

Killing by Colombian military escalates protests against state violence

By Andrea Lobo
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The killing of 38-year-old Juliana Giraldo Díaz by troops in the northwestern Colombian department of Cauca has fueled an escalation of demonstrations against state violence across the country.

A video of her husband, 29-year-old Francisco Restrepo, shouting to soldiers, “We have no guns, no drugs, nothing,” soon became viral. Demonstrations followed and continued into the night in Popayán, capital of Cauca; Cali, in the neighboring Valle de Cauca Department; and Medellín.

In an interview with *Semana*, Restrepo explained that he was driving with Giraldo and two friends in the backseats to a nearby town to buy spare car parts when he saw a group of soldiers on the road stopping vehicles without the usual signs of a checkpoint.

Having left the car’s papers at home, he turned the car around. At that point, two soldiers jumped out of the bushes and shot a volley of bullets toward the car without warning, he said, striking Giraldo in the head. “The four of us could’ve been killed,” he said, adding that soldiers immediately tried “to cover it up, picking up the casings, gathering the rifles and taking away the actual perpetrator of the crime.”

Giraldo was a computer engineer who had a beauty parlor in Miranda, Cauca. She lived with Restrepo in his parents’ home. He explains that they also made a living raising and selling chickens, a common activity among families of more limited means.

Anticipating the rehearsed official apologies, Restrepo stated: “Now the army can make a statement, the president can make a statement, so what? Could they ever compensate for losing my partner? They will never be able to pay for what someone does for you; she was my happiness.”

Minutes later, Duque and his military chiefs condemned the killing in perfunctory tweets. The Army itself issued a statement pledging to cooperate with the investigation.

Such statements are made as the country stands on the verge of a social explosion.

Mass protests on September 9 in Bogotá triggered by the police killing of worker Javier Ordóñez were crushed by the National Police with gunfire, massacring 14 people. This led to a national strike on Monday which saw demonstrations in all major cities and towns across the country, with riot police violently attacking protesters in Bogotá and Medellín.

On Tuesday, the Supreme Court issued a ruling confirming that, based on a review of evidence from the mass demonstrations in Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and Barranquilla in November 2019, “there existed—and this might continue—a repeated, constant and disproportionate aggression by law enforcement against those who peacefully demonstrated.”

The ruling orders the government in 14 separate points to guarantee the right to peacefully protest. The court adds that repression by the specialized Mobile Anti-disturbance Squadron (ESMAD) is acceptable, but only for “extreme situations.”

The Defense Ministry dismissed the findings and ruling stating “peaceful protests are guaranteed,” while president Duque added, “The Colombian state has always been respectful of peaceful freedom of expression by citizens.”

On Thursday, however, the ESMAD was deployed to attack peaceful protesters in Cali and Popayán. During a confrontation with protesters outside of military barracks in Cali, a police officer shot a concealed firearm against the demonstrators and was filmed subsequently putting it back in his vest. This shows that deadly force will be used again at a moment’s notice.

The armed forces and ruling elite are gradually upping the ante with greater violence, recognizing that the increased popular resistance to state violence is rooted in class tensions greatly exacerbated by their criminal

response to the coronavirus pandemic. In Colombia, this has led to the fifth highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and nearly 25,000 deaths, rampant poverty and 25 percent unemployment.

Contrary to what the official “opposition” claims, the turn to authoritarianism is due not merely to the particularly fascistic outlook of President Ivan Duque or his close ally in the White House. It is rooted in the deepening social and political crisis of global capitalism.

All factions of the ruling class internationally have centered their response to the pandemic on protecting their wealth and assigning greater resources for war preparations, all at the expense of workers’ lives and livelihoods.

This is confirmed by the efforts of all pro-capitalist parties and trade unions in the “opposition” working to contain social opposition and channel it behind appeals to the military and illusions in “police reform” and rotten bourgeois democratic politics.

Thursday’s events in particular reveal that the wave of social unrest is merging with opposition to the devastation caused by the state’s counter-insurrectionary war against the peasant-based guerrillas. These operations have resulted in the killing of more than 200,000 civilians and the displacement of 7 million people since the 1960s.

The war has been driven by US imperialism’s efforts to build up the Colombian security forces as a bastion of US military control over Latin America. Currently, these efforts have focused on the drive to overthrow the Venezuelan government and install a US puppet regime. Washington has long justified its support for the war in Colombia on the basis of fighting “narco-terrorism,” a catch-all term to refer to peasant-based guerrillas, drug cartels and any organization or government critical of Washington.

However, evidence abounds that US officials ignore the close ties between the Colombian security forces and oligarchy and the drug cartels. In fact, a 2017 White House memorandum noted that Trump considered designating Colombia in noncompliance with drug trafficking norms. “Ultimately, Colombia is not designated because the Colombian National Police and Armed Forces are close law enforcement and security partners of the United States,” it states.

Now, the Colombian government and the compliant media are justifying a further crackdown and online censorship, based on the claim that protests are being organized by “criminal organizations” on social media.

Miranda has long been one of the hotspots of military

operations against the guerrillas and peasants.

As of 2010, 176 “false-positive cases” were documented in El Cauca by the human rights group Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos. The chapter on Cauca explains:

The public forces have acted systematically to enforce their control over the different populations in the department using blood and fire, employing the accusation of “guerrilla collaborators”—meanwhile showing their “successes” to their superiors as well as national and international opinion—to present “battle casualties” of citizens from humble backgrounds.

The report also cites the killing of a 23-year-old demonstrator by the ESMAD in 2007 on the same road as Giraldo.

In August 2019, three indigenous people were killed in a bus on that same road in an alleged crossfire, but the case was never resolved. Just last week, a few kilometers south of the area, five civilians on a public bus were hit by bullets but survived.

A wave of roadblocks and demonstrations in 2012 demanding the closing of the military base in Miranda led the Ministry of Defense to threateningly insinuate that “a terrorist organization” was behind the protests.

Between 2000 and 2010, thousands of impoverished workers and peasants across the country were victims of the deliberate “false-positive” killings in which civilians murdered by the military were made to look like guerrillas in order to inflate body counts. Cables show that the Pentagon was fully aware of this barbaric practice but continued its collaboration and aid as usual.

The brazen and reckless attack on Juliana Giraldo was the outcome of the capitalist state’s total disregard for life and its terror tactics against the impoverished masses at the behest of the Colombian capitalist class and US imperialism.

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