The Paramilitarization of the War in Colombia

Paramilitary violence is not complementary to military strategy. In fact, the paramilitaries have come to replace the armed forces, which are mired in crisis as a result of their failure to defeat the guerrilla insurgency.

BY MARC W. CHERNICK

Over the course of six consecutive days between July 15 and 20, 1997, over 100 heavily armed men seized control of Mapiripán, a small coca-growing town in southeastern Colombia, torturing and killing an estimated 30 villagers. Carlos Castaño, the man who heads the paramilitary group known as the United Self-Defense Units of Colombia, unabashedly took credit for the carnage in an interview published by the weekly Cambio 16. Those who were massacred in Mapiripán, Castaño said, “were the most dangerous and most despicable among the population. I will never apologize.” His self-defense patrols were winning the war in Colombia, he said, “not by killing peasants but by killing guerrillas. These were not innocent peasants. They were guerrillas dressed as peasants.”

The Mapiripán massacre was carefully planned and executed. Weeks before, members of the paramilitary group traveled to the region to prepare the terrain for a military attack on the town and to select the victims. Two days before, Castaño moved his men by plane from his stronghold in the northern regions of Urabá and Córdoba. Army supporters march in a military parade in Apartado, in the province of Urabá, in July 1997.

They landed in a community airfield heavily guarded by the Colombian army, deep in the coca-growing regions of the eastern plains—an area strongly influenced by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The reports that filtered out of the region reveal a scene of terror that rivals the worst days of earlier periods of violence in Colombia. Witnesses spoke of the paramilitaries carving up body parts of live victims and dumping them into the river and decapitating victims with chainsaws. They also described the resurrection of well-known historical forms of killing in Colombia—such as the “necktie,” formed by slitting the throat of the victim and pulling down the tongue—which have not been seen since the violence of the 1940s and 1950s. The grizzly orgy of violence turned Mapiripán into a ghost town. Those who managed to survive flooded into makeshift refugee camps, shantytowns and new, hastily constructed barrios on the outskirts of urban centers throughout the region. They joined the growing numbers of internally displaced peasants, now believed to have surpassed a million people nationwide.

The army battalion based in the region did not arrive until the last day of the killing spree, on July 20, even though the town’s municipal judge had called requesting...
Counterinsurgency in Colombia, like many other internal wars from Guatemala to South Africa, is essentially a dirty war against individual collaborators and suspected supporters of the insurgents. Entire communities are often forcibly displaced in order to disrupt guerrilla control over a particular area. But unlike other internal wars, the paramilitary violence in Colombia is not a subordinate strategy designed to complement the activities of the military. In fact, the paramilitaries have increasingly come to replace the armed forces, which are mired in crisis as a result of their failure to defeat the insurgents. The figures for political violence during the first nine months of 1997 are revealing in this sense. While only 7.5% of armed attacks were attributed to the army, 60% were attributed to paramilitaries, and 23.5% to the guerrilla. But while the military is increasingly disengaged from the conflict, it remains deeply involved in aiding and assisting the development of a large-scale paramilitary project. The scope of the army’s involvement in paramilitary activity is believed to be broad. It is unlikely, for example, that the paramilitaries could have projected themselves into new areas like Mapiripán with such force without the careful collaboration of the armed forces.

There used to be a certain amount of coherence—at least in the dominant narrative of the left and right—to Colombia’s violence and low-intensity war of the last 30 years. Until recently, the standard account was as follows. Guerrilla groups took up arms in the absence of political channels under a closed and increasingly repressive regime forged through the exclusionary National Front coalition, established by the warring Liberal and Conservative parties to bring an end to the decade of violence between 1948 and 1958. The state responded with repression, expanding the powers of the military through successive states of emergency. The violence today, however, no longer conforms to this narrative. The state has become a collaborator rather than principal actor, while the paramilitaries have taken center stage in the conflict.

Over the past several years, meanwhile, the FARC’s military power and territorial control have grown dramatically. At the same time, however, they have been unable to project that military might into political power at the national level, partly because in recent years they have prioritized military rather than political strategies. Nonetheless, in areas under their control, particularly in regions in eastern and southern Colombia where the state’s presence has been historically weak, guerrillas perform many of the local-level functions of the state—maintaining order, officiating at weddings, births and divorces, organizing education, mediating conflict and administering justice, and marketing agricultural products. And as state authority has deteriorated in many areas of the country in recent years, the FARC has been able to extend its influence beyond its traditional strongholds. The paramilitaries, however, have increasingly sought to fill this power vacuum as well.
Colombia has a long tradition of paramilitarism, going back to the violence during the 1940s and 1950s. But the seeds of today’s paramilitarism were planted in 1965, when the government granted the army the legal authority to arm civilians in order to counter the spreading guerrilla warfare launched by the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). From 1965 to 1980, the army’s paramilitary strategy was low intensity, as was the war. There was little combat between guerrillas and military units, and combat-related deaths of guerrilla and soldiers numbered a few hundred a year. Paramilitary activity was local and only a minor factor in the conflict. After 1984, however, when the government of Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) signed a cease-fire agreement with four guerrilla movements—the FARC, the EPL, the April 19th Movement (M-19) and the Workers’ Self-Defense Movement (ADO)—paramilitary groups became an increasingly central part of the army’s counterinsurgency strategy. With counterinsurgency prohibited as a result of the cease-fire agreements, the army decided to exercise its legal “right” to arm civilian populations in order to stop the political advances of the guerrilla. The army found a willing ally—as well as a major source of financing—in Colombia’s new land-owning narco-bourgeoisie. Land was an attractive investment for the drug barons not only for its material value but also for the social status it bestowed. By the end of the 1980s, drug traffickers had become the largest landowners in the country, turning large swaths of rural Colombia into large, unproductive cattle ranches. This rapid expansion of Colombia’s cattle frontier has provided the social base for Colombia’s modern paramilitary forces. As the traffickers consolidated their landholdings, they began to create private armies to guarantee their security in the face of the constant guerrilla pressure for monies through extortion (“revolutionary taxes”) and kidnapping. These private armies also became powerful tools to displace local peasant populations, thus serving the dual functions of opening up land and destroying the social base of the guerrilla. This agrarian counter-reform has resulted in the concentration of land ownership, and has turned thousands of peasants into refugees and, in many instances, into recruits in the paramilitary or guerrilla armies. This dynamic has been strongest in the agricultural lands in the north of Colombia, as well as in Magdalena Medio, the eastern plains and parts of the Andean region. It has also extended toward the agricultural frontier, as cattle ranchers buy up colonized land, displace peasants or incorporate them into precarious social and agricultural arrangements, and create paramilitary armies to protect their new holdings. Through the mid-1990s, these paramilitary projects were mostly based at the local level, and reflected a close alliance among drug barons, landowners, regional political bosses and the military. Such was the case in Puerto Boyacá in the Magdalena Medio river valley in central Colombia, which greeted arriving visitors with a sign hailing the city as the “Antisubversive Capital of Colombia.” By the mid-1980s, more than a hundred of these local paramilitary groups existed in Colombia. Over the next decade, they grew into strong regional paramilitary groups—the Death to Revolutionaries.
Movement in Magdalena Medio, the paramilitaries of Chucuri in Santander, and the now infamous Peasant Self-Defense Units of Córdoba and Urabá, led by Carlos Castaño and his brother, Fidel.

These paramilitary groups were not only aimed at subversives, but also became a key link in Colombia’s burgeoning drug trade. The Castaño brothers’ links to the cocaine trade go back to the early 1980s. In Urabá, which is strategically located on the Atlantic Coast across the Darien Gap, perhaps to a Portuguese rest home for the mentally unstable. Carlos Castaño inherited his brother’s wealth and hatreds. He left middle school after his father’s death. Ever since, he’s been at war.

Castaño leads the Peasant Self-Defense Units of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU), the 1990s outgrowth of Fidel’s Tangueros, who took their name from the Castaño ranch. The Tangueros perpetrated the most gruesome massacres of the previous decade. The look, however, is new. Castaño has recruited not a band of professional hit-men, but a private army, which he describes without irony as a new kind of guerrilla. The men guarding him have blue uniforms with baseball caps printed with the letters “ACCU.” They have wartime regulations, a joint chiefs-of-staff, and even “hearts-and-minds” civic-outreach campaigns.

And they have a goal. “We are going to end this war once and for all,” Castaño says. To this end, Castaño has since forged an alliance of like-minded paramilitaries, which he calls the United Self-Defense Units of Colombia (AUC). The AUC is his attempt to propel his regional war into the national arena.

Castaño admits what he calls “errors”—the killing of innocents. “Especially at the beginning, we made mistakes, since we had poor training,” he says. “But we have matured as a fighting force. We now have units throughout the country, and have recuperated many areas from guerrilla domination.”

But war is not all he thinks about. He has hired sociologists, anthropologists and agronomists, he told me, to come up with solutions to Colombia’s problems. The ACCU sponsors grade schools, cooperatives, land reform and agricultural credits. As we spoke, he drew from a battered rucksack a sheaf of neatly printed reports, on ACCU letterhead. One surveys problems facing poor youth. Another addresses the elderly.

These reports, Castaño explained, also served as intelligence, the work the ACCU does before launching an attack. For instance, he explained, they had recently discovered that the guerrillas were “laundering cattle.” After stealing a herd, guerrillas would trade several steers to a peasant in exchange for one “clean” steer. The reduced but “laundered” herd would then be sold to the slaughterhouse. “Butchers were helping fund the guerrillas through this process,” Castaño said, “so we had to send them a message that it would no longer be tolerated.”

The message was direct. The bodies of butchers began to appear on the country roads of Córdoba. “What if the butcher did not know the origin of a steer?” I ventured.

“If he didn’t know,” Castaño countered forcefully, “he should have.”

Castaño argues that most of the hundreds of murders attributed to the ACCU annually are guerrillas—either trained fighters or supporters who, in his view, are equally guilty. He categorically denies allowing his men to torture or mutilate, although the evidence is overwhelming that such practices are common. But in Castaño’s world, almost any activity—boarding a bus, buying beef, treating a patient, paddling a canoe—can seem like part of a vast, silent conspiracy. Just as guerrillas threaten and kill suspected paramilitary supporters, so do paramilitaries threaten and kill suspected guerrilla supporters. Who will be left when the fighting is finished?

Castaño is sure of one thing—he will likely die before he reaches his goal of a guerrilla-free Colombia. The million-dollar reward the government has put on his head annoys him, if only because he believes that he has done more for Colombia than anyone. Sometimes, he says, he thinks of what he will do when it is over—work the cattle, which he loves, have his wife and children near. But he knows, better than most, that a man with so many enemies is unlikely to see a Colombia at peace. His life is war. And in large part because of him, so too is the life of his country.
especially extradition to the United States. As long as the paramilitaries and their narco-allies had their guns turned on the guerrilla, left-wing activists, human rights workers and even amnestied guerrillas, the army was content to allow them free reign. But soon the guns turned against government ministers, judges, governors, senators and presidential candidates. This explosion of narco-violence against the state led to a Supreme Court decision in 1989 that declared the 1965 law that authorized the military to arm civilians unconstitutional.

Still, the armed forces—and by extension the government—have proven unwilling to crack down on the paramilitaries. And in a move that further undermined the government’s credibility, the Samper Administration authorized the creation of new civilian rural defense units known as Convivir in 1994, in an effort to create new groups over which the government could exercise more control. The result, as expected, has been to add one more armed group to the mosaic of armed actors in the Colombian countryside.

The evidence is overwhelming that the military continues to facilitate paramilitary operations. Military leaders mistakenly believe that the paramilitaries represent a useful and successful counterinsurgency strategy for defeating the guerrilla because they have been able to recapture control of certain areas like parts of Magdalena Medio. But the armed forces also understand that the paramilitaries are not accountable to them or to any other state authority. Even by the standards of the Colombian armed forces, the “success” of the paramilitary strategy is questionable. As the paramilitary violence has escalated, so has the FARC’s military power, territorial control and geographic reach. Official statistics place the guerrillas in over half the national territory, in 622 of 1,071 municipalities in 1997. In 1985, they maintained a presence in only 173 municipalities. The paramilitaries have wrested a few key zones from guerrilla control, but in general they do not seem capable of mounting a sustained military campaign against the guerrilla. In effect, the paramilitaries have increased the violence, not controlled the insurgency.

Yet the very fact that the government remains unable or unwilling to dismantle the paramilitaries is testimony to their political strength. When Castaño announced the launching of his national paramilitary project last year, he insisted that there could be no peace with the guerrillas without the participation and cooperation of the AUC. Castaño says that the paramilitaries have a political project and are performing functions that the state has abandoned, particularly in relation to counterinsurgency. The move into Mapiripán last July was not only an attempt to bring the dirty war into the center of the guerrilla zones. It was also an attempt to create “facts on the ground” that establish the power of the paramilitaries as the country begins to look toward the presidential elections of May 1998 and what will likely be a new attempt at a negotiated settlement with the guerrillas in late 1998 or 1999.

The guerrillas have stated that they will not sit down at the negotiating table with the paramilitaries. They reject the idea that the paramilitaries have a political agenda separate from the interests of cattle ranchers, narco-landowners and drug traffickers. They view them simply as agents of state terror.

One in Every 40 Colombians, a Refugee

T he local priest was first to challenge the darkness in Guintar by stringing Christmas lights from the church steeple. Then someone hung lights above a nearby door and window. On the day I visited this village of 2,000 in central Colombia, Robert opened his coffee shop for the first time in four months, and light from this single door spilled onto a lovely, deserted and dark central square.

Last August, paramilitaries seized Guintar and accused its residents of supporting leftist insurgents. The men, heavily armed and dressed in fatigues, forced everyone from their homes, then chose one man and cut off his nose. A paramilitary told Robert and other store owners that if they opened their doors again, he would return, cut them open alive and string their entrails from the manicured bushes in the square. The reason? Store owners probably sold to middlemen for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas that have operated in these dry mountains for decades.

Weeks later, the FARC returned, and vowed that the paramilitaries would never win. To underscore their power, they killed the mayor, a town councilman and a resident of the nearby town of Anzu, who they accused of supporting paramilitaries. Seven families left Guintar the next day, joining the thousands forced to flee their homes because of political violence in Colombia.

Robert, though, holds on. He says he has no choice. “I have 11 people in my family, so how are we supposed to live?” he asked as we stood near his store. The only one to reopen since August, Robert knew he was risking his life and the lives of his family. A mixture of fury, fear and humiliation twisted his boyish features. “The minute we see them coming again, we are going to run for our lives.”

This drama is repeated in thousands of villages and towns throughout Colombia, where war is not fought between armed and uniformed combatants, but against the civilian population. Although many have died in the hills around Guintar, few wear a uniform or even profess an allegiance to one or another actor in this malignant drama.
another side. It is store owners like Robert, truck drivers, peasants, teachers, doctors, community leaders, food vendors and washerwomen who run the highest risks in today’s Colombia.

According to the nongovernmental Council on Human Rights and Displacement, between 1985 and 1996, 920,000 people have been displaced by violence—one in every 40 Colombians. Seventy-two percent are children. Although forced displacement has been going on for over a decade, 1997 was marked by movements of entire populations. For instance, last March, more than 13,000 people, mostly from Afro-Colombian communities along the Pacific coast, began fleeing their homes after paramilitaries took control of the region. Those who tried to hold on later suffered army rocket attacks, which they claimed targeted guerrilla encampments as well as villages and farms.

Indeed, the close coordination of paramilitaries with the army continues to be a leading cause of political violence. Although the government and Colombia’s military leaders deny that they promote or even tolerate paramilitaries, the abundant evidence—reflected in hundreds of investigations carried out by the attorney general’s office, the UN, the Organization of American States, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and even the U.S. State Department—is consistent and terrifying. Through its armed forces and particularly the army, the Colombian government continues to tolerate and often openly promote paramilitary atrocities in the hopes of vanquishing a decades-old insurgency.

The price is murder, forced disappearance and mass displacement. In 1997, many Pacific coast refugees gathered at a crowded camp at Pavarando Grande, which lacked sufficient food, water and health care. Even while they were in the camp, paramilitaries threatened to kill them and reportedly assassinated several people in nearby towns.

The Samper Administration responded to mass displacement by creating the post of “presidential counselor for the displaced” last April, adopting a revised national plan on displacement in May, and promulgating Law 387 in July, which deals specifically with assistance, protection and prevention issues. Advocates for the displaced claim that the government is promoting the return of the displaced to their homes without guaranteeing their safety.

What can be done? Barring peace and intense government investment in rebuilding burned towns, bombed roads and abandoned fields, Maria Villegas, the Public Ombudsperson for the department of Antioquia, adopts a pragmatic approach. Since the paramilitaries killed Guitar’s telephone operator and cut the lines, she will try to shame the authorities into installing a single pay telephone for the town, so that residents can call out, but no one can be accused of placing calls for one or another side. She will send books and toys for a Christmas party for the children, but it will be held in the town square, so no home owner can be accused of rebelling against edicts. And when families flee, she will do her best to get them the pots, blankets and clothing they will need to start new lives as refugees.

I inquire about Robert, and Villegas shakes her head. “By opening his store,” she says, “he has signed his own death certificate.”

It is obvious that there are no longer only two actors involved in Colombia’s conflict. There are at least three, and each of the three—the guerrilla, the paramilitaries and the armed forces—is internally fractured into multiple parts. Achieving a lasting peace will depend on the delicate and immensely complex task of bringing these three actors together to reach viable, pragmatic agreements for a cease-fire, and then the conditions for building peace. There is little doubt that there can be no peace in Colombia unless the paramilitary issue is addressed.

Whether the paramilitaries are invited to sit at the negotiating table, as they insist and as the government seems to favor, or are dismantled, as the FARC has demanded, is a pressing issue which has yet to be resolved. But any negotiation will be, as Gabriel García Márquez recently said, a negotiation among losers. All sides have lost in this war. The final question that remains to be answered is whether the outlines of a new Colombia might emerge on the heels of this tragic loss.
The Lessons of Acteal
16. For a discussion of types of violence in the 1940s and 1950s, see Alfredo Molano, Los Años del Trepel (Bogotá: CEREC, 1985).
20. The Paramilitarization of the War in Colombia
21. The Paramilitarization of the War in Colombia
22. U.S. Entanglements in Colombia Continue
23. A massacre is defined as a collective killing of four or more individuals. Statistics provided by Colombia’s Permanent Committee