Ex-FARC Mafia Hold Key to Colombia's Newest Criminal Conflict Zone
Clashes between an emerging Ex-FARC Mafia cell and the Urabeños in Ituango are signs that the Nudo de Paramillo is rapidly becoming the latest epicentre of post-FARC criminal violence. Rearmed factions of the 36th Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) faced off against the Urabeños, leaving a reported four dead and three injured on the Urabeños side and resulting in the mass displacement of around 35 families.
The Nudo de Paramillo region is a key strategic criminal territory. It is one of northwest Colombia’s most important coca cultivation areas, and a hub of internal movement corridors connecting key territories such as Sur de Bolivar, Bajo Cauca, Chocó, Urabá and the Caribbean coast.

There are multiple actors in the conflicts raging around the Nudo. In the south, the conflict between the ex-36th Front guerrillas and the Urabeños is complicated by the presence of former fighters from the 18th Front of the FARC and reports the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) may also have entered the region. Along the eastern border, the Bajo Cauca municipalities of Tarazá, Cáceres and Caucasia and the Cordoba municipality of San José de Uré have seen bitter fighting between the Urabeños and a splinter group known as the Caparrapos, while the ELN, with a strong presence in Tarazá and Cáceres and in nearby municipalities such as Anori, also have a claim on drug interests in the region. In the northern territory of Alto Sinú, meanwhile, reports suggest ex-FARC fighters and commanders are working with the Urabeños to violently seize control of coca crops and the movement corridor towards the coast.

The outcome of the various battles for the Nudo de Paramillo and the criminal future of the region remains uncertain. But the balance of power in these conflicts is likely to lie with the former FARC guerrillas. Their local knowledge and influence along with their experience in war and crime is unmatched. The FARC were previously the most powerful actors in the region, and the Ex-FARC Mafia, whether acting alone or in alliance with the ELN or even mafia groups, are now likely to assume this position.

**Transnational Pursuit of Undeclared Assets**

**Threat to Demobilized FARC**

Angry crowds looted a chain of supermarkets in Tolima and Cundinamarca after prosecutors arrested the chain’s owners and accused of them of laundering millions of dollars for the FARC.

Colombian prosecutors later handed over 13 million electronic files to their Ecuadorian counterparts related to FARC assets in Colombian’s southern neighbour.
Attorney General Néstor Humberto Martínez’s dogged pursuit of the FARC’s undeclared assets represents one of the principal threats to the ambitions of demobilized guerrilla leaders. If he can show they have not complied with their commitment to turn over their wealth, then they will lose the benefits agreed to in the peace agreement.

Much of these hidden assets are likely to be in Ecuador, a logistics hub and rearguard refuge for the FARC’s western and southern blocs with a dollarized economy, which facilitated the laundering of international drug trade payments. Similarly, many assets are likely to be found in Colombia’s neighbour to the west, Venezuela.

The central question surrounding this process is whether the demobilized FARC have access to these assets or whether they are now in the hands of Ex-FARC Mafia elements and frontmen.

**Combat and Killings Sound Alarm in Catatumbo**

The west Colombia region of Catatumbo saw several deadly confrontations between the security forces and both the ELN and the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Popular – EPL) as well as the killing of three Venezuelans in Colombia, attributed to the ELN.

The violence has also crossed the border, with seven people killed in a clash authorities say was between the EPL and Venezuela’s forensic police.

Although Catatumbo has not yet emerged as one of the main conflict zones of the post-FARC underworld, there have been indications of a deteriorating security situation for some time.

Most of the reported violence has involved clashes between armed groups and the security forces, and selective assassinations. However, InSight Crime’s sources have also spoken of a conflict between the ELN and the EPL that has been building since the withdrawal of the FARC from Catatumbo.
Indications Ties Between ELN and Venezuela Growing Ever Closer

Reports have emerged of the ELN distributing Venezuelan government food aid stamped with guerrilla propaganda in the border regions.

The Colombian government later confirmed that an ELN guerrilla who died while planting explosives in Norte de Santander was a current or former member of Venezuela’s Bolivarian National Guard (GNB).

If the Venezuelan government is aiding the ELN cement social control, then this could signal the embattled administration is shifting from a permissive towards a cooperative stance towards the guerrillas in Venezuela.

The notion that the Venezuelan government is trying to establish a role in the border region’s underworld and its criminal economies was further reinforced by the naming of Fredy Bernal as “protector” of border state Táchira. Bernal previously acted as the Venezuelan government’s contact with the FARC and is also a key connection with the Venezuelan armed “colectivos” networks and the police.

The flood of hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan refugees into Colombia, meanwhile, is providing a fertile recruiting pool of desperate people, not only for the ELN, who have long recruited Venezuelans, but for all underworld actors active along the border.

Armed Strike Demonstration of ELN’s Strength and Weakness

The ELN carried out a three-day “armed strike,” principally in protest at the government’s suspension of peace talks

There were reports of burned vehicles, attacks against transport infrastructure and retentions and harassment of travellers in Nariño, Antioquia, Cauca, Cesar, Norte de Santander, and Valle de Cauca, but no reported causalities.

The strike acted as a reminder that the ELN retain the capacity to cause considerable disruption to everyday life in several regions of Colombia. However, their actions were largely restricted to areas with a strong ELN presence, showing that despite their recent expansion the threat the rebels pose and influence they wield remains territorially limited.
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