

## PEACE: WHAT WAR ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

By Eduardo Posada

The present government's peace policy – like its predecessors' – is conceived on mistaken and confused premises. Public opinion, and sectors of "civil society" also constantly refer to peace in language full of confusions. When we say we want peace, what war are we talking about? Are we engaged in a civil war, as the foreign press repeats almost daily? What in fact is the nature of the conflict in Colombia? And why is it important to have a precise definition of it?

We could start by defining what the Colombian conflict is not. We are not involved in a war of national liberation, such as those which took place in the old empires of Britain, France or Portugal, the anti-colonial struggles that exploded in Africa and Asia since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nor is it a war of secession, driven by nationalist causes such as that of ETA against the State and society of Spain; nor is it inspired in legendary conflicts of religious origins, such as that in Northern Ireland. And it is not an ethnic war between communities divided by their racial make-up, as in so many of the conflicts of post-colonial Africa, where the frontiers of the new states did not take account of the ethnic diversity of the population.

In a recent work Charles King approaches the study of how to end "civil wars" (Ending Civil Wars, Adelphi Papers, 308, 1997) King classes some 43 conflicts in the contemporary world as civil wars, even though they do not have much in common. Everything seems to fall under the concept of "civil war" The phrase certainly suggests an internal conflict rather than a war between States. But it also evokes a generalized mobilization of polarized populations. That, at least, is the image of the American civil war in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the Spanish civil war in the 20<sup>th</sup> – another "classic" civil war. These elements of generalized mobilization or internal polarization between two communities is visibly absent in Colombia. Sociologist Fernando Uricechea pointed this out recently when he rightly rejected the description of the Colombian conflict as civil war (What civil war) *El Tiempo*, October 2000). But King is one of many international analysts who disagree. Others have gone further: some extreme positions describe our conflict as a civil war uninterrupted since independence. As Uricechea concludes, to classify the Colombian conflict as civil war is "objectively incorrect" and "worse, politically perverse", since it is affording guerrilla violence a legitimacy which it does not have.

In Colombia there is no "civil war, but a war against civilians" says Hernando Gomez. This play on words has caught the attention of international observers such as Fernando Savater ("Colombia at its last gasp", *EL Tiempo* 12/12/99). It has also found an echo within Colombia, even within the government. But the description is incomplete and may further confuse our understanding of the nature of the conflict. Our war is also against the agents of the State, defenders and representatives of the constitutional order. In Colombia "civil society" cannot be defined as the absolute opposite of the State, as if it was stripped of any representation in State institutions, or as if the fate of the State were somehow not linked to the fate of civil society. There are problems and imperfections indeed; but the legitimacy of the system is regularly reasserted through the election cycle which continues to function even in very serious conflict, as was shown by the elections on 29 October.

Government has usually avoided the use of the expression “civil war”, and has indeed recently and openly rejected it. Some like the notion of “war against the civilians”, as noted. There have been other attempts to make a definition. In a speech on 22 October 1998 President Pastrana said that “Colombia has to clearly different wars; the drug-traffickers’ war on the country and on the world, and the guerrillas’ confrontation with the economic. Social and political order which they consider to be unjust, corrupt and a protector of privilege”. The government has accepted that the State and society face “wars”, and has allowed that one of them has political motivations. The term which it most commonly uses is “internal armed conflict”, This is closest to the terms of international law and to the flexibility which the quest for a political solution requires. But it is still vague, and does not help to define the nature of the conflict. Indeed, when we examine the government’s rhetoric more closely as to the objectives of peace – “comprehensive peace” – the definition of “conflict” seems to extend to a sort of general confrontation between Colombians, as if in the end we were really talking about a “violent culture” common to all of us, and not to the violent actions of certain outlaw armed groups – be they guerrillas, paramilitaries or drug-traffickers.

A more precise definition of the nature of our conflict naturally involves the identification of agents, conduct and responsibilities. Any definition that we adopt has effects on the application of international law. Such definitions also condition the perception that world opinion has of the conflict. In the western democracies the perception is reflected by the level of pressure on the management of their foreign policy regarding Colombia. The mistaken image of a “civil war” or more mistaken still, the idea that we are suffering from a culture of violence” only serves to scare off the international community. The notion that this is not a “civil war but a war against civilians” implicitly leaves the position of the State in doubt. With such confused definitions, any diplomacy for peace runs a high risk of isolation, disinterest and eventually, rejection. For Colombians, the most significant point is the effect which the definition has on the nature of the conflict in the possibilities of speedy solution. All policies are developed on the basis of diagnosis. A policy which aims for “comprehensive peace”, such as that developed by the government, is therefore in need of urgent reconsideration. And the first question to be answered is “What kind of war are we talking about?”

This is the second of a series of articles on the predominant language of political analysis of Colombian realities and its effect on the peace process.