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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is based on the findings of a three-week assessment trip to Colombia in September 2006 by a United States Institute of Peace-sponsored team that included the author, Iciar Gomez, Cynthia Mohoney, and Will Owens. Traveling to Bogotá, Medellín, and the northern province of Córdoba, the team interviewed more than a hundred demobilized ex-AUC combatants and scores of government officials, NGO representatives, Catholic and Protestant church leaders, and civil-society workers.

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Jonathan Morgenstein

Consolidating Disarmament

Lessons from Colombia's Reintegration Program for Demobilized Paramilitaries

Summary

- Colombia embarked on a major disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program in 2003 with the goal of permanently ending the threat of violence from the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). This program progressed surprisingly smoothly through disarmament and demobilization but has stumbled on reintegration.
- Lessons from Colombia's reintegration program are best understood if examined from the standpoint of the three major sectors involved in the DDR process: the national government, the demobilized combatants, and the local communities.
- By examining Colombia's experience with reintegration and understanding the lessons from that process, other countries may be more likely to succeed in consolidating and making permanent their own combatants' disarmament.
- The Colombian government decided against granting a blanket amnesty to individuals who had committed violent crimes. Instead, it initiated a reintegration process that utilizes the existing domestic justice system. As a result, the justice system has been overtaxed.
- A justice mechanism that is seen as fair as possible by all parties—the demobilized combatants, the victims, and the population at large—underpins the ability of the state to reassert itself and to make permanent the reintegration process.
- Demobilized combatants were offered a number of benefits, such as educational, legal and psychosocial services, and health care. Also, support centers were established throughout the country to facilitate their reintegration into society. However, the centers were not provided with the needed resources, and the benefits were largely insufficient.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

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- Support centers should be a lynchpin to any government's reintegration efforts. These centers should be fully staffed with personnel who have gone through significant training on all the regulations governing the DDR process and all the resources available to the demobilized combatants.
- Governments must provide access to appropriate educational and training programs to ensure successful reintegration. Further, offering appropriate incentives for attendance would substantially increase the likelihood of successfully reintegrating ex-combatants.
- The national government failed to communicate the details of the reintegration program to local authorities. As a result, civilian populations were often left uninformed, exacerbating feelings of alienation and the perception that their government was collaborating against them and their interests.
- Reintegration programs must be flexible and adapt to local needs and concerns. Further, a comprehensive strategic communications plan is important to ensure transparency and the appropriate dissemination of information and to minimize local frictions over reintegration efforts.
- If the problems with Colombia's current reintegration program are not addressed, many of the demobilized combatants may return to their former lives of violence and crime, and Colombia will miss out on the real peace that has eluded it for almost sixty years.

Introduction

An essential component of any post-conflict stabilization program is the permanent dismantlement of armed groups and their fruitful absorption into civilian society—this process is known as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Although Colombia continues to wrestle with violent conflict at the hands of multiple armed factions, the country embarked on a major DDR program in 2003 with the goal of permanently ending the threat of violence from one of those armed factions—the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or AUC). This program progressed surprisingly smoothly through disarmament and demobilization but has stumbled to a degree on reintegration.¹

This report offers a brief history of the AUC and then examines aspects of Colombia's reintegration process from the standpoint of the government, the demobilized combatants, and the communities at large, offering general lessons for Colombia and future DDR initiatives elsewhere. It is neither meant to be an exhaustive study of Colombian reintegration efforts nor is it meant to offer specific lessons for Colombia, particularly in light of the ever-changing political landscape in Colombia. Rather, the report is intended to offer a broad understanding of obstacles future reintegration programs might encounter anywhere in the world and to provide potential paths for overcoming those obstacles.

Colombia and the AUC

For the American public, Colombia conjures images of death squads, civil war, narco-kingpins, brutal kidnappings, and ubiquitous chaos. The key protagonist forces that drove those images for decades were the drug cartels, the left-wing guerrilla movements—Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN)—and the right-wing paramilitaries of the AUC.

FARC's and ELN's origins were based on the economic grievances that have typically spawned leftist Latin American insurgencies. Because of the state's inability to pro-

vide protection from these left-wing insurgent groups, wealthy land and business owners formed local militias to defend themselves. Over the years these militias took on a life of their own, establishing an extensive network and eventually becoming coordinated under the AUC umbrella. These paramilitary groups also achieved a blurry status at the margins of the law, receiving tacit support from legal authorities. At times, authorities overtly sanctioned paramilitary activities—for example, by coordinating AUC and official police or military efforts. However, the AUC eventually became a law unto itself and evolved into what was labeled by the U.S. government as one of the world's largest terrorist groups, engaging in massive narco-trafficking and widespread death-squad activities.

As a result of the cocaine trade's expansion in the 1980s and the collapse of international communism in the 1990s, both the FARC and AUC began to transform. They became progressively less and less driven by political ideology and more and more involved in drug trafficking, mafia-style criminality, and territorial battles. In 2003, Colombian president Álvaro Uribe successfully induced the AUC to dismantle itself voluntarily, and AUC leaders proclaimed that they desired to build the "authentic peace that the Colombian nation waits for and deserves."² Experts, skeptical of the paramilitaries' self-professed altruism, have speculated on multiple rationales as to why the paramilitaries offered to hand in their weapons. One widely circulated rumor in Colombia is that President Uribe gave a verbal promise that no paramilitary leaders would be extradited to the United States if they complied with the terms of the agreement. Another theory is that many paramilitaries felt they could manipulate and ride out the toughest terms of the agreement, emerging on the other side of the process with a clean slate, in full legal possession of their assets, and with all of their crimes absolved.

AUC Disarmament and Demobilization

When the Colombian government embarked on the AUC's demobilization, officials anticipated that twenty thousand men and women would turn in their weapons and renounce the path of the gun. To their shock and excitement, by April 2006, more than thirty-one thousand men and women of the AUC had lined up to participate in the DDR program.³

It is unknown from where the additional eleven thousand (or more) demobilized individuals came. One theory is that the AUC's force strength had been underestimated. A second theory is that drug traffickers who wished to avoid prosecution or extradition posed as paramilitaries and enrolled in the program. A third theory is that a large number of noncombatants who had been AUC supporters participated in the program, such as local farmers, artisans, and cooks. A fourth theory is that a number of tagalongs "joined" the AUC at the very last moment to enjoy demobilization benefits, such as job training and a cash stipend. A fifth and final theory is that the paramilitary leaders deliberately gamed the system: they hired otherwise unrelated peasants to pose en masse as rank-and-file troops with substandard weapons, leaving the core paramilitary forces intact.

Some observers cite a prolific array of failures in the AUC DDR process. While many such criticisms have strong merit, objectively speaking the DDR effort has borne some fruit. For example, the drop in crime levels following demobilization has been undeniable. According to the Colombian National Police, between 2002 and 2005, kidnappings dropped by 73 percent, homicides by 37 percent, "terrorist actions" by 63 percent, extortion by 31 percent, commercial cargo theft by 50 percent, and auto theft by 37 percent.

Nevertheless, one crucial question of the process must be addressed: how permanent is the demobilization? More specifically, will the overwhelming majority of the demobilized individuals blend into civilian society and become productive and peaceful contributors to their communities? Or will they become a source of violence and conflict, especially once the "humanitarian aid," virtually their only initial legal source of income, runs out? Will they become a new but traditional criminal threat, or perhaps relaunch illegal armed groups that are at times allied with narco-traffickers, death squads, and human-rights-abusing defense militias?

Colombia has seen reasonable success with its disarmament and demobilization programs, but its follow-up reintegration program has left much to be desired.

AUC Reintegration?

Any initially successful program of demobilization and disarmament must be followed up with a well-planned and fully implemented reintegration program to ensure ultimate success. Colombia has seen reasonable success with its disarmament and demobilization programs, but its follow-up reintegration program has left much to be desired. In the process, Colombia's experience with reintegration has left numerous lessons—positive and negative—for other countries that might one day undertake a similar process. To fully lay out and understand these lessons, this report examines Colombia's reintegration process from the standpoint of the three major sectors involved: the government, the demobilized combatants themselves, and the communities into which the demobilized combatants must assimilate.

National Government Structures

The Colombian model for peace and reconciliation is rare among recent reintegration processes. Colombia has chosen not to offer amnesty for criminal acts committed by combatants during the conflict or to employ the use of war-crimes trials—lengthy procedures that often take place in international courts outside of the country at issue. Instead, the Colombian government has initiated a process of peace that utilizes the existing domestic justice system. Another factor that makes the Colombian case unique is that this process has been initiated in the midst of ongoing violent confrontation in many parts of the country. Normally such processes are initiated only upon the cessation of active hostilities. Although this choice means that Colombia's example might be atypical as a model for future reference, the strengths and weaknesses of Colombia's effort can be valuable for those seeking to walk that terribly fine line between a cold pragmatist's amnesty and a total idealist's justice. Indeed, this choice is one with which all reintegration processes must wrestle in order to find the most effective balance for a specific conflict.

Justice and Peace Laws: Permanent Legal Structures for the Rule of Law

Colombia's justice process is an important component in the reintegration of former combatants. One of the major factors in Colombia's continuing violence is the lack of state legitimacy and the rule of law in many corners of the country. If the perpetrators of crimes continue to run free, then there will be less faith in the law, both for the demobilized combatants and others in the communities. Even if perpetrators are not convicted, a serious effort at finding and prosecuting those who have committed the most egregious acts of violence reinforces a culture of lawfulness and the rule of law. It acts as a deterrent to those who may be contemplating a return to the paramilitary or criminal lifestyle. It also reaffirms the greater society's faith in the state, the lack of which was a prime contributor to the genesis of the paramilitaries in the first place. Moreover, victims, other vulnerable populations, and civilians in general will be more likely to support the assimilation of demobilized combatants if there is reason to believe that those who represent a violent threat due to past atrocities have been weeded out and brought to justice.

The Colombian government established two laws to provide structure for this process: Law 782 and Law 975 (commonly referred to collectively as the Justice and Peace Laws, or JPL). Law 782 was adopted in 2002 and allows the president to pardon "political crimes" but not crimes against humanity, torture, forced displacement, kidnapping, or other heinous crimes. Such blanket amnesty had been granted by previous administrations as a key concession in past negotiations with guerilla groups. However, the massive number of heinous crimes that had been committed over thirty years and a changed international environment made blanket amnesty an unacceptable concession. Law 782 also provides for a set of social, economic, and judicial benefits to be offered to the demobilized, including

access to health care, education, employment-generating “productive projects,” and psychosocial support for reintegration into Colombian society.⁴

In June 2005, the Colombian Congress passed Law 975. Its purpose is to discover the facts about crimes committed during paramilitary activities in order to acknowledge the rights of victims to truth, justice, and reparations. Law 975 establishes the legal procedures for trying and punishing perpetrators of violent crimes as members of paramilitary groups. Ostensibly, the JPL prioritized the rights of victims. However, Law 975 was based upon the willingness of perpetrators (*victimarios*) to confess their crimes. In return for complete and truthful confessions, perpetrators received reduced sentences of no more than five to eight years, depending on their crimes.⁵ This reduced sentence would be forfeited should a confession later prove to be incomplete or should the former combatant fail to adhere to the conditions of the sentence. Due to case overload, it appears unlikely that any serious investigations can take place beyond those to which the perpetrators are already confessing.

Indeed, with the registration of more than forty thousand demobilized combatants—thirty-one thousand demobilized from the AUC paramilitaries and nine thousand voluntarily demobilized from the FARC and ELN guerillas—the amount of evidence and testimonies to investigate under Law 975 is overwhelming. While visiting the Fiscalía’s (Colombian Attorney General’s) offices in Bogotá, the USIP team was shown five rooms filled with thousands of documents and files containing confessions and evidence for cases yet to be investigated. As of October 2006, nearly three thousand demobilized combatants had come forward to provide testimony for their crimes. However, as a representative of the Fiscalía pointed out during an interview, many of these crimes go back more than twenty years. “How can you investigate that?” he asked rhetorically, noting the meager resources available to them for investigations; at the start of the process only twenty-three people were assigned to investigate the potentially thousands of cases. By September 2007 only a small number of cases had actually begun trials, despite the large number of paramilitary testimonies.⁶ By this date, 5,344 former combatants had been currently postulated or listed for prosecution under Law 975.⁷

In reality, Law 975 is not intended to prosecute all thirty-one thousand demobilized AUC paramilitaries but only those directly involved in major violent crimes against Colombian citizens. It could, however, serve as a significant tool for dismantling paramilitary structures. Until upper and midlevel paramilitary leaders are tried for their crimes, many will continue to operate criminal and subversive enterprises from the shadows through informal, illicit structures.

This threat was borne out in discussions with rank-and-file demobilized combatants. Many of those interviewed by USIP admitted to maintaining contact with their former midlevel leaders. While they felt the highest AUC leaders had abandoned them, these former foot soldiers maintained connections with the mid and low-level leaders, who were apparently waiting out the reintegration process with the hope that demobilized combatants would come to them looking for jobs—illicit or otherwise. “Narco groups are seeking us out,” one demobilized combatant told the team. Warned another, “We don’t want to go back to war, but we will if we have to. Colombia will suffer, but we need to feed our families.” Some of these former paramilitaries were explicitly promised higher wages and better conditions if they returned once their eighteen-month demobilization benefits ended. The message was clear: unless the Colombian government began to fully implement Law 975 to prosecute and convict former paramilitary leaders, informal structures would continue to exist and both the government’s sincerity toward the peace process and the government’s legitimacy itself would be thrown into greater and greater doubt.

Lesson: No civil conflict in the world has ever been resolved with all parties feeling that full “justice” has been served. Nevertheless, attempts at some modicum of justice—such as Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Hague tribunals, Rwanda’s Arusha trials, and South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission—are crucial to the long-term success of DDR and domestic peace.

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The most successful reintegration processes will have a mechanism for removing those potential spoilers.

The most successful reintegration processes will have a mechanism for removing those potential spoilers who have a vested interest in the reestablishment and/or continuation of the recently demobilized groups. Moreover, as weak states and the absence of the rule of law are among the core causes of the original emergence of armed groups in most civil conflicts, a proper justice mechanism that buttresses the state and the rule of law is essential for the social compact. In short, a justice mechanism that is seen as fair by all parties—the demobilized combatants, the victims, and the population at large—underpins the ability of the state to reassert itself and to make permanent the DDR process.

Frank Pearl's Appointment as "Reintegration Czar": Unity of Effort

In the initial phases of the DDR program, multiple agencies were in charge of major components of the reintegration process. President Uribe recognized the problems inherent to this structure and other serious gaps in the crucial reintegration program, including a notable lack of effort to engage the business sector in the process. As a result, following his overwhelming reelection victory in May 2006, President Uribe signed Presidential Decree 3043, thereby establishing a high counselor for reinsertion to address these problems.

President Uribe appointed Frank Pearl, a successful entrepreneur respected in many sectors of society, as high counselor to execute a major overhaul of the reintegration program. Aware that there were serious flaws with the existing program, he embarked on an inclusive and broad-based selection of advisers to set the program on the right path. Reporting directly to the president himself, Pearl consolidated a number of separate and at times rival agencies that had previously been tasked with implementing different aspects of the DDR program. Although major shortcomings in the Colombian reinsertion program remain, there are some indications that by unifying the program, Pearl was able to conduct an assessment of the existing program's strengths and weaknesses and identify areas for improvement. For example, Pearl recognized through in-person discussions with personnel in the field that one of the highest priorities to address was the dearth of support centers for demobilized combatants, known as Centers for References and Opportunities (Centro de Referencia y Oportunidades, or CROs). Pearl expanded their numbers from eleven in the summer of 2006 to more than twice that by autumn of 2007.

Lesson: Consolidating multiple programs under the leadership of one person can increase accountability and improve the allocation of resources by allowing for an objective examination of needs. Further, a unified and streamlined structure can more effectively promote efficient and complementary execution of the separate agencies' reintegration programs. However, a unified program should not be equated with "centralization." As the following lessons will stress, a decentralization of authority and close consultation with provincial and municipal governments will be key to success on the local level.

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Demobilized Combatants

The key to a successful reintegration program is ensuring that the ex-combatants remain demobilized and choose a life free of violence. This is easier said than done, as many have been socialized in violent and paramilitary environments their entire adult lives. These men and women must radically adapt to a peaceful coexistence among civilian populations and establish a viable career often without marketable skills. Some undoubtedly would prefer to remain as combatants. However, the vast majority, who want to reintegrate successfully, struggle to find the coping mechanisms and skill sets that can help them succeed in this new life.

Centers for References and Opportunities

The establishment of CROs, ostensibly as a central clearinghouse for all reintegration-related efforts, was an innovative and potentially very constructive component of the

total DDR system. The CROs were financed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and operated on a contract by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a privately funded, UN-affiliated displaced-person support organization. CROs supposedly provided “one-stop shopping” for all information regarding benefits, legal, psychosocial, and educational support, and all other issues related to the DDR process. However, by September 2006, there were only eleven total CROs—including three for demobilized minors—spread throughout the country. Although each CRO had a permanent staff that performed all the local and personal administrative work for each demobilized ex-combatant, the CROs as a whole were not living up to their potential in a number of ways.

First, the CROs could have been constructive points for the dissemination of information and services, but they were being underutilized. Generally speaking, however, CRO staff was not sufficiently explaining to demobilized combatants what programs were available and how such programs worked. To some degree, this deficiency appeared to reflect a lack of understanding among the CRO personnel themselves about how all the reintegration programs functioned or even which benefits and support existed. Moreover, even if CRO employees did know about all the available resources, only a few of the resources were currently accessible at the CROs rather than at multiple disparate service-providing locations.

Second, the CROs could have been contact points for other organizations to reach the demobilized, but they were not consistently utilized this way. For example, management of the entire program of providing services to the demobilized combatants would be much simplified by centralizing all program registration through the CROs.

Third, the monitoring of the demobilized combatants was at times disorganized and flawed. The CROs could operate more effectively if they had sustained computerized files (or at least meticulous paper records) on each demobilized individual. These files would include all of their personal data and information about the support they had received. In Medellín, for example, maintaining lists of the demobilized combatants’ current residences fell to the police, who were periodically sent to verify addresses. This is not the type of job that police should be doing. Because they do not necessarily have the time to take on such an effort, this requirement often fell through the cracks. One government official in Montería told the USIP team that in June 2006 there were approximately 2,999 demobilized individuals that his government agency was supposed to support. Three months later, he was told there were only 2,204. No one knew how the other eight hundred had disappeared.

Lesson: A central, comprehensive support center should be a lynchpin to reintegration efforts. These centers should be fully staffed with personnel who have gone through a significant block of training on all the regulations governing the DDR process and all the resources available to the demobilized. Local personnel, who can account for the variety of individual community needs and responsibilities, should staff them. Local personnel will also facilitate communication and coordination between the CROs and the local governments, schools, and health care networks to ensure local support for the program.

Additionally, all CROs should hire demobilized individuals to help run the offices, a policy many have already implemented. On a small scale, this allows the few who obtain these positions a chance to develop important skills. On a larger scale, this will help give the CROs credibility with ex-combatants and give demobilized individuals someone with whom they could relate “on the inside.”

Nevertheless, the network of CROs should be accountable to the unified reintegration program. This will ensure that potential services and changes to the system do not fall through the cracks and that all CROs are aware of all changes. Moreover, it will facilitate feedback from the personnel on the ground level to the government officials at the top who are running the entire program.

A central, comprehensive support center should be a lynchpin to reintegration efforts.

National Learning Service

The National Learning Service (El Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje, or SENA) is the community college network in Colombia that conducts vocational training. Its programs run from basic classes lasting a few months to year-long courses on advanced subjects such as auto mechanics. One of the CROs' tasks has been to help demobilized combatants enter the SENA in order to gain useful job skills. Unfortunately, many SENA sites have very limited class selections. Some sites, for instance, only have fish-farming and bread-baking classes.

Such a bare-minimum education is insufficient. Relevant schooling must be made readily accessible to all demobilized combatants no matter the location or reading and education level. Colombia has had mixed results in these areas, doing better in some provinces and worse in others. For example, almost all demobilized individuals with whom the USIP team spoke either expressed happiness at the educational opportunities they had received or bemoaned the lack of such opportunities.

Although the SENA program was one of the few widely praised aspects of the reinsertion process, substantive criticisms of the SENA programs remained. First, courses were not always useful and did not always fit the local target demographics' needs. Although the program was offered in many locations, even in some very small and rural municipalities, course selection was often based on who was available and willing to teach regardless of how many times the same course had been given or whether it was needed in the first place. Thus, many demobilized combatants went to the SENA searching for a specific course, such as irrigation techniques, only to find that no such course was offered.

Second, the course schedules were often not posted in a convenient place; even when posted, the postings were often wrong. Thus, many demobilized combatants had trouble finding their classes because of time and location issues.

Third, at times a SENA school may have been operating well, but it did not want to admit demobilized individuals because the professor or the other students were scared to have them in class. They were afraid that if a dispute arose, the former combatants would use violence to address it.

Fourth, the demobilized combatants often had very low levels of education and could not attend regular courses for which the completion of a secondary education was a prerequisite. Instead, demobilized combatants were often provided a very basic one-to-three month introductory course in a given skill set, such as auto mechanics, and were later unable to advance to a higher level of classes because they were still functionally illiterate.

Fifth, there was also a lack of motivation among some demobilized combatants that must be acknowledged and addressed. In the northern small town of Valencia, for example, ten demobilized individuals were completing their primary education when the team visited the municipality, and a hundred more were working to finish their secondary school education. However, 402 were not attending any formal educational classes although most of them appeared to be married and many of their wives had access to school. Once the accessibility and other issues discussed above are addressed, a systematic survey of those still not attending school should be conducted to determine why they are not attending classes. Only when the causes of absenteeism are determined, can adequate remedies be designed.

Sixth, the demobilized combatants did not receive any stipend above those payments normally made to those who attend school, such as subsidized transportation to and from school. However, this subsidy often does not even cover the full cost of transportation. Thus, those who attended classes sacrificed more financially—even if only marginally—than those who did not take advantage of the educational support.

Lesson: Because education is the key to economic opportunity and a prosperous future in civilian society, governments must provide access to appropriate education and training programs to ensure reintegration. Further, offering appropriate incentives for attendance would substantially increase the likelihood of successfully reintegrating ex-combatants.

Governments must provide access to appropriate education and training programs to ensure reintegration.

System for Tracking, Monitoring, and Evaluation

The System for Tracking, Monitoring, and Evaluation (Sistema de Acompañamiento, Monitoreo y Evaluación, or SAME) was the computer program used by USAID and IOM to biographically and biometrically register every demobilized ex-paramilitary and to develop an ongoing portfolio of their progress toward normalized reintegration. Among other data, SAME stores fingerprints, DNA samples, and physical descriptions. Additionally, it lists all the academic course work and benefits that each demobilized individual has received from the DDR program. During the disarmament process, every ex-combatant who wanted to receive compensation for disarming had to hand in his or her weapons and be entered into a computer database. This registration process was done systematically at the moment of disarmament and demobilization. Many observers described this initial registration in a positive light. The CROs have used SAME to keep track of each demobilized individual's progress in education, training, and other aspects of reintegration.

However, SAME could have been used much more effectively. As noted, the CROs were not utilizing the programs as comprehensively as they could have. Also, this computer program and its contents were considered proprietary and in the possession of IOM. The government of Colombia was not given full and free access to the data stored on the database. Moreover, many local government officials had no idea that the database even existed. One local minister of health complained that he had no idea exactly how many ex-combatants resided in his jurisdiction. He understood that the nearest CRO was somehow responsible for maintaining numbers, but he had never heard of SAME or known that the information stored in the program existed. If this minister had wanted to develop a mental-health-support program for demobilized combatants within his jurisdiction, he would have encountered multiple unnecessary obstacles to assessing the scale and type of problems common among the demobilized demographic.

Lesson: A computer database that catalogues and tracks information on each ex-combatant can be extremely useful for on-going maintenance and improvement of a reintegration effort. But software is only as effective as its sustained inputs. A database must be up, running, and function checked before demobilization to allow immediate registration and tracking of every demobilized person. Furthermore, every major change in each ex-combatant's status (residence, job, health, education) should be annotated to allow reintegration support staff to determine which demobilized combatants are in greatest need of specific kinds of support. The staff must then proactively connect individual ex-combatants to appropriate support services.

"Humanitarian Support"

Fifty-eight percent of demobilized combatants in Colombia never made it to sixth grade, and 87 percent never made it to tenth grade.⁸ Moreover, many joined their armed factions for economic reasons. In order to reintegrate successfully, ex-combatants must very quickly obtain a means to support themselves and their families or be working toward such an end. As the lack of quality jobs was likely a cause of conflict to begin with, ensuring access to work will be key to the sustainability of peace. Until then, it is important to ensure that the demobilized do not become disillusioned with the DDR process and that they can provide for themselves and their families until a permanent job comes along. Therefore, a stipend or transitional support is required for ex-combatants. In Colombia's process, this stipend is poorly labeled as "humanitarian support".

Nevertheless, the stipends cannot become an excuse for ex-combatants to become lazy and dependent. The stipend must be only a *transitional* support mechanism. To ensure that demobilized individuals will come off the support, a number of structures must be built into the stipend program. While there has to be a reasonable period to prepare an ex-combatant for assimilation into the job market as a qualified, employable laborer,

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there must be a sunset on the stipend to ensure the recipient does not try to live on it forever. To ensure that even the least motivated individuals use the stipend-supported time effectively, the stipend's provision must be contingent every month on engagement with other self-help programs.

Thus, demobilized combatants should only receive their stipend if they can prove that they have been attending education courses, receiving psychosocial support, searching for permanent employment, etc. Because many demobilized combatants have families to support, the stipends should be scaled so ex-combatants with dependents receive more money. This approach presents obvious risks of fraud, but these can be mitigated with biometric identification of families and rules that only count dependents who were in existence at the time of the actual demobilization.

In accordance with the agreement between the government and the AUC, the government of Colombia did provide demobilized individuals a modest stipend of 358,000 Colombian pesos (US \$160 at the time) each month. This money was allocated for eighteen months from the date at which the ex-combatants demobilized. They were then individually eligible to apply for a one-time six-month extension of the stipend.

This financial help was just barely enough for one person to survive for a month and certainly not enough to support a family. This encouraged the participants to seek alternative forms of income rather than invest in the education or psychosocial counseling that is time consuming but important to long-term stability and income generation.

The stipend was directly deposited in a local bank account, which the participant had to establish. The establishment of the account was a positive concept in that it introduced the demobilized individuals to the formal financial system, which many had never dealt with before. However, there was no indication of extensive instruction for the demobilized on how to take advantage of and benefit from banking services (e.g., savings accounts and/or loans). So while this aspect of the stipend program had potential to improve longer-term household financial stability, the program could have been greatly strengthened in this regard.

Unfortunately, the initial stipend required no actions from the ex-combatants once they demobilized and handed in their weapons. Moreover, the extension did not require proof that the demobilized were actively engaged in any self-improvement programs. The officials and ex-combatants the USIP team questioned largely agreed that if ex-combatants were required to attend classes in order to receive their stipend, most would likely return to school. The ex-combatants did have to verify their current address on a periodic basis, but this was the responsibility of the CROs. If the nearest CRO did not monitor this issue, the ex-combatant suffered no consequence for not updating the CRO.

As mentioned, in the Antioquia region outside Medellín, the police force handled address verification. The police, ostensibly once per month, authenticated that a given ex-combatant still lived at a specific location. If they could not verify that the demobilized individual lived there, the stipend was suspended until the residence was reconfirmed with a visual identification of the individual. This clearly put a burden on the police outside their traditional responsibilities. Further, given the past role of certain police elements in the country's political violence, having police play this role left questions as to whether this was the best policy. Placing more of the burden on the demobilized individuals themselves to prove that they are still at the same location and having designated CRO civilians conducting periodic residence verifications would likely be a much more sustainable and less confrontational method.

Lesson: Reintegration of ex-combatants in all conflicts requires that they buy into the new order. Offering the demobilized a viable economic future demands that they have proper educational, psychosocial, and financial support until they are ready and able to fully reenter civilian life. Tying direct monetary incentives to these essential steps toward reintegration dramatically increases the likelihood demobilized individuals will follow through on these processes.

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Psychosocial Support

The psychological trauma of engaging in ongoing warfare for years has been well documented. Reintegration is especially difficult for those who became combatants during their adolescent years and never fully acculturated to a peaceful, civilian lifestyle before picking up guns. This is evident in the dire need for psychosocial counseling of demobilized combatants everywhere in the world where violence has been endemic. Colombia is no different in this sense.

After lack of economic opportunity, the lack of access to psychosocial counseling was the second most common criticism of the reintegration program. From the government officials in Bogotá to the priests in Montería to the demobilized individuals in Santa Fe Ralito, everyone agreed that the experience of serving in the paramilitaries had traumatized the ex-combatants in a way that impeded their reintegration to civilian society.

The most common manifestation of this psychological trauma appeared to be the extraordinarily low threshold toward resorting to violence in solving a conflict. An official at the CRO in Montería, the capital of the province of Córdoba, expressed fear for her personal safety after demobilized combatants violently rioted following a delay in their humanitarian-support payments. Despite the ex-combatants' apparent recognition that the workers at the CRO were there to help, they had internalized the use of force as the means of resolving conflict.

Every demobilized individual ostensibly passed through an initial course in psychosocial support offered by the IOM. This course received positive reviews from virtually everyone affiliated with the DDR process interviewed by the team, including the ex-combatants themselves. However, these classes were considered tremendously insufficient to confront the profound issues that needed to be addressed. That is, the course was considered a fantastic introduction to a much-needed follow-up course that was rarely taught.

The only place where counseling appeared to approach satisfactory levels was in Medellín, which had established its own reintegration program. This Medellín reintegration program—developed by the strong leadership of Medellín's reform-minded mayor and his broadly participatory administration—set a high standard for the rest of the country and at times avoided DDR mistakes that were found elsewhere. As Colombia's economic powerhouse, Medellín could afford to provide counseling services with its own local resources, which far outstripped those available to the rest of the country. But even in Medellín, the system was strained and able to provide only group counseling sessions rather than individual support. As evidence of the dedication and commitment of the personnel on the ground, some of the counselors expressed a willingness to try to help individuals outside the classroom. Nevertheless, this was the exception to the standard rule.

Lesson: Future reintegration programs elsewhere are advised to ensure ongoing mental-health support for demobilized individuals.

Productive Projects for Peace

Government-sponsored projects are often necessary to ensure the short- and medium-term employment of demobilized forces.

Colombia established a major government-sponsored employment program collectively known as the Productive Project for Peace (PPP) to address this need. Through the PPP, Colombia's government encouraged economic growth by requiring a sound business plan in exchange for seed money and land to initiate the venture. Despite good intentions, the PPP program was flawed. There tended to be significant confusion among the reintegrated combatants about the PPP. They understood that this was likely their best method of attaining economic viability outside the confines of the old—or newly forming—paramilitary blocs. However, what those opportunities were and where the reinserted combatants could apply to participate in these projects were very poorly understood.

Government-sponsored projects are often necessary to ensure the short- and medium-term employment of demobilized forces.

Although the demobilized combatants expressed major confusion regarding eligibility requirements, they agreed that in certain regions only those demobilized combatants loyal to the local strongman ever got their plans approved. Although this might have been a conspiracy-fueled misperception, the lack of transparency in the process did nothing to alleviate such rumors.

The key point here is that there was a severe lack of understanding regarding processes for reinserted combatants to apply for participation in the PPP. If there was a standard set of procedures, requirements, and forms to be filled out, the CROs should have been much more effective at publicizing them. In fact, it would have been extremely useful if the entire PPP effort were run through either the CROs or the local banks where the ex-combatants received stipends.

Contrary to the understanding of the demobilized combatants, the official process was run by the government's Colombian Institute of Rural Development (INCODER). INCODER processed the applications and determined the selection criteria. A representative of the Office of High Commissioner for Peace (OACP), which has oversight responsibility for INCODER's execution of the PPP effort, said that as of December 2006 there were only twenty existing productive projects in the entire country, employing 937 demobilized and 400 agriculture workers.

As these numbers indicate, the program was actually not exclusively dedicated to demobilized combatants. Other citizens, even those who had nothing to do with the paramilitaries, could participate in the program. However, all groups applying for a project had to show a well-designed business plan. INCODER would only award land—and the 2 million pesos per demobilized participant for seed money (non ex-combatant, internally displaced persons only received 1.75 million pesos)—to groups proposing projects that fit criteria established in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and the OACP. The award criteria called for projects that would be profitable, have an assured market, generate jobs and income, use clean technology, protect natural resources and the environment, and engage with private-sector business partners.

Aside from questions about the application process and complaints about lack of information, ex-combatants whom the team interviewed repeatedly cited two key limiting factors of the PPPs as a major solution to the employment problems. First, all PPP proposals required a 200,000 Colombian pesos (US\$93) application fee, which would not be returned if the application was rejected. Second, all proposals for demobilized AUC combatants had to be for agriculture-based projects based in rural areas. This last issue was a shocking impediment to employment prospects because more than 80 percent of demobilized combatants claimed to be from a city or town.⁹

The demobilized combatants who settled in rural areas and attempted to establish a PPP encountered problems of titling rights. Over the years, the paramilitaries coercively appropriated tremendous tracts of land. INCODER was the organization empowered to acquire the land through expropriation or direct negotiation with current owners. Locals in Colombia told the USIP team that former paramilitary leaders were trying to launder their illicitly seized land through the PPP process. They hoped to have the land taken by the government, then reallocated to a PPP project run and operated by their prior subordinates. Eventually the land would simply accrue back to these “para-jefes” with fully legal mechanisms authenticating their ownership. This process of “collective reparation” is both legal and facilitated by the JPL. It is problematic in that it perpetuates, codifies, and effectively amnesties past injustices, as well as lays the seeds for future organized crime.

The confusion regarding how to apply to the program meant many who were ready, willing, and able to work would have been incapable of navigating the system. Therefore, they effectively huddled together under the umbrellas of individuals with the resources and knowledge of how to establish a PPP. Unfortunately, some of these knowledgeable people exploited those who had gathered with them for work. They gathered many more workers than needed for their projects in an attempt to seize the two million pesos each

worker brought them. For example, the USIP team visited a project waiting on approval where there was only sufficient work for half the PPP employees who had signed on for the project. They all worked two months then took two months off. But instead of breaking off into two groups, seeking two separate projects on two separate plots of land, the group leader worked to ensure the project continued in this vein, paying a minimum salary to the project participants. The leader of this specific PPP—whom USIP witnessed acting in an intimidating fashion toward others—was clearly exploiting many if not most of those in his project.

Lesson: Government-sponsored employment programs are clearly necessary for reintegrating ex-combatants into civilian life. But the programs will only be successful if developed properly. Microcredit models with sufficient educational and vocational support have proven effective around the world and should be constructive in the DDR environment as well. However, these types of programs must be simple to apply for, well publicized, available to demobilized combatants across all regions (rural and urban) and sectors, and subject to effective oversight by inspectors to ensure that they do not become corrupted, manipulated, and abused by organized (or individual) criminal elements.

A Closing Time Window

From the moment demobilization begins, there is limited time to carry out the reintegration of the demobilized combatants back into mainstream society. They and the receiving communities have expectations that, if not met quickly, can lead to disillusionment, frustration, violence, and crime. In addition, because DDR takes place in countries that are generally poor and unstable, the governments that must support reintegration programs often rely on external sources to fund such efforts. Thus, the support promised by the government to the demobilized combatants often has a hard time limit—normally linked to resource availability provided by international support, which may wane due to the international community's short attention span.

A comprehensive and fully funded reintegration program needs to be in place when demobilization actually begins. In Colombia, the initial paramilitary units demobilized before the money was even available for the reintegration programs. If the reintegration program does not begin on schedule, then the demobilized combatants will be waiting around for what they have been promised. The growing disappointment in the lack of organization in Colombia's reintegration program was causing individuals to contemplate a return to combatant life either as members of their original militias or as independent, violent criminals. One ex-combatant told the team, "Maybe the government promised too much too fast. People are not getting what was promised to them."

A number of ex-combatants indicated that the entire demobilization process and their disillusionment with it could result in a worse situation than if the AUC had never disarmed. These demobilized explained that they felt abandoned by their high-level commanders and betrayed by the government, both of which had pledged to take care of them. If conditions did not improve, they and others might join up with the previously mid and low-level commanders into smaller crime groups. These small groups would have little to no discipline or purpose to their organizations other than criminality and violence. Colombia, they warned, could descend into total random violence and chaos.

Lesson: Colombia offers an example of how DDR programs must be preplanned and effectively implemented within a reasonable time window. If action is taken within that window, there is a genuine chance that a country's DDR effort will lead to long-term good. However, if the window closes without action, the recidivism of the overwhelming majority of formerly demobilized combatants could possibly create worse instability and violence than before the peace negotiations began. Thus, structures and programs should be up and running from the first day of demobilization. Moreover, international and other assistance organizations must be corralled for a long-term commitment in terms of finances and skilled personnel with reintegration-support experience.

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The Greater Community

When ex-combatants settle into a civilian community, multiple sectors of the population will have significant concerns about how this new, potentially volatile presence will affect their lives.

When ex-combatants settle into a civilian community, multiple sectors of the population will have significant concerns about how this new, potentially volatile presence will affect their lives. The local community's reaction can either exacerbate or improve the ability of demobilized combatants to integrate peacefully. Aside from the obvious sources of influence in the community that must be positively engaged in this process—such as the clergy and local civil-society groups—the business sector, local government officials, and victims of past paramilitary violence, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), must also be engaged to successfully execute a DDR program.

The Business Sector

Recruiting the participation of the business sector in planning and executing reintegration eases the adaptation of demobilized combatants into both the economic and psychological mainstream. President Uribe's appointment of Frank Pearl was an attempt to address this problem, as Pearl has been viewed as someone who could mobilize the Colombian business community to participate more in the efforts to support the entire DDR process. Jobs with satisfactory salaries, professional development potential, and upward mobility allow self-empowerment for the demobilized combatants. They become economically self-sufficient and earn dignity and self-worth separate from the gun. They are able to provide for themselves and their families. Additionally, they can mix with civilians who lack a violent past, facilitating the faster acquisition of nonviolent societal norms that they would ideally be learning in psychosocial support programs.

Many if not a majority of the paramilitaries had initially joined their armed groups for economic reasons. According to Ana Arjona and Stathis Kalyvas of Yale University, 51 percent of these ex-combatants primarily enlisted either to “escape extreme poverty” or for the “promise of money or goods.”¹⁰ Thus, a crucial component to keeping them out of the armed groups is providing economic opportunities through legal means. However, very little effort was initially made to engage business communities to either employ the demobilized combatants or provide general economic opportunities for them. The PPP system is intended to fill this gap, but it is an insufficient mechanism to employ so many demobilized.

Time and again, demobilized personnel told the USIP team that they wanted quality work. Some would mock the training they were receiving from SENA—such as to become bakers. They were willing to do such work in order to earn money, but they were hoping to find jobs that would suit them better.

An additional 10 percent identified “power” or the opportunity to be “someone important in the community” as their primary motivation for initially joining paramilitaries. The economic and social empowerment of a respected and quality job could address these desires by creating opportunities to pass into such positions in the community. Further, if the former combatants were gainfully employed in a job surrounded by civilians, they could establish and maintain more independent social and economic networks from the structures that otherwise might draw them back into the paramilitary lifestyle.

Lesson: To ensure long-term success, reintegration programs require the successful collaboration of the business community to maximize job opportunities for ex-combatants. Assigning a deputy director at the national level and local coordinators to mobilize local business-sector participation in generating jobs for the demobilized will help facilitate this kind of crucial support for the economic requirements of reintegration.

Local Governance and Vertically Integrated Planning

The planning of the reintegration process needs to involve all levels of government, especially the municipal and provincial levels. The highest levels of government have the most resources (financial and otherwise) but the least knowledge of the situation on

the ground, while the lowest levels have the opposite strengths and weaknesses. Vertically integrating planning will allow constituencies at all levels of society to have ample opportunity to contribute to the reintegration process.

Many government officials at the provincial and municipal levels complained to the USIP team that they had no part in the discussions on how the reintegration process should take place. Therefore, the programs established by the national government were plagued by a number of problems. For example, certain support structures were designed for uniform application across the country and were not suitable to local social and political dynamics. Additionally, the entire enterprise was designed with no comprehensive communications plan to inform the localities of the details of the program. Many people in and out of government lacked crucial knowledge about the program, its benefits, and how it worked. As a result, local government service providers were unable to inform demobilized combatants about eligible assistance when approached. Equally problematic, local civilian populations were not informed about what was going on from their own government, exacerbating feelings of alienation and the perception that the government was collaborating against them and their interests and further eroding state legitimacy, which is a primary cause of Colombia's paramilitary and guerilla problems.

Lesson: Involving all levels of government is important in designing a reintegration program with sufficient flexibility to adapt to local needs and concerns. Moreover, a comprehensive strategic communications plan is important to ensure transparency and the appropriate dissemination of information and to minimize local frictions over reintegration efforts. Built-in flexibility will also allow individual communities to support the reintegration efforts in ways that accommodate local concerns.

IDPs and Other Victims

For Colombia, the long-term prospect of peacefully reintegrating ex-combatants into civilian society is directly tied to the fact that Colombia is home to the world's second largest population of IDPs. Moreover, many IDPs were displaced directly as a result of paramilitary actions that occurred before demobilization began. Thus, throughout the country, demobilized combatants are often moving into neighborhoods and at times are literally right next door to their previous victims.

In discussions with victims' groups, the USIP team found that while they certainly desire a form of justice to be served against the perpetrators of crimes, they are more concerned with a feeling of closure and truth. Thus, while the JPLs were structured to some degree with this concept in mind, strengthening the JPL mechanisms will go a long way toward facilitating long-term reconciliation and thus peaceful reintegration.

Lesson: Servicing the dramatic needs of IDPs and other victims is a complex and major endeavor that has to be tackled in the context of a successful reintegration program. If the needs of IDPs and other victims are not properly managed and improved, old animosities will likely fester, creating fertile ground for conflict and the recruitment of a new generation of combatants, even if those who just demobilized do remain civilians. Appointing a credible deputy director of the reintegration program to liaise specifically with this sector and advise the program's czar will go far in reducing possible conflict between victims' groups and the ex-combatants.

Conclusion

For Colombia, the initial stages of its DDR program were a surprising success when considering the number of armed combatants who turned in their arms and vowed to turn to civilian life. However, within a two-year period, hundreds if not thousands of ex-combatants were becoming disillusioned with the shortcomings of the DDR program's final stage—reintegration. Because of this, they began to return to structures of violence

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If the needs of IDPs and other victims are not properly managed and improved, old animosities will likely fester, creating fertile ground for conflict and the recruitment of a new generation of combatants.

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If weaknesses are not addressed, Colombia could backslide into an even darker period than when these DDR efforts began.

and crime. There is only a short window of opportunity to prevent this recidivism and induce a significant majority of the former combatants to permanently remain as civilians and eschew the armed lifestyle. If Colombia is successful, it could take a significant step toward a real peace that has eluded it for almost sixty years. If the weaknesses outlined above are not addressed within a reasonable period, though, Colombia could backslide into an even darker period than when these DDR efforts began.

Colombia's struggle to deal with these questions has presented an educative opportunity for future reintegration efforts elsewhere. In fact, Colombia has learned many of these lessons itself and begun to address their initial shortcomings. Some efforts to address these weaknesses do come with controversy. In the summer of 2008, for example, Colombia extradited a number of top former paramilitary commanders to the United States for prosecution. Extradition assured that they would face some sort of justice. However, many in Colombia—especially victims' groups—questioned whether taking them out of Colombia's own courts would undermine the growing legitimacy of the state's judiciary institutions. Sending these men abroad for unrelated crimes would also impede the ability of victims to find their dearly sought "truth," which they weighed as even more important than court-system justice.

While acknowledging that the aspects of Colombia's reintegration program examined here are neither exhaustive nor static, the lessons learned can be constructively applied to other countries. From Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan to conflicts across Africa, demobilizing nonstate armed factions remains an unavoidable necessity in bringing sustainable peace. It is hoped that an understanding of Colombia's experiences in reintegrating its ex-combatants will help improve the likelihood that other countries will succeed in consolidating and making permanent their own combatants' disarmament.

Notes

1. Iciar Gomez and Will Owens were copartners in the research of this report. Jeffrey Krentel and Anil Varghese provided key editing support. I would like to give special thanks to Tanya Urquieta and Laura Zambrano at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Colombia, Catalina Acevedo of the International Organization for Migration–Colombia, Tania Figuero and Astrid Yepes of Corporacion Escuela Galan, as well as Cynthia Mohoney, Pamela Phillips, and Annalise Romoser for helping me understand the complexities of Colombia.
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4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Law 975 was passed in 2005, but Colombia only began implementation in May of 2006.
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