

COLOMBIA'S NEW ARMED GROUPS

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COLOMBIA'S NEW ARMED GROUPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The disbanding of the paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) between 2003 and 2006 is seen by the administration of President Alvaro Uribe as a vital step toward peace. While taking some 32,000 AUC members out of the conflict has certainly altered the landscape of violence, there is growing evidence that new armed groups are emerging that are more than the simple "criminal gangs" that the government describes. Some of them are increasingly acting as the next generation of paramilitaries, and they require a more urgent and more comprehensive response from the government.

Since early 2006, the Organization of American States (OAS) Peace Support Mission in Colombia (MAPP/OEA), human rights groups and civil society organisations have insistently warned about the rearming of demobilised paramilitary units, the continued existence of groups that did not disband because they did not participate in the government-AUC negotiations and the merging of former paramilitary elements with powerful criminal organisations, often deeply involved with drug trafficking. Worse, there is evidence that some of the new groups and criminal organisations have established business relations over drugs with elements of the insurgent Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN). At the same time, the government's plan for reintegrating demobilised paramilitaries has revealed itself to be deeply flawed.

These alerts have to be taken seriously since conditions now exist for the continuity or re-emergence either of old-style paramilitary groups or a federation of new groups and criminal organisations based on the drug trade. The military struggles with the FARC and the smaller ELN are ongoing, and drug trafficking continues unabated. Massive illegal funds from drug trafficking help fuel the decades-long conflict, undermine reintegration of former combatants into society and foment the formation and strengthening of new armed groups, as occurred with the AUC and the FARC more than a decade ago.

These new groups do not yet have the AUC's organisation, reach and power. Their numbers are disputed but even the lowest count, from the police and the OAS mission,

of some 3,000 is disturbing, and civil society groups estimate up to triple that figure. Some of these groups, such as the New Generation Organisation (Organización Nueva Generación, ONG) in Nariño have started to operate much like the old AUC bloc in the region, including counter-insurgency operations and efforts to control territory and population so as to dominate the drug trade. Others, such as the Black Eagles in Norte de Santander, are less visible and both compete and cooperate with established criminal networks on the Venezuelan border.

The government's response to the threat has been insufficient, limited to treating it as a law enforcement matter, mainly the responsibility of the police, who have instituted a special plan and a special "search unit" to deal with what they generically label "criminal gangs" (*bandas criminales*). This has not stopped the groups from spreading across the country. In some regions the security forces do not cooperate with each other and show low commitment to fight the new groups. Justice institutions, in particular the attorney general's office, often cannot carry out investigations because they lack resources and are not helped by the security forces but also because they are intimidated. The reintegration program for ex-combatants is being restructured to overcome serious shortcomings but time is working against it.

A new, comprehensive strategy is essential if the emerging groups and criminal organisations are to be defeated. It requires combining solid intelligence and more effective law enforcement with military measures, all with full respect for human rights and complemented by improvements in how demobilised fighters are reintegrated into society, including a major, national rural infrastructure and development program. This strategy needs to concentrate initially in the regions where paramilitary domination has ended but which are targets of both the new groups and the FARC. Sustaining security in those areas depends both on permanent, effective police and military presence as well as on providing tangible economic benefits and services for the local communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Colombia:

1. Adopt a comprehensive strategy to combat the emerging armed groups and criminal organisations, including:
 - (a) improved intelligence work and law enforcement measures, such as additional special "search units" (*bloques de búsqueda*) and expanded police presence in all affected regions, especially along the borders;
 - (b) immediate action to confront emerging groups once they are detected by the ombudsman's office or the OAS peace support mission (MAPP/OEA);
 - (c) stronger military action against the new armed groups when they operate in larger units that present visible targets;
 - (d) strengthened capabilities in the justice institutions, in particular providing the attorney general's office with more investigators, prosecutors and secure computer and telecommunication systems so as to investigate crimes committed by the new armed groups and criminal organisations; and
 - (e) increased outreach to community and civil society groups, especially women's groups, to gather information on their security concerns and priorities.
2. Reduce the risk demobilised combatants will resume criminal activities or be recruited by the new illegal armed groups by:
 - (a) concluding swiftly the restructuring of the program for their reintegration into society and improving the coordination of law enforcement agencies with the program; and
 - (b) implementing, with participation of women, indigenous, Afro-Colombian and other vulnerable groups and in areas previously dominated by the paramilitary, a rural governance and development strategy so as to reduce local poverty and provide strengthened law enforcement, economic infrastructure and community services.
3. Implement more effective measures to protect witnesses and victims who testify against paramilitary leaders under the Justice and Peace Law (JPL) and investigate all allegations of sexual and gender-based crimes by paramilitaries applying for JPL protection, since sentences for those

convicted of such crimes cannot be reduced under the JPL.

4. Implement, within the interior and justice ministry's plan to prevent irregularities in the October 2007 departmental and municipal elections, measures aimed at preventing interference by the new armed groups and other criminal organisations.

To the Police and the Armed Forces:

5. Cooperate closely with the justice institutions, in particular the offices of the attorney general and the ombudsman, in investigations related to crimes committed by members of new armed groups and criminal organisations.
6. Search intelligence archives and communications from military commands with respect to all 2,695 paramilitaries seeking reduced sentences under the JPL and give copies of all documents found to the attorney general and prosecutor general.
7. Investigate allegations of ties between security personnel and the new armed groups and criminal organisations and immediately sever any such ties, suspend the officers involved and provide the information to the attorney general and prosecutor general.
8. Increase the protection of civilians, including union organisers and women leaders, and avoid, in particular in operations against new armed groups and criminal organisations, forced displacement and the violation of ancestral territories of indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations.

To the Attorney General, Prosecutor General and Supreme Court:

9. Request from the Congress additional staff and logistical resources and from the executive branch more cooperation so as to facilitate investigation, prosecution and convictions under the JPL, and prosecute any demobilised paramilitary who did not come forward under the JPL and is found to have committed atrocities.
10. Coordinate with the National Penitentiary Institute (INPEC) to ensure that detained paramilitary leaders do not have uncontrolled access to cellphones and other communications that permit them to maintain control over their former troops or to establish contact with newly emerging groups.

To the OAS Peace Support Mission (MAPP/OEA):

11. Continue verifying reintegration of demobilised combatants and issuing timely alerts about the

rearming of demobilised paramilitary groups and the emergence of new armed groups.

To the European Union and the OAS:

12. Prepare observation missions, in cooperation with the Colombian authorities and civil society, for the departmental and municipal elections in October 2007.

To the U.S. Government:

13. Continue to make aid to Colombia's police and armed forces dependent on severing relations with paramilitary organisations, extend those conditions to cover new illegal armed groups and communicate, when preparing certifications, with the independent Colombian judicial authorities as well as the executive.
14. Adjust U.S. aid to a 50/50 balance between military/police assistance and economic, justice, rural development and humanitarian assistance for the displaced, including special attention to rural areas and the needs of women, indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups.

Bogotá/Brussels, 10 May 2007

COLOMBIA'S NEW ARMED GROUPS

I. INTRODUCTION

Since disbanding of the paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) started in late 2003, Colombia's armed conflict has undergone important changes. Closely associated with the demobilisation of almost 32,000 members of the AUC, among them nearly 2,000 women,¹ which the government of President Alvaro Uribe and others have hailed as a major step toward the pacification of the country, is the emergence of new armed groups using names such as Black Eagles and New Generation Organisation (Organización Nueva Generación, ONG). Operating in several regions, they are a great concern for the government as well as the Organization of American States (OAS) peace support mission (MAPP/OEA) and human rights and civil society organisations. While the government refers to them as "criminal gangs" (*bandas criminales*) and perceives them as a law enforcement issue, Colombian human rights groups and think-tanks and some international observers believe they are the continuation of the paramilitaries under a different guise.

There is no consensus on what the new groups actually are and to what degree they continue the AUC. All are in some type of criminal activity, whether drug trafficking or petrol smuggling, but organisation and modus operandi vary strongly from region to region. Some are headed by paramilitaries who did not demobilise, such as Vicente Castaño and Martín Llanos or are believed to receive orders from imprisoned AUC leaders, such as "Macaco"; others are commanded by former mid-ranking AUC leaders who took up arms again; still others are the armed wing of drug-trafficking organisations that have existed for years or even combinations of all these. Estimates of total members vary widely, from 3,000 to 9,000.

What is clear is that they are a serious challenge to the government's demobilisation and reintegration policy, a threat to Colombian society and an obstacle to peace. A potential danger is formation of a federation of the new

groups and criminal organisations, akin to the AUC, but perhaps even including some elements of the insurgent Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), which both occasionally fight with the new groups and have established drug business ties with them. Such a federation could become a major new armed actor in the Colombian conflict.

While President Uribe calls the fight against the new groups a priority, their spread has not been stopped. The security forces set up a "special search unit" (*bloque de búsqueda*) in Cúcuta (Norte de Santander), and there is a police plan to combat the groups. The recently launched "democratic security consolidation policy", successor of Uribe's first term "democratic security strategy", seeks to increase military and police presence in regions once dominated by the AUC. But the strategy still lacks a clear nexus to a major rural investment and governance package that could be implemented as soon as security permits. Moreover, Crisis Group observed in several regions that security force commitment to fighting the new groups is low, in part because the FARC is the priority but also because drug-related corruption is taking a toll. Judicial institutions are acting against the new groups and criminal organisations, as well as investigating links between paramilitaries and local political elites, but struggle with limited resources and, at times, fear among their officials, who are under enormous pressure.

An important part of available government energy and resources is focused on the vital transitional justice framework for the demobilisation and reintegration of illegal armed groups, the Justice and Peace Law (JPL). The government's strategy is being reworked to cope with past shortcomings but its impact could be limited owing to the frustration building up among the demobilised ex-fighters.

The evidence gathered by Crisis Group in several regions and the analysis in this report strongly suggest the threat represented by the new armed groups cannot be controlled by merely fighting them as "criminal gangs". An integrated strategy is required that can respond to their diverse nature and dynamic modus operandi and that links military action and law enforcement to an improved reintegration program. The challenge is to complete dismantlement of the AUC in the midst of ongoing conflict with the insurgents and unabated drug trafficking.

¹ This figure for women is equivalent to 6 per cent of all demobilised AUC members. The women have special reintegration needs on which assistance programs have not focused sufficiently. "Foro Desmovilización de las AUC. Altas y Bajas del Proceso", INDEPAZ, 2 August 2006. Also see Section IV C below.

II. MORE THAN CRIMINAL GANGS?

Congressional and public debate about the controversial transitional justice framework for demobilisation and reinsertion of illegal armed groups was centred on whether the Uribe administration's plan would not only disband the paramilitaries' military structure but also undo their pervasive influence in political and economic society and sever their links to organised crime. Critics warned that the 2005 JPL could not achieve this.² Recent investigations by the media and the attorney general's office into paramilitary infiltration of the secret police (Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, DAS) and the Constitutional Court's requirement that confessions under the JPL be complete, have introduced new concerns. It appears that the carefully constructed lid on official complicity with the paramilitaries could be torn off.

However, since late 2005 Colombia has also witnessed the emergence of new armed groups. The non-governmental organisation Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP) was among the first to warn about the emergence of a "third generation of paramilitaries".³ Articles about new groups with the name "Black Eagles" (Aguilas Negras) began to appear, mostly in the regional press.⁴ Subsequently an increasing number of testimonies and reports have been published in the media and by think-tanks, human rights organisations and international observers.

The sixth report of the OAS mission (MAPP/OEA) in March 2006 underscored the headway made in AUC demobilisation but also expressed concern over "(1) the regrouping of demobilized combatants into criminal gangs that control specific communities and illegal economic activities; (2) holdouts who have not demobilized; (3) the emergence of new armed players and/or the strengthening of those that already existed in areas abandoned by demobilized groups".⁵ In two subsequent reports, the MAPP/OEA identified a growing number of new or regrouped illegal armed actors in several regions.⁶

Some analysts, observers and policy-makers believe Colombia is witnessing the continuation or re-emergence of old-style paramilitary groups, owing to the flaws in AUC demobilisation and the JPL.⁷ Others, including the government, perceive the new groups simply as criminal gangs closely linked to the illegal drug industry or as an almost inevitable fact of post-conflict life.⁸ The 2006 report on Colombia of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) refers to them as "new illegal armed groups" and warns that they "represent an important challenge for the success of paramilitary demobilisation and reinsertion and for future peace processes".⁹ International law experts do not agree on whether the new groups, or some of them, ought to be considered as parties to the armed conflict.¹⁰

These diverging interpretations are not surprising given that little time has passed since AUC demobilisation and the first appearance of the new groups. Adding to the complexity, some of the groups have fused with existing criminal organisations. In these cases it appears that the old criminal organisations are the dominant element. The new groups exhibit different characteristics depending on the region in which they operate.

Answering the question about change and continuity is difficult not least because even prior to demobilisation the paramilitaries, AUC and "independent" groups alike, were not a single actor. A common denominator so far is that all the new groups have close links to drug trafficking and other criminal networks. This, however, would not make them very different from the old paramilitaries, as the following brief overview of the AUC's evolution shows. What appears to be different is that they have nothing approaching a unified command structure, and their control of regional politics and economy is far less pervasive. They have also largely refrained from any political or ideological cause, such as counter-insurgency. However, given the complex nature of a conflict whose political and criminal elements are inseparably interwoven,¹¹ this

² See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°16, *Colombia: Towards Peace and Justice?*, 14 March 2006.

³ "La tercera generación", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, *Siguiendo el conflicto*, no. 25, 12 August 2005.

⁴ "Persecución militar y paramilitar contra el campesinado del Catatumbo", Agencia Prensa Rural, 29 November 2005.

⁵ "Sixth Quarterly Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council on the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OEA)", 1 March 2006.

⁶ "Septimo Informe Trimestral del Secretario General al Consejo Permanente Sobre la Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia (MAPP/OEA)", OAS, 30 August 2006; "Octavo Informe Trimestral del Secretario General al Consejo Permanente

Sobre la Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia (MAPP/OEA)", OAS, 14 February 2007.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 12 April 2007.

⁸ Alfredo Rangel, "El Rearme Paramilitar", *Revista Cambio*, 19 February 2006.

⁹ "Informe de la Alta Comisionada de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en Colombia", UNHCHR, 5 March 2007.

¹⁰ "Plan Integral Contra las Bandas Criminales", Policía Nacional – Dirección de Carabineros y Seguridad Rural, internal document; "Mapa de Distribución de los Grupos Paramilitares en Territorio Colombiano", INDEPAZ, Bogotá, 12 March 2007; Evelin Calderon, "El Nuevo Escenario Paramilitar", Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, March 2007.

¹¹ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°11, *War and Drugs in Colombia*, 27 January 2005.

does not exclude “counter-insurgency” operations, including territorial and population control, when fighting over coca plantations and drug-trafficking routes.

A. THE AUC AS PREDECESSOR

The paramilitaries were never a homogenous organisation but rather a marriage of interests between powerful local warlords, drug barons, organised crime, members of local political and economic elites and counter-insurgent groups. Attempts to unify these diverse actors under a sole command with a political identity began in the early 1990s. In the following fifteen years, the paramilitary federation massively expanded its power across the country in all sectors of society.

In 1994, Carlos Castaño set up the Córdoba and Urabá Peasant Self-Defence Forces (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá, ACCU). In a bloody expansion during the next three years, he established control of the banana growing region of Urabá (north west of Antioquia). The Sinú Front of the ACCU, headed by Salvatore Mancuso,¹² continued the expansion into the neighbouring Upper Sinú Valley in Córdoba department.¹³

Castaño's influence within the paramilitaries grew with successes against the guerrillas and their supposed collaborators and gave him the opportunity to export the model to other regions. In April 1997, his meeting with delegations of paramilitary groups operating independently across the country gave birth to the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC).¹⁴ This new organisation claimed the same counter-insurgency motivation and political identity.¹⁵ At this stage, the AUC was an array of irregular armed groups totalling nearly 4,000 combatants, including military

units in rural areas, vigilante-type units for urban and semi-urban areas, hit men, death squads and intelligence and logistics elements. A second AUC summit in May 1998 decided to expand AUC territorial influence, while the number of combatants increased to 6,800.¹⁶

In 1998, Salvatore Mancuso led the first move along the Atlantic coast, reaching the Venezuelan border in the north eastern Catatumbo region (Norte de Santander department), displacing the ELN and the FARC from several coca-growing municipalities and moving into the provincial capital, Cucutá. In 1998 and 1999, the AUC penetrated the Middle Magdalena Valley and the south of Bolívar department, expelling the ELN from the oil-refining city of Barrancabermeja.¹⁷ AUC-sponsored protests of the Pastrana administration's 2001 plan to demilitarise a zone in the region for talks with the ELN made its control evident.¹⁸

While its strongholds were in northern and central Colombia, the AUC also sent fighters to the eastern plains and the south, often to coca cultivation areas.¹⁹ By 2000, it had about 8,000 well-equipped combatants,²⁰ and its involvement in drug trafficking was undeniable – multi-ton loads of cocaine were being seized from it.²¹ Alliances were struck with notorious traffickers like Diego Murillo (“Don Berna”).²² Drug barons even paid large sums

¹² Salvatore Mancuso is the son of a wealthy Italian immigrant family, owners of vast estates devoted to agribusiness and cattle-raising in Córdoba department. After being held for ransom by the EPL guerrillas, he established a security cooperative, then became a top ACCU commander. Mauricio Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas, 1982-2003* (Bogotá, 2003), p. 243.

¹³ The ACCU committed 1,456 assassinations in 1996 and 808 in 1997. “Los caminos de la alianza entre los paramilitares y los políticos”, Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, Bogotá, February 2007, p. 6.

¹⁴ From the ACCU: Carlos Castaño, César Marín, Santander Lozada and Jose Alfredo Berrio; from the Puerto Boyacá self-defence forces: César Salazar and “Botolón”; from the Middle-Magdalena self-defence forces: Ramón Isaza and “Lieutenant González”; from the Eastern Plains: Humberto Castro and Ulises Mendoza. Edgar Téllez and Jorge Lesmes, *Pacto en la sombra* (Bogotá, 2006), p. 62.

¹⁵ Gustavo Duncan, *Los Señores de la Guerra*, (Bogotá, 2006), pp. 294-295.

¹⁶ This summit was attended by the self-defence forces of other departments and regions: Santander, the south of Cesar, Casanare and Cundinamarca. *Pacto en la sombra*, op. cit., p. 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 66.

¹⁸ The Andrés Pastrana government (1998-2002) and the ELN held talks in Havana from December 2000 to January 2001, agreeing to demilitarise the Middle Magdalena region in order to begin peace talks. However, civil resistance hindered the government from doing so, and the talks broke up in early 2002. Francisco Leal, *La seguridad de la inseguridad. Colombia 1958-2005* (Bogotá, 2006), pp. 200-201.

¹⁹ In July 1997, the AUC sent heavily armed men to Mapiripán (Meta) where they massacred 49 peasants; in November 1997, the AUC massacred fifteen people in El Aro district (Ituango municipality, Antioquia), and in 1998, 22 in Puerto Alvira (Meta). On 15 September 2005 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled against the Colombian state for its responsibility in the Mapiripán case, finding that members of the armed forces collaborated or at least turned a blind eye. Declarations by former paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso under the JPL point to direct collaboration by air force and army personnel. Mancuso also said that deceased General Alonso Monsalva helped plan the paramilitary incursion in El Aro for which the Inter-American Court also ruled against Colombia, on 1 July 2006. *Pacto en la sombra*, op. cit., p. 63.

²⁰ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°5, *Colombia: Negotiating with the Paramilitaries*, 16 September 2003.

²¹ “Colombian police nab 2.5 tons of cocaine”, *El Tiempo*, 19 August 2000 and “Embajadora de E.U.: ‘Farc y paras operan como nuevos carteles’”, Reuters, 1 December 2000.

²² See Medellín case study below for more on “Don Berna”.

to buy AUC “franchises”, not just to help their illegal businesses but also to be part of the negotiations with the Uribe government that started in 2003.²³ In 2000, Castaño admitted that 70 percent of AUC income came from drugs.²⁴ By 2002, there were some 12,000 AUC combatants.²⁵

That drug traffickers had taken hold of the AUC and its internal tensions became apparent with Castaño's resignation in May 2001.²⁶ In September 2002, the U.S. sought his and Mancuso's extradition for smuggling seventeen tons of cocaine.²⁷ Cases of AUC cooperation with the guerrillas over drugs put the final nail in the coffin of the AUC's claim to being a basically counter-insurgency movement.²⁸

The AUC also tapped other sources of income. As early as 2000 it was clear that it was part of the cartel of groups that perforated the fuel pipelines to sell petrol on the black market. According to the police, the AUC was responsible for 90 per cent of the stolen petrol, worth \$106 million in 2002 and \$80 million in 2003.²⁹ Extortion from businesses and residents in areas under paramilitary

control was another big earner. For example, gold miners in Remedios and Segovia (Antioquia) had to pay over \$1 million a month to the Bolívar Central Bloc (BCB).³⁰ Multinationals, such as Chiquita Brands, which recently admitted to paying nearly \$1.7 million between 1997 and February 2004 in Uraba and Santa Marta, are under investigation for financing paramilitaries.³¹

The military power the AUC exercised added to the inability of the state to deliver public services in rural areas and allowed the paramilitaries to take de facto control of even legal local economies.³² Senior and mid-level AUC commanders forced the displacement of farmers, bought up land at derisory prices and formed large estates in what became known as the “agrarian counter-reform”. Four to six million hectares of arable land are believed to be in the hands of paramilitaries and drug lords.³³ Elmer Cárdenas bloc commander Fredy Rendón (“El Alemán”) took land from Afro-Colombians in the Atrato river basin (Chocó) and Urabá, for example, and invested heavily in agribusinesses.³⁴

Along with criminal economic expansion came penetration into political life. Carlos Castaño had a gift for public relations, presenting the AUC not as murderous vigilantes but as a legitimate actor in the conflict: a natural response to guerrilla excesses and abandonment by the state.³⁵ Paramilitary expansion accelerated during the peace talks

²³ In the last stage of its expansion before negotiations with the Uribe government, the AUC welcomed prominent drug traffickers, especially from the North of Valle cartel, such as the brothers Victor and Miguel Mejía (the “Mellizos”) in Arauca. Victor Mejía (“Pablo Arauca”) took command of the Vencedores de Arauca Bloc, under BCB command; Salvatore Mancuso “sold” the South of Bolívar Front, in the coca crop-infested Serranía de San Lucas, to drug lords of Putumayo department, who renamed it the Central Bolívar Bloc; Gabriel Galindo (“Gordolindo”), wanted for extradition to the U.S. since 1999, took command of the Pacific Bloc in Valle and North of Cauca; Guillermo Pérez Alzate (“Pablo Sevillano”) received the Libertadores del Sur Bloc in Nariño; Miguel Arroyave gained AUC “franchises” in Meta and Casanare. See “Dinámica reciente del conflicto en el Norte del Valle”, Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y DIH, Bogotá, 2006, pp. 26-27; *Pacto en la sombra*, op. cit., p. 97; *Paramilitares y autodefensas, 1982-2003*, op. cit., p. 243; Crisis Group Report, *War and Drugs in Colombia*, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

²⁴ “Las finanzas de los paras”, *Revista Cambio*, 16 May 2000.

²⁵ Another incorporation of a drug trafficker that received much media attention involved Hernán Giraldo in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Joseph Contreras, “The Next Escobar?”, *Newsweek*, 21 May 2001.

²⁶ “Renuncia es división de las Auc”, *El Espectador*, 1 June 2001.

²⁷ “E.U. acusa a Carlos Castaño y Salvatore Mancuso del envío de nueve embarques con 17 toneladas de cocaína”, *El Tiempo*, 28 September 2002.

²⁸ Steven Dudley, “Paramilitaries ally with rebels for drug trade”, *Miami Herald*, 25 November 2004.

²⁹ “Carta Petrolera”, ECOPEPETROL, ed. no. 108, April-May 2004. Reportedly, petrol stolen increased from 443 barrels per day in 1998, to 1,540 in 1999, 4,514 in 2000, 5,846 in 2001 and 7,270 in 2002, before gradually decreasing to 942 in 2006. See www.ecopetrol.com.co.

³⁰ “‘Paras’ cobran cada mes \$3.000 millones a 7.000 mineros ilegales en Remedios y Segovia (Antioquia)”, *El Tiempo*, 5 April 2004.

³¹ Human rights organisations have filed complaints alleging involvement of other multinationals such as Coca-Cola and Drummond in the financing of paramilitary groups. Chiquita Brands was recently fined for illegal activities in Colombia. “Banana ‘para-republic’”, *Semana*, 17 March 2007.

³² *Los Señores de la Guerra*, op. cit.

³³ Estimates vary from six million hectares according to the Procuraduría General de la Nación to four million according to the Contraloría; the non-governmental organisation CODHES estimates 4.8 million hectares. Before being assassinated in 2004, Metro Bloc commander “Rodrigo” affirmed in an interview that Miners Bloc commander Ramiro Vanoy (“Cuco”) held 250,000 hectares, Salvatore Mancuso 60,000 and Bolívar Central Bloc commander “Macaco” 30,000 in the Lower Cauca valley. *El Tiempo*, 16 September 2006.

³⁴ The fighting between paramilitaries and insurgents drove large populations, including indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, away from their ancestral lands. More than 10,000 hectares were then redistributed and resold to large projects, most notably African palm-tree plantations. The government has identified the problem and says it will rectify it but this has not yet been completed. “Reversazo de Incoder les quitó 10 mil hectáreas a negritudes”, *El Tiempo*, 23 October 2005; “Puro Tilín Tilín...”, *Semana*, 24 March 2007.

³⁵ “Colombia right-wing warlord said U.S. asked for help”, Reuters, 10 August 2000.

between the Pastrana administration and the FARC (1999-2002), as the AUC presented itself as the bulwark against an imminent insurgent takeover. During the paramilitaries' own negotiations with the Uribe government in Santa Fe de Ralito they showed their desire to create a movement capable of exerting political and social control in the post-demobilisation era. The recently revealed 2001 accord signed by AUC leaders and regional politicians and the appearance of Ernesto Baez, Salvatore Mancuso and Ramón Isaza before the Colombian Congress in 2004 reflected this goal.

Intimidation and control of local candidates allowed the AUC in certain regions to get a hold on public funds. The information retrieved from a laptop belonging to Northern Bloc (BN) mid-ranking commander "Don Antonio", seized by police on 11 March 2006, helped reveal how BN commander "Jorge 40" plundered the municipal budget of Soledad (Atlántico). Sources told Crisis Group that he had ties to Métodos y Sistemas, which received a twenty-year concession to collect taxes in Barranquilla district – a concession that reportedly produced \$17.7 million from 2002 to 2006.³⁶ Indications are that "Jorge 40" may have taken as much as half.³⁷

It was not just municipal budgets and contracts that were vulnerable to paramilitary plunder. The health system was also systematically robbed. There were reports of over \$100 million being taken from it in Atlántico department alone,³⁸ as well as of theft from half the 48 Subsidised Regime Administrators (Administradoras del Régimen Subsidiado, ARS).³⁹ AUC expansion into new regions and sectors, such as gambling and construction, continued even into the demobilisation talks with the Uribe government.⁴⁰

The "para-politics" scandal, which erupted in late 2006, is beginning to produce hard evidence of the extent of paramilitary penetration into politics.⁴¹ So far, this has been restricted largely to the Caribbean coast but it

likely will expand in coming months to departments like Antioquia. Some 50 politicians – local, regional and national – have been implicated, including fifteen members of Congress.⁴² The scandal has claimed the political life of Uribe's former foreign minister, María Consuelo Araújo, implicated the ex-head of the DAS, Jorge Noguera, who was arrested on request of the attorney general, and is swirling around the army chief, General Mario Montoya.⁴³

From the start of the government-AUC talks in 2003, the paramilitary bosses applied pressure to obtain lenient demobilisation terms.⁴⁴ Some groups left the table or never appeared at the demobilisation ceremony, like "Martín Llanos" in Casanare and mid-ranking commander René, who is still active in south western Antioquia. In May 2006 the Constitutional Court settled the controversy around the JPL,⁴⁵ giving the law some teeth and better balance between benefits for former combatants and the victims' rights to truth, justice and reparations.⁴⁶ However, the demobilised paramilitary leaders made several threats to withdraw from the peace process. In the face of mounting public criticism, on 14 August 2006 Uribe ordered that the AUC high command be placed in temporary seclusion in La Ceja (Antioquia). Some of the leaders, foremost Vicente Castaño, refused to turn themselves in, insisting that the goal posts had been shifted, and started new armed groups.⁴⁷

³⁶ Based on an average exchange rate of COP\$2,590 per U.S. dollar for the period 2002-2006.

³⁷ If this is true, "Jorge 40" may have had access to the financial data of all Barranquilla taxpayers. Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla, 15-16 February 2006.

³⁸ "Olla podrida en la salud", *Revista Cambio*, 5 September 2004.

³⁹ "Auc controlan 24 de 48 ARS del país", *El Colombiano*, 6 September 2004.

⁴⁰ "Paramilitares se infiltraron en las economías regionales", *El Tiempo*, 2 July 2005.

⁴¹ Para-politics is the term used for links between paramilitaries and politicians. The scandal escalated in early 2007 when the Supreme Court ordered the arrest of Senators Alvaro García and Jairo Merlano and Congressman Eric Morris for links to paramilitary groups. Further investigation has produced evidence on a wide range of politicians.

⁴² "Qué dejará el río revuelto de la 'parapolítica'?", *El Heraldo*, 1 April 2007.

⁴³ Paul Richter and Greg Miller, "Colombia army chief linked to outlaw militias", *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March 2007.

⁴⁴ The government submitted its first "alternative sentencing bill" to Congress in 2003. It was far more lenient than the JPL ultimately passed in June 2005. Crisis Group Report, *Negotiating with the Paramilitaries*, op. cit.

⁴⁵ From the start, this legal framework was controversial with victims groups and human rights organisations. See Crisis Group Report, *Towards Peace and Justice?*, op. cit.

⁴⁶ On 10 October 2005, 31 civil society organisations filed suit against the JPL, which had come into force on 25 July 2005. On 18 May 2006, the Constitutional Court ruled the process through which the law was passed constitutional but modified some of its provisions: Ex-combatants risk losing all JPL benefits if they do not confess all crimes, return all ill-gotten assets and pay reparations to victims, even with their legal assets, and they are liable for all crimes committed by their blocs. The ruling holds them liable for victim reparations beyond the first degree of kinship directly affected by their illegal group's action. It also reiterates the state's responsibility to ensure reparations if the ex-combatants' assets are insufficient, requires that victims have full access to information throughout the legal process and gives judicial authorities a longer period to investigate and verify a confession. "Sentencia No. C-370/2006", Corte Constitucional Bogotá, 18 May 2006.

⁴⁷ "Jorge 40" surrendered on 4 September 2006, after two weeks in hiding. Some paramilitary leaders with pending extradition

B. THE NEW ILLEGAL ARMED GROUPS

The paramilitaries built a power base in all sectors of society, legal and illegal. The new groups do not yet have this reach, are smaller and less visible, but also dynamic in a fast-changing environment. In their short history, it has not been uncommon for them to change denomination, fight with other emerging groups over a strategic territory and experience frequent leadership quarrels. They have nowhere near the presence of the AUC, which was in 711 municipalities before demobilisation. The government has identified 22 groups, not all coinciding with those highlighted by the OAS,⁴⁸ in 102 municipalities and sixteen of the 32 departments. The police put membership at just over 3,000.⁴⁹ Independent studies put the number higher, in one case 84 groups with 9,078 members,⁵⁰ in another 78 groups with between 3,500 and 4,500 members in 169 municipalities, 38 of which had no AUC history.⁵¹

The authorities have identified four regions where activity is most evident. The first includes Guajira, Northern and Southern Cesar, Magdalena, Southern Bolívar, and Norte de Santander on the Atlantic coast; the second is Antioquia, in Urabá and the south west; the third is the eastern lowlands, including Casanare, Vichada and Meta; the last is the south east, including Nariño, Putumayo, Caquetá, Chocó and Caldas. These regions are epicentres of criminal activity, each with specific dynamics in relation to the armed conflict.

Not all the groups post-date AUC demobilisation. Some are AUC units that never entered the peace process⁵² or left before or after demobilising.⁵³ In the plains of Meta, Vichada and Casanare departments, for instance, paramilitaries led by "Martín Llanos" and "Cuchillo", which did not participate in the process, have clashed with groups led by Vicente Castaño and Hernán Hernández

orders are still at large, such as the "Mellizos" brothers and Vicente Castaño. In a communiqué, Castaño set conditions for his surrender, including restoration of all guarantees in the JPL before the Constitutional Court ruling and guarantees regarding the terms of prison detention. *El Tiempo*, 23 September 2006.

⁴⁸ "Octavo Informe Trimestral del Secretario General al Consejo Permanente Sobre la Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia (MAPP/OEA)", OAS, 14 February 2007.

⁴⁹ "Plan Integral", op. cit.

⁵⁰ "Mapa de Distribución de los Grupos Paramilitares en Territorio Colombiano", INDEPAZ, Bogotá, 12 March 2007.

⁵¹ Evelin Calderon, "El Nuevo Escenario Paramilitar", Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, March 2007.

⁵² The Peasant Self-Defence Forces of Casanare, (Autodefensas Campesinas de Casanare), led by Martín Llanos, never entered the peace process and remain active.

⁵³ Individuals like Hernán Hernández (now in police custody) and Vicente Castaño demobilised but picked up arms again, insisting the government had not fulfilled its promises.

(now in police custody), who seek to regain control of the area.⁵⁴ Other groups, identified as working with drug cartels such as the Rastrojos have expanded in former AUC areas but have a longer history of their own.⁵⁵ Criminal gangs such as the Black Eagles are also coming more into the open in order to advance their interests by instilling fear among the population.

Nevertheless, certain features tend to identify groups. The Organización Nueva Generación (ONG) in Nariño seems to have inherited a more military structure from its forerunner, the AUC's Libertadores del Sur Bloc (BLS); the Cacique Arhuaco Bloc in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta is also controlling territory in a military manner. The group led by "Codazzi" in Magdalena and some men of the Contrainsurgencia Wayúu⁵⁶ led by "Pablo" in Guajira seem to have avoided demobilisation and retained the unit structure they had under the AUC's Northern Bloc (BN). The less cohesive groups have no clear chain of command, such as the Black Eagles in Norte de Santander. Struggles between factions, once a feature of the AUC's Catatumbo Bloc in Norte de Santander, are common.⁵⁷ Less cohesive structures are used by urban groups for illegal economic networks and hit squads in Cúcuta, Medellín and Barranquilla.

⁵⁴ It is believed Llanos seeks to reclaim control over the traffic of chemical precursors controlled in the late 1990s by Martín Arroyave, deceased leader of the Centauros Bloc, which operated in Meta department. Under pressure from Vicente Castaño and his new armed group, he may have actively sought an alliance with "Cuchillo", former second-in-command of the Centauros Bloc, who was allegedly involved in the murder of Arroyave in an attempt to take over part of the region's drug-trafficking business. Clashes between Castaño's group and "Cuchillo" have escalated since September 2006, when "Cuchillo" allegedly ordered the murder of two women said to be close to Hernán Hernández in Guamal (Meta). As retaliation, hit men killed a woman allegedly close to "Cuchillo" in Villavicencio (Meta) in December 2006. "Guerra entre bandas de paisas y llaneros genera incremento del sicariato en Villavicencio", *El Tiempo*, 16 January 2007; Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 5 February and 13 March 2007.

⁵⁵ Two armed groups linked to the Norte del Valle cartel fall under this heading: the "Rastrojos" and the "Machos", which have also used paramilitary names, Norte del Valle Peasant Self-Defence Groups (Autodefensas Unidas Campesinas del Norte del Valle, AUCNV) and Popular Peasant Groups (Rondas Populares Campesinas) respectively.

⁵⁶ The Wayúu are an indigenous people living mostly in the north eastern department of Guajira in Colombia and Zulia state in Venezuela. The 2005 Colombian census estimates close to 500,000 inhabitants identify themselves as Wayúu. Close to 45 per cent of the population in Guajira is estimated to have Wayúu origins.

⁵⁷ It has also become evident that ONG seems stricter regarding the use of military-style uniforms, while the Black Eagles seem to operate mostly in civilian clothing. In Magdalena some new groups are also reported to use uniforms.

All the new groups are involved in some way with illegal activities such as drug trafficking and smuggling so seek tight grips on seaports and poorly controlled border crossings, especially to Ecuador and Venezuela. Their relationship to organised crime, however, varies from region to region. ONG is relatively autonomous, able both to forge drug alliances and fight rivals in its region. The Black Eagles in Norte de Santander, on the other hand, seem to be a part of an intricate criminal network, in which they sometimes engage in internecine struggles over smuggling. In Guajira, "Pablo's" new group controls traditional smuggling routes. Others, such as the Cacique Arhuaco front in Magdalena, have rebuilt part of the old criminal structure of the AUC's Tayrona Resistance Bloc. The Rastrojos are simply the armed wing of a faction of the Norte del Valle drug cartel (NDVC) led by Wilber Varela ("Jabón").

ONG has a more defined territorial dominance in municipalities such as Policarpa and Cumbitara in Nariño, where it controls and defends coca crops against the FARC and ELN. The Black Eagles in Norte de Santander have been sighted along strategic corridors, including Cúcuta, Puerto Santander, Banco de Arena, Villa de Rosario, Tibú and Ocaña, but there is no record of it fighting with insurgent groups or reaching into the high plains coca-growing region of Catatumbo. Ad hoc drug-export alliances with the insurgents have been seen in the past and should not be discounted. Ex-combatants are being pressured to rearm by new groups in Norte de Santander and the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta on the Atlantic coast.

In most cases, control over civilians is veiled, though where there is open confrontation with other armed groups, especially the insurgents, the new groups and criminal gangs use intimidation just as the AUC once did. Their influence on politics is not yet clear. The mayor of Algarrobo (Magdalena) was arrested in the company of Black Eagles from Magdalena.⁵⁸ However, it is uncertain whether the new groups will try to control candidates in the October 2007 elections for mayor and governor.⁵⁹ The assassination

of Yolanda Izquierdo, a victims' representative in Córdoba, demonstrates the vulnerability of victims to the new groups. While the military and police are fighting the new groups, civilians are still reluctant to cooperate because of a perception that military-paramilitary links still exist.

⁵⁸ "Alcaldesa del Magdalena y otras ocho personas capturadas en reunión de paramilitares", Caracol Radio, 20 December 2006.

⁵⁹ The interior and justice ministry has launched an initiative against election irregularities ("Pacto por la Transparencia ¡A Voto Limpio!"). Parties that participate in it agree to (1) reject and denounce pressure from criminal groups; (2) prevent persons under judicial investigation from running on their platform; (3) refrain from supporting candidates suspected of belonging to or being sponsored by criminal groups; (4) maintain proper financial accounting; (5) maintain up-to-date information on their websites; (6) take no money beyond what is allowed by law; (7) have candidates swear before a notary that they have no criminal record; and (8) be prosecuted if they violate these commitments. The initiative also foresees establishment of Coordination and Follow-up Commissions for the Electoral Process in each department. The elections are to be monitored by a rapid reaction

unit with participation from the armed forces, police, the registrars' office, the defence and interior and justice ministries, the attorney general's office, the ombudsman and the public prosecutor.

III. CASE STUDIES

A. NORTE DE SANTANDER

1. AUC history in the region

The AUC came to Norte de Santander in 1999 for not just the more than 15,000 hectares of coca in the Catatumbo region⁶⁰ but also to control Cúcuta and crossing points for smuggling like Puerto Santander along the Venezuelan frontier.⁶¹ In August 1999, some 200 paramilitaries from Córdoba and Urabá killed 35 people in Tibú municipality at the start of a campaign to replace insurgent domination of the region.⁶² However the guerrillas, principally the FARC, rallied sending in fresh troops after using Venezuelan territory as a staging ground.⁶³ By the end of 2001, the AUC and FARC had a tacit agreement on a division of territory.⁶⁴ This truce was broken in the lead-up to the Catatumbo Bloc (BC) demobilisation in December 2004, when in June the FARC massacred 34 coca leaf harvesters (*raspachines*) working for the paramilitaries. That heralded a successful campaign to retake and hold the area of La Gabarra.⁶⁵

The BC presence in Norte de Santander was divided into two principal areas, mostly in the lowlands. Rural units were in Tibú and La Gabarra to control territory and its drug crops and protect laboratories and routes into Venezuela. These were linked by road to Puerto Santander (a paramilitary centre and training camp), and from there to Cúcuta.⁶⁶ In and around Cúcuta there was an alliance with sophisticated native criminal networks that enjoyed backing from local politicians. The paramilitaries lent muscle to these networks and were able to shut out smaller operators, establishing a monopoly on smuggling drugs

⁶⁰ Figures from the Dirección Nacional de Estupefacientes estimated 15,039 hectares of coca crops in the Catatumbo region in 1999. "Una mirada al Catatumbo", Gobernación de Norte de Santander, 27 August 2004. The UN drug office has a similar estimate for coca cultivation in Norte de Santander in 1999. "Colombia, Coca Cultivation Survey", UNODC, June 2006.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 5 February 2007.

⁶² ELN presence there dates to the mid-1970s; the FARC arrived toward the end of the 1980s. See "Dinámica reciente de la confrontación armada en el Catatumbo", Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario, August 2006.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, 21 February 2007.

⁶⁴ "La Desmovilización de Bloque Catatumbo", Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, November 2004.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 20-21 February 2007.

⁶⁶ Between 2001 and 2003, paramilitaries also penetrated the midland and highland areas, such as Convecnón, Teorema, Hacará and San Calixto, zones to which insurgents had transferred their operations.

and other contraband.⁶⁷ Several small-time criminals were killed seeking to smuggle goods without paying the paramilitaries. The urban networks used taxi drivers, storekeepers and, above all, private security guards to control certain neighbourhoods, in particular the poorer ones (*comunas*), and to collect intelligence.⁶⁸

In the lead-up to demobilisation, differences appeared within the BC, allegedly between a faction totally dedicated to drug trafficking and another which kept a counter-insurgency veneer.⁶⁹ One leader, Carlos Enrique Rojas Mora ("El Gato"), was killed in October 2004. However, there also appeared to be competing interests within the Northern Bloc (BN) for control of Norte de Santander. Though Salvatore Mancuso was in charge, frequently arriving by helicopter in Cúcuta, where he was treated as royalty, evidence suggests that before demobilisation "Jorge 40" made his presence felt in Ocaña, which sits astride a route to the Caribbean coast. Analysts have suggested that he was also after drugs from the Catatumbo region, which he wanted to move along his established coastal routes. He put his operations under his lieutenant, "Omega", who had links to powerful drug traffickers.⁷⁰

The first AUC demobilisation of more than 1,000 fighters was the BC's in Tibú, Norte de Santander department, on 10 December 2004, when 1,437 members of the Mobile Catatumbo Bloc and La Gabarra Front of the BN surrendered their weapons under the leadership of Mancuso.

2. Presence of new illegal armed groups and criminal organisations

The security forces list only various Black Eagles groups as new in Norte de Santander. They have been noted in Cúcuta, Puerto Santander, Banco de Arena, Villa de Rosario, Tibú and Ocaña. The government puts their numbers at under 200, principally AUC cells that did not demobilise and kept weapons and a skeleton structure.⁷¹ This is almost certainly an underestimation, not just of the Black Eagles, but of other groups operating in and around Cúcuta.⁷² Human rights groups in the region put the

⁶⁷ The urban paramilitaries engaged in extortion ("protection") rackets, dealing in stolen cars from Venezuela and money laundering, as well as drug trafficking. Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 5 February 2007, Cúcuta, 19 February.

⁶⁸ "Infiltración de Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (Auc) en empresas ilegales de vigilancia de Cúcuta", *El Tiempo*, 17 October 2004.

⁶⁹ "La Desmovilización del Bloque Catatumbo", Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, November 2004.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 5 February 2007.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, 21 February 2007.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 21-22 February 2007.

membership of new armed groups closer to 800.⁷³ The Black Eagles appear to be dedicated solely to guarding the drug business – centres for buying cocaine base, laboratories and routes. While the name Black Eagles is being used by many new groups across the country, in Norte de Santander there is evidence that a number of groups with that name have been working together.

Crisis Group research identified three leaders of these Black Eagles, all ex-AUC. Two have since been killed and one detained. Máximo Cuesta Velandia (“Sinaí”) was a BC commander who did not demobilise and set up his operation in the former AUC stronghold of Puerto Santander. He reportedly dedicated himself to trafficking and even bought drugs from the FARC. Adrián de Jesús Mesa (“Camilo”) also from BC, took over in Cúcuta from small and mid-size criminal gangs and sought to reestablish control over smuggling, including petrol from Venezuela.⁷⁴ Jhon Palma from Northern Bloc (BN) concentrated in Ocaña, starting in March 2005. He was interested in securing cocaine base from Catatumbo and moving it up to the Caribbean coast. All three apparently had contacts with “Omega”.⁷⁵

The web was swiftly unravelled by one or several other groups, beginning in November 2006, when “Omega” was assassinated in Medellín and Jhon Palma was killed in Ocaña. In December 2006, another Black Eagles commander, “Camilo” was murdered in Ureña, a Venezuelan frontier town, and the army captured “Sinaí”. Perhaps also connected to the purge was the killing of a well-known underworld figure in Cúcuta, José Orlando Velásquez (“Surca”), in February 2007.⁷⁶ Demobilised BC members say they have been caught up in the feuds, either by association with a faction or attempts to reactivate them.⁷⁷

It is not clear exactly who was behind all this, or whether the killings were connected, although this seems likely. Security forces and judicial sources told Crisis Group that former members of the Bolívar Central Bloc (BCB), from

the south of Bolívar department and Caucasia in the north of Antioquia, were linked to the killings, with responsibility reaching up to former BCB commander Carlos Mario Jimenez (“Macaco”), currently in Itagiú prison with other demobilised AUC commanders.⁷⁸ The attorney general’s office is investigating “Macaco” for links with Black Eagles in Norte de Santander.⁷⁹ There are also reports that Vicente Castaño has been recruiting up to 200 men there so as to retake former BC fiefdoms between El Tarra and La Gabarra, where the FARC has returned.⁸⁰

Crisis Group research revealed that the old paramilitary protection quotas are still being charged in Cúcuta, but now by the new groups.⁸¹ At least two in Cúcuta are involved in extortion, smuggling and the drug trade: the “Boyacos” and the “Pepes”, which have become the drug-trafficking elite following the BC demobilisation.⁸² There are reports of a “hit men’s office” (*oficina de cobro* in Colombian criminal jargon)⁸³ in Cúcuta municipality, run out of Juan Frío.⁸⁴ Sources in Cúcuta said the new groups there also run a debt collection agency, charging 30 per cent. The three groups are believed to have links with the Black Eagles and be behind some of the larger money-laundering operations in Cúcuta, which include nightclubs and shopping malls.⁸⁵

⁷³ Elizabeth Yarce, “Los secretos del nido de las Águilas Negras”, *El Colombiano*, 14 January 2007.

⁷⁴ Sources have also said that the former commander of the BC’s La Gabarra Bloc, Armando Pérez Betancourt “Camilo”, would be working along the Venezuelan border to reestablish an armed group in collaboration with Vicente Castaño. “Águilas Negras coordinan delitos cometidos desde Venezuela, denuncian en la frontera”, *El Tiempo*, 13 April 2007; Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 20-21 February 2007.

⁷⁵ Carlos Eduardo Huertas, “El nido de Las Águilas”, *Semana*, 10 February 2007; Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, 21 February 2007.

⁷⁶ “El nido de Las Águilas”, op. cit.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Yarce, “Los secretos del nido de las Águilas Negras”, *El Colombiano*, 14 January 2007.

⁷⁸ “El nido de Las Águilas”, op. cit.; Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 21 February 2007, Bogotá, 5 and 13 February.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 13 March 2007.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, 21 February 2007.

⁸¹ Interviews revealed an elaborate scale of charges levied on residents in many neighbourhoods. Depending on a house’s size, the equivalent of between 50 cents and \$1.50 is levied every week. Commercial properties pay much more, depending on earnings. Collection is often by the private security companies the AUC set up. Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 19 and 21 February 2007.

⁸² Sources say the Boyacos and Pepes could have links to the Norte del Valle Cartel. The Boyacos may have retained business connections in La Gabarra, even after the FARC retook it. Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, 21 February 2007; Alejandro Reyes, Francisco Thoumi and Liliana Duica, “El Narcotráfico en las Relaciones Fronterizas de Colombia”, Centro de Estudios y Observatorio de Drogas y Delito, Universidad del Rosario, May 2006.

⁸³ These are institutions initially set up in Medellín and Envigado to mediate disputes between drug traffickers, for example after a drug consignment was lost and blame had to be allocated. They developed into assassination services, running protection rackets and collection services. Crisis Group interviews, Envigado, 14 February 2007.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 19 February 2007, Juan Frío, 22 February.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 20-21 February 2007.

3. Conflict dynamics

Norte de Santander is the major route for drugs passing into Venezuela, from where they either go across the Caribbean to the U.S. by small plane, fast boats or commercial flights, or to the more lucrative market of Europe, where prices are higher and extradition risks much lower.⁸⁶ The U.S. State Department reported 159 flights in 2006 out of Venezuela and Colombia to the Caribbean, including 46 to Haiti and 79 to the Dominican Republic, with some 55 metric tons transiting those two countries alone.⁸⁷ With pressure on traffickers increasing in Colombia, some organisations are establishing bases in Venezuela, allegedly helped by corrupt elements in that country's security forces, particularly the National Guard, including the so-called "Sun Cartel", referring to the gold stars that National Guard generals wear.⁸⁸

Drugs are not the only contraband moving across the Venezuelan border. The government of President Hugo Chávez has established price controls on basic foodstuffs, petrol is heavily subsidised and control of foreign currency is strict.⁸⁹ This presents opportunities for criminals in Norte de Santander to flourish. The trade in petrol from Venezuela is believed to be in the hands of new groups working with elements of the Venezuelan National Guard. AUC formerly monitored this trade and required a cut from smugglers. The system is intact, with new groups and criminal organisations in charge bribing police and customs.⁹⁰

Cúcuta's many currency exchanges offer Venezuelan bolívares almost two thirds below the official rate.⁹¹ This, combined with the need to launder drug money, has led to an explosion in smuggling goods from Venezuela that

are sold cheaply in Colombia, in a contraband industry known as the "San Andresitos".⁹²

While the FARC broke the territorial deal with the AUC and are reestablishing control over much of the coca production, there have not been reports of clashes with the Black Eagles. Indeed, sources spoke of new groups, among them the Black Eagles, buying cocaine base from the guerrillas, particularly from "Megateo",⁹³ who was once a member of a dissident faction of the People's Liberation Army (EPL), which demobilised in the early 1990s and now works with the FARC.

A study by a Colombian non-governmental organisation links many politicians to the former paramilitaries. AUC penetration of the department's political structure went deep, as in Atlantic coast departments where the NB operated.⁹⁴ The mayor of Cúcuta was investigated but no charges were brought.⁹⁵ Human rights groups and community leaders fear privately security guard cooperatives in the slums could be used to pressure residents to vote for specific candidates in the 2007 regional elections.⁹⁶ Local institutions and security forces also appear to continue to be penetrated.

Crisis Group traced several cases, one where a demobilised paramilitary who complained of an armed group's pressure to join was killed 30 minutes after leaving the attorney general's office in Cúcuta. Another source alleged that members of the security forces killed demobilised fighters working as informants so they could claim reward money.⁹⁷ These suggestions of corruption and infiltration clearly reduce already slight public faith in the department's institutions and not only make people reluctant to present complaints and cooperate with the security forces but also make victims afraid to present cases to the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (NCCR) or testify against perpetrators.

⁸⁶ Law enforcement agencies from several countries told Crisis Group at least 200 tons of cocaine are believed to pass through Norte de Santander annually and Colombian traffickers increasingly look to Europe. Crisis Group interviews, Caracas, 23 October 2006 and 2 February 2007, Bogotá, 16 March.

⁸⁷ "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2007", U.S. State Department, at www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/vol1/html/80857.htm.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, 21 February 2007; "Rasguño reveló qué está dispuesto a contarle a la justicia y qué guarda en su computador personal", *El Tiempo*, 22 March 2007.

⁸⁹ See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°19, *Venezuela: Hugo Chávez's Revolution*, 22 February 2007.

⁹⁰ Fleets of old American cars, prized for their huge fuel tanks, pass constantly across the border, filling up in Venezuela and emptying their tanks into plastic drums in Colombia, which are then sold along the road. A parallel trade, with bicycles carrying jerricans of petrol across the dry riverbed border, is also obvious. Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 4 February 2007, at crossing points into Venezuela, 22 February.

⁹¹ The official rate is just under 2,200 to the U.S. dollar. In Cúcuta exchange rates were over 3,700 to the dollar.

⁹² These markets are called "San Andresitos" after the Caribbean island of San Andres, which was declared a duty-free port in the 1950s and became a staging post for contraband entering Colombia.

⁹³ "Megateo", whose name is believed to be Ramón Navarro, was finance chief of the EPL's "Libardo Mora Toro Front". See "El DAS iba por alias 'Megateo'", *Vanguardia Liberal*, 25 April 2006.

⁹⁴ "Los caminos de la alianza entre los paramilitares y los políticos", Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, February 2007; "Norte de Santander, uno de los departamentos de mayor control 'para'", *La Opinión*, 20 February 2007.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 19 February 2007; "Con esos amigos...", *Revista Cambio*, 23 May 2004.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 20 February 2007.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 19 February 2007.

4. Conclusion

Norte de Santander, with its strategic position along the Venezuelan frontier, lack of infrastructure and abundance of drug crops, is a natural home to criminal elements. The guerrillas came in the 1970s and the AUC in the late 1990s. The AUC's illegal activities – drugs, extortion, money laundering and smuggling – continue, with the new groups, linked to other criminal organisations, picking up where the AUC left off. There have been the inevitable underworld feuds for control of these illegal businesses, but Norte de Santander's distinction is the level of organisation and collaboration between the armed and criminal groups. The allegations that AUC heads direct operations from Itagüí prison and seek to gain regional control suggest a major threat and the possible return of AUC-like political and social penetration.

B. NARIÑO

1. AUC history in the region

In 2000, the AUC's Bolívar Central Bloc (BCB) founded the Southern Liberators' Bloc (BLS) in the Pacific seaport of Tumaco. By 2001 it had expanded inland to Llorente,⁹⁸ and there was evidence of activity in the provincial capital, Pasto.⁹⁹ There were clashes with FARC's 29th Front and Mobile Column Daniel Aldana (still in the region today), as the paramilitaries moved behind the government's May 2001 "Tsunami" offensive against the FARC in Barbacoas.¹⁰⁰ BLS counter-insurgency peaked in 2003¹⁰¹ but declined after it gained control of key areas, principally along the coast and the Mira, Patía, Tapaje and Telembí rivers. The AUC had a presence in the small towns along the Pasto-Tumaco highway, and for three years its main base was at Junín,¹⁰² almost exactly where the security forces now have a checkpoint.

BLS was led by Guillermo Pérez Alzate ("Pablo Sevillano"), a notorious drug trafficker who got his start allegedly with the Norte del Valle Cartel (NDVC). He is said to have been one of those who bought an AUC "franchise" and rights to operate in Nariño during the negotiations with the Uribe administration.¹⁰³

On 30 July 2005, 689 BLS members demobilised in the mountain municipality of Taminango, north east of Nariño. Its three fronts¹⁰⁴ handed over 596 weapons. The demobilisation heralded the dismantling of the powerful BCB led by Carlos Mario Jimenez ("Macaco"). Local sources say the BLS did not fully demobilise and the paramilitary networks remain intact, though in reduced numbers and with a much lower profile.¹⁰⁵ One source said as many as half the BLS's members are still active, among them many commanders.¹⁰⁶ Residents of Llorente and Tumaco told Crisis Group the mid-ranking paramilitary commander "El Paisa", who ran the town of Llorente under the BLS, is still in control.¹⁰⁷

2. Presence of new illegal armed groups and criminal organisations

The Carabinero Police have traced five groups in Nariño: Organización Nueva Generación (ONG), Rastrojos, Traquetos, Machos and Black Hand (which appears also to call itself Black Eagles).¹⁰⁸ The first two are the main players. While official estimates put the number of members of new armed groups and criminal organisations in Nariño at some 300, other informed sources put it at over 2,000.¹⁰⁹

BLS was concentrated in the lowland areas along the Pacific coast, in which the Rastrojos and parts of ONG now operate, and the mountain municipalities from Samaniego to Policarpa, where ONG is most active.¹¹⁰ Reports on ONG started to appear in early 2006, and it is considered an example of paramilitary continuity. Witnesses reported that in early 2007 members were

Control's Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker Kingpins list, with an extradition warrant pending. Juan Carlos Garzón, "Desmovilización del Bloque Libertadores del Sur del Bloque Central Bolívar", Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, August 2005.

¹⁰⁴ "Heroes of Tumaco and Llorente Front" (Frente Héroes de Tumaco y Llorente); "Antonio Nariño Peasant Brigades Front" (Frente Brigadas Campesinas Antonio Nariño); "Lorenzo de Aldana Front" (Frente Lorenzo de Aldana).

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Barbacoas, 27 February 2007, Tumaco, 1 March.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Pasto, 27 February 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Llorente, 28 February 2007, Tumaco, 29 February.

¹⁰⁸ According to sources the "Machos" of Diego Montoya, a boss of a faction of the Norte del Valle drug cartel, also appeared recently in Nariño but were expelled by the Rastrojos, of the same cartel, who formed an alliance with ONG. Crisis Group interviews, Pasto, Cali, Tumaco, February and March 2007; "Plan Integral", op. cit.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Pasto, 1 March 2007.

¹¹⁰ Juan Carlos Garzón, "Desmovilización del Bloque Libertadores del Sur del Bloque Central Bolívar", Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, August 2005.

⁹⁸ Germán Jiménez, "Llorente, nuevo campo de batalla", *El Espectador*, 1 April 2001.

⁹⁹ "Golpe a las AUC", *Revista Cambio*, 1 April 2001.

¹⁰⁰ "Ejército recuperó Barbacoas", *El Tiempo*, 25 May 2001.

¹⁰¹ "Los Derechos Humanos en Nariño", Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario, 2004.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Ricaurte, 27 February 2007.

¹⁰³ He was linked to the February 2002 seizure of eleven tons of cocaine and is on the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets

sighted in several mountain municipalities of Nariño wearing uniforms and armbands.¹¹¹

The Rastrojos are the armed wing of an NDVC faction led by Wilber Varela (“Jabón”),¹¹² for whom the U.S. has an extradition warrant and offers a \$5 million reward. NDVC is the successor of the Cali Cartel, and many of its leaders began under the Cali drug-trafficking organisation of the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers, Gilberto and Miguel, who are now in a U.S. prison. The NDVC fragmented after the death of its leader, Orlando Henao, in 1998, with Varela and another clan leader, Diego Montoya (“Don Diego”), who created a private army (the “Machos”), fighting an all-out turf war. During the Santa Fe de Ralito negotiations, the NDVC tried to integrate the Rastrojos and the Machos into the AUC to portray them as paramilitary rather than criminal but the government rejected the move after harsh criticism.¹¹³

NDVC, unlike the Medellín and Cali cartels, is not monolithic but rather a federation of associated traffickers, some of whom deal with the paramilitaries, some with the guerrillas and others, like Varela, who keep lines to both. Varela is believed to be working presently with ELN insurgents in Cauca¹¹⁴ and has a long association with the BCB’s “Macaco”.¹¹⁵ It is no coincidence that the Rastrojos operate in Nariño, which once had a strong BCB presence. Indeed, Crisis Group was told that “Macaco” sold his Nariño “franchise” to Varela, and they were working together there.¹¹⁶ The Colombian marines captured twenty Rastrojos members in September 2006 along with a complete organigram of the group in Tumaco, which revealed a structure of 120 men, operating in the old BLS areas.¹¹⁷

3. Conflict dynamics

Nariño is an epicentre of the armed conflict and the associated humanitarian crisis, with one of the highest numbers of forced displacements in Colombia. Responsibility for violence is less clear-cut than when the territorial division between the FARC, ELN and AUC usually allowed it to be accurately determined. Now selective and anonymous killings have become more common, and the armed groups have generally assumed a lower profile. Authorities are often at a loss to determine author or motive, except to say that most violence is associated with the drug trade.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, some of the armed groups with close links to the demobilised BLS, in particular ONG, are apparently establishing structures and a modus operandi, including large counter-insurgency operations, similar to those of their AUC predecessors.

Since the start of the year, the FARC and the ELN, which total some 3,000 according to local sources,¹¹⁹ have been fighting in the rural areas of Samaniego and Gauchavés, with the FARC dominant;¹²⁰ the insurgents have been struggling with ONG, the Rastrojos and the Black Eagles, the latter hitherto unknown in the region. The FARC and government forces have also been in conflict, in areas close to the Pacific coast and the mountain municipalities of Policarpa and Cumbitara, and there have been reports of the Rastrojos and other new groups fighting each other and of deaths from the settling of accounts between drug networks linked to all the above. There are no reports of the Rastrojos fighting ONG; indeed there are rumours of their alliance.¹²¹ This does not rule out that the FARC and the new groups occasionally cooperate on drugs. Paramilitary and guerilla cooperation is nothing new in Nariño. Indeed, in 2005 there were reports that the BLS had struck a business agreement with the FARC’s 29th Front to export drugs.¹²²

The Rastrojos moved into Nariño after the BLS demobilisation in mid-2005. Seizing the opportunity, the Rastrojos expanded from their base in Valle de Cauca into the neighbouring department of Cauca and through

¹¹¹ See next section below.

¹¹² The Rastrojos were born in 2003 out of the break-up of the Cali Cartel and the surge of strongmen Wilber Varela and Diego Montoya. The new private armies were forged through alliances between local Traquetos and local armed units. They fought for control of cocaine production labs and commercial routes. “Dinamica Reciente de la Violencia en el Norte del Valle”, Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de la Vicepresidencia de la Republica, July 2006.

¹¹³ “Se Destapa el Comisionado”, *Semana*, 14 November 2005.

¹¹⁴ “Farc contra ELN”, *Semana*, 2 February 2007.

¹¹⁵ “Macaco” is said to have worked for the NDVC before joining the AUC. Gustavo Duncan, *Los señores de la guerra*, (Bogotá, 2006), p. 320. Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 13 and 16 March 2007.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Tumaco, 1 March 2007, Bogotá, 15 March.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Tumaco, 2 March 2007.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto 26 February 2007, Tumaco 28-29 February.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto and Cali, February-March 2007.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto, 26 February 2007.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Cali, 1 March 2007.

¹²² In Colombia’s largest ever drug seizure, in May 2005, fifteen tons of cocaine found on boats on the Mira River in Tumaco, drugs were marked with symbols of both the FARC and paramilitaries. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 16 March 2007; John Otis, “Colombian enemies team up in drug trade”, *Houston Chronicle*, 29 May 2005; “La Costa Pacífica, especialmente Nariño, se convirtió en la “Tranquilandia” de Farc y paramilitares”, *El Tiempo*, 29 May 2005.

Nariño to the Ecuador border. With this, the Rastrojos have established their influence along the Pacific seaboard of the three departments and gained access to the drug crops that proliferate there, not just coca for cocaine, but also poppy for heroin. Varela appears to have his own military wing, based on and working with former AUC fighters and units.

In May 2006, a large rural march protested against aerial spraying of drug crops in the municipality of Policarpa. It was reportedly both orchestrated and forced by the FARC so as to disrupt the presidential election and to use rural residents as a human shield against the new groups.¹²³ Several unidentified persons, either civilians or FARC combatants, were killed, reportedly by ONG, during heavy fighting. In the aftermath, a number of community leaders were assassinated, again supposedly by ONG. This suggests that in parts of Nariño the war for territorial control and drug crops continues much as it did prior to the BLS demobilisation. In late March and early April 2007, well over 1,000 families were forced to leave their homes in El Charco and La Tola owing to heavy fighting between marines and the FARC.¹²⁴ Reportedly, there have also been clashes over coca and poppy crops¹²⁵ and trafficking routes between ONG and Black Eagles in Policarpa and Cumbitara.¹²⁶

While government forces have dealt several blows to the new groups and criminal organisations in Nariño, Crisis Group interviews suggested that in some areas the illegal groups had the support or complicity of members of the security forces. There were repeated reports of security force checkpoints along the Pasto-Tumaco highway accepting payments from drug traffickers to allow the passage of narcotics or precursor chemicals. Despite the massive security presence in municipalities along the highway, corpses were reportedly being left in Llorente because the attorney general's office felt the area was too dangerous to enter, and the army would not help.¹²⁷ It was also clear coordination and collaboration between the various elements of the security forces, as well as

between the military and civilian institutions, particularly the attorney general's office, were inadequate.¹²⁸

The security forces appear to have been unable to win civilian confidence in much of Nariño. The indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities particularly have complained bitterly of offensives and aerial spraying of coca crops, insisting that the military has abused them and stolen food and livestock. They say large plantations of industrial crops, such as African palm, are being forced on them in their ancestral lands and do not deny that guerrillas operate in their territory.¹²⁹ The close-knit indigenous communities are also under pressure from drug traffickers, who offer to buy their land for high prices, causing much internal friction, for example among the Awa and Camawari.¹³⁰

In many Nariño communities there is a fear of denouncing abuses. Some insist the attorney general's office is penetrated by new groups, with whom the security forces are allied. The ombudsman's office (Defensoria) has a little more credibility, but the local prosecutor general's office (Procuraduría) also is seen by some as infiltrated. The performance of the people's defender's office (Personería), particularly in Tumaco, was criticised. Many internally displaced persons (IDPs) are not registering with Acción Social, the government agency charged with assisting them, either because of fear or the perception that there is no point as they will receive no benefits. Faith in government, despite the increased presence of security forces, thus does not appear to have improved much, and the feeling among civilians is that impunity is widespread, further undermining the state's credibility.¹³¹

There was not the same level of paramilitary political penetration of local, regional and national government in Nariño as in areas like the Caribbean coast. Indeed, Nariño is a stronghold of the opposition Polo Democrático Alternativo party (PDA), although the October elections will need to be watched carefully. Local communities, observers and even the security forces in Nariño indicated that there is evidence the new groups are seeking to influence those elections.¹³²

¹²³ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto, 28 February and 1 March 2007.

¹²⁴ "Acción Urgente en Nariño", comunicué, Grupo de Trabajo de la Frontera Colombo-Ecuatoriana, 30 March 2007.

¹²⁵ Nariño was the second department in terms of coca cultivation in 2005, accounting for 16 per cent of total cultivation (13,875 hectares). It was also second in terms of poppy cultivation, accounting for 24 per cent (475 hectares). See "Colombia, Coca Cultivation Survey", UNODC, June 2006.

¹²⁶ Testimony of participants of the Grupo de Trabajo de la Frontera Colombo-Ecuatoriana, Bogotá, 11 March 2007.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto, 1 March 2007, Tumaco, 2 March.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Pasto, 1 March 2007.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto and Ricaurte, and Tumaco, 27 February and 2 March 2007.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto and Ricaurte, 27 February 2007.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto, 27 February 2007, Tumaco, 28 February-1 March.

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, Tumaco, 28 February-1 March 2007.

4. Conclusion

The continuities of the paramilitary forces and the drug trade drive the conflict in Nariño to an important degree. While the drug trade has led to the expansion of criminal organisations and the emergence of new groups in the department, the war fought by the illegal armed groups, new and old, exhibits many familiar features, including ONG's counter-insurgency operations. Nariño is of the utmost strategic importance for guerrillas to maintain their mobility. Unlike other parts of the country, the leaders of the drug trade and organised crime do not live there but rely on lieutenants. Outside of Pasto and Tumaco, there are few large urban centres, so money laundering is on a small scale.

C. ATLANTIC COAST

1. AUC history in the region

Northern Bloc (BN) commanders Salvatore Mancuso and Rodrigo Tovar ("Jorge 40") led the AUC's expansion along the Atlantic coast. The BN was an umbrella for a large network of local paramilitary groups that operated independently until their co-option, subordination or submission between 1998 and 2002.¹³³ In 1998 and 1999, the BN advanced across the region, defeating the ELN in the coca-growing area of southern Bolívar department and the Montes de María region, and taking control of the Lower-Magdalena River basin and Barranquilla, capital of Atlántico department. In July 2002, Hernán Giraldo's ("El Patrón" or "El Viejo") independent irregular force that ran drug trafficking on the northern slopes of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta yielded to the BN.¹³⁴ In February 2002, BN entered the rural area of Uribia municipality in the Upper-Guajira region (Guajira department) to take over strategic illegal trade corridors hitherto the preserve of the Wayúu ethnic group. The offensive took advantage of inter-clan rivalries and eventually created the Wayúu Counterinsurgency Front under BN command.¹³⁵

¹³³ Salvatore Mancuso handed over his BN command when he demobilised in late 2004 with the Catatumbo Bloc. "Jorge 40", a native of Cesar, joined the ACCU and began to operate in the south of Bolívar in 1997. In 1998, he went to Cesar to organise the paramilitary structures under the new AUC. In time, the AUC expanded from the Sinú and San Jorge river basins in Córdoba and Sucre departments to the west and the Venezuelan border to the east.

¹³⁴ The AUC clashed with Giraldo's Mamey Self-Defence Forces after three U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency agents were killed by his men in November 2001. Under BN control, Giraldo renamed his force the Tayrona Resistance Bloc. Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla, 16 February 2007, Santa Marta, 11 March.

¹³⁵ The Guajira corridors are used to smuggle consumer goods,

On 4 December 2004, the Southern Magdalena and San Fernando Island Self-Defence Forces, led by José Barrera¹³⁶ and operating in Magdalena and Cesar departments, became the first BN group to demobilise: 47 men handed over 41 weapons. In four demobilisations between mid-January and mid-July 2005, another 2,100 BN fighters in Córdoba, Sucre and Bolívar departments laid down 442 weapons. The bulk of the remaining groups of the BN and Bolívar Central Bloc (BCB) in southern Bolívar, Atlántico, Magdalena, Guajira and Cesar departments demobilised between 31 January and 10 March 2006. About 8,700 combatants were demobilised and 3,286 weapons were handed over.¹³⁷

2. Presence of new illegal armed groups and criminal organisations

Questions remain about the commitment of the BN's top commander, "Jorge 40" to the dismantlement of the BN. The seizure of a laptop held by Edgar Fierro ("Don Antonio"), his military right hand in Atlántico department, revealed continued political and military activity while negotiations with the Uribe government

Venezuelan gasoline, weapons and drugs. On 10 July 2002, the AUC assassinated Maicao's reportedly biggest drug kingpin, Mario Cotes, then Luis Angel Gonzalez ("Lucho Angel"), on 7 March 2003. In Portete Bay on 18 April 2004, four people were killed, twelve disappeared and more than 500 were displaced, many to Venezuela. On 13 July 2005, Dilian Epinayú, a Wayúu woman and key witness of the Portete bay massacre, was assassinated. Crisis Group interview, Riohacha, 13 March 2007. The Wayúu Counterinsurgency Front was created by "Jorge 40" and the Ipuana family members José María Barros and José María Gómez ("Chemabalas"). The police arrested Barros and "Chemabalas" in October 2004, leaving "Pablo" as the region's strongman. "Dinámica Reciente de la Confrontación Armada en la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta", Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos, February 2006, pp. 22-23.

¹³⁶ Though Barrera was an active paramilitary boss for more than fifteen years, he was freed from La Ceja detention centre on 4 October 2006 for lack of charges.

¹³⁷ On 18 January 2005, 925 men of Salvatore Mancuso's Sinú-San Jorge Bloc; on 2 February 2005, "Ramón Mojana" and 110 men of the Mojana Front; on 15 June 2005, 465 combatants of the Tolová Heroes Bloc led by Diego Murillo ("Don Berna"); on 14 July 2005, 594 men of the Montes de María Heroes Bloc; on 31 January 2006, 2,523 combatants of the South Bolívar Front of BCB; on 3 February 2006, 1,166 combatants of Hernán Giraldo's Tayrona Resistance Bloc; on 4 March 2006, 251 combatants of Julio Francisco Prada's ("Juancho Prada") Julio Peinado Becerra Front of the AUC. The Northern Bloc (BN) demobilised in two stages: on 8 March 2006, 880 members of the strike forces and 1,335 members of social support fronts; two days later, 1,220 strike-force combatants and 1,325 social support members. See www.altocomisionadoparalopez.gov.co.

were underway.¹³⁸ Though sources allege involvement of “Jorge 40” with emerging new groups,¹³⁹ it appears that his key operatives who did not demobilise prefer to retain control of Atlantic coast urban centres like Barranquilla. The presence of hit men (*sicariato*) squads indicates the need to use force to retain control of all sorts of illegal activities.¹⁴⁰ Sources pointed out that, suspiciously, “Don Antonio” and Carlos Mario García (“El Médico” or “Gonzalo”), the political liaison of “Jorge 40” in Barranquilla, demobilised with the Chimila Bloc that did not operate in Atlántico department.¹⁴¹

Following the arrest of “Don Antonio”, Miguel Villarreal (“Salomón”) and Wilmer Guerrero (“Nacho Guerrero” or “Luisito”) became the new bosses of Barranquilla’s underworld.¹⁴² It appears that, following loss of the laptop, the order was given to eliminate all with knowledge of BN political links.¹⁴³ However, police sources maintain that it is far from clear whether “Salomón” and “Nacho Guerrero” follow “Jorge 40” or act on their own. Both were believed to be hiding in Venezuela.¹⁴⁴ “Salomón” was arrested in the north eastern city of Bucaramanga on 20 April 2007.

¹³⁸ The laptop seized on 11 March 2006 contained a list of 558 assassinations of left-wing activists and union leaders committed between 2003 and 2005 in Atlántico department. This information was reinforced by an investigation conducted by the attorney general’s office into the activities of “Jorge 40”, which suggested he was building parallel power structures even while officially demobilising. “Así opera el imperio criminal del paramilitar Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, alias ‘Jorge 40’”, *Semana*, 7 October 2006. Various sources told Crisis Group that a number of conspicuous combatants and mid-level commanders of the BN structures were not present during the demobilisation ceremonies, while peasants were dressed up in military fatigues after being promised the monthly stipend for demobilised combatants. Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla, 15-16 February 2007, Santa Marta, 12 March.

¹³⁹ A source said “Jorge 40” might have kept a strategic reserve of approximately 150 heavily armed men in the southernmost tip of Magdalena (Banco and Plato municipalities) and Cesar departments. Another source said his men were fighting other new groups for the drug-trafficking routes in Cesar and Guajira. Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 13 February and 7 March 2007.

¹⁴⁰ According to various sources, the criminal bands in Barranquilla and Atlántico departments have about 200 to 375 members. “‘Jorge 40’ recargado”, *Semana*, 19 November 2006. See www.indepaz.org.co.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Barranquilla, 16 February 2007.

¹⁴² Press sources indicate that Wilmer Guerrero also heads the criminal structures in Sucre department. *El Tiempo*, 13 November 2006. Both men are former police officers who joined “Jorge 40” after being implicated in the 2002 return of two tons of seized cocaine to drug traffickers and did not demobilise. Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla, 15-16 February 2007.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla, 16 February 2007.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Barranquilla, 16 February 2007.

The quick rise of new armed groups just a few months after the last BN bloc demobilised appears linked to mid-level commanders and combatants who did not demobilise or rearmed shortly afterwards. With the basic structures of demobilised BN fronts still intact, the new groups they have formed are trying to retain territorial control of strategic regions in which they formerly operated and where they have strong links with criminal activities, especially drug trafficking and weapons smuggling.¹⁴⁵ A case in point is “Codazzi”, a non-demobilised, mid-level commander¹⁴⁶ who is believed to be maintaining drug corridors in Chibolo, Tenerife and Pivijay (Magdalena department) with some 50 men.¹⁴⁷ In Guajira department, about 40 men of the Wayúu Counterinsurgency Front led by “Pablo” did not demobilise and continue to control smuggling and drugs in the Upper-Guajira, the Riohacha-Maicao-Uribia triangle.¹⁴⁸

The Atlantic coast has not escaped the rise of the Black Eagle groups, which claim responsibility for actions in Atlántico, Cesar, Magdalena and Guajira. In late 2006, the Black Eagles sent written threats to Atlántico University union leaders in Barranquilla (Atlántico). In Magdalena, they operate in Santa Marta, Zona Bananera and Fundación municipalities with a base in the Palmor rural district of Ciénaga, sending pamphlets signed by former BN mid-level commanders Adán Rojas Mendoza (“Negro Rojas”) and “101” to businessmen and farmers;¹⁴⁹ in Maicao (Guajira), former BN mid-level commander Jairo Samper (“Lucho”) armed a new group that associated with the Black Eagles.

The ongoing rearming on the northern slopes of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta (Magdalena and Guajira) is being done behind Hernán Giraldo’s back and involves elements foreign to the region;¹⁵⁰ Giraldo, in Itagüí prison, appears to have been toppled by some former commanders.¹⁵¹ Two demobilised mid-level commanders of the Tayrona Resistance Bloc, since arrested, Norberto Quiroga (“5-

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 5 February 2007.

¹⁴⁶ “Codazzi” led the Chivilo group, which was in Ciénaga Grande, El Difícil, Nueva Granada, Plato and Pueblo Viejo and operated under the BN’s Jhon Jairo López front. “Dinámica Reciente de la Confrontación Armada en la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta”, Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos, February 2006, p. 21.

¹⁴⁷ Though a paraplegic, “El Cóndor” or “Halcón 1”, now “El Acostado”, a renowned paramilitary chief of El Banco (south of Magdalena), allegedly runs a new group south of Magdalena and Cesar, with ex-BCB people.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Riohacha, 13-14 March 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Santa Marta, 12 March 2007.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Santa Marta and Itagüí, 12 and 30 March 2007.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, Barranquilla and Santa Marta, 13 and 16 February and 11-13 March 2007.

5” or “Beto Quiroga”) and Edgar Córdoba Trujillo (“5-7”), armed a new group, the “Cacique Arhuaco Front”, with 50-60 men.¹⁵² Though a source who visited their base in the Sierra Nevada told Crisis Group they justified this by claiming the government did not play fair with the new JPL framework,¹⁵³ judicial sources believe that “Felipe”, a former close “Jorge 40” collaborator may be behind the new front.¹⁵⁴

The demobilised men of Hernán Giraldo’s Tayrona Resistance Bloc denounced pressures on them to rearm in late 2006. Many were forcefully displaced to Santa Marta and a series of assassinations in Santa Marta seemed to confirm their claims.¹⁵⁵ In response, some are believed to have rearmed under Commander “Chaparro”, though the name of their new group is unknown.

3. Conflict dynamics

The Black Eagles on the Atlantic coast appear to be operating as criminal urban groups, at least as dangerous as their AUC predecessors. According to human rights defenders, there is evidence of communication among them, including a meeting between the Barranquilla-based “Salomon” and the Black Eagles of Magdalena.¹⁵⁶ Alleged Santa Marta Black Eagles commander “Negro Rojas” is believed to be an associate of Commanders “5-5” and “5-7”.¹⁵⁷ However, security forces in the region believe the Black Eagles are armed groups that operate independently, while using the name generically to instil fear among citizens.¹⁵⁸ The security forces do appear to be tracking down the Black Eagles in Magdalena and

Guajira, as the captures of “101”, “Negro Rojas” and “Lucho” demonstrate.¹⁵⁹

On the northern slopes of the Sierra Nevada, the Cacique Arhuaco group of “5-5”, “5-7” has been fighting “Chaparro” for control of drug crops and clandestine ports and appears to be backed by former top AUC commanders and drug lords. The feud escalated in January and February 2007. According to state sources, Vicente Castaño visited and sent 300 men to reinforce “5-5” and “5-7”,¹⁶⁰ while “Chaparro” got 150 men from “Macaco” and the “Mellizos” brothers¹⁶¹ through one of Dibulla’s clandestine ports.¹⁶²

It is said that “Macaco” sent an emissary to broker a truce and deal, after which the situation appears to have calmed down, with “Chaparro” controlling from the Piedras River to the Palomino River while “5-5” and “5-7” control from the Piedras to the west, where they operated under the BN.¹⁶³ However, as “5-5” and “5-7” were arrested in a police raid in Medellín on 9 March 2007,¹⁶⁴ it is uncertain who the Cacique Arhuaco’s new commander is and whether its territory will be occupied by a new armed group.

Reinforcements to specific regions by ex-top AUC commanders could lead to new structures among the new groups all over the country.¹⁶⁵ If this happens on the Atlantic coast, the San Angel plains (centre of Magdalena department) and Cesar department could become strategic

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 13 February 2007, Santa Marta, 12 March.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Santa Marta, 12 March 2007.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Santa Marta, 12 March 2007.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá and Barranquilla, 13 and 16 February 2007.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla and Santa Marta, 16 February and 12 March 2007.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla and Santa Marta, 16 February and 11-12 March 2007.

¹⁵⁸ The commander of the Marines No.1 Battalion in the Montes de María region recently argued that there were new groups but no Black Eagles in his jurisdiction. “Águilas Negras no operan en Sucre y Bolívar”, *El Heraldo*, 15 February 2007. Police authorities argue that the pamphlet threatening union leaders in Atlántico is dated, as many names on the list have been out of the city or union activities for years. Reportedly, the Black Eagles logo on the pamphlet is different from the one on Magdalena Black Eagles communiqués. Another source remarked that similar threats were previously sent by a group that identified itself as “Death to Unionists” (Muerte a Sindicalistas, MAS), Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla, 16 February 2007.

¹⁵⁹ Police arrested “Rojas” in Tolima department, 750km south of Santa Marta on 29 March 2007; “Lucho” was captured in Soledad (Atlántico) on 28 February.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Santa Marta, 12 March 2007.

¹⁶¹ Miguel Angel and the “Mellizos”, were accused of being drug traffickers posing as paramilitaries in order to avoid extradition to the U.S. Miguel Angel was renamed Commander “Pablo Arauca” of the Vencedores de Arauca Bloc, operating in the eastern lowlands close to the Venezuelan border.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interview, Santa Marta, 12 March 2007.

¹⁶³ “5-5” led the AUC offensive that subdued Hernán Giraldo in 2002, then remained as leader of the La Tagua group of the Tayrona Resistance Bloc in Bonda, Minca and El Campano (Sierra Nevada). “Dinámica Reciente de la Confrontación Armada en la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta”, Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos, February 2006, p. 20. Crisis Group interview, Santa Marta, 12 March 2007.

¹⁶⁴ Sources suggested that their presence in Medellín could conform with the alleged “Macaco”-“Los Mellizos”-Vicente Castaño pact. Crisis Group interviews, Barranquilla and Santa Marta, 16 February and 11-12 March 2007.

¹⁶⁵ Reportedly, men formerly under “Macaco”’s command could still be in control of the coca crops in the south of Bolívar, an area of influence of the now dismantled BCB. New groups emerging from former BCB structures led by “Mono Teto” and “Leo” are believed to be fighting against former “Jorge 40” men for control of the drug routes in Cesar and Guajira. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 7 March 2007.

corridors for transport of coca leaves from the south of Bolívar to laboratories in the Sierra Nevada ranges, before being exported through the inlets and illegal ports along the Sierra Nevada northern slopes and the Guajira peninsula.

Control of Guajira department is needed for the smuggling that facilitates the money laundering and cheap Venezuelan gasoline drug traffickers require. The conflict between the new group of "Pablo" and Wayúu smuggling structure remnants broke out again in February 2006 with the assassination of the brother of a supposed Wayúu drug kingpin. Since April 2006, killings attributed to new groups have occurred in Wayúu indigenous lands.¹⁶⁶ The Wayúu people are intimidated by the new groups that keep a tight grip on smuggling operations in Maicao and Portete Bay despite the presence of an army battalion in the Upper-Guajira but the Wayúu from Maicao have begun to arm to resist attacks.¹⁶⁷

As the new groups mainly focus on drug trafficking, it is uncertain whether they will fight the FARC and ELN or form ad hoc alliances with them when the guerrillas try to penetrate their territories. In the south of Guajira, insurgent menace is latent, especially in the strategic corridor between the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta and the Serranía of Perijá, close to the Venezuelan border.¹⁶⁸ ELN's Francisco Javier Castaño Front and FARC's 19th and 59th Fronts have retained armed presences in the higher ranges despite heavy army pressure.¹⁶⁹ Though the FARC appear to be trying to win hearts and minds by refraining from operations to regain territory,¹⁷⁰ people working with Sierra Nevada communities told Crisis Group the guerrillas are moving inside the indigenous reservations (*resguardos*).¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ On 4 April 2006, Alvaro Uriana was tortured and assassinated in Poropo (Uribia municipality); on 18 February 2007, Gregorio Solano was forced from the Wayúu Mayabagloma reservation and killed; on 3 March 2007, brothers Joel and Daniel Paz González were assassinated in Paraguachón district (Maicao municipality); on 14 March 2007, Osiris Amaya, a teacher on the El Cerro Wayúu indigenous reservation (Hatonuevo municipality), was killed. Crisis Group email communication, 12 April 2007.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Riohacha, 13-14 March 2007.

¹⁶⁸ FARC's 41th Front uses Venezuelan territory for their operations in the Serranía of Perijá, mobilising about 700 men, Crisis Group interview, Riohacha, 14 March 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Before the BN demobilised, the army set up an advanced training camp and a mountain battalion in the higher Sierra Nevada ranges. Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, Santa Marta, Riohacha, 13 February and 11-12 and 14 March 2007.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Santa Marta, 12 March 2007.

¹⁷¹ In Mingueo (Dibulla municipality) the Wiwa, Kogi and Wayúu ethnic peoples have denounced the presence of all armed actors on their territories; Wayúu people in San Juan del Cesar municipality were forced out; a *Mamo* (wise man) and Wayúu Alejandro Urariyu were recently killed by guerrillas;

4. Conclusion

Under the AUC the Atlantic coast was controlled by the BN, several groups of which controlled well-defined territories. The emerging new groups appear to operate under a similar logic, with leaders who were mid-level commanders and combatants who did not demobilise or rearmed soon after. They are based in regions where they formerly operated, with strong criminal links. However, there are also outside elements, apparently with ties to former top AUC commanders like Vicente Castaño (at large) and "Macaco" (in Itagüí prison) seeking to muscle in. While it appears to be a free-for-all at the moment, there is evidence of the new groups entering into agreements, perhaps heralding a new, cooperative structure akin to the old AUC structure. It remains to be seen how these new groups react to guerrilla advances and how they interact with local communities. Evidence suggests that AUC extortion rackets are still in operation but the type of community relations that the AUC had have not been seen.¹⁷²

D. MEDELLÍN

1. AUC history in the city

Paramilitary involvement in Medellín, like that of its principal player Diego Murillo ("Don Berna"), had its roots in drugs and organised crime. "Don Berna" was once head of security for a clan within the Medellín drug cartel; when his boss was killed by Pablo Escobar in prison, he became a key member of the PEPES (People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar). This group dedicated itself to weakening the power of the drug lord through selective killings until he was shot by police in 1993. It was in the PEPES that "Don Berna" cemented his relationship with Carlos and Fidel Castaño. In 1998 he began to sound out the possibility of entering the AUC and was admitted to its ruling body, the "Estado Mayor", with the name "Adolfo Paz".¹⁷³ He has long been sought by U.S. law enforcement agencies,

the Chimila ethnic people in San Angel (Magdalena) are being labelled paramilitary collaborators; the FARC reportedly stepped up extortions against farmers. Crisis Group interviews, Santa Marta, Riohacha, 12-14 March 2007. The Wiwa people of the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada have been pressured by the FARC for shelter and food, while the military stigmatises them as guerrilla collaborators. Documents obtained during Crisis Group interview, Riohacha, 13 March 2007.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Itagüí, 30 March 2007.

¹⁷³ See Norbey Quevedo H. and Libardo Cardona M., "El renacer 'para' que ronda en Antioquia", *El Espectador*, 24 February 2007; Jeremy McDermott, "FARC and the paramilitaries take over Colombia's drug trade", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 1 July 2004.

who have a pending extradition order against him for drug trafficking.¹⁷⁴

Before the takeover by the AUC, a diverse array of criminal organisations was fighting for control in Medellín. Parts of the city, particularly the poor neighbourhoods (*comunas*), have long been dominated by street gangs (*combos* or *bandas*).¹⁷⁵ The paramilitary Metro Bloc, which joined the AUC, and militias, some independent, others associated with the FARC and ELN, were also part of this illegal world, with control most notoriously over Comuna 13.¹⁷⁶

Strategy under “Don Berna” was to take over these groups, or at least make them accountable. In 2001, the Bloque Cacique Nutibara (BCN) appeared, the mafia structure he used to exercise power in the city. Destruction of the militia networks was completed thanks to the 2002 security force offensive in Medellín (Operation Orion), directed by the now head of the army, General Mario Montoya. There were a number of reports of the paramilitaries following on behind this successful offensive and consolidating their control over Comuna 13.¹⁷⁷ General Montoya is enmeshed in scandal over the operation after the *Los Angeles Times* claimed intelligence reports show he worked with paramilitaries during the operation.¹⁷⁸ Montoya has strenuously denied the allegations and is supported by the government as well as the U.S. embassy in Bogotá.

The final stage in the assumption of power in Medellín by “Don Berna” was the destruction in 2003 of an AUC faction which refused to subjugate itself and opposed paramilitary involvement in drug trafficking: the Metro Bloc, led by Carlos García (“Rodrigo” or “00”).¹⁷⁹ The rural area it controlled near Medellín was taken over by a new group controlled by “Don Berna”, the “Heroes of

Granada” Bloc.¹⁸⁰ By the time of the BCN demobilisation, he ran much of the criminal world of Medellín.

The demobilisation of 873 BCN members in Medellín on 23 November 2003 started the disbanding of the AUC, a process that lasted until mid-2006. There were strong allegations by independent observers and human rights groups, however, that those who handed in weapons were not really AUC members but gang members, some recruited just for the demobilisation. In hindsight, this is perhaps not surprising. The BCN was not a traditional paramilitary group but a network,¹⁸¹ with various components, including drug traffickers, *oficinas de cobro*, and gangs involved in multiple criminal activities. Most were not paramilitary in any clear sense but in traditional mafia style made payments up the chain of command to “Don Berna”. These criminal organisations were not part of any demobilisation; many exist to this day.¹⁸²

2. Presence of new illegal armed groups and criminal organisations

Medellín is the most difficult case in which to prove a new group now operates and the easiest to show that the influence of the former AUC boss is largely intact. While unable to agree on the exact nature of the mafia running its criminal underworld, sources agreed that “Don Berna” remains the power broker.¹⁸³ There are reports of groups still controlling the *comunas*' streets and conducting patrols, though now without uniforms and rifles.¹⁸⁴ There have been killings linked to lucrative gambling contracts believed to be controlled by emerging groups.¹⁸⁵ Their activity has forced displacement linked to territorial fights in many parts.¹⁸⁶ There have been reports of forced recruitment by new groups linked to the paramilitaries.¹⁸⁷ The reports of the influence of “Don Berna” have been too frequent to ignore.¹⁸⁸

¹⁷⁴ Chris Kraul, “U.S., Colombia spar over drug lord”, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 February 2006.

¹⁷⁵ In 2003, over 6,300 gangs were in the city. See Jorge Giraldo Ramírez, “Conflicto armado urbano y violencia homicida. El caso de Medellín”, Centro de Análisis Político Universidad Eafit, February 2006.

¹⁷⁶ The militia phenomenon was complex. Some autonomous ones were: “Milicias Populares del Pueblo y para el Pueblo”, “Milicias Pueblo Unido”, “Milicias Ché Guevara” and “Milicias Obreras 1° de Mayo”. Linked to the ELN were “Milicias Populares del Valle de Aburrá” and “Milicias 6 y 7 de Noviembre”. “Milicias Bolivarianas” had FARC links. See Ana María Jaramillo, *Milicias Populares en Medellín: entre la guerra y la paz* (Medellín, 1994).

¹⁷⁷ “Army criticized for not attacking paramilitaries in Medellín”, EFE, 18 October 2002.

¹⁷⁸ Paul Richter and Greg Miller, “Colombia army chief linked to outlaw militias”, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March 2007.

¹⁷⁹ “La cacería”, *Semana*, 28 September 2003.

¹⁸⁰ The bloc “Heroes of Granada” demobilised in August 2005 in San Roque (Antioquia), one of the largest demobilisations involving more than 2,000 paramilitaries.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 15 February 2007.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 9 February 2007.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 26 March 2007.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 13 February 2007; Norbey Quevedo H. and Libardo Cardona M., “El renacer ‘para’ que ronda en Antioquia”, *El Espectador*, 24 February 2007.

¹⁸⁵ “Ajuste de cuentas relacionado con el negocio del chance podría estar detrás del atentado en Medellín”, *El Tiempo*, 11 July 2006.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 14 February 2007; “Se recrudescen el destierro intraurbano”, *El Colombiano*, 1 October 2006.

¹⁸⁷ “Alarma en la Comuna 13 por reclutamiento forzado de menores a grupos armados”, *El Tiempo*, 5 August 2005.

¹⁸⁸ Gloria Castrillón, “La mano invisible de ‘Don Berna’”, *Cromos*, 5 June 2005.

Unlike in small towns and medium-sized cities, putting its own man in as mayor of Colombia's second largest city and one of its biggest industrial centres is difficult for any illegal armed actor. Instead of political infiltration at the higher level, armed groups have concentrated on street-level politics, the Communal Action Committees (Juntas de Acción Comunal, JAC), where they have ensured that sympathetic candidates win senior positions.¹⁸⁹

3. Conflict dynamics

There is little evidence of any overt conflict in Medellín today. Homicide rates have been steadily declining, while investment in the city increases. This is due to two factors. The first is that the police have created fourteen new posts over the last four years and added 2,500 officers.¹⁹⁰ Mayor Sergio Fajardo, as seen in support for the reinsertions program, paid great attention to security issues and worked closely with the police.¹⁹¹ Manoeuvring room for new groups and mafia has been greatly reduced.

The other factor is the strict control "Don Berna" reportedly still exerts over the underworld. His people, through the *oficinas de cobro*, still appear to regulate the *combos* and *bandas*.¹⁹² Crimes such as robbery, drug trafficking and car theft are permitted but killings generally are not.¹⁹³ He has imposed peace on the criminal factions and resolves disputes, preventing all-out gang war.¹⁹⁴ Matters are usually settled either through payment to injured parties or the selective killings of those who break the rules. There have been several high-profile killings of ex-paramilitaries and senior criminals, notably the murders of Gustavo Upegui and Daniel Mejía ("Danielito").¹⁹⁵ Both have been linked to *oficinas de cobro*, and the attorney general's office is investigating "Don Berna".¹⁹⁶ A name allegedly linked to the killings is "Rogelio" ("El Flaco"), reportedly the lieutenant who executes orders from paramilitaries in Itagüí prison.¹⁹⁷

Ironically, one of the tools that apparently allows "Don Berna" to keep his organisation under control is the non-governmental organisation set up to run the demobilised paramilitaries, the Democracy Corporation (Corporación Democracia), which acknowledged that it still takes cues from "Don Berna".¹⁹⁸ On its books it has 4,150 demobilised paramilitaries, principally from BCN and Heroes of Granada Bloc.¹⁹⁹ A spokesperson told Crisis Group that despite all obstacles it remains committed to the reinsertion program.²⁰⁰

4. Conclusion

Since the days of Pablo Escobar and the Medellín cartel, this city has been home to powerful leaders and organised crime groups. This has not changed. "Don Berna" concentrated power in his hands and took over the role once held by Escobar, making the AUC for a time an umbrella under which the mafia thrived. The state's power is now being progressively consolidated thanks to the determination of local authorities, and there is no longer open combat between armed groups with ideological trappings. It appears, however, that mafia needs are still being satisfied by the "Don Berna" organisation.

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 13 February 2007.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 8-9 February 2007.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 9 February 2007.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 13 February 2007.

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 13 February 2007.

¹⁹⁴ "El 'pacificador'", *Semana*, 24 April 2005.

¹⁹⁵ Gustavo Upegui was the owner of the Envigado Football Club and reputed to have been a member of the Medellín cartel. He was killed in July 2006 in what is widely believed to have been an internal dispute between new groups; Daniel Mejía, who demobilised with the Heroes of Granada Bloc, was freed from prison in November 2006 for lack of charges. He disappeared a week later and is believed dead. "Atribuyen muerte de dueño del Envigado FC a pugna entre paramilitares", *El Tiempo*, 13 March 2007.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 13 March 2007.

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 8-9 February 2007, Bogotá, 16 March, Envigado, 28 March.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 14 February 2007.

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 13 February 2007.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 29 August 2006.

IV. STATE RESPONSE

A. SECURITY POLICY

After four years of its “democratic security policy” (DSP), the Uribe administration has launched what it calls the “democratic security consolidation policy” (DSCP),²⁰¹ which, as its name indicates, is meant to consolidate the gains of its predecessor through Uribe’s second term, to 2010. Among the threats identified are the “insistence of the narco-terrorist groups on terrorism and drug trafficking” and the “criminal gangs that pretend to take over control of the different criminal activities previously advanced by the illegal self-defence forces”.²⁰² While the police differentiates between “narco-terrorist groups” and “criminal gangs”, the basic thrust is to describe the security challenge essentially as a criminal one. With respect to “criminal gangs”, it underscores the “government’s firm decision to withdraw all judicial benefits, apply the ordinary penal code and, when applicable, extradite any demobilised person of these groups that relapses into activities of drug trafficking, terrorism or any other crime”.²⁰³

Aware that the emergence of the new groups could undermine AUC demobilisation and the JPL process, Uribe has assigned high priority to fighting them,²⁰⁴ with tactics more akin to the battle against the drug cartels than the counter-insurgency operations used against the guerrillas and, to a lesser degree, the paramilitaries. This is in part because the new groups have opted for a more clandestine presence.²⁰⁵ The police have designed an “Integral Plan against Criminal Bands” and placed it under the command of the Police Carabineros. Several other arms of the security forces – including the army, navy and secret police (DAS) – meet regularly with the attorney general’s office and the OAS mission on the issue.²⁰⁶

The Carabineros have identified vulnerable municipalities and in 2006 built fifteen new police stations to assert state presence.²⁰⁷ There are plans for another 30 during 2007,

²⁰¹ “Política de consolidación de la seguridad democrática: fortalecimiento de las capacidades del sector defensa y seguridad”, Documento Conpes, no. 3460, 26 February 2007.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 13 and 16 March 2007.

²⁰⁵ Crisis Group Interviews, Pasto, Tumaco, Medellín, Cúcuta, Barranquilla, and Santa Marta, February and March 2007. Community leaders in many regions do not know who the local commanders are.

²⁰⁶ Crisis Group received a copy of a police document outlining the “Integral Plan”.

²⁰⁷ New stations were established in Callejas (Cordoba); El Dos, Pie de Pepe and San Lorenzo (Chocó); San Jose de Oriente

including in areas with new group presence and astride corridors used by drug traffickers. In Cúcuta, the police have set up a “special search unit” (*bloque de búsqueda*), a highly mobile task force to fight the new groups – in this case the Black Eagles.²⁰⁸ It has had some success, killing five and capturing 36 as of February 2007. A criticism levelled at it, however, is that it has targeted the Black Eagles only at their lower echelons.²⁰⁹

The marines in Tumaco (Nariño) have adapted their tactics to the changing threat. Since the Rastrojos of the Norte del Valle cartel (NDVC) are deeply embedded in the civilian population and use networks established by the AUC’s old BLS bloc, traditional military operations were unsuccessful. The Rastrojos dress in plain clothes and meld into the local communities, and citizens have been reluctant to cooperate in the face of overt threats. The marines are now making more use of human intelligence-gathering techniques, along with random and highly mobile ground and river operations, hoping to catch the Rastrojos off-guard. In September 2006 they captured twenty members of the Rastrojos, and in the last week of February 2007 they arrested a leader in Tumaco.²¹⁰

The army, which Uribe expanded,²¹¹ has deployed new units to regions with a heavy presence of new groups and criminal organisations. In Norte de Santander department, it responded to the demobilisation of the Catatumbo Bloc (BC) in 2004 by putting in more troops and setting up the San Jorge Task Force, 1,500 strong, an all-arms force with engineers, infantry and armoured units. The Second Division, responsible for the region, was boosted by more than 3,000 troops from 2004 to 2006.²¹²

The army has also been active along the Caribbean coast and in the Sierra Nevada range. The highest number of

(La Guajira); La Mercedes, Buena Esperanza and Petrolea (Norte de Santander); Bocas de Pauta (Casanare); San Teodoro & La Venturosa (Vichada); Madrigales, El Ejido & La Esmeralda (Nariño) and El Tigre (Putumayo).

²⁰⁸ Search blocs were used to fight Pablo Escobar of the Medellín cartel in the early 1990s and more recently against the Norte Del Valle Cartel (NDVC).

²⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 19 February 2007.

²¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Tumaco, 2 March 2007; police files showed that Nolido Antonio Puente Garcia (“Pedro”), was captured in Tumaco on 27 February 2007.

²¹¹ From 2002 to 2006, the armed forces and the police have increased from 295,957 to 391,004 (not counting civilian personnel). But the increase followed a period of cuts. In January 2007, total armed forces personnel had dropped to 382,266. “Logros de la política de consolidación de la seguridad democrática”, Ministry of Defence, March 2007.

²¹² “Dinámica reciente de la confrontación armada en el Catatumbo”, Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario, August 2006.

new group members killed and captured – 230 as of February 2007 – has been in Magdalena.²¹³ The High Mountain Battalion “Mayor Daniel Robinson Ruiz” in the Sierra Nevada has made its patrols more random and extended them far down the mountain to cut transit routes. The army’s elite anti-kidnap units (GAULA) worked with the attorney general’s office to capture a Black Eagles leader in La Guajira peninsula, a former AUC commander who did not demobilise.²¹⁴ Units of the Santa Marta-based First Division have also been busy.²¹⁵

Nevertheless, the security forces have been unable to control areas such as Catatumbo in Norte de Santander, where dense jungle and the proximity of the mountains and the Venezuelan border allow the new groups operating room. In most regions Crisis Group visited, there were multiple reports of security forces either tolerating the new armed groups and criminal gangs or even actively working with them.²¹⁶

The security forces are clear about the threat presented by Vicente Castaño, a leading paramilitary commander who did not demobilise. The police believe he is rebuilding parts of the AUC in his old area of influence in the Uraba region (Antioquia and Chocó). Significant recruitment has been reported, centred on San Pedro de Uraba and including demobilised fighters, with the lure being pay well over the minimum wage set by the government. Castaño’s plans were dealt a severe blow in April 2007, however, with the capture of Ever Veloza (“Hernán Hernández”), his right-hand man and military commander, formerly the head of the Banana Bloc of Uraba.²¹⁷ Nevertheless, there is evidence that he is extending his efforts to the Caribbean coast and the eastern plains, principally Casanare, Meta and Vichada departments, which is where his ally, Miguel Arroyave of Centauros Bloc, operated. Arroyave, with 1,100 men, demobilised there in September 2004 but is believed to be active again.²¹⁸

The rise of the new groups means another front has opened in the drug war, a key element of the Uribe administration’s policy. The government is fighting that conflict with four main weapons: crop eradication, interdiction, dismantling of trafficking organisations and alternative development. The eradication aim for 2007 is 210,000 hectares, 50,000 manually, the rest by aerial fumigation. This is slightly

less than in 2006 when 214,000 hectares were eradicated.²¹⁹ However, despite these record figures and the seizure of more than 139 tons of cocaine in 2006,²²⁰ the flow of drugs from Colombia remains at least constant.²²¹

B. JUSTICE

The chronically overburdened and notoriously slow justice system is having difficulty in reacting to the threat of the emerging groups and organised crime at the same time as it is trying to cope with implementation of the JPL.²²² Crisis Group heard recurrent complaints by justice sector officials in several regions about precarious working conditions and insufficient resources to conduct criminal investigations in a thorough and timely manner and lack of cooperation from the security forces. Pervasive fear was felt in places such as Nariño, Norte de Santander and Magdalena departments, not least because of a record of paramilitary infiltration of state institutions.²²³

Important investigations are nonetheless underway, not least the Supreme Court’s efforts to deal with politicians linked to the paramilitaries. The “para-politics” scandal was detonated by the capture in 2006 of what apparently was the computer of “Jorge 40” and the revelations of an imprisoned former DAS figure, Rafael Garcia.²²⁴ It has mushroomed, with evidence of deals between politicians and the AUC not only on the Caribbean coast but also in Antioquia department.²²⁵ The attorney general is pursuing allegations that Jorge Noguera, the former DAS head, worked with paramilitaries.²²⁶ The testimony of demobilised AUC members, who are just now being called before the special JPL courts, may also provide crucial evidence.

²¹³ “Plan Integral”, op. cit.

²¹⁴ Carlos Reyes, “Capturado cabecilla de las ‘Águilas Negras’”, *El Heraldo*, 2 March 2007.

²¹⁵ Agustín Iguarán, “Abatidos 2 ‘Águilas Negras’”, *El Heraldo*, 24 February 2007.

²¹⁶ See the case studies in Section III above.

²¹⁷ “Detenido el jefe paramilitar Éver Veloza ‘H.H.’, lugarteniente de Vicente Castaño”, *El Tiempo*, 3 April 2007.

²¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 13 March 2007.

²¹⁹ “Colombia busca erradicar 210.000 hectáreas de cocaes”, Associated Press, 29 January 2007.

²²⁰ “Logros de la Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática”, Ministry of Defence, March 2007.

²²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 16 March 2007. After eradication in 2002, the U.S. State Department reported 144,000 hectares of coca available for harvesting, the same figure it reported in 2005, despite more eradication. “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report”, U.S. State Department, 2003 and 2006, at www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/.

²²² Crisis Group interviews, Santa Marta, 11 March 2007.

²²³ Crisis Group interviews, Pasto, Tumaco and Santa Marta, February and March 2007.

²²⁴ “Los Crimenes de Don Antonio”, *Semana*, 21 April 2007; “El Computador de Jorge 40”, *Semana*, 3 September 2006.

²²⁵ Sibylla Brodzinsky, “Colombia to expose militia’s reach”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 December 2006; “Documentos que prueban otra reunión de políticos y ‘paras’ estarían en poder de la Corte Suprema”, *El Tiempo*, 22 March 2007; “El turno de Antioquia”, *Semana*, 14 April 2007.

²²⁶ “Fiscalía niega que error suyo haya permitido libertad de ex director del DAS Jorge Noguera”, *El Tiempo*, 28 March 2007. Noguera is at liberty on a court’s procedural ruling.

The investigations have had a large impact on politics and public attitudes. Corruption has long been a part of Colombian political life, but the public perception is that for the first time impunity is being seriously challenged, with nine serving members and one former member of Congress in prison and others under investigation.²²⁷ How far the heavily burdened legal system will take these matters remains to be seen. While the Supreme Court is investigating many of the cases it is the attorney general's office that must collect evidence, and it has limited resources. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the scandal will make politicians much more cautious about having anything to do with irregular groups and their political projects.

C. FROM REINSERTION TO REINTEGRATION

Despite the evident shortcomings of the government reintegration program, worries about large-scale rearming of ex-combatants have been exaggerated. According to police sources, only 17 per cent of 1,070 former AUC members arrested after demobilisation were involved with new groups.²²⁸ Most had committed petty crimes, often with small, urban and semi-urban gangs, which offer more lucrative employment than the government stipend for the demobilised.²²⁹ Sources agree such "micro-rearming" could present a more difficult challenge to reintegration than the re-emergence of large armed groups.²³⁰

Nevertheless, pressures placed by new groups on ex-combatants should not be ignored. The police and the OAS mission have confirmed recruitment in Montería and Valencia (Cordoba), San Pedro de Urabá (Antioquia) San Martín and Acacías (Meta),²³¹ Bolívar and Nariño.²³²

²²⁷ The detained are Senators Alvaro García, Jairo Merlano, Alvaro Araújo, Luis Eduardo Vives, Miguel de la Espriella, Mauricio Pimiento, Alfonso Campo and Dieb Maloof; Member of the House of Representatives Eric Morris; and former Congresswoman Muriel Benito Revollo. Another member of the House, Jorge Luis Caballero, is a fugitive, believed to be hiding in Spain. Under Supreme Court investigation are President of the House of Representatives Alfredo Cuello, Members Alvaro Morón and Mauricio Parodi, and Senator Rubén Quintero.

²²⁸ "Noveno informe sobre el Ciclo de Seguimiento y Control a Desmovilizados", Policía Nacional, 5 March 2007.

²²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 28 March 2007.

²³⁰ It is not uncommon for these small gangs to identify themselves as former AUC, or as new illegal armed groups. Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 5 February, 26 and 28 March 2007.

²³¹ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 13 March 2007.

²³² The MAPP/OEA has confirmed that the former Defensores de San Lucas Front, which belonged to the Bolívar Central Bloc of the AUC, has recruited demobilised fighters and is operating in Bolívar. Similar cases have been reported in Nariño, where ONG recruited ex-combatants of the Libertadores del Sur Bloc.

There have also been reports of recruitment and pressures on ex-combatants around the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta (Magdalena),²³³ in Cúcuta and Norte de Santander,²³⁴ and in Turbo (Antioquia).²³⁵ The police have recorded the deaths of 474 ex-combatants,²³⁶ a number the high counsellor for reintegration (HCR), Frank Pearl, believes is actually close to 1,000.²³⁷ Authorities say these deaths are mostly related to criminal activity,²³⁸ but reports show that some in Barrancabermeja, Villavicencio, Cúcuta, Santa Marta, Barranquilla and Medellín have been killings by hit men and may be related to clashes between new groups.²³⁹

To reduce the risk of ex-combatant relapse, the government has made important changes in the reintegration program. Since June 2006, the police have been charged with monitoring ex-combatant activities and producing monthly reports.²⁴⁰ They, as well as the DAS's Administrative Security Department, have set up protection programs

The MAPP/OEA has also received information about possible recruitment of ex-combatants by former members of the Northern Bloc of the AUC in Cesar. "Octavo Informe Trimestral del Secretario General al Consejo Permanente Sobre la Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia (MAPP/OEA)", OAS, 14 February 2007.

²³³ Crisis Group interviews, Santa Marta, 11-13 March 2007.

²³⁴ According to local sources, ex-combatants have been offered up to \$450 monthly to rejoin new illegal armed groups and threatened to join or leave town. Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, 19-20 February 2007.

²³⁵ There have been reports of recruitment near El Dos district in Turbo municipality (Antioquia), where the AUC Bananero Bloc demobilised. Crisis Group interview, Medellín, 13 February 2007.

²³⁶ "Noveno informe sobre el Ciclo de Seguimiento y Control a Desmovilizados", Policía Nacional, 5 March 2007.

²³⁷ Interview with Frank Pearl, Caracol Radio, 14 March 2007.

²³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 13 and 28 March 2007.

²³⁹ According to authorities and ex-combatants in Barrancabermeja (Santander) the recent death of fifteen demobilised fighters resulted from clashes between new groups wanting to take over drug routes and trafficking structures. Felix Quintero, "Desmovilizados se rearman en Barrancabermeja y sirven a narcotraficantes y traficantes de gasolina", *El Tiempo*, 13 March 2007. "Preocupación por asesinatos de desmovilizados y taxistas en Villavicencio", *El Tiempo*, 11 December 2006; Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 13 February 2007, Barranquilla, 15 February, Santa Marta, 11-13 March.

²⁴⁰ The police cross-reference information from the HCR, the office of the high commissioner for peace, police intelligence, army, the attorney general's office and other sources to evaluate ex-combatant presence and profile in a region. Through their regional offices and network of community police, they visit ex-combatants' residences, monitor their activities and organise events where for ex-combatants. These activities and visits are not necessarily done in conjunction with the HCR. In addition community police are rotated often in order to reduce potential for corrupt practices. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 28 March 2007.

for ex-combatants.²⁴¹ While these changes have helped, demobilised fighters are generally wary of contact with security forces, especially in regions where perception of collaboration or infiltration between paramilitaries and security forces is widespread.²⁴²

Since the establishment of the HCR's office on 9 September 2006,²⁴³ economic aid has been extended to all ex-combatants who have gone through the program's initial eighteen months²⁴⁴ or who have quit it but wish to return.²⁴⁵ Following former AUC commander Salvatore Mancuso's alert that 5,000 had rearmed, HCR Pearl admitted on 13 February 2007 that his office did not know the whereabouts of 4,731 demobilised fighters,²⁴⁶ though a month later he said close to 2,800 of the missing had been located.²⁴⁷

Pearl emphasised to Crisis Group that his plan concentrates on reintegration into society, rather than reinsertion, which he says is like short-term relief.²⁴⁸ The new policy addresses

some major deficiencies in the current program.²⁴⁹ There is to be more decentralisation thanks to a stronger network of regional Reference and Opportunity Centres (CRO) through creation of 29 service centres in 22 departments.²⁵⁰ Elected authorities and economic sectors are to be encouraged to participate in the design of projects that cater to local needs.²⁵¹ An effort will be made to draw more precise personal profiles of ex-combatants so as to offer better assistance,²⁵² with an emphasis on differentiated programs for child and young combatants (up to 26) and the wives of ex-combatants.²⁵³ Another focus is to be on reintegration of ex-combatants as part of their communities and reconciliation with victims in an attempt to maintain a balance between the benefits provided to ex-combatants and the victims' rights to reparations.²⁵⁴

The challenges are nonetheless formidable.²⁵⁵ Income generation schemes have been unsustainable. Only 26 per cent of demobilised fighters have jobs.²⁵⁶ The HCR has said that but 22 of 152 projects managed by the High

²⁴¹ The police protection program is managed by the regional commands, which, with the help of the police investigation and intelligence agencies, SIJIN and SIPOL, and judicial authorities, establish the risk level of ex-combatants. Measures can go from self-protection training to police protection and relocation. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 28 March 2007.

²⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 14 February 2007, Cúcuta, 19 February, Barranquilla, 15-16 February, Santa Marta, 12 March.

²⁴³ Even though the government announced creation of the office of the high counsellor for reinsertion on 8 July 2006, it was only officially established on 9 September 2006 through decree 3043. Frank Pearl was appointed high counsellor for reintegration that same day through decree 3045. See Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°12, *Tougher Challenges Ahead for Colombia's Uribe*, 20 October 2007, pp. 8-9.

²⁴⁴ On 12 July 2006, the Program for Reincorporation to Civilian Life (PRVC), run by the interior and justice ministry, extended economic aid for six months to ex-combatants who had completed their initial eighteen-month period and were still attending activities, were employed or were developing a productive project. "Extienden Ayuda Humanitaria a Algunos Desmovilizados de las AUC", Servicio de Noticias Estatales, 12 July 2006.

²⁴⁵ Frank Pearl announced the extension of humanitarian aid to ex-combatants who are no longer part of the program. Government decree 395 of 14 February 2007 provides the legal basis for the extension of humanitarian aid to ex-combatants until the HCR deems their reintegration complete.

²⁴⁶ "Gobierno no tiene pista de 4.731 reinsertados, denuncia consejero para la reintegración, Frank Pearl", *El Tiempo*, 13 February 2007.

²⁴⁷ According to HCR Pearl, some 7,500 demobilised fighters had attended regional inter-institutional meetings ("brigades") coordinated by regional reference and opportunity centres (the CROs) by 14 March 2007. These "brigades" were to continue into May. Interview with Frank Pearl, Caracol Radio, 14 March 2007.

²⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, HCR Frank Pearl, Bogotá, 7 December 2006.

²⁴⁹ The HCR has said the new reinsertion policy will become part of the state development plan when it is incorporated into the state policy document known as CONPES in June 2007.

²⁵⁰ The new centres will be in areas with concentrations of ex-combatants, autonomous and able to assist with education and training, psycho-social help and income-generation programs.

²⁵¹ The HCR, the national planning office and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) have set up regional inter-institutional committees in Valledupar (Cesar), Montería (Córdoba), Sincelejo (Sucre), Bucaramanga (Santander), Santa Marta (Magdalena) and Cartagena (Bolívar). These gather representatives from the governor's or mayor's offices, HCR, local chambers of commerce and the private sector. They analyse the viability of reinsertion policies and projects from a regional perspective. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 26 March 2006.

²⁵² According to the office of the HCR, there will be 287 psychologists in the service centres, so that each deals with only 120 to 150 ex-combatants, allowing for more personalised diagnosis and assistance.

²⁵³ Ex-combatant wives will be provided special assistance to prevent abuses. Special profiles of ex-combatant wives are being drawn up to assist with this.

²⁵⁴ The IOM, the National Planning Agency (DNP) and the HCR are developing an index to measure the socio-economic reintegration of each ex-combatant in his or her community. HCR is working with the NCCR to design voluntary reparation projects.

²⁵⁵ There are now more than 43,000 ex-combatants: 31,670 demobilised collectively as a result of the negotiation process between the government and the AUC; 11,772 demobilised individually: 6,285 from the FARC, 3,548 from the AUC, 1,592 from the ELN, and the rest from other illegal armed groups.

²⁵⁶ "Octavo Informe Trimestral del Secretario General al Consejo Permanente Sobre la Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia (MAPP/OEA)", OAS, 14 February 2007.

Commissioner for Peace are viable.²⁵⁷ Inability to find work, whether due to lack of training, psycho-social preparation, commitment or labour demand, has forced ex-combatants to turn progressively to informal jobs²⁵⁸ and in some cases to relocate from rural areas to cities such as Medellín and Barranquilla with more dynamic labour markets.²⁵⁹ The HCR has identified weaknesses in delivery of basic aid: only 28 per cent of demobilised fighters have had counselling, 46 per cent have had access to basic health coverage, 23 per cent to occupational training and 10 per cent to higher education.²⁶⁰

Ex-combatant frustration is high: those from the Bananero and Mineros Blocs have protested in Urabá against the lack of security, job opportunities and stigmatisation;²⁶¹ those in Cúcuta, Medellín and Barranquilla have also protested, and it is becoming harder to bring them together for activities.²⁶² It is questionable how former combatants, some of whom have been in the government program for over two years, will react to the large reform proposed by the HCR.²⁶³ The transition will need to be implemented swiftly and smoothly if the reform is to succeed. A source close to the reintegration process said: "We are moving in the right direction at the wrong speed".²⁶⁴

Ex-combatants in Bolívar and Middle Magdalena Valley and in cities such as Cúcuta, Medellín, Pasto²⁶⁵ and Santa

Marta have sought work in private security cooperatives, which some communities view as ominous.²⁶⁶ There is certainly a risk of some ex-combatants working as informants for criminal gangs while being part of the HCR's program.

Differentiated treatment for mid-level commanders will also need to be analysed closely. In regions such as Bajo Cauca, Medellín, Risaralda, Uraba and Magdalena Medio, such individuals, with the support of their old superiors, have established non-governmental organisations which promote their own agricultural projects.²⁶⁷ While these provide potential leadership positions for commanders, the government has been unable to fully verify the finances and the legal status of the land that is being used.²⁶⁸

For a more effective reintegration program for demobilised paramilitary in the countryside and to make it harder for the FARC to expand into areas which were the centre of past violence, the government should invest in high-impact jobs projects in rural communities. So as to avoid resentment from other elements of society at special benefits, it should at the same time finance infrastructure and services that benefit the entire community. While the bulk of those funds must come from the Colombian national budget, a shift in Washington's funding, as many in the new U.S. Congress have been arguing, to a 50/50 split between military and economic aid rather than the 80/20 of recent years, would allow Colombia to jump-start that rural infrastructure effort and provide greater direct support to the displaced and families of victims in the rural communities where the conflict and the fight against drug cultivation are concentrated.

²⁵⁷ It is estimated that only 850-900 demobilised fighters are currently employed in these projects. Frank Pearl, presentation during "El Proceso de Reinserción en Colombia" conference, organised by Pax Cristi, INDEPAZ and Revista Semana, Bogotá, 7 March 2007.

²⁵⁸ Despite PRVC efforts, reduction in illiteracy rates has not been significant. In December 2006 government sources told Crisis Group that 70 per cent of ex-combatants were functionally illiterate; HCR Pearl recently announced that close to 50 per cent are still functionally illiterate. "El Proceso de Reinserción en Colombia" conference, organised by Pax Cristi, INDEPAZ and Revista Semana, Bogotá, 7 March 2007.

²⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 13 February 2007, Barranquilla, 15 February.

²⁶⁰ Crisis Group calculations from figures provided by the HCR based on Accompaniment, Monitoring and Evaluation System (SAME) information from 30 November 2006.

²⁶¹ María Paula Gonzalez, "Reinserción: Proyectos ¿Productivos?", INDEPAZ, 13 February 2007; Carlos Salgado, "Excombatientes del Bajo Cauca piden más seguridad", *El Colombiano*, 22 January 2007.

²⁶² Reportedly many complaints are handled informally and are neither recorded nor followed up. Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 14 February 2007, Cúcuta, 19 February, Barranquilla, 15 February.

²⁶³ Observers fear a similar situation with contractors hired to provide seminars and services to ex-combatants if their contracts are not renewed. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 15 February 2007.

²⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 26 March 2007.

²⁶⁵ The Mayor of Pasto and ex-combatant representatives have

agreed not to employ demobilised combatants as private security guards. "Alcalde de Pasto se reunió con Alto Consejero Presidencial para la Reintegración", *Alcaldía de Pasto*, 19 December 2006.

²⁶⁶ "Octavo Informe Trimestral del Secretario General al Consejo Permanente Sobre la Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia (MAPP/OEA)", OAS, 14 February 2007; Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 13 February 2007, Cúcuta, 19 and 21 February, Santa Marta, 12 March.

²⁶⁷ Corporación Democracia in Medellín covers close to 4,150 ex-combatants, mainly from the Cacique Nutibara and Heroes of Granada Blocs. Buscando Caminos Buenos, which has productive projects in Risaralda, Bajo Cauca, Putumayo and Nariño, is made up mainly of former combatants from the Bolívar Central Bloc. Semillas de Paz is made up of members of the BCB, Bloque Caribe, Llanos and Catatumbo. Tarazá sin Hambre, a non-governmental organisation sponsored by Cuco Vanoy, former leader of the Mineros Bloc, has productive projects which benefit more than 300 families. "Jefes paramilitares detenidos en cárcel de Itagüí se autoproclaman 'presos políticos'", *El Tiempo*, 3 April 2007.

²⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Medellín, 14 February 2007, Bogotá, 26 March.

D. DANGERS AHEAD

Only a short time has passed since paramilitary demobilisation, the emergence of new illegal armed groups and the consequent reshaping of Colombia's landscape of violence, so a comprehensive description of challenges is difficult. A starting point is that the conflict with the FARC and ELN continues, and the drug trade has not been controlled. These are the parameters within which the new groups and organised crime will evolve. It is thus prudent to take seriously the warnings that at least some of the new groups could evolve into criminal organisations much like the AUC before demobilisation, that is, a federation of illegal armed groups competing with the insurgents over criminal access to resources (economic, political and social), with ever closer links to drug trafficking and a degree of acquiescence or support from the military and local elites. The government's response to the problem has been slow and insufficient.

In areas of operation, manpower, leadership and finances, the new groups and their criminal counterparts do not yet have the AUC's reach. They also do not have its counter-insurgency motif. While in some cases they do fight the guerrillas (ONG in Nariño), in others they work closely with them (the Rastrojos with the ELN in Cauca) or have entered into drug business arrangements (Vicente Castaño in Vichada with the FARC). Their aims appear to be primarily drugs, and any fighting is concerned largely with that illegal business, not ideology. This, however, is a continuation of a trend seen in the late days of the AUC, when the anti-guerrilla model established by Carlos Castaño was superseded by drug trafficking.

What is different about the new groups is their political position and the public perception of them. The government has said they will not receive any kind of recognition but rather will be pursued as common criminals. The para-politics scandal has damaged much of the old AUC support. The AUC had enjoyed a quasi-legitimate status in some parts of the country, particularly their strongholds of Antioquia, Córdoba and parts of the Caribbean coast. The new groups have nothing like this and are seen as a mafia.

AUC commanders in Itagüí prison have lost the empathy they once felt for state and government. The peace process developed in unexpected ways. Even the government was surprised at how the Constitutional Court toughened the JPL in May 2006; the para-politics scandal was also unpredictable. AUC leaders in Itagüí feel they have been betrayed by Uribe and in particular by his peace commissioner, Luis Carlos Restrepo. All have regrets, and many say they would prefer to be back in the mountains

fighting than in a cell.²⁶⁹ Those still at liberty are no longer sympathetic to the government and in many cases know that capture could mean a one-way ticket to a U.S. court. The commanders in Itagüí have warned about the rearming of groups in various parts of the country and development of a "third generation" of paramilitaries, much more dangerous than their predecessors.²⁷⁰

The drugs business, with massive funds at its disposal, has always reacted quickly to new circumstances, devising methods to circumvent every obstacle Colombian and U.S. security forces put in its path. After the fall of the monolithic Medellín cartels in 1993 and 1995, the drug trade atomised into so-called "baby cartels", that specialised in just one or two links of the trade. The danger today is that the disbanding of the AUC and the emergence of the new groups may presage an atomisation of criminal organisations, making them more difficult to combat, much as happened after destruction of the drug cartels.

A series of agreements linking guerrillas, baby cartels and now the new groups and organised crime is already apparent. There is evidence the drug-trafficking organisations are content to let the FARC control some crop-growing areas. The FARC does not have the export routes and markets the cartels and the AUC had, although they seem to have exported cocaine directly to Mexico²⁷¹ and Brazil.²⁷² All these groups share three common interests: that the trade flourish to mutual benefit, the central government is weakened, and extradition to the U.S. is repealed. This could be the basis for a powerful alliance.

The AUC began as an anti-guerrilla federation and evolved into a drug federation in which traffickers from across the country used the paramilitary network to make deals, pool shipments and share routes. While 59 AUC leaders are detained, key players in the drug world remain at liberty, men who have cooperated before and are likely to do so again, linking up their new groups. There is also evidence that some in Itagüí still control criminal activity, using loyal lieutenants and the relative freedom for communication, including by cellphone, the prison regime allows.²⁷³

²⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 15 March 2007, Itagüí, 30 March.

²⁷⁰ Comunicqué from Salvatore Mancuso, 4 February 2007; "Existe una 'tercera generación de paramilitares más peligrosa' que la que se desmovilizó", *El Tiempo*, 23 March 2007.

²⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 16 January 2007 and 16 March

²⁷² There is the well-documented case of Brazilian drugs trafficker "Fernandiño" (Luiz Fernando da Costa), who worked with the FARC's Eastern Bloc and moved up to 20 tons of cocaine a month into Brazil. "'Fernandiño Beira', el Pablo Escobar brasileño", *El Espectador*, 20 February 2001.

²⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 9 and 16 March 2007, Itagüí, 30 March.

Heading the list of those at large is Vicente Castaño, the AUC's "diplomat". He worked in the drug trade under his brother Fidel (believed killed in a guerrilla ambush in 1994²⁷⁴), then acted as broker and middleman in drug deals, not just within the AUC but also with cartels.²⁷⁵ U.S. authorities have long considered the Mejia twins to be among Colombia's most prolific traffickers.²⁷⁶ Wilber Varela and Diego Montoya are still at large, leaders of the Norte del Valle cartel (NDVC), a "pure" drug-trafficking organisation, who did not participate in the government-AUC negotiations. Particularly Montoya worked closely with the AUC, living for some time under its protection in the Magdalena Medio.²⁷⁷

The new groups are likely to become stronger thanks to income from drugs and other illicit activities. Depending on their region and the existing criminal networks, their evolution could follow one of two paths: the AUC model, which was successful in controlling territory, population, local elites, drug routes, departure points and urban centres; or the cartel model, which is now primarily clandestine, seeking to fit in with the urban middle classes and with some legitimate businesses, while sub-contracting violence, transportation and distribution. Every new group has the backing of at least one drug-trafficking organisation and in some cases is its military wing.²⁷⁸ What happens to the commanders in Itagüí and how effective the government's "Integral Plan against Criminal Bands" is will determine whether the new groups develop the overt military power and social and economic control of the AUC. The difference could be that they will also be dedicated to fighting the state, perhaps alongside guerrilla elements.

Since the conflict with the FARC and ELN continues, however, some new groups may yet adopt the counter-insurgency stance of their AUC predecessors, acting in the interests of local elites by fighting the rebels. This is likeliest in areas where the state has been unable to project itself. There is some evidence of groups using uniforms and armbands like the AUC and issuing the same kinds of threats against human rights defenders, left-wing activists and community leaders. This is particularly so with ONG in Nariño²⁷⁹ but trade unionists in Santander have received death threats from Black Eagles.²⁸⁰

V. CONCLUSION

Paramilitary demobilisation has altered the landscape of violence and the course of the 43-year conflict. According to the government, one armed actor – the AUC – has been removed, and only the insurgent FARC and ELN remain to be fought by the military. The post-demobilisation emergence of what the Uribe administration calls "criminal gangs" is viewed with concern but the police have been charged with handling them, thus far unsuccessfully. While there are diverging views and rough estimates only on numbers of groups and members, it is clear that the problem has been growing since AUC demobilisation began in late 2003. Since 2006, the OAS has been sounding the alarm. Human rights organisations, the ombudsman's office and Colombian think-tanks have insistently, and perhaps somewhat simplistically, warned that all things paramilitary continue to exist as before, and a new generation is in the making.

The evidence gathered by Crisis Group suggests there is not one but several types of emerging or new illegal armed groups, but their common denominator is participation in criminal activities. It is still too early to tell, however, whether Colombia is witnessing the failure of AUC demobilisation and reinsertion and the resurgence of paramilitaries, or experiencing a reshaping of the criminal world, including the atomisation of actors that had been more or less united under the AUC umbrella. Both scenarios must worry anyone interested in seeing Colombia achieve peace and an end to decades of violence.

The regional evidence presented in this report suggests the variations among the new groups are best explained by (1) the degree to which the demobilisation of individual AUC units was effective, including the severing of links to non-demobilised paramilitaries and the dismantling of command structures; (2) the existence of illegal industries and networks, including the guerrillas, in the regions where demobilisation took place and new groups are emerging; (3) links to local elites and the armed forces; and (4) the general dynamic of the armed conflict, including the struggle over strategic routes and regions.

ONG in Nariño is an example of a new group that has continued acting much as the paramilitaries did. After the less than successful demobilisation of the regionally strong BLS, it is estimated that up to half its former members returned to illegal armed groups. Owing to the strong military presence of both the FARC and ELN in Nariño, ONG is fighting the guerrillas. The main motivation for its "counter-insurgency" activity is clearly control of drug crops and processing facilities as well as the trafficking routes to the Pacific and Ecuador. Government forces engaged in operations against the guerrillas have

²⁷⁴ Mauricio Aranguren Molina, *Mi Confesión Carlos Castaño revela sus secretos* (Bogotá, 2001), p. 17.

²⁷⁵ Jeremy McDermott, "Interview with Rodrigo 00", BBC News, 22 May 2004.

²⁷⁶ "Los narcogemelos", *Semana*, 3 September 2001.

²⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 16 March 2007.

²⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, 16 March 2007.

²⁷⁹ Open letter by Bishops Gustavo Girón Higueta, Hernán Alvarado Solano and Fidel León Cadavid Marín, "Comunicado Público de la Diócesis de Tumaco", Tumaco, 26 March 2007.

²⁸⁰ "Águilas Negras amenazan a grupo de sindicalistas", *Vanguardia Liberal*, 16 February 2007.

not shown themselves overly concerned with ONG. The situation is exacerbated by the penetration of Nariño by drug-trafficking organisations, in particular the Rastrojos, who seized the opportunity in the immediate post-demobilisation phase to move south and have formed an alliance with ONG.

In La Guajira and on the northern slopes of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, the emerging groups appear to operate with a similar logic. A number of mid-level commanders refused demobilisation and carried on with a reduced, tight-knit group of subordinates. Others rearmed shortly after their units demobilised. Though their numbers are small in relation to the groups of the Northern Bloc (BN) that demobilised in 2005-2006, their capacity to recruit demobilised combatants is high. They operate in a region with lucrative smuggling opportunities for all sorts of commodities, including cocaine and Venezuelan petrol. Other smaller new groups led by rearmed mid-level commanders and adopting the Black Eagles name have emerged in Maicao, a traditional city for contraband activities. Most members of these groups are not Guajira natives and are at loggerheads with the Wayúu ethnic groups that want to regain control of smuggling. The FARC are present between the Sierra Nevada and the Serranía de Perijá range, along the Venezuelan border. The security forces have been unable to consolidate control in the region.

In Norte de Santander the Black Eagle situation is different. The Catatumbo Bloc (BC) never had the almost undisputed reign that the BLS had in Nariño: the AUC and the FARC divided the territory. While the AUC established a strong presence in Cúcuta, this strategic border area was and is home to several other criminal networks, working with members of the local elite and profiting from all sorts of smuggling across the Venezuelan border. The AUC sought not to absorb these criminal organisations but to subordinate them. The BC demobilisation was more effective than that of the BLS in Nariño and the government's "special search unit" has taken strong measures against the Black Eagles.

In consequence, these new groups are operating not as old-style paramilitaries but in ad hoc alliances with other criminal groups, though this has not excluded turf wars. The Black Eagles are not fighting the FARC, which has retaken the Catatumbo region, but they are trying to control Cúcuta's neighbourhoods and some rural areas by intimidating residents. The apparent intention of Vicente Castaño, an AUC commander still on the run, to regain a strategic road in La Gabarra region from the FARC, however, could herald the re-emergence of an old-style paramilitary group in Norte de Santander.

It appears no new armed groups have appeared in Medellín but the mafia-like criminal networks linked to drugs that have existed for decades continue, supposedly still under orders from imprisoned AUC leader "Don Berna". The old paramilitary groups are no longer visible but still exert control. The effectiveness of the demobilisation of the Cacique Nutibara Bloc (BCN) in 2003 has been questioned but the mayor's office has made strong efforts to make reinsertion work. In addition, government security forces expelled guerrilla militias, though seemingly easing the way for paramilitary occupation in the process.

The government's response to the growing threat of new illegal armed groups has been inadequate. Labelling them criminal gangs does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. While there is clearly a strong criminal and drug-trafficking element to all the groups, the abundant evidence gathered by Crisis Group suggests there are different types, requiring a differentiated response. There is certainly a danger old-style paramilitary groups will emerge but also a threat that a new federation of criminal and drug-trafficking organisations could be built, perhaps including some FARC and ELN elements.

A main difficulty in controlling these groups is that the state's presence in many regions is still precarious. While security forces are larger and more active, there are questions about their effectiveness in regaining control of areas formerly controlled by the AUC as well as their commitment to fighting the new armed groups. The government is clearly dedicated to combating them – creation of the "special search unit" in Cúcuta reflects this – but the FARC are the main object of its military strategy and more often than not security forces turn a blind eye on the emerging groups. The situation is exacerbated by officials' lack of resources – and in some places pervasive fear among them – to do their job well. Crisis Group heard many bitter complaints from those in the offices of the attorney general and the ombudsman, including about the lack of cooperation from the security forces in their investigations.

The reinsertion program has had serious shortcomings. While only a minority of members of the new groups are demobilised combatants, and the program is being thoroughly restructured by the high counsellor for reintegration, the government is working against time. As paramilitaries leave the program without jobs, the risk of relapse into criminal activities increases. There is no fast-response, high-impact program that offers rural communities economic options linked to security, infrastructure investment, services and governance.

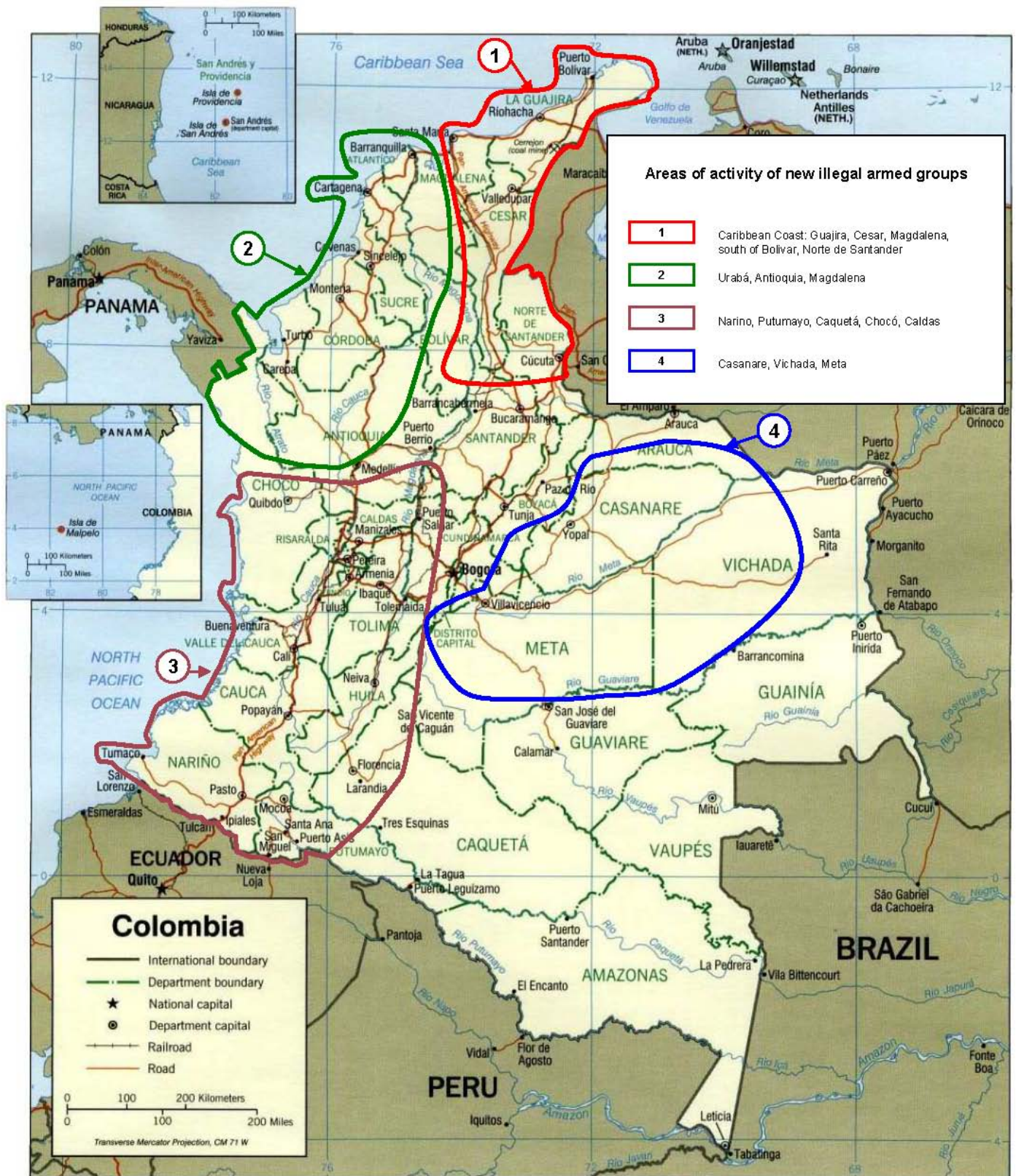
It is essential to design and implement a comprehensive strategy to confront the emerging groups and criminal organisations. This requires more effective law enforcement,

military action linked to better intelligence and improvements to the reintegration program, in parallel with strengthened governance at the community level that enables the government, in conjunction with civil society and the private sector, to act more effectively – and more rapidly – to address post-demobilisation challenges.

Bogotá/Brussels, 10 May 2007

APPENDIX A

MAP OF COLOMBIA WITH AREAS OF NEW GROUP ACTIVITY



Based on a map made available by The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Colombia's Borders: The Weak Link in Uribe's Security Policy, Latin America Report N°9, 23 September 2004 (also available in Spanish)

A New Chance for Haiti?, Latin America/Caribbean Report N°10, 17 November 2004 (also available in French)

War and Drugs in Colombia, Latin America Report N°11, 27 January 2005 (also available in Spanish)

Haiti's Transition: Hanging in the Balance, Latin America/Caribbean Briefing N°7, 8 February 2005 (also available in French)

Coca, Drugs and Social Protest in Bolivia and Peru, Latin America Report N°12, 3 March 2005 (also available in Spanish)

Spoiling Security in Haiti, Latin America/Caribbean Report N°13, 31 May 2005

Colombia: Presidential Politics and Political Prospects, Latin America Report N°14, 16 June 2005 (also available in Spanish)

Can Haiti Hold Elections in 2005?, Latin America/Caribbean Briefing N°8, 3 August 2005 (also available in French)

Haiti's Elections: The Case for a Short Delay, Latin America/Caribbean Briefing N°9, 25 November 2005 (also available in French)

Bolivia at the Crossroads: The December Elections, Latin America Report N°15, 8 December 2005 (also available in Spanish)

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