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Colombia's Gamble

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While everybody is watching the dramatic events in the Middle East and the allied campaign in Afghanistan, a nation to our South is quietly writing new chapters in counterinsurgency practices. That state is, of course, Colombia, coming back from the brink of dissolution a decade ago. With great effort it has succeeded in halting and reversing the threat of guerrilla movements that once threatened its civil life. But as a consequence of success, its government and security services are now grappling with another challenge – to wind the war down and in the process to rebuild a stronger civil society.

No responsible Colombian would claim today that the war is over. Though the main guerrilla group, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), which is deeply involved in the narcotics trade, has been substantially defeated and no longer threatens the government, it still retains capability to terrorize and dominate remote areas. Additionally, a new class of violent criminal bands, variously called “*Bandas Criminales*” or “Bacrim,” has emerged from the breakup of right-wing militias in the '90s to join the drug trade and ally themselves with the Mexican cartels. Colombian police now consider the Bacrim to be a more significant threat to Colombia than the FARC. Additionally, a Colombian defense official recently noted that, in some ways, this stage of the counterinsurgency campaign is tougher since the various guerrilla and criminal groups, now under increasing pressure from government troops and police, are operating in smaller, more hard-core bands and present more fleeting targets for police and military forces. Military and police strategies are adapting to these new conditions, but at this point it is not the military's operations *per se* that are especially remarkable; both the military and police have evolved into professional, competent services. What *is* remarkable is the manner in which Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) has become such an integral part of Colombia's military strategy for ending its long-running insurgency.

DDR is, of course, a process generally recognized internationally for standing down insurgents and winding down internal conflict. There's a U.N. manual on the subject and it has been tried from the Balkans to Africa with varying degrees of success. Colombia's program borrows from other experiences as well as their own, and the result is distinctly Colombian. Here are the high points.

First, the basis for all Colombian operations against guerrillas and common criminals alike is to *support the legitimacy of the civil government*, an objective identified in military strategic guidance as the “center of gravity” for the fight to restore peace. Operations “under the law” are a phrase heard frequently in Colombian military and government offices, and understanding the

role that law and legitimacy plays is fundamental to understanding Colombia's brand of counterinsurgency. With regard to reintegration, however, Colombian law throws in a wrinkle; a Colombian Supreme Court decision allows pardons only for members of so-called "formal" guerrilla bands – the FARC and the ELN (*Ejercito Liberacion Nacional*) because insurgent groups commit "political" crimes against the state that can be pardoned by the state. Bacrim, though, and members of other *Bandes Criminales* have committed common "nonpolitical" crimes against citizens and are therefore not pardonable by the state. A key to understanding the potential and limitations of the Colombian program is this split between guerrillas – "political" criminals – and the Bacrim, who are more "civil" criminals.

The point has to be made up front that Colombia's DDR experience, like others, is not uniformly successful. During 2010, over 32,500 former guerrillas "came in" to the DDR program, after careful vetting for background and sincerity. Throughout, though, it is the former fighters themselves who hold the best cards – a former guerrilla can quit the program and return to the bush anytime, and insurgent fighters have been known to leave the FARC for R&R, absorb as much assistance as possible, and then return to the fight. Vetting surrendering guerrillas to weed out "users" is a complex process.

The first two steps in Colombian DDR – disarmament and demobilization – is the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense. Initially, surrendering individuals or units turn themselves in to local army or police garrisons, where they are disarmed, interrogated to establish their *bona fides* and exploited to provide local tactical intelligence. One official familiar with the process recently pointed out that military interrogators can quickly verify whether an applicant is "genuine" – a "political" guerrilla versus a "criminal" -- by asking him (or her) to verify tactical details already known to the government that only a guerrilla would know – unit commanders' names, dates and locations of skirmishes with government troops, locations of bases and so forth. Members of criminal bands who flunk are, at a minimum, denied entry into the reintegration process and, if the evidence supports it, arrested. (It's worth noting that in conversations, former guerrillas indicate little hesitation about turning themselves into military or police posts; the government's campaign to spread the word about DDR, and as important, the readiness of military and police units to correctly receive and process guerrillas who want to come in, has been successful [FARC units have countered with coercion and execution]).

Only then, after their authenticity is established and all useful intelligence is wrung out, may a former guerrilla apply to begin the "reintegration" phase and his or her records will be placed in front of a government panel to rule on admission. Reintegration – the third phase – is so valued by the Colombian government that, although DDR is a critical part of Colombia's security strategy, the "R" phase is directed by a civilian, cabinet-level High Commissioner who works directly for the President. The program's budget – overseen by the High Commissioner – was over \$8B in 2010, and the budgets of other agencies (for example, education) also support the program.

Once an applicant is admitted to the Reintegration program, he or she – females account for about 14% of applicants – report to one of 29 service centers around the country, where applicants enter a three-phase program that consists of psychological counseling, education – some former guerrillas can't read or write – and then job training in Colombia's network of

vocational-technical schools. Association with a service center and follow-up by a psychological counselor may last up to six years. Six years is a long time for reintegration -- most programs follow former fighters for about two years – but the Colombians believe long-term follow-up, particularly psychological and social follow-up, is necessary.

Reintegration, the most expensive part of DDR, has cost over \$67 billion since 2007, is a mixture of Colombian and international donor funds. But whatever the expense, the Colombian government believes that it has no option – that ending the hemisphere’s longest-running insurgency, and bringing the rule of law to the country as a whole will require the reintegration and retraining of tens of thousands of former guerrillas.

The program has not remained constant over the years, with variations in pay, treatment and other wrinkles as officials learn more about the process. From the view of a visiting *Norte Americano*, the Colombian experience in DDR raises three questions; how long support for the program can be maintained at its present levels, how the military services and the High Commissioner’s team will be affected as the FARC and other groups get more hard-core and difficult to reach, and, finally, what the ultimate effect will be of the division between “political” and “criminal” classes of potential enrollees.

Thus far, and through three Presidents, DDR has remained a vital part of the Colombian government’s strategy to wind the war down. Bringing former guerrillas in will be harder and harder as guerilla fighters move deeper into the forests and away from garrisons and police stations – potential reception centers for surrendering guerrillas. A successful military plan (and a corresponding police plan) to reconfigure operations to account for a more dispersed force will be vital. Finally, Colombia will ultimately have to grapple with the largely artificial, but court-ordered divide between “political” guerrillas and other classes of criminals. In fact, the FARC, and to a lesser extent the ELN, are deeply involved in cocaine production, and have become criminal drug cartels in all but name. Likewise, as the Bacrim and other bands get larger and more guerrilla-like, their members become logical candidates for DDR. In actuality, the crimes committed by the FARC and the Bacrim are not very different, and Colombian law must find a practical solution.

The Colombian government, like all governments menaced by criminal bands that have grown to the level of insurgencies, is struggling to restore the rule of law and civil society. At this moment, it is successfully developing a DDR program that will be essential in winding down violence and returning tens of thousands of Colombian citizens to normal and productive lives. This is the only way an insurgency can end, regardless of its motivations. As one official recently said about the importance of DDR, “we’re taking our country back” by returning former insurgents to useful, productive lives in a civil society.

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