Colombia

Response to Information Request Number:	COL03004.ZMI
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Subject:	Colombia: Information on Illegal Armed Groups
From:	CIS Resource Information Center
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Query:

What has been the effect of the policies of President Álvaro Uribe since he took office on 7 August 2002 on the capabilities of the principal left-wing guerrilla groups and right-wing paramilitary organizations? How have they responded to his policies?

Response:

In its first year the Uribe government took a two-track approach toward illegal armed groups. It instituted a series of hard-line, counterinsurgency measures against the two main left-wing guerrilla organizations, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), National Liberation Army, apparently with the aim of defeating them militarily. At the same time, it engaged the principal paramilitary leaders, Carlos Castaño and Salvatore Mancuso, in extended negotiations.

THE PARAMILITARIES

The negotiations led to an accord on 15 July 2003 between the government and the

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paramilitary umbrella group, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, that called for the demobilization of paramilitary units, starting at the end of 2003 and finishing by the beginning of 2005. In exchange, the government agreed to take measures, mostly unspecified, to facilitate the incorporation of AUC forces into Colombian society (EL TIEMPO 15 Jul 2003).

However, a significant minority of the AUC units, called bloques, or blocs, refused to participate in the talks and did not sign the accord. There were about 13,000 paramilitary fighters in up to nine bloques that backed the accord, while as many as 7,000 belonged to units that did not. Among the key units that rejected the accord were the Bloque Metro, Metro Bloc, which operates in the eastern part of Antioquia department and in Medellín, and a number of bloques operating in eastern departments including Meta and Casanare. Even before the accord was signed, friction between paramilitary units had escalated into violent confrontation in a number of departments and in Bogotá, and the potential for increased internecine conflict threatened to undermine the agreement (LOS ANGELES TIMES 9 Jun 2003 & 21 Jul 2003, EL PAÍS (Colombia) 4 Aug 2003, EL ESPECTADOR, 3 Aug 2003, EL TIEMPO 5 Jul 2003, MIAMI HERALD 15 Jun 2003, EL NUEVO HERALD 27 May 2003).

The agreement was vaguely worded and left many critical issues unaddressed, including how the government would provide security for paramilitary forces as they laid down their weapons amid the continuing guerrilla insurgency, and how it would pay for the demobilization process. Colombian military analyst Alfredo Rangel predicted that only one-third of the paramilitary units that signed the accord would ultimately disband and warned that new paramilitary groups could emerge to take their place as long as the guerrilla war continued (LOS ANGELES TIMES 21 Jul 2002, IPS 16 Jul 2003).

There was also the question of whether the paramilitaries that agreed to demobilize would be held accountable for gross human rights violations they had committed and for their deep involvement in the illegal drug trade. Castaño, Mancuso and another AUC leader, Juan Carlos Sierra, have been indicted on drug-trafficking charges in the United States. Also, the U.S. has designated the AUC as a terrorist organization, along with the FARC and the ELN. Meanwhile, in Colombia there are dozens of charges against AUC leaders and members for murders and massacres. When domestic and international human rights groups demanded that the accord not result in impunity for the AUC, Castaño, Mancuso and some regional AUC leaders signaled that they would not abide by the accord if drug and human rights charges against them were pursued (EL NUEVO HERALD 28 Jul 2003, EL PAIS (Colombia) 19 Jul 2003, Reuters 4 Aug 2003. CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR 24 Jul 2003).

At the same time, the AUC did not fully adhere to the ceasefire it declared on 1 December 2002. Human rights organizations say paramilitary forces stopped attacking left-wing guerrillas directly and carrying out massacres of civilians, but continued to carry out more selective killings in various regions of the country. And, pending the proposed

demobilization, paramilitary units continued to maintain an armed presence in virtually every department in the country, as well as close ties with the Colombian military. In July 2003, José Miguel Vivanco of Human Rights Watch stated that while the armed forces were arresting more low-level paramilitaries than in past years, "in vast regions of the country, the military-paramilitary alliance remains as strong as ever" (IPS 16 Jul 2003, EL NUEVO HERALD 11 Jul 2003, EL ESPECTADOR 1 Jun 2003, HRW 8 Jul 2003; AI 29 May 2003).

If AUC units actually do begin to demobilize at the end of 2003, one question is whether government forces can secure the areas previously occupied by paramilitaries, or whether the FARC and the ELN will be able to move in and fill the vacuum. Some Colombian analysts are skeptical of the government's promise to gain control over vast regions currently under paramilitary control and said that the guerrillas are poised to take over paramilitary drug-crop operations and gun-running corridors. One said that guerrilla groups are already devising plans to retake ground lost to the paramilitaries in recent years. If that were to happen, and given that guerrilla expansion was the primary reason for the emergence of the paramilitaries in the first place, new paramilitary units could appear, or ones that demobilized might take up arms again (LOS ANGELES TIMES 21 Jul 2003, EL TIEMPO 20 Jul 2003, Reuters 16 Jul 2003).

THE FARC

After the collapse of peace negotiations in February 2002, the FARC significantly expanded its armed activities into urban areas, while in response the paramilitaries continued to strengthen their own urban forces. Urban political violence surged particularly in Medellín; parts of Bogotá and Cali; in the Caribbean port cities and resort towns of Barranquilla, Cartagena and Santa Marta; and in numerous mid-sized cities around the country such as Cúcuta, Bucaramanga and Pereira (SEMANA/Salazar 29 Dec 2002, IPS 3 Dec 2002, EL COLOMBIANO 17 Oct 2002, BOSTON GLOBE 3 Nov 2002, EL TIEMPO 19 Oct 2002).

After taking office, the Uribe government implemented a series of intensified security and counter-insurgency measures. One of them was Soldados Campesinos, Peasant Soldiers, a program which gave military training to more than 15,000 men so that they could provide security in their own rural villages. Another was the formation of a nationwide force of at least a million paid civilian spies and informers. Amnesty International and the Colombian Commission of Jurists expressed concerns that these programs were pulling civilians further into the conflict (HOUSTON CHRONICLE 14 Dec 2002, AI Dec 2002, IPS 9 Dec 2002).

Also in Uribe's first year, the Colombian armed forces became more aggressive in going after left-wing guerrillas and suspected supporters. Military spending increased and two new so-called mountain battalions were deployed to track down FARC units. The armed

forces, long criticized for their reactive response to the insurgency, went more on the offensive, staging sweeps in guerrilla areas, searching homes without warrants and forcing people to show proof of identity. The number of counter-insurgency operations increased substantially in late 2002 and during the first half of 2003. The government also stepped up efforts to entice both guerrilla fighters and paramilitaries to desert, promising security and financial rewards through a Programa de Reinserción, Reinsertion Program (ECONOMIST 5 Jun 2003, DALLAS MORNING NEWS 25 Jun 2003, EL TIEMPO 5 Aug 2003, EL COLOMBIANO 26 Jul 2003).

There have been differing views regarding the effectiveness of these policies. According to the government, by mid-2003 kidnappings and terrorist attacks had declined by about a quarter and homicides by 16 percent; killings and captures of guerrilla fighters had risen; and about 1,300 guerrillas had deserted to join the Reinsertion Program, nearly three quarters of them from the FARC, one quarter from the ELN (MIAMI HERALD 7 Aug 2003, EL ESPECTADOR 1 Aug 2003, EL PAIS (Cali) 3 Jun 2003, Reuters 6 Aug 2003, CHICAGO TRIBUNE 23 Jul 2002).

However, analysts and media outlets noted that although kidnappings were down, Colombia, with more than a thousand abductions in the first seven months of the year, remained far and away the world's kidnapping leader, with the FARC responsible for nearly 40 percent, the ELN a little over 20 percent, and paramilitaries about 12 percent. And although homicides declined generally, political killings at the hands of illegal armed groups, as a separate category, remained steady at around 4,000 per year according to some human rights groups, while other rights groups put the figure as high as 7,000. There was also an increase in the number of forced disappearances, with very few cases ever resolved, according to the office of the Defensoría del Pueblo, Public Defender (Reuters 6 Aug 2003, LOS ANGELES TIMES 27 Jul 2003, PAIS LIBRE Jul 2003, EL TIEMPO 7 Jul 2003 & 10 Jul 2003, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES 4 Aug 2003, MIAMI HERALD 7 Aug 2003).

Analysts also pointed out that after the collapse of peace talks in February 2002, the FARC reconfigured its national network of bases and redeployed some of its forces, much as it had during previous government offensives the FARC has overcome, such as in 1991, since its founding four decades ago. This time it expanded further into urban areas while moving other units and camps deeper into mountain and jungle strongholds and into frontier zones along Colombia's borders with Ecuador, Peru, Brazil and especially Venezuela. From these positions the FARC has adopted a strategy of "indirect confrontation," in the words of one analyst, that targets the military mostly at its weak points, while making the armed forces expend increasing time and resources trying to track down guerrilla units. The FARC's fundamental structures therefore remain intact, it continues to operate throughout the country, and the government has yet to capture or kill a single major FARC commander. It is generally believed to still have between 16,000 and 18,000 fighters, and has increased cooperation with the ELN, as discussed in the final section below. At the same time, the FARC has unleashed intermittent waves of economic

sabotage and terrorist attacks in both rural and heavily populated urban areas, while continuing to exhibit a viciousness that may now be worse than that of the paramilitaries, in the view of Robert Goldman, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights rapporteur on Colombia (EL ESPECTADOR 10 Aug 2003, SEMANA/Rangel Suárez 29 Dec 2002; SEMANA 13 Jul 2003, EL TIEMPO 5 Aug 2003, JANE'S INTELLIGENCE REVIEW 1 Jun 2003, ECONOMIST 5 Jun 2003, BBC NEWS 13 May 2003, Reuters 6 Aug 2003, NEW YORK TIMES 1 Jun 2003, EL PAIS (Colombia) 28 Jul 2003, EL TIEMPO 7 Jul 2003) .

FARC INTELLIGENCE AND INFILTRATION CAPABILITIES

Military actions are only one part of the FARC's overall strategy, and during periods of redeployment in the face of government offensives it has put emphasis on political organization, the penetration of public and private institutions, and strengthening its intelligence operations and financial systems. SEMANA, Colombia's leading newsweekly, described the FARC's intelligence operations as one of the key "tentacles" of the FARC insurgency. It is generally believed that the FARC's intelligence capabilities rival those of the government and evidence of that has continued to surface. One recent example has been the FARC's penetration of the reinsertion program for former guerrilla and paramilitary fighters who have deserted. On 8 June 2003, Jenny Rocío Mendivelso Mejía, was shot dead while sitting in a Bogotá coffee shop. She was a former FARC guerrilla who had participated in the reinsertion program and become a coordinator of the safe houses the government provided to protect deserters. She was one of at least three former FARC guerrillas killed in the capital by what Colombian authorities say are FARC assassination teams who pose as fellow deserters to infiltrate the program and track down their former comrades (EL ESPECTADOR 10 Aug 2003, SEMANA 9 Jun 2003, ELTIEMPO 10 Jun 2003 & 11 Jun 2003, EL PAÍS (Colombia) 12 Jun 2003, AP 13 Jun 2003, CHICAGO TRIBUNE 23 Jul 2003).

The FARC also has demonstrated the ability to penetrate the banking system in Colombia and even to set up "cloned" government bank accounts through which to launder money acquired through kidnapping, extortion and drug trafficking. In August 2002, Colombian authorities identified up to 800 bank accounts used by the FARC to launder nearly $50 million dollars. The FARC had opened the accounts in eleven banks by using the names of individuals and various institutions as testaferros, fronts. One of the bank accounts was actually registered to Colombia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had been utilized by the FARC to launder half a million dollars over eight months. Luis Camilo Osorio, Colombia's attorney general, suggested that the FARC had a mole operating within the ministry as well as numerous "auxiliaries" operating inside the banks. Other officials from the attorney general's office said the FARC had targeted at least three more federal government entities for the purpose of setting up disguised accounts, that there was evidence that numerous government institutions at the departmental and municipal levels had been infiltrated for the same purpose, and that the FARC had been able to "recruit" or otherwise place dozens, possibly hundreds, of people to carry out money-laundering schemes. The attorney general said that the FARC was able to establish such a complex network of

infiltration and disguised accounts because "it is encrusted in the activities of society" (BBC NEWS 29 Aug 2002, EL PAIS (Spain) 30 Aug 2002, AFP 29 Aug 2002, EL TIEMPO 30 Aug 2002).

In June 2003, SEMANA published the results of an extensive study into the business, intelligence and operational capabilities of the FARC, relying on information provided by former FARC members, official sources and independent analysts. No one knows exactly how much the FARC earns through drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and other activities. But the amount is substantial and estimates range from somewhat less than $1 billion annually, according to the Ministry of Defense, to as much as $2.55 billion, according to the attorney general. Even going by the lower figure, the FARC has enormous sums at its disposal, not only for military operations but to finance its intelligence networks around the country (SEMANA 9 Jun 2003, EL NUEVO HERALD 23 May 2003).

SEMANA reported that earnings also come from legal enterprises and front companies set up by the FARC, such as transportation, food and gasoline distribution companies, operations that perform the triple function of laundering money, keeping FARC units supplied, and gathering intelligence through penetration of Colombian society. The magazine reported, for example, that the FARC has seized control of beer and gasoline distribution in a majority of municipalities in Guaviare, Caquetá and Vichada departments as well as in a number of municipalities in Cundinamarca, the department that rings Bogotá. Non-FARC companies may be allowed to stay in business if they are willing to pay a tax to the guerrillas, but would be targeted for kidnapping or the destruction of their plants if they refused (9 Jun 2003).

According to SEMANA, the FARC is constantly working to increase its infiltration of government institutions, including law enforcement and the military. As one former FARC member stated, "It's easier to bring down an airplane with pliers than a missile. Why spend millions when we can bribe a mechanic for so much less?" In May 2003, for example, it was revealed that a number of employees of Indumil, the state arms manufacturer, had provided the FARC with tons of explosive material for making bombs. The FARC also uses its wealth, combined with threats of physical harm, to compromise local politicians, who are forced to act as business fronts for the guerrillas and to push for the appointment of judicial officials controlled by the FARC. The magazine reported that in many parts of the country, it is generally believed that the FARC has penetrated the local judiciary. A number of military officers indicated that FARC penetration of the armed forces is significant, not only at the level of common soldiers but at the officer level as well. Although the military would not comment formally, one captain told SEMANA that in 2002 at least 120 members of the military were retired because of their connections to the guerrillas. Judicial investigators said that the FARC has complete lists of the members of the National Police on computer and uses them to identify off-duty officers stopped at guerrilla roadblocks (9 Jun 2003).

In early July 2003, Colombian police in the Atlantic Coast city of Cartagena arrested a

woman named Kelis Rivera, nom de guerre Comandante Keila, a leader of the FARC militia group in that city known as Los Cimarrones. At the time of her capture, Rivera was living undercover as a domestic employee in a family home in a neighborhood near the local airport and offices of the police and the attorney general. The police claimed to have found in her possession documents and plans for a number of armed operations including one to free FARC members from a local prison. Police arrested about a dozen others alleged to be undercover FARC members, including a professor and two nurses. The police commander in charge of the operation said that Los Cimarrones has infiltrated many sectors of society in Cartagena, including labor unions, universities, professional groups and street vendor organizations (EL TIEMPO 8 & 11 Jul 2003).

There have been other reports of FARC infiltration of universities, including the National University in Bogotá. In November 2002, three mortar rounds were launched from that campus and landed near the U.S. Embassy and the office of the Attorney General. A subsequent government raid on the campus uncovered grenades, homemade explosives and bomb-making chemicals. SEMANA reported that one of the ways the FARC has extended its influence into the university system is by giving "scholarships" to students in exchange for political loyalty. According to JANE'S INTELLIGENCE REVIEW, infiltrating universities is a priority task for the "extensive urban militia networks" the FARC maintains "in most Colombian cities" (BOSTON GLOBE 30 Mar 2003, SEMANA 9 Jun 2003, JANE'S INTELLIGENCE REVIEW 1 Jun 2003).

THE FARC AND THE ELN

The FARC's intelligence and operational networks, as well as the ELN's, include out-sourcing of the initial stages of the kidnapping process. The researching of victims is often carried out by specialized kidnapping groups or organized crime organizations who sell victims to the FARC and the ELN. Kidnap researchers make detailed investigations into the wealth of potential targets and often bribe bank officials to provide account information. Similarly, people inside households such as maids, and employees inside companies, are threatened and/or paid to provide information about a target's daily routines. In the principal cities, particularly Bogotá, the actual kidnappings are often contracted out to experienced criminals who operate under the supervision of guerrilla units. Some of the specialized kidnapping groups that do business with the FARC and ELN have connections with members of state security organizations. As a high-level government intelligence official stated during a media interview, "There is a real machinery of criminals, with a strict division of labor, skilled methods of corruption at every level and proven infiltrations in public institutions." The FARC and the ELN also utilize a system in which kidnap victims are transferred from one guerrilla unit to another, with each unit extorting a separate ransom from the victims' families, an indication of the high degree of coordination between guerrilla units within the FARC and the ELN. Colombian police refer to this multiple-ransom racket as the carrusel, carrousel, or the conejo, rabbit (JANE'S INTELLIGENCE REVIEW 1 Jun 2003, EL ESPECTADOR 6 Jan 2002, EL TIEMPO 11 Jul 2003).

The FARC and the ELN are both able to infiltrate local, departmental and national government offices for the purpose of gaining access to sensitive information and influencing decisions on budgets, personnel and public works contracts. A Colombian army division commander stated in late 2002 that guerrillas were practically "co-governing" in some areas of the country. Other Colombian officials said that by securing state-financed housing and other social programs in areas under their control, the guerrillas could maintain a certain level of public support. Colombian military analyst Rangel has stated that the ELN and the FARC are able to dictate how public funds are allocated in up to 20 percent of the country, and that they receive between five and ten percent of monies earmarked for public works. Similarly, the ELN, like the FARC, has been able to infiltrate the judiciary and security forces in certain areas of the country and gain influence over judges and prosecutors. In March 2003, President Uribe himself denounced that in Norte de Santander department, "There are prosecutors who have been appointed through favoritism and who are in the service of the ELN" (HOUSTON CHRONICLE 20 Oct 2002, Caracol Radio 6 Mar 2003).

Peace talks between the government and the ELN, on and off since 1998, collapsed at the end of 2002. The ELN, which still has between 4,000 and 5,000 fighters, stepped up armed actions, increasingly in cooperation with the FARC. The ELN and the FARC have had differences in the past, sometimes leading to violent confrontation. But a little more than a decade ago they were formerly allied in the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar, and during Uribe's first year they again drew closer together. The ELN, despite having endured some significant setbacks at the hands of the paramilitaries in recent years, has continued in 2003 to mount actions in the northern, northwestern, central and southeastern regions of the country, areas where traditionally it has been strong. Since the end of 2002 there have been a number of reports of cooperation and military coordination between the ELN and the FARC, including in the northwestern departments of Arauca, Boyacá, Casanare and Bolívar, and the southwestern departments of Nariño and Cauca. ELN military commander Antonio García said in a July 2003 interview with the Colombian newspaper, EL TIEMPO, that there is a substantial degree of coordination between the two groups in a number of regions and that he expected that it would increase. Colombian analysts believe that the heightened cooperation would enhance the capabilities of both groups (EL PAÍS (Colombia) 2 Jan 2003; EL TIEMPO 9 May, 29 Jul, 2 Aug 2003; BBC NEWS 28 Dec 2002; EL COLOMBIANO 11 Jun 2003; SEMANA 20 May 2003; EL PAÍS (Colombia) 8 Jul 2003; EL COLOMBIANO 4 Jan 2003).

The ELN and the FARC also are operating alongside each other and possibly coordinating military, kidnapping and extortion activities in four Venezuelan departments along or near the border with Colombia—Zulia, Táchira, Apure and Barinas. The same may be the case in urban areas, including Bogotá, where both have established secret cells for the purpose of acquiring explosives, setting up clandestine clinics to treat their wounded and other activities. The television journalist who exposed such networks in 2002 received a series of anonymous death threats and went into exile (AFP 1 May 2003, IPS 31 Jul 2003, CPJ 2003).

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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