

FOCUS ON COLOMBIA



The Republic of Colombia occupies the north-western part of South America. It covers an area of 1,140,000 square kilometres, which is roughly equal to the area of Portugal, Spain, and France put together. Nearly 80% of the 44 million citizens live in urban areas. The eastern plains—three-fifths of the country's total area—are home to only 2% of the country's population. The capital, Bogotá, has a population of 7 million. Ethnically, 75% of the population is a result of the intermingling of indigenous Indians, Spanish colonists, and African slaves. Around 20% are European and only about 1% can be identified as fully Indian.

Colombia is well endowed with minerals and energy resources. It has the largest coal reserves in Latin America and significant amounts of oil, gold, silver, platinum, and emeralds. Sadly, it is also the world's leading supplier of illicitly refined cocaine and a growing supplier of heroin. As a result, the government is engaged in a broad range of narcotics control activities.

History

In 1538 Spain established the colony of New Granada—the

name stuck until 1861—but centuries later in 1819 after a fourteen-year struggle, the colony gained its independence from Spain. In the decades following, bitter rivalry between the Conservative and Liberal Parties led to two civil wars. The War of a Thousand Days (1899–1902) cost an estimated 100,000 lives. Up to 300,000 people perished during “La Violencia” (The Violence) of the late 1940s and 1950s.

A vicious attack on the Palace of Justice in Bogotá in 1985 shocked Colombia and the entire world. Of the 115 people killed, eleven were Supreme Court justices. A new constitution was drafted in 1991. Since then administrations have had to contend with both guerrillas and the narcotics traffickers. It is claimed that up to a thousand kidnappings take place each year. Thirty-five thousand people have been killed in the last decade.

Religion

Figures for religious groups are given as Roman Catholic, 93%; Protestant, 4%; others (including cults), 3%. Roman Catholicism came with the

Spanish conquest. Evangelical Protestantism didn't begin to make any noticeable inroads until after the 1840s.

Between 1948 and 1958, during the conflict between Conservatives and Liberals, Protestants were categorised as Liberals by fanatical Catholics, who took advantage of the political confusion to persecute them. Evangelical churches were destroyed, damaged, or confiscated, and many Christians were killed. In spite of this suffering evangelicals grew in number. In 1933 there were around fifteen thousand evangelicals. Today there are estimated to be around 2 million.

Prison Broadcast

Medellín is the nation's most violent city and Bellavista Prison its most lethal killing field. Behind the high walls, inmates once played soccer with a severed human head.

Often two prisoners a day were murdered as rival groups extended their warfare into the prison's maze of scrap-wood cubicles.

In 1990 inmates rioted. Days into the stand-off, Oscar Osorio, a Bellavista convict who became



prison chaplain, found the prison's public address system was still working. He boldly called prisoners to repentance. To the amazement of prison authorities, the inmates laid down their weapons. The riot was over. But more than that, the killing stopped, and the gospel swept through Bellavista. Articles have been written documenting the dramatic happenings in Bellavista prison during the intervening years. There are now more than five hundred prisoners engaged in Bible training programmes. And each day Christian prisoners proclaim "freedom in Christ" on a half-hour, live radio broadcast direct from the prison to the 3 million citizens living outside in Medellín.

Modern Missionaries

Colombia has almost eighty indigenous communities, each with its own language. Most of them are small in number. The task of reaching them is greatly hampered by the remoteness of the villages, the complexity of the

languages, and the presence of the guerrillas, who try to recruit native peoples for their own cause.

The Curipaco people are found on the Colombia/Venezuela border. My sister and brother-in-law lived in that remote tribe for many years, commenced churches and schools, and translated the New Testament. Juan Alan, a nephew, is the administrator of an evangelical hospital in Bogota. (Juan lived in Northern Ireland for a time and attended Kilskeery Independent Christian School.) The hospital was originally commenced by missionary Francis Hancox in the 1940s to treat evangelical Protestants who were refused treatment elsewhere. When the first patient requested admission, Francis slept on a

cot, giving her own bed to the patient. British monarch



Queen Elizabeth honoured Miss Hancox by awarding her an M.B.E. Miss Hancox later learned that the British Ambassador had recommended her after a visit he paid to her clinic during which he saw her treat a believer who had been viciously attacked by fanatical Roman Catholics. Miss Hancox, for some years a member of Sandown Road Free Presbyterian Church, was later supported by the Free Presbyterian Missionary Council. Dr. Alan Cairns has written about Miss Hancox, "A missionary who gave her all," in his published history of the Missionary Council.

A Great Need

I keep a small Colombian flag on my desk. The yellow stripe represents the gold for which the country is famous. It reminds the citizens of the wealth of the nation. The blue stripe represents the sky and sea and symbolises freedom and liberty. The red stripe is a reminder of those who sacrificed their life so that the people of Colombia could be free.

To me, however, the yellow is a reminder of the Scriptures that are more valuable than

gold that perishes (Psalm 19:10; Psalm 119:72, 127). My brother-in-law is now the manager of a print shop in Bogota that has one hundred full-time workers printing Bibles, books, and tracts, not only for Colombia but also for all of South America. A nephew has now joined the work. Pray for the literature as it is distributed that many may find true riches in Christ, for the blue of the flag reminds me that the only way to true freedom for those held in bondage by sin is through the liberating message of the gospel. The red reminds me of the cost the Saviour paid to provide redemption. Colombia needs to hear there is redemption through His blood.

Many have sacrificed their lives to spread the gospel in Colombia. Since 1988 at least seventy evangelical ministers have been murdered. During a visit I made to relatives in Bogotá, news came to the prayer meeting that another young pastor had been kidnapped in an isolated village. New Tribes Mission alone has had five missionaries kidnapped and killed in the past decade. Pray that many in Colombia will come to experience spiritual freedom and eternal riches through the message of salvation in Christ. ■



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