

## Colombia lures filming as violent crime drops

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By John Hecht

MEXICO CITY (Hollywood Reporter) - There was a time when Colombia's high murder and kidnapping rates made it nearly impossible to attract foreign shoots. Yet in recent years, as the government has cracked down on violent crime, the nation has seen a boom in film and TV production.

Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos understands the security concerns of foreign producers looking to shoot in Colombia. After all, in 1990 the one-time newspaper editor was kidnapped and held hostage for eight months by the Medellin cartel, led by the notorious drug kingpin Pablo Escobar.

"There are a lot of people obviously with apprehension," Santos says. "But the dramatic changes (in crime reduction) have put Colombia on the map with all kinds of investors, and that obviously includes the possibility of TV and filmmaking."

Though some opposition groups have criticized the government's hard-line crime-fighting tactics, the bottom line is that Colombia has become a much safer place over the past five years -- and consequently, a more appealing location for production.

When Santos got word last year that Mike Newell's "Love in the Time of Cholera" was initially going to be filmed in Brazil, he immediately contacted producer Scott Steindorff to ask him if he would consider shooting the picture in Colombia, where the Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel is set.

Steindorff reluctantly accepted after Santos offered "guaranteed security" for the cast and crew.

"They were so scared to do it, but we convinced them," Santos says.

Turns out the shoot went so well that Steindorff is looking at the possibility of doing other films in Colombia. What's more, "Cholera" generated \$15 million for the local economy and created thousands of jobs, according to film financing agency Proimagenes en Movimiento. Next year, director Antoine Fuqua will begin shooting a biopic about Escobar in Colombia. Also slated for next year is "Del Amor y Otros Demonios" (Of Love and Other Demons), a drama based on the Garcia Marquez novel of the same name.

International television producers also are feeling much more comfortable in Colombia these days.

"There is street crime, but I personally feel very safe in Colombia and would rank it near the very top" for talent, infrastructure and value, says Brendan Fitzgerald, Sony Pictures Television International's senior vp international production for Latin America.

Sony is in preproduction on the comedy series "Aqui No Hay Quien Viva" and the game show "Power of 10" for Colombian broadcaster RCN.

Vice President Santos acknowledges that U.S. State Department travel warnings have hurt production opportunities in Colombia. Yet he points out that new doors open every time a foreign producer walks away with a positive experience.

"Colombia is at a turning point," he says. "The reality is quite different now than what it was five years ago."

Reuters/Hollywood Reporter