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Colombian Rebels Disarm, but Paramilitary Problems Persist

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With the handover to UN inspectors of the remaining weapons in their arsenal on June 27, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionaria de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas put an end-note on the longest and costliest internal war in Latin American history.

In the country's principal cities, the development was cause for celebration, while for the extreme right, it was further evidence that the government of President Juan Manuel Santos has "given itself over to Marxist terrorism." That sector also warned that, should it win next year's elections, it will dismantle, one-by-one, the agreements that paved the way for peace. The ominous appearance, in the meantime, of civilian commandos in territories abandoned by the disarmed rebels, and the killing of dozens of human rights defenders, demobilized guerrillas and their family members, shows that the extreme right is already employing the deadly machinery of its paramilitary organizations.

In a long-anticipated ceremony in the central department of Meta, which had been a jungle stronghold for the FARC, UN personnel sealed shut the last of several shipping containers filled with weapons. The arms will later be melted down and used to build monuments. "The abandonment of weapons is the symbol of the new country that we can and are already starting to become," Santos said. "A country in which there are opportunities for all Colombians, in the cities, in the towns, and in the rural hamlets that the state was unable to access during the armed conflict."

In an emotional speech, the president repeatedly thanked the guerrillas for surrendering their weapons despite the state's failure to follow through on all of the steps it had agreed to ([NotiSur, April 28, 2017](#)). "We've come up short, and we thank [the FARC] for the trust it has bestowed on us," he said. The top FARC commander, Rodrigo Londoño (aka Timochenko), responded by saying, "Farwell to arms"—a clear reference to the title of one of Ernest Hemingway's novels. He then urged the rebels to cease calling themselves guerrillas and instead go by the name "militants of hope."

Leaders on both sides share a concern for the future safety of FARC members, who are set to become an official political party on Sept. 1 in a ceremony in front of the government palace in Bogotá, the capital. Protecting those members will be key, both Santos and Timochenko acknowledged, given what happened in the 1980s, when demobilized guerrillas formed the Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union, UP) and were victims of a veritable genocide that ended their foray into formal politics ([NotiSur, April 10, 1990](#)).

"The extermination and disappearance of the UP never should have occurred," Santos said. And—just as he did in September 2016 when, in a speech to survivors, he described the period of violence as "political genocide"—the president acknowledged that the government hadn't taken "the necessary measures to prevent and impede the crimes despite clear evidence that the persecution was taking place."

Timochenko responded by pointing out that since Jan. 1, 2016, more than 150 civil society leaders and human rights defenders had been killed. "In recent days, at least six of our comrades [were killed] and the state still isn't doing anything," he added. "We warn you that we're not willing to accept a repeat of the UP genocide."

Targeted killings

The situation and the threat it poses to the post-conflict period is of major concern to all groups in the social and political spectrum except for the Centro Democrático (Democratic Center), the far-right party led by former president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). The presence of new paramilitary organizations, the murders of civil society leaders and guerrillas and their families, and the threats being made against villagers in rural western Colombia, along the Pacific coast, paint a grim picture of what the future could hold.

So far, the victims have been carefully selected. The weekly newsmagazine *Semana* reported that on June 21, a paramilitary unit entered the municipality of Buenos Aires, in the southwestern department of Cauca, and snatched Mauricio Vélez from his home. Vélez, the vice president of the union of the country's public universities, previously worked as a manager for América de Cali, a popular soccer team in the departmental capital. His body, with a gunshot wound in the head and showing signs of torture, turned up along a road a few kilometers from Buenos Aires, where about 1,000 guerrillas were preparing to hand over their weapons.

Since February, when members of the FARC began gathering and demobilizing in three designated spots in northern Cauca (Buenos Aires, Miranda, and Caldon), 13 civil society leaders have been gunned down in those areas and dozens others have been threatened. At least four of the six guerrillas Timochenko talked about were killed there as well.

The local office of the Defensoría del Pueblo, the Colombian ombudsman's office, warned about the violence early on, and social organizations, indigenous groups, and Afro-Colombian community council organizations confirmed the threat in follow-up reports. On July 4, the departmental legislature held an emergency session to address the situation and discuss possible measures. The paramilitaries responded immediately with new threats made against eight social activists. A press release from the progressive Marcha Patriótica (Patriotic March) movement pointed a finger at a terrorist group called the Frente de Guerra Sur Occidental contra los Comunistas (Southwestern War Front against the Communists). Another recently formed group operating in the area goes by the name Patria Grande-Ejército del Pueblo (Grand Fatherland Army of the People).

Semana and other news outlets agree that northern Cauca, considered a critical area in the counterinsurgency war, is already experiencing the "ills" that observers had feared might accompany the peace process. Complicating matters is that the area has two ethnic minorities (indigenous people and blacks) that together make up about 40% of the population.

"A number of reports point to what's happening in that region with unprecedented detail," a *Semana* columnist wrote. "Selective homicides, threats, and displacements combined with the arrival of new armed groups using terror to try to control places left by the FARC after the peace agreement was signed."

'We're here to stay'

The reports are coming from the same strategic corridor---Buenos Aires, Miranda, Caldon, and Corinto---that was at the heart of the area occupied by the guerrillas and saw some of the heaviest fighting during the half-century war against state forces. The corridor is also valuable for all kinds of illegal activity, from weapons, cocaine, and marijuana trafficking, to the makeshift detention centers common criminals use to house their kidnapping victims.

What's not clear is why, at such a critical moment, the government is ignoring the existence of paramilitary groups associated with drugs or weapons trafficking and illegal mining, and of the major landholders who use them as a kind of private army. The ministries in charge of security, Defense and Interior, instead prefer to talk about bacrim, short for *bandas criminales* (criminal gangs) ([NotiSur, March 10, 2017](#)).

But others say that the groups that in recent weeks have been pushing into hamlets abandoned by the state are indeed paramilitaries. Anthropologist Rafael Alonso Mayo says the groups either assemble local residents and let it be known that from then on, they, the paramilitaries, are the ones in charge, or they go in quietly and leave obvious and threatening messages on the most visible walls.

That is what happened July 3 in the area around Apartadó, in the northwestern department of Antioquia—a stronghold of former President Uribe—where members of the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (Gaitanista Self-Defense Groups of Colombia, AGC), a paramilitary group, tagged 24 walls with the words: “AGC, we're here to say.” They put an exclamation point on their graffiti with a pair of random murders.

The FARC, in the meantime, is finishing up a long internal debate regarding the political party it plans to form. The process began in April with public readings of a document called the “61 April Theses” and will continue with a convention that will end on the last week of August ([NotiSur, June 30, 2017](#)). From there, on Sept. 1, the FARC will present its new party---whose name is a strictly kept secret---on a stage that will be erected in front of the Casa de Nariño, the seat of the Colombian government. The next step will be voter outreach. “That's the time to win over the sentiments and support of millions of Colombians,” Timochenko said.

As a party, the FARC will participate in the 2018 elections. But, as part of the peace accord reached in Havana, Cuba ([NotiSur, July 15, 2016](#)), they will also be guaranteed 10 legislative seats, five in each house of Congress, which will be added to the current number of seats in Congress. For the next two legislative periods (from July 20, 2018, to July 19, 2026), the Senate will go from having 102 members to 107 and the Chamber of Deputies from 166 seats to 171. In 2026, the two houses will go back to their current composition.

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