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Colombian Mercenaries Fighting for Arab Coalition in Yemen

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Since the beginning of this decade, talk in Colombia has been that hundreds of the country's best officers and soldiers were serving as mercenaries in hot spots around the globe. Some put the number at more than 300 fighters; others said 450, and still other stretched the number to 3,300. At the beginning of this year, more specific reports indicated that most of these persons were fighting a war in the Middle East, more than 13,000 kilometers away. The setting is the impoverished Republic of Yemen, where Shiites and Sunnis—the two main branches of Islam—are fighting each other, and where Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are present. Since March 2015, a Sunni Arab coalition headed by Saudi Arabia and made up of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Qatar, and Bahrain has been intervening in the fight. Dozens of Colombians may have died there, but until recently, nothing had been said back home.

In a story published Nov. 25, 2015, under the headline "Emirates Secretly Sends Colombian Mercenaries to Yemen Fight," two New York Times reporters, Emily Hager and Mark Mazzetti, wrote that hundreds of Colombian soldiers, as well as troops from San Salvador, Panama, and Chile, had contracted to join the UAE army. Their investigation confirmed reports published months earlier in the newspaper *El Tiempo* and the magazines *Semana* and *Don Juan*.

The mercenaries were lured by salaries more than eight times larger than what they would receive as retirees in Colombia. "These big offers with good salaries and benefits are an incentive for our best soldiers," said Jaime Ruiz, a retired officer who heads the *Asociación de Jubilados de las Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia*, an organization of Colombian military retirees ([NotiSur, Oct. 7, 2005](#)).

Monthly pay can reach \$7,000

While the first soldiers emigrated at the beginning of 2010, Hager and Mazzetti reported that the arrivals of South American mercenaries in Abu Dhabi and the UAE increased in March 2015. The men were tempted by monthly payments of between US\$2,000 and US\$3,000, plus US\$1,000 a week when the soldiers are assigned the toughest jobs and operate directly in Yemen. The members of the Arab coalition have no soldiers of their own on the ground, as the coalition's intervention is limited to devastating aerial bombing. According to the Times, the main reason for contracting mercenaries is that the citizens of the seven emirates that make up the UAE have no interest in serving in the military. Other sources note that Emiratis don't see the Yemen war as their own, and that at least half the population of the UAE is made up of foreign labor. Above the US\$6,000–US\$7,000 per month that the mercenaries could receive if they enter Yemeni territory, they have other benefits: If they get out alive, they and their immediate families can receive immediate Emirati citizenship, a pension, and the same health benefits UAE natives receive. Their children are guaranteed education until they enroll in university, the sources say.

According to the Times article, the UAE military has taken control of a program that had been originally headed by a private US firm hired by Erik Prince, founder of Blackwater Worldwide,

a company that provides security services to the Pentagon, principally in Iraq and Afghanistan. Emirate officials said the most sought-after foreign soldiers are the Colombians because, after more than half a century fighting the guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), they are the best prepared.

The Times reported that after Blackwater stopped doing the recruiting, the job went to Global Enterprises, a Colombian firm run by Óscar García Batte, a former commander of special operations in Colombia's Army who commands the Colombian troops in the UAE and was deployed in Yemen. Other sources say this task is actually done by a Colombian company called ID Systems Ltd. The first journalist to mention ID Systems was Nathalia Hernández in Don Juan, a magazine published by the daily El Tiempo. Hernández was the first reporter to write about the presence of the mercenaries in Yemen. Her story, published Feb. 4, 2015, was particularly valuable because she lived with one of the mercenaries in Abu Dhabi for 12 months.

'Responsible for false positives'

Hernández wrote, "Blackwater contracted a Colombian firm named ID Systems Ltd. that itself contracted dozens of men and even got authorization from the Colombian Ministry of Defense to train them in the Escuela de Caballería de Bogotá (Bogota Cavalry School), with an agreement that they would not sign up men on active duty." The official line, Hernández added and no one refuted, "is that most of those who participated in the training were retired, but others say some were on active duty and were in trouble for human rights violations." She specifically wrote "responsible for false positives," which is the way Colombians describe military personnel who dressed up young men as guerrilla fighters and then killed them, making the deaths appear as combat fatalities, something the high command rewarded with money and military promotion. The government kept a tight silence after the publication of Hernández's article.

The Times said the UAE ambassador in the United States, Yousef Otaiba, declined to speak about these issues. The paper added that a spokesman for the US Central Command, which supervises US military involvement in Yemen, declined to comment as well. Hager and Mazzetti also used their story to report details about US participation in Yemen, which they said includes logistical support and aerial resupplying of the coalition planes conducting the air strikes. The Pentagon, they added, sent a team to Saudi Arabia to provide intelligence guidance to coalition forces, and the Obama administration approved the sale of billions of dollars in military equipment that is being used in Yemen. In November 2015, the US government authorized a Saudi order for US\$1.29 billion in thousands of bombs intended to replenish stocks depleted by the campaign in Yemen, the Times reported.

On Nov. 26, a day after the Times published its story, El Tiempo pointed out that it had been the first to expose the presence of Colombian mercenaries in the Middle East. It did so by republishing a month-old article in which El Tiempo's assistant editor, Jineth Bedoya Lima, had interviewed one of the men, a former Colombian Army captain who moved to the UAE to fight in Yemen.

"Despite the heat, it's not the same to fight with unlimited air support, a fixed shift--- the soldiers who go into Yemen each fight just three eight-hour days---the newest technology in arms and equipment, and the certainty that if you don't return, your family's future is guaranteed," thanks to a life insurance policy, the former captain told Bedoya Lima.

Later he justified his condition as a stateless soldier: “When we began to arrive in Abu Dhabi, our expectations were high. We knew we were sacrificing family in exchange for well-being, something we never had in Colombia when we put on an Army uniform. They have called us mercenaries, traitors, cowards, and opportunists, but we aren’t any of those things. We are men who make a decision in response to the lack of guarantees in order to do our job. Here we have all” those guarantees.

The last chapter of the heart-wrenching Yemeni story started in March 2015 when the Arab alliance began a bombing campaign to weaken the Houthi rebels, who are Shiite. The militia holds control of Sana, the Yemeni capital, after conducting a sustained advance driven by the inertia of the so-called Arab Spring, with political support from Iran, which is also Shiite. The foreign incursion rekindled the fighting, Bedoya Lima said.

The Houthis’ progress collided with the interests of Saudi Arabia, the main regional Sunni force, allied since the 1990s with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh (1990-2012). Saleh was forced to step down in the framework of the regional revolt exploited by the Shiites. The case of Yemen is unique in a geographical region plagued by poverty and inequality. In addition to being one of the poorest nations in the Middle East, it suffers historical fragmentation of its own, as approximately 53% of its people are Sunni and the remaining 47% are Shiite, the two major, irreconcilable branches of Islam.

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