

The FARC and Colombia's Illegal Drug Trade

By John Otis
November 2014

Introduction

In 2014, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, Latin America's oldest and largest guerrilla army known as the FARC, marked the 50th anniversary of the start of its war against the Colombian government. More than 220,000 people have been killed¹ and more than five million people uprooted² from their homes in the conflict, which is the last remaining guerrilla war in the Western Hemisphere.

However, this grim, half-century milestone coincides with peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC that began in Havana, Cuba, in November 2012. The Havana talks have advanced much farther than the three previous efforts to negotiate with the FARC and there is a growing sense that a final peace treaty is now likely.³ So far, the two sides have reached agreements on three of the five points on the negotiating agenda, including an accord to resolve an issue that helps explain why the conflict has lasted so long: The FARC's deep involvement in the taxation, production, and trafficking of illegal drugs. On May 16, 2014, the government and the FARC signed an agreement stating that under the terms of a final peace treaty, the two sides would work in tandem to eradicate coca, the plant used to make cocaine, and to combat cocaine trafficking in areas under guerrilla control. The FARC "has

promised to effectively contribute, in diverse and practical ways, to a definitive solution to the problem of illegal drugs," Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos said in a televised speech the day the accord was signed.⁴

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A month later, Santos secured more time to bring the peace talks to a successful conclusion. On June 15, 2014, Santos won a second four-year presidential term in a run-off election against opposition candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga, who had been harshly critical of the peace process and had threatened to suspend the negotiations if elected.⁵

A decade ago, Colombia supplied about 90 percent of the world's cocaine. But due to anti-drug efforts in Colombia as well as Peru's reemergence as a major producer, Colombia since 2011 is believed to provide less than half of the world's cocaine, according to U.S. officials.⁶ Yet drug profits continue to be a vital source of cash for the FARC, a smaller Marxist rebel group known as the National Liberation Army, or ELN, and other criminal organizations in Colombia. Massive drug profits help the FARC to buy weapons, uniforms, and supplies and to recruit fresh troops. The fight between the FARC and illegal right-wing paramilitary groups over coca fields and drug smuggling corridors has been a key factor in the conflict's extreme levels of violence, forced displacement and land grabs.⁷ When the two sides first met to discuss the drug issue in November 2013, Colombia's chief peace negotiator, Humberto de la Calle, called the illegal drug trade "the fuel that feeds the conflict."

During the last round of peace talks with the government that lasted from 1999 to 2002, the FARC was at the peak of its military power thanks, in part, to a surge in drug income and made almost no effort to seriously negotiate a peace treaty. Since then, the U.S. government has provided Colombia with \$9.3 billion in aid,⁸ much of which has been spent on counterinsurgency and counterdrug programs targeting the FARC. The Colombian military's successful efforts to weaken the FARC and reduce its drug income through targeting coca fields, drug laboratories, and smugglers have helped convince FARC leaders to return to the bargaining table for negotiations that hold much promise for a final peace accord.⁹

This paper will examine the FARC's long history of involvement in Colombia's illegal narcotics industry and the impact of rebel drug profits on the course of the armed conflict. It will also explore the likely impact of the drug accord reached at the peace negotiations in Cuba on efforts to extricate the FARC from the drug-trafficking equation, possible changes in Colombia's counterdrug policies, as well as the strong possibility that some FARC members will continue producing and smuggling drugs in a post-conflict scenario.

THE FARC-DRUG CONNECTION: FROM HANDS-OFF TO ALL-IN

The FARC pre-dates the boom in Colombia's illegal narcotics industry by several decades. The rebel army started out as a band of farmers who fled to the mountains of western Tolima department to escape *La Violencia*, the massive wave of political violence that erupted following the 1948 death of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a Liberal Party presidential aspirant. These gunmen were essentially self-defense militias and they rarely clashed with the Colombian army. But after Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba, the Colombian government—fearing the spread of Communism—dispatched thousands of troops to try to route them. The May 1964 army offensive is widely deemed as the beginning of Colombia's modern-day guerrilla war. It also convinced these armed peasants, who were commanded by a former storekeeper, Pedro Antonio Marín who went by the alias "Manuel Marulanda," to scrap their self-defense doctrine and fight to install a Marxist government in Bogotá. Two years later, this rebel army adopted the name Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. Its initial strength: 350 men.¹⁰

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For years the FARC remained just one of an alphabet soup of Colombian rebel groups that included the National Liberation Army (ELN), the People's Liberation Army (EPL) and the April 19th Movement (M-19). Though linked to Colombia's Communist party, the FARC never received much training or funding from the party, from Castro or from Eastern Bloc countries. Although the illegal drug industry began taking hold in Colombia in the 1970s, the FARC had long considered the business counterrevolutionary and feared drug money would corrupt its forces. But as a rural-based rebel movement with few ties to urban areas, money was always in short supply.¹¹

In order to finance a huge expansion of its forces, the FARC leadership finally switched tacks in 1982 and started taxing drug producers and smugglers. Under the new policy, the FARC began levying a 10 percent per kilogram tax on coca base, a raw form of cocaine produced from coca leaves and chemicals that is later turned into powder cocaine in jungle laboratories. In other areas, the FARC taxed marijuana growers and farmers harvesting opium latex from poppies which is used to make heroin. The rebels also collected fees for every drug flight leaving rebel controlled areas.¹²



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The FARC has long defended its practice of promoting coca cultivation and then taxing drug farmers for protecting their crops on the grounds that impoverished peasants in remote, roadless areas lack alternatives to make a living. “We are not drug traffickers,” said the late FARC spokesman, known as “Raúl Reyes” in a 2001 interview. “The FARC is a guerrilla army of men and women who are fighting 24 hours a day to change the country. The rest of what they say is lies.”¹³

But by the early 1990s, the breakup of the Medellín and Cali cartels had spawned a new generation of less-powerful “mini cartels” that turned to the FARC to protect their smuggling operations. At the about the same time, the Peruvian military began shooting down drug flights transporting coca paste from Bolivia and Peru to Colombian cocaine laboratories. As a result, much of the Andean coca crop shifted to the southern Colombian jungles where there was scant government presence and where the FARC held sway. From a few thousand acres the size of Colombia’s coca crop jumped to more than 400,000 acres in 2000 capable of producing 680 tons of cocaine, according to United Nations figures.

Control over the coca fields helped the FARC consolidate control over the peasantry and widen its social base.¹⁴ However, the FARC faced a stiff challenge from illegal rightwing paramilitary groups which had allied with drug traffickers and large landowners who were angry over FARC taxes, extortion and kidnappings. Known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC, these militias often worked in collaboration with the Colombian army and usually targeted the rebel’s civilian supporters. But the AUC became increasingly involved in drug trafficking. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, much of the fighting between the FARC and the AUC was for control over coca plantations and trafficking routes.¹⁵

The smaller ELN rebel group, which has about 1,500 fighters, is also involved in drug trafficking. Formed in 1965 by students, Catholic radicals, and left-wing intellectuals, the ELN has occasionally cooperated with the FARC but at other times, these rebel groups have targeted each other on the battlefield. At first, the ELN stayed out of drug trafficking on ideological grounds and funded itself through carrying out kidnappings for ransom and other extortion

schemes. But these days the ELN's primary income source is drug trafficking, a shift that government officials believe occurred between 2005 and 2007, which coincides with increased ELN activity along the Pacific coast and Venezuelan border, areas that are both coca-growing regions and drug-trafficking zones.¹⁶

The drug-fueled violence has forced more than five million Colombians from their homes, the third highest number after Sudan and Syria, while paramilitaries, drug traffickers and FARC rebels are believed to have stolen some thirteen million acres of land. Massive displacement and land grabs have contributed to one of the most lopsided ratios of property distribution in Latin America and contribute to the 42.8 percent poverty rate in the Colombian countryside.¹⁷ All of this inequality, in turn, convinced many peasants to join the FARC, whose leaders have always justified their war by saying they are fighting for land reform and for better economic conditions for poor Colombians.¹⁸

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Meanwhile, millions of drug dollars provided the FARC with a kind of steroidal boost allowing the rebel army to expand from 6,000 members in 1982 to about 20,000 fighters at the peak of its military power in the early 2000s, according to Colombian Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón.¹⁹ A 1998 report by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency warned that the FARC and its drug-trafficking allies would be able to defeat the Bogotá government within five years and convert Colombia into a “narco-state.”²⁰

That same year Colombian President Andrés Pastrana agreed to form a temporary safe haven for the FARC in order to hold peace talks that began in 1999. But instead of focusing on peace, the FARC used the 16,000-square-mile region in southern Colombia to train troops, stash hostages, grow coca, and establish links with international drug traffickers, like Mexico's Tijuana Cartel and Brazilian smugglers. In 2001, for example, the captured Brazilian drug kingpin Luiz Fernando Da Costa told Colombian authorities that the FARC helped him export more than 200 tons of cocaine to Brazil the previous year, charging him a tax of \$500 per kilogram and \$15,000 for each drug flight.²¹

Pastrana's peace talks ended in failure in 2002 but by then the U.S. Congress had approved a

\$1.3 billion aid package for Colombia and its neighbors known as Plan Colombia that was mainly designed to help stabilize the Bogotá government and prop up its floundering armed forces.²² At first, U.S. military aid was officially programmed for counter-narcotics operations in Colombia rather than for counterinsurgency missions due to fears among U.S. politicians about getting sucked into a Vietnam-like quagmire. But the distinction was largely artificial because the drug traffickers targeted by that aid were often FARC rebels. After the collapse of the peace talks between the Pastrana government and the FARC in early 2002, the U.S. Congress allowed American advisers to train Colombian troops for counterinsurgency operations against the FARC, which had been added to the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations in 1997. Soon afterwards newly elected President Álvaro Uribe launched a prolonged army offensive that drove the FARC away from major population centers, reduced its troop strength by about half and led to the killing or capture of dozens of FARC commanders.²³

The offensive coupled with more effective anti-drug programs that focused on interdiction would eventually make a big dent in FARC drug profits. Yet during the initial phases of the army campaign, the FARC may have actually increased its drug income as it scrambled to form alliances with criminal groups and became deeply involved in more lucrative midstream aspects of the drug trade, such as cocaine production and smuggling, according to Daniel Mejía, director of the Center for Security and Drug Studies at the University of the Andes in Bogotá.²⁴

By the mid-2000s fighting between the FARC and the AUC died down as the two sides began cooperating in the drug business. One of the earliest reports of cooperation involved FARC and paramilitary units smuggling drugs in 2001 in Arauca department that borders Venezuela. In one of Colombia's largest-ever drug seizure, police in 2005 confiscated 15 tons of cocaine in southern Nariño department that borders Ecuador and the Pacific coast. The cocaine had been produced in paramilitary drug labs from coca base that had, in turn, been produced in rebel-held areas and purchased from negotiators working on behalf of the FARC.²⁵

These alliances continued after the AUC formally demobilized in the mid-2000s. Although top paramilitary chieftains were either imprisoned or extradited to the United States on drug-trafficking charges, many mid-level commanders formed their own criminal organizations, dubbed by authorities as *bandas criminales* (criminal bands), or BACRIM.²⁶ Dedicated to drug trafficking, extortion, illegal gold mining, and other criminal activities, the BACRIM have actively sought business alliances with the FARC and today there is almost no fighting between these groups. Agreements for the FARC to supply coca base and cocaine to the largest BACRIM group, known as the Urabeños, have been reported in six of Colombia's 32 departments. In some cases, the BACRIM pay the FARC taxes for moving coca base through rebel-dominated areas. In other cases, the BACRIM pay in weapons, ammunition and supplies. There are also reports that BACRIM have provided the FARC with intelligence on army counterinsurgency operations and that the FARC, in return, have provided not only drugs but also training and shelter to BACRIM leaders on the run from authorities.²⁷

In some instances, the FARC is apparently cutting out the BACRIM middlemen and dealing directly with international drug smuggling organizations – although this remains the exception rather than the norm.²⁸ A 2007 letter found on the computer of the FARC spokesman Raúl Reyes—who was killed in a Colombian military strike the following year—outlined a plan to sell cocaine directly to Mexican drug cartels. The letter proposed selling 100 kilograms of cocaine to the Mexicans in a trial run.²⁹ In 2008, Sergio Jaramillo, who was then Colombia’s deputy defense minister and is now the Santos government’s peace commissioner and one of the negotiators at the Havana talks, confirmed that Mexican cartels were buying cocaine directly from the FARC. Speaking at security meeting of the Organization of American States in Mexico City, Jaramillo added that the FARC “controlled most of Colombia’s cocaine trade.”³⁰

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Law enforcement officials in both Colombia and the United States now say that some FARC units are moving cocaine overland to pick-up points in neighboring Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador and to vessels, semi-submersible boats, and submarines on Colombia’s Pacific coast for delivery to Mexico’s Sinaloa cartel and other traffickers as far north as Central America.³¹ One sign of this new capability came in 2011 when Colombian authorities captured a drug submarine capable of holding four tons of cocaine that allegedly belonged to the FARC.³²

Although they entail more risk, these cross-border deals are far more profitable for the guerrillas. The FARC can triple its per kilogram profit by delivering cocaine to pick-up points in neighboring countries rather than selling the drug at the laboratory door inside Colombia.³³ To facilitate these international shipments, the FARC has worked closely with contacts in a number of foreign countries, as these recent law enforcement cases indicate:

- In April 2013, Colombian José Evaristo Linares, who allegedly sent tons of cocaine from Apure state on Venezuela’s border with Colombia to Central America, was extradited to the United States. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Linares made regular payments to the FARC—which has a large presence on the Venezuelan side of the border—for the use of rebel-controlled airstrips in Venezuela.³⁴
- In April 2013, police arrested two men in Bogotá who are accused of serving as FARC intermediaries in a scheme to exchange cocaine for arms supplied by gun runners in the West African nation of Guinea-Bissau, an important transit point for South American cocaine destined for Europe.³⁵
- In February 2014, Guatemala extradited to the United States Sonia Cruz Quiceño;

she was reported to have served as a link between the FARC's 36th front based in Antioquia department and international drug trafficking organizations, an indication that this FARC unit may have developed its own export route.³⁶

In September 2012, Colombian Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón claimed that the FARC was involved in drug trafficking "at every level."³⁷ However, there is little evidence that the FARC is involved in the most lucrative downstream aspects of the drug trade such as retail distribution in consumer countries.³⁸ What's more, even as the rebels extend the reach of their international drug operations, the FARC has sometimes proved to be a mediocre player at cross-border smuggling. In February 2014, for example, a joint U.S.-Colombian operation seized 17 kilos of cocaine that the FARC and the ELN were allegedly sending to Russian traffickers in New York. The original shipment was supposed to be 50 kilos but due to logistical problems in getting the cocaine from jungle laboratories to the port of Cartagena, less than half that amount made it onto the vessel.³⁹

"If we understand drug cartels as mafias that manage international trafficking routes, then the FARC is not the big cartel that the authorities make them out to be," wrote Gustavo Duncan, a professor at the University of the Andes in Bogotá who researches Colombia's criminal groups. "Can an organization that has problems moving half a hundred kilos within Colombia be considered a cartel?"⁴⁰

Within the illegal drug industry's division of labor, the FARC's strength continues to rest with control over the coca fields—which are present in 23 of the country's 32 departments⁴¹—drug production, and the protection its troops can offer the BACRIM and other traffickers through its status as Colombia's last remaining illegal armed group with a broad, national presence. Duncan argues that the FARC's continued control over several hundred thousand Colombian coca growers in southern Colombia, where the guerrillas can recruit fresh troops and impose their own laws and taxes, makes the rebel group far more powerful and influential than any of the country's more traditional drug trafficking organizations.⁴²

Millions or Billions? The Size and Implications of FARC Drug Income

Underground economies are extremely difficult to measure; perhaps not surprisingly, estimates of the FARC's annual take from the illegal drug trade vary widely—even within the Colombian government. As Colombia's cocaine production diminishes—from a peak of nearly 700 tons in 2000 to 290 metric tons today⁴³—and the guerrillas get more involved in other criminal activities, such as extortion and the illegal mining of gold, tungsten, and coltan, there also is disagreement over what percentage of the FARC's annual income is derived from illegal drugs.

Speaking at a conference at the University of Miami in October 2012, Defense Minister Pinzón

said Colombia's illegal drug market was worth "some \$6-\$7 billion" annually and that the FARC received "between 40 percent and 50 percent of this value." That would put the FARC's annual drug income at between \$2.4 billion and \$3.5 billion.⁴⁴

However, Pinzón's numbers are far higher than other estimates by Colombian and U.S. officials and independent investigators. He made his remarks just as Colombian negotiators were preparing for the first round of peace talks with the FARC in Cuba. According to the Washington and Bogotá-based think tank Insight Crime, Pinzón's figures should be taken "with a grain of salt" because he may have been sending a signal to FARC leaders that a failure to follow through on the peace process could see them permanently labeled as nothing more than 'narco-terrorists.'⁴⁵

Another estimate released in 2012 by the Colombian Attorney General's Office put the FARC's annual income—including drugs and all other illicit activities—at \$1.1 billion.⁴⁶ General José Roberto León, who was then director of Colombia's national police force, told Reuters in 2013 that the FARC controls about 60 percent of the nation's drug trade and earns about \$1 billion per year from the industry.⁴⁷

Mejía, of the Center for Security and Drug Studies, said that Pinzón's much larger figures may have been accurate several years ago when drug production was much higher. But Colombia's annual cocaine production has fallen from 600 tons in 2007 to 290 tons in 2013 according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).⁴⁸ Now, Mejía says, the FARC probably earns less than \$1 billion per year in drug income.⁴⁹

León Valencia, director of the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation think tank in Bogotá, believes the FARC's drug income is much lower. León is a former rebel fighter and treasurer for the ELN, Colombia's second-largest guerrilla force. He says it costs about \$6,000 per year to feed, clothe, and arm a rebel fighter. He estimates the size of the FARC, including its part-time militias, at about 10,000 members and calculates the FARC's annual personnel budget at about \$60 million. Valencia said the FARC earns more than that. However, based on his cost-per-troop estimates and the lack of evidence that the guerrillas are stashing massive sums of money within Colombia or overseas, he said statements that FARC drug income may top \$1 billion are wild exaggerations.⁵⁰

A consultant to the Colombian government who has worked on drug issues for many years put the FARC's cost-per-troop at about \$12,000 per year and said the rebels require \$150 million a year to maintain their military campaign. But he agrees with Valencia's premise that, based on the FARC's operating costs, it is unlikely that the FARC earns many times that amount from the drug trade alone.⁵¹ Ricardo Vargas, a Colombian researcher on drug issues for the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute, puts the FARC's total annual income at about \$150

million.⁵² Duncan, the University of the Andes professor, refrained from putting a number on FARC earnings, saying only: “They are not earning as much as people think. But it is enough for the FARC.”⁵³

In a 2013 report, Insight Crime said that in terms of numbers, military capacity, territorial control, and earnings from the drug trade, “the FARC is one of the most powerful drug trafficking syndicates in Colombia, and perhaps the world.” Still, Insight Crime calculated that the FARC’s annual drug income at far less than \$1 billion.

Here is how Insight Crime came up with its numbers. Based on Colombia’s annual cocaine production of roughly 300 tons and the belief that the FARC controls about 60 percent of the coca fields, the FARC is likely involved in the production of about 180 tons of cocaine. If the FARC simply charged taxes on the coca base required to produce those 180 tons, it would earn \$45 million. If the FARC sold 180 tons of cocaine within Colombia, it would earn about \$500 million. If the FARC exported 180 tons to Central America, it would earn \$1.8 billion. The FARC is involved in a mix of these activities; thus Insight Crime concluded that “a realistic figure of FARC earnings from the drug trade would be well over \$200 million” per year.⁵⁴

Whatever the true figure, it is a substantial sum of money. Speaking before the U.N. General Assembly in September 2013, President Juan Manuel Santos said that drug trafficking “has been the main funding source for violence and terrorism in my country... Without the grim influence of drug trafficking—which fuels the fire of our war—I’m sure it would have already ended.”

Yet drug money is just one slice of the rebel’s financial pie. With the price of gold soaring, the FARC imposes taxes on illegal gold mines in rebel-dominated areas. The FARC is also involved in operations to mine tungsten and coltan, which are used for consumer electronics such as cell phones and DVD players. In addition, a boom in oil and mining exploration has allowed the FARC to ratchet up its operations to extort energy companies and their contractors as well as other businesses working in areas where the rebels are present. (The FARC previously earned huge sums by kidnapping thousands of civilians for ransom. But the FARC largely gave up this practice in 2012, which was one of the pre-conditions set by the Colombian government for opening peace talks with the FARC.⁵⁵ Of the 138 Colombians kidnapped between January and July of 2014, 14 were abducted by the FARC, according to figures of the Colombian National Police.

Compared to drugs, illegal mining and extortion offer several advantages for the FARC. Not only do these illicit activities attract less attention from law enforcement officials but when people are arrested for these crimes, they do not face the threat of extradition to the United States. Taking into account these rising streams of income, government officials and independent analysts say drug earnings now represents between 25 to 50 percent of the FARC’s annual

earnings.⁵⁶ This suggests that even if the illegal drug business was eliminated in Colombia, the FARC would survive, albeit in a weakened state.

Income from drugs and other illegal activities have both bolstered and undermined the FARC. Traditional Latin American guerrilla groups depended on the goodwill of local populations that provided the insurgents food, shelter, and recruits as well as financial and moral support.

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Cuba and Eastern bloc countries often provided money, arms, and training and, in the case of Castro, an overriding voice of authority.⁵⁷ This dependency served as a check on rebel behavior on and off the battlefield and forced them to attempt to win hearts and minds.

By contrast, financial autonomy and the group’s corresponding military power has allowed the FARC to disengage from public opinion and from the slow, difficult, precinct-by-precinct political work required to win popular support. Instead of convincing local communities that its cause is just, the FARC can threaten people into supporting, or at least tolerating, its activities in rebel-dominated zones.

The downside for the FARC is that Colombians will not soon forget its practice of targeting the civilian population through kidnappings, extortion, assassinations, and massacres, or its role in the drug trade that has brought so much violence to Colombia. Polling on the FARC is probably inaccurate because people are often reluctant or afraid to openly express support for an illegal armed group. Still, public opinion surveys routinely give the rebel organization an approval rating of about 2 percent.⁵⁸ This widespread rejection could haunt FARC leaders should they eventually disarm and become involved in legal politics.

But just how much has drug money transformed the essence of the FARC? Has the rebel army morphed into a drug cartel—in other words, a criminal organization whose end game is exporting drugs to enrich itself? Lewis Tambs, the U.S. ambassador to Colombia in the mid-1980s, had the FARC in mind when he coined the term “narco-guerrillas.”⁵⁹ Former president Álvaro Uribe, for whom President Santos served as defense minister, refused to even acknowledge that Colombia was involved in an armed conflict with the FARC. He insisted that rather than fighting rebels with political grievances, the country was facing a threat from FARC narco-terrorists. In spite of Uribe’s hardline rhetoric and fierce opposition now to the Havana negotiations, his government pursued back-channel contacts with the FARC to explore the possibility of peace talks, according to a number of leaked government documents and diplomatic cables.⁶⁰

The U.S. government has labeled the FARC as both a drug trafficking and terrorist organization

and has issued arrest warrants and extradition requests for nearly every major FARC leader on drug-trafficking charges. In addition, the U.S. government has claimed exceptional powers in dealing with overseas drug traffickers and terrorists, something that has left FARC leaders exposed to U.S.-backed lethal operations.⁶¹ Over the past decade, CIA covert operations that included National Security Agency signal intercepts and the use of GPS-guided smart bombs have helped Colombian authorities target and kill at least two dozen rebel leaders. The dead including FARC spokesman and No. 3 leader, known as “Raúl Reyes” as well as a key FARC drug trafficker known as “El Negro Acacio.”⁶²

Yet independent analysts as well as many U.S. and Colombian government officials stop short of calling the FARC a drug cartel because the FARC appears to funnel most its drug profits back into its war effort. Drug cartels, Duncan points out, do not field thousands of uniformed fighters who are schooled in Marxism, control territory, and wake up at 4:30 a.m. every day to train and launch attacks on government troops. The FARC existed long before Colombia’s illegal drug trade took hold and could not resist taking advantage of this lucrative new business that landed right on its doorstep.

But the same holds true for many sectors of Colombian society. Businesses, financial institutions, and politicians have all been tainted by drug money. The most high-profile case involved President Ernesto Samper, who had his U.S. visa cancelled after it was alleged that his 1994 campaign had received about \$6 million from the Cali cartel. Just weeks before the May 25, 2014, first-round presidential election, a top campaign advisor to President Santos resigned amid allegations that he accepted \$12 million from the country’s top drug lords to help negotiate their surrender. The campaign official denied the allegations which he said were part of a plot to smear the Santos campaign. No criminal charges have been filed against him.⁶³

President Santos, in contrast to Uribe, openly talks of Colombia’s “armed conflict” and made the peace negotiations with the FARC the centerpiece of his administration and his 2014 re-election campaign. These decisions indirectly imply that, in the view of the Santos government, the FARC remains a political organization in arms despite its deep involvement in the drug trade and other criminal activities.⁶⁴ In fact, the first points on the negotiating agenda concerned two of the FARC’s historical grievances: land reform and guarantees for left-wing political parties.

“Sometimes people forget that you negotiate peace with the enemy and accuse me of legitimizing the enemy,” Santos said in a May 2014 interview with the Spanish news agency EFE. “But if you don’t sit down with them you will never reach any kind of peace accord.”⁶⁵

The political nature of the Havana talks stands in stark contrast to negotiations in the mid-2000s with Colombia’s AUC paramilitary groups, whose leaders were treated more like mafia bosses. The paramilitaries fought against the FARC and initially pushed a political agenda; but in their later years these militias increasingly focused on drug trafficking, extortion, and other criminal

ventures. Thus, peace talks with the paramilitaries under the first Uribe government mostly avoided politics and focused on the terms of surrender for paramilitary groups and the length of prison sentences for their leaders, many of whom were later extradited to the United States.

The FARC negotiator, known as “Rodrigo Granda” said that if the international community considered the FARC to be, at heart, a drug trafficking organization, the Colombian government would not have launched the peace talks and Cuba, Venezuela, Chile, and Norway would not have agreed to act as guarantors and facilitators of the process. “We are not drug traffickers,” Granda told the Medellín newspaper *El Colombiano*. “We are an organization with clear political proposals and that is why the Colombian government feels obliged to sit down and negotiate with us.”⁶⁶

The Drug Agreement and Post-Conflict Scenarios

After reaching agreements in Havana on the first two issues on the five-point negotiating agenda - agrarian development and political participation - the Colombian government and the FARC in November 2013 began discussing point No. 3: the problem of illicit drugs. The negotiations were contentious and extremely difficult yet in the end both sides were ready to commit to changes.

Although he is a close U.S. ally, President Santos has repeatedly questioned the effectiveness of hardline U.S.-backed counterdrug strategies and has called for an international debate to seek alternatives, such as treating the drug plague as a public health issue rather than exclusively a law enforcement problem. Despite the steep drop in drug production in recent years—which has been a key factor in weakening the FARC—Colombia’s cocaine industry as a whole remains robust. “Colombia has been like the patient that follows all the instructions from the doctor but still has a fever,” Colombian Justice Minister Alfonso Gómez Méndez told reporters during a March 2014 visit to Washington after discussing drug issues with U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder.

In addition, there is a sense that sustaining past gains might be difficult, especially as U.S. military and economic aid to Colombia gradually diminishes. Colombia has received more than \$9.3 billion in U.S. aid since 2000. But annual assistance fell from \$551 million in 2008 to \$324 million in 2014.⁶⁷

For the FARC, its involvement in the drug trade has had many downsides, including the criminalization of many of its fronts, diminished moral authority and public support, the threat of extradition, and exposure of its leaders to U.S.-backed efforts to track and kill them.

These underlying concerns prompted the Colombian government and the FARC to reach an agreement at the Havana peace talks on the drug issue on May 16, 2014, called “The Solution

to the Problem of Illicit Drugs.”⁶⁸ The agreement covers three sub-points: coca eradication and crop substitution, public health and drug consumption, and the solution to the phenomenon of drug production and trafficking.

The agreement begins with a declaration that Colombia’s internal conflict began several decades before the illegal drug trade took hold in the country and that the origins of the war are unrelated to the drug trade. It also states that the current phenomenon of coca cultivation is partly the result of the poverty and marginalization of peasant farmers, the scant presence of government institutions in coca-growing zones, as well as to the existence of criminal organizations dedicated to drug trafficking. These points serve as government recognition that drug trafficking is not the defining characteristic of the FARC, an issue that is extremely important to the rebel organization.⁶⁹

Much of the agreement focuses on coca eradication and crop substitution. In it, the government has agreed to provide special treatment to coca farmers, described as “the weakest links in the drug-trafficking chain.” To do so, the government pledged to launch a new National Integral Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops, or PNIS, to bring about a structural transformation of coca-growing regions through sustainable crop-substitution and alternative development programs. Rather than a top-down approach which marred past alternative development efforts in Colombia, the accord states that these efforts would emphasize local decision-making, planning, and participation to come up with the most appropriate crop-substitution programs.

These commitments could help demobilized FARC members preserve their influence in former coca growing zones by playing a role in the administration of government-funded alternative development projects, according to Vargas of the Transnational Institute who has traveled to Havana to speak with rebel negotiators.

However, the agreement states that the implementation of these programs would be contingent on compliance with commitments that are to be made by local communities to voluntarily eradicate existing coca fields, to stop selling coca leaves and coca base to drug traffickers, and to refrain from replanting coca in the future. The agreement states that in areas where local coca growers do not cooperate with voluntary eradication programs, the government reserves the right to forcibly eradicate these fields. Forced eradication would be done by manually uprooting coca plants, but in cases where manual eradication is deemed too dangerous, the government reserves the right to target coca with crop-dusting aircraft.⁷⁰

In the accord, the government has pledged to pursue a cooperative model, in part, because forced eradication has been such a contentious issue in Colombia. Coca is often the most profitable crop in remote regions, thus forcibly destroying these drug fields without offering farmers sustained economic assistance to transition to legal crops can turn them against the



Colombian government and hamper counterinsurgency efforts. Yet efforts to promote legal economic endeavors in coca growing areas have often failed due to poor planning or the lack of decent roads to get crops to market.⁷¹

In addition, Colombia is the only country in the world where drug plantations are fumigated from the air under a U.S.-backed aerial eradication program that has sparked much controversy. In 2013, the Colombian government agreed to pay Ecuador a \$15 million settlement after the Quito government filed suit in the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Ecuador claimed that the herbicide released from planes spraying near the border had drifted into Ecuador causing environmental damage, livestock deaths, and health problems for humans.⁷²

In Peru and Bolivia, the two other main coca-growing nations, the plant is uprooted by machete-wielding anti-drug agents. But similar ground-based efforts in Colombia have left 62 people dead and hundreds injured because the FARC often protect the fields with land mines and snipers.⁷³ As a result, the drug accord between the Colombian government and the FARC calls for full cooperation from what would be a newly-demobilized FARC in efforts to manually uproot coca plants. It also calls for demobilized FARC members to cooperate with a nationwide program to remove anti-personnel mines from the countryside to make ground-based coca eradication campaigns safer.

In the second point of the drug accord, the government has promised to prioritize efforts to prevent and treat drug consumption. It has pledged to create a high level program to revise and coordinate policies regarding drug consumption and to approach the problem as a public health issue rather than a criminal justice issue.

The third point of the drug accord outlines commitments by both the government and the FARC to stop the production and trafficking of illicit drugs.

The government has agreed to implement an integral strategy to root out drug-related corruption from state institutions, stop money laundering, impound the ill-gotten assets of traffickers, and establish strict new controls against the smuggling of precursor chemicals required to make cocaine and other illegal narcotics. The government has also agreed to hold an international conference in conjunction with the United Nations in an effort to reach a global consensus on drug policies.

For its part, the FARC has agreed “to put to an end any relation that, in its efforts to promote the rebellion, it may have had with this phenomenon” of drug trafficking. Although vague, this statement is something of a breakthrough because it represents the first time in its history that the FARC has admitted to being involved in drug trafficking. “That used to be unthinkable,” said a Colombian government official familiar with the negotiations. “We have never had this before.”⁷⁴

However, the exact involvement of specific FARC fronts in drug trafficking and details about their personnel and their smuggling routes were not spelled out in the accord. These issues are to be dealt with in the future if the two sides sign a final peace treaty and the FARC demobilizes, according to the Colombian official.

“With this agreement, we will be taking away the gasoline that has stoked the Colombian conflict,” Humberto de la Calle, the government’s chief negotiator, said on the day the accord was signed.⁷⁵

Still, much was left unsaid in the drug accord, such as how the government will deal with future extradition requests for FARC members. So far, more than a dozen FARC members have been extradited to the United States on drug trafficking charges and extradition requests have been filed for every FARC leader of consequence, including the negotiators in Havana.⁷⁶ The probable scenario is that as part of a final peace accord, the Colombian government would promise the FARC not to honor these extradition requests as long as indicted FARC leaders distanced themselves from the drug industry. Even with such a commitment, however, the FARC has continued to insist on a constituent assembly to enshrine an eventual peace accord into permanent law. That would make it far more difficult for any future government to change or eliminate judicial guarantees for FARC leaders regarding imprisonment and extradition.⁷⁷

On both aerial eradication and extradition, the U.S. government publicly advocates staying the course. Kevin Whitaker, who in May 2014 took up his posting as the new U.S. ambassador to Bogotá, said at his confirmation hearing in December 2013 that canceling the aerial spraying program “would be a great mistake.” However, the aerial eradication program is now run by the Colombian government which still reserves the right to spray coca crops in “exceptional cases.” A Colombian government official said that while negotiating the drug accord with the FARC, “we felt no pressure from the U.S. government” to continue the aerial eradication program.⁷⁸

As for FARC leaders wanted in the United States, the U.S. executive branch has no power to withdraw extradition requests. Even if the White House preferred to backtrack on extradition in an effort to help Colombia’s peace process succeed, U.S. judges are independent of the executive branch. Prosecutors, in turn, are rarely pressured into dropping extradition requests that they regard as necessary to try cases.⁷⁹

If Colombia chooses not to honor extradition requests, however, officials from both countries have indicated that this position is unlikely to damage to the close bilateral relationship.⁸⁰ In 2011, for example, Colombia ignored a U.S. extradition request for Venezuelan drug trafficker Walid Makled, who was instead extradited to Venezuela in a gesture by President Santos to improve strained relations with the Venezuelan government. In addition, Colombia’s Supreme Court in 2009 halted the extradition to the United States of paramilitary leaders participating





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in transitional justice processes in Colombia. Neither decision derailed the otherwise strong relations between the two nations.⁸¹

Luis Carlos Villegas, Colombia's ambassador to the United States, has suggested that President Santos and future governments could keep the threat of extradition hanging over the heads of FARC leaders as a kind of guarantee. "Let's say there is a peace accord with the FARC and agreements to fight drug trafficking and to disarm," Villegas told Bogotá's *El Tiempo* newspaper. "Extradition would be the main instrument to deter the FARC from getting back into drug trafficking."⁸²

Still, the temptation for some rebel commanders to return to drug trafficking following a formal demobilization of the FARC will be strong. Indeed, the history of illegal armed groups that have demobilized in Colombia over the past 25 years strongly suggests that some members of the FARC will become full-time drug traffickers.⁸³

The most recent precedent is the demobilization of the AUC in the mid-2000s. About 30,000 paramilitaries laid down their arms but many mid-level AUC commanders refused to disarm and remained deeply involved in drug trafficking. They helped spawn a new generation of criminal gangs, the BACRIM, that have since become one of the main players in Colombia's illegal narcotics industry and are active in 21 of the country's 32 departments. In 2010, Colombian police estimated that 12 percent of the 3,700 BACRIM members were former paramilitaries.⁸⁴

There are similar examples, from Central America to West Africa, of armed groups signing peace accords yet maintaining clandestine armed structures and logistical pipelines that almost immediately morph into criminal enterprises. According to security analyst Douglas Farah, a journalist formerly based in Central America, examples include the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, the anti-Sandinista Contra rebels, the Farabundo Martí National



Liberation Front in El Salvador as well as far right groups in that country; the RUF in Sierra Leone, and the paramilitary structure of Charles Taylor in Liberia.⁸⁵

“FARC unity in a post-conflict scenario is especially important to the organization’s ruling secretariat, whose members aspire to get deeply involved in legal politics and run for public offices. Their political hopes would be severely compromised if a significant proportion of the FARC disobeyed their commands to disarm and remained involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking.”

The fact that the FARC leadership is aging, with many commanders in their 50s and 60s, as well as the Colombian military strategy of aiming for high-value FARC targets, could accelerate this shift. Historic FARC commanders like “Jacobo Arenas,” “Manuel Marulanda,” “Alfonso Cano,” and “Raúl Reyes” were committed Marxists intent on overthrowing the government. Some of the up-and-coming FARC commanders lack the same political commitment and have shown more enthusiasm for the organization’s criminal activities.

At present, there is no indication that individual FARC fronts or commanders have “gone rogue.” According to Jeremy McDermott, co-director of Insight Crime, FARC leaders are “smart enough not to leave their more powerful and moneymaking fronts in the hands of commanders they cannot trust.”⁸⁶ The few known cases of rebel leaders who have enriched themselves or otherwise deviated from the secretariat’s rules have been dealt with harshly. For example, a senior FARC commander known as “Granobles” was reportedly dismissed or executed by the rebels in 2012 for his flamboyant lifestyle.⁸⁷ Further evidence that the FARC’s command and control remains intact was the strict adherence by nearly every FARC front to unilateral Christmas ceasefires declared by the FARC leadership in Havana in 2012 and 2013 and during the first and second rounds of Colombia’s 2014 presidential election.

In 2013, a report in El Tiempo newspaper indicated that FARC commanders were selling off some of their drug laboratories and other assets in southern Colombia to representatives of Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel. This has been interpreted as a sign that these FARC leaders take the peace talks seriously and may be trying to cash in before the war ends.⁸⁸ The FARC’s Southern Bloc is deeply involved in the drug trade and the absence of its commanders from the peace talks in Havana had sparked concern that these FARC units opposed the negotiations and would go their own way. However, Southern Bloc commander “Joaquín Gómez” issued a statement in 2013 expressing his full support for the peace talks.⁸⁹ His deputy, “Fabián Ramírez,” joined the FARC negotiating team in Havana in April 2014 as the two sides moved closer to signing the drug accord.

FARC unity in a post-conflict scenario is especially important to the organization's ruling secretariat, whose members aspire to get deeply involved in legal politics and run for public offices. Their political hopes would be severely compromised if a significant proportion of the FARC disobeyed their commands to disarm and remained involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking. Leaders such as "Iván Márquez," the FARC's chief negotiator who briefly served in the Colombian House of Representatives in the 1980s, have much riding on their ability to maintain FARC unity and comply with the terms of any peace deal.

But due to the structure of the FARC, the organization's unity and discipline as well as the leadership's command and control could give way to fragmentation and deeper criminalization. The FARC is divided into seven regional blocs made up of 67 fighting fronts. Many are isolated from the ruling secretariat as well as from the negotiators in Havana. Colombian military intelligence agents said in 2013 that just 15 FARC fronts were following the orders of the secretariat "to the letter."⁹⁰

However, due to communications difficulties between FARC units spread throughout Colombia, strict vertical control has always been impossible. The FARC leadership allows a certain degree of autonomy among its fronts. Those fronts charged with fundraising, for the most part, are allowed to come up with the cash the best way they see fit in their respective regions. The Colombian government consultant said that within individual FARC fronts there is a division of labor to prevent contamination and corruption. Some of the guerrillas fight while others focus on drug production. Those fronts most deeply involved in drug trafficking are the wealthiest—they are considered the ATMs of the FARC—are expected to turn over their surplus earnings to rebel units that lack money.⁹¹

Upon demobilization, the FARC's fundraising stars may be most inclined to join the BACRIM, the ELN, or to form their own drug trafficking organizations that some analysts are already calling FARCRIM. Rather than risking their lives and liberty running drugs for the FARC, these mid-level commanders would be able to keep the cash for themselves.⁹²

In a recent report, Insight Crime identified a handful of FARC units that are most likely to evolve into criminal groups should the rebel army disarm. They include a half dozen fronts within the Iván Ríos Bloc which is heavily involved in drug trafficking and illegal gold mining in Antioquia, Córdoba, and Chocó departments in northwestern Colombia. The commander of the bloc is a historic FARC leader named Luis Carlos Usuga Restrepo. But he is in his seventies and is in delicate health and there is little coordination between different fronts in this bloc. If Usuga dies and the ideological aspect of his troops' activities is removed, the FARC units in the Iván Ríos Bloc could immediately become "one of the most sophisticated and most powerful organized crime syndicates in the region."⁹³

Another scenario put forward by a counterdrug official in Bogotá is that demobilized FARC members could keep their hands in the illegal drug trade and funnel the profits to help fund the legal political party that the FARC envisions forming upon demobilization.⁹⁴ It is a plausible scenario given that Colombian politics have long been awash in drug money. But the government consultant said that campaign finance controls have become much stricter and that future FARC politicians may decide that the risk of financing a new party with illegal drug profits is too great.⁹⁵

Conclusion

With the drug accord signed, government and FARC negotiators in Havana are now dealing with the issue of war victims and will then move on to the mechanics of the FARC's disarmament. They must also tackle the controversial subject of transitional justice and what kind of punishment FARC members accused of war crimes should receive.

"A peace treaty with the FARC and its successful implementation would be an historic achievement. It would disarm the country's largest rebel army that has been fighting against the government since 1964 and remove from the battlefield the last remaining insurgent group with a broad national presence"

Much could still go wrong in Havana and some of the most contentious issues, such as extradition and whether FARC leaders will serve any time in prison, have yet to be dealt with. What's more, there is no consensus on how to ratify an eventual peace accord. After signing a peace treaty, President Santos has vowed to call a public referendum in order to give voters the final say on the matter—and Colombians could vote "no." But as the negotiating teams plow ahead, the demobilization of the FARC seems ever more likely. During the 2014 presidential campaign, President Santos said that he expected to sign a peace accord by the end of 2014,⁹⁶ although many analysts believe the final paperwork won't be ready until sometime in 2015 or beyond.⁹⁷

A peace treaty with the FARC and its successful implementation would be an historic achievement. It would disarm the country's largest rebel army that has been fighting against the government since 1964 and remove from the battlefield the last remaining insurgent group with a broad national presence. It could also provide momentum for another peace process. On June 10, 2014, President Santos announced that since the previous January his government had been holding exploratory talks with the much smaller ELN, which is also involved in drug trafficking. Santos said the two sides are discussing the negotiating agenda in an effort to launch an official peace process that would be held outside Colombia and under similar conditions as

the ongoing talks with the FARC in Havana.⁹⁸

In addition, demobilizing the FARC would sideline one of Colombia's largest drug producing and smuggling organizations. A more peaceful countryside, in turn, would allow government institutions as well as non-governmental groups to provide services and carry out development work in some of the poorest and most isolated areas of Colombia which have long been fertile recruiting grounds for the FARC. It would also open the door for de-mining operations and for ground-based drug eradicators to destroy coca crops in areas that were longtime FARC strongholds.

But over the past 40 years, Colombia's illegal narcotics industry has proved to be extremely resilient. Drug lords have been killed or imprisoned only to be replaced by their lieutenants. The destruction of the Medellín and Cali cartels in the early 1990s gave way to a new generation of "mini cartels" that in some ways were harder to track because they kept lower profiles.⁹⁹ The demobilization of drug-trafficking AUC paramilitaries in the mid-2000s gave rise to the drug-trafficking BACRIM of today. It seems likely that this pattern will continue, with some members of the FARC, upon demobilization, joining BACRIM or the ELN, or forming their own drug trafficking organizations.

As long as there is demand for illegal narcotics, history teaches that these drugs will be produced and will find their way to lucrative markets in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. Therefore, a peace treaty and the eventual demobilization of the FARC—while extremely important for the overall development and well-being of Colombia—would be a significant but by no means fatal blow to Colombia's illegal narcotics industry.



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