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Resurgence of Paramilitary Violence in Colombia as Peace Deal Nears

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Just as the Colombian people, thanks to painstaking negotiations between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla army, are beginning to envision an end to the country’s half-century-long civil war, extreme-right paramilitary groups that have played a parallel role in the conflict are again engaging in major acts of violence.

In an apparent response to a successful anti-drug operation by state security forces, Los Urabeños—a paramilitary group that has been active in the northeast of the country since the 1990s and now goes by the name Clan Úsuga, in reference to its leader, Darío Úsuga—launched an offensive against police officers and their families. The campaign began in late March with a wave of killings and an “armed strike” (paro armado) between March 31 and April 1 that terrorized residents in 36 communities in the northeast, in eight of the country’s 32 departments.

The timing of the onslaught, right when the government and the FARC had planned to sign a definitive peace accord that would have entailed an immediate and bilateral ceasefire, could hardly have been a coincidence. The signing, set for March 23, ended up being delayed, not because of the actions of the Urabeños or a breakdown in the negotiations, but because the two sides still needed to agree on certain details regarding the demobilization of rebel fighters. It is clear, nevertheless, that opponents of the peace process are trying to make sure the talks, underway in Havana, Cuba since November 2012, collapse at the last minute (NotiSur, Jan. 9, 2015).

On Feb. 29, several weeks before the wave of killings and the armed strike, authorities arrested landowner Santiago Uribe, younger brother of former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). The Fiscalía General, Colombia’s national prosecutor’s office, says it has extensive evidence linking Santiago Uribe to Los 12 Apóstoles, a paramilitary group dedicated almost exclusively to drug trafficking. The Uribes have another brother, a cousin, a sister-in-law, and a niece accused of, or already jailed for, drug trafficking.

The former president and his Centro Democrático, outspoken critics of the peace process, organized a series of protest marches that took place April 2 in various cities. Over the course of the day, six police officers were murdered, allegedly by paramilitaries who were offered up to US$7,000 per victim. The government was quick to counter. On April 3, it announced the arrests of 59 members of the Urabeños.

The next day, from Havana, the FARC addressed the issue as well, and called on the government to make “a real commitment to ending paramilitarism, which isn’t some invention of the guerrillas, or a tactic to delay the peace process.” In a dispatch sent from the Cuban capital, the Associated Press news agency quoted rebel commander Pablo Catatumbo as saying, “We just saw how, with their armed strike, the paramilitaries slapped the Colombian people in the face in an attempt to interfere with the final peace accord.” On April 15, the rebels again demanded an end to paramilitarism, saying they are willing to lay down their arms, but only if their safety can be guaranteed.
“We want the Colombian people to know that we’re willing to give up our weapons, but not our lives,” the FARC said. “The authorities have an obligation to deal [with the paramilitary problem],” the group went on to say. “There is one government minister who never tires of repeating that paramilitarism is a fantasy, that it doesn’t exist. If that’s the case, who then is killing the human rights defenders, land rights activists, opposition leaders?”

A cautionary tale

The FARC also worries, the weekly news magazine Semana noted in an April 9 article, that the Urabeños and other gangs will take advantage of an eventual peace deal to seize rebel-controlled territory. “The government shares that concern,” the Bogotá-based publication reported. “It fears, too, that the [Clan] Úsuga, in search of political recognition, is killing leftist leaders, just as the AUC [Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, another paramilitary group] did. This is a situation that ‘enemies of the peace process’ can use in the regions to sabotage the peace accords to be signed this year.” In a similar vein, Timochenko, the FARC’s top commander, was quoted by the Spanish news agency EFE as saying, “The resurgence of paramilitarism is a real threat to unarmed [political] militancy and grassroots activism.”

The government, guerrillas and political leadership in general argued from the outset of the talks that a post-conflict scenario must include full safety assurances for rebels who go on to participate in mainstream politics. “Guaranteeing peace means guaranteeing security,” President Juan Manuel Santos said at one point. What the sides don’t want is a repeat of the situation in the 1980s, when the Unión Patriótica (UP) fell victim to a murderous terror campaign. The UP was a legally registered political party formed by demobilized members of the FARC, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)—a separate guerrilla force with which the government also plans to engage in peace negotiations starting in early May—and other minor organizations.

Their foray into regular politics was foiled starting in 1985, when the extreme-right began to systematically assassinate UP members. Presidential candidates Bernardo Jaramillo and Jaime Pardo Leal were killed (NotiSur, March 27, 1990), along with eight senators, 13 deputies, 73 city council members, 11 mayors, and at least 3,700 rank-and-file party members. Some say the horrifying body count was higher still, perhaps as high as 5,000. The systematic extermination effort was carried out, not just by extreme-right paramilitaries but also by state security forces—from the Army, secret service and police—and by drug trafficking gangs allied to the legal and illegal forces.

Operation Agamemnon

Four years ago, drug trafficker Daniel Barrera, before he was extradited to the US, described Úsuga, also known as “Otoniel,” as “a real animal, an extremely dangerous man, someone who kills just for the sake of it—children, doesn’t matter who.” Since then, public awareness of the Urabeños leader has continued to grow, and investigations into his handiwork suggest he’s just as ruthless as his old partner in crime described. From Urabá, a natural enclave where the departments of Antioquia, Córdoba and Chocó come together, the paramilitary group has expanded into 22 departments. The US government has reportedly offered a US$5 million reward for information leading to Úsuga’s capture. Authorities in Bogotá are also offering reward money—US$840,000, according to the Colombian daily El Tiempo.

In January 2015, the Colombian government launched a furious campaign against the Urabeños called “Operación Agamenón” (operation Agamemnon), an impressive name that refers—for
reasons that are unclear—to the Greek hero whose exploits are chronicled in Homer’s epic poems “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey.” A dozen Black Hawk helicopters, along with reconnaissance planes and 1,200 police and soldiers (drawn from the elite Jungla, Copes and Lobo units) were dispatched to northeastern Colombia to seize Úsuga and break up his gang. In its April 9 article, Semana reported that the force was made up of people from all over the country “so that they wouldn’t be bought off by the Urabeños.”

The more than year-long operation has made some headway. Dozens of Úsuga’s family members have been arrested, including his wife and brothers. In addition, police and soldiers have captured thousands of Urabeños, 70 tons of drugs, huge amounts of cash (US$15 million dollars plus another US$13.4 million worth of Colombian pesos), and some US$80 million worth of properties and vehicles, Semana reported.

Otoniel and his organization continue, nevertheless, to be active. “They say it has 8,000 or more members. The Urabeños, or Clan Úsuga, is actually much smaller than that. But what it’s done is create a kind of confederation of all sorts of criminals who operate under the Urabeños ‘brand,’” a prosecutor with a special organized crime unit told Semana. Unlike previous drug trafficking kingpins, like the infamous Pablo Escobar Gaviria, “Otoniel manages a network of local alliances that is expanding throughout the country,” the official added. “Groups like La Empresa, in the western region of Buenaventura; the Oficina de Envigado, in the northwestern department of Antioquia; La Cordillera, in the Eje Cafetero (also known as the Coffee Triangle); and the Bloque Meta, in the east, end up working one way or another for Otoniel and the Urabeños.”

The Urabeños have been compared to the Al-Qaeda network as a type of business franchise that has profited by lending out its name.

Semana reports that corruption has been and continues to be one of the biggest obstacles to achieving greater results in the fight against paramilitaries in general and the Urabeños in particular. In their capacity to corrupt, the extreme-right groups have no ethical, moral or economic limits. In the past year, according to the magazine, 150 public officials, including detectives, prosecutors and judges, have been arrested on suspicions of collaborating with paramilitaries and drug traffickers.

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