Iron fist politics in Colombia:
A panorama of destruction

During the last decade many Latin American countries have resorted to mano dura (iron fist) politics and militarisation to combat crime, drugs and subversion. The high number of killed, injured and displaced persons in Colombia is a testimony of the failure of the iron fist policy with regard to in a crucial aspect of security: developing cultures of respect. When making policy in response to illegal groups’ violence, does using the same violent strategy allow for constructive social engagement? Does it break cycles of violence? While the villains’ death makes for a peaceful ending in comic books, in Latin America it reproduces violence. It is urgent to reimagine heroism and restore “enemies” their human dignity.

SECURITY POLICIES IN LATIN AMERICA
In response to high rates of crime, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Brazil, Mexico and Colombia have designed security policies based on the use of military force. Just as the superhero Iron Fist eradicates evil in the Marvel comics world, these security policies attempt to create peace through the physical and political extermination of illegal armed groups. In Colombia for instance, the government decided to win the war against drugs and subversion by military means. According to official reports, over 15,000 members of non-state armed groups and more than 4,000 army soldiers have lost their lives between 2002 and 2008 (Colombian Ministry of Defence; Codhes 2008) and 5 million people are internally displaced (Norwegian Refugee Council 2011).

FROM “INTERNAL ARMED CONFLICT” TO “WAR ON TERROR”
The government has traditionally defined the Colombian conflict as a war between the state and the communist guerrillas, but this changed radically since the 1980s. The expansion of drug cartels and the creation of paramilitary groups increased the complexity of the conflict. The number of war actors proliferated and intricate connections amongst them emerged. Violence rates rose to the highest in the world, and civilians became the main victims of the illegal armed groups and the armed state forces (Echavarría 2009, Doing gender in the midst of war, Journal of Peace Research 2).

Influenced by the US reaction to the attacks on 11 September 2001, the naming of the Colombian conflict went from “internal armed
IRON FIST POLITICS IN COLOMBIA: A PANORAMA OF DESTRUCTION

The war effort has cost dearly in terms of human lives lost, and also has proven very expensive for Colombians. In 2010 for instance, Colombia was the Latin American country allocating the most money to military spending in relation to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at 4.1 per cent, the World Bank reported. When including the money needed for state reparations to victims, amongst other defence costs, the number goes up to 6.5 per cent of the GDP (Codhes 2009).

Official reports use the concept “executed” when guerrillas, paramilitaries and gang members die in combat, and the word “assassinated” when army soldiers die in combat. Colombia is a democracy committed to human rights treaties; however, the life of a hero and villain is not worth the same. The rights to life and equality admit exceptions under Iron Fist politics. On average, seven Colombians die in combat every day.

Some cases under investigation of assassinations are not included in the official report. “The scandal of the false positives” refers to the assassination of thousands of civilians murdered by the army, who were then dressed in rebel uniforms or given guns. They were then presented as guerrillas or paramilitaries killed in combat. This allowed units to fabricate results, and officers to gain promotion and public recognition (BBC news 2009). The army has already taken

Table 1: Official figures of individuals affected by the armed confrontation. Colombia, 2002-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Figure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total subversive executed</td>
<td>12,713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total paramilitaries and criminal gang members executed</td>
<td>2,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total members of the state forces assassinated</td>
<td>3,948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total arrested</td>
<td>49,523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injured - state armed forces</td>
<td>11,488</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Adapted from: Colombian Ministry of Defence. Period 2002-September 2008

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responsibility for some of the cases. In 2009 the Colombian army launched a TV and radio campaign called “heroes in Colombia do exist” (Los héroes en Colombia sí existen) referring to soldiers who courageously fight terror.

**ENEMIES: WHO ARE THEY?**
The Colombian security discourse has created two main political identities: the terrorists “they” and the group of good Colombians “us” (Echavarría 2010, In/Security in Colombia). The category “terrorists/Them” comprises all members of non-state armed groups, and also sectors of civil society who dissent from the pillars of the security policy. For instance, in February 2011 Nobel Peace laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel criticised the rights violations caused by the terrorist, to remove them completely from Colombia (Caracol Radio 12 August 2011; italics added).

The category “heroes/us” has created a fascist social separation. The “other,” the “different,” the one who may disagree with the norm is becoming synonymous with “enemy.”

**GROWING INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE**
In Colombia, the number of bombs, massive kidnappings and other “loud” forms of political violence by guerrillas and drug cartels has decreased since the security policy started in 2002. At the same time, new studies reveal an increase in the use of violence to solve daily interpersonal conflicts. In February 2011, the political magazine Semana published an article titled “Intolerance” posing the question: “Colombians increasingly solve their daily conflicts by using guns and knives, what is going on?”

Interpersonal violence has not only increased but also expanded from capital cities to smaller urban centres. The number of unionists and indigenous persons assassinated has increased since 2007, and also offences such as robbery, sexual assault and domestic violence increased substantially from 2004 to 2010 (CNP 2010, Seguridad Democrática: balance de ocho años; Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal 2010, Forensis).

**EMERGENCE OF TOTALITARIAN FORMS OF HEROISM**
In August 2011 the Colombian president was asked about the increasing levels of interpersonal violence in urban centres. He claimed the new type of violence was a residual effect of the “success of the security policy” to combat terror (El Tiempo 10 November 2011; italics added).

Contrary to this analysis, an increase on violence may be a response to various complex factors, including the security policy’s “us” versus “them” language, and moral justification of violence as valid political action that the policy teaches by example.

The growing interpersonal violence may be a response to an understanding of “peace” as an ideal future status and not as an attitude in the present. The culture of intolerance denounced by Semana magazine relates to the stigmatisation of persons and groups and their labelling as “enemies.” The security discourse influences a change in attitude in the community and shapes the way individuals relate to each other. Earlier this year the Minister of Defence said, “The order given by the president to military commanders and police forces is raging, raging and raging against the terrorists, to remove them completely from Colombia (Caracol Radio 12 August 2011; italics added).

The identification of soldiers and military leaders as “heroes” also plays a role in constructing an image of the use of deadly force as a valid tool for solving social and interpersonal conflict. Public rewards for killing “enemies” reproduce absolute truths about good and evil in a society and contribute to an understanding of violence as a problem of the individual, disconnected from dynamics of poverty, lack of opportunities and marginalisation.

In cases such as Colombia, the security paradigm creates totalitarian forms of heroism based on the use of violence rather than respect for human rights and dignity. For instance, not long ago the Colombian president celebrated the success of a military operation, which caused the death of the FARC guerrilla’s political leader. He said, “Our heroes have changed the history of the country for the better (El Tiempo 5 November 2011).

**PRACTICES OF DEHUMANISATION**
The practice of celebrating death and displaying wounded corpses in mass media has led to forbidden and hidden processes of mourning, since the bodies of the “illegals” are dehumanised, merely linked to anti-
values. Thus, mourning “their” death has become suspicious and politically incorrect. Not even relatives dare to claim the bodies. As a consequence, indifference towards violent deaths has become the norm. The high number of killed, injured and displaced persons in Colombia is a testimony of the failure of the iron fist policy in a crucial aspect of security: developing cultures of respect and trust.

Acts, which used to be considered atrocious and illegal, are today considered essential for national peace. The youth in Colombia receive the message that killing is heroic and that designing public policy in response to violence from non-state armed groups, does using the same violent strategy allow for constructive social engagement? Does it break cycles of violence? Protracted armed conflict show that, in the case of Colombia, it does not.

IN SEARCH OF ALTERNATIVES

Colombia has lived through armed conflict for more than five decades and seen human rights abuses by all parties to the conflict. If aiming to stop cyclic violence, peace needs to be addressed as substantially different from pacification. The political and physical elimination of persons and groups is in itself structural and cultural violence. If nonviolent policymaking continues being postponed until all enemies have been eradicated, it will never happen. As long as individuals are different from one another, they can imagine enemies.

Besides an iron fist policy, another option is to imagine communities in a web of relations that include the so-called enemy. It is possible to be guided by a radical principle of inclusiveness supported by public institutions. Colombia and other Latin American countries need to rethink what it means to live in a democracy besides holding periodic elections. It is urgent to publicly reject armed structures as productive enterprises – to discourage the systematic use of deadly force by state and non-state armed forces and start legitimising dialogue, inclusion and radical respect for the right to life.

CONCLUSION

If security policymaking continues its current course in Colombia and generally in Latin America, public institutions will reach a point much closer to totalitarianism than democracy. The withdrawal process has already started. The challenge is to break cycles of violence and to facilitate constructive social engagement beyond dual identities. For that purpose, it is essential to re-dignify each person’s humanity and to make policy accordingly. Peace needs to be addressed as substantially different from pacification.