

# Testimony of Douglas Farah

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Before the House Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade

“Terrorist Groups in Latin America: The Changing Landscape”

February 4, 2014

2172 Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today on the FARC , the peace talks in Colombia, lessons learned for countering other terrorist organizations and the possible U.S. role going forward. I believe there are important lessons and that the U.S.-Colombia partnership is one of the most successful models we have seen in recent decades, in large part because of the sustained political will and commitment to resources over a long period of time by both countries.

Later this month the CSIS Americas Program will release a new report, "Colombia: Peace and Stability in the Post-Conflict Era," which I co-authored. Much of the current research for this testimony was drawn from working on that report.

I have had the privilege of being involved in Colombia since 1989. I was first sent by the *Washington Post* to cover an airliner blown up by the Medellín cartel. Over the past quarter of a century I have lived in Colombia a number of years and visited there regularly, first as a journalist and in recent years as a researcher and a consultant. I have seen the nation teeter on the edge of the abyss in the 1990s, when U.S. officials spoke of the possibility of a FARC victory and Colombia becoming a "narco state" to the present time, when Colombia is a regional model of democracy and economic development.

Yet the FARC, despite engaging in ongoing peace talks with the government of President Juan Manuel Santos, remains at the center of a multitude of criminal enterprises and terrorist activities that stretch from Colombia south to Argentina, and northward to Central America and into direct ties to the Mexican drug cartels, primarily the Sinaloa organization. It is involved in the massive laundering of drug money, and recent cases by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have shown the direct and growing criminal drug ties of the FARC and Hezbollah.

As I will discuss below, the FARC, since at least 1999, has established a direct relationship with the government of Iran, a government that is routinely designated by the U.S. government as a state sponsor of terrorism. The FARC was designated a terrorist entity in 1997, following the kidnapping and executions of seven American missionaries. The European Union followed suit in 2005.

Under the protection of the governments of Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Bolivia – as well as powerful friends in El Salvador and Panama -- the FARC maintains a robust international infrastructure that is producing and moving thousands of kilos of cocaine and laundering hundreds of millions of dollars. It has emerged as a pioneer hybrid criminal-terrorist insurgency, using drug money to sustain an ideological movement. Over time the ideology has faded and the FARC has become much more of a business enterprise, helping to enrich its leadership and the leadership of the regional governments it supports.

The current peace talks between the Santos government and the FARC, underway for 14 months in Havana, Cuba, have yielded more results than past dialogues, in large part because the FARC is in a significantly weakened state.

It is not for me, as a non-Colombian, to judge the wisdom of holding such talks. So far the two sides have reached a general agreement on two of the six items on the agenda – land reform, which remains one of the greatest challenges to the country's stability; and the potential participation of the FARC in nation's political life if an agreement is reached. The third topic currently under discussion, which has led to the most strain, revolves around severing the FARC's long-standing relationship to the cocaine trade, the issue that touches at the heart of the FARC's economic power.

What I can say, after watching multiple peace processes in Central America and West Africa, that almost every armed group that has negotiated an end to a conflict have maintained clandestine armed structures and logistical pipelines that almost immediately morph into criminal enterprises. This was true of the Sandinistas and the Contras in Nicaragua; the FMLN and far right groups in El Salvador; the RUF in Sierra Leone; and the paramilitary structure of Charles Taylor in Liberia. One would have to extremely naïve to believe that the FARC, which as existed for almost 50 years as a subversive, clandestine organization already deeply involved in criminal enterprises, will not do exactly the same thing. This will present an enormous danger to Colombia, its neighbors and the United States.

And there is the tremendously important question of exactly whom the General Secretariat of the FARC represents in the negotiations in Havana. The Colombian military estimates that the Secretariat, badly hurt by the loss of key leaders and spending most of their time outside the theaters of combat, now exercises real command and control authority over only 15 of the FARC 67 combat fronts.<sup>1</sup> Although the control appears to extend to the groups most involved in the drug trade, this means that several thousand combatants now operate largely independently of the high command.

As many members of the paramilitary United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) groups did a decade ago, many FARC combatants are simply forming their own mini criminal groups and no longer feel any loyalty to their military structure. This will likely strengthen the emerging criminal groups, known as BACRIM in Colombia, as the AUC desertions did. There are multiple cases of former AUC and the FARC, once mortal enemies, engaging in the cocaine trade together.

The FARC has been consistently underestimated as a transnational organization that has significant and long-standing ties to multiple international terrorist and criminal groups. Understanding those ties are important to drawing lessons from the long road Colombia has traveled.

The FARC is a regional and trans-regional organization. The significant support – logistically, financially, ideologically – the group receives from nations and non-state allies in the hemisphere that aid and abet its criminal and terrorist alliances is

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<sup>1</sup> Author interview with senior Colombian officials, September 2013.

significant and dangerous. The FARC is a central part of the revolutionary project of bringing together armed groups and terrorist organizations under the umbrella of the Bolivarian Revolution, with the aid and support of Iran. This is now a deeply criminalized political project with the express and overt intention of hurting the United States.<sup>2</sup>

What should worry us, as I have documented and written about extensively, is that the glue that binds these groups is a shared vision of creating a new world order, in which the United States, Europe and Israel are the enemies to be destroyed. Their common doctrine is one of asymmetrical warfare that explicitly endorses the use of weapons of mass destruction against the perceived enemies.<sup>3</sup> This doctrine remains a statement of intention, not a statement of capabilities. Yet a review of Iran's growing presence in the region, the FARC's growing relationship with Hezbollah and other terrorist groups and the ability of these groups to deal extensively with Mexican drug cartels, make that statement of intention a dangerous possibility.

### **Current Stability**

Over the past 15 years Colombia has undergone a remarkable and profound positive transformation, particularly regarding its internal security. The stability, strength of its democratic institutions, and booming economy are proof of a decade of policies that have pulled Colombia back from the brink of collapse.

For the first time in its history, the state has a presence in each of the nation's 1,102 municipalities. Although pockets of the country remain under the influence of a variety of non-state armed actors, by almost every measure today Colombia is a more safe and stable country. This is also a testament to the greatly increased professionalization and training of the Colombian police and military, and to the sustained bipartisan U.S. policy that spanned three administrations and has led to a successful partnership that is unique in Latin America.

A few data points stand out. The land used for the cultivation of coca, the raw material for cocaine, has been cut in half, from a high of 99,000 hectares (251,400 acres) in 1999 to 48,000 hectares (122,000 acres).<sup>4</sup> Rather than producing 90 percent of the world's cocaine, Colombia now produces less than 60 percent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete view of the aims, goals and strategy of the Bolivarian Revolution and its project to create 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism, see: Douglas Farah, *Transnational Organized Crime, Terrorism, and Criminalized States in Latin America: An Emerging Tier-One National Security Priority* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, August 2012),

<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1117>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. The doctrine of asymmetrical warfare and the use of WMD is outlined in many writing used by the Bolivarian Revolution, and has been adopted as official military doctrine in Venezuela.

<sup>4</sup> UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Colombia: Coca Cultivation Survey 2012," June 2013, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Colombia\\_Coca\\_Cultivation\\_Survey\\_2012\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Colombia_Coca_Cultivation_Survey_2012_web.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Data provided by the Colombian National Police and supported by U.S. government figures.

Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants have dropped from 70.2 in 2002 to 30 in 2012. The most significant drops occurred in the cities of Bogotá and Medellín.<sup>6</sup>

As the conflict has moved into a different phase against more diffuse and less structured set of actors, U.S. aid has been steadily dropping. Although Colombia is still one of the top recipients of U.S. aid in the world, the downward trend—from \$441.5 million in 2009 to \$279.5 million in 2013 and a projected \$257.6 million in 2014<sup>7</sup>—is likely irreversible.

Even at its peak during the Uribe administration—\$611 million in 2004—U.S. aid never accounted for more than 26 percent of Colombia’s national security budget. The rest has come from Colombian resources generated by higher taxes, mostly levied on businesses and the wealthy, to pay for the Colombian part of the budget.<sup>8</sup> The percentage of U.S. support had dropped to 4 percent by 2012 and is projected to be 3 percent in 2014, while the overall Colombian defense budget continues to increase slightly through the same period.<sup>9</sup> This is a testament of the Colombian people’s willingness to undergo significant economic sacrifice to fund the conflict on their own.

Yet in a country that has been in an almost continual state of internal conflict for more than 50 years and where undisputed state authority has been absent for centuries, the gains remain fragile and reversible. Government officials recognize that citizen security and a positive state presence are essential to any path toward durable peace and economic growth.<sup>10</sup>

Colombia’s internal violence is complex and historic, defying easy analysis or solutions. Even as the state security apparatus becomes more efficient, more effective, and more respectful of human rights, the drivers of insecurity, as they have over the past five decades, continue to mutate into new and lethal forms.

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Edward Fox, “Colombia’s Yearly Homicide Rate Sees 7% Drop,” InSightCrime, December 7, 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/colombia-yearly-homicide-rate-sees-7-drop>.

<sup>7</sup> “Just the Facts: A Civilian’s Guide to U.S. Defense and Security Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean,” a joint project of Center for International Policy, Washington Office on Latin America, and the Latin America Working Group, [http://justf.org/All\\_Grants\\_Country](http://justf.org/All_Grants_Country).

<sup>8</sup> Author interviews with U.S. and Colombian officials.

<sup>9</sup> Data provided to the author by the Colombian Ministry of Defense.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of “positive state presence” draws on the work of Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Jackson defines negative sovereignty as freedom from outside interference, the ability of a sovereign state to act independently, both in its external relations and internally, toward its people. Positive sovereignty is the acquisition and enjoyment of capacities, not merely immunities. In Jackson’s definition, it presupposes “capabilities which enable governments to be their own masters.” (29). The absence of either type of sovereignty can lead to the collapse or absence of state control. See also Anne L. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas, “Conceptualizing Ungoverned Spaces,” in *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*, ed. Anne L. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

## **A Brief History of the FARC: The Early Days**

The FARC is currently a shell of what it was in late 1990s, when it controlled more than 40 percent of the national territory and had some 20,000 combatants. It is worth briefly reviewing the history of the hemisphere's oldest armed insurgency and its metamorphosis from a motely band of Marxist guerrillas wandering the jungles of Colombia into a prototype hybrid terrorist-criminal organization that was once on the verge of taking power. Current estimates place FARC combat strength at about 7,200, seldom operating units of more than 10 people and largely unable to hold territory.

The FARC grew out of the Liberal Party militias that fought against the Conservative Party in Colombia in the bloody period of the late 1940s and 1950s known as "La Violencia." The negotiated end to the fighting between the two main political parties brought an unprecedented period of political stability to the capital, but several of the militia groups in more remote regions remained active and in control of autonomous regions. In 1964 the FARC, formed in one of those regions, was officially formed with an ideology that was a combination of Soviet Marxism and nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, the FARC and various other insurgent groups grew in different parts of Colombia. These included the Chinese-backed Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación-EPL), the Cuban-back National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional-ELN) and the M-19 nationalist movement. The EPL and M-19 movements negotiated peace settlements with the government in the early 1990s, while the ELN remains a fighting force but has lost most of its military strength and political following.

The FARC continued to grow throughout most of its life, reaching a peak of about 18,000 combatants in the 2002 period. Unlike most rebel groups, the original founders of the group, until recently, lived long lives and retained significant influence over the group. They leaders were, until recently, more likely to die of old age in the hills than in combat. Jacobo Arenas, the founder of the FARC, died of old age in hills at the age of Colombia in August 1990. His successor and long-time second-in-command, Manuel Marulanda (AKA "Sure-shot") died of a heart attack on March 26, 2008.<sup>12</sup> Alfonso Cano, who succeeded Marulanda, was killed by the Colombian military on November 4, 2011.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a brief history of the FARC's development, see:

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/latin\\_america/colombia/players\\_farc.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/latin_america/colombia/players_farc.html)

<sup>12</sup> Hugh O'Shaughnessy, "Manuel Marulanda: Commander of the FARC guerrilla army during four decades of insurgency against the Colombian state," *The Independent* (London), May 26, 2008, accessed at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/manuel-marulanda-commander-of-the-farc-guerrilla-army-during-four-decades-of-insurgency-against-the-colombian-state-834337.html>

<sup>13</sup> BBC News, "Top FARC rebel leader Alfonso Cano killed in Colombia," November 5, 2011, accessed at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-15604456>

The survival of the FARC has been possible in part because the FARC is not as dependent as many other non-state armed groups on external sources of financing, most of which evaporated with the end of the Cold War. Instead, the group established a strong nexus with criminal activity, including drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, allowing it to finance itself following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Marxist bloc.

It was also possible in part because the Colombian government exerted relatively little effort to fight the FARC for more than three decades. While active, the group was largely viewed as a nuisance but not a threat to the state and actual efforts to confront the FARC militarily were relatively rare. Finally, the state support of Colombia's neighbors Venezuela and Ecuador over much of the past decade has given the FARC a significant rearguard area for rest, relaxation, resupply and financial activities.

Beginning in the late 1970s and growing in the 1980s, the FARC began to implement what it considered to be legitimate "taxes" on landowners and illicit activities in areas where the group exercised considerable political power. One favorite way of collecting taxes was to kidnap the landowners and hold them for ransom.

This, in turn, led to the formation of paramilitary groups paid for by the large landholders to protect their property and themselves from the FARC and other guerrilla organizations. Over time the paramilitary units, often under the protection of the military, grew into formidable fighting forces and cocaine trafficking structure, and has been deemed by human rights groups to be responsible for the majority of the human rights abuses committed against civilians in Colombia.

The upsurge in the paramilitary violence coincided with a prolonged negotiation period in the 1980s between the government and the FARC, which led to significant hopes that the FARC could be brought into the political process as a legal party. As a result of the negotiations the FARC formed a political party called the Patriotic Union (*Union Patriótica*-UP) and joined the political process while maintaining its armed wing.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the UP's legal status the paramilitary forces viewed the organization as a front for the FARC and the drug traffickers viewed the UP as a threat to its activities. As a result, the narco-paramilitary forces carried out a series of massacres against thousands of UP candidates and leaders, including the assassination of its two most promising presidential candidates.

As the peace process unraveled, the FARC entered a new phase of working with drug traffickers, protecting coca fields and laboratories and collecting "*gramaje*" or taxes on the products moving through their territory. With the influx of cash, the FARC was able to expand its recruiting, buy new weapons become a much more structured, effective military force. This coincided with the killing or extradition of the leaders of the major drug trafficking organizations in Colombia, leaving the

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/latin\\_america/colombia/players\\_farc.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/latin_america/colombia/players_farc.html)

once-mighty cartels fractured, less unified and less able to control who entered the trade.

### **From Insurgency to Narco-Terrorism and the Edge of Victory**

Gradually the FARC moved from an ideological force that protected drug trafficking operations to a more structured criminal enterprise that relied more and more on its own drug trafficking structures, kidnappings and extortion to finance its existence.

As the FARC began to take control of cocaine laboratories, landing strips and international trade in a more active, direct manner, its financial situation improved markedly, and the insurgency used the money to purchase new weapons, recruit more combatants (whom they were able to pay more than a Colombian army soldier), and rapidly consolidate control over many swaths of rural Colombia. Eventually they were able to cut off the main highways among the nation's major cities.

In a change of tactics, the FARC began targeting Americans for kidnappings, particularly evangelical Christian groups that lived and worked in isolated areas. In 1993 the FARC kidnapped three members of the New Tribes Mission, and in 1994 kidnapped two more, as well as member of Wycliffe Bible Translators. All six were killed while in captivity. These targeted attacks, coupled with increasing evidence that the FARC had emerged as a serious drug trafficking organization, led President Clinton to place the FARC on the State Department list of terrorist organizations in October 1997.<sup>15</sup> The European Union would eventually follow suit, listing the FARC as a terrorist entity in 2005.<sup>16</sup>

As the internal security situation of Colombia collapsed, the United States, deeply involved in counter-narcotics efforts, grew increasingly alarmed. By the mid 1990s Colombia was one of the most violent nations in the world, despite having eliminated the infamous Medellín and Cali cartels. The FARC, right-wing paramilitary "self-defense" groups, and drug-trafficking organizations controlled more than half the national territory. Colombia was the world's largest producer of cocaine, as well as coca leaves, the raw material for cocaine.

The situation sank to its lowest point in the late 1996 when President Ernesto Samper's U.S. visa was publicly revoked for Samper's alleged ties to the Cali cartel.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2004/September/04\\_crm\\_599.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2004/September/04_crm_599.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Official Journal of the European Union, Council Decision of Dec. 21, 2005, accessed at: [http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2005/l\\_340/l\\_34020051223en00640066.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2005/l_340/l_34020051223en00640066.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Art Pine and Steven Ambrus, "U.S. Revokes Colombian President's Visa, Citing Ties to Drug Traffickers," Los Angeles Times, July 12, 1996, accessed at: [http://articles.latimes.com/1996-07-12/news/mn-23364\\_1\\_colombian-president](http://articles.latimes.com/1996-07-12/news/mn-23364_1_colombian-president)



The chairman of the Colombian military's Joint Chiefs of Staff met the same fate, and the military was in complete disarray.

At the same time the army suffered a string of humiliating defeats at the hands of the FARC, whose newly armed and trained units, controlling enormous amounts of territory, defeated the military in more than a dozen major encounters in a row.

A 1998 assessment by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) found that the FARC and its allies in drug trafficking would be able to defeat the government within five years, converting Colombia into a "narco-state." The commander of the U.S. Southern Command at the time testified in Congress, "The primary vulnerability of the Colombian armed forces is their inability to see threats, followed closely by their lack of competence in assessing and engaging them."<sup>18</sup>

When President Andrés Pastrana agreed in 1999 to peace talks with the FARC and granted them a territory the size of Switzerland as a demilitarized zone, the Colombian government was at its weakest point. In addition to the military defeats, the economy was sinking. Poverty rates had risen dramatically, unemployment was growing, and the economy sank by more than 4 percent in 1999.

The FARC, with some 18,000 combatants and flush with sophisticated new weapons and equipment purchased with money from its burgeoning drug trade, was at its strongest point militarily since it was founded in 1964.

During the three-year negotiations, which ended in February 2002, the FARC significantly strengthened itself and its ties to cocaine trafficking while dragging the talks on with endless and constantly shifting demands.

It also moved to aggressively expand its outreach to other terrorist groups and insurgencies to increase its technical capabilities and establish relationships that endure to this day. In many cases the representatives were invited to spend significant amounts of time in the FARC-controlled peace zone.

Among the more unusual visitors to the FARC territory were a group of Iranian government officials, ostensibly sent to finance a \$12 million *halal* beef slaughterhouse and refrigerated meat storage facility. The project was unusual, to say the least, given the remoteness of the region, the lack of transportation for the meat and general lack of economic rationale for the investment.<sup>19</sup> The plant was never built but it provided the FARC leadership with several months of unmonitored time with the Iranian officials, a relationship that endures to the present time.

Two other terrorist groups that spent a significant amount of time training FARC cadres in a variety of explosives techniques, intelligence methods and kidnapping skills: Basque ETA terrorist and a splinter group of the Irish Republican Army. Their involvement came to light with the arrest of three members of the organizations in

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<sup>18</sup> Douglas Farah, "Colombian Rebels Seen Winning War; U.S. Study Finds Army Inept, Ill-Equipped," *Washington Post*, April 10, 1998, <http://colombiasupport.net/archive/199804/wp41098.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Penhaul, "Iranians in Sideshow t Colombia Peace Process," Reuters News Service, December 28, 1999.

2001. By 2003 the FARC was using techniques from both organizations to set off car bombs and other explosives that took hundreds of lives.<sup>20</sup>

Other experts from closer to home also joined the FARC in the jungle safe zone. Among the visitors were Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista leader and current president of Nicaragua; Salvador Sánchez Cerén, the leading candidate for president of El Salvador and leader of the most hardline Marxist faction of the FMLN in El Salvador; and José Luis Merino, AKA Ramiro Vásquez, a Communist Party leader in El Salvador who later supplied large shipments of sophisticated weapons to the FARC and reportedly taught them urban kidnapping techniques.

### **Turning the Tide**

But the military, given a reprieve, also used the time to reorganize, train, and dramatically improve its capabilities.<sup>21</sup>

It became increasingly evident the FARC was using the ceasefire with the government during the peace talks to expand its cocaine trafficking networks as well as acquire new weapons. But other factors were changing the nature of the political and drug-related violence in Colombia that would ultimately set the FARC back on its heels.

Beginning in 1999, the Clinton administration launched Plan Colombia, a multi-year, multi-billion dollar program to tackle drug-related issues in the region. For the first time, significant amounts of aid could be given directly to the Colombian military, whose human rights record was widely recognized as being abysmal, to fight the FARC. The years of carefully trying to segregate counter-drug aid, largely given to the National Police, from small amounts of counterinsurgency aid, given the military, were over.

This evolution would dramatically alter the intertwined conflicts in Colombia. Plan Colombia has increasingly allowed the military to push the FARC to more remote areas and carry out more sophisticated attacks against the rebel group.<sup>22</sup>

With the election of Álvaro Uribe in 2002, Colombia's military turnaround began in earnest. Under Uribe's program of "Democratic Security," raw recruits were replaced over time with a highly trained NCO corps; intelligence operations were

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<sup>20</sup> Tim Padgett, "The Next Terror Nexus? Colombia fears the IRA and ETA may be using the country as a base for weapons testing and training," *Time Magazine International*, February 24, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent overview of this process, see previous CSIS reports on Colombia, particularly Peter DeShazo, Tanya Primiani, and Phillip McLean, *Back from the Brink: Evaluating Progress in Colombia, 1999-2007* (Washington, DC: CSIS, November 2007),

<http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/071112-backfromthebrink-web.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> The counter-drug and counter-insurgency aid figures come from the Center for International Policy, and its studies of Plan Colombia, accessed here:

<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aidtable.htm>

revamped and enhanced, and significant new Colombia resources were committed to the conflict.

Uribe also underscored the important link between democracy and security, stating consistently that the overarching goal was to “reinforce and guarantee the rule of law in all our national territory.” As the government raised taxes and showed results, the businesses and citizens in urban areas became more supportive of the government.

Although Uribe would come under significant and justified criticism from human rights groups for illicitly spying on journalists and political enemies and tolerating human rights abuses in the military,<sup>23</sup> he is widely credited with developing the first comprehensive plan—including programs encompassing judicial, infrastructure rehabilitation, education, and medical programs to reestablish government authority in areas where non-state actors had held sway for generations.

Focusing on rapidly accelerating military operations against the FARC and the group’s drug-trafficking infrastructure, Uribe and his military leadership designed a strategy that pushed the guerrillas out of the economically vital middle section of the country and away from cities and important transportation routes.

It also aimed to do away with their leadership by focusing significant resources on High Value Targets. From 2008-2012, for the first time in the conflict, senior FARC commanders were located and eliminated. This was particularly effective in targeting those leaders with direct ties to drug trafficking and massive human rights abuses, as was the case of Jorge Briceño, AKA Mono Jojoy, the commander of the FARC’s Eastern Bloc, killed in 2010 in an aerial bombardment.

Part of the urgency of confronting the FARC was the fact that presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Rafael Correa of Ecuador were giving significant logistical, financial, and political support to the FARC, allowing FARC to expand its international networks and increase its resources.

Perhaps no action has played as significant role in changing the tide of the conflict in Colombia as the March 1, 2008 killing of Raúl Reyes, the FARC’s second most important commander and chief international liaison. Reyes, whose real name was Luís Edgar Devia Silva, and 25 others were killed in an aerial bombardment by the Colombian military on a FARC camp just across the Ecuadoran border. Included in the dead were five Mexican citizens and one Ecuadorian citizen living in the camp.<sup>24</sup>

The camp, with electricity and hard structures, was in Ecuadorian territory and had existed for some time. The Ecuadoran forces had refused to move on it, despite pleas from the Colombian government to shut down the base.

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<sup>23</sup> For a comprehensive look at the positive and negative aspects of the Uribe government, see June S. Beittel, “Colombia: Background, U.S. Relations, and Congressional Interest,” Congressional Research Service, November 28, 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32250.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/americas/7272832.stm>

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Colombian commandos entered the camp and retrieved documents and computers, including hundreds of gigabytes of data from the personal computer of Reyes containing communications with other members of the FARC 7-person general secretariat, Venezuelan president Chávez, senior Ecuadorian officials, and an outline of the political and economic strategy of the FARC. It is the most significant seizure of primary source documents from the FARC in recent decades, and the first time a member of the FARC general secretariat had been killed in combat in more than 40 years of war.

While setting off a diplomatic row, the attack also accomplished two significant things: it captured years' worth of internal FARC communications that greatly enhanced the operational understanding of the group, and it killed a senior FARC commander, the first member of the guerrillas' general secretariat to be killed in combat in 44 years of war. Reyes's death was followed by the killing of other high-value FARC targets, as well as a stream of desertions of many mid-level and upper-level commanders, sending the FARC into a downward military and financial spiral from which has never recovered.<sup>25</sup>

Two days later Reyes' death a second member of the FARC general secretariat was killed, this time by his own bodyguards, and data from his personal computers was also recovered. The assassination of Iván Rios (aka Manuel Muñoz Ortíz) at the hands of his own security detail was widely viewed as a sign of deep internal stress within the FARC. The assassins cut of Rios' hand and presented it, along with the computer data, to a Colombian military unit.<sup>26</sup>

The Colombian raid into Ecuadorian territory sparked an international incident that led Venezuela, Ecuador and Nicaragua to break diplomatic relations with Colombia for several days, before the Organization of American States helped broker a détente. On national television, Chávez said: "We pay tribute to a true revolutionary, who was Raúl Reyes," and called him a "good revolutionary."<sup>27</sup>

The documents show several alarming developments that have gone largely undetected by U.S. and Colombian intelligence services prior to the attack.

The first is that the long-cordial relationship between the FARC and Chávez had grown from one of friendship to one of allies and business partners, a relationship that endures in the Maduro government. It is clear that that FARC received a large sum of money from Chávez in 2007, although it is unclear if the money is a loan or a

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<sup>25</sup> For a more complete look at the role of Ecuador and the FARC, see Douglas Farah and Glenn Simpson, *Ecuador at Risk: Drugs, Thugs, Guerrillas and the Citizens Revolution* (Alexandria, VA: International Assessment and Strategy Center, January 2010), [http://www.strategycenter.net/docLib/20101214\\_EcuadorFINAL.pdf](http://www.strategycenter.net/docLib/20101214_EcuadorFINAL.pdf). For a study of Venezuela's role with the FARC, see Douglas Farah, *Transnational Organized Crime, Terrorism, and Criminalized States in Latin America: An Emerging Tier-One National Security Priority* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, August 2012), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1117>.

<sup>26</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7284222.stm>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/03/02/america/bogota.php>

gift. There are several references to “300” as an amount the FARC receives, and Colombian authorities have stated unequivocally that the number refers to \$300 million given by Chávez to the FARC. It is also clear that the FARC has Venezuelan government protection for its massive movement of cocaine to Central America and West Africa.

The second insight gleaned was the FARC’s extraordinary reach into regional politics, particularly in Ecuador, where the President Correa, whose presidential campaign received hundreds of thousands of dollars directly from the FARC, was willing to change senior military commanders along the border (the area where Reyes was killed) in order to curry favor with the insurgents. The role of Bolivia’s President Evo Morales in supporting the FARC also stands out.<sup>28</sup>

The third is the FARC’s apparent willingness to engage in trafficking of material (uranium) that could be used for a low-grade nuclear bomb. The type and grade of uranium in question indicate the FARC had been the victim of a scam or was planning on perpetrating a scam on an unsuspecting third party.

A fourth major point is the FARC’s overt discussion of its involvement in drug trafficking and the need to move cocaine and money associated with the trade they have long claimed to not be involved in.

The fifth is that the FARC has engaged in a deliberate campaign to hide its involvement in some of the worst atrocities, including the assassination of members of congress in 2006.<sup>29</sup>

In the wake of the death of Reyes and Ríos by violent means and Marulanda to natural causes in a 30-day span left the FARC reeling, and more blows were to come. On July 15, 2008, the army carried out a dramatic rescue operation that freed 15 of the FARC's highest value hostages. These included former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three American contractors.<sup>30</sup>

The holding of the hostages had been of great political and psychological value to the rebels. Not only did it prove the group could capture and hold senior political figures and U.S. citizens, the negotiations for the freedom of these hostages had given the FARC new opportunities to establish contacts with a host of governments, and a pretext for maintaining a political infrastructure in Venezuela.

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<sup>28</sup> The details and documentation of these relationships see: Douglas Farah, “Into the Abyss: Bolivia Under Evo Morales and the MAS,” International Assessment and Strategy Center, 2009; and Farah and Simpson, op cit.

<sup>29</sup> The author worked with U.S. and Colombian officials to analyze the captured Reyes documents, which have now been made public. For more details on the issues raised here see Farah and Farah and Simpson, op cit. The main cache of Reyes documents were compiled into a single document, “The FARC Files: Venezuela, Ecuador and Secret Archives of ‘Raúl Reyes,’” A Strategic Dossier, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Kraul, “15 Hostages Freed as FARC is Fooled in Cunning Operation,” Los Angeles Times, July 3, 2008, accessed at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-hostages3-2008jul03.0.3051652.story>

This growing network, under the pretext of negotiating a "humanitarian accord" that would lead to a prisoner exchange between the Colombian government and the FARC, allowed the FARC to build a significant, new international network, both in Latin America and elsewhere.

### **The Central American Network**

The FARC's Central American network, unveiled in the Reyes documents, is among the most important in the current discussion because it is still active.

One of the FARC staunchest supporters for more than 20 years has been Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega. The alliance was first formed in the 1970s, when Ortega led the Sandinista revolution that succeeded in taking power in Nicaragua in 1979. Throughout his first presidency (1979-1990) Ortega was at the center of the revolutionary movements active throughout Latin America, in part because Nicaragua was the one state besides Cuba in the hemisphere where a violent, Marxist revolution triumphed. As a result, Ortega maintained close ties with revolutionary regimes and movements across the globe, including the FARC, when he was re-elected president in 2006.

Of interest in the current discussion are the ties with the FARC, Libya, the Red Brigades, and the FMLN in El Salvador. When Ortega suffered an unexpected electoral defeat in 1990, among his last acts in office was to grant citizenship to 990 foreign nationals, including dozens of wanted Spanish ETA terrorists and Italian Red Brigade terrorists.<sup>31</sup>

There is also compelling evidence that, in addition to the formal, cordial ties the Sandinista government maintained with the revolutionary government of Iran and the regime of Mommar Gadhafi in Libya, it also maintained ties with radical non-state Islamist groups. This included issuing passports for a suspect arrested in New York in connection with the Feb. 26, 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. When U.S. authorities arrested Ibrahim Elgabrownny in Brooklyn in early March 1993, U.S. authorities found five Nicaraguan passports, five Nicaraguan birth certificates and two driver's licenses. The passports contain photographs of El

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<sup>31</sup> Among the more comprehensive articles on Ortega's ties to foreign terrorist groups see: Tracy Wilkinson, "Nicaragua Pulls Up Red Carpet: Leftists, Idealists and Fugitives Flocked to Sandinista-led Nation in the 1980s," Los Angeles Times, June 21, 1994, p. A01; Douglas Farah, "Managua Blast Rips Lid Off Secret Salvadoran Rebel Cache," The Washington Post, July 14, 1993, p. A01. Among the terrorist granted citizenship was Alessio Casimirri, who ran a popular Italian restaurant, Magica Roma, in Managua, despite being tied to the 1978 murder of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro. Several members of the Spanish ETA organization were deported, but most of those granted citizenship remain there.

Sayyid Nosair, his wife and children. Nosair is in prison in New York, convicted of a weapons charge after being acquitted of the 1990 murder of Rabbi Meir Kahane.<sup>32</sup>

This is relevant because Ortega has never broken the ties to the various groups, including the FARC. In 1998 Ortega, then the leader of the opposition in Nicaragua awarded the Augusto Sandino medal, his party's highest honor, to Manuel Marulanda (aka Tirofijo or Sure Shot), the FARC's supreme commander. In 2000 Ortega attended an international convention in Libya, organized by Gaddafi for "political parties, revolutionary movements, liberation movements and progressive forces."<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 1: Daniel Ortega pins the Augusto Sandino medal on FARC leader Manuel Marulanda**

This meeting was significant because senior leaders of the FARC were also in attendance. The timing is important because it was at a time when the FARC was seriously beginning to look to purchase surface-to-air missiles in order to have more

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<sup>32</sup> Farah, op cit. The documents were discovered after an explosion ripped apart an underground bunker holding not only thousands of weapons, but also hundreds of Nicaraguan passport and identification cards for Marxist groups around the hemisphere, from the MIR in Chile to the Tupac Amaro group in Peru. The garage belonged to a wanted Basque terrorist, who disappeared after the explosion.

<sup>33</sup> José de Córdoba, "Ortega's Old Friendships are Liabilities as Election Nears," The Wall Street Journal, Oct. 19, 2001.

effective defenses against the U.S.-supplied helicopters that were beginning to arrive in Colombia for the police and military as part of Plan Colombia.<sup>34</sup>

A Sept. 4, 2000 e-mail from Reyes' computer, addressed to Gadhafi and signed by Reyes, offered a bold alliance and laid out the strategy:

*Comrade Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, Great Leader of the World Mathaba, receive our revolutionary and Bolivarian greeting. We want to express our gratitude for the invitation that you gave us to visit your country and the hospitality you showed our delegation during the recent Summit of Heads of State, Governments, Parties and Organizations of the World Mathaba. We want to let you know that the FARC continues its struggle for the conquest of political power to govern Colombia...As a member of the (FARC) high command I have been asked by the commander in chief to request from you a loan of 100 million dollar, repayable in five years. Our strategic objectives and circumstances of our war oblige us to seek weapons with greater range to resist our enemy's advances. One of our primary needs is the purchase of surface-to-air missiles to repel and shoot down the combat aircraft. Our strategy is to take power through the revolutionary armed struggle. (emphasis added)*<sup>35</sup>

Apparently Gaddafi was not immediately responsive to the request, and so the FARC tried to follow up on the request, this time through Daniel Ortega. In a Feb. 22, 2003 note "From the Mountains of Colombia," that was hand-delivered to Ortega, Reyes requested help:

*Dear compañero Daniel, this is to send you my warm and effusive revolutionary greeting, and that of commander Manuel Marulanda. We also are writing to see if you have any information on the request we made to our Libyan comrades, which was made in writing in the name of the secretariat of the FARC, and which I signed. The Libyans said they would answer us, but we have not yet received any information...While we were in Libya they explained to us that the political responsibility for carrying out Libya's policies in the region were in the hands of Daniel Ortega. For that reason, we are approaching you, in hopes of obtaining an answer.*

*I also want to reaffirm to you that the primary priority of the FARC, in order to achieve greater success in its military operations against enemy troops, in order to take political power in Colombia, is acquiring anti-aircraft*

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<sup>34</sup> Plan Colombia is a multi-billion dollar program through which the United States has funded the expansion, retraining and arming of the Colombian national police and military. Begun in 1999,, at the end of the Clinton administration, it has continued with bipartisan Congressional support, through the Bush years.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Gadhafi, in possession of Author. It can also be seen here: Octavio Enriquez, "Ortega, Puente Entre Gaddafi y las FARC," La Prensa, June 27, 2008.



*capabilities, in order to counteract the efficiency of the Colombian and U.S. aircraft against our troops.*<sup>36</sup>

It is not clear what the result of the discussions were, but relations between the FARC remained cordial. According to documents obtained by La Prensa, Nicaragua's most important newspaper, the key envoy between Ortega and the FARC is Luis Cabrera, the Nicaraguan ambassador in Cuba. Cabrera is a nationalized Argentine who has maintained a long friendship with Ortega, dating back to the Sandinista revolution.

Citing other documents from Reyes' computer, the newspaper said FARC leaders had met numerous times with Cabrera, who promised the rebels any help within Nicaragua's ability. He even offered to let the FARC establish a link on the Sandinista website in order to make it easier for people to get in touch with the organization. Reyes wrote to the FARC representatives in Havana not to forget to "visit the Nicaraguan ambassador with great frequency. Take him documents and express our appreciation for the stimulating statements of *comandante* Ortega."<sup>37</sup>

The Reyes documents also show that the FARC maintained significant contacts with members of another former ally in El Salvador. A key player in supplying weapons to the FARC appears to be José Luis Merino, a senior figure in the Communist Party, one of the five parties that made up the FMLN in El Salvador during that nation's 11-year civil war. During that time, the FMLN was also closely aligned with the Sandinistas, led by Ortega, in Nicaragua. Merino used the alias "Ramiro Vásquez" during the conflicts, and is still known by his *nom de guerre*, as are many former rebels who adopted other identities during the war.

The FMLN formally demobilized in 1991 and became a legal political party, and its candidate, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, another long-time friend of the FARC and former senior rebel commander, is the favorite to win this year's presidential election.

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<sup>36</sup> Letter to Daniel Ortega, in possession of the Author. It can also be seen here: Octavio Enriquez, "Ortega, Puente Entre Gaddafi y las FARC," La Prensa, June 27, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Octavio Enriquez, "Contacto Está en La Habana," La Prensa, June 28, 2008 viewed at: [http://laprensa.com.ni/archivo/2008/junio/28/noticias/nacionales/268624\\_print.shtml](http://laprensa.com.ni/archivo/2008/junio/28/noticias/nacionales/268624_print.shtml) In addition to this support, La Prensa reported that a well-known Nicaraguan painter, Genaro Lugo, helped a senior FARC official identified as Alberto Bermudez, obtain Nicaraguan identity papers, something Luga admitted to doing. This is interesting because the incident was described in Reyes papers. See: [http://www.laprensa.com.ni/archivo/2008/junio/29/noticias/nacionales/268787\\_print.shtml](http://www.laprensa.com.ni/archivo/2008/junio/29/noticias/nacionales/268787_print.shtml)



**Figure 2: FMLN presidential candidate Salvador Sánchez Cerén (center) with the FARC leadership. To the left is Raúl Reyes and on the right is Manuel Marulanda.**

The Communist Party is a small but influential group within the FMLN coalition because it controls the international resources, including those funds provided by Chávez for the current electoral campaign, now underway. Communist Party members, including Merino (who is currently serving as a Salvadoran delegate to the Central American Parliament), are widely suspected of retaining a clandestine, armed wing after the rest of the FMLN had officially demobilized. This armed wing is suspected of carrying out several high-profile kidnappings in El Salvador and elsewhere in Latin America.<sup>38</sup>

Merino, using his old alias "Ramiro Vásquez," had been an important logistics officer for the Communist Party during the Salvadoran war, and seems to have maintained significant contacts abroad in the weapons-buying world.

According to Sept. 6, 2007 e-mail from Iván Ríos, a member of the FARC secretariat, to other secretariat members lays out the multiple negotiations under way for new FARC weapons, including the highly coveted surface-to-air missiles:

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<sup>38</sup> For a more complete look at Merino and the role of the Communist party, both with the FARC and with criminal activities, see: Jose de Cordoba, "Chavez Ally May Have Aided Colombian Guerrillas: Emails Seem to Tie El Salvador Figure to a Weapons Deal," *The Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 28, 2008, p. A9.

1) Yesterday I met two Australians who were brought here by Tino, thanks to the contact made **by Ramiro (Salvador)**. We have been talking to them (the Australians) since last year.

2) They offer very favorable prices for everything we need: rifles, PKM machine guns, Russian Dragunovs with scopes for snipers, multiple grenade launchers, different munitions...RPGs (rocket propelled grenades), .50 machine guns, and the missiles. All are made in Russia and China.

3) For transportation, they have a ship, with all its documents in order, and the cargo comes in containers. The crew is Pilipino and does not know the contents, with the exception of the captain and first mate. They only need a secure port to land at.

4) They gave us a list of prices from last month, including transportation. They offer refurbished Chinese AKs (Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles-DF) that come as used, but in reality are new, and were not distributed to the Chinese army, which developed a new line of weapons, for \$175. AK 101 and 102, completely new, for \$350. Dragunovs, new with scopes, \$1,200. RPG launchers for \$3,000 y grenades for \$80. They say they have a thermo baric grenade that destroys everything in closed spaces (like the bombs the gringos use against Alqaeda (sic) hideouts) for \$800. Chinese missiles (which they say are the most up-to-date at this time) with a 97 percent effective rate, \$93,000, and 15,000 for the launchers. They say it is very easy to use, and they guarantee the training. If one of these missiles were identified inside Colombia it would cause them a lot of problems, but if, on the side they include old Russian SA-7 (shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles-DF) it would serve to confuse, mislead or at least give the impression that the guerrillas have weapons of different types, no just Chinese. The ammunition for AKs is 21 cents a round, but if we buy more than 3 million rounds, the price drops to 9 cents a unit.

4) (sic) They promised to give us an exact price on other material. Two months ago they sent me a price list (very favorable, for example, a used .50 machine gun for \$400, new for \$3,000), but I didn't take the list to the meeting place.

5) They do the purchasing without the need of a down payment, but when the merchandise is on the ship, they want 50 percent. When it is delivered they collect the other 50 percent. The money moves through a bank in the Pacific, in an independent country where they can move money without any questions being asked. Once the cargo is shipped it can take one month, or a month and a half to arrive in Venezuela. They said we could have a representative, it doesn't matter what nationality, on board the ship while it sails to its final destination.

The memorandum goes on to describe the potential purchase of different types of radio equipment, and the protocol for future contact, which will only be done in face-to-face meetings. There is an agreement to meet again on Nov. 23, 2007, to review an up-to-date price list and to test some radios on the ground. Ivan finishes

by reiterating that the Australians "**are friends of Ramiro,**" and can therefore be trusted.<sup>39</sup>

On Nov. 12, 2007, Iván sent another missive outlining developments on several fronts. He noted that Rodriguez Chacín, at the time minister of interior and one of Chávez's closest advisers, was involved in the transaction and added, "he has already suggested mechanism for receiving the Australians in Orinoco."<sup>40</sup> This

That mechanism was apparently put to use, because a subsequent e-mail from Nov. 23, the day of the agreed-upon follow-up meeting Iván wrote that "we are waiting for the Australians, in order to reach an agreement on the items mentioned before. El Cojo (the Cripple) is responsible for the first quota and the logistics."<sup>41</sup> This seems to indicate that Australians were arriving via Venezuela, as El Cojo is the nickname of an unidentified senior Venezuelan official who, according to other documents, is close to Chávez with whom the FARC has developed "an excellent relationship that is constantly growing closer."<sup>42</sup> The first quota seems to refer to the payment, and placing him in charge of logistics would be logical, as he is credited with coordinating other logistical efforts for the guerrillas.

### **The Coordinadora Continental Bolivariana**

While the bilateral and individual relationships are of tremendous importance to the FARC, the group was also anxious to break out of its broader international isolation. The mechanism devised for this was the Coordinadora Continental Bolivariana (The Bolivarian Continental Coordinator-CCB). The concept was to build a broad-based Bolivarian movement across the continent that would appear to be a coalition of progressive forces, when in fact, it would be driven and controlled by the FARC.

According to documents in the Reyes computer, the CCB was born in August 2003, and by December had an anthem, a flag, a newspaper called "Bolivarian Mail," letterhead stationary and a logo. "The CCB is work of the FARC, the Bolivarian Movement composed of the José Maria Córdoba and Caribbean blocs, a Dec. 7, 2003 the internal document said. The document said "Comrade Alfonso," referring to Alfonso Cano, later the FARC's commander-in-chief, had been informed of each of the steps taken, and that the first executive meeting had been held "in one of our camps" to "lay out the specific tasks and responsibilities for the activities that are currently underway. Among our tasks is the creation of a Bolivarian movement, the

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<sup>39</sup> E-mail provided by Colombian authorities, in the possession of the author.

<sup>40</sup> E-mail provided by Colombian authorities, in the possession of the .

<sup>41</sup> E-mail provided by Colombian authorities, in the possession of the Author.

<sup>42</sup> Dec. 23, 2007, e-mail from Iván to the FARC high command, in possession of the Author.

establishment of the CCB in each country, etc. This organization has already led protests in Ecuador and Panama."<sup>43</sup>

The CCB soon established a significant presence across Latin America, attracting the sympathy of numerous leftist political organizations and NGOs, many committed to non-violence. According to a March 11, 2005 report on the CCB's activities in 2004, there were already active groups in Mexico, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Chile. International brigades from the Basque region of Spain, Italians, French and Danish were operational. Work was underway in Argentina, Guatemala and Brazil. The number of organizations that were being actively coordinated by the CCB was listed at 63, and there were "political relations" with 45 groups and 25 institutions. The CCB database contained 500 e-mails.<sup>44</sup>

The CCB leadership went out of its way to hide its FARC affiliation to all but the more select inner circle. "The CCB runs the whole gamut, from respectable groups to useful idiots to terrorist," said one Colombian official studying the CCB. "There is the public face of the CCB, which seems benign, but the inner workings are all FARC, allied with other terrorist organizations that, frankly, we thought had disappeared."

This is borne out in numerous internal documents. In an April 1, 2006 letter from Reyes to "Aleyda," identified by Colombia authorities as Mariana López de la Vega of the Leftist Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Izquierdista Revolucionaria-MIR) of Chile, the FARC leader states "the CCB is part of movement of masses of the FARC, and as such receives all of our support. However, we are not deluded or confused, and understand that the CCB is broader than just our cells, as the CCB has a broad roof, which allows us, if we are politically agile, to reach other sectors of society and create more Communist militants."<sup>45</sup>

A Dec. 31, 2006 letter from Iván Ríos to Raul Reyes, (whom Ríos address as "Dear Foreign Minister") says the FARC support group in Chile "ask for instructions relating to CCB. It seems they are waiting precise orders from you regarding the activity in Santiago."<sup>46</sup>

### **Operation Titan, Ayman Jouma and Ties to Hezbollah**

There is now a significant body of evidence showing the FARC's operational alliance with Hezbollah and Hezbollah allies based in Venezuela under the protection of the Maduro government, to which relatively little attention has been paid. A clear example of the breadth of the emerging alliances among criminal and terrorist

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<sup>43</sup> Documents provided by Colombian officials, in possession of the Author.

<sup>44</sup> March 11, 2005 e-mail from Iván Ríos to Raúl Reyes, provided by Colombia officials, in possession of the Author.

<sup>45</sup> April 1, 2006 e-mail from Raúl Reyes to Aleyda, provided by Colombia officials, in possession of the Author.

<sup>46</sup> Jan. 3, 2007 e-mail to Iván Ríos, provided by Colombia officials, in possession of the Author.

groups was Operation Titan, executed by Colombian and U.S. officials in 2008. Colombian and U.S. officials, after a 2-year investigation, dismantled a drug trafficking organization that stretched from Colombia to Panama, Mexico, West Africa, the United States, Europe and the Middle East.

Colombian and U.S. officials say that one of the key money launderers in the structure, Chekry Harb, AKA "Taliban" acted as the central go-between among Latin American DTOs and Middle Eastern radical groups, primarily Hezbollah. Among the groups participating together in Harb's operation in Colombia were members of the Northern Valley Cartel, right-wing paramilitary groups and the FARC.

This mixture of enemies and competitors working through a shared facilitator, or in loose alliance for mutual benefit, is a pattern that is becoming more common, and one that significantly complicates the ability of law enforcement and intelligence operatives to combat these groups.<sup>47</sup>

While there has been little public acknowledgement of the Hezbollah ties to Latin American TOC groups, recent indictments based on DEA cases point to the growing overlap of the groups. In December 2011, U.S. officials charged Ayman Joumaa, an accused Lebanese drug kingpin and Hezbollah financier, of smuggling tons of U.S.-bound cocaine and laundering hundreds of millions of dollars with the Zetas cartel of Mexico, while operating in Panama, Colombia, the DRC and elsewhere.

"Ayman Joumaa is one of top guys in the world at what he does: international drug trafficking and money laundering," a U.S. anti-drug official said. "He has interaction with Hezbollah. There's no indication that it's ideological. It's business."<sup>48</sup> Joumaa was tied to broader case of massive money laundering case that led to the collapse of the Lebanese Canadian Bank, one of the primary financial institutions used by Hezbollah to finance its worldwide activities.

Other cases include the July 6, 2009 indictment of Jamal Yousef in the U.S. Southern District of New York alleges that the defendant, a former Syrian military officer arrested in Honduras, sought to sell weapons to the FARC -- weapons he claimed came from Hezbollah and were to be provided by a relative in Mexico.<sup>49</sup>

Such a relationship between non-state and state actors provides numerous benefits to both. In Latin America, for example, the FARC gains access to Venezuelan territory without fear of reprisals; it gains access to Venezuelan identification

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<sup>47</sup> While much of Operation remains classified, there has been significant open source reporting, in part because the Colombian government announced the most important arrests. For the most complete look at the case see: Jo Becker, "Investigation into bank reveals links to major South American cartels," *International Herald Tribune*, December 15, 2011. See also: Chris Kraul and Sebastian Rotella, "Colombian Cocaine Ring Linked to Hezbollah," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 22, 2008; and "Por Lavar Activos de Narcos y Paramilitares, Capturados Integrantes de Organización Internatcional," *Fiscalía General de la Republica (Colombia)*, Oct. 21, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Sebastian Rotella, "Government says Hezbollah Profits From U.S. Cocaine Market via Link to Mexican Cartel," *ProPublica*, December 11, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> United States District Court, Southern District of New York, *The United States of America v Jamal Yousef*, Indictment, July 6, 2009.

documents; and, perhaps most importantly, access to routes for exporting cocaine to Europe and the United States -- while using the same routes to import quantities of sophisticated weapons and communications equipment. In return, the Chávez government offers state protection, and reaps rewards in the form of financial benefits for individuals as well as institutions, derived from the cocaine trade.

### **Key Elements of Success**

Officials directly involved in current Colombian campaign against the FARC point to five general elements that have greatly weakened the FARC and led to the government's current success. These elements simultaneously generated popular support for the government and diminished the long-held fear of the FARC, while reestablishing (or in some cases, establishing for the first time) government legitimacy in many parts of the country.

While the United States initially tried to keep its counter-narcotics aid separate from counter-insurgency assistance to the military, and couched the rationale for the expanding aid package as a way to fight drug trafficking, the segregation was untenable. The Bush administration, along with a bipartisan majority in Congress, eventually allowed the lines to blur.<sup>50</sup> The current concept is that Plan Colombia rests on three legs: military, counter narcotics and social work.

The five main elements that those interviewed agreed were instrumental in changing the course of the war are:

- The emphasis by the military on seizing and controlling territory, specifically strategic corridors and roads, allowing civilian state structures to set up and begin to operate;
- A complete restructuring of the military, complemented by decisive civilian leadership; enforced intelligence sharing among different branches of the military and national police;
- The successful targeting of specific High Value Targets in the FARC leadership and the subsequent disruption of the FARC's command and control capabilities, extending to the drug trade.
- The creation of a culture that rewarded risk-taking both operationally and conceptually inside both the military and the police, leading to the innovative operations that were most harmful to the FARC;
- A sustained, bipartisan support for the program in the U.S. Congress, allowing the aid programs to flow over a sustained period of time.

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<sup>50</sup> Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Eyes Shift in Colombia Policy: Greater Aid for War Against Leftist Guerrillas Sought," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 15, 2002.

While the first two elements are not unusual, the latter three are areas where other countries, particularly the United States, have struggled. As outlined in the 9/11 Commission report and several other post mortems on the terrorist attacks on the United States, there has consistently been a culture of risk aversion in the intelligence community, compounded by an almost-total lack of sharing of intelligence both among intelligence agencies and between the intelligence community and law enforcement communities. Despite some progress in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the problems persist.

While the use of resources to attack high value targets was often debated in the early days of implementing the strategy in Colombia, it has proved pivotal in degrading the FARC over time. Because the FARC is a highly vertical organization yet highly compartmentalized by fronts and blocs, the individual commanding the overall structure is important and hard to replace.

As described above, the rapid loss of senior commanders, coupled with a host of defections and killing of mid-level and upper level commanders, caused the FARC to implode. Fearing all its communications were compromised, the leadership was forced to communicate by courier. Today many of the command and control problems of FARC, as well as their inability to recoup the terrain they have lost, is a result of this strategy.

The sustained bipartisan support for the policy not only came from the United States, but in Colombia. This long-term partnering allowed key personal relationships to grow in trust, and institutionalized successful methods of sharing information, operating jointly and acquiring the necessary equipment. In my view one of the most important decisions made by the Colombian authorities was to a fighting force they could sustain alone, something that has allowed the military and police to function at a high level even as outside assistance shrinks.

Finally, there is the issue of political will on both sides. It is a well-known adage in foreign policy that we cannot want success and reform more than those we are seeking to aid. In Colombia, the Colombian people, the elites, the military and the police, ultimately wanted to save their country from the FARC and other criminal-terrorist enterprises. It was this will, welded to the political will of the successive U.S. administrations to help make that possible, that is perhaps the greatest lesson.

### **Ongoing Security Challenges**

It is important to note that the war is not won and peace is not yet at hand. The constant ability of non-state armed actors to morph into new types of groups deriving income from different sources to fund their activities is perhaps the greatest security challenge facing Colombia today.

This is particularly difficult because the state security forces are having to simultaneously assume the costly and resource-intensive task of holding significant parts of the country where the central government is seeking to reestablish its



authority while continuing to clear new areas of the different armed groups largely operating in rugged jungle terrain.

The security forces have been remarkably successful in significantly reducing the existential threats to the state (major cartels, the FARC, and the AUC). But they are now facing a more dispersed series of actors that continue to undermine state sovereignty and diminish the state's ability to regain the trust of its citizens and establish the rule of law.

Even though the FARC has been reduced from its peak of more than 18,000 combatants to about 7,000 today, they pose a significant local threat in areas where they operate, generally relying on small-unit ambushes and constant movement to avoid large-scale combat. The BACRIM groups number and other insurgent groups, all deeply involved in drug trafficking, total some 5,000 armed members. Across the country there are several thousand more armed criminal gangs are operating on a smaller scale, and with less military coherence, in a more localized manner.

Reestablishing a state presence is particularly difficult in areas where the state has seldom had a presence at all, and where non-state groups have exercised sovereignty. In these areas the "culture of illegality" has thrived for generations, where the state is viewed as the illicit interloper and local political structure has virtually no ties to or response from the central government. In many cases, earlier human rights abuses of the military have left the local population hostile and wary of a renewed state presence.

One example of the new challenges that emerge even as traditional ones subside is the illicit trade in coltan and gold, both valuable minerals whose exploitation carries far less risk than the cocaine trade. Yet the illicit mining spawns armed groups, drives civilians from their land, causes significant ecological damage, and is a constant local driver of violence. The FARC, along with multiple other criminal groups, often with ties to drug-trafficking organizations, are increasingly involved in illicit mineral extraction.<sup>51</sup>

These new challenges mean that the security forces must be highly adaptable and reconfigured to meet more diverse challenges at a time when both U.S. and national resources are likely to diminish. It also means that the nation's security forces will have to learn to coordinate extremely closely with a host of civilian agencies and often cede the lead role to the civilians. This clash of cultures continues to pose significant challenges among different agencies involved in the consolidation process.

In recognition of these new challenges the Santos government in 2012 launched Campaign Sword of Honor (*Espada de Honor*), with the goal of launching a simultaneous offensive in the remaining base areas of FARC and ELN in order to deliver a decisive strategic defeat and combat the BACRIM and its illicit networks.

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<sup>51</sup> For an extensive report on the illicit coltan trade, see Ignacio Gómez, "Colombia's Black-Market Coltan Tied to Drug Trafficking, Paramilitaries," Center for Public Integrity, March 4, 2012, <http://www.publicintegrity.org/2012/03/04/8284/colombia-s-black-market-coltan-tied-drug-traffickers-paramilitaries>.

The operation, including the formation of 12 new regional joint task forces and intelligence fusion centers, focuses on 15 of the FARC's 67 combat fronts that are most active and most involved in the cocaine trade, and aims to reduce the FARC's size by 50 percent over two years. The campaign focuses on the most critical fronts in terms of command and control, terrorist activity, and financing, aiming at bringing FARC to half of its structural capabilities.<sup>52</sup>

In order to be able to bring legal charges—rather than lethal force—against the networks of civilian supports for the FARC and other violent groups, the task forces include judicial police and government prosecutors.<sup>53</sup> After initially starting in 51 municipalities, the operation has now grown to include 58 townships in the most vulnerable regions of the country.<sup>54</sup>

The FARC's growing lack of command-and-control capabilities over most of its fronts has significant implications for both the future FARC and the government's efforts to defeat it on the battlefield. There is a strong possibility, already seen in some areas of FARC operation, that the group's combat fronts will simply drift off into criminal activity, while perhaps keeping some sort of loose allegiance to and alliance with the FARC high command.<sup>55</sup>

This is but one of multiple difficulties remaining in the area of national security. Given the complexity of the internal conflicts and the geographically diverse regions that they span, addressing them within a single security policy is not an easy task.

### **Challenges Going Forward**

As the forthcoming CSIS report notes, a failure to adequately address the continuing challenges could risk many of the hard-won gains achieved by the Colombian security forces in recent years. To their credit, leaders of the security forces are highly aware of the changing nature of the internal conflict and the need to revise and revisit many past assumptions and operational strategies and tactics that, though successful in the past, may not be adequate in the coming years.

The change from a force primarily focused on combating a structured insurgency with a centralized command and its overlapping cocaine-trafficking structures to a small-unit war with a wide variety of enemies is difficult on its own.

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<sup>52</sup> For a more in-depth look at Operation Sword of Honor, see Colby Martin, "Colombia's New Counterinsurgency Plan," Stratfor, March 29, 2012, <http://www.openbriefing.org/issuedesks/politicalviolence/espadadehonor/>.

<sup>53</sup> Information provided to the author by the Colombian Ministry of Defense.

<sup>54</sup> Colombian vice minister of defense Jorge Bedoya, CSIS conference in Bogotá, Colombia, June 17, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> For a look at different scenarios for the FARC's evolution during the current peace process, see Jeremy McDermott, "Possible Scenarios for the FARC's Fragmentation," InSightCrime, May 20, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/farc-peace/scenarios-farc-fragmentation>.

One of the biggest concerns of Colombian defense officials is the sustainability of the current policy at a time of declining U.S. aid and a growing weariness in the Colombian population over the level of taxation needed to sustain the effort. Not only do current levels need to be sustained, but many will have to significantly expanded as the state pushes to establish a presence farther and farther afield.

There are also significant logistical costs and hardships associated with creating sufficient security in remote areas to enable the functioning of other state institutions, such as the judiciary, law enforcement, and road building, in those places. Compounding the problem is the need to hold territory where the civilian population for decades has either been overtly hostile to the state and sympathetic to non-state actors, or has often been the victim of significant human rights abuses by the state.

Both factors make Herculean tasks of efforts to establish a positive state presence and a relatively secure environment and to sustaining the effort until the state presence can take root. Yet failure to meet any of these challenges could give non-state armed actors enough space to prosper while failing to meet the expectations of an already-skeptical civilian population. Such disillusionment could lead to further support for non-state actors, reigniting the cycle of violence.

Over the past decade Colombia has demonstrated the resolve to take many significant strides toward transforming the nation and eradicating the violence that has plagued it for generations. Many more strides remain to be taken.

It is clear to me, as the CSIS report details, that the U.S.-Colombia strategic partnership must continue for the foreseeable future, even if the peace talks with the FARC were to prove successful. With or without a formal peace agreement, the Colombia government will require not only ongoing military and police support, but support in other central areas of their vast undertaking of reestablishing a positive state presence in huge areas of the country where the government has been absent for generations.

The recent shifts in the nature of the conflict are largely a reflection of the success of the joint strategy of dismantling the major existential threats to the state. Maintaining the current positive trends will require a constant reevaluation of the national strategy and goals, as well as resource allocation. Both the Colombian government and its U.S. partners must allow the cooperation to be flexible and agile in dealing with the shifting security threats.

### **Lessons Going Forward**

In observing the Colombian conflict for almost 25 years, it seems to me that there are several key lessons one can draw that would be applicable in other theaters.

The first is that there has to be a significant level of trust between the partner nations. The United States cannot want success more than the partner nation, or

there are significant conflicts, as we see in Afghanistan today and in the collapse of the Northern Triangle in Central America.

This trust, in Colombia, led to a common vision. Colombians demonstrated an extraordinary degree of creativity, patience and willingness to assume risk in fighting their enemy with the United States supplying crucial technical assistance but little operational leadership. The trust led the United States to support some of the riskiest operations of the Colombians, including the hostage rescue, that would be almost impossible to imagine with any other ally.

A second lesson is that intelligence dominance matters. In a time of the massive intelligence thefts by Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and others, the necessity and usefulness of intelligence dominance is being questioned. While it is imperative that privacy concerns and civil liberties be protected, there are few cases where the innovative, creative and pro-active use of human intelligence and signal intelligence can be traced so directly to an overwhelming change in a conflict.

A third lesson is that intelligence reform matters. The Colombians were able to undertake massive intelligence reforms across institutions to improve their performance. Because of its massive civil liberties abuses and illegal spying on its own citizens – a cautionary tale in intelligence dominance – the equivalent of our FBI, the DAS, was abolished even as other reforms brought an unprecedented cooperation between the police and military. This willingness to make very difficult decisions for the good of the country in the face of significant institutional resistance is both rare and crucial.

A fourth lesson is that hybrid groups like the FARC, the Taliban in Afghanistan and many others, thrive in the seams of the world's illicit trade pipelines. With money from cocaine the FARC has built a significant political infrastructure that has allowed it to flourish and endure far beyond what a less criminalized group would have. The FARC is a prototype of the coming hybrid terrorist-criminal insurgencies, some being fought under an ideological banner and some in the banners of theology. All are dangerous and far more difficult to attack than terrorist groups of past generations, given the access to enormous financial resources.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the lesson that none of these groups operate in a vacuum. Governments like those of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador create the operational environment in which the FARC, Hezbollah, Iranian officials, ETA, Brazilian drug trafficking organizations and others can meet in safety, exchange lessons learned and build networks of convenience.

This is not to say there is one giant conspiracy or alliance of all these groups. Rather, it is a deliberately created environment where these groups can mingle, socialize, trade expertise and make temporary alliances of mutual convenience. This is the danger of the FARC, and that danger is unlikely to diminish with a successful peace process in Colombia. The FARC will, I am certain, retain a financial and military infrastructure to continue to aid the Bolivarian project long after any agreement might be signed.

Thank you.

