

CUADERNOS DEL CONFLICTO
PEACE INITIATIVES AND
COLOMBIA'S ARMED CONFLICT



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DEFINITION AND STAGES OF REARMAMENT

The last demobilization of the Colombian United Self-Defense Groups (AUC) took place in mid-August 2006 in the municipality of Unguía (Chocó), with the surrender of weapons by the Norte Medio Salaquí Front of the Élder Cárdenas Bloc. This represented the conclusion of a process that involved 29,740 men and 1,911 women, for a total of 31,651 demobilized members of the AUC. The only front that did not participate in the demobilization process was the Cacique Pipintá Front that was part of the Central Bolívar Bloc. This group was supposed to demobilize on 15 December 2005—along with the Héroes y Mártires de Guática Front—but the group's members failed to appear in the zone that the government had designated.

During the period following demobilization, the OAS Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OEA, by its acronym in Spanish) was in charge of verifying the dismantling of the self-defense groups' armed units and of monitoring public order in the zones where the demobilized fronts and blocs had previously exercised influence. The first reports on this subject were contained in the Sixth Quarterly Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council and identified three dynamics: 1) demobilized combatants were regrouping as criminal gangs that were exerting control over specific communities and illegal economic activities; 2) groups that had not demobilized remained intact; 3) new armed actors had appeared, and/or others had been strengthened in zones from which the demobilizing groups had withdrawn.

What were found in the zones were illegal groups under the orders of mid-level commanders who had hand-picked trusted men to keep control of a particular area. The groups were involved in illegal economic activities. They pressured the demobilized paramilitaries, and they had ties to criminal gangs with which they had joined forces. As such, what was seen was a process of atomization in which the AUC blocs split into a series of more or less independent factions, without any specific hierarchy. Each rearmed group or gang sought to hold onto the existing sources of illegal income: extortion, fuel theft, drug routes, and drug laboratories, among others.

In this context, what we saw was a kind of articulation among certain structures that had their origin in different sectors. It was apparent that most of the mid-level commanders from the Norte Bloc remained active and practically intact in La Guajira, Cesar, and Magdalena. At the same time, the influence of the northern Valle [del Cauca] cartel began to be seen in the appearance of illegal armed organizations, especially in south Chocó, with the groups known as the United Self-Defense Groups of Northern Valle linked to drug trafficker Diego Montoya, as well as in Nariño and Putumayo, with the Rastrojos gang, at the service of Wilber Varela.¹ Information also exists about demobilized combatants who were recruited individually in different parts of the country, such as the Urabá region and Córdoba, to go to other regions of the country to join the drug traffickers' private armies.

Evidence of rearmament gradually began to appear in the area where the Central Bolívar Bloc had demobilized. This affected the lower Cauca region, Caquetá, Putumayo, and Nariño. In the meantime, some groups of demobilized combatants went back to crime in zones like the Magdalena Medio region, Tolima, and the eastern plains region. The Eighth Quarterly Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council reported:

In its work on verification, the Mission has identified 22 new units with approximately three thousand members, part of whom had belonged to the self-defense forces. There are indications of possible rearmament in the case of eight of these units, placing their cases on alert status. The remaining fourteen cases have been fully verified by the Mission. It is noteworthy that the MAPP/OEA has observed that the groups that appeared after the AUC demobilizations and also stemmed from the holdouts that were not dismantled, have recruited individuals who were in the process of reintegration; however, only part of their members are demobilized combatants.²

Progressively the OAS Mission—as it accompanied the communities and despite the state's effort to occupy the areas that the self-defense groups had left—began to observe that in some specific locations substantial change

did not take place after the demobilizations, in that risk factors that compromised safety continued to exist. The armed groups were still present, exercising control over segments of the country and manifesting clear ties to illegal economic activities, especially drug trafficking.

Based on this context, in the Ninth Quarterly Report, the MAPP/OEA identified a series of trends that characterized these regions: 1) the emergence of alliances and organizations under clear leadership; 2) the continued existence of clandestine command structures –especially mid-level commanders; 3) the recruitment and considerable mobility of the former combatants; 4) the adaptability and flexibility of the modus operandi of the emerging criminal groups; 5) the impact on vulnerable population groups and communities; 6) the filling of areas vacated by the self-defense groups with drug trafficking structures.³

According to the Tenth Quarterly Report, this latter tendency has gathered strength, playing a central role in the dynamics of the armed conflict and public order:

Drug traffickers saw the demobilization of the self defense groups as an opportunity to take control of the illegal crop zones and corridors. After the dismantling of the paramilitary units, organizations began to emerge that sought to maintain illegal influence over certain areas in which the government has not yet been able to fully re-establish its presence.⁴

In the same report, the Secretary General warned that behind these dynamics was a process of adaptation, in which some demobilized members of the AUC were joining Mafia-like private armies at the service of drug trafficking. A series of transitions were evident that gave the process of demobilization a new character, one that went beyond the MAPP/OEA mandate of verification, aimed at monitoring the dismantling of the armed structures of the self-defense groups but not at the emergence, continued existence, or creation of groups at the service of drug trafficking. The phenomenon of rearmament took on more and more of a criminal aspect, without counter-insurgent objectives and in service of illegal drug markets.

The definition of the illegal armed groups after demobilization has been quite a controversial issue. The

Colombian government and its security agencies have dubbed these factions “emerging criminal bands,” distinguishing them clearly from the demobilized self-defense groups. In contrast, non-governmental organizations, human rights groups, and some analysts and academics maintain that the groups reflect the endurance of paramilitarism; there is thus talk of a single organization known as the “Black Eagles,” a “new kind” or “third generation” of paramilitarism.

Several issues must be taken into consideration in order to define terms. This first is that, as the experience of other countries has indicated, there is always a small group of former combatants that does not go through the process of reintegration into society, and that could potentially regroup and rearm. This took place in Central America, in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, as well as in Africa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, and Angola. This also appears to be happening in the Colombian case, where the armed confrontation between the government and the guerrillas continues and where drug trafficking maintains its influence.

The second issue is that two years after the final paramilitary demobilization, the process is at a moment of transition in which the definition of these armed illegal groups is complex and susceptible to changes resulting from processes of dispute and alliance. The Secretary General describes this process in the Ninth Quarterly Report:

The newly formed units and the remaining [hold-outs] can be described as on a continuum between a splintered, dispersed state and an interest in monopolizing the illegal activities. On the one hand, the units are independent with loose partnerships, casual and fluid associations, and no concrete, lasting alliances. On the other hand, there is a hierarchical organization that controls and regulates all of the illicit economic activities and operations in the different territories.⁵

A third element is what is known as paramilitary “recycling.” During the demobilization process, there were frequent rumors about the arrival of the drug cartels in

some regions. According to different sources, while some structures were dismantled, others arrived to take control of the areas that had previously been dominated by the self-defense groups. This process has raised a series of questions about the transparency of the process and the effectiveness of demobilization and disarmament.⁶ The continued existence of small armies supported by structures of hit-men has led some to claim that paramilitarism still exists. To what degree is this affirmation true?

Several elements need to be analyzed. In verifying the dismantling of the armed structures and monitoring public order, the MAPP/OEA did not observe the emergence of illegal counterinsurgency groups. To the contrary, the quarterly reports have noted ever more frequent alliances between sectors of drug trafficking and guerrilla organizations; these alliances are based on illegal economic activity.⁷

Looking back over this situation, one of the main accomplishments of the demobilization process has been the delegitimizing of paramilitarism. Although it is true that mafia-like organizations have spread with the consolidation of these illegal groups—replicating some of the modus operandi of the self-defense groups—these have been stripped of their political motivations.⁸ This has happened despite the fact that some of these illegal armed organizations have endeavored to present themselves as the resurgence of paramilitarism, making threats against left-leaning sectors, grassroots organizations, and victims' groups, even attempting to assassinate several of their representatives. This situation has had a negative impact on the process, creating the impression that paramilitarism continues to be active.

A factor that makes this situation even more complicated is the relation between the current illegal groups and demobilized former commanders and mid-level officials from the AUC. The MAPP/OEA quarterly reports have mentioned this relationship, making reference to former paramilitary leaders that entered the Justice and Peace process—most of whom were extradited to the United States—as well as to those who remained underground. The Secretary General issued the following warning in the Ninth Quarterly Report:

Some of these groups are led by commanders of the United Self-Defense Forces (AUC) who did not heed the government's call to participate in the process, while others reflect an alliance between former paramilitaries and drug traffickers. Moreover, it has been noted that mid-level AUC commanders are heading new illegal armed units.⁹

The involvement of demobilized combatants in these illegal armed groups should also be taken into account. The National Police estimate that around 13 percent of the members of these illegal groups are former self-defense group combatants. This is equivalent to around 300 people, representing less than 1 percent of the total that demobilized. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that the estimate is based on the number of members of the so-called emerging gangs that have been captured or killed in combat. For example, in early 2008 the MAPP/OEA alerted the authorities to the difficulty in establishing the percentage of demobilized combatants who had gone back to illegal armed groups. This was because the Mission had not been able to obtain from the authorities the full names of the persons reported as “killed in combat” by the security forces. Information available through February 2008 showed that a significant number of these deaths—approximately seven out of every 10 deaths in combat—were reported as “NN”.¹⁰ Although this percentage has gone down considerably, the full identities of those killed in combat is still not available, meaning that this figure could vary. Regardless, the percentage would still be a very small.

According to the verification reports on reinsertion, the MAPP/OEA maintains that most of the demobilized combatants are in the process of making the transition to civil life. In some cases this is in the face of enormous difficulties and under strong pressure from illegal armed groups. As of October 2008, over 1,200 demobilized combatants had been reported as killed, most of them the victims of homicides. These incidents are related to disputes between armed groups over control of territory, conflicts between the former combatants themselves, control of the illicit economy, the presence of armed groups that are attempting to consolidate their power, and forced recruitment. Some of the former combatants have received death threats for refusing to join the new groups.¹¹

As for defining these emerging illegal groups and gangs of holdouts as criminal gangs, their ties to illegal economic activity, especially drug trafficking, are clear. Using geographic cross-referencing, the OAS Mission found a clear correlation between the areas with coca crops and illegal drug trafficking corridors on the one hand, and on the other, the presence of illegal armed groups; this was reported in the Mission's Eleventh Quarterly Report. Furthermore, the MAPP/OEA has seen that groups with ties to the northern Valle cartel are clearly exerting influence in zones that were under the control of the self-defense groups prior to demobilization.

In addition to the factors cited above is the fact that effective recruitment campaigns have enabled these illegal armed groups to reestablish themselves and stay active despite the offensive by state security forces. The groups have also been able to maintain levels of corruption, especially at the local level.

The tendencies identified during this transition phase lead to the conclusion that these rearmed cadres and groups are:

- organized to some degree;
- linked to the drug trafficking economy;
- lacking in a counterinsurgency motive (although they try to appear as if they have political motivations); and
- linked to certain former AUC leaders or mid-level commanders.

They have secured the participation of only a low percentage of the demobilized population and have the ability to recruit and foment corruption, especially at the local level.

It is important to consider the implications that the appearance, continuation, and growth of these groups have for the security of the populations affected by violence. This is the major factor to be addressed by the Mission in its monitoring of public order in the post-demobilization phase.

As described in the Tenth Quarterly Report, even after the demobilization of the self-defense groups, a number of communities continue to be vulnerable to threats and

violent actions. Illegal activities and social disputes have prevented the restoration of the social fabric. The MAPP/OEA has identified three situations in which the population is affected. These relate to: a) the presence of an illegal armed group; b) the response of illegal armed groups to actions by the state; and c) disputes between groups involved in drug trafficking. In these contexts, forced recruitment is a constant, primarily affecting the demobilized combatants and, in some cases, minors.

Rounding out this panorama is that in some parts of the country where the various illegal armed groups are present, the victims are still living in fear. In other cases they are the victims of intimidation and threats that serve as disincentives to report their situation or participate actively in the Justice and Peace process.

In the quarterly reports, the Secretary General has acknowledged the efforts made by the Colombian state. According to the MAPP/OEA, the state has demonstrated its resolve to combat the illegal armed groups; it has increased the number of operations, resulting in more captures and deaths in combat. At the same time, the reports have noted the strength and resilience of these illegal factions. Their resources permit constant recruitment and continue to foment corruption.

Given this situation, the views of leaders and the population must be seriously taken into account. No matter how the armed groups are defined or labeled, the presence of an armed organization that continues to wreak terror means that the communities continue to perceive that the phenomenon of paramilitarism continues, regardless of political or criminal connotations. Proof of the influence of crime in an area and of the capacity of the armed groups to carry out intimidation is the impact on the populations themselves. For the OAS mission, this issue is key. The relevant institutions must continue to make sustained efforts in this area, in order to consolidate a process that has contributed to peace in Colombia. •

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- ¹ Drug trafficker Diego Montoya was captured on 10 September 2007, and Wilber Varela was murdered in Venezuela in February 2008.
 - ² Eighth Quarterly Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council on the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OEA), CP/doc.4176/07, 14 February 2007, p. 6.
 - ³ Ninth Quarterly Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council on the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OEA), CP/doc.4237/07, 3 July 2007.
 - ⁴ Tenth Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council on the MAPP/OAS Mission, CP/doc.4249/07, 31 October 2007, p. 2.
 - ⁵ Ninth Quarterly Report. *op.cit.*, p. 2.
 - ⁶ Tenth Quarterly Report, *op.cit.*, p. 2.
 - ⁷ Eleventh Quarterly Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council on the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OEA), CP/doc.4321/08, 21 June 2008, p. 3.
 - ⁸ Tenth Quarterly Report, *op.cit.*, p. 2.
 - ⁹ Ninth Quarterly Report, *op.cit.*, p. 1.
 - ¹⁰ Not named or identified. Eleventh Quarterly Report, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.