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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

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Colombia: Whether the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo, FARC-EP), the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) and the former United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) pursue victims who relocate to another area; whether these groups track their victims over the long term, even if the latter return to Colombia after an extended period of time

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Written reports on whether the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo, FARC-EP), known also as FARC, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) and the former United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) pursue victims who relocate to another area in the country and whether these groups track their victims over the long term, even if the latter return to Colombia after an extended period of time could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. However, a number of experts who have written on the situation in Colombia provided their opinion on the subject.

Persons who have moved to another area of the country

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch indicated that "[d]ue to their presence in vast sectors of Colombia, it is likely that the FARC, ELN and successor groups to the AUC have the capacity to pursue victims throughout many regions of the country" (9 Nov. 2009). This information was corroborated by a professor of Sociology at Acadia University and research member of the Atlantic Canada-Colombia Research Group, who, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, stated that, "[the FARC-EP and ELN] most certainly have the capacity and fortitude to continue targeting persons [they perceive] to be 'class enemies' or deterrents to their political and ideological objectives" (19 Jan. 2010).

Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of Law at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida and expert on international law and international criminal law, indicated that, "the FARC, and to a lesser extent the ELN, are absolutely capable of pursuing individuals nearly anywhere within the Colombian national territory if the individual's threat or interest to either group warrants such effort" (21 Jan. 2010). In addition, she noted that these groups have the capacity to engage in intelligence gathering (Professor of Law 21 Jan. 2010). Furthermore, addressing the FARC "with the understanding that [these] statements apply to the ELN, as well", she added that,

Colombia's illegal armed groups ...have access to private bank records and credit card activities; they can track someone down based on their paper trail. They can eavesdrop on family members to determine where a target is located, or bribe acquaintances and neighbours for information.

...

Colombia's societal characteristics also play a role in the ability of an individual to resettle in a different part of the national territory. ... Regional identity is very important, especially among rural inhabitants of Antioquia (who are known as *paisas*), and it is virtually impossible to relocate from one part of the country to another without someone taking note. ...

Whether the FARC would choose to continue pursuing a relocated individual depends greatly on the value of that individual to the FARC. If we are talking about a person of humble origins being relocated to another part of

Colombia, it is possible that he could live in peace from further FARC harassment. ... If the relocated individual is a member of the political elite, business class, academia, or professional class and was targeted by the FARC for extortion or coercion to cooperate and provide technical assistance to the FARC, that would render the individual a high-value target to the FARC. (ibid.)

However, in correspondence with the Research Directorate a professor of Sociology at the National University of Colombia (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) and author of articles on the armed conflict in Colombia stated that it is [translation] "likely impossible" for the FARC, ELN and former AUC to track their victims when they relocate from one part of the country to another (13 Jan. 2010). According to him, these groups do not have the capacity to carry out operations throughout the country (Professor, National University of Colombia 13 Jan. 2010). In his view, although [translation] "the capacity of the central State to provide protection is still insufficient, and it does not include the totality of the territory ... [this capacity] has been increased as far as the capacity to protect threatened or vulnerable people" (ibid.).

Persons returning from abroad

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Senior Researcher with Human Rights Watch indicated that "[d]ue to their presence in vast sectors of Colombia and extensive information networks, it is likely that the FARC, ELN and successor groups to the AUC have the capacity to pursue victims even after they have spent many years outside the country" (Human Rights Watch 9 Nov. 2009). Furthermore, in the view of the Professor of Sociology at Acadia University, the FARC and ELN "would continue to view persons, it deems as a 'class' enemy, regardless of time duration or geographical location" (19 Jan. 2010). The Professor at Stetson University, explaining that the following statements apply also to the ELN, addressed this issue as follows:

[It] depends on the ongoing value of that individual to the FARC. ... The FARC is capable of monitoring over the long term the movement of Colombian nationals from and into Colombia by flagging names that will signal an alert when that individual returns to Colombian soil. Also, there is some risk to a targeted individual who continues to reside outside Colombia, especially if that individual is a high value target and resides in a nation where the FARC maintains a significant covert presence (other Andean states, Argentina, Paraguay, Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, and some parts of the United States, particularly Florida and Georgia). ... at some point, the paper trail of an individual's daily routine and lifestyle would expose that individual to possible identification by the FARC.

Moreover, there is a stigma attached to Colombian nationals who return to Colombia from the United States, Canada, and Europe. Many criminals and illegal armed groups such as the FARC are under the impression that expatriates returning to Colombia bring back with them money that can be extorted. ... This false assumption places many returning Colombians at risk of being targeted by groups who must include extortion in their arsenal of criminal activities in order to survive. Therefore, even if several years have elapsed, there is simply no way to assure that a repatriated Colombian national who was once targeted and persecuted by the FARC can live securely and in peace. (Professor, Stetson University 21 Jan. 2010)

In contrast to the above statements, according to the Professor at the National University of Colombia, it is [translation] "unlikely" that the FARC, ELN and the former AUC could locate victims who return to the country after they have lived abroad for a long period of time (Professor, National University of Colombia 13 Jan. 2010). In his view, government actions have succeeded in neutralizing their communications, reducing their operational capacity and [translation] "minimiz[ing their] capacity of intelligence gathering" (ibid.). A report published by the Foundation for Security and Democracy (Fundación Seguridad y Democracia - FSD) on the armed conflict in Colombia corroborates this information (FSD 18 Dec. 2008). Again, in his correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Professor at the National University of Colombia noted that a bombing raid of a camp located in Angostura, Ecuador, and several raids of other camps, in which computers and hardware were seized, have decreased the international operations of the FARC and its capacity to expand (13 Jan. 2010).

Influence of the FARC, ELN and former AUC in the country

An Agence France Presse (AFP) article published by the Ecuadorian daily *El Tiempo* reports that according to government data, FARC has approximately 7,000 [translation] "insurgents" (AFP 5 Feb. 2009). An International Crisis Group report, however, indicates that government figures are inconsistent: according to the Ministry of Defence, there are 7,000 to 8,000 guerrillas, but a Colombian security agency states that FARC has approximately 10,000 combatants (International Crisis Group 26 Mar. 2009, 7). A British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) article reports that as of November 2009, the ELN had approximately 1,500 members (BBC 5 Nov. 2009). An article published by Agencia EFE indicates that according to the National Police (Policía Nacional), "Colombia's new militias have at least 4,000 fighters, a large number of them members of the defunct AUC militia organization" (Agencia EFE 18 Aug. 2009).

A report published by the Ministry of National Defence (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional) on 18 May 2009 indicates that in 2002, 529 FARC members were demobilized while the number registered in 2008 was 3,027 (Colombia 18 May 2009, 14). In the case of the ELN, the number of disarmed members was 63 in 2002 and 403 in 2008 (ibid.).

In an annual report covering the period between July 2007 and July 2008, the Ministry of National Defence indicates that information provided by the demobilized paramilitary soldiers and the cooperation of intelligence officials contributed to the Colombian government's efforts to

- free 31 hostages;
- seize and destroy 8.9 tons of cocaine;
- deactivate 7,449 antipersonnel mines;
- seize 98.8 tons of explosives, 3,207 firearms and 7,820 grenades. (Colombia 5 Aug. 2008, 7)

Further, on 1 January 2009, a bombing raid destroyed two FARC camps that were located in the Department of Meta (AFP 3 Jan. 2010), in central Colombia (ColombiaContact.com n.d.). According to a general, "similar [raids were] being carried out in Caqueta and Guaviare (southeast) departments" (AFP 3 Jan. 2010). Citing some of its former reports, the International Crisis Group indicates in its report of 18 December 2009 that, since 2007, government measures have reduced the presence of the insurgents in Colombia's urban centers and have pushed "them out of many regions where they previously were strong" (18 Dec. 2009, 3). According to two sources, government military operations carried out between 2002 and 2004 have weakened the military capacity of the FARC in Bogotá (Colombia 15 Sept. 2008, 6-7; *Semana* 27 May 2009). A report entitled *The FARC at Their Worst Moment in History* published by the Ministry of National Defence indicates that military efforts have "resulted ... in a loss of presence and influence of the FARC in most of the Colombian territory, including the eastern mountain range, their traditional point for strategic deployment" (Colombia 15 Sept. 2008, 6-7). The same report states that the FARC has lost its national power and has become an "organization with local influence" (ibid., 7). In contrast, in her correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Senior Researcher with Human Rights Watch indicated that "[w]hile the FARC and ELN have been pushed out of many regions, including major cities, it is very likely that they retain the capacity to carry out operations - including kidnappings, killings, and bombings - in any part of the country" (Human Rights Watch 9 Nov. 2009).

In its report, International Crisis Group recognizes that although the FARC has seen its capability weakened, it still retains capacity "to adapt to a changing security environment and gain recruits mostly among the rural poor" (18 Dec. 2009, 4). The Senior Researcher with Human Rights Watch added that, "the FARC, the ELN and successor groups to the AUC continue to engage in abuses against civilians in Colombia" (Human Rights Watch 9 Nov. 2009).

In the same way, according to the Professor of Law at Stetson University,

The current status of the FARC and ELN is somewhat uncertain. Recent reports suggest that the FARC's ability to conduct military operations against the government and launch terrorist acts against civilian targets has been weakened. ... The FARC has suffered setbacks due to better coordination of counter-guerrilla operations by the police, military, and better management of intelligence resources. ... While the ELN does not pose the threat it once did to Colombian national security and civil society, on December 16, 2009, the FARC and ELN, ..., issued a joint statement announcing that they were joining together with "force and belligerence" to oppose the Uribe government. (Professor of Law 21 Jan. 2010)

The above information is corroborated by two media sources that indicate that the FARC and the ELN announced that they intend to join forces and work together in their fight against the government; these two groups were previously enemies (*The Irish Times* 18 Dec. 2009; Reuters 16 Dec. 2009). However, a Colombian political analyst has qualified this union as "largely symbolic" (ibid.; BBC 17 Dec. 2009).

Following the killing of nine Colombian soldiers in November 2009, a political science professor at the Javeriana University (Universidad Javeriana) cited in a Reuter's article, indicates that "[t]here [was] a reactivation of the FARC [during the fall of 2009] in places like Cauca and Norte de Santander, near the Venezuelan border" (Reuters 10 Nov. 2009). He added that, even if "[t]he FARC no longer present[ed] a strategic threat to the state, ... they [were] making the point that they [could] still do damage despite Uribe's counteroffensive" (ibid.).

Governor Luis Francisco Cuellar was found dead on 22 December 2009 after he was kidnapped by members of the FARC (RFI 23 Dec. 2009). The last time a governor was kidnapped was in April 2002 (*Le Monde* 23 Dec. 2009). A report published by FSD, in 2009, indicates that the number of murders committed by illegal groups decreased by 2.2 percent, from 13,607 (between January and October 2008) to 13,311 (between January and October 2009) (FSD 18 Dec. 2009, 4). The same report notes that the number of kidnappings for extortion has also been reduced by 23 percent, from 167 (between January and October 2008) to 128 (between January and October 2009) (ibid., 11).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives from the Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, Instituto de Estudios Políticos, Washington Office on Latin America ([WOLA](#)) and professors from the Universidad Autónoma de Occidente and the Universidad del Valle were unsuccessful. Representatives from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Colombia - Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, Colombia - Policía Nacional de Colombia, Colombia - Observatorio de Derechos Humanos (ODH), Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC), Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, Fundación País Libre, Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, Human Rights First, Inter-American Dialog, Latin America Working Group, Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos (OACNUDH), and professors from Georgetown University, Universidad Antioquia and Universidad Javeriana could not provide information within the time constraints of this Response. Representatives from the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular <<http://www.cinep.org.co/>> (CINEP) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and professors from the Universidad de los Andes and the University of London were unable to provide information for this Response.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International ([AI](#)), *Bogotá Daily*, *Cambio* [Bogotá], Centro de Investigación y Cooperación para el Desarrollo (CIDEAL) Colombia - Ministerio del Interior y de Justicia, Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento Forzado (CODHES), European Country of Origin Information Network ([ecoi.net](#)), *Le Monde diplomatique*, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) Organization of American States ([OAS](#)), ReliefWeb, *The Herald Tribune*, *El Tiempo* [Bogotá].

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