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LADB Staff

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Leader of Colombian Rebel Group FARC Confirmed Dead

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2008-06-06

Officials from the rebel guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) confirmed in May the death of its top commander Manuel Marulanda, known by the nickname Tirofijo (Sureshot). The death of Marulanda made him the third commander in the FARC's seven-member secretariat to die in recent months. The surrender of another iconic (but lower-ranking) FARC commander signaled that the government of militarist President Alvaro Uribe may be winning a huge and significant number of tactical victories against the hemisphere's oldest and strongest rebel force.

Many analysts have wondered in print whether the FARC would ever regain the offensive in its conflict with government and paramilitary forces. Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda dead of natural causes Marulanda, a peasant's son who built Latin America's mightiest guerrilla army, was believed to be 78.

The "comandante maximo" of the leftist FARC died March 26 of a heart attack, but secretariat member Timoleon Jimenez, known by the nom de guerre Timochenko, did not announce his death until a video broadcast on May 25. He did not specify where Marulanda died, though military officials said his death coincided with bombings in southern jungles where he was believed to be holed up.

Later reports from the military, however, said there were no bombings the day he was said to have died. A leathery-faced man with piercing eyes and a sixth-grade education, Marulanda was the world's longest-fighting rebel leader, the archetypal product of Colombia's bloody modern times. He took up arms in his late teens and spent his entire adult life organizing resistance to governments he considered corrupt. Famously reclusive and paranoid,

Marulanda was never known to have gone abroad or even visited Bogota, Colombia's capital. Jimenez said Marulanda's death followed a short illness whose nature he did not describe. The guerrilla leader spent his last moments "in the arms of his companion, surrounded by bodyguards," Jimenez said. Marulanda fathered at least seven children but is not known to have married. Born Pedro Antonio Marin, Marulanda took his nom-de-guerre from a labor leader beaten to death in the 1950s in a secret police dungeon.

A master strategist, he earned his nickname Tirofijo for his skill ambushing Army patrols. Unlike other Latin American guerrilla movements, his survived as the Soviet Union collapsed and Cuba's military influence shrank. Colombia's lucrative drug trade was the enabling engine, as was a kidnap-for-ransom operation.

Marulanda's story personifies the political violence that has plagued Colombia since the late 1940s. Born in the small southwestern coffee town of Genova, Marulanda took up arms in 1949 after Partido Conservador militants began slaughtering supporters of the peasant-backed Partido Liberal.
"The violence came after me like a shadow, from one town to the next," Marulanda told biographer Arturo Alape. During a decade, at least 200,000 people died in political bloodletting that became known as La Violencia.

When other Liberal guerrillas disarmed in 1953, Marulanda joined up with communist outlaws. Eleven years later, he cofounded the FARC after US-backed government troops overran the isolated agrarian enclave that he and other communist refugees called home. In the early 1980s, FARC negotiations with the government of President Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) led to the creation of a legal rebel political arm called the Union Patriotica (UP).

But a truce dissolved in 1984 after a series of assassinations of party leaders, blamed on right-wing death squads. In all, at least 4,000 UP activists were killed, decimating the party and helping explain the FARC's subsequent refusal to disarm.

Many observers of the Colombian conflict point to the massacre of UP activists as the key factor in the failure to find a political solution to the seemingly intractable Colombian conflict. An avid student of military history and guerrilla warfare, Marulanda was also a tango lover who played violin as a child. He built the rebels into a 15,000-strong guerrilla army that controlled vast swaths of countryside by the mid-1990s, dealing punishing blows to the military with attacks in which it captured scores of soldiers and police.

The government says the rebels currently hold some 700 hostages, including three US military contractors and the French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt, whom the FARC kidnapped in 2002 while she was running for president (see NotiSur, 2002-03-01). Through the years, the Army branded Marulanda a dangerous terrorist, offering princely rewards for his capture and periodically claiming it had killed him in combat. In his 1989 biography, Alape counts 17 such claims.

But time and again, Marulanda reappeared alive and well dressed in simple campesino clothing or camouflage fatigues and always with the trademark rubber boots, machete on his belt, and towel draped over his shoulder to wipe the sweat off his brow. He had long been rumored to be suffering health problems, including suspected prostate cancer, and there were conjectures during the last year that he was already dead, since he had not appeared in new videos.

Alfonso Cano, the FARC ideologue named to replace Marulanda, once said that after a long rainy march in the jungle he asked Marulanda how it was that his boots and pants had no mud stains. "He told me, 'I never take a step without deciding where I am going to step next,'" Cano recalled. As the FARC stepped up kidnappings and got deeper into Colombia's cocaine trade in the 1990s, Marulanda insisted the group had not shed its ideal of a more equal distribution of land and wealth. The closest the grizzled rebel chief came to fulfilling that dream occurred with the 1998 election of President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002).

Shortly after taking office, Pastrana pulled government troops from a rebel-dominated region the size of Switzerland to facilitate peace negotiations (see NotiSur, 1998-07-17). The FARC began running the region as its own ministate, raising taxes and appointing mayors. The peace process
brought Marulanda into contact for the first time with scores of visitors from Colombian politicians to UN envoys and business executives.

Marulanda eschewed interviews, particularly with US journalists he suspected could be spies. He was so wary of assassination attempts that he would have his companion "Sandra" taste his food to make sure it wasn't poisoned.

At the January 1999 inauguration of peace talks, Marulanda left Pastrana alone onstage next to an empty chair, claiming he had gotten wind of an assassination attempt (see NotiSur, 1999-02-19). Pastrana said he later learned Marulanda didn't want to be seen embracing the Colombian president.

The peace talks collapsed in February 2002 after the rebels hijacked a plane, kidnapping a senator on board. President Uribe's subsequent landslide victory drastically altered the military landscape (see NotiSur 2002-05-31). Backed by billions of dollars in US military aid, Uribe built up the armed forces and, making defeating the FARC his priority, pushed the rebels deep into Colombia's jungles and put them on the defensive.

After bodyguard kills Ivan Rios, 'Karina' turns herself in
March was a lethal month for the FARC Secretariat. A Colombian military strike on a camp in Ecuador on March 1 killed Marulanda's expected successor Raul Reyes (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07). Reyes was believed to be the de facto commander of the FARC as Marulanda's health declined.

On March 7, Colombian Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said Ivan Rios had been killed by his own men. Earlier the Army had claimed he had died in combat with its troops. The reported death came less than a week after Reyes death.

Ivan Rios whose real name was Manuel Munoz Ortiz was the youngest member of the seven-member secretariat. He was said to have been killed in a mountainous area of the western province of Caldas. Santos said the FARC's chief of security gave Colombian troops the leader's severed hand as proof of his death. It was unclear why he was killed, but later reports said one of his bodyguards killed him and chopped off Rios's hand to prove to the authorities he had killed the commander and so collect a reward in excess of US$1 million.

In May, a leading commander named Nelly Avila Moreno, known as Karina, surrendered to authorities and claimed at a press conference that Rios' murder had been a factor in her surrender. The government blames Karina for a string of murders and abductions and for extortion in the northwestern Antioquia region. Her surrender was seen in the press as another coup for Uribe who made her a priority target for the security forces in 2002. Karina was "nearly dying of hunger" when she and another guerrilla, known as Michin, handed themselves in, Defense Minister Santos said. "We have been after this woman who did such damage to Antioquia and the whole region of Uraba for a long time," Santos told RCN Radio.

Karina, who is in her 40s, had a fearsome reputation in Antioquia. None doubted her fighting prowess, and she has the wounds to prove it: she has lost an eye in combat, has scars across her face,
and a bullet wound on one of her arms. In 2002, a reward of more than US$800,000 was placed on her head. Karina was an example to the women in the rebel army, who make up more than a third of the ranks of the FARC. Her immediate boss was Rios.

Since his death, Karina had been in sole command of the FARC division in Antioquia. Colombian media reports said that, in the wake of Rios' killing, this division began to disintegrate and faced a sustained Army offensive. Two weeks earlier, President Uribe sent a public message to Karina in which he guaranteed her safety if she handed herself in. Antioquia Gov. Luis Alfredo Ramos was quoted by local media as saying that Karina's family had also urged her to surrender.

Karina's propaganda value for Uribe increased on May 19 when she urged other guerrillas to follow her example and abandon their decades-long struggle. During a news conference, she said she surrendered because she was encircled, had a bounty on her head, and was alarmed by Rios' murder. "To my comrades: Change this life that you are leading in the guerrilla group and re-enter society with the government's reinsertion plan," she told reporters, saying she had spent 24 years with the FARC.

Karina said she was not sure of her legal status, but she should be able to apply for leniency under a law designed to encourage demobilization that caps prison terms at eight years (see NotiSur, 2005-06-17, 2005-07-22 and 2006-06-09). The law has supposedly demobilized thousands of right-wing paramilitary fighters, although many reports have said some militia groups are forming anew under new names.

"The decision [to surrender] was made because of the pressure by the Army in the area," Karina said almost matter-of-factly, standing alongside her companion, who surrendered with her and her daughter. Authorities said Karina was wanted for murder, terrorism, rebellion, and kidnapping. The presidency said she led a number of major attacks including a 2000 ambush that killed 13 soldiers. The chief prosecutor's office said she was wanted for three massacres in 1999 and 2002, but provided no details.

Santos said Karina "had the guts to do any type of operation and managed to occupy one of the highest posts a woman has ever reached in the ranks of these terrorists." While the FARC estimate that about a third of their fighters are women, female commanders are still a rarity. Karina denied being as bloodthirsty as she has been portrayed, and rejected unsourced media reports implicating her in the 1983 killing of Uribe's father.

**The beginning of the FARC's end?**

Karina's comments gave a glimpse into how some parts of the FARC are faring under a withering US-backed offensive by Colombia's military. She said she had been virtually cut off for the past two years and out of contact with the secretariat. She said she had fewer than 50 rebels under her command when she decided to surrender.

Speaking of the Rios bounty-killing, Karina said, "It's a difficult situation. You have a lot of fighters by your side, but you don't know what each one is thinking. Some of them are thinking of their
economic situation." Karina expressed admiration for Venezuela's socialist President Hugo Chavez. The Colombian government alleges he sought to arm and finance the rebels according to documents the Colombian government claims it found on the computer of Reyes (see NotiSur, 2008-05-09).

Chavez and other regional leaders question the legitimacy of the supposed FARC documents. In response to a reporter's question, Karina said she had no knowledge of Chavez arming or funding the FARC. Asked what the Venezuelan president means to the rebels, she simply said: "We admire Chavez for the way he is."

The government now estimates the FARC's strength at about 9,000 fighters, about half its former numbers. It also claims that defections and demobilizations are increasing, with some deserters supposedly absconding with guerrilla funds. Colombia's Foreign Relations Minister Fernando Araujo said on May 26 that Marulanda's death signaled the start of the FARC's end.

"It is the beginning of the end for the FARC, there are sound strikes [against the FARC] that are occurring more quickly every time," said Araujo. "The country views with hope the collapse of this narcoterrorist organization, which for 44 years has filled Colombia with terror and pain. We now are beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel."

The deaths and capture of top FARC commanders are reminiscent of events in Peru in 1992, when the Peruvian military captured Sendero Luminoso leader Abimael Guzman. The years after his capture saw a severe decline in the strength of the Maoist rebel group that had held sway in the Peruvian countryside for years before (see NotiSur, 1992-09-15, 1992-10-06 and 1993-07-16).

The question about the FARC's survival is a matter of whether its command structure can sustain the shock of these losses. Some reports have noted that the command structure is specifically and deliberately designed to weather the loss of individual leaders. They point to its survival beyond the Soviet era as evidence of this. Jeremy McDermott of BBC news wrote on May 25, "Nobody believes the FARC is going to unravel, as happened with Peru's Shining Path after the capture of its leader Abimael Guzman in 1992.

The FARC is structured to withstand the loss of key leaders and enough men of high profile and charisma survive to ensure that there is continuity. The fact that the FARC still receives hundreds of millions of dollars from drugs, kidnapping, and extortion ensures that it will still be able to recruit and equip new levies."

The rebel army's chief ideologue Alfonso Cano now heads the group while a seven-member secretariat takes the place of Marulanda and Reyes. Experienced guerrillas like Jorge Briceno (aka Mono Jojoy), who leads the military wing and commands the largest and strongest remaining bloc of the FARC, and Timochenko Jimenez are in the secretariat.

But as the FARC sustains further strategic losses and attacks, its power appears to be severely on the wane. On April 28, analyst Leon Valencia wrote in Bogota daily newspaper El Tiempo, "It is not easy for the guerrilla group to recover" from being on the defensive since the late 1990s, "the
blows have been overwhelming. But in the past two years the FARC has transformed its structures into mobile forces: 26 columns and 23 companies; they have reverted to small groups that attack in a fluid manner and can withdraw with agility; they are trying to build a rear guard in neighboring countries and make the war over hostages into a lethal political weapon."

On April 29, El Tiempo reported that in 2007 the FARC had failed, for the first time in 20 years, to take over a single town in military action. The head of Colombia's Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. David Rene Moreno said Marulanda's death was "the hardest blow that this terrorist group has taken, since Tirofijo was the one who kept the criminal organization united."

Pablo Casas, an analyst at Bogota think-tank Fundacion Seguridad y Democracia, compared the FARC to a "dying giant, dying slowly." "I don't see any factor they can use to keep a strong structure," he told Reuters news agency. There are doubts that Cano will be able to replace Marulanda effectively. "Marulanda was a mythic founder who gave cohesion to the rebels," said Alejo Vargas, a university professor and conflict analyst.

Analysts and Army intelligence believe that the death of Marulanda could trigger a wave of desertions, further weakening the FARC and providing further treasure troves of information with which the military can hammer away at commanders and units that remain in the field.

Some analysts see the prospects for peace improving with the passing of the founding leader and the ascension of Cano. "Marulanda was a hard-line communist of the old agrarian school," said Gen. Manuel Jose Bonnett, a former head of the armed forces. "We may now see a more pragmatic and modern approach from the secretariat."

There have long been rumors of divisions within the FARC between the political wing, represented by Cano, and the military wing, led by Mono Jojoy. "For many FARC field commanders, the natural leader would be Mono Jojoy," said an unnamed intelligence source to the BBC. "He was once Marulanda's bodyguard, is a man who understands guerrilla warfare, and planned many of the biggest successes the FARC have had." Along with much of the military power, Mono Jojoy also has some of the biggest coca-growing areas under his influence. Should he make a bid for the leadership, the FARC could split.

However, the approval of Cano would have come from the secretariat, of which Mono Jojoy is also a member meaning a joint decision would have been reached. In political terms, the successive military and propaganda coups against the FARC help Uribe enormously. Even as dozens of his allies in Congress, members of his Cabinet, and his own family face federal prosecution for links to paramilitary death squads, Uribe's popularity skyrockets.

Many analysts say his hard-line stance against rebel groups help keep him the most popular president in all of Latin American opinion polling (see NotiSur, 2008-05-16). Uribe rejects FARC calls to demilitarize the regions of Florida and Pradera, a prerequisite the rebels have set before they will come to negotiations. The Colombian government has rejected the idea, offering instead an unpopulated 150 sq km area where the military does not operate.