coca crops. Until he can walk again he can't work. But a Scottish aid agency is determined to help ...

## REPORTAGE

**A**s Servio Cordoba moves slowly on crutches across the veranda, his left foot and lower leg are painfully obvious by their absence below the hem of his three-quarter-length trousers. A white patch hides his now sightless left eye. Sitting down awkwardly on a bench outside his family home, he rests his ruined limb on a red plastic chair. Without a word, his teenage son darts across with a folded towel which he places gently underneath his father's damaged leg to make him more comfortable. It is a simple gesture in stark contrast to the complex reality of their lives here in Colombia.

For five decades now, the land where poor farming families like the Cordobas live and work has been the battlefield of the world's longest and deadliest ongoing conflict. At least 40,000 people are estimated to have died in the fighting and related political violence since 1986 alone.

The terror began in the mid 1960s with the formation of the leftist guerrilla groups Farc (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and ELN (National Liberation Army). Government troops and right-wing paramilitary groups, enlisted by wealthy families to protect their property, fought back. Now the civil war effectively imprisons thousands of the nation's poorest people in their homes since the illegal cocaine trade turned the conflict into a lucrative drugs war, and landmines became the insurgents' weapon of choice to protect illicit coca plantations.

Paramilitaries and guerrillas alike fund their struggle through the money which Colombia generates as the world's largest producer of cocaine – in 2007 more than 400,000 acres of the country were dedicated to growing coca, the base material for the narcotic. It has been estimated that Farc alone takes in \$500m-\$600m each year from the illegal drug trade.

Meanwhile the United States – a key market for cocaine – gives the Colombian government billions of dollars (£3.8bn between 2000-2009) to disrupt the drugs trade.

But critics say recent aggressive military campaigns, continued by the current administration led by new president Juan Manuel Santos of the Social Party of National Unity, do little to reduce the drugs trade but much to increase civilian casualties as rebels retaliate with more landmines.

Communities that refuse to give their land up to guerrillas for coca cultivation face



intimidation campaigns which drive families from their homes, and an estimated three million people have been displaced since the conflict began. Those who remain face being massacred by both paramilitaries and guerrillas who want to drive communities off their farms to create more coca plantations, adding to the grim toll who have been killed or injured in what the United Nations has branded one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

The paths, roads and mountains which local people like Servio Cordoba must navigate to go about their daily business are literally a minefield, unmarked and constantly shifting beneath their feet as war rages on around them. Locals have come to expect the rebels to abide by what amounts to a gentlemen's agreement under which landmines are taken up during the day and relaid at night, allowing people to go about their daily business without risk.

**Trusting the entente one day in June last year** cost Cordoba, 36, his left leg and eye. "It was a Saturday," he recalls. "I went out to work at 8.30am, walking along a well-used road with some friends. From 6pm to 8am it is mined and from 8am to 6pm they [the rebels] move them, so at 8.30am you generally trust that it is OK. But I stepped forward and suddenly I saw my leg without my foot.

"We looked behind us and realised we had already passed three other mines without seeing or activating them."

Miles from anywhere, the farmer endured excruciating pain as his friends carried him on a makeshift stretcher of bamboo to seek help. Six hours later they found a military medic who gave Cordoba an intravenous drip. An ambulance took him to hospital in the town of Samaniego, near where he and his family live in the southern Colombian province of Narino. Then he was transferred to the main hospital in the provincial capital, Pasto. By then, more than 12 hours after the blast, he had lost copious amounts of blood and was on the brink of death.

The amputation operation was complicated by a severe infection that kept him in hospital for six weeks and caused him to lose vision in his left eye.

In the months since, Cordoba has been making costly trips north to the Colombian capital, Bogota, for assessments for the prosthetics he needs. He thinks he qualifies for official funding for a false leg under a government fund for war victims, but he already knows eligibility does not mean he will receive



**The southern Colombian town of Samaniego, above, is ravaged by conflict between the military and guerrillas. Opposite page: Maria Zuniga, pictured with grandson Diego, struggles to feed her family since her husband Adolfo trod on a rebel-laid landmine. The government has yet to pay the Zunigas any compensation**

anything. His claim has so far gone unanswered. Cordoba is not alone – it takes at least a year for compensation to come through.

Nearly one in three landmine survivors is forced to take the authorities to court to get the money that is rightfully theirs, but many others do not even apply because they don't know they are entitled to compensation or are scared to apply or don't understand the forms.

Meanwhile families scrape by thanks to charities, friends and relatives. As Cordoba's ordeal highlights, health services are woefully inadequate.

Since last April, however, a newly upgraded rehabilitation centre at Narino University Hospital in Pasto has been providing much better care for landmine survivors. The centre is purpose-built for people with disabilities,

**'We looked behind and realised we had passed three other mines without seeing them'**

with modern equipment including a hydrotherapy pool. It is part of a wider modernisation programme – a remarkable achievement when many other cash-strapped public hospitals in Colombia are closing because the government is not quick to honour funding commitments.

The centre has expensive private medical suites, the income from which helped pay for the £700,000 rehabilitation centre. Scotland-based aid agency, Mercy Corps, donated an extra £121,500 for additional specialist equipment. "Without access to specialist health and rehabilitation services, landmine survivors risk infection, major health issues and death," says Mervyn Lee, executive director of Mercy Corps' European headquarters in Edinburgh. "Many are unable to make a living and face extreme poverty. Our local teams work across the country to help thousands of survivors, giving them access to emergency healthcare and rehabilitation services."

Cordoba welcomes the facilities but they also remind him of what is so severely lacking in his town. "It is traumatising coming back here to nothing after all the support there [in Pasto]," he says.

Determined to be positive, however, he hopes to find labouring work when he can walk again, to support his wife and teenage son and daughter. He also counts himself lucky that they still have their home.

Many others are not so fortunate. Rebels reportedly demand as much as \$1000 from civilian landmine survivors to pay for "wasting" a weapon designed to kill or maim a soldier. The fine is out of all proportion to the cost of manufacturing a landmine as a "deterrent" to discourage locals from taking risks. Unable to afford the charge, countless victims abandon their homes and land, fearing further violence.

For Maria Zuniga's family and around 30 others that desperate journey brought them to a desolate encampment which they built themselves using mud, wood and anything else they could find.

Clinging precariously to a hillside just ►



Left: dozens of families like the Zunigas live on the outskirts of Samaniego in ramshackle huts, having been forced off their land by guerrillas. Critics say military campaigns under previous presidents and the newly elected Juan Manuel Santos, below, only add to the number of civilians hurt or killed by the rebels' landmines



► outside Samaniego, it is a far cry from the safe haven they dream about. On the other side of town one of the many mountains where landmines are routinely laid looms ominously.

Cradled in her arms, Zuniga's grandson, Diego, two, is too young to understand why his grandfather cannot walk or hear properly any more. Or why his family is slowly starving in this dusty camp, crammed four to a bed in a bare shack which floods whenever it rains.

It was six hours from here where Zuniga, 42, nearly lost her husband, Adolfo, after he trod on a landmine on their farm. "It was about 8am and he was outside working as usual when I heard a sound and went out to see what it was," she says. "I found him about 10 minutes from the house, covered in blood, mud, burns and thorns from a nearby bush. Blood was pouring from his leg so I tied it as best as I could and ran for help."

Frantic with fear, she found someone to drive her husband to hospital in Samaniego, where he was taken by ambulance to the Pasto hospital, a two-hour journey on rough mountain roads. "He was so bad I thought he was going to die," says Zuniga.

Despite suffering three fractures to his leg, a severe bone infection and third-degree burns, Adolfo survived and did not need an amputation. But two and a half years on he is

still unable to walk properly, has lost his land, is deaf in one ear and is plagued by post-traumatic stress disorder.

Today he is working on a farm three hours away where he labours occasionally but his wages are so meagre that he and his wife cannot afford to feed their family. "Today is market day but I have no money to buy anything for us to eat," says Zuniga. "There are days when there is no food to cook. Our children have malnutrition. It is very difficult. It is horrible."

Like Cordoba, Zuniga and her family have yet to receive compensation from the Colombian government. Unsurprisingly she feels abandoned by the authorities.

**G**abriela Portillo, who co-ordinates Mercy Corps' work in Narino and is a member of partner organisation, the Colombian Campaign Against Landmines, agrees much more could be done. "Many landmine survivors don't know what their rights are and after leaving their homes they tend to keep moving, which makes them harder to trace," she says. "The government is not looking for them because they want to show there is a reduction in the numbers of victims displaced by the conflict."

The Colombian government has at least

**'I found him covered in blood, mud, burns and thorns from a nearby bush'**

signed up to the international landmine ban treaty, and some progress has been made, but in the 10 years since the treaty came into force Colombia has suffered the world's highest number of deaths and injuries caused by landmines almost every year. New figures show that in 2008 Afghanistan reported the most landmine casualties, with 992 people wounded or killed. Colombia was close behind, however, taking second place with 777 deaths or injuries.

The latest international conference assessing the treaty's impact – held in Colombia last November – also highlighted poor progress on helping victims. Meanwhile the conflict and corruption across Colombia continue. A month ago a police station in Samaniego was bombed. Rebels were blamed, but there is widespread suspicion that the army also plants bombs to look as though they were left by guerrillas in order to justify the presence of soldiers. As if the people who live here need any further reminder, someone has scrawled the following message on the wall of a house on the outskirts of the town: "ELN presente." The ELN is here. ■

For more information about the work of Mercy Corps in Colombia, including how to make a donation, visit [www.mercycorps.org.uk](http://www.mercycorps.org.uk).

## THE BLOODY COST OF SCOTLAND'S COCAINE USE

**T**wenty years ago a gramme of cocaine cost an average of £87 in Scotland. Now it costs less than half that – about £40.

The counterpoint to falling prices is spiralling popularity of the class A drug. The United Nations' World Drug Report last month found that 3.7% of the Scottish population had used cocaine, one of the highest rates in the world.

The last Drug-Related Deaths In Scotland

report recorded the greatest ever number of fatalities, 574 in 2008, up from 455 in 2007.

Most involved heroin and/or morphine but fatalities involving cocaine rose from 47 to 79.

The increase could be explained by changing data collection methods, but more reliable statistics also show "marked increases" in cocaine- and heroin-related deaths between 1996 and 2007.

With health risk messages having little

impact, Scotland recently joined the Colombian government's Shared Responsibility campaign, urging people to quit because of the harm they are contributing to overseas.

The moral message is that getting high on cocaine fuels violence against poor Colombian families by rebel groups who use guns and landmines to secure and protect illegal coca plantations.

New think tank Transform Drug Policy Foundation Scotland believes legalisation and regulation of illicit drugs is the best way to minimise harm.

Joint founder, Jolene Crawford, says: "Only this way will we begin to reduce both the catastrophic violence around drug production faced by poor farmers in Colombia and the deaths and crime associated with drug use in Scottish communities."