

Online Monitoring of Human Rights & Civil Unrest in Colombia

TEACHING GUIDE

2023

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INTRODUCTION

UC Santa Cruz Human Rights Investigations Lab created this teaching guide based on research about the socio-political contexts in Colombia, including the targeting of environmental defenders.

This research lab uses open source investigative methods and techniques, which refers to information that is publicly available on the internet and not behind a paywall. Drawing on, for example, social media content, reports from human rights organizations, and online databases, digital investigators are able to gather large amounts of data that needs verification. This research lab collects online data and verifies the information discovered for validity.

In this teaching guide, you will find the following information:

- Brief background about 2021 conflicts in Colombia.
- Overview of learning objectives.
- One exercise to practice the open source research technique called geolocation.
- One exercise to explore corporate corruption.

Table of Contents

2	Background
4	Learning Goals
5	Exercise 1: Geolocation
8	Exercise 2: Corporate Corruption
10	About the UC Santa Cruz Lab
10	Acknowledgements

Caption: Colorful colonial houses on a cobblestone street in Guatapé, Antioquia in Colombia



1100+

The number of "protesters and bystanders [that had] been injured since April 28 [2021], according to the Ministry of Defense."

Source:
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/09/colombia-egregious-police-abuses-against-protesters>

Background

About Recent Conflicts in Colombia

Colombia has a long and complicated history of state violence and civil conflict. In a 2013 national report, the National Centre for Historical Memory reported 200,000+ deaths, 25,000+ disappearances, and 5.7 million people displaced by armed conflict between 1958-2012.¹ Following a decade of political violence known as La Violencia (1948-58), numerous guerrilla groups emerged, the two largest of which are las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and el Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) to take up arms against the government. Another notable guerilla group is M-19, in which Colombian president Gustavo Petro was a member. Formed in 1974, M-19 became a legal political party in the 1980s after negotiating a peace agreement with the Colombian government.

In the 1980s, right-wing paramilitary groups began forming in retaliation, most notably the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) which formally disbanded in 2006, but persisted through smaller splinter groups.² The participation of civilians is a distinct feature of the Colombian conflict, marked by decentralized violence that supersedes the military, which ultimately results in an increasingly affected population. Colombia has a long history of political instability due to violence inflicted by both state agents and paramilitary groups operating with state compliance, in addition to drug traffickers and guerrillas.³

Colombia's geographic position, as a gateway to South America with access to the Pacific and Caribbean ocean, makes the country an ideal location for trade and economic activities, from both licit and illicit businesses. Despite the potential for economic prosperity, Colombia ranks among the worst in the world in regard to income inequality, with 56.2% of the country's income belonging to the richest 20% of the population.⁴ As of 2018, the primary ethnic groups in Colombia are the following: mestizo (53.5%), Afro-Colombians (10.5%, including racial categories of mulatto, raizal, and palenquero) Amerindians (3.4%) and unspecified ethnic groups (1.9%).⁵ Afro-Colombians make up the majority of the Pacific region, and they experience extreme poverty and disproportionate effects of the civil conflict.⁶



Caption: Colombian flag on a historic building in La Candelaria neighborhood in Bogotá, Colombia

Ivan Duque Marquez, a right-wing politician from the Centro Democrático party, was the president during the spring and summer protests of 2021. Former president Duque repeatedly ignored the killings of local leaders and activists, urging instead for a stronger police force to end this cycle of violence, even though state agents and paramilitary groups make up the majority of killings within Colombia.⁷

Sources to Learn About Armed Groups in Colombia:

- [The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia \(AUC\)](#).
- [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia \(FARC\)](#).
- [National Liberation Army \(ELN\)](#).
- [List of the 80 Victims of Homicidal Violence in the Framework of the National Strike as of July 23](#)
- [Repression and Death on the Streets of Colombia](#)

SPRING 2021 PROTESTS

Demonstrations that began on April 28, 2021, initially over a proposed government tax, but would ultimately escalate to include grievances over inequality, corruption, a failed attempt at a peace process, and state violence. Major cities like Cali and Bogotá became epicenters of conflict during this time, experiencing devastating repercussions. Despite President Ivan Duque's decision to withdraw tax reform proposals on May 2, 2021, the protests continued due to the police's violent response.

On May 5, 2021, Duque announced the establishment of a national hotline to report violence, yet blamed narco-trafficking groups for the violence and failed to condemn violence inflicted against protesters by the police and paramilitary.⁸ A few days later on May 9, 2021, journalists reported that 47 people had died since the protests began, 39 of whom were killed by Colombian state actors.⁹ Yet the following day on May 10, 2021, Duque announced the deployment of the fuerzas públicas, a branch of Colombia's police force, to Cali, only further fueling the succession of violence.

Police officers using both lethal and non-lethal weapons at a close distance, frequently aiming directly at their head, caused the vast majority of the deaths and injuries at the 2021 demonstrations. Eye injuries were the most common, which in some cases resulted in the victim losing their eye. Temblores, a social movements organization, recorded at least 4,687 cases of violent acts (not including cases of disappearance) by public forces between April 28, 2021, and June 26, 2021.¹⁰

Throughout the duration of the protests, Colombian authorities exploited their power and violated the rights of peaceful protestors by using excessive and unnecessary force to disperse them. Under the pretext of restoring order, terrible injuries have been inflicted on hundreds of people and dozens of young people lost their lives, with the intent to instill fear, discourage peaceful protests, and punish those demanding to live in a fairer country.

Three significant cases of human rights violations in Cali garnered international attention. The first case occurred on May 3, 2021, known as “Operation Siloé.” In this case, National Police officers, ESMAD, and the Special Operations Group of the National Police of Colombia (GOES), used lethal weapons, including Tavor 5.56mm rifles, against peaceful protesters. There were at least three reported deaths from gunshot wounds, hundreds of injuries and several detained. The second incident was on May 9, 2021 in which National Police officers attacked the Indigenous Minga by armed civilians. Minga means “collective work” and it refers to both Indigenous and mestizo, of the Andean republics. This attack resulted in eleven Indigenous people being injured. The third case occurred on May 28, 2021, when the National Police officers and armed civilians used excessive force in an attack on demonstrators in the neighborhood around Valle University. In this incident, armed civilians beat and detained a dozen young demonstrators.¹¹

Sources

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- ¹¹ “Violent Repression, Paramilitarism, Illegal Detentions and Torture of Protesters in Cali.” Amnesty International, August 8, 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/colombia-repression-violenta-contra-manifestantes-pacificos-cali/>.

LEARNING GOALS

Background

Acquiring general information about Colombia and its recent conflicts.

Geolocation

Learning an open source research technique of geographically locating an image or video.

Discussion

Engaging in a discussion about the role of corporate corruption in exacerbating political conflicts in Colombia.



EXERCISE 1



GEOLOCATION 101: VERIFYING IMAGE CONTENT

PURPOSE

To understand the geolocation steps that global digital investigators engaged in when seeking to verify the thousands of videos posted on social media for accuracy and corroboration during the 2021 political protests.

GUIDING QUESTION

What is the harm being done here and how does that harm threaten dissent, democracy, and human rights accountability?

LEARNING GOAL

Geolocation, which refers to identifying the coordinates of a video or image in order to verify its authenticity, is an important and methodical process for digital investigators.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- copies of images (see page 6) with content warning
- laptop
- internet access
- Google Earth Pro (optional)

LESSON STEPS

1. Ask students to read The New York Times article (May 27, 2021) titled "[Videos Show the Violent, and Deadly, Ways Colombian Police Quell Protests.](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/video/colombia-protests-cali-police-video.html?smid=url-share)"*
2. Ask students to share notes from the reading about what they learned regarding digital investigations and the Colombian protests.
3. Review images and ask students questions about the details they notice in them (see Lesson Plan on page 7).

*<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/video/colombia-protests-cali-police-video.html?smid=url-share>

GEOLOCATION EXERCISE IMAGES

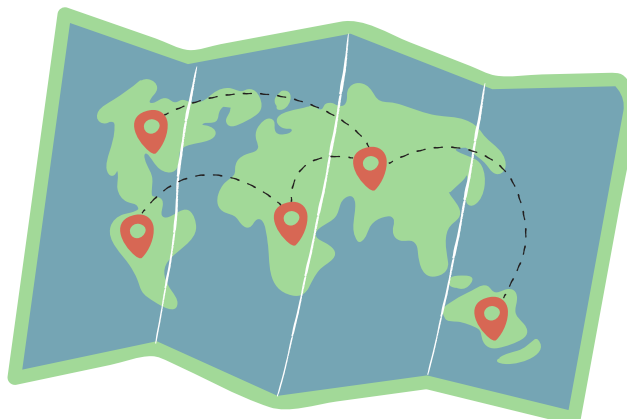


LESSON PLAN

- Show students the images (video screenshot stills) on page 6 and ask them to identify the weapons used, who was involved, and the location of the video.
The following questions can serve as prompts:
 - What weapons are being used by state agents to harm protestors?
 - Are there relevant characteristics to note on these officers (i.e., any badges, uniform colors).
 - Who are the actors involved in this image? (i.e., ESMAD, GOES, National Police officer, civilians)
- In order to clarify where this incident took place, the location itself must be determined.
 - Are there any street signs or significant landmarks?
 - What other clues are in the image that can pinpoint its location?
- Based on the clues derived above, open Google Maps or Google Earth Pro to try and pinpoint the location. Note the geocoordinates once you identify the location. Use street view and compare it to the image. Ask students if they feel confident in locating where this incident occurred.

DEBRIEF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the harm being done in this incident?
 - a. Is this harm justifiable or is it unjustified?
2. How is this an example of human rights abuse?
3. What are the power dynamics at play in this situation?
4. If possible, what do you think could bring justice to this situation?



EXERCISE 2



ASKING QUESTIONS LIKE AN INVESTIGATOR: THE CASE OF ALLEGED GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION

PURPOSE

The goal of open source investigators is to uncover the truth behind “bad” actors and their possible connections to human rights abuses. To achieve this goal, each digital investigation requires a plan. For this exercise, determine possible avenues of research inquiry based on general information provided about alleged government corruption.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Based on information provided in this case, what research directions should the investigation consider as next steps? How is corporate corruption linked to human rights violations?

LEARNING GOALS

To understand the benefits of engaging in research as a group or team, rather than as a solo individual, especially given that digital investigations are generally collaborative endeavors.

LESSON STEPS

1. Read about the “7M” corporation on page 9, which is composite of several companies based in Colombia.
2. Depending on the size of your group, discuss the questions and determine your next steps as a research team. We recommend working in groups of 4-5.

DEBRIEF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some next steps your research team should consider to verify that Grupo 13 and Veloz are monopolizing the military vehicle industry?
2. What are some search queries your team should use to verify the information you currently have about Grupo 13 and Veloz is valid and legitimate?
3. What additional searches can your team conduct to locate new information online about the possible connections between the military/police and private companies?
4. How would you describe the relationship between the state and the companies they are contracting based on the information you’ve read in this guide?
5. What additional information is needed to assist your team’s understanding of the power dynamics of the military and arms/vehicle manufacturers in Colombia?

7M Company Profile

This composite profile reflects various companies in Colombia and is not an actual company.

Company name: Grupo 13

Location: Colombia, Latin America

Number of Employees: 50-75 employees

Description of the Service(s) the Company Provides:

Offers consultations to private companies in the development of selling or lending goods and services.

Director/President (top administrator):

Miguel Roberto Martinez

Narrative:

According to a Colombian news outlet, the International Arms Trade Treaty was violated by Grupo 13, the National Police of Colombia, and a second country in Latin America. The Colombian National Police purchased ten military tanks from a Latin American government over two consecutive years and contracted Grupo 13 to design the vehicles. These same tanks were later used by the National Police to run over civilians that were protesting in Colombia. The Colombian police participated in the design of these vehicles by sharing their experiences and ideas with Grupo 13. Article 7 of the international treaty was breached by not having evaluated that the vehicles could be used to commit human rights violations.

Grupo 13 also has close internal ties to a different Colombian company called Veloz. It's reported that in the last three years Grupo 13 and Veloz have been working closely together to secure 80% of the vehicle contracts with the National Police in Colombia. Former police officers who were previously in charge of the purchasing process for the Colombian police now work at Grupo 13 as Commercial Directors. Grupo 13 advertises themselves as a consulting company to private companies during the process of purchasing goods or services with the Colombian government. The company claims to advise vehicle assemblers but does not state its direct involvement with the purchase and construction of military vehicles.



About the Human Rights Investigations Lab for the Americas at the University of California, Santa Cruz



Launched in Fall 2019, the Human Rights Investigations Lab for the Americas is dedicated to offering digital verification support to non-governmental organizations, news outlets, and other advocacy partners that are initiating open source investigations. Housed in the Dolores Huerta Research Center for the Americas (Huerta Center) at UC Santa Cruz, this Lab harnesses digital technologies to address and confront human rights violations.

The Lab's social justice mission is to track and monitor ongoing humanitarian, environmental and socio-political crises throughout the Americas by using open source investigative methods to achieve accountability for communities adversely affected by human rights violations and to promote justice.

To learn more about the Lab, please go to our website (humanrights.ucsc.edu) or email hrlab@ucsc.edu.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to acknowledge the human rights activists of Colombia who risk their lives in the struggle for a more democratic country and the local journalists seeking the truth when abuses occur during citizen uprisings.

Thank you to Dr. Saskia Dunkell of the University of California, Santa Cruz and Giancarlo Fiorella of Bellingcat for their counsel and support on the overall project.