

CUADERNOS DEL CONFLICTO
PEACE INITIATIVES AND
COLOMBIA'S ARMED CONFLICT



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GOING BACK TO CRIME: DRUG TRAFFICKING AND EMERGING CRIMINAL GANGS

This article is less abstract than the preceding ones and focuses on drug traffickers and the different elements of the drug trade they represent. My main argument is that the demobilization of the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC*) is heralding a new chapter in the Colombian drug trade. The old generation of traffickers linked to the AUC has been removed from the drug trafficking equation: many of the central players have been killed or extradited to the United States. At the same time, the FARC has been further hit by the Colombian security forces; the most notable incident was the July 2008 rescue of 15 hostages, among them the French-Colombian citizen and former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. The situation has changed dramatically, but, as I will demonstrate, drug trafficking continues.

What has changed? In many cases, members of the AUC were not only drug traffickers in their own right but also provided services to the drug trafficking industry. These activities included the protection of laboratories, the collection of coca leaf to make coca base, the control of transport corridors, control of shipping points, assassination services, debt collection services, arbitration services, etc. Many of these activities came under the umbrella of the AUC, which was essentially a gang of drug traffickers. Political correctness aside, in my view the group that negotiated with the government as the intermediary for the AUC was composed primarily of drug traffickers and only secondarily (a distant second) constituted an anti-subversive force.

With the dismantling of the AUC, this gang of drug traffickers lost several key components. One was political protection. Second was the quasi-legitimate status that the paramilitaries had enjoyed in many parts of Colombia. And third, the group lost its ideological façade. It will be extremely difficult for the new generation of paramilitaries to recover these three elements. It is clear that these drug trafficking groups are trying to rebuild their political front to justify various actions. And there is evidence that many of the killings that are occurring

now, particularly of trade union members, and the threats against the organizers of a large demonstration in March 2008, come from *Las Águilas Negras* (Black Eagles) -- a group of heterogeneous organizations that emerged in early 2006 and that apparently were linked to former members of the Central Bolívar Bloc that did not demobilize. Though these groups carry out political killings, most of their actions are related to drug trafficking.

There is no doubt that the former paramilitaries are supporting candidates for Congress, an activity that now has to be done in a much more clandestine manner. Drug trafficking, after all, is about contacts. It is about knowing how to get in touch with people who can provide certain services needed for the drug trade.

The main contact for a long time was Vicente Castaño. He was murdered in March 2007, but his death was only confirmed a year later. In fact during 2007 there were numerous rumors that he was killed, something that initially seemed false for two reasons. First, no one was gobbling up his land or his luxury apartments, rural estates, or properties. This is something that usually happens when a drug trafficker disappears from the scene; there is a scramble to take all his booty. The second reason was that Castaño's wife remained very active. She used to, and I believe she still does, run all of the façade companies and manages a lot of his assets.

Vicente Castaño belonged to the Castaño Clan that founded the paramilitary movement. He was always behind the scenes. Initially his older brother Fidel and subsequently his younger brother Carlos fronted the organization, but Vicente was always present, from the days when Fidel was a member of the Medellín cartel. Vicente was in charge of the drugs supply to the United States; he was always a drug trafficker.

Was he anti-subversive? Probably yes. The Castaños started on their crusade because their father was kidnapped and then killed by the FARC. However, Vicente was the top leader, in charge of all the businesses. It was he who sold many of the AUC franchises to drug traffickers across the country. It was he who put together many of the deals. When he was alive, it was believed that he was the one man who could rebuild a nationwide alliance of drug traffickers. His name surfaced all over the

country, not just in his native Antioquia, but in Norte de Santander, Tolima, parts of Putumayo, Santander, and especially in connection with the Black Eagles. The Black Eagles have been linked, in one way or another, with Vicente Castaño throughout the country, and the Castaño name has enjoyed quasi-mythological status within the drug world and criminal underworld.

The following two drug traffickers who belonged to the AUC, were part of the peace process but did not turn themselves in. In August 2006, when President Uribe was under a great deal of pressure and ordered the paramilitary leaders to concentrate in the holding area of La Ceja in Antioquia, Vicente Castaño and the Mejía brothers known by the alias of “Los Mellizos” (“The Twins”) did not. Despite the death of one of the Mejía brothers and the arrest of the other,¹ they are included in this discussion because they so obviously were drug traffickers at the same time that they were part of the paramilitary peace process. They were thoroughbred drug traffickers, bursting onto the scene in August 2000, when \$35 million dollars in cash were found in two apartments in Bogotá, obviously waiting to be laundered or spent. In 2000, these two brothers bought one of the AUC franchises, the Victors of Arauca, *Vencedores de Arauca*.

Both brothers demobilized under the Justice and Peace Law until the order came to congregate in La Ceja. They decided to ignore it. During the period that they were fugitives from justice, they massively extended their control. There is evidence that they bought part of the territory and the routes of “Jorge 40” in the Atlantic Coast. That is to say, they bought a list that consisted of people that were being extorted, killers for hire, corrupt politicians, etc. The Mejía brothers also bought the network of Hernán Giraldo in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The city of Santa Marta was their originally a base of operations, and they spread to Barranquilla and south Bolívar Department. They expanded into Norte de Santander, basically trying to control the border with Venezuela and parts of the Atlantic coast, which are essential drug trafficking departure points and transit routes.

Another drug trafficker who negotiated under the AUC’s umbrella was Carlos Mario Jimenez, alias “Macaco”, who was extradited to the United States in May

2008. He is included in this list because he played a key role when the drug trade split apart in the nineties, after the fall of the two big cartels - the Medellín cartel of Pablo Escobar and the Cali cartel of the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers-, and when the Norte del Valle cartel broke apart. It was said that the drug trade had become characterized by *cartelitos*, “baby cartels” and to a certain extent this is true in the sense that many of the organizations specialize in just one aspect or link in the drug chain. Some act as brokers for procuring coca base, another may be an expert in developing laboratories to produce high purity cocaine, others may be transporters specialized in maritime routes. But the drug trade still needs the capos. This is because the trade is atomized. Someone is needed on top to put all these elements together. If a baby cartel can produce perhaps 200-300 kilos of drugs, it is not able to compete with the big cartels. Someone from the *cartelitos* is not able to go to Mexican drug traffickers and say, “Don’t mess with me because I’ve got five guys behind me and I produce 200 kilos.” Instead, what is needed is a man like “Macaco” to whom one can say, “I want to ship this.” And he can put together big shipments and negotiate and, to a certain extent, guarantee those shipments.

This is how Pablo Escobar behaved when he pioneered the cartel system. That is why these capos are still needed for the drug trade to operate. The AUC, the paramilitary movement, provided the perfect vehicle for the capos. The AUC had a military arm and, thanks to the AUC’s reputation for massacres, selective assassinations, and other brutalities, it sparked fear.

Diego Murillo, alias “Don Berna,” was also extradited to the United States on 13 May 2008.² He is mentioned here to illustrate one essential link in the drug trafficking world in order to understand it. Diego Murillo is a legend in the drug world and the paramilitary world. He started as a bodyguard for the Galeano clan that was part of the Medellín drug cartel. Fernando Galeano was killed by Pablo Escobar at the La Cathedral Prison. Don Berna survived the wave of killings and afterwards he was instrumental in setting up the PEPE’s (*Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar*, People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar), a group the police organized to search for Escobar. They killed much of Escobar’s support base –lawyers, body-

guards, relatives— and subsequently they became the core group for the creation of the AUC. Most of those who were Pepes were the founders of the AUC.

Escobar set up the “collection offices” (“*Oficinas de Cobro*”) and “Don Berna” developed the concept, the first one being the “Envigado Office”. To understand the drug trade, it is important to understand what the offices are. They started basically as arbitration services. Let us suppose that we are all drug traffickers and we are pooling shipments. We hand over the drugs to one person. She is supposed to send the shipment to Mexico, but she loses it. We are all extremely upset. To whom do we turn? We want our money back. We go to the office and we say, “Look, here’s the score.” “Don Berna,” who ran the office for many years, was in charge of deciding what to do in these cases. The offices have become the foundation of the criminal organizations in Colombia. They began in Medellín and now they are everywhere. The guerrillas tried to set something similar up in Bogota, but it did not work out.

Daniel Rendón Herrera, alias ‘Don Mario’, is also worth mentioning because of the power he held during the post-demobilization period until he was captured in April 2009.³ He controlled a strategic corridor in the Northern Coast of Colombia from the Urabá area to La Guajira. He is the brother of former paramilitary leader Fredy Rendón Herrera, alias “El Alemán” (“The German”) of the Elmer Cárdenas Bloc, who is currently incarcerated in the Itagüí prison. Don Mario was always part of the Elmer Cárdenas bloc and financed it. The bloc was unusual within the AUC in that it was actually fought against the guerrillas. It was a true anti-subversive paramilitary force. Along the Atrato River, running the length of Pacific coast in Chocó Department, his brother and the guerrillas engaged in intense combat. That is all behind him now. After the demobilization “Don Mario” began to work with the FARC in the Atrato region. There was a delineation of territory. To ship drugs through the area “Don Mario” controlled in the Gulf of Urabá, particularly the Port of Necoclí, the guerrillas just had to pay a tax. He helped them pool shipments and move drugs. This gave new life to the Jose Maria Cordoba Bloc of the FARC, which operates in the area. This bloc suffered a blow

when his boss “Ivan Rios”, a member of the Secretariat, was murdered by one of his bodyguards in March 2008.

There are two other drug traffickers who were associates of the AUC and are currently very active. The first one is Pedro Guerrero, alias “Cuchillo” (“Knife”), who also failed to turn himself in at La Ceja. He has rebuilt a very large organization calling itself the *Ejército Revolucionario Popular Anti-Comunista* (Popular Revolutionary Anti-Communist Army) ERPAC. The idea, obviously, is to construct an ideological façade, although this appears to be a joke in bad taste because Guerrero is working closely with the FARC. His partner in crime is Daniel Barrera, alias “El Loco Barrera” (“The Crazy Barrera”), one of the biggest traffickers in Colombia at this time.

“El Loco Barrera”, was also an associate of the AUC. An extremely important player in the drug market, he worked closely with the AUC and is actually listed within the organization. Barrera represents the new face of drug trafficking in the sense that he cut his teeth with the FARC. He made his name running drugs for the guerrillas and now, along with “Cuchillo,” is playing both sides. In fact, there really are no sides in the drug trafficking world. It is all about the business. And Barrera very successfully manages guerrilla networks, drug networks, and paramilitary networks, all united by a common interest in moving as much cocaine and heroin as possible without being caught.

According to the FARC, everything is about the paramilitaries, but really what interests them is the drug trade. A good example is Gener García, alias “John 40”, one of the FARC’s most powerful drug traffickers. He is the commander of Front 43 and operates in Meta Department in the Eastern plains. For years he worked with “El Loco Barrera,” and undoubtedly worked with the predecessors of the Centauros Bloc. The FARC now offer the same services that the AUC previously supplied when they controlled the territory: protection of crops, protection of routes, departure points, laboratories, etc. As such, they are, in the truest sense of the word, still a drug cartel. This paper will not address how political they are but rather will concentrate on the drug issue. The FARC are not a homogenous drug cartel, in the sense that the differ-

ent blocs have their own drug trafficking organizations. “John 40” has worked closely with “Negro Acacio” of Front 16, who was killed by the Army in 2007. They ran the drug operations for the Eastern Bloc, one of several FARC blocs, and the most powerful of them. They had other cartels in the Southern Bloc, the José María Córdoba Bloc, so that each of the blocs had at least one drug cartel.

Another change in the situation since the fall of the AUC, and because of the continuing success of the democratic security policy, is that the FARC and the guerrilla groups depend, more than ever, on drugs for financing. Their other two sources of income, kidnapping and extortion, have been very badly hit, so they are relying a great deal now on drug trafficking as their principal source of finance. The ELN has been affected as well. They are breaking down, their command structure is extremely weak and they are getting involved with drugs as well. At least one front, perhaps two, have made alliances with the northern Valle cartel.

I want to give you a little look ahead. We have been talking about peace with the guerrilla groups, including the FARC, and about the deterioration of the command and control structures. One of the major drug players, who plays with all sides—the FARC, the ELN and the Black Eagles—is a man known as “Megateo,” who is from the EPL, a group that demobilized in 1991. Still active, still with the front, the EPL front is now one of the biggest players in the eastern part of the country. The future of the FARC, if they do disintegrate, will lie with this man and the EPL, which could provide us with some hints as to what might happen.

Most of the faces are old and familiar. They are paramilitaries who are either in prison or out of prison and who have ties to the generation of paramilitaries that negotiated with the government, although the situation is different, vastly different. They do not have the same political cover. They do not have the quasi-legal façade, and they are essentially pure drug traffickers. The guerrillas have also lost their political north. They are deteriorating. Their organization is deteriorating. The guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the drug cartels are becoming increasingly similar, and there is evidence that they are

working together in the interests of drug trafficking, and this is not the exception but rather the rule. They need to. It is good for business. They are specialized in different things. The government, therefore, is now facing a front united in the interest of the drug trade and united in the interest of opposing a weak central government. We have not yet reached the point, but I think we will, when paramilitary groups will carry out criminal actions for the FARC in return for favors and drugs. And so we are looking at a huge, confusing and diverse criminal world with no ideological barriers.

While some of the players in Colombia’s drug trafficking universe have changed, the central thrust of this presentation has not: all criminal elements in Colombia, be they guerrillas, paramilitaries, or drugs cartels, are working together in the interest of the business. This will continue even more as the FARC fragments and the guerrilla high command loses control over its more remote fronts.

Drug cultivation increased in Colombia in 2007-2008. More drugs than ever left the country. The groups handling these drugs are becoming more diverse and more clandestine, increasingly relying on one another to further the business, sharing routes, contacts, products, and networks. The success of the government’s democratic security policy has forced disparate illegal armies and criminal elements to put aside their differences and to cooperate in producing and exporting drugs. •

¹ During the *Rastrillo* Operation, the Army killed Victor Manuel Mejía in a rural zone between Tarazá and Cauca, in the north of the Antioquia Department, on April 30, 2008. Two days later, on May 2, 2008, Miguel Ángel Mejía was captured by the authorities in Honda, Tolima, and extradited to the United States, on March 4, 2009.

² On 22 April 2009, alias “Don Berna” was convicted by a New York judge to 31 years and 3 months of jail and to pay a US \$ 4 million dollars fine for the crime of conspiracy to import cocaine into the United States.

³ After almost a month and a half of persecution, the Special Units of the Police, commanded by General Oscar Naranjo, Director General of the National Police, captured “Don Mario”, in Necoclí (Antioquia) on 15 April 2009.