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# Colombian Counterinsurgency: Steps in the Right Direction

## Summary

President Cesar Gaviria has taken some significant steps to reduce the Colombian guerrillas' military capability, but he has not made sufficient headway to forestall an upsurge in violence during the campaign for national elections in March and May 1994.

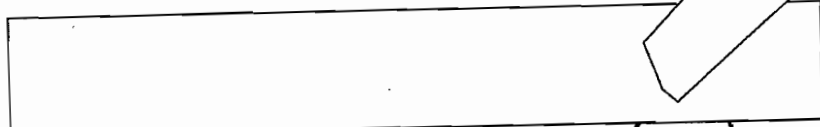
- The government has sent military units into rural guerrilla strongholds, captured a number of midlevel guerrilla leaders, taken steps to interrupt insurgent funding, and expanded its public relations campaign.
- Nonetheless, manpower and equipment limitations, training shortfalls, and the absence of a broad pacification program continue to handicap progress. (S NF)

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Gaviria almost certainly will continue to pursue his aggressive counterinsurgency strategy, but military capabilities need to be improved and the program continued beyond the end of his term next August to produce lasting results.

- Early indications suggest that stepped up violence during the campaign may convince the next administration to return to a policy of greater accommodation with the guerrillas.



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- A policy of accommodation would probably free some resources for the counternarcotics effort but would also undermine the counterinsurgency effort and increase investor jitters, particularly in the vital oil industry. [redacted]

### Background

President Gaviria's current hardline approach to domestic insurgents evolved from earlier failed efforts to entice the groups to join the political mainstream. In June 1991, Gaviria initiated talks with the country's remaining active guerrillas to reduce violence, while promising several smaller groups, which had already demobilized, assistance in their social reintegration. (See appendices for data on major guerrilla forces and activities.) Bogota pressed for a cessation of attacks, stringent cease-fire terms, and eventual disarmament. Frustrated with guerrilla intransigence over the next year, Gaviria ended the talks and increased antiguerrilla operations after the insurgents assassinated a former government minister in May 1992. Moreover, the President made it clear that the guerrillas would have to agree to a cease-fire and demobilization before he would return to negotiations. [redacted]

### The Colombian Guerrillas

Colombia's insurgent alliance--the Simon Bolivar Coordinating Group--incorporates the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the People's Liberation Army (EPL). The FARC is the largest group, with approximately 5,500 combatants; followed by the ELN, with about 2,700; and the EPL, with about 100. (C NF)

Despite years of struggle, the guerrilla groups--established in the 1960s--never have controlled more than their backcountry enclaves. They still adhere to a class struggle ideology and their goal of overthrowing the government, which they believe represents only the interests of Colombia's elites. The eclipse of international Communism has failed to weaken the insurgents' resolve to overthrow the government. [redacted]

The guerrillas have adopted a long-term strategy of incrementally extending their military and political control over Colombian territory. They conduct hit-and-run attacks throughout the country to force the Army to disperse its forces. They also work to destabilize the government through terrorism in the cities. Their forces are concentrated in remote rural regions where they often function as the de facto government, providing services and enforcing their own justice. [redacted]

### Making Progress...

Since mid-1992, the Army has stepped up operations in the insurgents' traditional rural strongholds, causing some disruption to their operational planning, logistic networks, and training. The Army's two elite mobile brigades have been pressing into remote jungle regions to attack the guerrillas. The brigades have captured some guerrilla logistic

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centers, destroyed training camps, and inflicted casualties, according to press reports. To expand the government's presence, the Army has begun sending forces into previously unpatrolled regions to deny the guerrillas operating areas and to attempt to fend off guerrilla sabotage against the nation's economic infrastructure. After a high level strategy session in July 1993, Army Commander General Hernan Guzman ordered increased operations in guerrilla-held territory. The Army began to form a new brigade in the vital Cusiana oil region to respond to the growing security concerns of foreign investors. [redacted] other units have also been deployed to the remote northwestern jungles. [redacted]

The security forces have killed and captured a number of guerrilla leaders, causing some gaps in the guerrillas' command structure. In late 1992, the government arrested Francisco Galan, the ELN's military strategist and a confidant of ELN leader Manuel Perez, [redacted]. In addition, Bogota captured an ELN high command member, ELN militia commanders from Medellin and Bucaramanga, and the ELN leader in Magdalena responsible for numerous oil pipeline attacks, according to [redacted] media sources. The arrests have resulted from citizen tipoffs in response to the government's well-publicized rewards program, [redacted]

Since late 1992, Bogota has been working to disrupt guerrilla funding and supply networks. Security forces have arrested several guerrilla financial officers while they were securing supplies in the cities, and the government is investigating a number of alleged guerrilla front companies. [redacted] the guerrillas are sufficiently concerned to have moved some of their money into more secure overseas holdings. Although most companies still pay ransoms, Bogota has been able to gather a far greater amount of information on guerrilla extortion efforts than in previous years, [redacted]

In contrast to his predecessor, President Barco, Gaviria has succeeded in maintaining public support for a hardline counterinsurgency strategy. The government has coupled military actions with continuing efforts to undercut the guerrillas' legitimacy and to consolidate public support for the government's approach. To exploit public fears, the President has been pressing the theme that the guerrillas have discarded their ideology and evolved into common criminals and hired assassins. Conversely, [redacted] Gaviria has publicly emphasized reforms in the Armed Forces that seek to reduce human rights abuses by investigating and discharging guilty servicemen. [redacted]

#### **...But Problems Persist**

The military continues to lack the mobility to locate and engage insurgent units, scattered throughout vast areas, effectively. [redacted] Army brigades, which must patrol hundreds of kilometers through mountains and jungles, desperately need more helicopters for troop transport and resupply. The Army depends on a limited number of Air Force helicopters, which must also support military counternarcotics operations against drug laboratories and airfields scattered throughout the backcountry. [redacted] Army Commander Guzman says that the lack of helicopters--as well as insufficient communications and logistic support--is severely hampering the Army's effort. [redacted]

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The Army needs to concentrate more of its manpower in the rural regions to extend government authority. Even though Colombia has one of the largest armies in Latin America, government officials claim that troop strength in the countryside is insufficient to control the guerrillas and maintain security, [redacted]. For example, only a few brigades are positioned in the vast eastern regions and are unable to provide local security and civic assistance, which are vital to gaining the rural population's trust. A former Colombian Minister of Defense has acknowledged [redacted] that Bogota's inability to provide for the basic needs of the rural poor directly facilitates guerrilla recruitment. Moreover, the military's continued harsh treatment--despite the new human rights code--of *campesinos* suspected of guerrilla sympathies perpetuates the hostility--or, at best divided loyalties--of the villagers, handicapping intelligence collection for counterinsurgent operations. [redacted]

#### Human Rights: A Spotted Record

Colombian security forces continue to employ death squad tactics in their counterinsurgency campaign. The military has a history of assassinating leftwing civilians in guerrilla areas, cooperating with narcotics-related paramilitary groups in attacks against suspected guerrilla sympathizers, and killing captured combatants. Several Army officers were recently indicted for complicity in the massacre of 13 villagers in Rio Frio last October, [redacted]. In another case, the [redacted] Naval intelligence officers allegedly paid to have various union and political leaders, as well as common peasants, murdered. [redacted]

Despite continued military abuses, Bogota is striving to improve its human rights record. The Gaviria administration is beginning to institutionalize human rights training in the security forces. [redacted] government human rights ombudsmen are instructing in various military and police training courses. In addition, [redacted] Gaviria endorsed the appointment of a UN High Commissioner to examine human rights in Colombia and announced disciplinary actions against several military personnel charged with violations. [redacted]

Although the military is improving its counterinsurgency performance, its poor tactical execution continues to handicap its impact on the guerrillas. [redacted] the Army is particularly weak at patrolling and ambushing, which are essential skills for effectively engaging the guerrillas. Moreover, [redacted] most Army units never patrol after dark and that the guerrillas "own the night." [redacted] also report that even elite units fail to train their noncommissioned officers and soldiers, which adversely affects military capabilities. Also, the security forces have made little headway against urban guerrilla cells. Bogota has arrested several rural combatants when they were using urban safehouses but has been unable to penetrate the urban groups, which conduct most of the bombings in the main cities. [redacted]

<sup>1</sup> The 125,000-member Colombian Army is primarily a static garrison force. The Army's strength has nearly doubled since the mid-1980s, but most brigades remain located near cities, where supplies are accessible. Units generally consist of foot soldiers whose logistic and training limitations prevent them from patrolling far from their base. [redacted]

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One year has not been enough time for the administration to fully implement its aggressive strategy to reduce violence. The military has been unable to procure additional helicopters to boost Army mobility--Bogota is still trying to conclude a deal with Russia for troop transport helicopters, [redacted] In the eastern plains, the new Army brigade remains below strength, with only 2,000 out of the planned 5,000 men deployed, according to press reports. Moreover, the Army must still build roads and airfields in many of the isolated regions to enhance military operations. [redacted]

As a result, the guerrillas have successfully continued their attacks as the election approaches in an effort to discredit Bogota's hardline counterinsurgency stance and encourage greater accommodation by the next administration. In September, insurgents bombed oil pipelines and ambushed two Army patrols, killing scores of soldiers, according to [redacted] press reporting. [redacted] guerrillas set off a number of bombs in Bogota during October and November, which killed several policemen and raised public fears. The guerrillas almost certainly hope that violence will sway public opinion and weaken the government's resolve, forcing a return to negotiations on more favorable terms. [redacted]

#### Gaviria Likely To Stay the Course

Despite guerrilla efforts to embarrass the government, Gaviria almost certainly will continue his aggressive counterinsurgency approach during the remainder of his term. The President has steadfastly demanded that the guerrillas forswear violence and accept eventual demobilization before renewing peace talks; a policy reversal now, in the wake of guerrilla violence, would undermine his political credibility. Government Minister Villegas and the military's high command have publicly stated that there will be no talks with the guerrillas. [redacted] Gaviria's peace advisor Carrillo says Bogota believes that the government is winning and that the guerrillas are seeking negotiations only to stave off military pressure and are not genuinely interested in peace. The guerrillas' manipulations of previous negotiations--particularly in the mid-1980s with then President Betancur, when they rejuvenated their forces during a cease-fire--reinforces the government's judgment. The small ELN splinter group currently willing to negotiate on the government's terms is the only exception. Successful conclusion of talks with this group--possibly during this year--will give Bogota the opportunity to advertise a policy success. [redacted]

During the election campaign period ahead, Army counterinsurgency operations are likely to impede--although not eliminate--an upsurge in guerrilla efforts to disrupt electioneering and discredit the government. The Army has yet to put the guerrillas on the defensive in their strongholds, but its growing presence probably will hinder the guerrillas' movements and ability to concentrate forces for multifront attacks. Even so, the guerrillas are likely to ambush Army patrols, as they did last September, to diminish public confidence in the military. Also, urban guerrilla cells probably will strike at soft, high-profile targets, which would gain them considerable public attention. For example, security forces uncovered a FARC plan to attack the capital's city bus center during the Christmas holidays. [redacted] In the past few years, however, the guerrillas have been unable to sustain their offensives for more than several weeks and have failed to undermine public support for the administration. [redacted]

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### The Next Administration

Political candidates have already become targets of guerrilla violence. In September 1993, ELN guerrillas assassinated a former Conservative Party congressman and demanded that candidates outline their position on the insurgency, according to the Embassy. In October, guerrillas bombed the National Registry, which manages elections. In November, they hit several candidates' offices. After one bombing, the M-19 Democratic Alliance presidential candidate, Navarro Wolf, began wearing a bulletproof jacket, claiming that "there's going to be a lot of bullets" during this election,

As a result of guerrilla threats, the candidates are cautious in their public statements and appear more willing than the present administration to make overtures to the insurgents. The Conservative Party's candidate for president, Andres Pastrana, announced that peace with the guerrillas would be a principal issue for his administration,

The leading Liberal Party presidential aspirant Ernesto Samper is establishing contacts with the various guerrilla forces in an effort to ward off attacks and possibly to gain their political support.

The level of guerrilla violence during the campaign and in the early months of the next administration probably will be a key factor in the next president's willingness to renew negotiations. New administrations typically have been conciliatory when faced with high levels of guerrilla violence. Gaviria--as well as his two presidential predecessors--began their terms in such a fashion. The leading candidates so far have avoided stating specific conditions under which they might negotiate. We know especially little of Pastrana's calculations, but Samper's association with Serpa already appears to indicate a willingness to engage guerrilla concerns.

Renewed negotiations--based on the guerrillas' terms--could stall the military's counterinsurgency momentum and allow the guerrillas a tactical respite. Moreover, guerrilla leaders hope that the next administration will accept decentralized peace talks, allowing them to conduct talks with municipal authorities, whom they can intimidate, rather than with Bogota. The Colombian military, however, would be very concerned with such a development. Field commanders--fearing that the guerrillas were buying time to rebuild their forces--probably would use paramilitary forces to attack the guerrillas covertly in an effort to maintain continued military pressure.

### Implications for the United States

The insurgents do not pose a serious threat to the Colombian Government, but their continued ability to hit military and economic targets in remote regions and to sow fear through assassinations and bombings in the cities undermines popular confidence in the government and makes foreign investors wary. Gaviria's hardline counterinsurgency approach has sent a clear law-and-order message and has reassured US firms interested in continued investment in Colombia. In particular, the Army's effort to develop a long-term security presence in the developing oil regions has encouraged foreign petroleum companies, which have been concerned with rising security costs. However, if

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a new administration focuses on extended talks with the guerrillas and fails to increase the military presence in the oil regions, investors are likely to hold back on new ventures.

Despite improvements in the investment climate as a result of Gaviria's counterinsurgency program, Colombia's difficulty in correcting human rights abuses is likely to continue as long as the hardline strategy is in force. The increase in Army operations in rural guerrilla strongholds has escalated violence, and the Army so far has treated Gaviria's new human rights guidelines as merely pro forma. The Army traditionally has not taken guerrilla prisoners, and several recent brutal insurgent ambushes have not encouraged sensitivity to human rights practices. Moreover, most of the fighting takes place in remote regions, where it is difficult for the government to exercise oversight.

In addition, the hardline strategy probably will continue to distract the military from counternarcotics missions. Given the logistic demands of antiguerrilla operations, the military leadership probably will continue to redirect resources from counternarcotics efforts. The military traditionally has valued its position as the nation's defender against the insurgents, while it continues to be uneasy with its counterdrug role. The Army is likely to continue to address US antidrug concerns by arguing that its counterinsurgency efforts are necessary for the counternarcotics fight, seeking to bolster its case by repeated references to an alliance between the traffickers and the guerrillas. If the new president returns to a policy of negotiation with the guerrillas, more military resources would be available for antidrug missions, although the determination to pursue traffickers will depend more on the character of the incoming administration than on an armed forces' decision.

#### The Guerrilla-Trafficker Relationship

The guerrillas and the traffickers cooperate extensively, but there is no evidence of a high-level narco-guerrilla alliance. Individual guerrilla units throughout the countryside guard drug laboratories, airfields, and growing fields, according to military reporting. Press reports speculate that the guerrillas gain hundreds of millions of dollars yearly for these services. the absence of evidence that top guerrilla leaders meet with cartel bosses.

Despite some areas of cooperation, significant friction almost certainly exists between the traffickers and guerrillas. Traffickers work with guerrillas only in regions where the guerrillas dominate and resist any guerrilla intrusions into their territory. For instance, in the Cali area, the FARC challenged the cartel by abducting Cali cartel kingpin Santacruz Londono's sister last year. The cartel retaliated by kidnapping more than 20 urban guerrillas and guerrilla sympathizers.

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