# Colombian drug violence leads to exodus

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## Body

Wealthy professionals fleeing the crime in record numbers are taking their money and skills from the struggling nation.

As the United States is preparing to dramatically increase its commitment to the ***drug*** war in Colombia, a troubling phenomenon is headed in the opposite direction.

Colombians by the thousands are bailing out of their country.

Miami immigration lawyers say their offices are besieged by immigrants seeking refuge from the ***drug***-fueled ***violence*** that has brought Colombia to its knees.

"It's a veritable ***exodus*** of people who are leaving because of insecurity," said Michael Bander, a ***leading*** Miami immigration lawyer. "There's no optimism anymore. They drained it out of themselves."

COLOMBIA

President Clinton is due to visit Colombia this month in a show of personal support for President Andres Pastrana. Last week Clinton signed a directive making U.S. assistance to Colombia a "national priority." This comes on the back of a $ 1.3-billion aid package approved by Congress in July.

But the flight from Colombia hardly bodes well for U.S. policy.

Unlike previous immigration waves to hit South Florida, most of the new arrivals are wealthy businessmen and middle-class professionals. Their departure is a double blow, combining capital flight with a brain drain the country can ill afford in a moment of crisis.

In their desperation to leave many have sold property and cashed in their savings, wondering if they will ever return.

"We don't see any future in Colombia," said Juan Carlos Velasquez, who left a computer business in the capital, Bogota, to move to Miami with his pregnant wife in January. "Every day the news reports more massacres. So many, it's like listening to a nightly sportscast."

Their decision to leave was prompted by a letter threatening they would be kidnapped, or their businesses bombed and employees killed, if they did not pay up. Guerrillas and paramilitary groups commonly demand what is known in Colombia as a vacuna, Spanish for vaccination, to finance their armies. Paying the vacuna affords a family immunity from the threat of ***violence*** - at least temporarily.

"For the last two months we were too frightened to leave the house," Velasquez said. "The government doesn't do anything. We have no one left to defend us."

Staying in Colombia would have meant purchasing a bulletproof car and hiring bodyguards. "We didn't want to live like that. It means a change of mentality. We didn't want to become part of the culture of ***violence***," he said.

The ***exodus*** of ***Colombian*** professionals is a sign of how deep the crisis has reached. Until recently the ***violence*** was largely limited to areas of the countryside where ***drug*** lords, guerrillas and paramilitary groups fought out their turf wars.

But as the guerrillas and paramilitaries have grown in size, requiring more money, their criminal tentacles have been increasingly felt in the cities.

Colombia holds the world record for kidnappings. Last year the official number of abductions reported rose to 2,945 cases, up 30 percent from the previous year.

On top of that an economic recession has seen unemployment rise, fueling common street crime. "Now no one is untouchable," said Bruce Bagley, a top Colombia expert at the University of Miami. "You can't work in the cities anymore. You can't run businesses without paying taxes to guerrillas or paramilitaries. Colombians love their country, but you can't live like that."

Because many Colombians arrive in the country on tourist visas, it's hard to know how many plan to become permanent residents. ***Colombian*** officials say that as many as 200,000 Colombians have left the country in the past two years, mostly for the United States.

In 1999, 366,423 Colombians applied for U.S. visas, more than double the number in 1997.

And the pace shows no signs of letting up.

Their presence is being felt all over Miami, where Colombians now make up the second largest immigrant group after Cubans. Every Sunday, hundreds of Colombians pack the pews at the Apostolic Mission of Christ, an Orthodox church near downtown Miami. The church offers cut-price legal services to less well-off arrivals. At the end of the service a priest asks how many Colombians in the congregation need advice about immigration. Nearly half raise their hands.

At the Miami office of the ***Colombian***-American Service Association, program director Johanna Davila says her agency assists some 1,000 newly arrived Colombians each month.

Davila left Colombia two years ago after her brother was killed.

Although more than 70 percent of those who come to the office say they left Colombia after receiving threats, Davila said most do not have enough evidence to present a solid case for political asylum.

"In Colombia people are too scared to go to the authorities and make a formal complaint," she said. "When they get here they don't have any legal proof of what happened to them."

Even so, applications by Colombians for political asylum have risen sharply in the past two years, according to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. In 1999 the INS received 399 cases, compared with 842 in the first six months of this year.

Washington has so far rejected calls from ***Colombian*** emigres to grant them temporary refugee status. Privately, U.S. officials say most of the immigrants are members of Colombia's upper crust, well able to fend for themselves.

In order to qualify for asylum, Colombians must show a credible fear of persecution on grounds of political or religious belief, or membership in an especially vulnerable social group.

While being rich may make businessmen a target for extortion and kidnapping in Colombia, the INS does not consider mere wealth sufficient justification.

These days the INS does appear to be lending a more sympathetic ear to cases from Colombia. Last year only 122 asylum cases were granted with a 39 percent approval rate, compared with 61 percent, or 348 cases, this year.

Irma Londono, 42, won her asylum claim in June, less than two months after filing an application. A journalist who worked with ***Colombian*** army intelligence, she was able to document her case after receiving repeated threats.

She recalled attending her asylum hearing a day after news from Colombia of a particularly vicious killing. Armed men had placed a booby-trap bomb around the neck of an extortion victim.

"The INS officer who was attending my case was really affected by that," she said.

But in many cases political asylum isn't the only option.

At Bander's law firm, one of the largest handling immigration cases in Miami, staff members say they receive up to 100 new visa applications from Colombians every week. In most cases Bander recommends other alternatives, including non-immigrant business and investor visas.

Due to the sudden demand, his firm has organized seminars in several ***Colombian*** cities this year explaining how to travel legally to the United States.

"I tell them it's not difficult to get here," said Yvonne Torres, a ***Colombian***-born paralegal on Bander's staff. "In fact it's very easy because they have talent and are professionals."

As Miami's image as "the capital of the Americas" has evolved in recent years, many U.S. companies doing business in Latin America have opened offices in the city.

"There's a demand in Miami for qualified people from Latin America," Torres said. "We show them what they need to do to become eligible."

As an example she gives the case of a real estate agent from Cali, Colombia's second largest city, who now works with Spanish-speaking clients for a Miami firm. More Colombians are opening their own businesses in Miami, creating more opportunities.

One popular ***Colombian*** restaurant chain in Miami, Patacon, recently opened several new premises, importing chefs from Colombia on temporary work visas.

While immigration to the United States may appear to some as the easy way out for educated Colombians, it remains a difficult decision.

"We didn't want to leave," said Sergio Otalora, 39, a newspaper columnist who arrived in Miami this month. "We tried to put fear aside, but you can't live all the time on your nerves. It makes you sick."

Otalora left with his wife and their 3-year-old son after he wrote a column critical of the paramilitaries. They fear it will be years before they can think of returning.

"It makes you feel very bad. I know some people accuse us of abandoning a sinking ship," he said. "But that's moral blackmail. We have to think of Pedro, our son. Maybe in 15 years he can go back and contribute something."

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