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The Colombian Conflict: Uribe's First 17 Months[1]

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Abstract

Analysis of our new, 16-year dataset on the Colombian civil war finds under Uribe: guerrilla and paramilitary attacks dropping sharply to long-run averages since 1988, lower for April-December, 2003; government-guerrilla clashes at all-time highs, exceeding guerrilla attacks; civilian killings dropping sharply and continuously to all-time lows, mainly from decreased paramilitary attacks; combatant killings rising sharply to all-time highs; guerrilla tactics shifting toward indiscriminate attacking, forcing civilian injuries to long-run highs; government-to-guerrilla casualty ratios in clashes falling; government-paramilitary clashes increasing but still uncommon; paramilitary performance in clashes poor and worsening; guerrilla-paramilitary clashes dropping sharply; the ELN seriously weakened, mounting few attacks.

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[1] We base our analysis on a database which we built with the significant contribution of Juan Fernando Vargas. Andrés Dávila, Malcolm Deas, Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, Madelyn Hicks, Anne Sophie Linder, Michael Mandler, Eduardo Posada Carbó, Enrique López Enciso and Juan Fernando Vargas have all provided us with very thoughtful comments on a preliminary draft of the paper. We also benefited from seminar participants at CEDE-Universidad de los Andes, Fedesarrollo, IEPRI-Universidad Nacional de Colombia and DNP-National Planning Department of Colombia. Restrepo acknowledges financial support from Banco de la República. We thank the RSF fund of Royal Holloway and Central Research Fund of the University of London for funding this project. Responsibility for any errors remains our own.

1. Introduction

Colombia is important, both for its 44 million people and for the wider world. Apart from the large human and economic toll the conflict imposes on Colombia, the country's illegal armed groups, left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and narcotraffickers are at the heart of the world cocaine trade. They have spawned a huge displaced person population, are a source of instability for the Andean region and have developed sophisticated arms trafficking networks.[2] Colombia received nearly $2.5 billion in US aid from 2000 through 2003, and the US commitment is expected to hold above $700 million annually over the next two years (Center for International Policy, 2004). Most of this aid has been aimed at combating the narcotics business but the US has been moving tentatively toward more direct counterinsurgency support. It is, therefore, vital to the US to understand what kind of a partner it has in the Colombian government and society. Domestically, there is great interest in assessing the security policy implemented by the present Colombian Government, as it constitutes the largest military offensive ever against the guerrillas waging war against the Colombian state.[3] From a purely academic point of view, it is interesting to study the responses of the armed groups in the country to this dramatic policy change.

Álvaro Uribe assumed the presidency of Colombia on August 7, 2002, riding a wave of general dissatisfaction with the country's increasingly violent conflict. The urban population was experiencing an unusually high level of personal insecurity and,

[2] Marcela (2003) and Cragin and Hoffman (2003) make persuasive cases for the importance of Colombia to the outside world. Nevertheless, we do not single out Colombia as the primary regional problem in the Andes as Council on Foreign Relations (2004) appears to do. If fact, one could argue that Colombia is currently causing less negative spillover for the region than most, and possibly all, of its neighbours.

[3] There is controversy regarding classification of the Colombian conflict and whether it is indeed a civil war. Posada (2001) is an interesting treatment of this question. We, however, follow conventional political science methodology and use civil war terminology since the conflict's killing rates and other characteristics fit those used in that literature to define civil war.

after the failed peace process of the previous government, voters supported a hard-line stance against the illegal armed groups. Uribe forged a strong connection to voters with his tough approach, promising to take the fight to the enemy and produce results. Since election, Uribe's popularity has grown in Colombia where he enjoys a 79% approval rating, benefiting from a widespread perception that his government has made life safer and put the insurgent groups under fire (Invamer-Gallup, 2004).

Uribe's security approach is generally known as the *Democratic Security Policy*, an ambitious plan to gain control over lawless territories and provide security to all sectors of society based on an expanded military and police presence and the creation of networks of civilian support.[4] The core objective is to extend the rule of law to all parts of the country, even the most remote ones. Notably, the government views counterinsurgency as a task for the whole society, rather than a chore to be delegated to the military. Some specific policies, such as the rollback of conscription and the professionalization of the military, are extensions of previous reforms pursued over the last decade. But much is new. For example, the government has established National Police presence in all major townships, many of which lacked police for decades. The government expanded the number of rural police corps, created new battalions of peasant-soldiers who train and serve near their homes and built an extensive network of civilian informants.

The *Democratic Security Policy* is extremely popular with most of the Colombian population (Invamer-Gallup, 2004) and highly regarded in Colombian and American military circles (e.g., Marcella, 2003). Nevertheless, it has drawn some strong criticism. For example, ICG (2003) argues that Uribe's policy excessively

[4] The government's exposition of this policy in English is Presidency of the Republic and Ministry of Defence, 2003. Pizarro (2003a) is an independent and favourable evaluation and ICG (2003) is an unfavourable one. We are struck by the resemblance of Uribe's plan to recommendations made by military analysts (Nuñez, 2001, Spencer, 2001 and Marks, 2002), especially its emphasis on local and civilian participation.

emphasizes a military approach while neglecting poverty, inequality and human rights. Mass detentions of people suspected, based on local informants' statements, of supporting the guerrillas have created huge controversy and even a rebuke from the Procurator General (*El Tiempo*, 2004b). Some analysts have criticized the informant networks as generating spurious evidence against innocent people who then, after release, become potential targets of right-wing paramilitaries. Some also argue that the existence of locally based armed units exposes isolated communities to guerrilla retaliation. The Uribe government has faced particularly fierce censure from human rights organizations and has sometimes responded with angry rebuttals, including from Uribe himself.[5] We believe that this polemical environment has obscured some of the underlying facts about the conflict and we hope that our paper will contribute to more fruitful future discussions.

2. The Data Source

Our analysis is based on the dataset presented in Restrepo, Spagat and Vargas (2003). This is the first time-series dataset for the Colombian civil war that is detailed (close to 20,000 events), high-frequency and long. It allows analysis of the actions of all participants in the Colombian conflict over more than 16 years. Our database records a set of characteristics for each event: date; location (township and department); whether or not there was a clash; the groups involved; whether or not there was an attack; the type of attack; the group(s) responsible; killings; and injuries.[6] We have

[5] See, for example, Human Rights Watch (2004), United States Institute of Peace (2004), Amnesty International (2003) and WOLA (2003). From Colombia see Comisión Colombiana de Juristas (2003) and the introduction and chapter 11 of Colombian Platform for Human Rights, Democracy and Development (2003).

[6] In our terminology clashes require fighting between at least two groups while attacks are uncontested events.

now extended the database to include Uribe's first 17 months and are, therefore, in a unique position to assess the work of his government.

Restrepo, Spagat and Vargas (2003) describes in detail the construction of our dataset so we will only summarize its main characteristics briefly here. We build the database using events listed in the annexes to the periodicals *Justicia y Paz* and *Noche y Niebla* published quarterly by the Colombian NGO'S CINEP and the Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz (hereafter, CINEP). CINEP uses this information in its reports, focusing on the measurement of human rights violations, violations to international humanitarian law and political violence, connected or not with the conflict. We, on the other hand, are interested in civil war dynamics. Therefore, CINEP's database organization and statistical analysis are entirely inappropriate for our purposes. Fortunately, the raw information they provide is so extensive that we can distil from it just its war-relevant components. Working from the detailed list of events published in the annexes to the reports, we identify and code events following our own criteria designed to include all conflict events and only those events.

In the original dataset and in our quarterly updates we follow a stringent quality control regime in cleaning the data that proceeds in four stages, covering both event inclusion and the coding of events. First, we randomly sample a large number of events and check against the CINEP source that they are properly included and coded. Second, we randomly sample events, look up these events in press archives and again verify our inclusion and coding. This is a test both of the transfer of information from the CINEP source to our database and of the quality of the CINEP raw information itself, which turns out to be high. Third, we find all the major events in the dataset and carefully investigate each one in the press record. Finally, we

compare lists of significant events from other sources with our data, such as Human Rights Watch and Colombian government reports, occasionally adding events after thoroughly investigating them ourselves.

We wish to stress three points about our data. First, the dataset is independent of government figures, since the primary source is CINEP periodicals. Some people accuse CINEP, and other NGO's that use their figures, of left-wing bias. In particular, some accuse these groups of discounting the violations of guerrilla groups and of overstating the violations of government forces.[7] In fact, we agree that many CINEP publications seem to interpret the Colombian government in a distrustful, suspicious manner. Nevertheless, our team has spent many months pouring over CINEP's raw data and performing extensive quality checks, and we are convinced of the integrity of the raw database. Moreover, since our numbers turn out to be rather favourable to the Uribe administration, any readers sceptical of our quality assurances should still remain confidant in our main findings.

Second, our data go all the way back to 1988 so we are able to offer a long perspective on the conflict. This feature is important because several changes over the past year are dramatic when compared to the previous few years, but really just represent returns to long-run averages. A short-term view of the conflict, concentrating on annual rates of change of some criminality and armed-forces-operations variables, has pervaded press reports, government evaluations, editorial comments and the work of analysts in Colombia. This practice is understandable in the absence of a long-term series, but it gives an incomplete view of the conflict and its evolution that we hope to remedy with our work.

[7] See, for example, O'Grady (2004) which is based on a report from the US Embassy in Colombia. They argue that CINEP and other human rights NGO's overstate the true level of human rights violations and bias their figures against the government and in favour of the guerrillas, for example, by counting a single event as violating human rights multiple times and by following the legal convention of defining human rights in such a way that they can only be breached by a government authority.

Third, the data focus on the conflict narrowly defined and cannot give a full picture of Colombia and the conflict. In this paper we restrict ourselves almost exclusively to analysing our data since this is what we are uniquely positioned to do. We do not, however, wish to imply that the issues we address are the only important ones. For example, we do not assess overall changes in human rights or political liberties as a result of Uribe's policies. On the other hand, since our data focus on issues of life and death and the struggle for power we do think we are addressing some of the most important issues facing Colombia today.

Fourth, we analyze only national trends. Colombia has a complex and varied topography, including extensive mountains and jungles, so conflict conditions do vary considerably by location. Our findings are very strong, so the national trends we identify should generally reflect those of most regions. Nevertheless, some regions might not conform well to our description of events.

3. Background

We now provide a succinct background on the conflict, including all the main actors in the dataset.[8] Apart from the *La Violencia* period (1946-66) in which the country was split along the lines of the Liberal and Conservative parties, fighting has been mostly between several guerrilla groups and government forces with the more recent participation of paramilitary forces also fighting against the guerrillas. The origin of the guerrilla groups can be traced back to leftist peasant self-defence organizations aligned with the Liberal party, even before *La Violencia*. There are two significant guerrilla groups currently active in Colombia. The Armed Revolutionary Forces of

[8] Rabasa and Chalk (2001) and Safford and Palacios (2002, ch. 14) give recent overviews of the conflict, including discussions of the origins and conduct of the main parties in our dataset.

Colombia (FARC, in its Spanish acronym) was founded in 1964 after the government ordered an attack on one of the partisan self-defence agrarian movements that had originated in *La Violencia*. Today the FARC is estimated to have between 16,000 and 20,000 combatants, making it the largest guerrilla group in the world. The second largest guerrilla group in Colombia is the National Liberation Army (ELN), which was founded in 1965 with support from the Cuban government. The ELN faced a profound crisis during the eighties but was reborn, thanks mainly to extortion of multinational companies trading in natural resources. The ELN is thought to have from 4,000 to 6,000 combatants. These guerrilla groups are largely rural and follow typical guerrilla tactics in a protracted conflict, attacking mainly fixed government positions and public infrastructure. On several occasions the FARC and ELN entered into peace talks with the government, most recently during a three and a half year period under the government of Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) leading to the demilitarization of a large zone in the south of the country known as the *Despeje.*

The paramilitary groups are for the most part gathered under the umbrella alliance United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (AUC), which was formally created in 1997, although paramilitary groups and self-defence organizations can be traced back to the late seventies (Pizarro, 2003b). In the late eighties and early nineties these groups acquired notoriety due to strong links with the narcotraffic cartels. 1994 marked a turning point for the paramilitaries because that was when records indicate that they first began localized operations against guerrilla groups. Within a few years the paramilitaries became a major factor in the conflict. In December, 2003 the AUC declared a unilateral truce and later started demobilization talks with the government.

Government forces include the military (army, navy, and air force), the National Police (in charge of internal security and normal policing duties) and other small security corps like the security service (DAS). The National Police are in charge of what is known in military and security terms as "paramilitary" operations in which forces, usually armed with automatic weapons, conduct long-term internal security operations, without large numbers of operatives and without the use of artillery. These actors must be distinguished from what we call "paramilitary" groups in our dataset as the latter neither belong to the institutional apparatus nor are under the command and control of the state.

Our dataset allows us to pick up the story in 1988. Although there is significant continuity of actors in the conflict going back to the 1950s, in terms of both intensity and qualitative characteristics the last 16 years can be considered a valid unit of analysis. Our dataset includes the hottest period of war while allowing a significant degree of historical perspective.

4. Summary Measures

We first explain a vital piece of our terminology: the difference between clashes and attacks. We define a clash as a direct encounter between two or more groups of armed individuals that results in armed combat. We define an attack as a violent event in which there is no mutual, armed combat between two groups. In other words, attacks are one-sided events such as massacres of civilians, antipersonnel mine detonations, terrorist incidents, acts of sabotage such as blowing up a bridge or an oil pipeline and aerial bombardments. Clashes are fights involving at least two groups.[9]

[9] For more details on our methodology and coding criteria see Restrepo, Spagat and Vargas (2003).

One striking feature of the data is that there are very large changes in the variables during the period just before and just after Uribe's inauguration, reflecting the influence of several factors. First, violence levels were very high at the beginning of 2002. A large increase in the number of guerrilla attacks beginning in December 2001 was followed by the collapse of the peace process at the end of February, immediately leading to a big military offensive by the government into the *Despeje* zone. Second, in 2002 the guerrillas interfered extensively in the parliamentary elections in March, the presidential elections in May and the presidential inauguration in August. Third, after inauguration the swift implementation of the *Democratic Security Policy* increased the morale of the troops and created a new, more offensive environment in the military. Finally, the paramilitary truce starting December, 2002 is reflected in the data.

Figure 1 gives the total number of casualties, i.e., killings and injuries, in the war. Following Restrepo, Spagat and Vargas (2003) we designate 1996 as the beginning of an "upsurge" period in the conflict. The line labelled "upsurge" in the figure ends when Uribe took office. We see a dramatic decline in killings under Uribe compared to the peak of early 2002. Table 1 shows monthly killings for time periods designated "Uribe", "late upsurge", "entire upsurge", "*Despeje*" and "previous to Uribe". Killing rates remain much higher than their long-run averages (i.e., previous to Uribe), somewhat lower than in the late upsurge period but above those for both the *Despeje* and the upsurge period as a whole. There is no contradiction between the strong decline in killings shown in figure 1 and the increase in killings in most of the comparisons from table 1, because the peak in early 2002, highlighted in the figure, was short-lived whereas the table averages over relatively long time periods. Figure 1

also shows wild fluctuation in the injury rate under Uribe. However, the average monthly injury rate is at a historic high under Uribe (table 1).

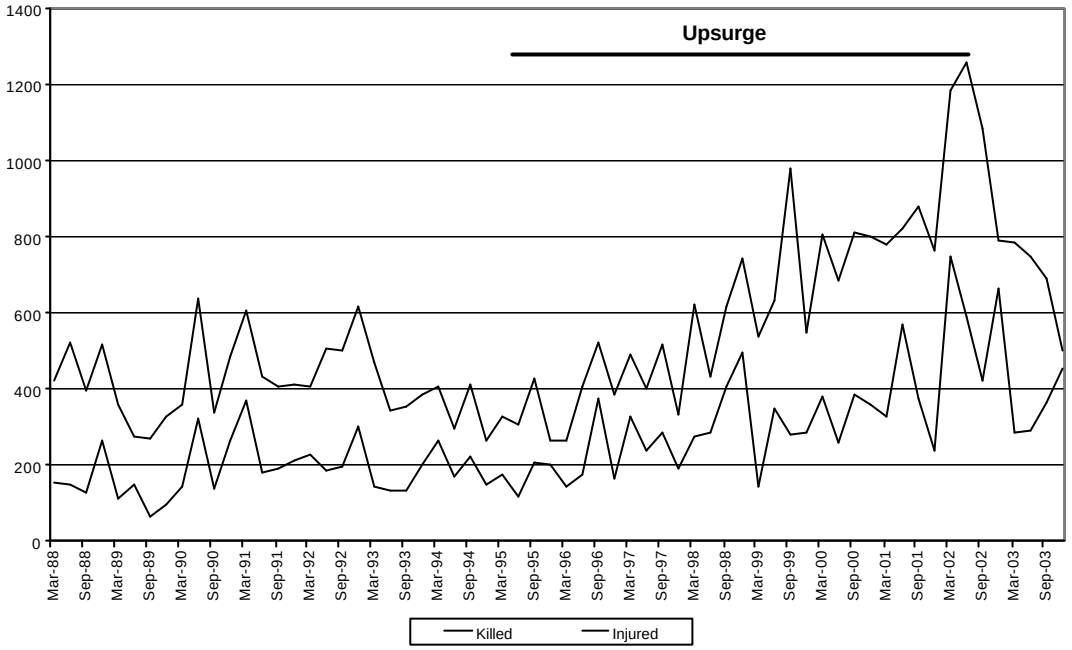

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Figure 1. Quarterly number of people killed and injured in conflict events

Table 1. Attacks and Casualties per Month by Period

	Periods				
	Uribe Government	Upsurge		"Despeje" period	Previous to Uribe
		Late	Entire		
	8/2002 – 12/2003	1/1999 – 7/2002	1/1996 – 7/2002	10/1998 - 2/2002	1/1988 – 7/2002
People Killed	259	269	219	255	175
People Injured	140	124	109	119	85
Guerrilla Attacks	54	76	65	71	53
Paramilitary Attacks	7	21	12	16	7

Guerrilla and paramilitary strategies both emphasize attacks while the government generally prefers clashes to attacks. Thus, the sharp drop in both guerrilla and paramilitary attacks under Uribe displayed in figure 2 is very good news. Government attacks have remained steady and at a low level.[10] Table 1 shows that

[10] Government attacks are mostly aerial bombardments and antinarcotics and antikidnapping operations that are usually unopposed.

under Uribe both guerrilla and paramilitary attacks have been much lower than in the late upsurge period and lower than the average for the whole upsurge period and for the *Despeje* period, when the government was negotiating with the guerrillas. Nevertheless, attacks remain around their long-run averages before Uribe. On the other hand, the strong downward trend of figure 2 clearly indicates that in the last three quarters of 2003 the attack rates for both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries fell well below long-run averages. This would be a breakthrough if it can be maintained.

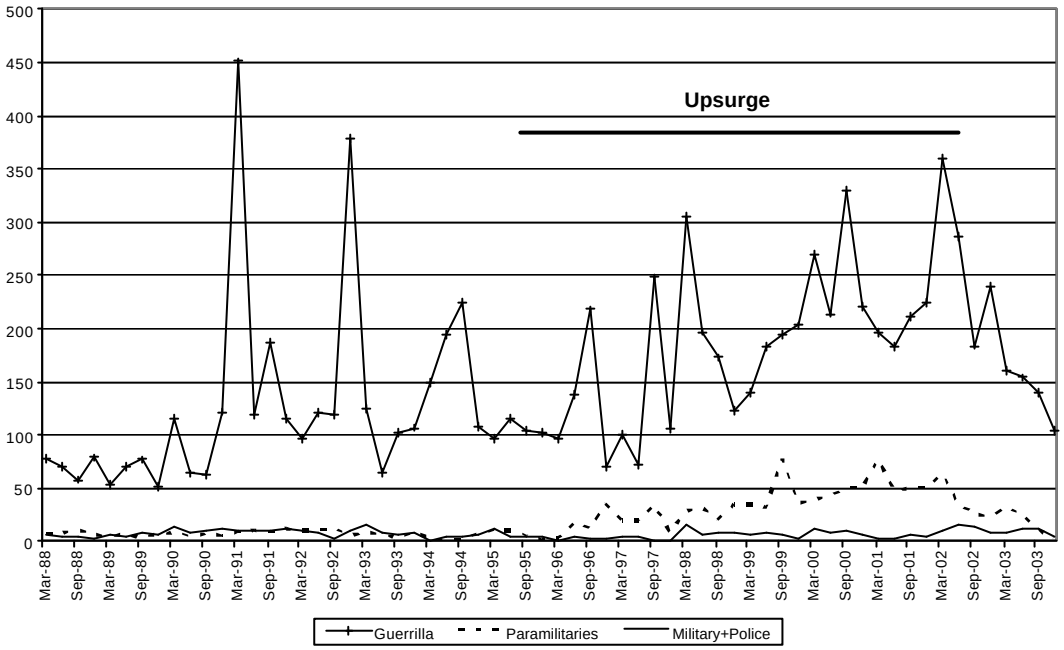

Figure 2. Quarterly number of attacks by group

Figure 3 shows the evolution over time of the number of clashes each of the three sides has participated in. Levels for the government and the guerrillas are holding near all-time highs while clashes involving paramilitaries have plummeted. Accordingly, the gap between government and guerrilla clashes has closed, as there must be at least two sides to any clash.

The combined effect of figures 2 and 3 could create a misperception that paramilitaries have been minor players in the conflict. However, we will show below

that a disproportionately large number of people have been killed in the relatively small number of conflict events in which the paramilitaries have participated. So the paramilitaries are important.

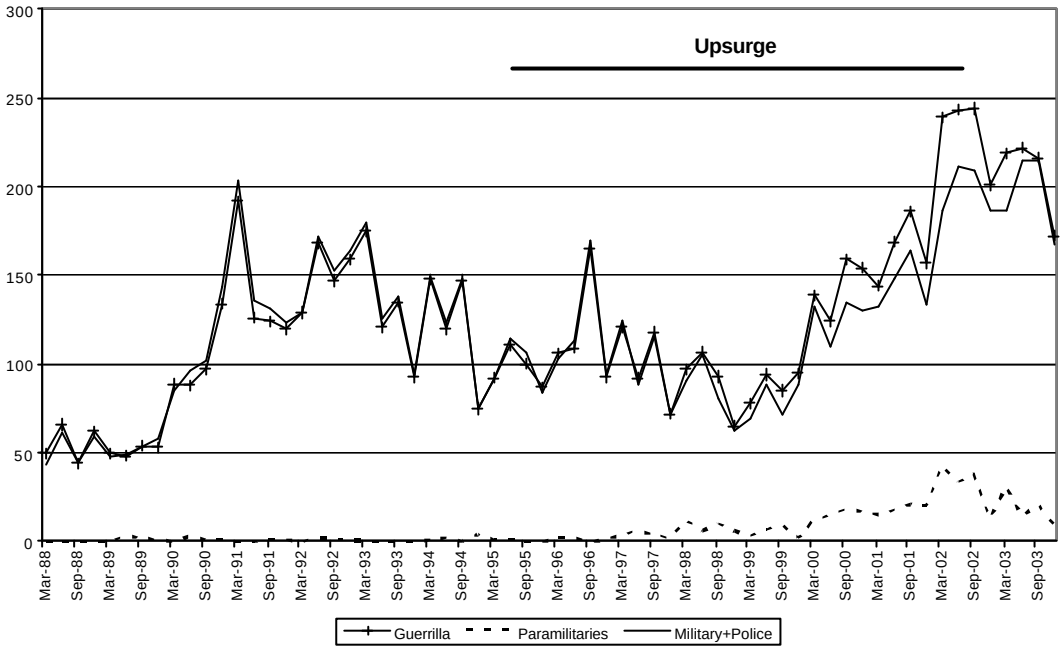

Figure 3. Quarterly number of clashes by group

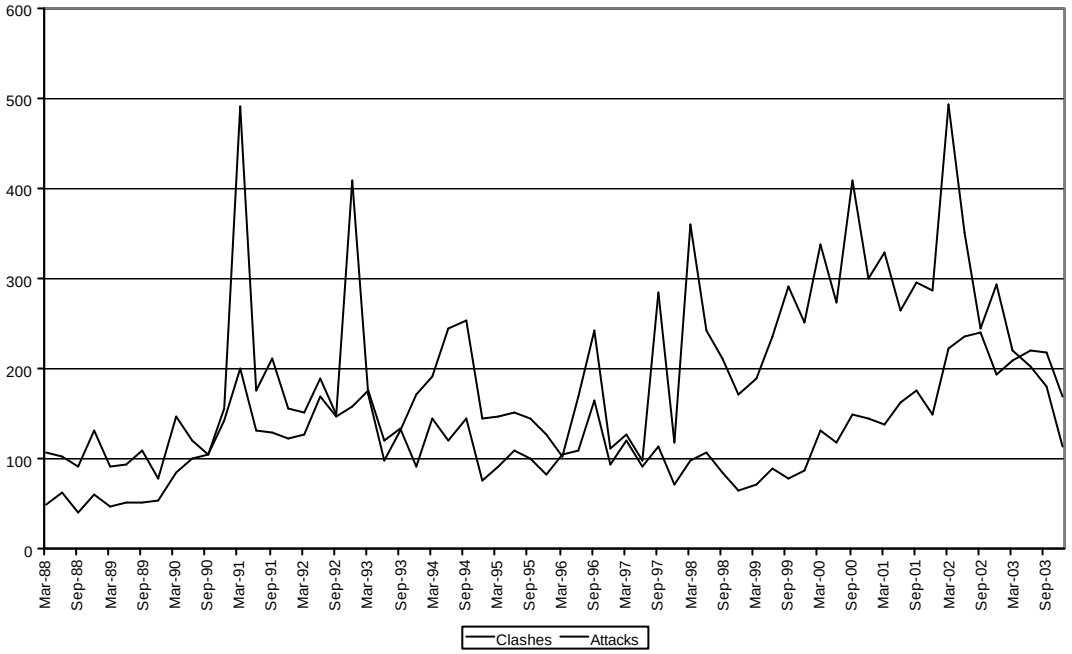

Figure 4. Quarterly number of clashes and attacks

Figure 4 shows that the Uribe government, building on an increase in clashes that began in 1999, has managed to push the number of clashes to slightly above the number of attacks for the first time since 1988. Table 2 assesses the impact of this change by listing the number of killings and injuries in both types of events for the time periods from table 1. Killings in attacks and the number of attacks mirror each other quite closely between the two tables. Injuries per attack, on the other hand, are at an all-time high under Uribe. In fact, as the attack rate has reverted to its long-run average the injury rate has risen to more than double its long-run average. This reflects a strong rise in indiscriminate guerrilla attacks including urban terrorism, the use of crude gas-canister mortars and antipersonnel landmines. In clashes, the monthly killing rate under Uribe is at an all-time high while the corresponding injury rate has dropped to about its long-run average.

Table 2. Monthly Casualty Rates for Attacks and Clashes for Various Time Periods

	Periods				
	Uribe Government	Upsurge		"Despeje" period	Previous to Uribe
		Late	Entire		
	8/2002 – 12/2003	1/1999 – 7/2002	1/1996 – 7/2002	10/1998 - 2/2002	1/1988 – 7/2002
Killings in attacks	80	127	103	131	82
Injuries in attacks	95	74	62	72	49
Killings in clashes	68	58	50	54	38
Injuries in clashes	15	23	23	23	16

Figure 5 depicts the main series only from 1996 onwards, thereby magnifying recent movements. The extent of the decline in killings from its peak, the most important intensity measure for the conflict, is readily apparent here. The figure also draws out the fact that the slow but continuous increase in clashes faltered slightly since Uribe's inauguration. This is due, as we shall see, to the government not fully compensating for the decrease in paramilitary-guerrilla clashes. The almost continuous fall in the attack rate since the peak in March 2002 is also clear.

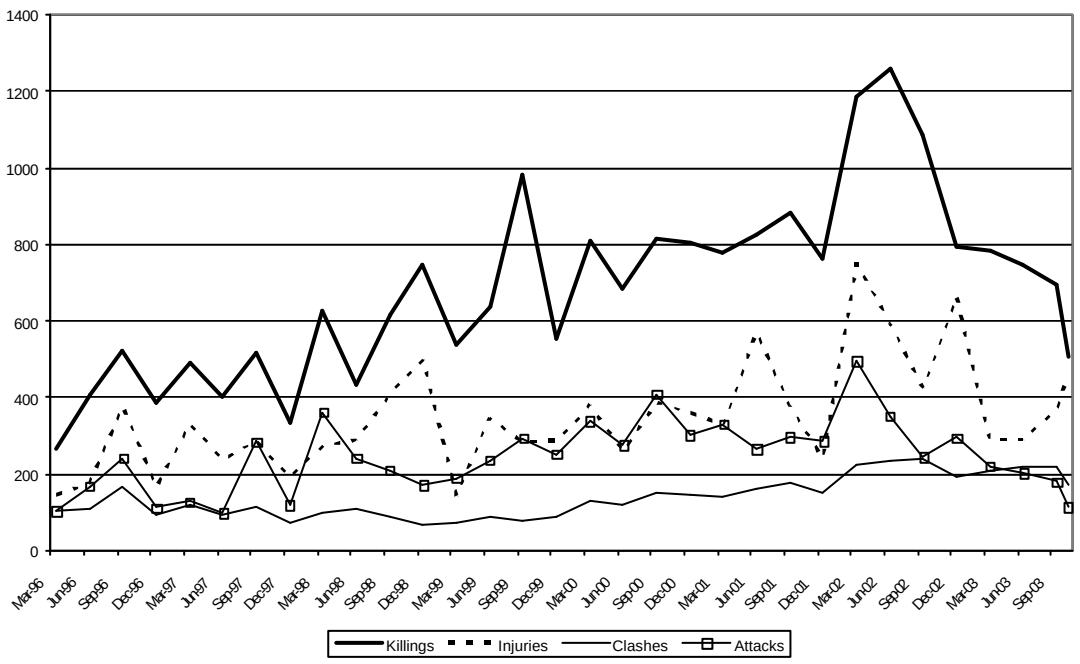

Figure 5. Quarterly conflict activity since 1996

5. Civilian Casualties

Figure 6 and Table 3 indicate that civilian killings have dropped sharply during Uribe's first months in office in comparison with all our categories, even to well below the long-run average before Uribe.[11] On the other hand, civilian injury rates are at all-time highs. This reflects the guerrillas' new practice of indiscriminately targeting civilians.

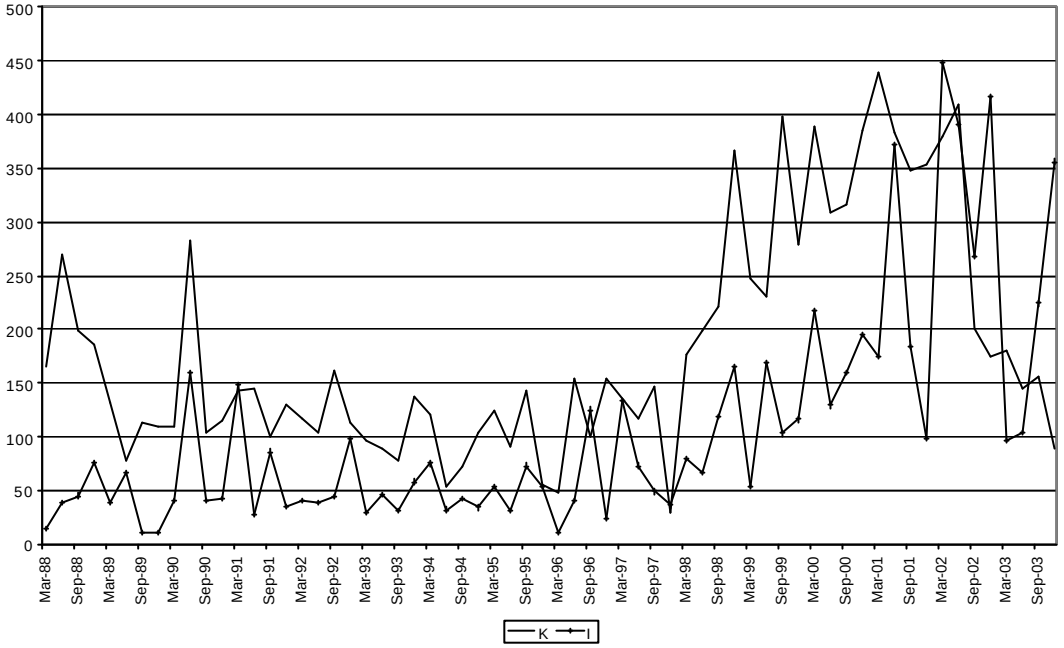

Figure 6. Quarterly number of civilians killed and injured in conflict events

Table 3. Monthly Casualty Rates for Various Time Periods

	Periods				
	Uribe Government	Upsurge		"Despeje" period	Previous to Uribe
		Late	Entire		
	8/2002 – 12/2003	1/1999 – 7/2002	1/1996 – 7/2002	10/1998 - 2/2002	1/1988 – 7/2002
Civilians Killed	52	114	85	114	62
Civilians Injured	82	63	46	57	31
Combatants Killed	207	155	134	141	113
Combatants Injured	58	61	63	62	54

[11] One of the main strengths of our data is that it includes casualties of the war without mixing in ordinary homicides. Nevertheless, we note that the full homicide rate in Colombia has decreased by about 20% under Uribe following a trend that began in 1997 and to which the cities of Medellín and Bogotá have contributed significantly. Therefore, the improvement in war-related civilian killing is matched by a general improvement in the homicide rate. There have also been big declines in other key indicators such as kidnappings and forced displacement, but we do not integrate these statistics into our discussion because we have no new information on these phenomena.

Table 3 immediately yields another interesting fact: under Uribe Colombia has become safer for civilians but not for combatants.[12] Combatant casualties are running much higher even than during the late upsurge period and far above long-run averages before Uribe. This is entirely consistent with table 2, as most combatant casualties occur during clashes. To summarize, the war is hot, but the pressure on civilians has been reduced. Of course, many civilians are still being killed and injured, so we now pursue this issue further.

Figure 7 shows civilian killings organized by group involved. This picture must be interpreted with care because many conflict events involve multiple participants and, therefore, apportioning blame is tricky, often requiring detailed information. For example, in a clash between guerrillas and paramilitaries in which civilians are killed some may have been killed by combatants on each side, the clash might have been initiated by guerrillas in retaliation for an earlier paramilitary attack and there may exist multiple credible but contradictory accounts of the event. Figure 7 avoids these complicated issues. The government curve simply records the number of civilians killed each quarter in events involving the government. Similarly the paramilitary and guerrilla curves represent civilians killed each quarter in events involving paramilitaries and guerrillas respectively. Thus, a civilian killed in a clash between guerrillas and government forces will appear in the curves for both the guerrillas and the government and the figure cannot be used to attribute definite blame to either side.

Figure 7 shows that civilian killings in recent years have occurred primarily in events involving the paramilitaries and secondarily in events with guerrilla participation. The government has always been rather disconnected from civilian

[12] The definition of combatant under international law is complicated but to a first approximation turns on proven membership in a conflict organisation or the wearing of an identifiable uniform or marking.

killing. It is, therefore, not surprising to learn that the drop in civilian killing under Uribe derives mainly from decreased paramilitary involvement and secondarily from less guerrilla involvement in civilian killing. Decreased paramilitary activity makes sense since the AUC has been officially on ceasefire since December 2003. Nevertheless, the paramilitaries remain active, having involvement in 24 civilian killings per month from the beginning of the ceasefire period until the end of 2003. In fact, during the ceasefire there have been 856 conflict-related killings in events involving the paramilitaries. Subtracting off the 477 of these that were paramilitary members, this averages out to 29 killings per month. These figures are not wildly inconsistent with the claim, widely circulated in February 2004, that the paramilitaries have killed 600 people since going on ceasefire.[13] Also interesting is the breakdown of monthly killings in paramilitary-involved conflict events during the ceasefire: 37 paramilitaries, 24 civilians and 5 non-paramilitary combatants, not a picture of success.

Despite the violations, paramilitary activity really has decreased continuously during the demobilization discussions. This is in striking contrast with FARC behaviour when it negotiated with the Pastrana government while its attack rates were rising toward all-time highs. Isacson (2003) considers the possibility that the FARC might have been split into some potential peacemakers and others trying to sabotage peace efforts. We find this implausible, given the broad increase in FARC attacks during the peace negotiations, suggesting high-level FARC approval for the general trend. Recent AUC behaviour strikes us as a much better fit for a theory of split

[13] See *El Tiempo* (2004a) and *El Colombiano* (2004). Without committing to a specific figure the United Nations also considers the paramilitaries to be in breach of the ceasefire: see Villelabeitia (2004). The government itself recently provided figures for paramilitary violations of the ceasefire and a summary of reports that it has received from third parties (High Commissioner for Peace, 2004).

leadership: a strong decrease in overall activity but with numerous violations. As the demobilisation talks have consolidated, the reduction in killings has deepened.

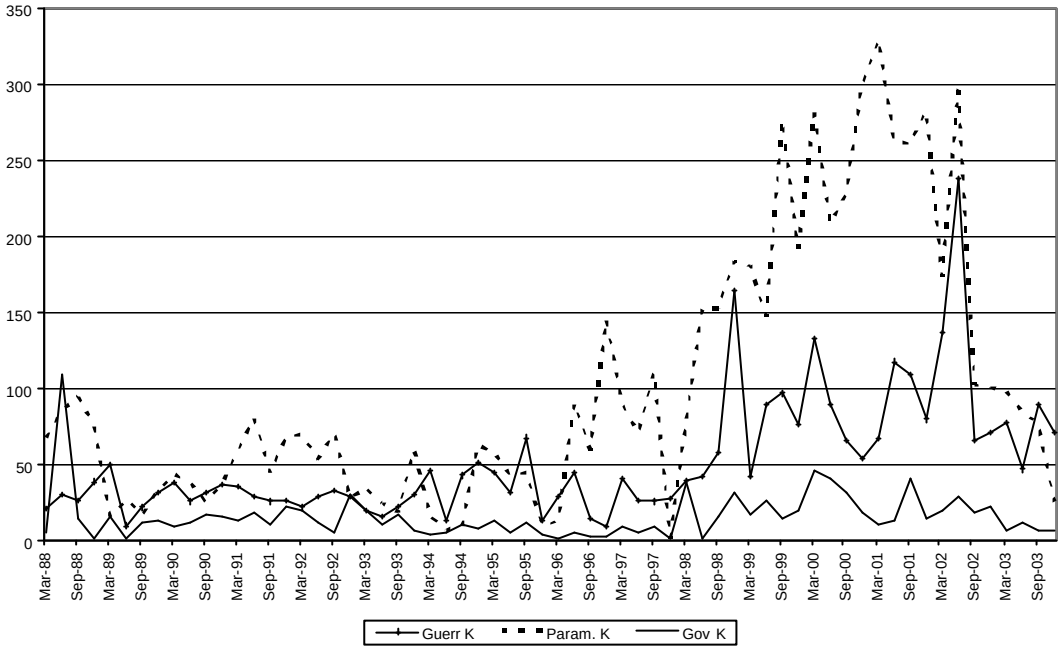

Figure 7. Quarterly number of civilians killed in conflict events by group involved

The paramilitaries injure relatively few people, a little-appreciated but vital fact about the Colombian conflict. Over the whole period of our dataset the three groups have established the following ratios of killed civilians to injured civilians in events in which they have participated: 1.0 for the guerrillas, 1.1 for the government and 10.2 for the paramilitaries! We take this as an indication that most civilian casualties perpetrated by the paramilitaries are intentional killings rather than "collateral damage" of operations aimed at other objectives. This observation points to another reason why injuries have not followed killings in a steep decline under Uribe; the sharp drop in paramilitary activity does not translate into a big decrease in civilian injuries because the paramilitaries never were the biggest factor in causing civilian injuries.

In figure 8 we pursue the question of blame for civilian killings by presenting civilian killings in attacks by group, thus restricting ourselves to events with only a single participating group. The idea is that clashes involve at least two groups and, hence, potential confusion over responsibility for casualties, but in attacks there is only one fighting group and responsibility is unambiguous.[14] Figure 8 is consistent with figure 7. Again, paramilitaries emerge as the biggest killers of civilians in recent years and the improvement in civilian safety derives mainly from the large and continuous decrease in paramilitary conflict activity. Note that guerrilla killings of civilians have not diminished at all in recent years.

Figure 9 gives injuries in attacks and differs significantly from figure 8. First, it shows the guerrillas as the main perpetrators rather than the paramilitaries. Second, while government-caused and paramilitary-caused injuries have decreased from low levels, guerrilla-caused injuries are running at extremely high levels.

The above discussion runs strongly counter to many reports of mushrooming human rights violations by the Uribe government (footnote 5). This is partly explained by our exclusive focus on killings and injuries during conflict activities while the human rights organizations consider a much wider range of rights during conflict and non-conflict related events. Vital for the thesis of an increase in violations is the classification of many mass detentions as human rights violations, a point that can be and has been argued, even by the Colombian Procurator General (*El Tiempo*, 2004b). But there are two further common practices of government critics that are difficult, in our view, to justify. First, they produce and stress a number for total human rights abuses that simply adds up different kinds of violations including killings and mass arrests on equal terms, distorting the overall assessment of

[14] Naturally, figure 7 omits many civilian killings so we have bought clear responsibility at the cost of comprehensiveness of coverage.

government actions and its effects on the population. There can be no single correct way of balancing one type of human rights violation against another but it is hard to defend simply adding up killings and detentions as if they are equally serious violations. Second, some NGOs (e.g., Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2003) also have been reporting huge increases in unverifiable indicators, such as the number of threats under Uribe, which could be true but must be treated with caution.

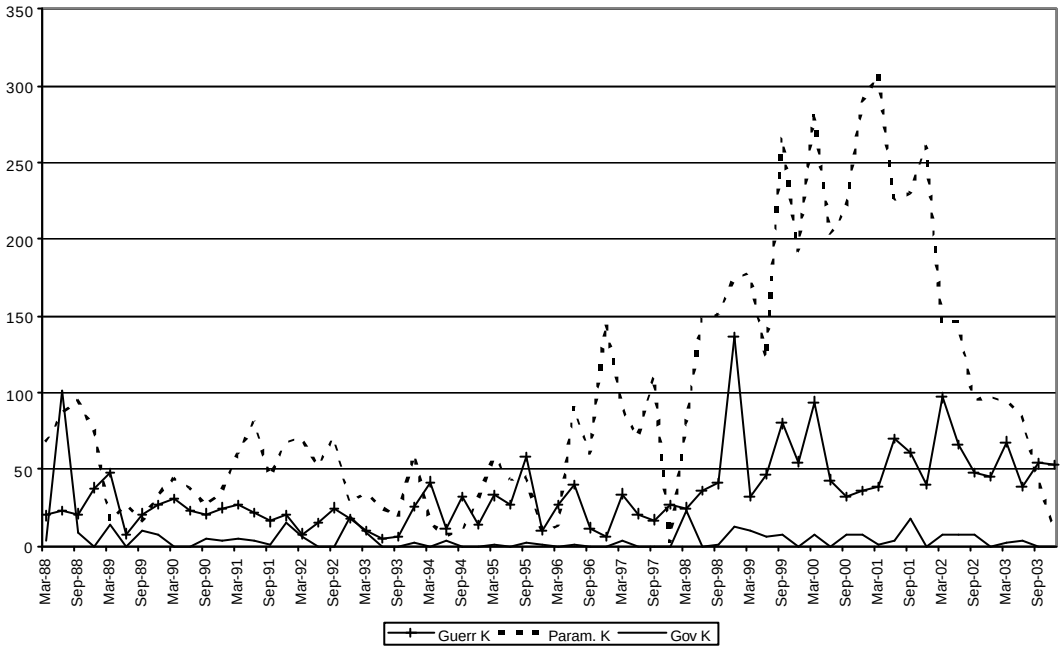

Figure 8. Quarterly number of civilians killed in attacks by group

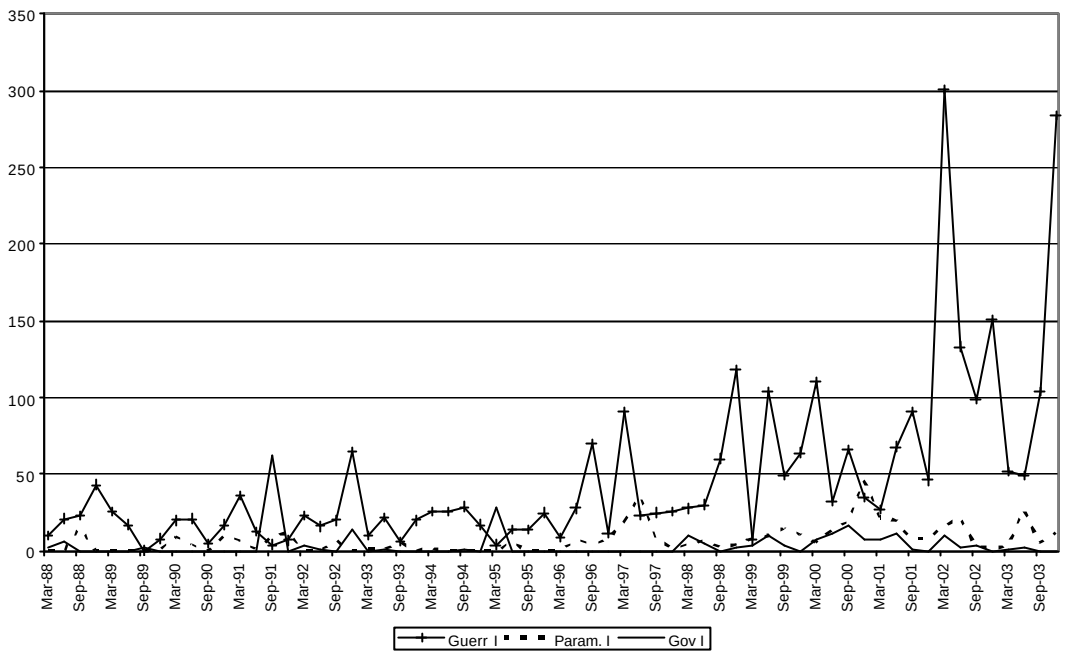

Figure 9. Quarterly number of civilians injured in attacks by group

6. Combatant Casualties

Figure 10 gives total casualties (killings plus injuries) in events in which the government has participated. It shows that, beginning several years before Uribe assumed office, government casualties began to decrease while guerrilla casualties rose to long-run highs.

On the other hand, aside from an anomalous event in the middle of 2002, the paramilitaries barely register as a government target until an increasing trend appears during the last three quarters of 2003. This is partly explained by the fact that the paramilitaries have often simply surrendered to the government when challenged rather than fight. Nevertheless, in terms of military strategy, the government clearly does not treat the paramilitaries symmetrically compared to the guerrillas. It is, of course, not surprising that the government has always directed vastly more resources at fighting the guerrillas than it has at combating paramilitarism. After all, the guerrillas are working to overthrow the State whereas the paramilitaries, however unwelcome they may be, share the State's goal of preventing this outcome. In fact,

Marks (2002) specifically recommends a counterinsurgency approach of first defeating the guerrillas before going after the paramilitaries. Nevertheless, given the paramilitaries record of killing civilians one could certainly argue that the government approach has been excessively lopsided. In this context, we are quite interested in the tentative trend for government forces to clash increasingly with paramilitary groups that are not respecting the declared AUC ceasefire.

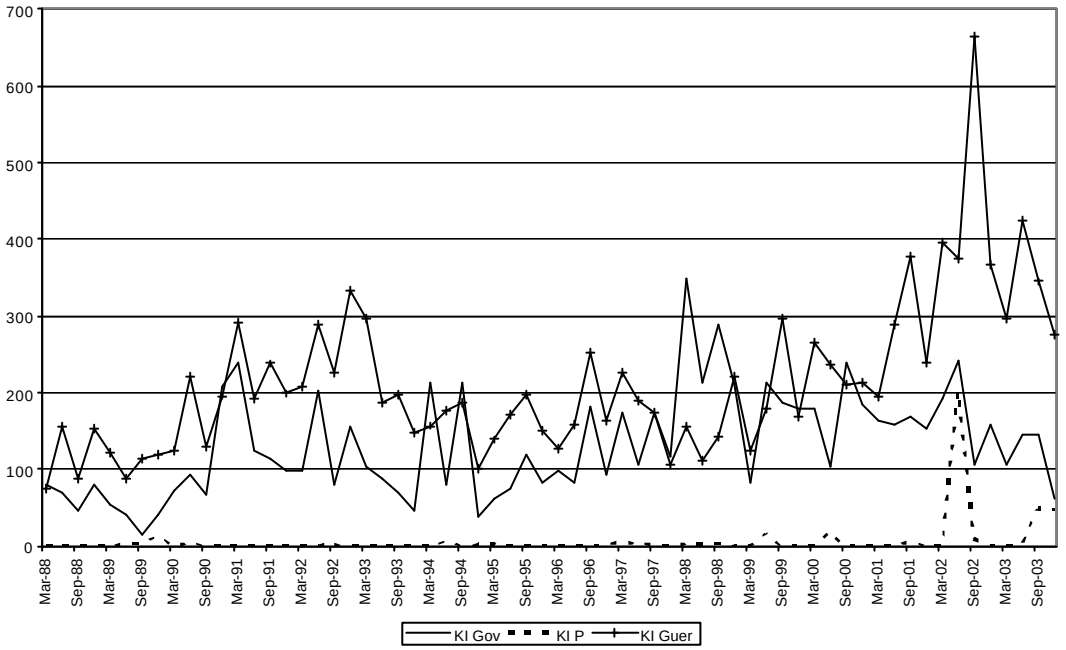

Figure 10. Quarterly number of government-related casualties

Figure 11 shows casualties by group in events in which the guerrillas participate. As previously noted, the guerrillas exhibit a marked preference for attacks over clashes. Of course, when there is no opposing side fighting back the guerrillas are unlikely to suffer many casualties. The government, on the other hand, strongly prefers clashes to attack. For this reason figure 11 is much more favourable for the guerrillas relative to the government than is figure 10 with long-run casualty figures very similar for the two groups in the former picture. Nevertheless, it is

apparent that since the beginning of the Uribe administration guerrilla casualties have been consistently above those of the government, with a declining trend for both series. This is a rare and significant event in long-run perspective. There has never before been a period of sustained relative losses for the guerrillas in the events in which they participate. In fact, from mid 1997 until early 1999 the guerrillas were definitely getting the better of the government in events with guerrilla participation.[15] Finally, since clashes between the paramilitaries and the guerrillas have decreased markedly under Uribe, paramilitary casualties in figure 11 drop sharply.

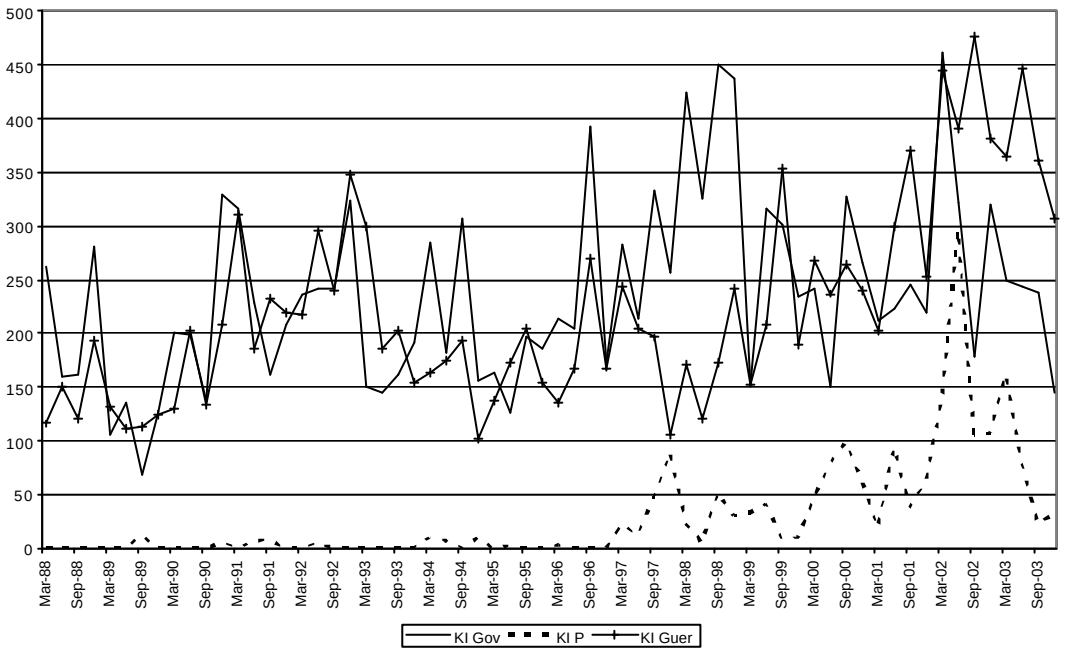

Figure 11. Quarterly number of guerrilla-related casualties

The corresponding figure for the paramilitaries confirms all statements involving paramilitaries in the last two paragraphs without adding new insights so we do not provide it. Instead, we give figure 12 that shows casualties by group in those

[15] By this period the FARC had developed numerous large mobile companies and its longstanding preference for attacks over clashes was shifting in favour of clashes, as these FARC units we were overwhelming isolated Army bases. Marks (2002) describes how the Colombian military was able to increase its own mobility and turn the tables against the FARC. The use of airpower and aerial troop transport was fundamental for the successful response of the military to this challenge.

clashes in which the paramilitaries are involved, overwhelmingly clashes with the guerrillas. Interestingly, a large number of civilians are also killed in these events. But the big story of the picture is the paramilitaries' great ineffectiveness as a fighting force. In all but one year the paramilitaries suffer more losses than they inflict on the guerrillas and paramilitary casualties are growing rapidly. The recent trend toward more clashes with the government only compounds the paramilitaries' problems. Even when they are not clashing with the government, the enhanced government presence in the Colombian countryside under the *Democratic Security Policy* is probably placing new restrictions on the paramilitaries' freedom of movement. Thus, the decline in paramilitary attacks and the paramilitaries' willingness to enter demobilization talks with the government seems sensible.[16]

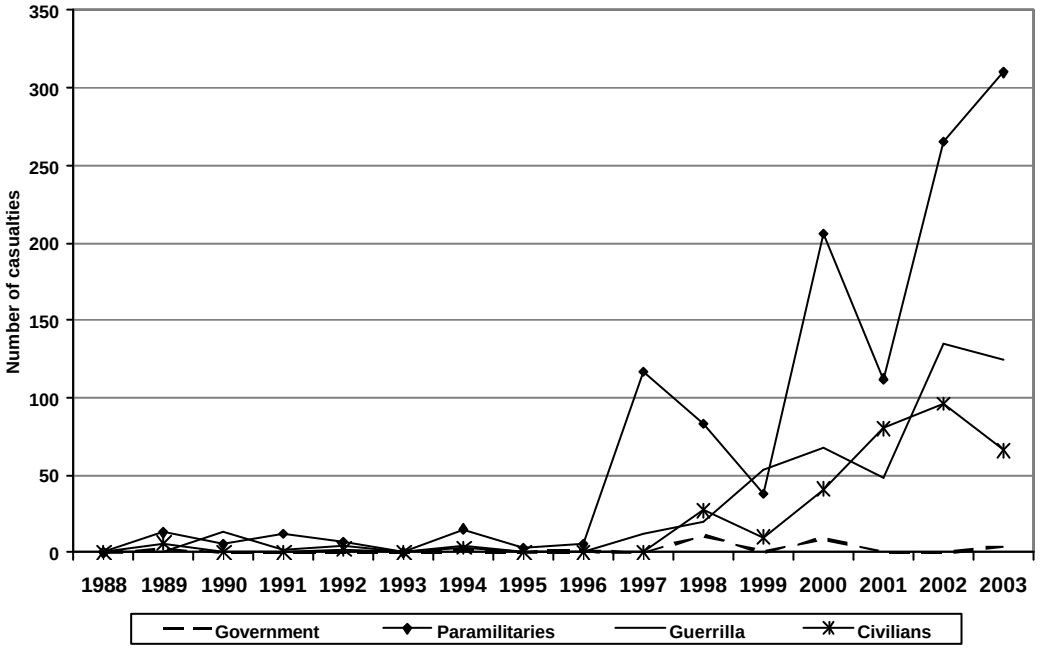

Figure 12. Annual number of paramilitary-related casualties during clashes

[16] Another probable factor bringing the paramilitaries to the table is the US insistence that paramilitary leaders should be extradited to the US to face drug-trafficking charges. It is likely that the paramilitaries believe that the Uribe government might give them a better deal than its successor would and, in particular, might have the inclination and influence in Washington to allow them to avoid extradition.

7. The FARC vs. the ELN

Figure 13 shows the series for both clashes and attacks for both the FARC and the ELN. Both attack series show very sharp declines, indicating that this piece of good news about the guerrillas in general applies specifically to each of the two main sub-groups. Again we stress that the fighting technology of guerrilla groups relies heavily on sneak attacks while clashes are generally disadvantageous. The number of clashes for both groups has decreased somewhat under Uribe, again reflecting the sharp decline of the paramilitaries. But for the first time, the number of clashes has surpassed the number of attacks for both groups. Note also that the ELN shows larger percentage decreases in both attacks and clashes relative to the FARC. Indeed, the ELN has almost disappeared as an attacking force. This continues a longer trend that began in 2000, two years after the death of Father Manuel Pérez, its able leader.

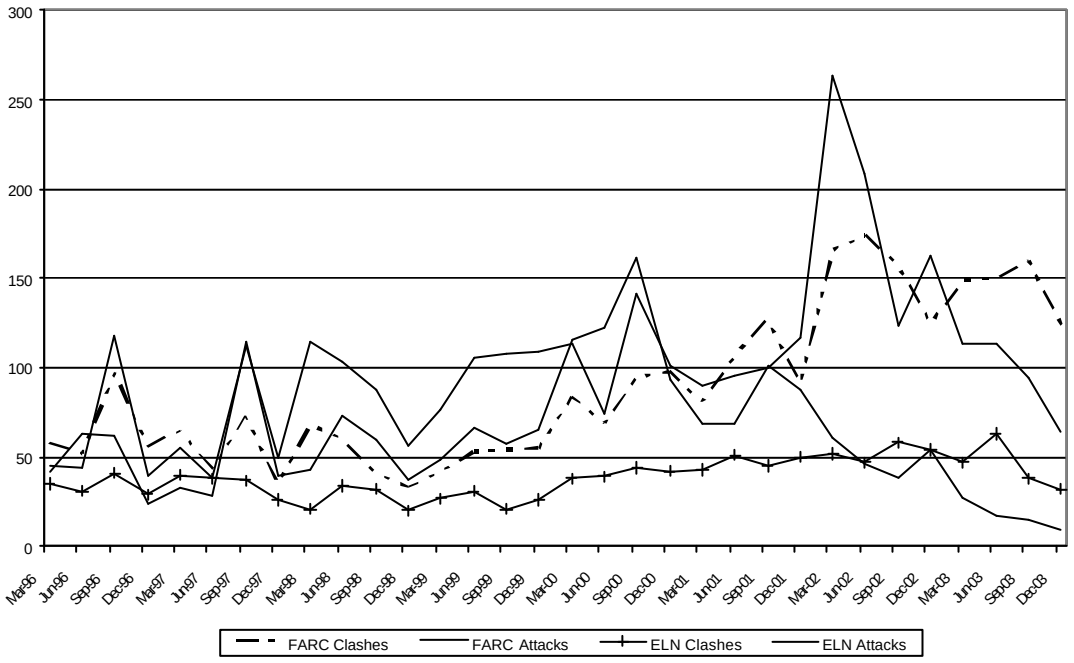

Figure 13. Guerrilla attacks plus clashes by group

8. Summary and Conclusion

Here, in brief, are our main findings. Attacks by both the paramilitaries and guerrillas have dropped sharply back to their long-run averages for the whole Uribe period but substantially below these averages for the last three quarters of 2003. Clashes involving paramilitaries have plummeted while those between the guerrillas and government forces are near all-time highs. Total killing rates have decreased from their peak but remain well above long-run averages, masking a big divergence: civilian killing has dropped to even below the long-run average while combatant killing is at an all-time high. Guerrilla attacks have brought injury rates to record levels, largely due to the increased use of antipersonnel mines and urban terrorism, but again there is a divergence: civilian injuries are running at an all-time high while combatant injuries conform to long-run averages. Clashes have become increasingly lethal both for the guerrillas and for the paramilitaries. The paramilitaries have been the biggest killers of civilians and the decrease in civilian killing is mainly tied to strongly diminished, but still not eliminated, paramilitary activity. The paramilitaries are ineffective and getting worse in clashes. The government has improved its casualty ratios relative to the guerrillas and has started to clash more with the paramilitaries. FARC clashes with the government are near an all-time high but FARC attacks have dropped sharply. The ELN is in continuous and strong decline, suggesting that the time is probably ripe to engage them in demobilization negotiations.

In short, most of the series show good or excellent progress with the civilian injury rate being a notable exception. In the context of an ongoing and unsettled conflict, the combination of more lethal clashing with the FARC and less killing of civilians is ideal for Colombia, and the two phenomena are probably connected with each other. Restrepo and Spagat (2004) provides statistical evidence based on our

data set that paramilitary attacks increase when there is a combination of infrequent government clashes and frequent guerrilla attacks. In other words, paramilitary activity substitutes for government activity so when the government becomes more aggressive the paramilitaries tend to decrease their attacks. Thus, it is no accident that the government taking the offensive in the war is saving lives, even in the short run. Of course, even more lives might be saved if in the long run the government offensive leads the guerrillas to negotiate earnestly for peace.

Such progress could not have been taken for granted in 2002. For example, Sweig (2002, p.1) argued that "If clear and tough demands are not put on the Colombian military and political elite to double tax revenues, double the defense budget, cut ties to the paramilitaries, send their sons to fight, return the internally displaced to their homes, and to enact other reforms, Colombia's precipitous decline will only continue." In fact, without such outside pressure Colombian democracy delivered a government that has prosecuted the war with a determination and success that nobody considered possible in August, 2002.

Despite the abundant good news, we observe in some circles a puzzling reluctance to acknowledge any recent improvements. In fact, there is a definite tendency to treat the Colombian government as an international pariah regime.[17] We suggest that admitting the existence of some real achievements should be a test of good faith for the critics of Uribe's policies. Much government policy is certainly open to criticism. For example, one might question the demobilization negotiations with the paramilitaries as possibly leading to impunity for grossly violent offenders. Or one might question the policy of mass detentions of suspected guerrilla supporters as a violation of human rights as the Colombian Procurator General has recently done

[17] There was much commentary along these lines during Uribe's February, 2004 visit to Europe together with vigorous protests and boycotts by some MEPs (*El Tiempo*, February 9-15). Representative of this point of view in English is Hilton (2004).

(*El Tiempo*, 2004b). Perhaps some analysts can make a persuasive case that the gains of Uribe's year and a half will eventually be reversed under the pressure of various slow-acting mistakes with possible legitimacy and military costs for the government.

We believe that some caution is in order. We stress that paramilitary and guerrilla attacks over the whole Uribe period have only moved back to their historical averages. It seems unlikely that military performance against the guerrillas has really improved to the point where a final defeat of the FARC is a near-term possibility. In fact, Marcella (2003) argues that the Colombian military is far from the superiority it would need to really win the war. Moreover, just sustaining present policies to consolidate the gains made against illegal groups will present a fiscal challenge after a series of tax hikes and expenditure cuts have already been used to finance a continuous military budget expansion. Casual inspection of our pictures suggests some degree of cyclicality in war intensity, suggesting that a new guerrilla offensive is not only possible, but likely. So whether the positive trends of Uribe's first year can be maintained remains an open question.

In fact, we perceive a danger that high expectations encouraged by recent successes might become a liability in the future. Over the next two years many people both in Colombia and abroad might become frustrated if the war has not clearly entered an endgame process. Our statistics do not suggest that the FARC has already begun a terminal decline. Maybe over the next few years war indicators will continue their rapid improvement. Or maybe they will simply get stuck near their long-run averages as complacency replaces the urgency of the present. Colombia has accomplished much within a short period of time but still faces a long and tough road forward. But for the moment the gains are there for all to see and should be acknowledged.

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