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Colombia's Intelligence: Putting the Country at Risk?

Over the past decade, the Colombian state has misused a run-down intelligence system in a bid to control an ever-evasive security environment plagued by organized crime, drug trafficking and political corruption.

By Robert Shaw for ISN

Using the now-defunct intelligence agency, the Department of Administrative Security (DAS), the government targeted 'enemies of the state' in an audacious state-orchestrated plan to consolidate power.

Beyond pursuing the never-ending 'drug war' and targeting high-level FARC commanders, Colombian intelligence services dedicated much of their time and money to infighting and illegally tracking investigative journalists, opposition politicians and judges. These extra-curricular activities meant little time and energy was spent focusing on more pressing intelligence and security issues, such as the exponential growth of neo-paramilitary groups in Colombia and growing tensions on the Venezuelan and Ecuadorian borders.

Exposing Colombia's intelligence agency

In early 2009, during the mandate of President Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), a scandal splashed across the pages of *Semana*, a leading national weekly magazine, detailing how members of the DAS were illegally spying on prominent journalists, along with Supreme Court judges and opposition politicians.

[A New York Times report](#) highlighted the disarray and security gaps that plagued Colombia's intelligence service, warning that the "sprawling nature of DAS's operations may have allowed some of its agents to sell intelligence to the private armies that have plagued Colombia during its four-decade war, or otherwise be infiltrated by paramilitary and guerrilla operatives."

By the close of President Uribe's first term, the DAS had evolved into a disorganized and dangerous powerhouse of poorly coordinated non-strategic intelligence. With 6,500 personnel and an annual budget of over \$220 million, it was tasked with ensuring the security of state institutions and individuals, providing counter-intelligence services spanning both external and internal threats and managing immigration control.

Adam Isacson, Colombia expert at the Washington Office on Latin America, told the ISN that in "large

swathes of rural Colombia, particularly on the border zones with Venezuela and Ecuador, security remains weak as the civilian government's arrival in these ungoverned zones has been delayed indefinitely and a sort of martial law exists.”

“In countries like Colombia, the quality of intelligence has been a tragic joke and it was inevitable that sooner or later our former power-hungry intelligence agency, the DAS, would be disbanded,” Jorge Restrepo, head of the Colombian conflict analysis think-tank CERAC told the ISN.

From 2002 to 2011, the DAS was the subject of a growing array of controversies, ranging from its alleged infiltration by right-wing paramilitary groups and drug cartels to illegal wiretapping investigations. In mid-2009, the Attorney General’s office launched an inquiry that resulted in the arrests of several top intelligence officials (including former DAS Deputy Director José Miguel Narváez) and warranted the arrest of fourteen more DAS employees.

According to Carlos Lauria, the Americas coordinator for the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), illegal surveillance did not begin under the Uribe administration. In 1996, during the administration of President Ernesto Samper, there were already allegations that the intelligence service was spying on reporters. Daniel Coronell, a Colombian investigative reporter, told the CPJ that espionage was sporadic, however, compared to the systematic and persistent spying that occurred under his successor. The Uribe government, Coronell elaborated, deliberately sought to conflate critics with enemies. “This is clearly an abuse of power,” he said.

Hollman Morris, a Colombian investigative reporter known for his in-depth coverage of the country’s five-decade civil conflict, [said](#) he believed that spies had targeted his confidential sources to neutralize them and to discredit his reporting. The target of death threats himself in 2005, Morris was ostensibly under DAS protection. “It’s ironic: The same people tasked with protecting me were the ones who are supposedly spying,” he said. “It is like sleeping with the enemy.”

Out with the old and in with the new

So in the midst of rising security concerns and a [radical restructuring of top-brass officials within the armed forces](#) in November last year, Colombia announced the launch of a new intelligence agency, called the National Intelligence Directorate (DNI). This agency is supposed to conduct tactical operations that identify threats to national security without interfering in military and police intelligence work.

It is now six months since it became operational, however, and a great deal remains unknown about the new intelligence agency that replaced the DAS. In addition, serious doubts persist over the feasibility of cutting an agency from 6500 to 300 people, safely transferring hundreds if not thousands of highly sensitive documents and above all restoring faith in an intelligence system that is vital to tackling the diverse and complicated security risks facing Colombia.

For example, a [report](#) released in May this year by the Colombian NGO Nuevo Arco Iris notes there is a clear indication that the Colombian armed forces have neither gained control nor maintained a clear intelligence strategy to deal with the rising presence of the neo-paramilitary groups known as the ‘bandas criminales’ or ‘bacrim’, who now operate extortion rings and drug-trafficking operations in up to 28 of the country’s 32 provinces.

The [Presidential decree](#) that brought the new agency to life focuses on “strategic intelligence” and President Santos placed the former head of the Colombian Navy, Admiral Alvaro Echandía, at the helm.

“Everything has now changed,” Restrepo told the ISN. “Colombia has replaced its old conception of intelligence focused on criminal investigations and political threats with the new and modern concept of strategic intelligence.” But will this work?

Strategic intelligence versus political gain

In tandem with the establishment of this new intelligence strategy, STRATFOR detailed a series of new military operations launched by President Santos and his Minister of Defense, Juan Carlos Pinzón, which form part of [an aggressive new Colombian counterinsurgency strategy](#) dubbed ‘Operation Espada de Honor’ (‘Sword of Honor’). This strategy has been created in response to the increasing levels of violent activity perpetrated by guerrilla groups in the country. The strategy expands the list of targets for security forces and the locations where they will engage guerrillas, with the goal of crippling the FARC both militarily and financially.

The Operation also involves centralizing the intelligence gathered by Colombia’s armed forces. This is backed up in physical terms by the addition of 20,000 personnel to the national police force and 5,000 soldiers to the army’s national ranks.

Nevertheless, Nuevo Arco Iris criticizes the plan, arguing that it primarily targets the supposedly weakened FARC while neglecting to counter the threat posed by the ‘bandas criminales.’ These groups have roots in the United Defense Front (AUC) paramilitary organization, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the anti-land restitution armies.

The operation was introduced at a time when former President Uribe and his staff were hounding Santos for losing ground on security and allowing the FARC to rebuild. Once again, a certain discord hangs over the need to separate independent intelligence gathering from public and political pressure to show quick military results against the FARC.

While military gains against the FARC have resulted in President Santos receiving credit for the killings of the guerrilla organization’s highest leaders such as Mono Jojoy and Alfonso Cano, Colombia’s leader has found it increasingly difficult to consolidate the structural reform of his intelligence agency.

As the CPJ’s Carlos Lauria told the ISN, “the new intelligence agency’s main challenge will be building back trust in how and with whom it carries out its operations. The agency will need to break with the previous model where the political party in power used intelligence to not only extract information from opposition politicians and critical journalists but also to intimidate [supposed ‘enemies of the state’]”.

Moving forward on a sound new legal platform?

On 12 July, *Semana* reported that the Constitutional Court of Colombia nominally approved a [new intelligence and counter-intelligence law](#), which will regulate the Colombian state’s intelligence work. The law aims to put an end to previous irregularities and abuses by the DAS.

Rights groups in Colombia, such as the [Colombian Commission of Jurists](#), fear that the legislation to dismantle the DAS is merely a smokescreen intended to deflect responsibility from those who ordered and carried out illegal interceptions and other offenses linked to DAS over the last few years. They also believe that the law does not limit the new agency’s powers firmly enough and fails to provide adequate oversight.

Looking ahead, Andres Morales, Director of the Colombian Press Freedom Foundation, remarked to the ISN that “while there isn’t proof that shows that the new intelligence agency is illegally spying on

journalists, the agency has kept a low profile and little is known about what it's doing.”

“The DAS was a state entity that was supposed to guarantee the security of all law-abiding Colombian citizens but which ended up generating more insecurity for our people.

“...To prevent cases of future abuses by our intelligence services, it's quite simple, they should stick to what they were designed to do – prevent events happening that put the national security of the country at risk.”

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Dismantling Colombia's New Illegal Armed Groups](#)
[Moving Beyond Easy Wins: Colombia's Borders](#)
[Improving Security Policy in Colombia](#)

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