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.

COL103710.E

Colombia: Whether the Black Eagles (Águilas Negras) have links to former paramilitary groups, such as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC); criminal activities of the Black Eagles, including extortion and drug trafficking; state response to the Black Eagles (2008 - February 2011) Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Origins of New Paramilitary Groups or Criminal Bands

Despite the Colombian government's efforts to demobilize paramilitary groups, which started in 2002 (CCR Mar. 2011, 7), new groups have sprung up (ibid., 8; Human Rights Watch Feb. 2010, 3; Saab and Taylor 2009, 456). The demobilization process focused on the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) (ibid.; US 11 Mar. 2010, Sec. 1; Human Rights Watch Feb. 2010, 3), which is made up of 37 paramilitary groups (ibid.). Human Rights Watch, in a report on the new face of violence in Colombia, refers to the new groups as "successor groups" because they have taken over "the criminal operations that the AUC leadership previously ran" (ibid.). This is corroborated in an interview by the Mexican state news agency NOTIMEX, in which the Director of the Democratic Culture Foundation (Fundación Cultura Democrática) notes that the new, emerging groups have their origins in the AUC (21 Feb. 2011).

However, Human Rights Watch reports that there is debate between experts on whether these new groups are the "heirs" of the AUC paramilitaries (ibid., 1, 3) or, as the Colombian government describes them, new emerging criminal bands (bandas criminales emergentes, BACRIM) that are involved in the illegal drug trade (ibid., 4; Saab and Taylor 2009, 456). The Latin American Special Report explains that the reason the government does not want to recognize the so-called BACRIM as "neo-paramilitary groups," is that to do so "would effectively admit to its partial responsibility since the problem partly stems from the failures in the paramilitary demobilization effort" (Latinnews.com 2010, 8).

Black Eagles and Links to the AUC

The Institute for Studies in Development and Peace (Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz, INDEPAZ), a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Bogotá working towards the promotion of social peace (n.d.), indicates that there are six main new paramilitary groups, one of which is the Black Eagles (Águilas Negras) (INDEPAZ 15 Mar. 2011). Human Rights Watch reported that there are nine major successor groups, including the Black Eagles (Human Rights Watch Feb. 2010, 4). Similarly, Agence France-Presse (AFP) reports that Colombian authorities recognize seven organizations consisting of former AUC members, such as the Black Eagles (AFP 21 Jan. 2011). It is also noted by several other sources that the Black Eagles is a branch or extension of the AUC (RSF 25 Apr. 2008; Voz 25 Mar. 2009; Saab and Taylor 2009, 463), and was formed with ex-AUC members (AFP 21 Jan. 2011).

In a February 2011 AFP article, humanitarian leaders reportedly indicate that the Black Eagles are a paramilitary group that has emerged from the demobilized AUC (AFP 20 Feb. 2011). The Director of the Democratic Culture Foundation, in an interview with NOTIMEX, also identified the Black Eagles as one of the new paramilitary groups that was [translation] "formed through fusions and alliances with other groups" and that it includes non-demobilized and demobilized AUC paramilitaries in its ranks (NOTIMEX 21 Feb. 2011).

Alliances with paramilitary and guerrilla groups
The *Latin American Special Report* writes new paramilitary groups often work with other criminal or guerrilla groups to "share narco-traffic corridors" (Latinnews.com 2010, 9). As the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) explains, the new groups tend to be motivated by money rather than ideology, and they often form alliances with guerrilla groups, their "former enemy," to protect trafficking routes (Mar. 2011, 8, 10). The President of the Security and Democracy Foundation (Fundación Seguridad y Democracia) notes, in an AFP article, the existence of alliances between the demobilized AUC paramilitaries and the guerrilla groups, saying that they are based on an agreement to provide weapons to the guerrillas in exchange for coca paste and protection (19 Nov. 2010). A specific example is provided by *Semana.com*, which notes that reports from various organizations claim an alliance between the Black Eagles of Urabá -- who control the flow of narcotics and weapons entering and leaving the country through the Gulf of Urabá and the town of Atrato in the department of Chocó -- and the Caribbean Block (Bloque Caribe) of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) (6 Aug. 2008). Corroboration for this information could not be found within the time constraints of this Response.

**Geographic Presence**

According to the INDEPAZ study, in 2010, the Black Eagles were operating in 99 municipalities in the following 20 departments: Antioquia, Arauca, Atlántico, Bolívar, Boyacá, Caldas, Cauca, Córdoba, Chocó, Cundinamarca, Distrito Capital, Magdalena, Meta, Nariño, Norte De Santander, Quindío, Risaralda, Santander, Sucre, and Valle (15 Mar. 2011). More generally, , Agencia EFE, citing the Director of the National Police, reports that groups like the Black Eagles are involved in drug trafficking and [translation] "converge in coca cultivation zones where FARC is also present" (25 Jan. 2011). For his part, the Director of the Colombian Democratic Culture Foundation notes that illegal organizations such as the Black Eagles are concentrated in northern Colombia and the Pacific (NOTIMEX 21 Feb. 2011). Reporters Without Borders (RSF) similarly places their area of operation in northern Colombia (RSF 25 Apr. 2008). In 2010, the Foundation Ideas for Peace (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, FIP), an independent Colombian think tank committed to improving knowledge of the armed conflict in Colombia (FIP n.d.), also mentions the department of Norte de Santander as a place of Black Eagle activity (FIP Jan., 2010, 3).

In addition to the north, Human Rights Watch reports their presence along the majority of the Nariño coastline [southwest Colombia] and the Andean mountain range [which falls along western Colombia] (Feb. 2010, 8). A conflict dynamics and peace negotiations coordinator at the FIP noted in an opinion piece published in *Semana.com*, in 2008, that the Black Eagles operate up to the southwest and eastern parts of Colombia (*Semana.com* 23 Jun. 2008). A 2011 AFP article reports that the Black Eagles also have a presence in Bogotá (20 Feb. 2011).

**The Black Eagles Name**

According to the researchers at InSight, an organization with offices in Colombia and Washington specializing in providing information on organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean (InSight 15 Mar. 2011), the government and the media have used the "generic" term "Black Eagles" to describe "ex-paramilitaries still trafficking drugs" in Colombia (25 Feb. 2011). Examples include the Black Eagles of Urabá, currently known as the Urabeños and, in Córdoba and Antioquia, the Black Eagles of the North (InSight 25 Feb. 2011).

As well, many groups that have threatened social activists have done so using the Black Eagles name (ibid.). The InSight researchers also suggest that "in some areas of Colombia, low-level street gangs [possibly] adopt the name 'Aguilas Negras' to better intimidate victims into paying extortion fees, or abandoning their property" (ibid.). Human Rights Watch similarly reports the police as contending that the Black Eagles are "not a single group, but rather a convenient label that many groups, including local gangs, had appropriated to generate fear in the population" (Feb. 2010, 36). The *Latin American Special Report* also writes that there are persons identifying themselves as Black Eagles members when "committing crimes, intimidating human rights activists and forcing local residents out of their land," and says that there is "no evidence" that they belong to "a firmly unified national group" (Latinnews.com 2010, 10). However, the Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris (CNAI), a Colombian NGO working towards the development of social peace (CNAI 26 May 2008), indicates that it is [translation] "unknown" whether the various groups using the Black Eagles name operate in coordination with one another or are unrelated groups using the same name (ibid. Dec. 2008, 45).

In addition, the *Latin American Special Report* makes a distinction between the persons who call themselves Black Eagles and commit crimes in different parts of the country and the "several successor groups" issuing statements in the name of the Black Eagles, saying that the latter "may have some level of national organisation amongst different satellite groups with a common goal but not a cohesive structure" (Latinnews.com 2010, 10). InSight also mentions that the Black Eagles "appears to be the blanket name for the many successor groups willing to adapt the AUC's tactics and, in many cases, its political discourse" (InSight 25 Feb. 2011). Human Rights Watch writes that it received "consistent reports" from among the residents and authorities it interviewed that the Black Eagles "are in fact a single successor group with a high level of coordination, operating in many ways like a former AUC block" (Feb. 2010, 36).

**Criminal Activities**
In general, reports the CCR, paramilitary groups such as the Black Eagles engage in extortion, maintain stolen land for "legal and illegal businesses" and, as previously mentioned, protect trafficking routes (CCR Mar. 2011, 8). Human Rights Watch similarly reports that, "[i]ke the AUC blocks," these new groups are "deeply involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activities, including smuggling, extortion, and money laundering" (Feb. 2010, 28). The CCR also mentions that the new groups "operate mainly to defend the legal and illegal businesses of their current leaders, who may include politicians, entrepreneurs and probably corporations" (Mar. 2011, 10). More specifically, InSight notes that the Black Eagles are "dedicated to protecting the economic interests of former mid-level paramilitary commanders" (25 Feb. 2011).

According to the Ministry of Defence, in an article describing the capture of Black Eagle members in Nariño, other Black Eagles activities include homicide, extortion, and the illegal sale of firearms and drugs (Colombia 8 Sept. 2009). Human Rights Watch also reports interviews with witnesses who said that members of the Black Eagles "were controlling crime and killing, and forcibly displacing, raping, or threatening them" (Feb. 2010, 36). A 2009 Semana.com article also reports on the capture of 28 suspected Black Eagles members, 8 of whom were identified as drug-trafficking business leaders (9 Sept. 2009). However, the Black Eagles are not known to control any transnational drug-trafficking routes (InSight 25 Feb. 2011).

**Threats to civilians**

Human Rights Watch reports that the Black Eagles "frequently engage in acts of violence against civilians," including "trade unionists [and] human rights defenders" (Feb. 2010, 8, 29-30). The CNAI also reports that the Black Eagles have [translation] "written and made personal threats against union members, councillors, counsel and defence attorneys, as well as professors and journalists" (Dec. 2008, 45). InSight adds that the Black Eagles threaten ["labor unions, social aid agencies, and land reparation activists," as well as groups such as the CNAI and the Washington-based Washington Office on Latin America (25 Feb. 2011). RSF states that the Black Eagles are responsible for threatening and killing journalists, in many cases after the journalists were "criticised by President Alvaro Uribe's government" (RSF 3 May 2010), as well as "forcing some journalists to flee their region if not the country" (ibid. 21 Apr. 2010).

According to InSight, the Black Eagles operate by announcing its presence in a given area by distributing pamphlets. Usually, these will announce the imposition of an evening curfew, declare their rivalry with another local gang, or threaten the community with 'social cleansing' (that is, threats against drug addicts, prostitutes, or 'guerilla sympathizers' like union organizers or intellectuals). (InSight 25 Feb. 2011)

A few other sources also report that the Black Eagles specifically target social activists, labelling them as guerrillas (Semana.com 14 May 2009; Human Rights Watch Feb. 2010, 29-30; Cambio 19 Mar. 2009). For example, Semana.com notes that although organizations attacked by the Black Eagles are domestically and internationally recognized for their social and developmental work, as well as their aid to conflict victims, the Black Eagles -- the self-proclaimed [translation] "army of social restoration" -- sees them as or working for "guerrillas" (14 May 2009). Human Rights Watch corroborates the statement that groups such as the Black Eagles label their targets as "guerrillas" (Feb. 2010, 29-30), while the Colombian news source Cambio provides an example of the Black Eagles threatening human rights defenders and referring to them as "guerrillas" and [translation] "obstacles to democratic security" (19 Mar. 2009).

In addition to the InSight researchers, the United States (US) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009*, reporting more generally on the "new illegal groups" and paramilitary members, says that they are responsible for committing "massacres or 'social cleansing,' killings of prostitutes, gay men and lesbians, drug users, vagrants, and gang members in city neighbourhoods they controlled" (US 11 Mar. 2010, Sec.1g). More specifically, Voz, the official newspaper of the Colombian Communist Party (Partido Comunista Colombiano), reports that the Director of the National Police has begun to investigate the "worrying situation" created by the Black Eagles, which includes [translation] "acts of social extermination and the 'cleansing' of the destitute, prostitutes and dissolve persons in various cities" (25 Mar. 2009).

A representative from Colombia's National Ombudsman's Office, speaking generally about paramilitaries in a 2010 interview with the CCR, stated that the groups have "informant networks" in Colombia that enable them to control "complete neighbourhoods and cities" (Mar. 2011, 17). The CCR also indicates that the Colombian government maintains a personal information system -- which involves finger scanning, photographing and requiring people to provide identification upon entering public buildings -- that is managed by private security companies (Mar. 2011, 21). However, the CCR points out that there is a "general suspicion" that these companies are "owned by former or current members of the military or security forces, the government and/or the paramilitaries" (Mar. 2011, 21).

**Land displacement**

According to a December 2008 CNAI report, the Black Eagles are involved in forcibly displacing people from
their land (Dec. 2008, 45). Human Rights Watch acknowledges that although the extent to which the new paramilitary groups are responsible for the land displacement is not known, it reports that "much of the displacement is occurring in regions where [these] groups are active" (Feb. 2010, 50-51). InSight also notes that armed groups calling themselves Black Eagles have been involved in land displacement in Chocó, Sucre and Antioquia, and that the Black Eagles have been threatening and killing "activists advocating for land repatriation" in Córdoba and Santander to maintain the land interests and drug-trafficking routes established by the former AUC (25 Feb. 2011).

Further corroboration is provided by Colombia's Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation (Agencia Presidencial para la Acción Social y la Cooperación Internacional), Social Action (Acción Social), which reports that in 2009 hundreds of civilians in the Colombian departments of La Guajira, Antioquia and Córdoba were forcibly displaced following [translation] "hostilities and threats ... by insurgent groups like the FARC and criminal groups like the Paisas, Rastrojos and Black Eagles ... trying to consolidate territories to promote cultivation and trafficking of illegal substances" (Colombia 18 Aug. 2009). The Presidential Agency also reports that the constant threats made by the Black Eagles and the Paisas affected about [translation] "ten thousand indigenous" Zenú people in Puerto Libertador, Córdoba (ibid. 27 May 2009). In 2010, Agencia EFE reported that, in Medio Baudó, a municipality in Chocó, approximately 50 families hid in the jungle due to territorial fighting between the Black Eagles and the Rastrojos (17 Aug. 2010).

**State Response**

In the CCR report, the Canadian Counsellor in Bogotá acknowledges in her interview that "what are now called 'neo paramilitaries' and drug-traffickers need to be addressed better by the current Colombian government" (CCR Mar. 2011, 6). As an example of this, Human Rights Watch states that the Colombian government "has failed to invest adequate resources in the police units charged with combating the [successor] groups, or in the group of prosecutors charged with investigating them" (Human Rights Watch Feb. 2010, 4).

INDEPAZ also reports that the National Police reportedly continue to deny the existence of the Black Eagles (INDEPAZ 15 Mar. 2011). For example, Human Rights Watch reports that a senior police member regarded the Black Eagles of Nariño as "more mythical" than "real" (Human Rights Watch Feb. 2010, 35).

The Ministry of Defence notes that, in 2008, the National Police had identified 160 suspected members of the Black Eagles, one of whom was captured in Cúcuta, Norte de Santander for attempted homicide, illegal possession of a firearm, and other crimes (Colombia 21 May 2008). The Ministry of Defence also reported on the 2008 killing of eight members of the Black Eagles by military troops in western Antioquia (ibid. 30 May 2008), as well as the capture of the top leader in Antioquia (ibid. 18 Sept. 2008). The Ministry also notes that in 2009, 36 members of the Black Eagles were captured in Pasto, Tomaco and Ipiales, municipalities of Nariño, and that six of them were organizational heads; previous operations also resulted in the capture of another ten Black Eagles members who were involved in homicide and drug trafficking (ibid. 8 Sept. 2009).

In contrast, according to the US Country Reports, corrupt "local military and police forces" continue to make deals with either the new groups or non-demobilized paramilitary members (US 11 Mar. 2010, Sec. 1a). Similarly, Human Rights Watch notes hearing, through interviews with international observers, local officials and residents in the Nariño region, that "public security forces apparently tolerated the Black Eagles" (Feb. 2010, 8-9). For example, a former national official who once worked in the Urabá region said that although the army did not collaborate with the new groups, it tolerated them, preferring not to "confront them" in the rural areas for which they are responsible; however, the official also reported an incident in which the police in Belén de Bajirá appeared to be working with the Black Eagles (Human Rights Watch Feb. 2010, 101).

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.

**References**

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Agencia de Noticias del Estado Mexicano (NOTIMEX). 21 February 2011. "Afronta Colombia nueva amenaza por surgimiento de 'bandas emergentes'." (Factiva)


**Additional Sources Consulted**

**Oral sources:** Academics from the University of Tromsø; the Center for Latin American Studies at Georgetown University; the Sociology Department at Manhattan College; the Department of Political Science and Government at Universidad del Rosario; the Department of Political Science at Universidad de los Andes; the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences at the University of Texas at Dallas; as well as the Director of Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris (CNAI) did not reply within the time constraints of this Response. Academics from the Department of Economics at Universidad del Rosario and the Department of Sociology at Acadia University were unable to provide information for this Response.

**Internet sites, including:** Amnesty International (AI), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), El Universal [Cartagena], Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación (CNRR), Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES), The Economist [New York], El Espectador [Bogotá], European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Fedesarrollo, GlobalSecurity.org, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United States (US) Office on Colombia.

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