

In Colombia— A Terrorist Sanctuary?

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SOON AFTER the entire world expressed solidarity with the United States' intention to physically defeat terrorism, the predictable waffling about how to define "terrorist" began. Some governments struggled to find a semantic concoction that would appear as shared outrage while helping to distract American attention from their own dubious liaisons and *détentes* with outlaw groups. In this regard, the importance of organizational identity was nowhere more transcendent than in northern South America where the 11 September 2001 attacks heightened an already keen attentiveness to U.S. foreign policy. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, in a speech to the Venezuelan Congress, asserted that Colombia's two major armed dissident groups, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the larger Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), "cannot be considered terrorist because if they were we could not negotiate with them, because one does not talk with terrorism, but rather combats it."¹

Chavez's logic was impenetrable—governments do not negotiate with terrorist organizations. Colombia's government had been negotiating with these groups; therefore, the FARC and ELN are not terrorist forces. Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Heinz Moeller later made a muddled, but similar, comment.² The dissemblance was lost on no one, especially in Colombia. The immediate post-World Trade Center issue of leading Bogota news weekly, *Semana*, includes a brief, insightful article about what the events meant for Colombia.³ The article notes President George W. Bush's early ultimatum about punishing terrorists and whoever protects them, then wondered aloud how the United States would define protection.

In 1998, Colombia's government bet its success, and maybe the country's future, on a plan for a negotiated settlement with the FARC and ELN. Together, the two groups annually commit thousands of kidnappings and hundreds of murders, extortions, and bombings, making Colombia one of the most dangerous and violent countries in the world. Their

modus operandi is to translate ruthlessness into fear, thereby gaining the kind of respect that springs therefrom. Their explicit objective is to take power.⁴

Nevertheless, to find a way out of what Colombia's government may have seen as an impasse, President Andres Pastrana agreed to temporarily hand over a piece of Colombian territory to the FARC. Officially called the *despeje*, or clearing, the

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area was cleared of all government armed forces, leaving it under complete FARC control. A 10-kilometer-wide no-man's zone then was added around the outside. Ostensibly, the FARC required this concession as an assurance of security to begin a course of peace negotiations. The results were dubious, the FARC having conceded nothing in more than 2 years of talks.

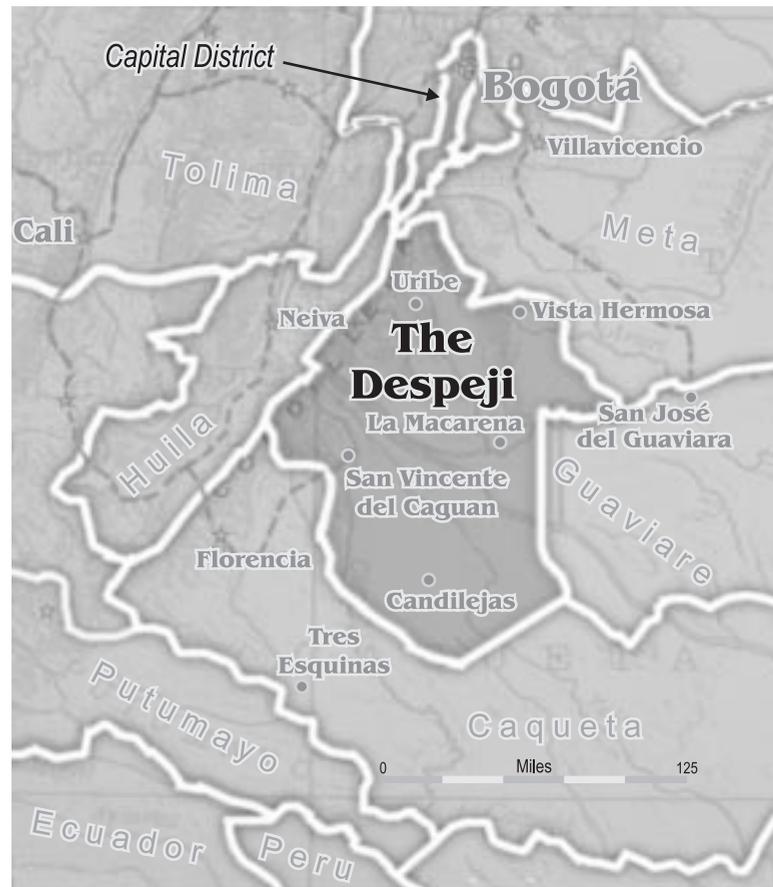
The FARC actively exploited the natural military advantages of safely occupying such a huge section of geography in the heart of the national sovereignty.⁵ Protected interior lines allowed the FARC to greatly increase its effective military presence in areas around the zone, expanding the total amount of territory under its control, at least partially.⁶ To the south this provided special strategic advantage, helping to secure the FARC's southern line of communication out of Colombia into Ecuador and Peru. Within the *despeje*, the FARC was able to hide and manage its inventory of hostages, step up training, and manufacture bombs and mines. To the northwest, the *despeje* borders the mountain approaches to Bogota.

Although underrecognized, an earlier *Semana* article provided definitive answers about the nature of the ELN and FARC, and of the government's peace plan.⁷ By 2001, Pastrana was pressing for a similar zone for the smaller ELN. The area chosen lies along the middle reaches of the Magdalena River. Aside from dominating the most strategically important line of communication in the country, the proposed zone includes a major coca crop concentration as well as oil industry infrastructure. The *Semana* interviewer questions Pastrana about ongoing negotiations with local residents who were opposed to the proposed accord.

The interviewer asks, "And if there is no agreement, are you going to continue with the clearance zone in that area?" The frank answer is troublesome, its logic perhaps the first public expression, beyond reciting abstractions, of the President's reasoning: "The country needs to understand that the ELN is prepared to make peace, but if it doesn't happen, it is prepared to make war. And it has a great terrorist capability."⁸ In a nutshell, a president is stating that his country must understand that if he does not give an armed outlaw group strategically important land the group will hurt the country. To avoid violent harm, the president advises the country that it must yield its wealth and accept strategic risk. There is no doubt about Pastrana's use of the term "terrorist" in his explanation or about the simplicity of his appeasement.

Coca cultivation in the FARC *despeje* increased as U.S.-sponsored Plan Colombia coca eradication activities proceeded outside it. A major goal of the eradication plan has been to reduce the financial blood flow to the FARC and thereby decrease its capacity for violent action. However, because Colombia has a longstanding policy of not negotiating with drug dealers, the Pastrana government long maintained publicly that the FARC was not a drug-trafficking organization. For a time, the United States was deferred to Pastrana's political expedience regarding classification of the FARC. After all, the Drug Enforcement Administration itself was always slow to accept publicly the idea that the FARC is a drug-trafficking organization. However, since 11 September, when terrorist replaced trafficker as America's number one enemy identity, it has been too much for the United States to overlook these organizations' terrorist character and too much for the Colombians to ask the United States to do so.

During the week of 5 September, three Irish Republican Army members were captured in Colombia after having trained FARC members.⁹ Even in the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks, the FARC could not moderate its behavior, murdering a popular government official while holding her captive.¹⁰ The FARC mounted a pub-



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licity effort in which it expressed sympathy for victims of the World Trade Center disaster, but Colombian Government security forces revealed a tape recording of a senior FARC leader asserting that the FARC would "combat them [North Americans] wherever they may be, until we get to their own territory, to make them feel the pain which they have inflicted on other peoples."¹¹

A mild paradox in the course of U.S. policy regarding Colombia's situation makes the *despeje* question still more interesting. Another of Colombia's illegal armed organizations, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), recently joined the ELN and the FARC on the U.S. Department of

State's official list of international terrorist organizations.¹² The AUC's stated purpose is to eliminate the ELN and the FARC, but like them, it has been implicated in human rights violations and in the drug trade. The AUC may have been put on the State Department's terrorist list in part because FARC peace negotiators demanded that the Colombian Government demonstrate good will in opposing the AUC. Now it appears that including the AUC on the list will make it harder for some publicists to overlook the terrorist characterization of the FARC and ELN. The AUC is generally labeled right-wing, while the FARC and ELN are known as leftist.¹³ It might have been arguable to Colombians that leftist or anti-American leanings, rather than organizational behavior, were dominant criteria for selection to the list. With the AUC included, however, that argument has diminished.

The question for the future will not be how to describe groups such as the FARC and ELN. They will keep their rightful place on the terrorist list. The harder question will be how to encourage an allied government not to allow a huge area of land to be used as an outlaw sanctuary and training ground for acts of extreme violence. As for Colombia, if the Colombian Government believes it must concede

national territory to its armed dissidents because otherwise they will commit debilitating acts of violence against the country, we must ask what authority, strategy, or equipment has been lacking.

As a corollary, we might ask what parts or determinants of our own policies have so discouraged the Colombian Government, or so disabled its ability to apply military power, that a small outlaw army could bully an ally of 40 million people. Perhaps we accepted the notion that the problems in Colombia are essentially political or cultural and the military instrument therefore inappropriate. Popular, plausible theories signaling economic disparities, political inequities, and cultural anachronisms as the root causes of conflict may have distracted us from appropriately defining the more immediate requirement.¹⁴ Consider the following list of advantages the subversives enjoyed for more than 2 years: interior lines, rear area security, protected lines of communication, protected financial resource bases, marshaling areas, training areas, and access to strategic corridors. These are not societal failures fueling underlying causes of popular discontent.¹⁵ They are military objectives. In February 2002, the Colombian Army took back the *despeje*. **MR**

NOTES

1. "Chavez Says Colombian Guerrillas Not Terrorist," *EFE News* [Spain] (29 September 2001), at <http://www.prairienet.org/clm/clmnews_files/010929EFE02.html>.

2. "Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Expresses Views on Terrorism, Integration," *LAP20011007000041, Quito Hoy*, Internet Version in Spanish (7 October 2001).

3. "La Hora Del Garrote," *Semana* (17 September 2001, 62), Foreign Broadcast Information Service translated text.

4. In an interview with propagandists of *Patria Roja*, the Communist Party of Peru, FARC commander Raúl Reyes made the standard assertion: "The FARC has risen as a Marxist-Leninist force fed by Bolivarian thinking that struggles for power and does not recognize the State." He goes on to explain the negotiations with the government. Evidently, for the FARC, the peace negotiations form part of their process for taking power. See <<http://www.geocities.com/capitolhill/senate/9785/actu10.htm>>.

5. The propagandistic value cannot be understated, propaganda and operational strategy being at some point linked. The FARC has long made explicit arguments in favor of belligerent status under international law. See, for instance, "Beligerancia," *FARC-EP Documentos*, at <<http://www.farc-ep.org/>>. See Armando Borrero Mansilla, "La importancia militar de la zona del despeje," *El Tiempo* (19 October 2001), at <<http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/19-10-2001/prip118531.html>>.

6. See Scott Wilson, "Colombian Rebels Use Refuge to Expand Their Power Base: FARC Pushes Boundaries of Government-Backed Safe Haven," *The Washington Post Online* (3 October 2001), A25, at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>; "Envisioned as a way to end Colombia's nearly four-decade civil war, the FARC's safe haven instead has become the guerrillas' single biggest military advantage in the widening conflict, according to senior army officers and defense analysts in Colombia."

7. "Mi única prioridad no es la paz," *Semana*; interview with President Andres Pastrana, *Semana* (26 February 2001), 30.

8. *Ibid.*

9. "Colombia Details Fresh [Irish Republican Army] IRA Link to Guerrillas," *Financial Times*, at <<http://ft.com> September 17 2001 20:43>; see also "IRA Denies Sending Trio to Colombia," *Agence France Presse* (19 September 2001), at <http://www.prairienet.org/clm/clmnews_files/010919AFP01.html>. The Cuban Government's longstanding sponsorship of Colombian subversive groups should

regain currency as an issue, especially in light of Cuban collaboration with and aid to other international terrorist organizations. See, for instance, Ninoska Pérez Castellón, "The Cuban Connection," *Latin American Special Report* (30 September 2001), 1.

10. Scott Wilson, "Colombian Guerrillas Kill Popular Official," *Washington Post Foreign Service* (1 October 2001), A16.

11. Luis Jaime Acosta, "Colombian Rebels Plan Strike in U.S.," *Reuters* (24 September 2001) See also *Colombian Labor Monitor* at <clm@prairienet.org>.

12. Ken Guggenheim, "Citing Massacre, Powell Assails Colombia Group as Terrorist," *Boston Globe* (11 September 2001, A15).

13. Some ELN members may have been defecting to the AUC. See, in this regard, the official AUC website, *Colombia Libre*, at <[http://www.colombialibre.net/colombialibre/](http://www.colombialibre.net/)>, which posted an item claiming widespread defections from the ELN to the AUC. The FARC can also be expected to receive members from the ELN if it is, as some analysts contend, crumbling. These possibilities raise questions about the ideological dimension of both the ELN and the AUC. The reported lack of organizational cohesion in the ELN further calls into doubt the Colombian Government's decision to give it a large internal sanctuary.

14. Changes after 11 September are palpable. Francis Taylor, Coordinator for Terrorism Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, stated in early October to attentive South American audiences that his office was designing an antiterrorist strategy for Colombia that would complement Plan Colombia. See Sergio Gomez Maseri, "E.U. prepara estrategia antiterrorista para Colombia," *El Tiempo* [Bogotá] (12 October 2001), at <http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/12-10-2001/prip_pf_0.html> and "EE. UU. No descarta intervenir en Colombia" [United States Does Not Rule Out Intervention in Colombia] (16 October 2001), at <www.clarin.ar>.

15. As the ELN describes it, "This complex panorama of the social, political, economic and legal reality and of the opportunities of life denied to the majority of Colombians is what gave rise to and sustains the existence of a guerrilla movement and the inevitability of revolutionary armed struggle. It is not the desire nor the result of individual motives of warlike men, as Colombia's ruling class would have it." See <<http://www.web.net/ein/ELN/ein.html>>. Whatever Colombia's ruling class would or would not have and whatever social injustices exist, objectivity compels one to conclude that, indeed, much of the violence in Colombia is the desire and result of individual motives of warlike men.

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