# Columbia

| Response to Information Request Number: | COL00001.OGC |
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| Subject: | Colombia: Kidnapping and extortion by armed groups in urban and suburban areas |
| From: | INS Resource Information Center (RIC) |
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**Query:**

To what extent do armed groups in Colombia target urban and suburban areas for kidnapping and extortion, and which sectors of society are most at risk?

**Response:**

According to sources available to the RIC, the already high rate of kidnappings and extortion in Colombia continued to climb during 1999. At the same time, armed groups, particularly leftist guerrilla organizations, have sharply increased their use of kidnapping and extortion against middle and upper middle class targets in urban and suburban areas of the country. Extortion, as distinct from direct kidnapping, involves threatening people with abduction, death or other harm, usually by telephone or written communication, unless some form of payment is made.

Colombia has the highest kidnapping rate in the world. (AP, 31 October 1999; BBC, 14 December 1998) In November 1999 the Free Country Foundation (*Fundación País Libre*), a Colombian non-governmental organization that monitors kidnapping and assists victims and their families, said that it had recorded 2,283 abductions in the first nine months of 1999, or about 8.3 per day. (Los Angeles Times, 21 November 1999) That figure was greater than the 2,216 kidnappings recorded by the organization during all of 1998. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 18 April 1999)

According to *País Libre*, the number of kidnappings more than doubled between 1995 and 1998, as the organization recorded 1,068 abductions in 1995, followed by 1,528 in 1996, 1,693 in 1997 and, as noted, 2,216 in 1998. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 18 April 1999)

At the end of 1999 Colombia's national police said that the total number of reports of kidnappings it received in 1999 would reach at least 2,800 (*El Nuevo Herald*, 31 December 1999), compared to 2,649 in 1998. (Reuters, 23 December 1999)

Totals differ because some victims report kidnappings only to the police or other government security forces, while some report them only to *País Libre* or other NGOs. At the same time, many victims and their families, fearing retribution from their captors, do not report kidnappings at all, meaning that the actual number of abductions is greater than indicated by available statistics. (*El Tiempo*, 27 September 1999; *New York Times*, 3 June 1999)

Leftist guerrilla organizations continue to carry out the majority of kidnappings. According to *País Libre*, 62.5 percent of the 2,216 abductions it recorded in 1998 were carried out by

such groups, with 667 attributed to the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; 566 to the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), National Liberation Army; 109 to the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL), Popular Liberation Army; and 43 to other guerrilla organizations. (US DOS, February 1999) There are about 15,000 FARC fighters, while ELN forces are estimated at 5,000 and EPL forces at less than one thousand. (*Miami Herald*, 5 October 1999; *El Nuevo Herald*, 2 January 2000)

Of the remaining abductions that took place in 1998, *País Libre* attributed 231 to common criminals, 20 to right-wing paramilitary groups, and 580 to "unknown organizations." During 1998, 341 kidnap victims were freed by police or other security forces, 21 escaped, 82 were murdered, 1,039 were freed through negotiation, payment of ransoms, or unilateral actions of the kidnappers, and many remained captive. Arrests or prosecutions in any of the cases were rare. (US DOS, February 1999) In general, because of Colombia's weak judicial system, between 90 percent and 95 percent of all crimes go unpunished, according to the government's own figures. (Reuters, 24 November 1999; Reuters, 29 December 1999).

The percentage of kidnappings carried out by leftist guerrilla organizations appears to increased somewhat in 1999, as the government's anti-kidnapping unit reported in June and again in October that such groups were responsible for up to two-thirds of all abductions being carried out during the year. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 1 October 1999; *New York Times*, 3 June 1999)

The most notable trends in the last two years, and particularly in 1999, have been the upswing in kidnapping and extortion by left-wing guerrilla organizations in urban and suburban areas; the increased targeting of the middle and upper middle classes in those areas; and the greater use of sophisticated technology in carrying out such operations. The *Christian Science Monitor*, for example, citing both official and non-official sources, reported in mid-1999, "Where once the rebels targeted wealthy elites and foreign businessmen, they now cast their nets wider. Increasingly, the guerrillas snatch members of the country's urban middle classes…" (*Christian Science Monitor*, 4 August 1999).

The Associated Press, citing a similar range of sources, reported that the business class in Bogotá "had always 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." (Associated Press, 31 October 1999) A list of victims compiled by *País Libre* in 1999 included doctors, accountants, small and medium-sized business people, surveyors, lawyers, teachers, students, and pilots, among others. (*New York Times*, 3 June 1999)

The principal aim of most kidnappings and extortion operations is to raise revenue. A report issued by the Colombian government in 1999 said that the three main leftist guerrilla organizations in recent years had obtained more than $1.2 billion in kidnapping ransoms alone. (*New York Times*, 3 June 1999; *CNN World*, 11 May 1999) Kidnapping for ransom is now their second biggest income source; the first is "taxes" imposed on drug traffickers which now amount to nearly $1 billion per year. The increased income has helped make it possible for the FARC, for example, to pay its troops three times what Colombian army conscripts make, according to U.S. and Colombian government sources. (*Washington Post*, 6 July 1999).

At the same time, there is a political component to the increased use of kidnappings and extortion in urban areas, as the FARC in particular has vowed to make the country's middle and upper classes feel the pain of a protracted conflict whose principal victims have long been civilians in rural areas. (AP, 31 October 1999). Meanwhile, the three main guerrilla organizations at times resort to large-scale seizures of hostages for purposes of publicity and political propaganda. The ELN, for example, believing it was being ignored in favor of the FARC in the government's peace initiatives, in April 1999 hijacked an Avianca

domestic flight en route from the regional capital of Bucaramanga to Bogotá, and in May abducted 140 people from a Catholic church in an upper middle class neighborhood of Cali. (*New York Times*, 21 June 1999; *Miami Herald*, 5 October 1999)

At the end of 1999, *País Libre* reconfirmed that during the year the FARC, ELN and EPL had stepped up their use of kidnapping and extortion in urban areas. For example, in the first nine months of 1999, and for the first time, the municipality with the highest number of reported kidnappings was Bogotá, with 83. (*País Libre*, December 1999) The FARC, in fact, publicly pledged in 1999 to extend its prosecution of the war further into urban areas (*Washington Post*, 27 November 1999), and both the FARC and the ELN continued to characterize kidnappings as "retentions," a legitimate means, they claim, of raising funds during war time. (*CNN World*, 11 May 1999)

*País Libre* also noted an increase in the use of extortion by leftist guerrilla groups in many of the country's metropolitan areas, particularly in and around Bogotá, Ibagué, Sogomoso, Tunja, Neiva, Barranquilla, Cartagena, Cali, and Bucaramanga. (*País Libre*, December 1999). The organization estimated in late 1999 that 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. Juan Francisco Mesa, *País Libre* Projects Director, told the Associated Press that he personally knew of between 200 and 300 companies that have been approached by guerrilla extortionists, and that executives of some of the companies that had refused to pay were kidnapped by guerrillas as a result (Associated Press, 31 October 1999). Meanwhile, the chief of the government's anti-kidnapping unit, in noting that 1,015 cases of extortion had been reported nationally in the first eight and one half months of 1999, emphasized that the real number would be substantially greater because most extortion victims never report the crime. (AP, 31 October)

Although the FARC and the ELN are the principal perpetrators of extortion, the EPL, as in the case of kidnappings, is increasingly involved as well. In 1999, for example, in a fairly typical extortion scenario, a beauty salon owner in a Bogotá suburb received a typewritten note from the ELP threatening to kill family members unless the group was paid $20,000. (*Los Angeles Times*, 12 October 1999)

Right-wing paramilitary groups also are engaged in extortion in urban and suburban areas, according to *País Libre* and local media reports (*País Libre*, December 1999; El Tiempo, 3 January 2000) For example, in early 2000 it was reported that in Cundinamarca, the department that surrounds Bogotá, extortion operations perpetrated by both the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), a principal paramilitary group, and the FARC were widespread and increasing. The largest group of victims in 1999 was small business people—especially owners of drugstores, bakeries, hardware stores and other such commercial establishments—but targets also included industrialists, ranchers and street market vendors. Local police determined that a number of extortion calls were being made from telephones inside urban jails where AUC members have been imprisoned on kidnapping or other charges, and that criminal bands were being hired to conduct some of the legwork. Victims were being offered a variety of methods to make payoffs, including quota systems and even payment through the Internet. (*El Tiempo*, 3 January 2000)

The targeting of the middle and upper middle classes in urban areas for direct kidnapping is carried out in a number of ways. One is to lure the intended victim to a relatively secluded spot, as was the case of a businessman abducted in a Bogotá suburb after he received an anonymous telephone call claiming squatters had invaded the site of a new home he was building. (*Miami Herald*, 15 August 1999) Other frequently used tactics include crashing a vehicle into the target's automobile and abducting the individual in the middle of traffic, or simply using force to follow targets into their own homes to make the snatch. (*El Tiempo*, 27 September 1999) Guerrilla groups also on occasion hire criminal bands to carry out the abductions. (Associated Press, 31 October 1999) In 1999 there also was at least one reported case of an urban businessman abducted by common criminals who then "sold" him to one of the guerrilla groups. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 2 May 1999)

Cash payments of thousands up to millions of dollars—paid in lump sums or periodic installments— are the most common but not the only form of ransom demands. One urban businessman, for example, was forced following his release to act as a *testaferro*, or front, for his former guerrilla captors in the purchase of a number of gasoline stations. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 2 May 1999)

Since 1998 one of the more notorious ploys used by the three principal guerrilla groups to target urbanites is the practice known as *pesca milagrosa*, miracle fishing, after Jesus Christ's promise to turn his disciples into fishers of men. The phrase also refers to a children's grab-bag type of game played at birthday parties and during holidays in Colombia. A band of guerrillas appears out of nowhere and sets up a roadblock on a major highway running between cities or between cities and beach, rural or other areas where city dwellers frequently travel. They stop every vehicle and abduct passengers with the means to pay ransoms. In 1999, a written warning handed out at toll booths across the country featured the slogan: "Accept the fact you could be kidnapped." (*New York Times*, 3 June 1999; *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 August 1999; BBC, 4 July 1999)

According to the Colombian national police, incidents of *pesca milagrosa* occurred in Colombia at a rate of about two per week in 1998. The police reported that in the first trimester of 1999 the rate had increased to nearly three per week (*El Nuevo Herald*, 2 May 1999), and that 129 people had been abducted during nineteen of the larger operations. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 18 April 1999)

The relative wealth of highway travelers, or of any other prospective targets, is not determined simply by their appearance or the types of vehicles they drive. The FARC maintains computerized databases of potential kidnapping and extortion victims—including people's citizen identification numbers, bank records and credit histories. It also utilizes laptop computers at roadblocks to check detainees against its lists of preferred victims and potential targets. Government officials, acknowledging that almost any information can be bought in Colombia, said in late 1999 that the FARC had obtained personnel files from numerous companies and businesses, as well as archives listing owners of real estate and property prices in Bogotá and other cities. (AP, 21 December 1999; *Miami Herald*, 5 October 1999; *El Nuevo Herald*, 2 May 1999)

Sophisticated technology, including cell phones, audio scanners, video surveillance and online information gathering, is also utilized for urban extortion operations. Guerrilla bands will stake out victims and their families for weeks, sometimes months, delving into their daily routines and finances until they have enough information to prove to victims over the phone or in writing that they can kidnap or do great harm to anyone in the family if payments are not made. At the same time, guerrilla organizations augment the information in their databases by regularly consulting business magazines and newspaper society pages, and by obtaining membership lists of Colombia's principal trade associations. (AP, 31 October 1999; *Miami Herald*, 15 August 1999)

The FARC apparently also uses advanced computers for accounting and to manage its considerable financial resources. In late 1999, members of FARC claimed that it had updated its hardware and software to the latest generation, including obtaining an advance version of Microsoft's Windows 2000, and that it was using state-of-the-art optical storage to back up and secure important files. (AP, 21 December 1999)

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