



The Popular Revolutionary Anti-Terrorist Army of Colombia (Ejercito Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista Colombiano - ERPAC) began as a right-wing proxy of the Colombian government battling leftist guerrillas. Following a failed peace process, the group began doing business with the rebels and other former paramilitaries, controlling vast territory that it used to process and store cocaine. The

ERPAC officially surrendered to the government in December 2011, under leader "Caracho," but fewer than half of its members handed in their weapons, leaving the rest to carry on fighting in Colombia's Eastern Plains.

ERPAC's stronghold was in the Meta, Guaviare, Vichada and Casanare provinces of the Eastern Plains. It controlled production of base and processed cocaine, which it sold to middlemen or exported through networks in Venezuela and Brazil. Since the 2011 surrender, the remnants of the group are thought to have divided into two rival factions, the Meta Bloc and the Libertadores de Vichada.

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Origins

Like many of the groups currently running the country's drug trade, known collectively by the government as "criminal bands," or BACRIMs, the ERPAC is descended from the paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Its roots lie in fighting between right-wing proxies of the government, and leftist guerrillas from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the Eastern Plains. There, members of what was known as the Centauros Bloc,

under the leadership of Jose Miguel Arroyave, battled FARC rebels for control of the region.

But from the beginning, the Centauros seemed more interested in the commercial than the military side of their work, which is why, in 2003-04, they launched a fight against a rival paramilitary group for control of the lucrative drug route through Casanare province near the Venezuelan and Brazilian borders. More than 1,000 died in the fighting. The Centauros won the battle, but more infighting followed. In September 2004, a group led by Pedro Oliverio Guerrero, alias "Cuchillo," ambushed and killed Centauros leader Arroyave.

The dissident groups implicated in the killing formed the Heroes de Llano and Heroes del Guaviare blocs, led by Manuel de Jesus Piraban, alias "Pirata," and Cuchillo

The two groups officially demobilized in September 2006 along with other paramilitary groups as part of the Justice and Peace process, with 1,765 men handing in 1,025 arms. However, Cuchillo secretly stockpiled weapons and rearmed with around 200 rebels, who became the founders of ERPAC.

The ERPAC thrived by allying itself with Daniel Barrera Barrera, alias "El Loco," and doing business with its former enemy, the FARC. Barrera, who was also aligned with the powerful Rastrojos criminal gang, was one of Colombia's most powerful drug traffickers until he was captured in Venezuela in September 2012. The ERPAC and Barrera used the Eastern Plains as their headquarters and regularly purchased coca base, the raw material used to make powdered cocaine, from the FARC, before processing and exporting it via Venezuela and Brazil. Authorities believe Cuchillo and Barrera exported between 2 and 3 tons per month. Some of their product went to Europe via impoverished West African nations such as Guinea-Bissau. They also sold their product to Mexican drug cartels operating in Mexico, Guatemala and other transit nations. In March 2010, the US Treasury designated Cuchillo and Barrera the two most wanted Colombian traffickers.

The ERPAC did more than traffic drugs. Using its overwhelming firepower, this group also stole land, robbed trucks, rustled cattle and extorted money from local businesses and wealthy farmers. Its contacts in the armed forces and police gave the group an advantage against its rivals.

Modus Operandi

The ERPAC was a former army and operated as such, gaining military control of territory in order to process and store illegal drugs, as well as terrorizing the local

population into submitting to its will. It had little ideology, and formed strategic alliances with Loco Barrera and its former enemies in the FARC in order to make money. The ERPAC operates mostly in remote areas of the Eastern Plains such as the departments of Casanare, Guaviare, Meta and Vichada. It bought coca base from the FARC, processed it in the Eastern Plains and exported it, mostly out of Venezuela by airplane or via the Pacific coast by boat. It attempted to expand to other areas, including Norte de Santander and the Magdalena Medio region in the heart of the country. Some cells of the group also appeared in Huila, Caqueta, Cauca and Putumayo, traditional guerrilla strongholds. Police intelligence reports say the ERPAC also had a "presence" in Arauca, Cundinamarca and Guainia.

The group fought battles with other powers in the Eastern Plains, including strongman Victor Carranza, known as Colombia's "Emerald Tsar," and remnants of former paramilitary group the Peasant Self-Defense Groups of Casanare (Autodefensas Campesinas de Casanare - ACC). The fight with the ACC dated back to 2003-2004, when the Centauros Bloc battled the group for control of the lucrative drug routes through the Eastern Plains. ERPAC also fought with other former paramilitary groups that have turned into criminal organizations, namely the Macacos, who operated under the auspices of the now extradited leader of the Central Bolivar Bloc, Carlos Mario Jimenez, alias "Macaco."

Evidence has also emerged pointing to collaboration between the ERPAC and corrupt elements in the police, army and intelligence agency the DAS, which is now disbanded.

The ERPAC suffered a series of heavy blows from 2009 onwards, with the arrest of top operatives included founding members Martin Farfan, alias "Pijarbey," (arrested December 2009) and Jose Covey Romero Zarate, who handled drug shipments from Vichada to Venezuela (arrested May 2010). In order to fill the holes in the ERPAC's command, Cuchillo's brother, Dumar de Jesus Guerrero Castillo, alias "Carecuchillo," escaped from prison and tried to reconnect with the group. However, he was recaptured a few months later.

In another sign of the group losing momentum in the Eastern Plains, the ERPAC botched a second assassination attempt against its rival Victor Carranza in March 2010. The group did manage to deepen its relationship with the FARC, after Guerrero met with the head of the 39th Front in eastern Meta order to negotiate the movement of drugs and precursor chemicals through rebel-controlled territory.

The most significant blow against the ERPAC came in Christmas 2010, when Cuchillo drowned in a creek while trying to escape a police raid on his ranch in Mapiripan, Meta. His second-in-command, Harold Humberto Rojas, alias "El Loco Harold," was also captured during the operation. He was the head of the ERPAC's security detail, meaning the man next-in-line to take command was the group's head of finances, another life-long paramilitary warrior.

The ERPAC's new leader, Jose Eberto Lopez Montero, alias "Caracho," lacked Guerrero's charisma and contacts in the drug trade. He soon faced the prospect of a fragmented ERPAC when a faction in Guaviare abandoned the group and began working as mercenaries for the FARC's 1st Front. Caracho moved quickly to confront the threat, sending a team of 50 armed men to defend ERPAC territory in the department. But there were further challenges to his command, as other mid-level operatives tried to strike out on their own and establish their own drug-trafficking operations.

Unable to hold the organization together, and perhaps hoping to take advantage of the soon-to-expire "Justice and Peace" Law which gave benefits to demobilizing paramilitaries, Caracho led some 272 members in a surrender to the government in December 2011. The majority were immediately freed, as there were no arrest warrants against them. Many were later recaptured, and as of September 2012 some 150 had been convicted, most of them sentenced to just four years and four months in prison.

Those surrendering made up less than half of the group's estimated fighters at that time, and the remnants are carrying on the ERPAC's business in its old territory. However, they split into several splinter groups. The two main groups, the Liberators of Vichada/ Heroes of Vichada (Libertadores del Vichada/Heroes de Vichada) led by the now released "Pijarbey," and the Meta Bloc, led by Rubber Antonio Navarro Caicedo, alias "Flaco Fredy."

This battle, and the capture of Flaco Fredy in September 2012, has allowed the Urabeños to gain influence in the region by backing the faction controlled by Pijarbey. The situation was complicated by the September 2012 arrest of Barrera. He was believed to have been backing the Meta faction of the ERPAC in their war against Pijarbey's Vichada faction. The Urabeños appeared to have been backing Pijarbey in the dispute, most likely with arms, cash and possibly shock troops, and with the Meta faction no longer able to count on the support of their powerful patron, the stage was set for another Urabeños ally to establish dominance and possibly become a faction of the Urabeños franchise.

In October of 2013 another rival of the Vichada faction was eliminated when Armando Carvajal Morales, alias "Mello", was shot dead in Bogota in what was reported to be a "revenge" attack. Carvajal was considered to be a top commander of a group known as the Rudos, and, with 50 men under his direct command, led the Rudos with his brother Martin Carvajal, alias "Kike."

Pijarbey now stands in a position to take control of the region, especially as intelligence reports suggest the Vichada faction continues to have success recruiting, with their numbers increasing from 143 to 200 since February 2012. The Urabeños numbers also continue to swell and as Colombia's dominant criminal group they are believed to be Pijarbey's key ally against the Meta Block.

Resources

- "Treasury Sanctions Colombian Trafficker," US Treasury Department, 14 January 2010.
- "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report - 2009," US Department of State, March 2010.
- "Daniel Barrera, el narco mas fuerte," El Tiempo, 5 May 2008.
- "Dismantling Colombia's New Illegal Armed Groups: Lessons from a Surrender," International Crisis Group, June 2012.

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