



## Lessons Learned from the Campaign Against the FARC in Colombia November 16, 2008

### NEFA Senior Investigator Douglas Farah



*[In 1990, on contract with The Washington Post, Douglas Farah moved to Bogota, Colombia, to cover the exploding drug war in the Andean region. Working in Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, he chronicled the rise and fall of the Medellin cartel, and its leader, Pablo Escobar. He also wrote extensively about the rise of the Cali cartel, the move by Colombian drug traffickers into heroin, and the growing alliance between Colombian and Mexican drug mafias. He now works as a Senior Investigator for the NEFA Foundation.]*

### **Introduction**

In November 1997, a classified U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report warned that the Colombian military was on the verge of defeat at the hands of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-FARC). The FARC, Latin America's oldest insurgency, had just been formally designated as a terrorist entity, and the report bleakly warned that Colombia could become a "narco-state" within five years. It described the Colombian military as inept, corrupt, ill trained, and poorly equipped. At the same time, the report noted, the FARC, flush with drug money, had acquired new Soviet bloc weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, and had a small air force to move its leaders around the country and provide logistical support to its troops.<sup>1</sup>

Gen. Charles Wilhelm, then-chief of the U.S. Southern Command, which is responsible for U.S. security in Latin America, publicly echoed the theme of the findings and worried about the ability of the Colombian military to survive. He noted that the Colombian army had effectively lost control of more than half of the national territory and had suffered a series of stinging defeats at the hands of the insurgents.

"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," Wilhelm told a Congressional hearing on March 31, 1998.<sup>2</sup> The United States had already revoked the visa of Colombia's president, Ernesto Samper, as well as those of several of his senior military commanders, because of their close ties to the Cali drug cartel. Relations between the Samper government and the Clinton administration had deteriorated to the point where there was barely any official contact between the two governments.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Farah, "Colombian Rebels Seen Winning War; U.S. Study Finds Army Inept, Ill-Equipped," *The Washington Post*, p. A 17, April 10, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Statement of Gen. Charles Wilhelm, Commander, United States Southern Command, Before the House International Relations Committee, March 31, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> For a more complete look at the deterioration of relations and how the Cali cartel bought the 1994 presidential elections, see: Douglas Farah, "The Crackup," *Washington Post Magazine*, July 21, 1996.

The military had also developed significant ties, not only with the drug trafficking cartels, but with paramilitary organizations that were responsible for most of the conflict's growing number of human rights abuses and civilian deaths. Weak and ineffective on its own, the army had turned increasingly to paramilitary groups that depended on the drug trade for their finances, to carry the war to the FARC. As a result, Colombia's human rights record had significantly deteriorated, with the civilian population bearing the brunt of the atrocities.

Yet just 10 years later, the Colombian military has become a model, in many ways, of a successful counterinsurgency force. The FARC, having grown to some 18,000 combatants, now can field less than half that amount and controls a fraction of the territory it did even five years ago. In 2002, the FARC had a significant presence in 500 of the nation's 1,100 municipalities and was present in 23 of the nation's 32 departments (states) In 480 of the nation's 1,100 townships, the mayors could not be physically present because of death threats from the FARC.<sup>4</sup>

Now, for the first time in its 44-year history, FARC senior commanders have been killed and its mid-level commanders and combatants are deserting by the hundreds every month. The rebel presence has been reduced to only 100 municipalities and 17 departments, and all 1,100 mayors live in the municipalities where they were elected. Colombian president Alvaro Uribe is the staunchest U.S. ally in Latin America, and his success against the FARC has kept his popularity rating above 60 percent for most of his six years in office.

This paper, a part of the NEFA Foundation's series on the FARC, will look at the lessons learned from the Colombian conflict, and how the Colombian state radically changed the course of a decades-long war against a well armed, well-financed, and highly motivated insurgency. Many of the best and most innovative ideas came from the Colombian civilian and military leadership, rather than from outside parties, and the execution of the most audacious parts of the campaign were carried out by well-trained and highly motivated Colombian troops.

This is not to say sustained, large-scale aid has not been vital to the program. In the seven years since the initiation of Plan Colombia, the United States has poured \$4.35 billion into the Colombian military. The aid has brought the military increased air capacity, technological support, training, and intelligence support.<sup>5</sup> This paper is not intended to give a full history of the FARC or its dismantling, subjects which have been covered in more detail in three previous NEFA Foundation papers.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is intended

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<sup>4</sup> Author interview, Gen. Oscar Naranjo, Commander of the Colombian National Police, Aug. 22, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Kraul, "Colombian Military Gains Come at Price," Los Angeles Times, Jan. 18, 2008, p. A01.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Farah, "What the FARC Papers Show Us About Latin American Terrorism," The NEFA Foundation, April 1, 2008, accessible at: <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefafarc0408.pdf>. The paper examines not only the documents captured from the FARC, but also the history of the FARC's involvement in the drug trade, the war with right-wing paramilitary groups, and the prominent support role for the FARC played by Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. The second paper, "The FARC in Transition: The Fatal Weakening of the Hemisphere's Oldest Guerrilla Movement," accessible at: <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefafarc0708.pdf>, examines some of the factors behind the recent military setbacks suffered by the FARC. The third paper, "The

to look at how this radical turnaround occurred, based on the premise that the FARC is, in many ways, the prototype of the criminal-terrorist networks that intelligence and law enforcement communities will be facing for many years.

This paper will also look at some of the enormous obstacles that remain in the conflict which hinder the ability to declare that the armed movement has been defeated by the state. The challenges are political, cultural, and economic. Despite the success in the field, the government has yet to consolidate its gains by creating a viable, permanent state presence in much of the country. Human rights abuses continue to plague the military, recently leading to the dismissal of 27 army officers, including three generals, for allegedly killing civilians to inflate their body count.<sup>7</sup>

There also exists the fundamental paradox of the Colombian experience, where substantial U.S. aid has been given for a sustained period of time, with the primary goal of reducing the flow of cocaine to the U.S. market. While the FARC has been crippled, and other large drug trafficking organizations such as the Northern Valley Cartel (NVC) and its allies in the paramilitary groups have been disbanded, the flow of cocaine has not been significantly reduced. From the Colombian perspective, the endeavor has been a success: forces that threatened the viability of the state have been forced into significant retreat.

From the U.S. perspective, however, the primary goal of the \$6 billion dollars spent on Plan Colombia was to reduce the flow of cocaine. That has not happened, and both senior Colombian and U.S. officials have admitted the failure. While there is certainly merit in crippling the operational capacity of a terrorist force that thrives on drug money, has shown the ability to cross-train with other terrorist organizations, and has a strong and public anti-American posture, a realistic reassessment must be undertaken of goals, means, and stated strategy in the new U.S. administration.

The paper draws heavily on interviews with current and former Colombian and U.S. officials, who were instrumental in developing the current policy, as well as interviews with former FARC officials and documents provided by the Colombian government and others. The primary purpose is to look at the valuable lessons learned in the recent Colombian experience with the FARC, as well as point to remaining difficulties that could, in a relatively short time frame, undermine the progress made.

### **Key Elements of Success**

Officials directly involved in the current Colombian campaign against the FARC point to four general elements that have greatly weakened the FARC and have 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.

"Our military strategy changed when we understood our problems differently after more than 40 years," said Andrés Peñate, a former deputy defense minister who

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FARC's International Relations: A Network of Deception," examines the FARC's international network, largely operating with the support of the Chávez government in Venezuela.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Romero, "Colombia Killings Cast Doubt on War Against Insurgents," The New York Times, Oct. 30, 2008.

helped restructure the military. “We thought drug trafficking was a problem of the United States and the PNC (Colombian National Police). The FARC was a problem for the military. In reality, drug trafficking and the FARC are manifestations of the same problem, but we had not diagnosed things properly because we were using a lot of ideology and very little analysis in looking at the problem.”

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>8</sup> In its current structure, Plan Colombia rests on three pillars: military, counter-narcotics, and social work.

The four 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;
- A complete restructuring of the military, complemented by decisive civilian leadership; enforced intelligence sharing among different branches of the military and national police;
- The creation of culture that rewarded risk-taking both operationally and conceptually;
- Sustained, bipartisan support of the U.S. Congress for the program, which allowed the aid programs to flow over a sustained period of time.

While the first two elements are not unusual, the latter two 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 and, according to senior intelligence and law enforcement officials, has grown noticeably worse the further we have moved from the attacks.

In order to understand the current situation, it is important to understand the recent history of the conflict that has immediate bearing. In-depth discussions of the history of the war and the FARC are contained in other papers in this series.

### **Territorial Control and Military Reform**

Since the mid-1990s, the FARC, engaging every more heavily in the cocaine trade and flush with cash, rapidly expanded its forces and drove the military from vast swaths of the national territory. As outlined above, by the late 1990s, the government controlled little more than a third of the country, with the FARC occupying more than a third, and confederated paramilitary armies known as the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia-AUC), a little less than the FARC.

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<sup>8</sup> Karen DeYoung, “U.S. Eyes Shift in Colombia Policy: Greater Aid for War Against Leftist Guerrillas Sought,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 15, 2002.

In 1997 and 1998, the FARC inflicted a string of 18 consecutive defeats on the army, regularly mobilizing units of 1,500 to 2,000 troops to attack military outposts manned by a few hundred men.<sup>9</sup> The FARC had also used its drug revenues to rearm with sophisticated Soviet bloc weapons, and were consistently able to outgun the military.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the FARC had begun to exchange technology and lessons with other terrorist groups, including Spain's ETA and the Provisional Irish Republican Army, greatly increasing its operational capabilities, particularly in the field of explosives.<sup>11</sup> These defeats in large part, led to the decision of then president Andrés Pastrana to hold peace talks with the FARC, starting in 1999. As a precondition, the FARC demanded and received permission to take over a "demobilized" region the size of Switzerland where the negotiations were to be held.<sup>12</sup>

While widely viewed as an excessively generous indulgence by the Pastrana government, several analysts pointed to the FARC's time in negotiations as the beginning of the end of the movement. Talks were finally broken off after three years, a time in which the FARC carried out numerous terrorist attacks and strengthened its ties to drug trafficking organizations.<sup>13</sup>

The FARC approached the negotiations, with some justification, as the victorious force. "They wanted to project the image of the FARC as the heroic Latin American guerrillas, but they got fat, they got big bellies," said Alejandro Reyes, one of Colombia's most respected academics who has studied the FARC extensively. "They were driving around in nice cars. They stopped the war, and went into diplomacy. At the same time they began recruiting a large number of young people, financed by the coca trade. They took advantage of the negotiations to seize control of the coca fields, routes and paste labs. They grew from 8,000 to 14,000 in a few years, and up to 17,000."

This rapid recruitment, and lack of ideological training, led to a rapid increase in the FARC's numbers and ability to control territory, but also created a new culture within the organization. Many of those recruited were from the lower ranks of drug trafficking organizations, particularly those who grew and protected the coca fields. The coca leaf is the precursor for making cocaine. The new culture of "quick and easy money" rapidly moved the FARC into more drug trafficking arenas and brought more money, but also greatly diminished the ideological component of the movement and its discipline.

While the FARC was growing in the relative peace of the negotiations process, the military had also set out on a broad restructuring program. A new generation of generals assumed control of the military and realized the war, after almost 40 years, had turned against them. In an effort to understand their own institution, the new

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<sup>9</sup> Author interviews with current and former Colombian military and police officials.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Farah, "Colombian Rebels Tap E. Europe for Arms; Guerrillas' Firepower Superior to Army's," *Washington Post*, Nov. 4, 1999, p. A1.

<sup>11</sup> For a more complete look at the FARC's relationships with other groups, see: Douglas Farah, "The FARC's International Relations: A Network of Deception," *op cit*.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Johnson, "Helping Colombia Fix Its Plan to Curb Drug Trafficking, Violence and Insurgency," *The Heritage Foundation*, April 26, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "FARC, ELN: Colombia's Left Wing Guerrillas," *Backgrounder*, 2008.

leadership, in 1998, commissioned a broad survey of its officer corps to determine morale, capacity, and the general breakdown of the institution.<sup>14</sup>

"Our conclusion after the survey was that we had to completely restructure, everything, everything had to be redone," said General Jorge Enrique Mora, who led the reform efforts. "It was not the strength of the FARC that defeated us, but our weakness." Mora and other officials involved in the reform process said that the changes were wrenching, but necessary. The army, air force, and navy leadership seldom spoke to each other and often failed to coordinate operations. Intelligence gathering was minimal and the primary work of the army was patrolling streets or guarding stationary targets such as light post, bridges, and dams.

Offensive, intelligence-driven operations were almost unheard of, in part because so little intelligence was being gathered. Rather than debriefing captured FARC rebels after combat, they were almost always executed or put in jail to rot. There were virtually no clandestine operations being run, and even the basic configuration of the FARC high command, and order of battle, were little understood, despite the conflict having dragged on for decades.<sup>15</sup>

"The first phase was to annihilate the fronts operating near the capital, the kidnapping groups," said Peñate. "We got rid of them in one year, they fell far more quickly than we thought possible. Then we cleared the highways, and levied the surcharge to use them. This money allowed us to buy motorcycles, trucks, and other equipment and to create a special highway police. This gave people great peace of mind because immediately the kidnappings dropped off and it was safe to travel again."

Another hurdle they faced was the fact that the military was woefully undermanned and was largely an army of conscripts. Much of the force was made up of "*bachilleres*," or high school graduates dragooned into the service. The wealthy families could pay so their children did not serve the obligatory 18-24 month term, and only a minority of the force was professional. This meant that most of the soldiers spent much of their time trying to avoid combat they were not trained to engage in, with very low morale. Slowly the army grew, as did the ratio of professional soldiers to draftees. In 2000, 35,374 soldiers in the army were draftees and there were 21,156 professional soldiers. The current ratio in the army is 52,700 professional soldiers and 2,870 *bachilleres*.<sup>16</sup> Overall, the military has grown 45 percent since 2000, from 214,500 to 390,000, with a core of about 80,000 professional soldiers.<sup>17</sup> The national police, whose primary responsibility is combating drug trafficking, has grown in the same period from 43,000 to 145,000.<sup>18</sup>

The growth of the military and police was largely financed by taxes on the wealthy, who for years paid almost nothing to support the war. The tax, pushed by the Uribe administration, also for the first time, gave the wealthy and business elites a stake

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<sup>14</sup> Author interview, Gen. (r) Jorge Enrique Mora, commander of the army (1998-2000) and chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, 2000-2002.

<sup>15</sup> This state of the Colombian military was gathered in a series of interviews with six current and past senior military and police officials, all who held senior commands at in the period under discussion.

<sup>16</sup> Figures provided by Gen. Mora.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Kraul, "Colombian Military Gains Come at Price," Los Angeles Times, Jan. 18, 2008, p. A01.

<sup>18</sup> Police figures provided by Gen. Oscar Naranjo, commander of the National Police.

in the war. Uribe, a businessman, was uniquely positioned to make the tax politically palatable.

The money allowed the government to expand into areas where it had seldom operated, and maintain a permanent presence in areas of heavy FARC activity. More than 90 percent of the nation's population lives in the northwest half of the country, and that half of the country produces more than 90 percent of Colombia's legitimate GDP. The southeastern half is comprised of jungles and rolling plains that are sparsely populated, but is the region where the FARC was able to establish itself in relative safety. It is also the region of the country where coca leaves grow and cocaine is produced. Moving the military from the protection of parts of the populated region, into what became known as "*Farclandia*," or FARC-land, correctly implying the region's near independence from the central government, was a major challenge. The government's mantra was "protect the rearguard (north) and take the war to the south."

This presented logistical problems, because of the rough terrain and the distances involved in maintaining supply lines. It also required creating specific counter-insurgency units that could carry out the task of attacking the FARC. Rather than carrying out an operation that would last three to five days in the rugged terrain, as was normal, the military was able to build a series of forward operating bases and rely on rapid air support for resupply and reinforcements. In addition to upgraded equipment and more troops, the U.S. Special Forces trained several dozen mobile, 28-man units that could survive for days in the jungle or mountains, and were transported by the newer, quicker Blackhawk helicopters.<sup>19</sup>

It was not until 2003 that the Colombian military, which had been at war for more than 40 years, began to conduct joint operations among its different forces. The navy and the army rarely communicated, and the air force was obsolete and seldom used. The National Police, which had received the bulk of the U.S. aid to that point, had better aviation equipment than the air force.

To end the bitter rivalries among the service branches, officers from different services were assigned to services outside their own. It took several years before the tension and rivalry gave way to something resembling a unified command structure capable of working together.<sup>20</sup> Gradually, the FARC was driven back from its traditional strongholds and its supply lines were placed under increasing stress.

The expansion of the military, however, has had a high cost, particularly in terms of human rights abuses. Extra-judicial murders by government forces have increased, according to human rights groups. For the five-year period ending June 2006, the military murdered 1,035 civilians, according to human rights groups, up from 685 the previous five years.<sup>21</sup> The magnitude of the problem became evident in October, when Uribe fired 27 officers, including three generals, over allegations that their soldiers had killed civilians in order to pad their combat numbers. A fourth general, Gen. Mario Montoya, who commanded the army, also resigned a few weeks later under mounting national and international pressure.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Kraul, op cit., and author interviews.

<sup>20</sup> Author interviews with Gens. Mora, Naranjo and other current and past defense officials.

<sup>21</sup> Kraul, op cit.

<sup>22</sup> "Colombian Army Commander Resigns," BBC News-Americas, Nov. 4, 2008.

### **Intelligence Reform and Political Leadership**

The expansion of the military was belatedly coupled with a complete restructuring of the intelligence structure that was discredited, distrusted, and compartmentalized. Innovation and creative thinking was discouraged, and the risk-averse military had produced a risk-averse intelligence structure.

Even more problematic was the fact that internally, the intelligence units had become completely discredited. The infamous Bridaga 20, the army's intelligence unit, had been disbanded in 1997, because of its involvement in several massacres of civilians. Each field unit ran its own intelligence, often at odds with other units. When an operation failed, commanding officers would blame poor intelligence, and intelligence officials would blame poor execution and delays in undertaking the operations.<sup>23</sup>

“For many years, this was viewed as regular warfare, and intelligence people were scattered everywhere,” said Santos. “There was a culture of reprisals against those who wanted things to change. As a result, we had very little intelligence, even on the (FARC) secretariat. We had to reorganize intelligence, both vertically and horizontally.”<sup>24</sup>

One of the main reasons for the dearth of intelligence, as noted earlier, was the military had never sought to debrief FARC prisoners or deserters. No database was kept on the FARC and its leaders. Nothing systematic was available anywhere in the system. Analysts were virtually unheard of. The body count, rather than the gathering of information, was prized and rewarded. Another problem was that the FARC had systematically penetrated the military units in its areas, and the military had almost no counter-intelligence capabilities. Rooting out the corrupt and the infiltrators is a task that is still a daily struggle.

While some progress in this field had been made in the early years of the Uribe administration, Santos and others felt more could be done. Shortly after assuming his position in early 2006, Uribe and Santos called a meeting of all the service commanders, the national police, and all of their intelligence chiefs. The message was simple: things were going to change.

“We said, don't let us catch you with any piece of information that might be useful to others in this room, or that others needed to have. If you do, you will be fired,” said Santos. At the same time, the United States was providing sophisticated electronic equipment, enhancing the capabilities of the army, if they could harness it. Instead of rewarding body count numbers, soldiers were rewarded most if FARC members surrendered or demobilized, and medals were given for the capture, rather than execution, of the guerrillas. Debriefings were systematized, information was shared, and a new picture of the FARC emerged.

“As we started to work with informers, we got better information, and with the information we got more intelligence and more deserters,” Santos explained. “It was like a snowball. In the beginning we had many demobilized who were young. They were afraid. Now we are getting veterans of 10, 15, 20 years, the hardcore combatants and mid-level commanders. And that is really hurting the FARC.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Author interviews.

<sup>24</sup> Author interview.

<sup>25</sup> Author interviews.

The seminal joint Colombian-U.S. intelligence operations that began to build the snowball were dubbed “Alliance,” and the long-term repercussions are being felt today. It began in 2003, when the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), working with Colombian officials, intercepted a call from a FARC supplier named Nancy Conde to confederates in Miami, seeking to buy satellite telephones for the insurgents. U.S. officials arrested the Miami contacts, and, in exchange for lighter sentences, had the FARC contacts buy the phones from an FBI front company. The phones sent to the FARC were embedded with listening devices that allowed the calls to be traced and monitored.<sup>26</sup> Over the next five years, thousands of telephone calls were monitored, leading to a string of military successes against the FARC, including the killing of several high-value targets.

As the Associated Press reported:

*They allegedly heard Conde and her co-conspirators negotiate shipments of everything from assault rifles to condoms for distribution to about a third of the FARC's estimated 9,000 fighters, including the 1st Front that held the hostages.*

*“We're not talking just about finances, communications equipment, food and weapons -but also medical supplies, medicines and people who cared directly for the wounded,” said Luis Ernesto Tamayo, the security official who ran the Colombian side of the operation.<sup>27</sup>*

The ability to monitor the communications of the FARC's senior commander paid off in significant ways earlier this year. One of the sat phones was used by Raúl Reyes, the FARC's deputy commander, not just to communicate with other members of the FARC secretariat, but with the FARC's international support network. The phone was used to help track the whereabouts of Reyes, who was killed in his sleep at a FARC camp in Ecuador, on March 1, 2008.<sup>28</sup>

But there was another, unexpected development from the use of the phones Conde procured for the FARC. One of the phones was given to Gerardo Aguilar, AKA César, who, in early 2006, was given command of the high value hostages the FARC was holding. These included Ingrid Betancourt, a former presidential candidate kidnapped in 2002, and three American military contractors, held since February 2003. Not only were military officials able to monitor calls, but they could jam the communications as well, reducing the FARC at times to having to use foot couriers to carry messages, rather than using the phone or radios. This caused significant delays in orders arriving and severely disrupted the rebels' command and control structure.

This development prompted new thinking within the military intelligence structure about how to free the hostages. Their efforts were greatly helped when, in

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<sup>26</sup> Author interviews and Frank Bajak, “Colombia Choked Rebels' Communications,” Associated Press, July 10, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Bajak, op cit.

<sup>28</sup> Author interviews. For more details on the operation against Reyes, see: Bill Lowther and Philip Sherwell, “Phone led US Experts to FARC Leader Raul Reyes,” Daily Telegraph, March 10, 2008. See also: Douglas Farah, “What the FARC Papers Show Us About Latin American Terrorism,” The NEFA Foundation, April 1, 2008, accessible at: <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefafarc0408.pdf>.

April 2008, a hostage named Jhon Pinchao Blanco, who had been held with the Americans, escaped. He was extensively debriefed on the security arrangements, treatment, and movement patterns of the FARC.<sup>29</sup>

Intelligence operatives were given the order to come up with a plan to rescue the hostages. They were told to let their imaginations run free. “We had told our people to think the unthinkable,” Santos said. “And they did. Our first reaction to their plan was that it was not possible. They convinced us the operation would hold relatively little risk to the hostages.”

The audacious rescue plan for hostages drew on many different intelligence elements. Manuel Marulanda, the legendary FARC leader, had died of natural causes shortly after Reyes was killed. Alfonso Cano, a long-time political leader of the FARC, had been named to replace him. Other senior FARC commanders had been killed, and the intelligence indicated the FARC was in turmoil, and that communications had broken down. In addition, Colombian authorities had arrested Conde in February, sending her boyfriend César into a deep depression. The military had a psychological profile of César, and knew he needed to be treated with great deference, and that the approval of his superiors was very important to him.

The hostages were being held in three groups. No operation would be mounted until the intelligence operatives could prove the viability of their plan by getting César to bring the three groups together under the pretext of moving them to a different location. A young woman, who was a radio operator for the FARC, had deserted in early 2008, and not only helped the military track the rebel communication frequencies, but also told them a fantastic story. One of Cano's former bodyguards, who was well known in rebel ranks for his perfect imitation of his commander's voice, had also quietly deserted and was living in Bogotá. He was tracked down and, imitating Cano's voice, ordered César to bring the disparate groups of hostages together to await further orders on how and when to move them south. When César complied with the order, it was clear the plan had a chance of succeeding. Santos went to brief president Uribe on the plan. The American ambassador and others were informed of the plan a few days before it was successfully carried out on July 2, 2008.

Special Forces members, dressed as relief workers and flying a helicopter that looked like one used in previous hostage exchanges, landed and took custody of the hostages. César was asked to accompany them. Once the helicopter was airborne, César was overpowered, and the hostages were freed without a shot being fired. The escape was a deep embarrassment to the FARC, and deprived them of their crown jewels in any negotiating process.<sup>30</sup>

What stands out is not just the audacity of the plan, but the willingness of senior political and military leaders to allow their analysts and field operatives to think so far outside the box, and the willingness to assume responsibility for the operations, even when they fail. Santos has gained widespread respect within the Colombian intelligence community for standing with the generals, giving everyone credit for success, and assuming joint responsibility for failure; accepting that as a price for operating. The result

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<sup>29</sup> For details on Pinchao's escape, see: Joshua Hammer, “Bungle in the Jungle,” *Men's Vogue*, December 2007.

<sup>30</sup> This account is based on interviews with sources with direct knowledge of events.

is that high risk/high reward projects are carried out regularly, including long-term infiltration efforts into different FARC fronts that have yielded a wealth of intelligence and have led to successful operations.<sup>31</sup>

Another factor often cited in the military's recent success is the use of a rewards program for FARC deserters. The program has been an incentive that has led to hundreds of FARC desertions and a willingness of deserters to provide information on senior commanders. Not all such payments have been without controversy. The government decided to pay a \$2 million reward to the bodyguard of a senior commander who murdered the commander and then chopped off the commander's hand as proof of identification. The payment of a person for murder, caused a great deal of handwringing in Colombia, and sharp rebukes by the international human rights community.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Road Ahead**

While it is clear that substantial progress has been made and the Colombian military has made remarkable progress in recent years, obstacles remain to the consolidation of those gains. These include:

- The inability so far to address many of the underlying social issues that have allowed the FARC to survive for 44 years;
- A false sense, particularly among the business and political elites, that the war is won, threatening the national consensus that has provided the military with the political backing it has needed;
- The lack of a mid-term program to hand off important functions to the Colombian military as U.S. aid faces substantial reductions;
- The ongoing investigations into the military, including senior leaders, for flagrant and continuing human rights abuses;
- The ongoing support of the Chávez government in Venezuela, the Correa government in Ecuador, and the Ortega government in Nicaragua to the FARC.
- The lack of progress in cutting off the flow of cocaine, which is being rerouted through Venezuela, and continues to yield high profits for the FARC;
- A global economic crisis that will limit Colombian government resources to carry on the current operational tempo and expansion, and at the same time, foreign aid, particularly from the United States, is likely to be reduced;
- The desire of president Uribe to amend the constitution to allow himself to seek a third term, a move that would undermine the criticism of Chávez and other leaders in the hemisphere who seek to perpetuate their stay in power through constitutional revisions.

Peñate and others have said the Uribe government has not taken this historic opportunity to address the fundamental social inequities that have given the FARC a reason to exist and a permanent pool of potential recruits. This is in part because the nation's elite now feel the war is being won. Hence, they see little incentive to carry out deep reforms that would, in the long term, deprive the FARC of its social base. This

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<sup>31</sup> For examples of successful long-term penetration operations, see "Operación Jaque II," *Revista Semana*, Aug. 2, 2008, edition 1370.

<sup>32</sup> The commander, Iván Ríos, was killed March 6, 2008. For details see: "Second Senior Farc Rebel 'Killed,'" *BBC News*, March 7, 2008.

includes not only land reform, but a solution to the hundreds of thousands of displaced people who have been driven from their homes by the conflict, and the establishment of a functioning judicial system.

León Valencia, a former FARC member and now a columnist for *El Tiempo*, Colombia's largest newspaper, said the hundreds of thousands of displaced people provide a permanent recruitment pool for the FARC. He also warned that, with its back to the wall militarily, the FARC would try to carry out new, spectacular attacks and kidnappings to reestablish itself militarily.

"They don't care about the loss of popularity," Valencia said. "They have burned their bridges. They cannot generate any more hatred towards themselves than already exists, so they have nothing to lose."<sup>33</sup>

While the support of Chávez, Ortega, and Correa has been amply documented,<sup>34</sup> the inability to diminish the world demand for cocaine substantially compounds the problem. It costs the FARC an estimated \$500 a month to maintain each combatant, meaning that the group can maintain 10,000 fighters for about \$60 million a year, plus other overhead expenses. While the sum is large, it is hardly out of the realm of the possible for an organization that, in past years, has generated several times that amount in revenue.

At the same time, the Colombian government is facing the same global economic crisis of other nations while being asked to assume a greater responsibility for programs currently paid for by the United States and other allies. Even before the global recession began, U.S. aid was slated to begin to slow down, and that trend will likely accelerate. "Right now we have moved the clock back to where we were in 1991, in terms of the FARC," said Peñate. "It feels like a great success, but it isn't. If you have (mud) up to your chin, and you get it down to your waist, you feel good, but you are still in lots of (mud). Now, the national consensus is weakening, and we haven't finished the war."

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<sup>33</sup> Author interview.

<sup>34</sup> See Farah, "What the FARC Papers Show Us About Latin American Terrorism," *op cit*.