

# Colombia

<b>Response to Information Request Number:</b>	COL02005.ZMI
<b>Date:</b>	May 20, 2002
<b>Subject:</b>	Colombia: Information on Prospects for Avoiding Threats from Armed Groups by Relocating In-Country
<b>From:</b>	INS Resource Information Center
<b>Keywords:</b>	Colombia / Guerrilla organizations / Paramilitary forces / Relocation

## Query:

What are the prospects for relocation in Colombia for Colombians threatened by the either the FARC or ELN guerrillas or the AUC paramilitaries? To what extent are the ELN and FARC guerrillas active in Caribbean coastal departments including Sucre, Magdalena, Atlántico, Córdoba, Bolívar and César; and could Bogotá be considered a relatively safe haven from any of the guerrilla or paramilitary organizations?

## Response:

Regarding the prospects for relocation in-country for Colombians threatened by the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), National Liberation Army, or the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia, the RIC has interviewed several country experts who have provided the following information.

In the view of Paul Paz y Miño, Amnesty International Colombia country specialist, "The AUC is clearly a national organization with ties throughout Colombia and the ELN operates widely as well, so that the idea of someone at risk from violations by either of these groups safely relocating in Colombia is not feasible" (Paz y Miño March 2002).

In the assessment of Douglas W. Payne, INS RIC expert consultant, there might be a few places where an individual could relocate away from the ELN. But unless the threat to the person were very specific to the ELN, the person would likely be targeted by the FARC because the FARC has a presence in virtually all of the nation's 32 departments and urban centers and has a country-wide capability to harm, and because the FARC targets people for essentially the same reasons the ELN does. Both groups target elected officials and candidates for public office, civic leaders, teachers, professionals, business people, journalists, labor and peasant activists or anyone else whom the guerrillas believe the FARC's and the ELN's leftist politics or their use of armed tactics. Both groups also target landowners, business people, professionals, children and others for ransom-kidnapping and extortion, with the aims of financial gain and undermining the social and political order of the country. Finally, in some areas of the country, FARC and ELN units are known to cooperate on occasion, at least in combat operations—for example, in a May 2002 combined attack on a police station in Antioquia department—and may be sharing intelligence, as well (Payne March 2002, INS RIC July 2001, CIP, HOUSTON CHRONICLE October 2001, EL ESPECTADOR 16 May 2002).

In Payne's view there also may be a few places where an individual could relocate away from the AUC, but probably not for very long. Among the three major armed groups – FARC, ELN and AUC – the AUC is expanding the most rapidly, both geographically and in terms of numbers, and since 2001 its rate of expansion has accelerated. The AUC has

stated that its aim is to counter the guerrilla groups wherever they are and the FARC, as noted above, operates virtually everywhere. The AUC therefore is increasing its urban presence to confront the sharp growth of FARC urban militias in recent years. At the same time, the AUC continues to spread from its original northern and central strongholds deeper into southeastern and southwestern departments, with the potential for soon achieving, if it hasn't already, a country-wide capability to harm. The Colombian Ministry of Defense says that the AUC is expanding more than twice as fast as the FARC and projects that if the current AUC and FARC growth rates remain the same, in less than five years AUC paramilitaries would match the number of FARC guerrillas (Payne March 2002, CIP, NEWSWEEK February 2002, MIAMI HERALD 29 March 2001, EL TIEMPO 27 October 2001, Reuters 26 February 2002).

With specific regard to the intelligence capabilities of the three armed groups, Hiram Ruíz, U.S. Committee for Refugees director of communications and former senior policy analyst for South America, says that, "The AUC and ELN are not yet quite as sophisticated as the FARC in their ability to track people down, but they continue to improve so that more and more residents of all Colombia's cities face the threat of kidnapping and extortion from all three groups" (Ruíz April 2002).

Meanwhile, the three principal armed groups are expected to keep growing, as all continue to profit substantially from illegal drugs, kidnapping and extortion operations, and all are able to equip and in many case pay their fighters well. The expansion of the ELN might slow if talks between it and the government still ongoing in spring 2002 were to lead to some kind of ceasefire, but that remains a big if (HOUSTON CHRONICLE October 2001, NEWSWEEK February 2002, Reuters 26 February 2002, EL TIEMPO 27 October 2001).

Regarding the extent of ELN and FARC activity in the Caribbean coastal departments, including Sucre, Magdalena, Atlántico, Córdoba, Bolívar and César, a number of sources have reported that it has increased over the past few years.

While the Caribbean coast of Colombia has not experienced the extreme levels of political violence or guerrilla insurgency witnessed in other parts of the country, there has been a substantial increase in recent years as both guerrilla organizations and paramilitary groups have extended their activities into the Caribbean coastal region. The ATLANTIC MONTHLY reported in 2000, for example, that the FARC and the ELN already had expanded into this region and specifically mentioned the cities of Barranquilla and Cartagena (May 2002).

In more recent developments, a non-comprehensive survey of the Colombian media and international wire services for the second half of March 2002 found a number of reports that indicate significant guerrilla activity continuing in the Caribbean coastal region, for example:

The Colombian daily EL ESPECTADOR reported on 22 March that security forces captured 15 suspected FARC members in Cartagena who were planning dynamite attacks in the city, the capital of the department of Bolívar. In the process, security forces commandeered from the FARC a quantity of firearms, explosives and technical maps of Cartagena, as well as Colombian military documents pertaining to the administration of the city. The newspaper also reported that a bomb explosion caused substantial damage to a supermarket in Cartagena and nearby houses a few days earlier, while another bomb of similar power had been deactivated by police at a warehouse in the city. The perpetrators in these last two instances were not known (22 March 2002).

Radio Caracol, Colombia's principal national radio network, reported on 15 March that security forces had uncovered a FARC network in Cartagena that was fabricating false identification documents such as drivers' licences and diplomas for FARC urban militias (15 March 2002).

On 18 March, Radio Caracol reported clashes between the army and FARC and ELN units

in a number of departments in the country including Atlántico (18 March 2002).

Also on 18 March, Radio Caracol reported that the FARC had attempted to blow up two electrical towers in the department of Magdalena, and that security forces had prevented another attack on electrical towers in La Guajira, another Caribbean coastal department to the east of Magdalena (18 March 2002).

On 22 March, EL ESPECTADOR reported that at least a dozen people had been kidnapped in the department of Sucre by the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), Revolutionary Army of the People, a dissident faction of the ELN. The abductions took place on a highway from Loricá in the coastal department of Córdoba to Barranquilla. Earlier the ERP unit had dynamited part of a bridge on the highway that connects Sincelejo, the capital of Sucre department, to Cartagena (22 March 2002).

On 23 March, the Colombian daily EL TIEMPO reported clashes between the FARC and infantry units of the Colombian navy in Bolívar department, citing the commander of the Fuerza Naval del Atlántico, Atlantic Naval Force (23 March 2002).

On 23 March, the Colombian daily EL COLOMBIANO reported heavy fighting between FARC units and the army in the departments of Atlántico and Magdalena, and the bombing by the Colombian air force of three guerrilla camps near the border between the two departments (23 March 2002).

Also on 23 March, the beginning of Holy Week and a period of holiday travel, EL TIEMPO published an advisory that warned motorists of zones where the risk of guerrilla attack or kidnapping was high. One area was the main highway leading into Cartagena from the South, with specific mention of four towns all within a 50-mile radius of Cartagena. Another was the road between Bosconia in César department and Fundación in Magdalena (23 March 2002).

On 31 March, EL TIEMPO and EFE News Service reported intense fighting between FARC units and the army south of Cartagena in Bolívar department. According to the army, a FARC commander captured after being wounded had participated in the failed plot to assassinate President Bill Clinton when he visited Cartagena in August 2000 (EL TIEMPO 31 March 2002; EFE 31 March 2002).

According to EL TIEMPO and EFE News Service, on 31 March, Easter Sunday, FARC units blew up three bridges, two in César department, cutting off much of the Caribbean coast from the country's central region (EL TIEMPO 31 March 2002; EFE 31 March 2002).

On 31 March, EL TIEMPO also reported that security forces had captured in Cartagena one of the FARC's principal radio and communications technicians and a cache of electronic equipment, as well as a number of the FARC's arms suppliers (31 March 2002).

On 25 March, EL TIEMPO reported that the Princess Cruise Line had suspended stops in Cartagena because of the 22 February 2002 Public Announcement by the US Department of State, which warned of the likelihood of increased terrorist violence following the breakdown of talks between the FARC and the Colombian government. The State Department announcement referred to the 17 April 2001 DOS Travel Warning, which stated: "Violence by narcotraffickers, guerrillas, illegal self-defense (paramilitary) groups and other criminal elements continues to affect all parts of the country" (EL TIEMPO 25 March 2002; US DOS April 2001).

The suspension of cruise ship stops by the Princess Cruise Line met with concern in the business community in Cartagena and other cities along the coast because of the potential economic fallout. According to Payne, business communities in areas dependent on tourism—such as Colombia's Caribbean coast, or Mexico's Pacific coast in Oaxaca and Guerrero—often try to downplay guerrilla activity and political violence for fear of hurting

business (EL TIEMPO 25 March 2002; Payne March 2002).

Regarding the possibility that Bogotá might be a relatively safe haven from any of the guerrilla or paramilitary organizations, a number of sources have reported the following information.

Bogotá for a number of years has been prey to high levels of organized criminal violence, including kidnappings, extortion and contract killings. Criminal bands are often quite sophisticated and, as an unnamed diplomat based in the city said to the DALLAS MORNING NEWS in 1997, "If someone is determined to get you, chances are they're going to get you" (June 1997).

Meanwhile, during the late 1990s Colombia's illegal armed groups began to target the city. In 1999 the Associated Press reported that the Colombian business class "had lived relatively free from rebel extortion that has long afflicted ranchers and oilmen in the countryside. That changed roughly two years ago. No longer a refuge, the capital became fertile ground for rebel 'tax collectors' demanding payments known euphemistically as 'la vacuna,' or vaccine." The Fundación País Libre, Free Country Foundation, a Colombian non-governmental organization that monitors kidnapping victims, estimated that in 1999 in the Bogotá area alone there were hundreds, possibly thousands, of middle and upper middle class business people who were making regular extortion payments to the FARC, and that a number of those who had refused had been kidnapped (AP 31 October 1999; PAÍS LIBRE December 1999).

Both the FARC and the AUC have continued to expand operations in Bogotá and have been combining their forces with criminal elements and corrupt law enforcement officials to carry out kidnappings, killings and other crimes with both financial and political aims. For example, in March 2002, a businessman was kidnapped in Bogotá by a combined group of police officers, agents of the local attorney general's office, criminals and FARC guerrillas, with the overall operation organized by the FARC's Frente 53, Front 53. In early 2002, it was reported that there were at least a dozen FARC military fronts, with hundreds of guerrilla fighters in each, operating in the proximity of Bogotá and that each one had its own urban militia operating within the city (INS RIC July 2001, EL TIEMPO 14 February 2002, EL TIEMPO 20 February 2002, EL TIEMPO 15 May 2002, EL NUEVO HERALD 27 January 2002).

With regard to the paramilitaries, NEWSWEEK has reported that the AUC's unit in Bogotá, the Bloque Metro, Metro Block, formed to counter the FARC directly and to target perceived leftist supporters generally, had at least 1,000 men under arms by early 2002. In recent years, the AUC has claimed credit for a number of operations against leftist targets in Bogotá, including the attempted bombing of the offices of a communist newspaper (NEWSWEEK February 2002, ECONOMIST May 2001).

Hiram Ruíz and Paul Paz y Miño do not believe that Bogotá affords a haven for a targeted individual even if he or she were to live there with a relatively low profile. Ruíz, who thinks that people in all of Colombia's urban areas face the threat of kidnapping and extortion (as noted earlier), believes, too, that Colombia's guerrilla groups in particular, with their technological capability and interconnected urban cell structures "can track where people are better than the government... If an individual is being targeted, going to any of the cities won't help them escape" (Ruíz April 2002, Paz y Miño March 2002).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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