

Rooted in Violence: Civil War, International Trade and the Expansion of Palm Oil in Colombia.

David Maher

Directorate of Politics & Contemporary History,
University of Salford, Salford M5 4WT, UK.

Email: d.j.maher@salford.ac.uk

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Abstract

Internal armed conflict severely inhibits economic growth according to a prominent set of civil war literature. Similarly, emerging scholarship finds that civil war inhibits processes of economic globalisation which are argued to produce economic growth. A case in point is international trade, which is reportedly stymied by intra-state war. In contrast, this article employs a critical theoretical framework which acknowledges the often violent tendencies of globalised capitalism. By analysing Colombia’s palm oil industry, this article argues that civil war violence can facilitate international trade. In the case study which is presented, violence perpetrated by Colombia’s public armed forces and right-wing paramilitaries has enabled the palm oil sector to enter and compete in the globalised economy. This includes processes of forced displacement, which have acquired land for palm oil cultivation, and violence directed at civil groups deemed inimical to the interests of the palm oil sector. By employing a micro-level approach, this article attempts to isolate violent trends related to palm oil cultivation in Meta, the largest African palm growing region in Colombia. An attempt is therefore made to give an empirically informed account of how violence in Colombia’s civil war is facilitating palm oil exports.

Introduction

According to a prominent set of civil war literature, internal armed conflicts severely inhibit economic growth. Similarly, emerging scholarship suggests that civil wars negatively affect international trade, a key facet of economic development. Within this context, it is argued that political violence inexorably stymies economic growth. This is epitomised by a dictum which is often cited in the literature, namely, that civil wars represent ‘development in reverse’.

In contrast to this literature, this article employs a critical theoretical framework that acknowledges the often violent characteristics of globalised capitalism. In the context of internal armed conflicts, a central concern of this paper is to investigate if violence in civil wars can facilitate central processes of economic development, in particular, international trade. A case study of Colombia is provided. Colombia appears to challenge the ‘development in reverse’ argument as periods of civil war violence have been accompanied by strong economic growth and high levels of international trade. More specifically, the following analysis investigates the links between Colombia’s civil war and palm oil production (also referred to as African palm and oil palm), an emerging sector of Colombia’s economy which is increasingly exported to international markets.

Since violence in civil wars is often localised, this article employs an analytical technique used increasingly by civil war scholars which investigates the micro-level dynamics of conflict. The following analysis thus investigates violence and palm oil production in Colombia by concentrating on the country’s largest African palm growing region, the department of Meta, and uses data that are disaggregated to the department *and* municipality level. (Colombia is made up of 32 departments, which are further divided into 1,119 municipalities, the smallest administrative units.) Such a disaggregated approach is rare in the literature investigating

violence and palm oil in Colombia, especially in terms of municipality level data. The following analysis also uses a uniquely coded dataset, built from existing data on human rights and political violence published by the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), a Colombian human rights organisation. Therefore, while anecdotal and qualitative evidence exists on the violent tendencies of palm oil production in Colombia, this article attempts to contribute to the debate by providing an empirically informed account of this violence.

This empirical analysis indicates that Colombia's civil war has not stymied economic growth linked to African palm. On the contrary, the data suggest that violence perpetrated by central actors of Colombia's conflict, specifically, the public armed forces and right-wing paramilitary groups, has facilitated the expansion of the country's palm oil industry. Acting in concert, these groups have forcibly displaced large swathes of people in regions suitable for palm oil cultivation and the abandoned land is subsequently used to harvest African palm. The armed forces and paramilitaries also maintain a strong presence in these contested areas and continue to challenge the guerrillas in emerging palm growing zones. Moreover, Colombia's public forces and paramilitaries direct violence at civil groups (e.g., trade unions) which are deemed inimical to the expansion of the palm oil sector and its competitiveness in the global market. This analysis therefore suggests that, contrary to the 'development in reverse' logic, certain types of civil war violence can buttress economic growth and enable emerging markets in conflict zones to compete in the global economy.

Civil war as 'development in reverse'¹

Conflict severely inhibits economic development, according to a prominent set of studies within the civil war literature (e.g., see Collier 1999, 2000, 2007; Collier et al. 2003; Murdoch and Sandler 2002, 2004; Bodea and Elbadawi 2008; World Bank 2011). These studies, which

often employ quantitative, large-N investigations into violence and development, have described the negative economic costs of internal armed conflicts as ‘profound’ (Murdoch and Sandler 2004: 138), ‘highly persistent’ (Collier 2007: 28), ‘dramatic and long-lasting’ (World Bank 2011: 64) and ‘astronomical’ (Collier et al. 2003: 80) with ‘titanic consequences’ (Collier and Duponchel 2013: 66). Civil war is argued to represent ‘development in reverse’, a dictum most famously advanced in *Breaking the Conflict Trap*, a report co-published in 2003 by the World Bank and Oxford University Press (Collier et al. 2003; see also Collier 2004, 2009). According to one calculation, a typical civil war lasting seven years renders a country approximately 15 percent poorer than it would have been in the absence of conflict (Collier 2007: 27).

The idea that civil wars retard economic development is pervasive within this prominent set of civil war literature. It is therefore peculiar that, as Murdoch and Sandler (2004: 138) rightly note, scholars have, with few exceptions, devoted most of their attention to the determinants and duration of civil wars, while ‘little effort has been expended to isolate the dynamic influences of civil wars on economic growth’. Rather than focus on the onset of civil war, this article thus aims to contribute to this less developed body of civil war literature which investigates the effects of civil war violence on economic growth.

Conflict and international trade

In addition to the observed destructive effects on physical, human and social overhead capital (e.g., Collier 1999, 2000; Murdoch and Sandler 2002, 2004, Collier et al. 2003), it is argued that civil war stunts economic growth by adversely affecting international trade and foreign investment (often discussed in the context of globalisation) (e.g., Collier 1999; Collier et al. 2003: 35). However, as Magee and Massoud (2011) point out, while the links between *inter-*

state conflict and trade have been extensively studied, there is much less research investigating international trade and *intra-state* conflict. As with broader research analysing economic development and intra-state conflict, studies which have addressed trade and civil war tend to focus on whether the former prevents or mitigates the onset of the latter.²

A few notable studies, however, have attempted to elucidate the impact of civil war violence on international trade. In particular, Bayer and Rupert's (2004) research suggests that civil wars lower bilateral trade between states by one-third, with negative economic effects spreading to neighbouring countries and beyond. Similarly, Murdoch and Sandler (2002, 2004) argue that civil wars disrupt trade flows and day-to-day marketing activities, as well as sever crucial supply lines, which, in turn, reduces economic growth. Martin, Mayer and Thoenig's (2008) study indicates that, in the first year of conflict, severe civil war results in a 25% decline in international trade; after 25 years of conflict, this increases to a 40% decline in trade. And while this effect is smaller for less-severe conflicts, it is still 'present and persistent', disappearing only after 20 years of violence (Martin, Mayer and Thoenig 2008: 546; see also the World Bank 2011: 64). Magee and Massoud (2011) also find that civil wars lead to a decline in economic openness and a reduction in international trade flows.

Development in reverse as historical amnesia

This prominent set of civil war literature has faced criticism. However, as with the broader literature, critical scholarship has tended to focus on civil war onset, elucidating the conflict promoting aspects of economic growth.³ Investigations into the economic effects of conflict have been less forthcoming. One notable exception is Christopher Cramer. Adopting a Marxian approach, Cramer is one of the few scholars to specifically question the propensity of civil wars to consistently cause economic decline (for a good overview, see Moore 2011). Cramer

criticises the prominent set of civil war scholarship for subscribing to what he argues is a flawed liberal assumption that the economic outcomes of war are exclusively negative, an assumption which ‘may only be sustained by a form of historical amnesia’. Civil wars as ‘development in reverse’, thus argues Cramer, is a misleading postulation which lacks ‘historical memory’ (Cramer 2006: 9; see also Cramer 2002: 1,857). Instead, Cramer (2006: 16-17) points out that violence has often been a central characteristic of societal change and development has commonly been ‘accompanied by, hastened by and made by appalling human disruption and violence’. Violence has often been ‘part of the economy, not simply a brake on it’ (Cramer 2006: 17).

Similarly, Charles Tilly (1985, 1990, 2003) elucidates the importance of war and war making to the formation and transformation of European states and capitalism, processes which Tilly (1990: 196-7) argues can be extrapolated from Europe to contemporary developing countries. Wars of conquest were also integral to the growth of early capitalist states. Paul Kennedy (1988: 143), for instance, notes how during the industrial age,⁴ the intensification of European and North American wars of conquest in the less developed world ‘were in many ways the military concomitant to the economic penetration of the overseas world and to the swift decline in its share of manufacturing output’. Other scholars illustrate the centrality of conflict to capitalist development in the context of US imperial globality (Joxe 2002; Escobar 2004b). For example, Escobar (2004b: 214) argues that developing countries are ‘the theatre of a multiplicity of cruel little wars’, which, ‘rather than barbaric throwbacks, are linked to the current global logic’ of the US-led globalised capitalist system.

Such a critical framework raises questions about the economic implications of civil war, including economic losses calculated as a result of violence.⁵ In other words, such estimations

consider only the costs of civil war and thus disregard the possibility that violence can also create economic opportunities for domestic and international capital which bolster rates of economic growth. Similarly, Gutiérrez-Sanín (2009: 10) argues that while there are many negative economic consequences of conflict, ‘the other side of the coin has been carefully avoided’. In other words, by looking at the ‘other side of the balance sheet’, one can appreciate the ‘anti-intuitive externalities’ of conflict, which can be ‘both pro-growth and distributional, and can combine in several ways’ (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2009: 6-7). For example, armed conflict may (*inter alia*) stimulate technological change, strengthen the state, produce various forms of political inclusion and produce ‘Keynesian effects’ from militarisation (such as the state investing in public works through the military; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2009: 7).

Large-N versus case study analyses

In addition to the theoretical differences outlined above, there is often a disjunct between the prominent set of civil war literature employing large-N, quantitative analysis models vis-à-vis narratives and case study analyses of individual conflicts (Cederman and Gleditsch 2009). Colombia is a case in point. In contrast to the ‘development in reverse’ dictum, a number of critical scholars posit that the upshot of violence in Colombia’s conflict has often been economic development under a capitalist logic (e.g., see Escobar 2004a, 2004b; Coleman 2007; Grajales 2011; Thomson 2011).

For example, contrary to postulations that the displacement of people negatively impacts economic development (e.g., Murdoch and Sandler 2002, 2004), Escobar (2004b: 214) instead elucidates the centrality of forced displacement to Colombia’s economic growth, a violent process that ‘frees up entire regions for transnational capital’. This type of violent capital accumulation is central to Cramer’s thesis that civil war violence can be positively linked to

economic ‘progress’. Moreover, Cramer (2006: 217) argues that the twin process of forceful asset accumulation and forced displacement ‘are at the heart of much of the violence and war around the world’ (Cramer 2006: 217).⁶ Additionally, Frances Thomson (2011: 344) notes how the violent accumulation of land and the repression of labour in Colombia have ‘proved particularly favourable to domestic and foreign agribusinesses’ and have facilitated capitalist development.

Problems with battle-deaths and aggregate-level analysis

The disjunct between large-N studies and case study analyses may be the result of what Cramer (2002, 2006) argues are serious methodological flaws of quantitative civil war research. This includes, *inter alia*, inadequate, simplistic and seemingly arbitrary proxies to measure complex concepts such as inequality, economic development, greed, grievances, and so forth. Notwithstanding these methodological criticisms, this article instead focuses on two different problems with the prominent set of civil war literature.

Firstly, these studies rely on what can be considered the ‘gold standard’ measure of civil war violence employed by quantitative civil war scholars: so-called battle-related deaths. This typically involves deaths directly resulting from contested combat between belligerent groups and excludes the deaths of soldiers or civilians where no reciprocal threat of lethal force is observed (Lacina 2009: 3). As Kaldor argues (2013: 7), such an emphasis on battle-related deaths counter-intuitively overlooks major episodes of violence in civil wars. Forced displacement and violence targeted at civil groups are cases in point.

Secondly, the prominent set of civil war literature overwhelmingly uses aggregated, national-level data for quantitative analysis. However, there is wide acknowledgement within civil war

studies that intra-state conflicts rarely engulf whole nations. Instead, conflicts are commonly limited to particular regions of host countries (see, for example, Cederman and Gleditsch 2009). Similarly, economic development varies across regions within countries. As such, studies which exclusively use aggregated, cross-country, quantitative data to investigate civil war, a phenomenon which is overwhelmingly regional in character, are increasingly recognised as problematic.

A growing body of civil war literature thus advocates the use of disaggregated data to better understand the dynamics of political violence (for datasets, see Raleigh et al. 2010; Melander and Sundberg 2011). As with the majority of aggregated studies, much of this new literature has analysed economic development in the context of civil war onset (e.g., Buhaug and Rød 2006; Buhaug et al. 2009; Hegre, Østby and Raleigh 2009). Collier and Duponchel's (2013) study is one exception, which analyses the conflict in Sierra Leone using firm-level data. The study suggests that high intensity conflicts lead to smaller sized firms, as well as lower incomes realised by these firms. Further, as a result of conflict, firms will face major financing constraints and there will be a scarcity of skilled workers.

Unfortunately, there are profound difficulties in obtaining disaggregated data, especially disaggregated economic data (regionalised GDP growth, regional investment, etc.) in poor, civil-worn-torn countries (e.g., Buhaug et al. 2009). Indeed, Collier and Duponchel (2013: 66, 70) 'fully acknowledge' the limitations of the firm-level data they use, a problem which is 'often the case in developing countries affected by long wars'. This includes the poor quality and availability of data.

Unlike many other conflict zones, however, Colombia boasts a good deal of available data

disaggregated to the department and municipality level. Paula Palacios (2012) has taken advantage of these data to research palm oil cultivation and forced displacement in Colombia. She finds that palm oil plantations are more likely to cause forced displacement than coca crops, an interesting observation given that the latter crop is often associated with violence (coca is the raw ingredient for cocaine). While Palacios' work provides useful and novel insights, her data are disaggregated only to the department level and not to the municipality level. For Palacios (2012: 14), this is because there is 'very scant' available information on palm oil cultivation at the municipality level, whereby such data 'would allow us to establish a more precise relation between the type of crop and displacement' (Palacios 2012: 14).

The analysis which follows attempts to address this problem by concentrating on Colombia's largest palm growing region, the department of Meta. Importantly, the following analysis uses data recorded at the municipality level. The palm oil data originate from Colombia's national federation of palm growers (known as Fedepalma) and official statistics published by the departmental government of Meta. Regarding violence, data are also disaggregated to both the department and municipality level. This includes data provided by CINEP, which, as noted above, have been further coded by this author to provide a uniquely coded dataset (see Appendix A for further information). Moreover, official government statistics on forced displacement have been compiled and collated by this author at both the department and municipality level.

Before discussing this disaggregated data, however, it is first necessary to outline Colombia's broader economic and violent trends. While Colombia's economy has traditionally maintained stable and positive economic growth (e.g., Holmes, Gutiérrez and Curtin 2008: 28), the following analysis concentrates on Colombia's economic development since 1990, when the

government of Colombia (GOC) introduced so-called neo-liberal economic reforms in a process known as *la apertura económica* (the economic opening).

Economic development and violence in Colombia

Colombia's economy

Central to neo-liberal economics is the greater integration of national economies into the globalised economy, achieved through, *inter alia*, international trade and foreign direct investment (FDI). Importantly, this integration is to be achieved through a particular neo-liberal logic, with an emphasis on private property rights, individual liberty, unfettered markets and free trade. Pervading this logic is a deep suspicion of collectivist forms of government and the role of the state in economic planning (e.g., Hayek 2001; Mises 2008). Rather than centralised economic planning, neo-liberals such as Hayek (2001: 40) argue that the state is instead required to design an 'effective competitive system' and a 'continuously adjusted legal framework' to foster free market capitalism.

Core policy instruments of neo-liberal economics – famously described by economist John Williamson (1990, 2004) as the Washington Consensus – include (*inter alia*) fiscal discipline, liberalising interest rates (which should be market-determined and positive to discourage capital flight) and a competitive exchange rate (which may also be market determined).⁷ Other central policy instruments include trade liberalisation (with domestic industries no longer protected by governments against foreign competition), the liberalisation of FDI, the privatisation of state-run enterprises, the strengthening of property rights, and the deregulation of markets (including labour markets) (Williamson 1990; see also 2004).

Subscribing to a neo-liberal economic logic, the Colombian government emerged from the

1980s with ‘a firm commitment to an essentially capitalistic free market orientation and to open international economic relations’ (Fleischer 1994: 2). During the 1990s, the GOC thus dramatically changed the structure of Colombia’s economy. For example, the government abolished exchange controls, liberalised imports, reformed labour legislation, relaxed controls over FDI, liberalised trade (including significantly lowering import duties), deregulated the financial sector, implemented privatisation programmes, and reformed the tax system and social security (see Fleischer 1994; Edwards 2001).

The GOC continued to fervently pursue market liberalisation policies throughout the 2000s (including liberalising two of its largest industries: coal and oil) and has created an attractive business climate for domestic and foreign investors. According to William Drennan of US oil and gas corporation Exxon Mobil, the fiscal terms offered by the GOC are now among the best in the world (Economist 2007). The GOC has also ‘intensified its trade diplomacy’ both in terms of multilateral factors, such as an active participation in ongoing international trade negotiations, and with regard to bilateral trade relations (OECD 2012: 14).⁸

On the whole, Colombia, a middle income country, has exhibited strong GDP per capita growth (at constant 2000 US\$) throughout the 2000s and, more specifically, throughout much of Álvaro Uribe’s presidency (Colombia’s former hard-line and right-wing president, in office 2002-2010).⁹ Between 1990 and 1999, Colombia’s GDP per capita grew at an average of 1%. This average rose to 2.5% between 2000 and 2009, higher than the regional average of 1.8% during this period (see World Bank n.d.). Between 2004 and 2007, GDP per capita growth was particularly strong, averaging 4.3% per year. Furthermore, although rates of growth slowed in 2008 and 2009 as the Colombian economy felt the impact of the global economic crisis (e.g., OECD 2012: 18), average GDP per capita growth recovered strongly in 2010 and 2011, with

growth rates of 2.6% and 4.5%, respectively.

This economic growth has been buttressed, *inter alia*, by strong increases in international trade, with turnover of external trade now constituting over a quarter of total GDP (OECD 2012: 98). Figure 1 shows that, as with GDP growth, increases in international trade have been much stronger throughout the 2000s than the 1990s. Colombia’s annual imports have grown from \$11 billion in 2000 to \$52 billion in 2011, expanding at an annual average of 16.1% during this period. Similarly, exports have risen from \$13.2 billion in 2000 to \$57 billion in 2011, an annual average increase of 15.4%. Despite the majority of exports being realised in the mining sector (55% of total exports), exports of agricultural products reached \$2.3 billion in 2011, up from \$1.1 billion and \$1.7 billion in 2000 and 2005, respectively (DANE 2012). In 2011, agricultural products represented 4% of Colombia’s total exports.

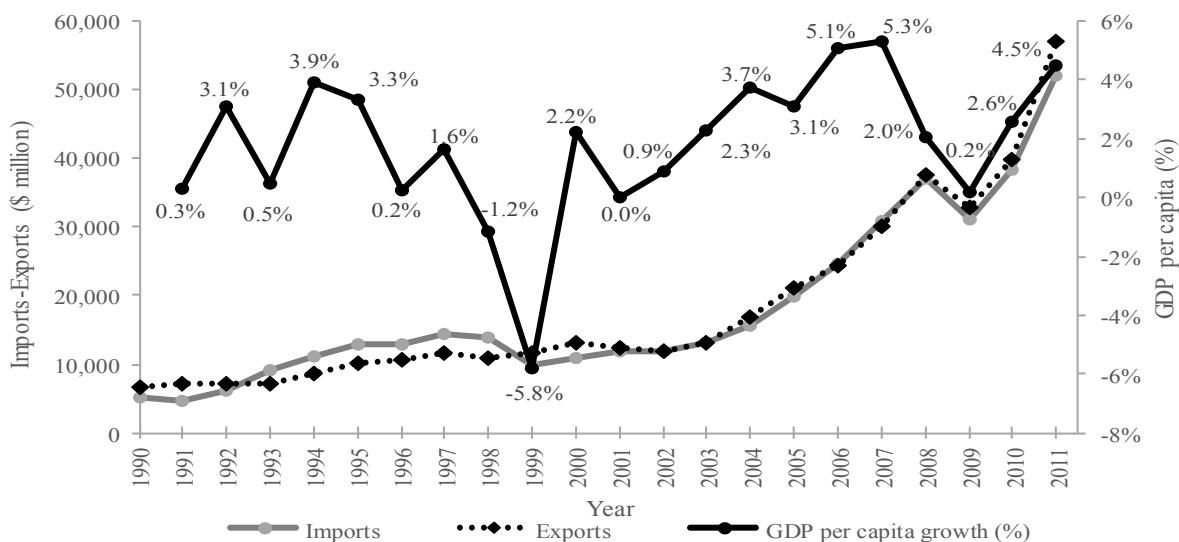


Figure 1: International trade (imports and exports) and GDP per capita growth (%)
 Source: Data adapted from Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (2012), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2012) and the World Bank (2012)

Colombia's civil war

An internal armed conflict involving the public armed forces, right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas has existed in Colombia since at least the early 1960s.¹⁰ Despite claims to the contrary (e.g., World Bank 2011), Colombia's conflict intensified during the 2000s, during which time the country's economy exhibited strong growth. This also coincides with a munificent US aid package (widely referred to as Plan Colombia) which, between 2000 and 2012, has totalled \$8.5 billion. The majority (74%) of this aid has been allocated to Colombia's military and police (see Just the Facts 2012; author calculations).

A number of indicators indeed demonstrate the intensification of Colombia's civil war violence. For example, excluding 2008, more Colombian soldiers and police officers were annually killed or wounded between 2003 and 2010 than in 2002, according to data from Colombian NGO Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris (2010: 22). This is important given that 2002 is considered the height of Colombia's conflict (e.g., see Ocampo Valencia 2010; Leech 2011: 139). Further, Colombia's largest left-wing guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (better known by its Spanish acronym, FARC), averaged 1,035 military actions between 1997 and 2000 but averaged 1,493 military actions between 2007 and 2010 (see Ávila 2011; author calculations). According to figures from the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), average annual battle-related deaths in Colombia's armed conflict were 1,173 in the period 1990-1999; this figure more than doubled during the period 2000-2008 to reach an annual average of 2,452 battle-related deaths (Lacina and Gleditsch 2005; data post-2008 were not available).

Perhaps a more revealing trend is forced displacement. In 2011, with an estimated 3.9 to 5.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) (see Acción Social 2011; CODHES 2011), Colombia recorded the highest number of IDPs in the world, followed by Iraq and Sudan

(IDMC 2012: 16). According to the GOC's statistics, which are generally thought to be at the conservative end of IDP figures (e.g., see CODHES 2011; IDMC 2012: 57), approximately 3.1 million people were forcibly displaced in the period 2000-2009, representing 79% of the total number of IDPs recorded by the GOC.¹¹ Therefore, forced displacement intensified during the 2000s.

Forced displacement should not be simplistically viewed as a vicissitude of armed combat. Instead, forced displacement is often employed as a concerted strategy of war. As Ibañez and Moya (2010: 649) observe, forced displacement in Colombia is a 'deliberate strategy of illegal armed groups to spread territorial control and diversify funding sources', and acts as 'a low cost and effective strategy for clearing out territories' (Ibañez and Vélez 2008: 661). Paramilitary groups are responsible for the majority of forced displacement in Colombia (e.g., see Ibañez and Vélez 2008: 662; Comisión de Seguimiento 2009a, 2009b: 17, 2009c), followed by Colombia's military, according to Leech (2011: 131).

Between 1980 and 2010, forced displacement caused by the armed conflict has led to an estimated 6.7 million hectares of land being abandoned or seized in Colombia. This is equivalent to 13 percent of Colombia's total arable land. This excludes the territories of ethnic communities, which would push the figure higher (see Comisión de Seguimiento 2010: 4). If the accounts of critical scholars are accurate, then this process of forced displacement has bolstered capitalist development in Colombia through the violent acquisition of land for commercial purposes. One sector that is argued to particularly benefit from forced displacement is agribusiness (e.g., Thomson 2011), especially considering the large swathes of land which are required for the industrial harvesting of commercial crops. A crop which fits this description is palm oil.

The palm oil sector

A late maturing perennial crop, African palm will produce fruit approximately three to five years after initial planting. While the crop can produce varying profitability for up to 50 years, the plant attains maximum production after seven to 10 years and, after 25 years onwards, the height of the plants makes it difficult to harvest its fruit (Mingorance 2006: 11; Palacios 2012: 137). Oil palm trees grow in tropical, humid regions and for commercial production it is recommended that African palm should be cultivated at a maximum altitude of 700 meters (Palacios 2010: 6).

Globally, consumption of palm oil products has increased in recent years, with an average growth rate of 4.4% (Fedepalma 2007: 34). Plantations of oil palm have become the fastest growing monoculture in the tropics, expanding from 6.5 million hectares in 1997 to 14 million hectares by 2007 (see Gerber 2010: 166). This boom has been stimulated by rising global demand for oils and fats, especially in China and India, as well as new biofuel markets in Europe and, more recently, the US (Fedepalma 2007: 34).

Colombia and the global palm oil market

Introduced in 1932, cultivation of African palm in Colombia has accelerated since the 1990s and particularly during the 2000s. Now cultivated in 96 municipalities in 16 departments of Colombia, the GOC (especially Uribe's administration) has actively encouraged palm oil cultivation, including tax free zones for agro-industrial projects focused on bio-fuel production (see CONPES 2008: 5). Colombia is now the fifth largest producer of palm oil in the world, behind Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Nigeria, and is the largest producer in Latin America (Fedepalma 2007: 27; CONPES 2008: 5; Leech 2009: 2). Cultivation of African palm reached

approximately 360,537 hectares in 2009, up from 138,457 hectares in 1997, representing an increase of 160% (figure 2).¹²

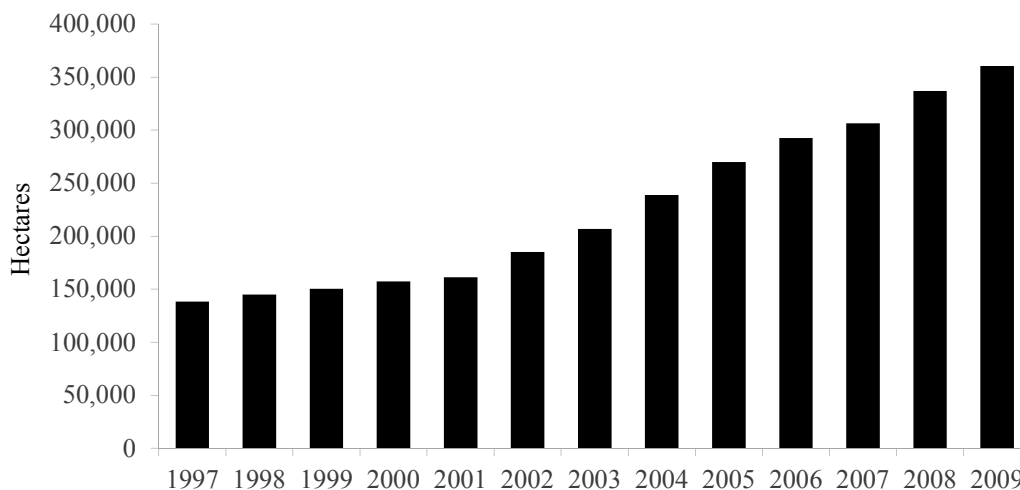


Figure 2. Total planted area of African palm cultivation in hectares

Source: Data adapted from Fedepalma 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010

Although Colombia currently lags behind its main global competitors – in 2006, Indonesia and Malaysia were responsible for 43.3% and 42.7% of global palm oil production, respectively, with Colombia responsible for 2% (Fedepalma 2007: 27) – the country is predicted to expand its share of the global palm oil market. Indeed, Colombia is already making strong inroads in the international market: according to data from Fedepalma (2005, 2010, 2012), the tonnage of Colombia's annual palm oil exports has increased rapidly from 145,000 tonnes in 2000 to peaks of 377,700 tonnes in 2007 and 356,200 tonnes in 2008. According to Fedepalma (2005: 9), Colombia exports almost 40 percent of its total palm oil production.

Approximately 75 percent of palm oil cultivation in Colombia is accounted for by large palm oil companies, with the remaining 25 percent cultivated by small independent growers (Leech 2009: 3). One reason for this is because harvesting palm oil is a costly venture, with a large amount of investment required for the preparation, establishment and maintenance of

plantations and production infrastructure. Cultivating palm oil thus requires a high level of fixed capital investment, presenting a problem for peasant farmers and small-scale African palm growers. For instance, small-scale growers often lack sufficient financial reserves to wait between three to five years for their crops to produce fruit and seven to 10 years for full production (e.g., Mingorance 2006).¹³

With such high set-up costs, producers have incentives to produce the largest possible scale per farm (Palacios 2010: 21) and larger palm oil plantations are argued to be more productive. For example, some indicators illustrate that larger units of production covering over 2,000 hectares are three times as productive as plantations covering 500 hectares (Mingorance 2006: 13). This is compounded by the ability of larger firms to better finance technologies which increase extraction yields (see Mingorance 2006: 14).

Colombia's largest palm growing region: the department of Meta

Geographically located in the centre of Colombia and to the east of the Andean mountains, the department of Meta has over 700,000 inhabitants spread across 29 municipalities. Over half of Meta's citizens live in the department's capital city, Villavicencio (DANE 2008), which lies only 120 miles from Colombia's capital city, Bogotá (Rausch 2007). Meta is Colombia's largest palm oil producing department and is located within Colombia's largest African palm growing zone, the Eastern Zone (as classified by Fedepalma 2010: 1). According to official departmental figures (Gobernación del Meta 2010), there were approximately 117,900 hectares of African palm planted in Meta in 2009. From the limited data available, it is clear that Meta's palm oil is increasingly being exported to international markets. For example, according to Fedepalma's (2005) data, exports of crude palm oil from the Eastern Zone (of which Meta is the largest palm growing region) rose from 27,100 tonnes in 2003 to 61,200 tonnes in 2004, an

annual increase of 125%.

Much of Meta's African palm cultivation is traditionally concentrated in the municipality of San Carlos De Guaroa, where 30,000 hectares (25% of the total) of African palms were planted in 2009 (Gobernación del Meta 2009). A number of municipalities, however, have exhibited strong growth in African palm cultivation. In particular, palm oil cultivation has rapidly expanded in Vistahermosa, Puerto Rico, Puerto Concordia and Puerto Lleras. In the period 2007-2009, these municipalities exhibited increases of 199%, 59%, 51%, and 50%, respectively, in terms of hectares of planted African palm, and were the four fastest expanding municipalities in terms of palm oil cultivation in Meta (Gobernación del Meta 2009, 2010). Collectively, 9,475 hectares of African palm were cultivated in these municipalities in 2009, representing 8% of the departmental total, a figure which looks set to rise further. Central to the following analysis is to observe if violence has declined in these areas thus allowing for economic development (i.e., the 'development in reverse' logic) or, conversely, if levels of violence have risen.

The conflict in Meta

Meta has traditionally been a FARC stronghold, falling under the auspices of the guerrilla group's powerful eastern block. However, the right-wing paramilitary umbrella group, the United Self-Defense Force of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, AUC), began to consolidate its presence in Meta in 1997 and paramilitarism soon expanded throughout the department. The paramilitaries' arrival marked the beginning of rising violence in Meta (Semana 1997; Spencer, 2001: 15; CODHES 2010). After the AUC began to establish and expand its presence in the department, the Colombian armed forces soon followed suit, a common pattern in Colombia's conflict. This was particularly the case during 2004-2006, when

the government deployed 17,500 troops in large-scale operations to challenge FARC strongholds in Caquetá, Meta and Guaviare (International Crisis Group 2009: 21; Isacson and Poe 2009). Predictably, the military's expansion in Meta was fiercely resisted by the FARC and this resistance has not abated (e.g., see International Crisis Group 2009: 10-11, including footnote 87: 21-2).

While Colombia's paramilitary groups are 'the complex result of the confluence of a great variety of actors, such as landholders, drug smugglers and army officers' (Grajales 2011: 773), it is imperative to highlight the centrality of Colombia's armed forces to the spread of paramilitarism. Collaboration between Colombia's public forces and paramilitaries is, according to Richani (2002, 103), an established fact.¹⁴ Indeed, the deep links between the country's public forces (most notably the military) and paramilitary groups have been well documented throughout Colombia (e.g., see Human Rights Watch 2001, 2010; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2003; Amnesty International 2004; Stokes 2005; El Tiempo 2009; Hristov 2009; Maher and Thomson 2011). The department of Meta is a good example, where the AUC's growth has been facilitated by Colombia's public forces. This includes the military's complicity and direct involvement in the gruesome Mapiripán massacre in 1997, which marked the beginning of the paramilitaries' expansion in the department (see Burt 2000; Spencer 2001: 13; El Tiempo 2009; Hristov 2009).

In 2003-2006, the AUC participated in a demobilisation process with the GOC, a deeply flawed attempt at dismantling paramilitarism (e.g., Hristov 2009; Human Rights Watch 2010; Maher and Thomson 2011). With an estimated 3,000 to 10,200 members (e.g., MAPP/OEA 2007; Semana 2008; HRW 2010), new paramilitary groups have formed throughout Colombia and claims pertaining to their links with Colombia's armed forces and public institutions are

emerging, including in Meta (e.g., see MAPP/OEA 2007; Colombian NGO Platform 2008; CODHES 2009; Isacson and Poe 2009: 14; HRW 2010). Moreover, there is a ‘substantial presence’ of paramilitary successor groups in Meta, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). This includes the Colombian Revolutionary Popular Antiterrorist Army (known by its Spanish acronym, ERPAC), which has at least 770 and up to 3,000 troops under its command, depending on the source (see HRW 2010: 72-3).

Paramilitaries and palm oil

While all armed groups have intensified their campaigns in palm producing areas (e.g., see Ocampo Valencia 2009; Gronewold 2011), it is the paramilitaries which are most closely linked to violence in the palm oil sector. The paramilitaries are, according to various sources, the principal actors committing human rights abuses linked to palm oil (e.g., see Mingorance 2006; Houldey 2008; Escobar 2001, 2004a, 2004b; IDMC 2007; Leech 2009; Ocampo Valencia 2009; Grajales 2011; Thomson 2011; Palacios 2012).

As Mingorance (2006: 33)¹⁵ notes, violence in palm growing regions is a ‘general phenomenon’, with the majority of violence perpetrated by paramilitary groups or ‘occur within the framework of paramilitarism’. So integral is paramilitarism to the palm oil industry that Mingorance (2006: 24, 34) refers to a specific Colombian palm production model, which consists of four basic elements: (1) armed incursion by paramilitary groups; enabling (2) the illegal and violent expropriation of land; (3) forced displacement of owners and/or communities which occupy these lands; and (4) the planting of African palm on the ‘conquered land’. This is then followed by (5a) the flow of palm oil towards both national and international markets; and (5b) territorial control (see also Escobar 2004b).

Paramilitary land acquisition has also involved a process of forced land sales, whereby peasant farmers are coerced to sell their land at a fraction of its market value (and often this money does not materialise) (IDMC 2007; Grajales 2011). In Meta, CODHES (2010) notes how the paramilitaries have constructed a model of forced land sales, which has been implemented in the majority of cases of land sales in this area. In this way, according to CODHES, a model of land expansion on a grand scale is being consolidated, dedicated to the cultivation of African palm in the south of the department (CODHES 2010). Pertinently, Meta's fastest expanding palm oil municipalities – Vistahermosa, Puerto Rico, Puerto Lleras and Puerto Concordia – are all located in the south of Meta.

Targeting civil society

In addition to acquiring land for African palm cultivation, violence is also targeted at civilian groups deemed inimical to the expansion, profitability and competitiveness of Colombia's palm oil in the global marketplace. Trade unions are a case in point. As Fedepalma (2007: 10) observes, key international producers are able to offer similar yields of palm oil to those in Colombia but, importantly, at lower costs. Representing Colombia's national association of oil plantation owners, Fedepalma argues that labour costs have been central to this problem. According to Fedepalma (2007: 44), during the 1990s, labour relations among the large palm growing firms were affected by industrial action which led to a succession of salary rises, bonus payments and changes in labour conditions. This led to a rise in labour costs to a level that Fedepalma (2007: 44) considers unsustainable. As will now be discussed, repression and violence directed at trade unionists have resulted in a decline in these costs and have facilitated the greater precariousness of labour conditions.

Colombia continues to be one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a trade unionist.

In 2010, more trade union members were killed in Colombia than the rest of the world combined (ITUC 2011). Within the palm oil sector, trade unionists, as well as other members of civil society who oppose the expansion of biofuel crops, have faced widespread violence. This includes harassment, threats, murder, forced disappearances and forced displacement (see Mingorance 2006; Houldey 2008). With regard to the latter, while acquiring land for palm cultivation, forced displacement is also aimed at ‘impeding collective action, damaging social networks, and intimidating and controlling [the] civilian population’ (Ibáñez and Vélez 2008: 662). It is also important to recognise how attacks against trade unionists are an integral part of Colombia’s civil war: as the National Trade Union School notes, most violations against trade unions, while often relating to industrial disputes, take place ‘in the context of war and are committed, in most cases, by one of the belligerent parties’ (quoted in ITUC 2007).

The paramilitaries are typically the main perpetrators of violence against trade unionists in Colombia, followed by Colombia’s public forces (e.g., see Stokes 2005; Hristov 2009; HRW 2009, 2010). For example, by mid-2012, from 143 cases of violence against trade unionists where the perpetrator could be identified, 104 cases (72.7% of the total) were attributed to the paramilitaries, 34 cases (23.8%) were attributed to Colombia’s public forces, and three cases (2.1%) to the guerrillas (two cases were not attributed to an armed group; see ITUC 2012).

In addition to directly targeting trade unionists, the greater precariousness of labour rights and the weakening of trade unions have been implemented in the palm oil sector by the formation of so-called Associated Worker Cooperatives (referred to by their Spanish acronym, CTAs) (e.g., see Seebolt and Salinas Abdala 2010). CTAs have further weakened the position of workers *vis-à-vis* palm oil companies (see Seeboldt and Salinas Abdala 2010: 50, footnote 17; see also Otis 2012). For example, under Colombian law, CTA workers are considered business

owners rather than employees, precluding members from joining trade unions (Otis 2012).¹⁶

This change in the structure of labour relations has been facilitated by armed violence. In other words, violations directed against palm oil workers and small-scale producers has enabled this restructuring of labour relations to occur without the freedom to unionise or the power to negotiate for better working conditions and sales prices for fruit (Mingorance 2006: 46-7). Currently, there are an estimated 800 CTAs consisting of 24,000 workers in Colombia's palm oil industry (Otis 2012).

Predictably, trade union membership in Colombia's palm oil sector has sharply declined as employment in the sector has swelled (e.g., Otis 2012). This has led to a situation where palm oil workers are 'clearly unprotected in terms of their conditions', with peaceful labour relations 'achieved through violence', leading to an 'unacceptable' situation of increased competitiveness of Colombia's palm oil companies achieved by 'a reduction in labour costs through armed violence' (Mingorance 2006: 46). Therefore, while more research is needed into the direct links between armed groups and palm oil companies in many areas of Colombia (see below), it is nonetheless true that companies and businesspeople involved in palm oil often profit from 'conditions ruthlessly imposed by paramilitary groups (and by the action or omission of the security forces)' (Mingorance 2006: 24).

Data: violence and palm oil cultivation in Meta

The data support accounts of intensifying violence in Meta. As figure 3 illustrates, forced displacement has been endemic in the department, with 128,591 people forcibly displaced in the period 1998-2010 (Acción Social 2011). This represents 18% of Meta's total population of 713,772 (DANE 2008). The annual number of people forcibly displaced intensified during the

2000s, with annual IDPs hitting peaks of 14,485, 17,277, 18,219 and 14,178 in 2002, 2005, 2006 and 2007, respectively. Similarly, the number of victims of human rights and political violence (henceforth: HRPV) recorded by CINEP (2011) were also high in the period 2001-2010. There were a total of 4,207 HRPV victims during this period, with peaks of 468, 947, 1,228 and 406 victims in 2002, 2006, 2008 and 2009, respectively (for information regarding CINEP’s data and forced displacement, see Appendix B).

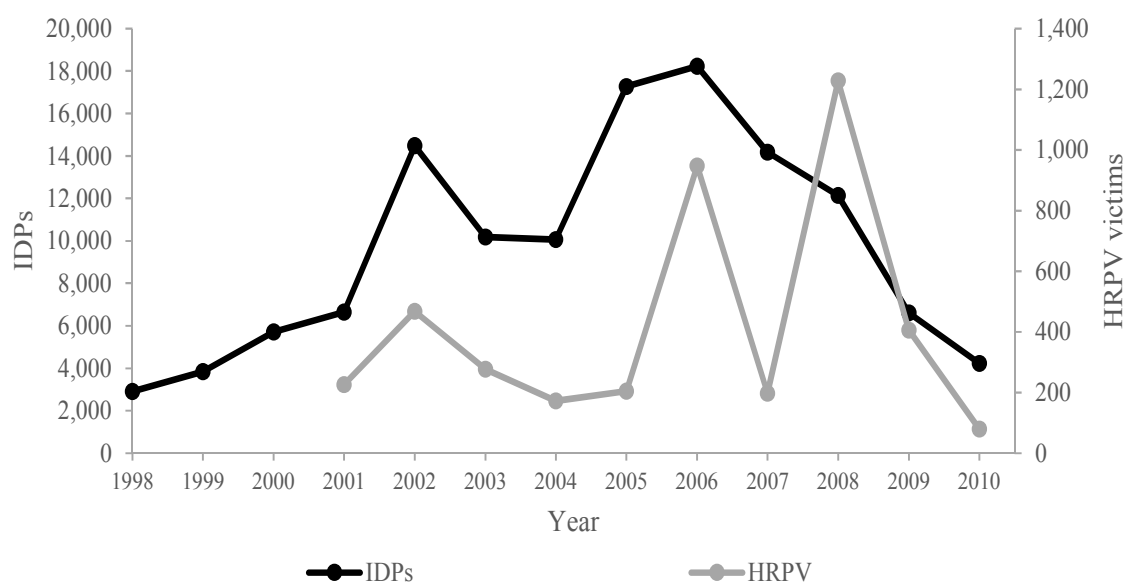


Figure 3. Annual number of IDPs and victims of HRPV in Meta, 1998-2010

Source: Data adapted from Banco de Datos de Derechos Humanos y Violencia Política del CINEP (2011); Acción Social (2011).

According to CINEP’s data (table 1), in the period 2001-2010, 2,381 HRPV victims were subjected to violence perpetrated by Colombia’s public forces, representing 57% of the total in Meta. The paramilitaries and guerrillas were each responsible for 13% of total HRPV victims. Overall, public forces-paramilitary violence was responsible for 3,035 victims, representing 72% of the total.

Table 1. Victims of human rights violations by responsible group, 2001–2010

Responsible group	No. of Victims	% of total
Public forces	2,381	57%
Paramilitaries	526	13%
Combined public forces-paramilitaries	128	3%
Total public forces-paramilitary violations	3,035	72%
FARC	538	13%
Guerrilla (unspecified)	6	~0%
Total guerrilla violations	544	13%
No information	271	6%
Other	357	8%
Total (all)	4,207	100%

Source: Data adapted from Banco de Datos de Derechos Humanos y Violencia Política del CINEP (2011)

There are a number of factors which can contribute to the violence in Meta. For example, Meta is Colombia's largest oil producing region (e.g., see DANE 2011: 39), with oil production concentrated in the municipalities of Puerto Gaitán, Acacías and Castilla la Nueva. To better understand violent trends related to African palm, the following analysis considers only Meta's fastest expanding African palm growing municipalities: Vistahermosa, Puerto Rico, Puerto Concordia and Puerto Lleras. It is also worth noting that Meta is an area where, in the past, the illegal drug trade has flourished, with the majority of coca crops located in the municipality of Mapiripán, but also in Vistahermosa and Puerto Rico (e.g., UNODC 2009: 13, 2012: 29).

Coca cultivation has, however, sharply declined in Meta from 18,740 hectares in 2004 to 3,040 hectares in 2011, an 84% decline (e.g., UNODC 2009: 13, 2012: 29). While this suggests that rising violence in Meta is not directly associated with the illegal drug trade, it is nonetheless

possible that the eradication of coca crops (namely, the GOC's manual eradication and aerial fumigation programmes) has contributed to displacement (Palacios 2012). This programme of coca eradication forms an integral part of Plan Colombia and is aimed at stymieing a major source of revenue for the FARC, which taxes coca transactions (while the FARC is accused of drug trafficking, its involvement in this activity is not clear-cut and is subject to debate; e.g., see Leech 2006, 2011; Brittain 2010). Importantly, Palacios (2012) acknowledges that such displacement may benefit palm oil cultivation given that abandoned land can be subsequently used for planting African palm. This argument is supported by Isacson and Poe's (2009: 14) research which is based on extensive documentary research and observations made from fieldwork conducted in Meta. They observe that in the surrounding areas of Puerto Toledo, previously a major coca market town in Puerto Rico that has been targeted for coca eradication, newly planted African palm now constitutes much of the agricultural activity.

In light of forced land sales in Meta and a lack of alternative economic opportunities, many affected farmers either have to replant their coca crops (which often continue to be eradicated), work in palm oil production or endure displacement (Mingorance 2006: 40; Isacson and Poe 2009: 16). This is compounded by the failure of the Colombian government to provide assistance to many farmers affected by eradication, the accidental fumigation of alternative crops, and the government's failure to invest in infrastructure needed to foster alternative markets for smallholding farmers (Isacson and Poe 2009: 15-16). With many of Meta's citizens continuing to harbour a 'deep distrust of a state' (Isacson and Poe 2009: 16), it is also feasible that some displaced citizens (particularly those displaced by eradication) have relocated deeper into guerrilla territories and continue to grow coca (for a similar argument analysing Colombia's southern departments during the 1990s, see Peceny and Durnan 2006).

Violence in Meta’s expanding palm oil municipalities

The palm oil producing municipalities of Vistahermosa, Puerto Rico, Puerto Concordia and Puerto Lleras exhibit some of the highest levels of violence in the department (from a total of 29 municipalities), especially in terms of forced displacement. As figure 4 shows, the two municipalities which have experienced the highest level of expansion in African palm cultivation between 2007 and 2009, Vistahermosa and Puerto Rico, have also experienced the greatest amount of forced displacement, with a total of 27,475 and 14,270 IDPs in these municipalities, respectively. Puerto Concordia and Puerto Lleras also have high numbers of IDPs, with 6,249 and 6,019 people displaced, respectively.

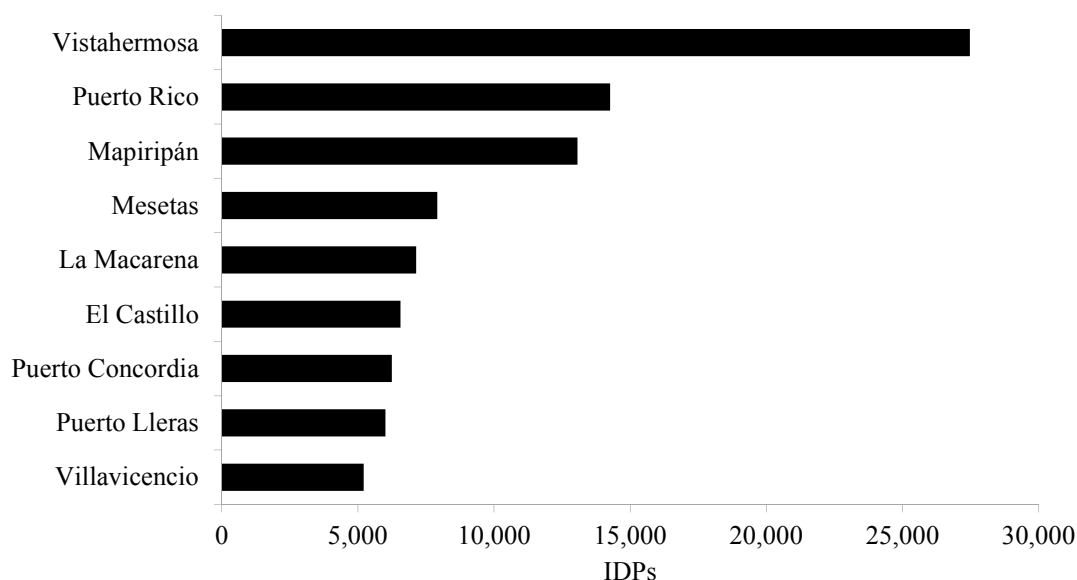


Figure 4. Ten highest ranking municipalities by number of IDPs in Meta, 1998-2010 (from a total of 29 municipalities)

Source: Acción Social (2011)

As figure 5 shows, violence has intensified in Meta’s fastest expanding palm growing municipalities during the 2000s. More specifically, forced displacement began to increase from 2004 onwards, hitting a peaks of 10,178, 9,474, and 7,172 in 2005, 2006 and 2007, respectively. Although the number of HRPV victims has oscillated somewhat (figure 6), the data nonetheless demonstrate an intensification of HRPV in these palm growing municipalities, with the annual

number of HRPV victims hitting peaks of 110 (in 2003), 120 (2005), 170 (2006), 154 (2008), and 109 (2009).

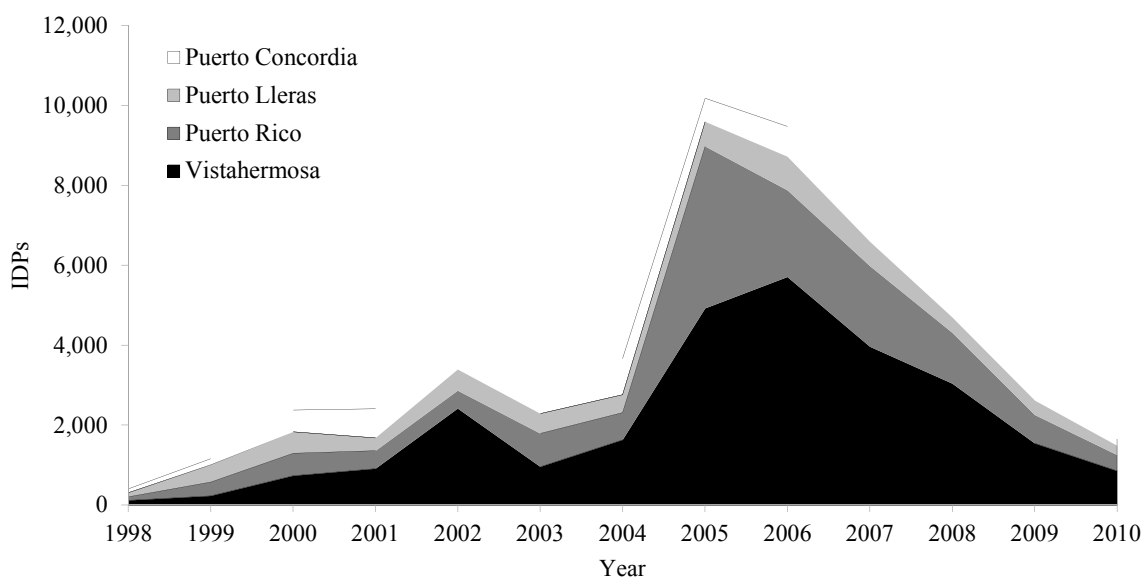


Figure 5: Forced displacement in Meta's four fastest expanding African palm growing municipalities, 1998-2010

Source: Data adapted from Acción Social (2011)

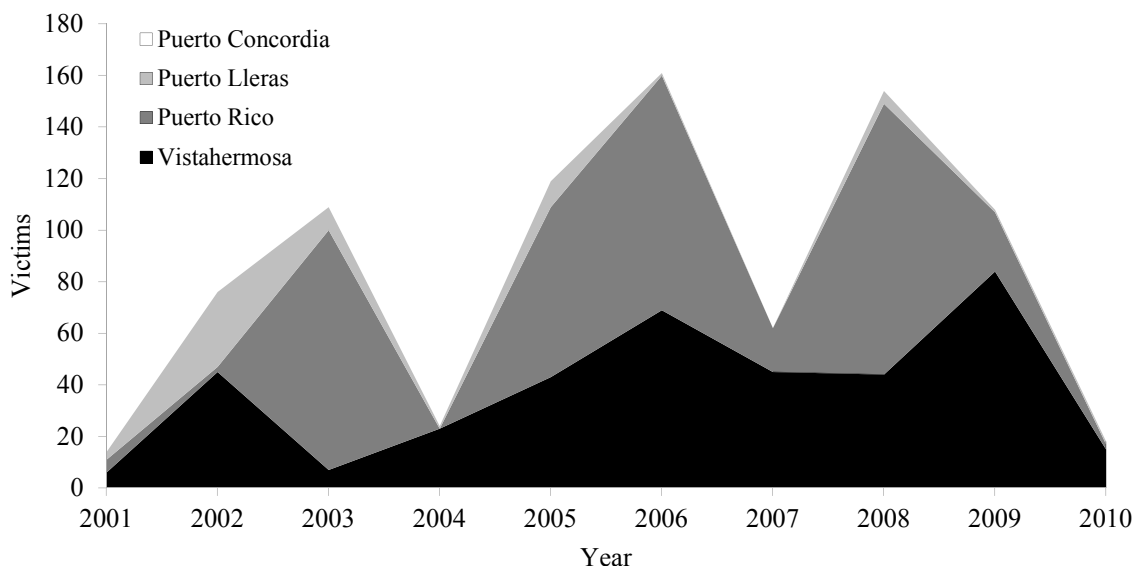


Figure 6: HRPV victims in Colombia's four fastest expanding African palm regions, 2001-2010

Source: Data adapted from Banco de Datos de Derechos Humanos y Violencia Política del CINEP (2011)

The data show that all armed groups have employed widespread violence in these palm growing areas (table 2). Nevertheless, in the two fastest expanding palm oil regions (Vistahermosa and Puerto Rico), the majority of HRPV victims were targeted by Colombia's public forces and the paramilitaries. The fastest expanding palm oil municipality, Vistahermosa, exhibits a particularly high level of paramilitary violence, with paramilitary groups responsible for 118 HRPV victims (31% of the total), while the public forces were responsible for 87 victims (23%). If the combined public forces-paramilitary actions are also considered, then the public forces-paramilitaries were responsible for a total of 220 HRPV victims in Vistahermosa, representing 58% of the total. The guerrillas were also responsible for a sizeable portion of HRPV victims in Vistahermosa, with 108 people subjected to guerrilla violence, 28% of the total.

In Puerto Rico, Colombia's public forces were responsible for the majority of HRPV victims, namely, 260 victims, representing 64% of the total. Nevertheless, victims subjected to some form of paramilitary violence (including combined public forces-paramilitary violence) totalled 22 victims, 16% of the total. Overall, public forces-paramilitary violence was responsible for 324 victims, representing 80% of the total. The guerrillas were responsible for 27 victims (7% of the total) in this municipality.

The numbers of HRPV victims are much lower in both Puerto Lleras and Puerto Concordia. In the former, however, the guerrillas were responsible for the majority of victims, namely, 42 HRPV victims (70% of the total). The paramilitaries were nonetheless responsible for a sizeable portion, namely, 14 HRPV victims (23%). If combined public forces-paramilitary actions are included, then public forces-paramilitary violence accounted for 16 victims (27%). In Puerto Concordia, the guerrillas were responsible for 18 victims, 50% of the total. Public

forces and paramilitary violence accounted for 7 victims, 20% of the total.

Table 2. Victims of HRPV by responsible group in fastest growing African palm regions, 2001-2010

Municipality	Public forces	Paramilitary	Combined public-paramilitary	FARC/ guerrilla	Other/ No info	Total
Vistahermosa	87	118	15	108	54	382
Puerto Rico	260	22	42	27	53	404
Puerto Lleras	0	14	2	42	2	60
Puerto Concordia	4	3	0	18	11	36
Total	351	157	59	195	120	882

Source: Data adapted from Banco de Datos de Derechos Humanos y Violencia Política del CINEP 2011

It is therefore important to note that the guerrillas have not simply capitulated in these African palm growing areas but have intensified their campaigns as they contest public forces-paramilitary consolidation in these regions. Indeed, while the guerrillas have left town centres in Vistahermosa and Puerto Rico as the public forces-paramilitary presence is consolidated, the FARC continues to be highly active in proximate rural areas (Isacson and Poe 2009).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding guerrilla violence, the Colombian public forces and paramilitaries were responsible for the majority (64%) of total HRPV victims in these four African palm growing municipalities. Moreover, the data above suggest that while the paramilitaries have been central to the expansion of palm oil in Meta, the role of the Colombian armed forces should not be underestimated. On the one hand, as noted above, the public armed forces have colluded with the paramilitaries. On the other hand, Colombia's public forces were responsible for the highest number of HRPV victims (40% of the total) in the four fastest expanding African palm municipalities. Further, violence in Meta began to increase in the period 2004-2005, when the Colombian government intensified its military campaign in the department, including in Meta's southern municipalities (Isacson and Poe 2009: 11-12).

While it is important to recall that CINEP's data largely overlook forced displacement, a preferred tactic of paramilitary groups (the inclusion of these data would therefore push paramilitary HRPV figures higher), it is also worth recalling that the GOC's coca eradication programme is likely to have contributed to forced displacement in Meta (discussed above). Moreover, Isacson and Poe (2009) report that Colombia's security forces, accompanied by members of the Prosecutor-General's Office (*Fiscalía*), have triggered displacement through actions such as mass arrests. According to accounts from local residents, many people have left towns and villages in Puerto Rico because they fear the *Fiscalía* and want to avoid being detained as suspected guerrillas supporters (Isacson and Poe 2009).

The data also suggest that as the public forces-paramilitary presence was consolidated in various parts of Meta, forced displacement steadily declined (figure 3). In other words, as noted above, forced displacement has served as a tactic to clear out territories and to achieve territorial control in areas of strategic and economic interest. After the public forces-paramilitaries achieved territorial control in various regions of Meta, forced displacement thus declined in the department. Figure 5 indicates a similar pattern in the palm growing zones discussed above. As widespread displacement led to the abandonment of land which was then used for palm oil cultivation, and the armed forces and paramilitaries gained a foothold in the area, forced displacement in palm growing regions gradually declined. Moreover, although it is difficult to ascertain, a decrease in coca cultivation and the subsequent decline of coca eradication efforts may further explain falling levels of displacement in Meta.

Similarly, levels of HRPV in Meta declined towards the end of the 2001-2010 period, further suggesting that the public forces and paramilitaries had consolidated their position in the

department during this time (figure 3). However, as figure 6 shows, levels of HRPV in the expanding palm growing zones have varied. For instance, after a decline in 2007, the number of HRPV victims rose in 2008 and remained high in 2009. In this light, while the data indicate that forced displacement declined after territorial control was achieved, the public forces and paramilitaries continue to police these palm growing zones and thus the number of HRPV victims is often high. Spikes in HRPV are also compounded by the actions of the guerrillas, who continue to challenge the presence of the public forces and paramilitaries in these palm growing areas.¹⁷

The HRPV figures in Meta's fastest expanding municipalities also help support the argument that Colombia's public forces have 'become private security corps for palm producers, and have committed many of the extrajudicial executions reported in the palm production areas' (Houldey 2008: 6). However, while the data support observations pertaining to collusion between palm oil companies and the public forces-paramilitaries in some areas of Colombia (e.g., see Richani 2002; Escobar 2004b; Mingorance 2006; IDMC 2007; Oslender 2007; Houldey 2008; Leech 2009; Ocampo Valencia 2009; Grajales 2011; Thomson 2011), more research into these links is required, especially in light of the rapid expansion of palm oil in Colombia. Indeed, before solid conclusions can be made, more research is needed into these links in Meta's fastest expanding palm growing municipalities. Further, the data above suggest that while scholars such as Palacios (2012) have focused on the actions of paramilitary groups and the guerrillas when analysing violence in Colombia's palm oil industry, it is imperative that future research considers the actions of Colombia's public forces.

Cultivation trends in Meta's fastest expanding African palm regions

As already discussed, in the period 2004-2008, the data illustrate a particularly acute period of

violence in Meta's four fastest expanding palm oil municipalities (figures 5 and 6). Considering the length of time it takes for African palm fruit to be harvestable (i.e., three to five years), if critical scholars are correct, then we should expect to see a rise in palm oil production in these municipalities from approximately 2007 onwards.

Available departmental figures (Gobernación del Meta 2006) show no or negligible production (namely, 28 tonnes in Vistahermosa) of palm oil during the period 2003-2005 in these four municipalities. By 2007, however, palm oil production increased to 5,800, 1,350 and 138 tonnes in Puerto Lleras, Puerto Rico and Vistahermosa, respectively. By 2009, production had risen further to 6,670, 2,010 and 460 tonnes, respectively (Gobernación del Meta 2010; according to the data, Puerto Concordia is yet to realise any tonnage of palm oil from the African palm planted in the municipality).

These production figures are likely to rise further in the near future as planted African palm matures and is harvestable. This is especially the case in Vistahermosa, where 835 hectares of African palm were planted (but not harvestable) in 2007, rising to 2,000 hectares and 2,500 hectares in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Similarly, by 2009, approximately 2,400 hectares of African were planted in Puerto Concordia, up from 1,600 hectares in 2007. This compares to 3,500 hectares of planted African palm in Puerto Lleras and 1,075 in Puerto Rico in 2009 (for data, see Gobernación del Meta 2009, 2010).

These trends in forced displacement and palm oil cultivation support the accounts of critical scholars who argue that the former has been integral to the expansion of the latter in Colombia. Further, while other palm growing municipalities in Meta have exhibited high levels of violence – for example, about 8% of the population of San Carlos De Guaroa (Meta's largest

palm growing municipality) was displaced between 1998 and 2010 (DANE 2010a; Acción Social 2011) – the violent trends discussed above extend well beyond the department of Meta.

Wider implications¹⁸

Other departments of Colombia's Eastern palm growing zone also exhibit high levels of violence. In the department of Casanare, for example, African palm cultivation has expanded and now constitutes 22% of Casanare's agricultural crops (Gobernación de Casanare 2012). As with Meta, forced displacement has been an acute problem in Casanare: between 1998 and 2010, 24,088 people have been displaced in the department, representing 9% of the departmental population (DANE 2005; Acción Social 2011). Paramilitary groups are also responsible for the majority of HRPV victims, followed by Colombia's public forces (CINEP 2011).

Similar to Meta, Casanare is an important oil producing region. While oil extraction is concentrated in the municipalities of Tauramena, Aguazul and Yopal, the municipality of Villanueva instead hosts a large amount of palm oil cultivation (Municipalidad de Villanueva 2011). The municipality of Villanueva also exhibits high levels of violence. For example, 1,955 people were forcibly displaced between 1998 and 2010 in Villanueva, representing 10% of the municipality's total population (DANE 2010b; Acción Social 2011). With further parallels to Meta, reports have linked violence to palm oil production in Casanare. For example, widespread paramilitary violence, including forced displacement and the subsequent planting of palm oil on abandoned land, has facilitated the expansion of the palm oil industry in the department (e.g., Mingorance 2006; Leech 2009; Semana 2009).

Similarly, the department of Nariño, located in the Western palm growing zone, has become an

increasingly important African palm growing region in Colombia (see Fedepalma 2007). The municipality of Tumaco hosts the bulk of Nariño's African palm and is a municipality which exhibits endemic violence. Between 1998 and 2010, 49,476 people were forcibly displaced in Tumaco, representing a staggering 31% of the municipality's population (DANE 2010a; Acción Social 2011). As with Meta, it has been reported that paramilitary groups in Nariño have used violence to acquire land for palm oil cultivation and to intimidate the local population (e.g., see Mingorance 2006; Leech 2009; Ocampo Valencia 2009; Maughan 2011).

Conclusion

The prominent set of civil war literature discussed earlier in this article suggests that civil war acutely inhibits economic growth. Underpinning this argument is the assumption that the destructive propensity of civil war inexorably impedes economic development. This has given rise to an often cited dictum: 'Civil war represents development in reverse'. Subscribing to this logic, emerging scholarship also suggests that intra-state violence retards levels of international trade in civil war economies.

Critical scholars, however, have argued that the 'development in reverse' logic is flawed and ignores the historical record of capitalism, which has often been expanded and entrenched through violence. For example, rather than inhibit economic growth, forced displacement can clear large swaths of land, thus creating commercial opportunities for domestic and foreign capital to subsequently exploit the abandoned territory. These scholars therefore highlight the centrality of violence to processes of political and economic 'progress' in a globalised capitalist economy.

The observations presented in this article do not resonate with the prominent set of civil war

scholarship but instead support the arguments of critical scholars. Indeed, the armed conflict in Meta has not precluded economic growth or retarded levels of exports from this region. On the contrary: in the case of palm oil, violence perpetrated by Colombia's public security forces and paramilitaries has cleared and secured areas for the expansion of African palm cultivation, production and exportation. Moreover, these armed actors have created a model of 'peaceful' industrial relations underpinned by violence. This violence has also lowered labour costs and facilitated the greater precariousness of labour conditions, ensuring that the benefits of economic growth related to palm oil are largely realised by palm oil companies *vis-à-vis* palm oil workers. Violence has thus created an attractive business climate for both domestic and foreign capital.

It would be naïve, however, to suggest that all civil war violence is conducive to the advancement of global capital. The analysis presented in this article thus suggests that *certain types of violence* in civil wars can bolster economic growth and enable emerging markets in conflict zones to enter and compete in the globalised economy. Indeed, in Colombia, public forces-paramilitary violence is qualitatively different from the violence perpetrated by the country's left-wing guerrilla groups, with the latter often attacking the economic interests of domestic and international capital. However, as we have seen, the violent actions of the former have supported the interests of domestic and foreign capital.

As noted above, violent trends related to palm oil extend beyond the department of Meta and are evident across Colombia. Similarly, links between violence and palm oil are not exclusive to Colombia. Indonesia, the world's largest exporter of palm oil, is a case in point. Violence has often been endemic in Indonesia and, according to the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Themnér and Wallensteen 2012a), the country has experienced internal armed

conflicts throughout the 1950-2005 period. There have been widespread episodes of violence and land disputes related to palm oil in Indonesia, especially in Sumatra, the island where the bulk of the country's palm production is located (e.g., see Marti 2008; Colchester et al. 2011; Yasir Alimi 2011). The links between conflict and agribusiness also extend beyond palm oil. For example, Gerber's (2010) research suggests that industrial tree plantations (ITPs) – large-scale mono-cultures of tree crops, which, in addition to palm oil, include such crops as eucalyptus, pines, teak and rubber tree – are causing large numbers of conflicts. Moreover, ITPs are often located in countries with civil wars (see Gerber 2010: 168-9).

An important final point needs to be made. As Cramer (2006: 47) warns, accepting that violent processes can advance economic development should not be 'distorted to justify cruel actions'. Instead, this acceptance should highlight that, while progress is something worth struggling for, 'The idea needs to be tempered by a sharper awareness that it will not erase the essential sources of suffering in society'. Moreover, Thomson (2011: 327) argues that agro-industrial projects which benefit from violence may constitute 'progress' in terms of job creation and foreign exchange earnings; however, capitalist development achieved through violent means should not be understood as 'progress' for all stakeholders. This is particularly true for the victims of forced displacement, who, as Ibáñez and Moya (2010) demonstrate, experience acute welfare losses. In this light, from the perspective of the thousands of civilians in Meta who are victims of political violence linked to African palm, economic growth driven by the expansion of the palm oil industry represents the obverse of 'progress'.

APPENDIX A

INFORMATION REGARDING CINEP'S DATA AND AUTHOR CODING

CINEP records a range of human rights violations and political violence, which include extra-

judicial killings, disappearances, collective displacement, torture, arbitrary detention, individual and collective threats, kidnapping, sexual violence, etc. (The extra-judicial killings of civilians by members of Colombia's public forces, who later disguised the victims' bodies to appear as insurgents killed in combat, are also recorded by CINEP. These executions are often referred to as the 'false positives' scandal.) CINEP records these violations by event; as such, multiple instances of human rights violations and political violence can be recorded in a single event. This has led some commentators to argue that the data show inflated numbers of human rights violations (e.g., O'Grady 2004). Supporters of the GOC, namely, Mary Anastasia O'Grady (2004), also criticise CINEP data for exclusively concentrating on violations committed by the state or state-sponsored actors (e.g., O'Grady 2004). This claim is manifestly false: the data indeed include violations committed by the guerrillas (see CINEP, 2008). Moreover, Holmes, Gutierrez de Piñeres and Curtin (2008: 68-71) compared GOC statistics on terrorism with CINEP figures on guerrilla violence and observed a high correlation between the two sets of data, providing confidence in the latter's data. For the purpose of the analysis relevant to this article, I have further coded the data to include only the *number of victims* per event rather than *number of violent acts* per event. This eliminates the problem of over-reporting human rights violations and political violence. (In fact, the problem of under-reporting human rights violations means that the situation in Colombia is likely to be worse than CINEP's data indicate; e.g., see Holmes, Gutierrez de Piñeres and Curtin 2008: 71; Colombia Defenders, 2009.) It is also worth noting that CERAC's (n.d.) dataset is based on CINEP's data; this dataset, however, has been further coded to record only actions deemed to be 'battle-related deaths' and 'battle-events'. Further, this dataset is only available at the department level. The data used in this article instead consider victims of all categories of violence perpetrated by all warring parties as coded by CINEP. To do this, I have further coded the data to better illustrate the authors of violent acts. In other words, CINEP's data do not use

a consolidated code or category to identify the author of an event. Violence perpetrated by Colombia's public forces, for example, can be recorded as Military Forces, Police, Air Force, Army, and so forth. Often, multiple authors can also be recorded for a single event (e.g., Military Forces, Police *and* Paramilitaries). In addition to coding CINEP's data by victim, I have further coded CINEP's data into consolidated codes for the authors of violence, namely, (1) Public Forces, (2) Paramilitaries, (3) Combined Public Forces-Paramilitaries, (4) FARC, (5) ELN, (6) Guerrillas (unspecified), (7) No information (as coded by CINEP), (8) Other (e.g., combatants, foreign agents, etc). I then compiled this data by year, author, number of victims, department and municipality.

APPENDIX B

CINEP's DATA AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT

CINEP's data include only collective/mass forced displacement (in Colombia, this is typically understood to be when at least 50 to 80 people are displaced in the same incident). CINEP's data thus omit individuals/individual households which have been forcibly displaced. Pertinently, this latter type of displacement is by far the most common form of forced displacement in Colombia (e.g., see Lari 2007; Ibáñez and Velásquez 2009). In this light, forced displacement data recorded by Acción Social, the Colombian government's agency responsible for documenting forced displacement, are used throughout this article.

With regard to HRPV, for the purpose of analysis, one significant event recorded by CINEP is excluded from the HRPV data used in this article, namely, the forced mass displacement of 6,000 people carried out by the paramilitaries in 2002. This event is excluded from the data because (1) this one event can skew the data in terms of the intensity and authors of HRPV during the 2000s and (2) due to the high number of IDPs in this event, it is difficult to be precise

with regard to the number of people displaced in Meta and the neighbouring department of Guaviare (see CINEP 2011). This episode should also be captured in Acción Social's data used in this article.

Notes

1. There is no consensus on how to define civil wars (for an overview, see Sambanis 2004). Nevertheless, pertinent to the analysis in this article, Colombia's conflict is consistently coded as a civil war or an internal armed conflict in the relevant datasets typically used for civil war analysis. (For datasets, see Sarkees and Reid 2000; Gleditsch et al. 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Lacina and Gleditsch 2005; Themnér and Wallensteen 2012a.; UCDP 2013.) The analysis that follows uses a broad definition of civil war violence which, as this article proceeds to discuss, encompasses forced displacement and violence against civilians perpetrated by belligerent armed groups of a particular conflict. In the case of Colombia, this refers to the public armed forces, the paramilitaries and guerrilla groups. Moreover, the terms 'civil war', 'intra-state conflict' and 'internal armed conflict' are used interchangeably throughout this article.
2. On the whole, these studies argue that trade is likely to produce economic growth (especially when mixed with other factors such as foreign direct investment), which, in turn, reduces the likelihood of internal conflict (for a good summary, see Magee and Massoud 2011; for studies, see Hegre et al. 2003; Barbieri and Reuveny 2005; Bussmann and Schneider 2007; Elbadawi and Hegre 2008).
3. For example, critics have argued that economic development can provoke civil war if economic growth is unfairly distributed and horizontal inequalities are exacerbated (e.g., Stewart 2002; Pugh 2006).
4. Which Kennedy analyses as the period between 1815 to 1885.
5. These economic estimations are also difficult to measure, with 'extensive debate over the accuracy of the different cost estimates' (Moser 2000: 25).
6. In fact, Cramer (2006) argues that this twin process constitutes primitive accumulation, Karl Marx's argument that the original accumulation of capital was inherently violent (Marx 1990: 875). While a discussion does not fit the scope of this paper, the suitability of applying primitive accumulation to contemporary debates can be contested. For Glassman (2006), a debate exists between Marxists (who argue that primitive accumulation is a distinct historical process which has now passed) and neo-Marxist (who see primitive accumulation as an on-going process). Nevertheless, both Marxist camps largely accept that capitalist accumulation was violent its incipiency and, in many parts of the world, continues to be violent in the extreme. It is this broad framework regarding the violent characteristics of globalised capitalist development which is applied throughout this article.
7. With hindsight, Williamson (2004) notes that ascertaining the degree of consensus with regard to attaining competitive exchange rates is problematic. In this light, as some critics argue (e.g., Birch and Mykhnenko 2010),

it is important to recognise diversity in the application of neo-liberalism across many countries.

8. For example, the GOC has ratified a number of free trade agreements, including with the US (entering into force in 2012), the EU (2013), Canada (2012), South Korea (2012), Chile (2009), the ‘Northern Triangle countries’ (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador; 2009-10), the European Free Trade Association countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland; 2009), and Mexico (1995) (see OECD 2012: 9-10, 99).

9. A discussion of the efficacy of neo-liberal policies in producing economic growth does not fit the scope of this paper. However, while Colombia has often produced robust economic growth, levels of poverty and inequality remain acute. Moreover, since neo-liberal restructuring began in 1991, wealth distribution has worsened. For example, in 1991, the richest 10% of Colombia’s population held a 39.5% share of the country’s total income; in 2010, the figure was 44.4% (World Bank 2012).

10. Estimations vary as to when Colombia’s civil war began. It is also worth noting that the GOC and Colombia’s largest guerrilla group entered into peace talks in October 2012. This process has not concluded and is not discussed in this article.

11. By 2011, the GOC recorded a total of 3,875,987 IDPs (Acción Social 2011). Moreover, IDP figures are cumulative and do not consider IDPs who have relocated and resettled.

12. Figures are taken from six Fedepalma reports. Where possible, the most recent report is used for annual figures as these figures are likely to be the most up-to-date.

13. Notwithstanding these costs, the number of small-scale growers has expanded during the 1990s and 2000s, aided by government financing schemes. Nevertheless, small-scale producers often accrue sizeable debts and ultimately enter into production agreements with large palm oil companies (e.g., Mingorance 2006: 13; Leech 2009: 2).

14. There are also well documented links between many of Colombia’s politicians and paramilitary groups (e.g., see IHRLC 2010). While important, a discussion does not fit the scope of this paper, which instead focuses on the links between Colombia’s public forces and paramilitaries.

15. Fidel Mingorance (2006) provides an in-depth discussion of Colombia’s palm oil industry. This includes an overview of the violations of Colombian and international law in palm growing regions. This overview is based on the accounts of the affected communities, social organisations, human rights groups and reports from Colombian government agencies. However, Mingorance’s data are not quantified and have no reference to chronology. Instead, Mingorance provides a list of violations committed in these palm growing regions, which are then outlined on a map of Colombia.

16. Other criticisms of CTAs are, *inter alia*, greater job precariousness, degradation of already unfair labour conditions in employer-employee relationships, the evasion of quasi-fiscal contributions, violations of labour laws, the loss of association and striking rights, the lack of trade union representation, and a lack of worker autonomy vis-à-vis companies (see Seeboldt and Salinas Abdala 2010: 50, footnote 17; see also Otis 2012).

17. This trend is also consistent with longer-term patterns in Colombia's conflict, whereby levels of violence vary across different periods (e.g., see data from UCDP 2013). Therefore, broader levels of HRPV in Meta (figure 3) could rise again.

18. The following data have also been further coded (namely, HRPV data from CINEP), as well as collated and compiled (i.e., forced displacement data), by this author.

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