

## **Rethinking the Colombian Conflict**

By Jorge Restrepo and Michael Spagat

The new Bush administration is bumping Colombia up its list of US priorities. The US is roughly doubling its in-country military and private contractor personnel. Colombia is both deeply intertwined with and poorly understood by the outside world. It wants and needs assistance in its struggle against the left-wing guerrilla groups and the various illegal right-wing paramilitary organizations. Progress on these problems will help the US, Europe and Colombia's neighbours. And yet, public and private actors abroad are often confused about the nature of the Colombian conflict.

First, analysts often designate the guerrillas as "narco-terrorists", seeking to delegitimize them and mobilize powerful anti-drug and antiterrorism sentiment in the US. But the term also portrays the guerrillas as more interested in protecting their drug business than in seizing political power through force. This characterization is fundamentally misleading.

The guerrillas are indeed big players in the drug business. And their frequent bombings such as the FARC attack on the El Nopal social club in 2002, killing 32 and injuring 162, are terrorism plain and simple. Guerrilla bombings cause the vast majority of civilian injuries in the Colombian conflict.

Yet guerrilla activity extends beyond narcotics and terrorism. Roughly a quarter of all guerrilla actions are infrastructure attacks, such as bombings to oil pipelines and electricity grids, and attacks on means of transport. Checkpoints and road blockages constitute another fifth of guerrilla actions. These activities generate little revenue. They also provoke reactions from the State and the illegal paramilitaries that complicate guerrilla efforts to profit from drugs. They are really only consistent with a goal of overthrowing the Colombian government.

Second, a common assumption is that guerrilla income derives overwhelmingly from drugs so that successful coca eradication must cripple their operations. But the guerrillas have diverse revenue sources including kidnapping, extortion, cattle rustling and land theft. We need to apply new creativity to squeeze them fully on all financial fronts. Developing a comprehensive and open land ownership database would be a great start. This would directly feed the battle against land theft and, by exposing who owns the land where illegal crops are grown, create an alternative to aerial eradication.

Third, many policymakers have treated the illegal paramilitaries as an unfortunate sideshow rather than a central element in their strategic thinking. In recent years the paramilitaries have been by a wide margin the biggest killers of Colombian civilians. They have killed roughly five times as many civilians as have the guerrillas. Their vigilantism is largely a response to the government's failure to provide local security and so the guerrilla problem is, in this sense, the more fundamental of the two. Nevertheless,

there is now a big paramilitary machine in place and Colombia and its partners must face up to it squarely.

A broad cross-party grouping from the Colombian legislature has just drafted a bill providing a legal framework for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of the paramilitaries. It caps prison sentences at ten years, requires restitution of stolen property and mandates cooperation in truth and reconciliation proceedings.

The bill also calls on the State to build institutional presence where the paramilitaries demobilize to prevent illegal armed groups from stepping into a void. This expensive proposition is absolutely vital. An institutional vacuum would be an open invitation to narco-traffickers, guerrillas and even new paramilitaries to thrive and expand.

The Colombian security forces are already overstretched across Colombia's mountainous and jungle-filled terrain. They simply cannot be everywhere all the time. More than 70% of paramilitaries' massacre victims lived in one of Colombia's many municipalities with population densities of less than three people per square kilometre. Thus, the costs of extending proper security to all of Colombia's remote and vulnerable areas would be huge. The urban electorate would resist such expenditures. We therefore recommend the development of local security institutions through the use of local taxes, local personnel and national supervision to prevent abuses. In our view this completes the best possible package for paramilitary DDR.

International support has been decidedly tepid toward Colombia's negotiations with the paramilitaries. International organizations, governments and NGOs that seem to unhesitatingly support virtually any guerrilla DDR process do not want to touch the paramilitaries with a ten-foot pool. Ironically, this detachment is squandering an opportunity to reduce violence, improve justice, and contain gun and drug trafficking in one of the world's most violent countries. Colombia's neighbours, Europe and North America all have a great stake in the outcome. The world must rise to the occasion.

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