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Colombia today is undoubtedly better off than it was 20 years ago. The country has reduced its homicide rate, vigorously fought terrorism, dismantled cartels and improved most social welfare variables. Thanks to its success, Mexico and Central America today suffer from the tentacles of migrating crime.

However, the Pacific Region in Colombia, where I come from, continues to face monumental challenges. Violence stemming from multiple illicit economies continues to be the eternal brake on its development.

The continued presence of guerrilla groups, their dissidences and multiple other expressions of organized crime demonstrate that the real driving force behind violence in the country persists: the profitability of drug trafficking and rampant impunity.

The exponential increase of more than 100,000 hectares planted with coca since 2016 at the national level demonstrates that the phenomenon is far from receding. In this part of the country alone, cultivation has grown by 97.4% in 10 years.

My department, Valle del Cauca, is a clear example of what this means. It is not about an apparently harmless bush. Drug trafficking has permeated daily life and seriously affects citizens: their life, their wellbeing and their belongings.

Because of its geography, with access to the sea and strategic mountain ranges, it is an epicenter of criminal organizations. Today Cali, the department's capital, has the highest number of homicides in the country.

What happened recently with the National Strike is a disturbing snapshot of what lies beneath simple statistics. It is a testament of the strength of criminals, of their flourishing business and of their capacity to affect society.

Although some politicians deny the evidence with alarming partiality, crime, as many here know, mutates and adapts. During the strike, it did so to perfection. Colombia experienced an episode of social protest that turned into a criminal hotbed in this region. The road blockades that Cali suffered for more than 3 months more closely resemble a failed state.

Organized crime and terrorism took advantage of general discontent and of our institutional lethargy to fatten their pockets and to strengthen themselves. The effect for the region is not a creation out of fantasy. May of 2021 was the month with the most homicides in 5 years in Cali. Unemployment rose to 24.3% and food prices skyrocketed. The price of a pound of potatoes, a staple of the local diet, increased by 525%.

Efforts to counter drug trafficking must increasingly trigger those who hide under a veil of legality and who profit the most without consequences: through politics, through business, through whichever facade. They must also increasingly consider the additional dynamics that intertwine to improve the math. In our case this include vandalism, terrorism, corruption and apparently legitimate strikes.

Local governments, including Cali's for example, must recognize their responsibility in dealing with the criminal phenomena that permeate their territories. Today, however, too many authorities wash their hands off by waving flags that excuse them of any responsibility.

Anti-narcotics strategies must identify and target the strongest players in the drug trafficking chain. Discussions in Europe are increasingly limited to individual consumer rights. But for producing regions the hand of crime is not only a question of entertainment, freedom and rights.

We pay with deaths. We pay with destruction, unemployment, hunger and fear. For that to change, the focus of efforts must also shed light into the more impune corners. Those who hide in beaches in Miami, souks in Dubai or highrises in London but delight in the profits of crime and narcotics must also be a priority to curtail the effects their greed has on society.