

## **Rethinking the Colombian Conflict**

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By Jorge Restrepo and Michael Spagat

Colombia is both deeply intertwined with and poorly understood by the outside world. It wants and needs assistance in its struggle against the left-wing FARC and ELN guerrilla groups and the various illegal right-wing paramilitary organizations. Progress on this front will help the US, Europe and Colombia's neighbours. And yet, public and private actors abroad are often confused about the nature of the Colombian conflict.

First, analysts often designate the guerrillas as "narco-terrorists", seeking to delegitimize them and to mobilize powerful anti-drug and antiterrorism sentiment in the US. But the term also portrays the guerrillas as more interested in protecting their drug business than in seizing political power through force. This characterization is fundamentally misleading.

The guerrillas are indeed big players in the drug business. And their frequent bombings such as the FARC attack on the El Nogal social club in 2002, killing 32 and injuring 162, are terrorism plain and simple. Guerrilla bombings cause the vast majority of civilian injuries in the Colombian conflict. The use of 'gas canister bombs' into which guerrillas often pack shrapnel and even rotten bananas to infect the wounds of their victims well illustrates FARC viciousness. In one incident they even hit a church where people were sheltering from guerrilla-paramilitary clashes, killing 119 and wounding 90. The ELN's record is only somewhat less vile than the FARC's.

Yet guerrilla activity extends beyond narcotics and terrorism. Roughly a quarter of all guerrilla actions are infrastructure attacks, such as bombings of oil pipelines and electricity grids, and attacks on means of transport, often stranding people on isolated roads to watch their buses and trucks burn. Checkpoints and road blockages constitute another fifth of guerrilla actions. These activities generate little revenue. They also provoke reactions from the State and the illegal paramilitaries that complicate guerrilla efforts to profit from drugs. They are really only consistent with a goal of overthrowing the Colombian government.

Second, a common assumption is that guerrilla income derives overwhelmingly from drugs so that successful coca eradication will necessarily cripple their operations. But the guerrillas have diverse revenue sources including kidnapping, extortion, cattle rustling and land theft. We need to apply new creativity to squeeze them fully on all financial fronts. Developing a comprehensive and open land ownership database would be a great start. This would directly strengthen the battle against land theft and, by exposing who owns the land where illegal crops are grown, create a more precise alternative to aerial eradication.

Third, many policymakers have treated the illegal paramilitaries as an unfortunate sideshow rather than a central element in their strategic thinking. In recent years the paramilitaries have been big narco-traffickers while killing roughly five times as many civilians as have the guerrillas. Their vigilantism is largely a response to the government's failure to provide local security and so the guerrilla problem is, in this sense, the more fundamental of the two. Nevertheless, there is now a big paramilitary machine in place and Colombia and its partners must face up to it squarely.

A broad cross-party grouping from the Colombian legislature has just drafted a bill providing a legal framework for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of the paramilitaries. It caps prison sentences at ten years, requires restitution of stolen property and mandates cooperation in truth and reconciliation proceedings.

The bill also calls on the State to build institutional presence where the paramilitaries demobilize to prevent illegal armed groups from stepping into the void. This expensive proposition is absolutely vital. An institutional vacuum would be an open invitation to narco-traffickers, guerrillas and even new paramilitaries to thrive and expand.

The Colombian security forces are already overstretched across Colombia's mountainous and jungle-filled terrain. They simply cannot be everywhere all the time. More than 70% of paramilitaries' massacre victims live in one of Colombia's many municipalities with population densities of less than three people per square kilometre. Thus, the cost of extending proper security to all of Colombia's remote and vulnerable areas would be huge. The urban electorate would resist such expenditures. We therefore recommend the development of local security institutions through the use of local taxes, local personnel and national supervision to prevent abuses. In our view this completes the best possible package for paramilitary DDR.

International support has been decidedly tepid toward Colombia's negotiations with the paramilitaries. International organizations, governments and NGOs that seem to unhesitatingly support virtually any guerrilla DDR process do not want to touch the paramilitaries with a ten-foot pole. Ironically, this detachment is squandering an opportunity to reduce violence, improve justice, and contain gun and drug trafficking in one of the world's most violent countries. Colombia's neighbours, Europe and North America all have a great stake in the outcome. They must rise to the occasion.

*Jorge Restrepo and Michael Spagat are in the economics department of Royal Holloway, University of London. Restrepo has been an economic advisor to the Colombian government. <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/economics/research/conflict/> gives a collection of their writings on Colombia.*