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Major Developments in the Colombian Conflict

Colombia remains locked in an armed conflict involving two left-wing guerrilla groups, the FARC and the much smaller ELN, and illegal right-wing paramilitary groups which are slowly demobilising. We have just updated our Colombia conflict database, maintained at our Bogotá-based think tank (CERAC), to include the first half of 2005. We have some important, new findings that we hope will stimulate a proper debate about Colombia's future. The full report can be found at <http://www.cerac.org.co/>.

The signal achievement of the Uribe government that took office in August, 2002 was a dramatic drop in conflict-related killings of civilians. Unfortunately, these gains have eroded significantly in 2005 when we record 658 conflict-related civilian killings. This more than doubles the rate of the previous two years and is only 10% below the rate in the year before Uribe took power.

The reasons for these trends are clear. The illegal paramilitaries have been the main killers of civilians in recent years in accordance with their explicit strategy of killing presumed (by them) guerrilla supporters. They went on official ceasefire in December, 2002, hoping to negotiate their way out of the conflict. Despite frequent violations the paramilitaries had reduced their killings of civilians. But in the first half of 2005 they went on a big killing spree.

This outbreak does not come primarily from massacres, the most common paramilitary action in the past in which four or more defenceless people are killed in a single event. Rather, the paramilitaries are now killing one or two people at a time, largely below the radar screen.

The Colombian government must cease tolerating this behaviour while it negotiates paramilitary demobilization. Less than a month ago Uribe did issue an ultimatum to the paramilitaries, warning that they must disarm and demobilize by December 31 or become prime military objectives. He was, in fact, reaffirming an old deadline which the paramilitaries were well aware of. But then the very next week the government actually extended this deadline for a further two months, squandering considerable credibility in the process. Nevertheless, it appears that paramilitary demobilisation and disarmament will resume this week with two vicious fronts from the departments of Antioquia and Bolívar, in turn belonging to the larger Bloque Central Bolívar of the AUC, turning in their arms.

Paramilitary leaders have done some tough talking during this crisis in the negotiations. Ernesto Baez, the de facto leader of the paramilitaries whom the US seeks to extradite on drug-trafficking charges, declared that since government forces have failed to defeat the guerrillas for four decades the paramilitaries would not have much to fear from them. Many observers nodded their heads. However, our data indicate that the paramilitaries are very poor fighters who have generally been pushed around by the guerrillas. They

could not respond to a concerted government assault, except possibly by reverting to terror as Pablo Escobar did in his final days. This puts the government in a strong negotiating position that it must exploit. Báez and his second, known as “Macaco”, are expected to demobilise this coming week.

Some observers have maintained that in 2003 and 2004 the FARC went into a kind of strategic retreat, preparing to mount a devastating counterattack. If so, they paid dearly for the “retreat” phase. In reality they lost record numbers of fighters over the last three years trying to defend their rearguard before dispersing. We also find that the number of guerrilla attacks actually bottomed out in 2005 after dropping very sharply over the last two years.

On the other hand, the number of guerrillas killed decreased and the number of government forces killed increased sharply in the first half of 2005. So there has been something of a comeback in 2005, although so far it has been short-lived and not truly devastating.

In 2004 the Colombian military, with US support, made an ambitious offensive into the swampy, disease-infested southern territories where the FARC has been digging in for many years. The results were quite positive until action shifted further south toward the Ecuadorian border in 2005. This and the Venezuelan border seem to be emerging as increasingly important FARC resources across which they can flee to temporary bases, regroup and launch new attacks. Government casualties now concentrate heavily in these frontier areas.

We are concerned about present trends in Colombia but consider them reversible. The government needs to lay down the law to the paramilitaries, the military needs to reestablish its recent good performance and Colombia needs to get better cooperation from its neighbors. The international community can and should help Colombia in these endeavors.

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