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Guerrilla Offensive Deals Blow to Colombian Army

by LADB Staff

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In an offensive that began in early March, Colombian guerrilla forces inflicted large numbers of casualties on the army in what analysts say may be Colombia's worst military defeat ever at the hands of leftist rebels. While the offensive was timed to coincide with legislative elections (see other article in this issue), fighting has continued in the southern province of Cauca, and losses on both sides mount.

Meanwhile, presidential candidate and former chief of the armed forces Harold Bedoya blamed President Ernesto Samper for the losses, while Samper blamed foreign governments who have supported the guerrillas by buying drugs and sending arms. Colombia has been wracked by political violence since the late 1940s when loyalists of the rival Partido Liberal and Partido Conservador fought a 10-year civil war known as "La Violencia." The 1960s saw the emergence of several leftist guerrilla armies, three of which have been waging war against the state ever since.

The two largest rebel groups, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), have both rejected peace talks with the Samper government, which they consider "illegitimate" because of its ties to drug trafficking (see NotiSur, 12/19/97 and 01/30/98). Extent of defeat still being assessed While the government at first minimized the seriousness of the offensive as well as the number of casualties, by March 10, its figures were similar to those released by the FARC.

By radio on March 8, FARC leader Fabian Ramirez told Reuter that guerrillas under his command had killed 83 soldiers and captured 43 "prisoners of war" in the first three days of fighting. He said another 32 soldiers had been wounded. Ramirez said six of his own fighters had died and brushed aside army claims that "at least" 40 dead guerrillas had been found in mass graves in El Billar.

On March 10, army commander Mario Hugo Galan said the bodies of 58 soldiers had been recovered from the thick jungle along the Rio Caguan. He said 27 more were most likely captured, and the fate of an additional 29 was unknown. Army Gen. Fernando Tapias said the final death toll for both sides could surpass 100.

During the several days of intense fighting, 33 civilians in the area were killed. "Never before have we had so many dead among the guerrillas and the army," armed forces commander Gen. Manuel Bonnett Larcano said in Bogota. Reinforcements search for dead and survivors Fighting continues in the jungle areas in southern Colombia as the army tries to rescue any survivors from the ill-fated counterinsurgency battalion.

Among those still searching for survivors around El Billar is Maj. John Jairo Aguilar, who was at the head of the 154-member unit when it was surrounded by about 600 FARC rebels. Aguilar said combat broke out when his men encountered units guarding rebel commanders, and they

were quickly surrounded by the rebels. "There is nothing tougher than seeing people die, and nothing more satisfying than being able to get people out alive," Aguilar said by radio from the Tres Esquinas base near El Billar.

Aguilar is clearly bitter about the defeat. "We're fighting an enemy that has 100% support of the civilian population," Aguilar said. "The enemy, the terrain, and the population are all against us." An officer who described the battle on condition of anonymity said the unit, Counterinsurgency Battalion 52, is one of four guerrilla-fighting battalions with up to 350 soldiers each. The battalions are the most highly trained, best-paid in Colombia's 146,000-person armed forces. More than 1,000 troops remained in the Caguan region, said Maj. Gildardo Wanumen, to hunt down the FARC column responsible for last week's devastating strike.

News reports say many of the reinforcements are clearly demoralized, however, and many are suffering from malaria. Wanumen said the blow at El Billar had taught the army "valuable lessons," which would enable it to "increase its power in the region." After the heaviest fighting, Samper visited the Tres Esquinas base on the Rio Caguan. "I call on all industrialized countries to stop selling weapons and buying drugs from those [guerrilla groups] that are financing these operations of war and death," Samper said. He asked foreign countries to demand "that these armed groups, dedicated to these demented acts of war, show some concrete sign of their willingness to seek peace."

Criticism of army and Samper

Following the military disaster, the military high command received stinging criticism for allowing a disaster of last week's magnitude to happen. Critics said the military should have immediately sent in more soldiers and ensured that communications were adequate to allow the quick introduction of reinforcements, which never arrived. Gen. Bedoya said Samper had used peace as a political instrument "to capture votes for his presidential candidate," former interior minister Horacio Serpa. "The FARC and the ELN are partners of the drug lords," said Bedoya. "A political decision must be made to confront the problem, which is the state's problem, not the soldiers' problem."

Bedoya said the calamity in Caqueta "is the result of an irresponsible political decision by Samper and his defense minister, Gilberto Echeverri," who ordered the armed forces to withdraw from an extensive area in Caqueta last year in exchange for the release of 70 soldiers, thus "renouncing sovereignty in favor of the narcoterrorist bands." Echeverri said the area between San Jose del Guaviare, near San Vicente del Caguan, and Puerto Asis in Putumayo is the production center for 85% of Colombian cocaine. "This mixture of the guerrillas and the coca is very explosive, very harmful," said Echeverri. "There is where the guerrilla's cash box is." Gen. Bonnett cautioned overreacting to the disaster. "Colombia is not the Titanic, it is not going to go under." He added, "Those in combat run the risk of losing their lives, and battles are won or lost."

Bonnett said the confrontations in El Caguan "are really a blow against subversion." Pope calls on bishops to work for peace As the death toll mounted, the Vatican called on the Colombian bishops to become more involved in ending the rebel war. "Colombia has had a dramatic experience with the nefarious consequences produced by a lack of peace," the papal letter to the Colombian bishops said.

Referring to the underlying causes of its 33-year-old guerrilla war, John Paul II said "diverse forms of injustice" have caused deep wounds to the Colombian people and to the social fabric of the country. He blamed "the excessive gap between rich and poor, an unbridled search for power and security, and little attention to those most in need." (Sources: The Miami Herald, 03/07/98, 03/08/98; Associated Press, Reuter, Spanish news service EFE, 03/10/98)

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