



# Insurgent Involvement in the Colombian Drug Trade

*Drug Intelligence Report*

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Intelligence Division

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Drug Enforcement Administration

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*Drug Intelligence Report*

This report was prepared by the South America Unit of the Strategic Intelligence Section. Comments and requests for copies are welcome and may be directed to the Publications Unit, Intelligence Division, DEA Headquarters at (202) 307-8726.

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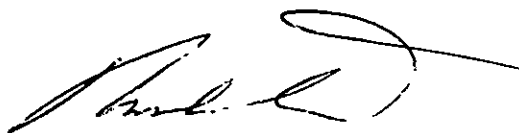
## ADMINISTRATOR'S MESSAGE

Although the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) does not have a counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism mission, the agency always has collected, analyzed, and disseminated intelligence on links between terrorist/insurgent groups and drug trafficking. Because DEA is cognizant of the high national security concern placed on information pertaining to potential acts of terrorism as well as security for its own personnel, it passes relevant intelligence on insurgent or terrorist groups to the U.S. foreign intelligence community in overseas cases, or to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in domestic cases.

This report examines the drug-related activities of Colombia's two major insurgent groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army. Over the years, reporting has suggested that these groups are involved in a broad range of activities—from extorting payments from drug traffickers to forming the “country's third drug cartel.” DEA analysis of this reporting, however, leads to three major conclusions.

- The connection between Colombian insurgents and drugs is formed most commonly through ad hoc “alliances of convenience” with drug trafficking organizations.
- The independent involvement of insurgents in Colombia's domestic drug production, transportation, and distribution is limited.
- DEA has no evidence that these groups have been involved in the transportation, distribution, or marketing of illicit drugs in the United States or Europe.

The most important link between the illicit drug trade and the Colombian insurgents is one of accommodation between traffickers and insurgents. DEA believes that the insurgents never will be major players in Colombia's drug trade.



Thomas A. Constantine  
Administrator

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the alleged drug-related activities of Colombia's two major insurgent groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* or FARC) and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* or ELN). These insurgent groups most commonly are connected to drug trafficking through ad hoc "alliances of convenience" with drug trafficking organizations.

Colombian guerrilla groups traditionally have supported their activities through extortion and kidnapping, with ranchers and other wealthy individuals being the primary victims. For many years, elements of the FARC and ELN also have extorted "revolutionary taxes" from drug traffickers operating in areas under their control. The insurgents' main source of income, however, continues to come from non-drug related kidnapping and extortion.

Despite Colombian security forces' frequent claim that FARC units are involved directly in drug trafficking operations, the independent involvement of insurgents in Colombia's domestic drug production, transportation, and distribution is limited. Some insurgents may assist drug trafficking organizations store and transport cocaine within Colombia; others may be involved in localized opiate trafficking within Colombia. However, no credible evidence indicates that the national leadership of either the FARC or ELN has directed, as a matter of policy, that their respective organizations directly engage in independent drug production or distribution. Furthermore, neither the FARC nor the ELN are known to have been involved in the transportation, distribution, or marketing of illicit drugs in the United States or Europe.

The relationship between drug traffickers and insurgents in Colombia is characterized by both cooperation and conflict. Some FARC and ELN units have negotiated "service contracts" with drug traffickers. In exchange for money or weapons, these guerrillas provide security for illicit crops, cocaine laboratories, and clandestine airstrips. Insurgents benefit from the revenues generated by providing their "services" to drug traffickers. At the same time, drug traffickers benefit in that the presence of insurgents in areas used for drug cultivation, processing, and transportation inhibits counter-drug operations.

Colombia's insurgents and drug traffickers do not have the same objectives. The FARC and ELN are in open rebellion against the Colombian Government and their actions are designed to undermine the existing order. Colombian drug traffickers on the other hand, are wealthy, violently aggressive capitalists who wish to exploit, not to destroy, Colombia's political system and free market economy. a

Changing economic and social conditions have deprived insurgents of outside financial and ideological support. This may result in heightened insurgent involvement in Colombia's domestic drug trade. It is not anticipated, however, that the insurgents will challenge the cartels' domination of the drug trade. Furthermore, the most important link between drug trafficking and Colombian insurgents will continue to be one of low-level accommodation between traffickers and insurgents.

## INTRODUCTION

The mission of the DEA is to combat domestic and international drug trafficking, and thus reduce the availability of illicit drugs in the United States. Although DEA does not have a counter-terrorism mission, the agency is concerned with linkages, actual or potential, between terrorist or insurgent groups and drug trafficking.

DEA's interest in terrorist/insurgent movements is based on two additional considerations. First, DEA realizes that information on potential acts of terrorism is a high national security priority. Second, DEA has an obvious requirement to identify possible threats to DEA personnel—in particular, threats to employees stationed overseas. As appropriate, DEA passes relevant intelligence to the U.S. foreign intelligence community in overseas cases, or to the FBI in domestic cases.

This report examines the drug-related activities of Colombia's two major insurgent groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* or FARC) and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberacion Nacional* or ELN). Both pro-Communist, the FARC and the

**The political objective of the FARC and ELN is to replace the current government with a leftist, anti-U.S. regime.**

ELN combine insurgent and terrorist operations. The political objective

of both groups is to replace the current government with a leftist, anti-U.S. regime. Current active membership in the FARC and ELN may total 7,500.

### DEFINING THE THREAT

This report deliberately avoids the term "narco-terrorism." This expression, as repeatedly used in media and official circles, has come to describe any connection between terrorist/insurgent groups and drug trafficking organizations. In particular, narco-terrorism has been defined in such a way so as to encompass much of the "normal" criminal violence associated with the drug trade. This overly broad definition of narco-terrorism confuses the actual interrelationships between terrorism/insurgency and drugs.

A more accurate definition of narco-terrorism is confined to violent acts by drug-trafficking or terrorist groups that are designed to influence national-level, counter-drug policy. For example, the murder of a rival drug trafficker by criminal associates would not be "narco-terrorism" simply due to the use of "terrorist-type" car bombs. Conversely, the Medellín Cartel's random car bombing campaign in 1991 was designed specifically to pressure the Colombian Government into outlawing extradition and thus would qualify as acts of narco-terrorism.

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## COLOMBIA: THE GEOGRAPHY OF DRUGS & INSURGENTS

Colombia's central location between Peru and Bolivia (which grow most of the world's coca) and the United States (which consumes most of the world's cocaine) makes it a logical hub for cocaine trafficking. Colombia is also the only South American country with coastlines on the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

Accordingly, a combination of Pacific and Caribbean drug-smuggling routes are available to Colombian traffickers.<sup>1</sup>

Colombia's geographic location, diverse terrain, and climate are important elements contributing to the country's illicit drug industry. Likewise, the tactical deployment of specific FARC and ELN units are geopolitically motivated. From a counter-drug/counter-insurgency perspective, Colombia can be divided into six broad geographic regions of interest:

*The Guajira Peninsula* is a flat, sparsely populated, semidesert area, well-suited for illicit airstrips. The Guajira is a key air departure point for cocaine-laden aircraft destined for Mexico and the island countries of the Caribbean and Central America. It is relatively free of insurgent presence.

**Colombia is the only South American country with coastlines on the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.**

*The Caribbean North Coast* is a diverse area of broad rivers, open beaches, swamps, and high cliffs. The region is more than a narrow coastline; often it is defined to include the lowland areas in seven different northern departments (states): Atlántico, Bolívar, Cesar, Córdoba, La Guajira, Magdalena, and Sucre. From a counter-drug

perspective, the seaports of Cartagena, Barranquilla, and Santa Marta are perhaps the most important cities in this region. Drug-trafficking groups exploit these ports, exporting cocaine and marijuana and importing essential chemicals used in cocaine processing. The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta

mountain range in Magdalena Department and the Perijá Mountains along the border with Venezuela are the traditional cannabis-growing areas. ELN and FARC units operate in both the Sierra Nevada and Perijá Mountains.

*The Pacific Coast* is a diverse territory that includes beaches, broad rivers, dense jungles, marshes, and swamps. The Choco, for example, is an area of dense jungle that extends to Colombia's northwest border with Panama. FARC units operating on both sides of the Colombian-Panamanian border may be involved in limited coca cultivation and/or cocaine base processing. Buenaventura is believed to be the most important Pacific coast port used by Colombian traffickers to export cocaine and to import essential chemicals.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed examination of the drug trade in Colombia, see *The Illicit Drug Situation in Colombia*, DEA, Intelligence Division, November 1993.

*The Andean Mountain Ranges*, dominated by three distinct chains,<sup>2</sup> have extremely rugged slopes and peaks that run from north to south and straddle the western half of the country. The rugged terrain hampers the Colombian Government's counter-drug and counter-insurgency operations. The Cauca Valley, located between the western and central Andean chains, is the stronghold of the Cali Cartel. The Valle del Cauca and Tolima Departments are important areas for cocaine laboratory operations. Significant opium poppy cultivation has been discovered in the mountains of Cauca, Huila, and Tolima Departments. There is a large insurgent presence in Santander Department and some guerrilla activity in the mountains of Caldas, Huila, and Tolima.

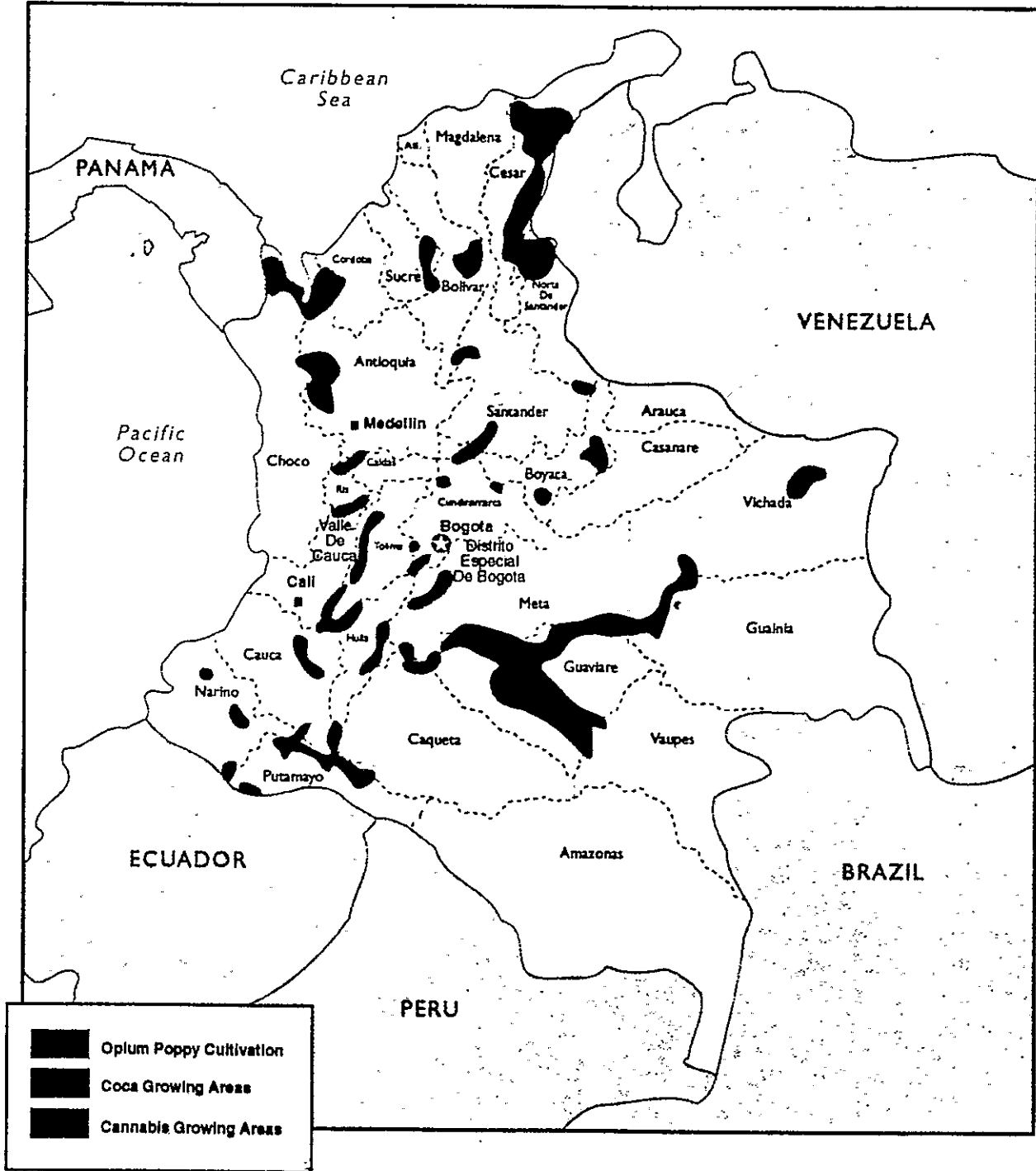
*The Eastern Lowlands (the Llanos)* are undeveloped and remote grassy plains that border the northeastern slope of the Andean mountain ranges. A high percentage of Colombia's coca cultivation and cocaine processing takes place in the Llanos. Clandestine airstrips used to transport cocaine also are common to the area. Because the Government of Colombia exerts limited authority in this isolated region, the Llanos attracts both drug traffickers and insurgents. FARC units have operated throughout this region for many years.

*The Eastern Rain Forest* is a large area of sparsely populated, dense jungle (*selva*) in southeastern Colombia. Similar to the Llanos in its isolation, the eastern rain forest provides cocaine traffickers and insurgents the freedom from government control necessary for major drug or guerrilla operations. Cross-country movement by land vehicle is impossible. Accordingly, cocaine traffickers, insurgents, and government security forces must use river and air transportation. Rivers crisscross the region, the most important of which are the Caquetá, Putumayo, and Vaupés. FARC units have de facto control over parts of the rain forest.

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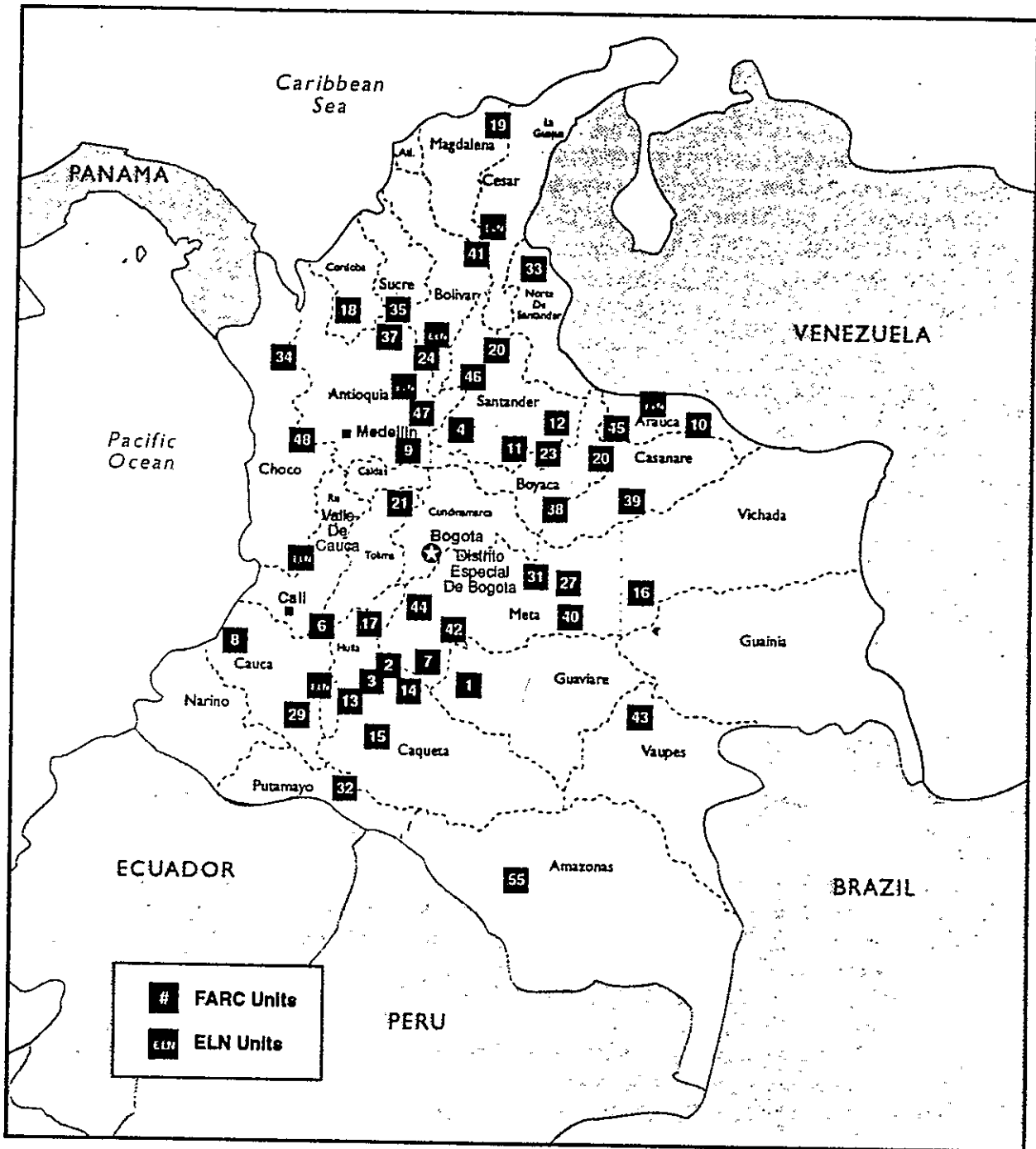
<sup>2</sup> Known as Cordillera Occidental (the western chain), Cordillera Central (the central chain), and Cordillera Oriental (the eastern chain).

# ILLICIT CULTIVATION IN COLOMBIA



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# SELECTED INSURGENT AREAS OF OPERATION\* IN COLOMBIA



\* This map provides a "snapshot" in time of selected FARC and ELN areas of operation. Some insurgent units have relatively fixed geographical areas of operation while other units are more transient. Furthermore, it should be stressed that not all insurgent units hold the same degree of power and influence over their areas of operation.

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## OVERVIEW OF COLOMBIAN INSURGENT GROUPS

The FARC is the largest insurgent group in Colombia, with more than 5,000 members. It is also Colombia's best-trained, best-equipped, and most effective guerrilla organization. Over the past 20 years, the FARC has operated throughout Colombia's eastern lowlands and rain forest, which are the country's primary coca cultivation and cocaine processing regions.

The ELN, with an estimated force of 2,500 guerrillas, operates primarily along Colombia's northeastern border with Venezuela. Territory under ELN influence includes Colombia's traditional cannabis cultivation areas. Oil and gas pipelines in Colombia's northeast are favorite ELN targets. During an insurgent offensive in 1992 and 1993, the ELN bombed dozens of oil pipelines.

While the FARC and the ELN are the primary insurgent groups currently active, other insurgency movements have figured prominently in Colombia's recent political history:

### 19th of April Movement (M-19)

Prior to March 1990, the 19th of April Movement (*Movimiento de 19 de Abril* or M-19) waged insurgent and terrorist operations throughout Colombia. The M-19 was responsible for one of the most infamous acts of terrorism in Colombian history. In November 1985, M-19 terrorists seized the Palace of Justice in Bogotá and took almost 500 hostages, including members of the Colombian Supreme Court and Council of State. A counterattack by

Colombian security forces led to the death of all the terrorists, 50 of the 500 hostages (including 11 Supreme Court justices), and 11 members of the security forces.

**Over the past 20 years, the FARC has operated throughout the primary coca cultivation and cocaine processing regions in the country.**

In March 1990, the M-19 signed a peace accord with the Colombian Government and was integrated into the legitimate political system. In December 1990, an M-19 led coalition won 19 of 70 seats in the Colombian Constituent Assembly.

However, the M-19 subsequently has lost influence in the Assembly as a result of its poor showing in the 1991 and 1994 elections.

### Popular Liberation Army (EPL)

The Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación* or EPL), which at one time may have totaled 1,400 members, laid down its arms in 1991. However, a small, dissident faction of the EPL has continued its armed struggle against the Colombian Government.

### Simon Bolívar National Guerrilla Coordinating Board (CNGSB)

In 1987, the FARC, ELN, M-19, and EPL formed the Simon Bolívar National Guerrilla Coordinating Board (*Coordinadora Nacional Guerrillero Simon Bolívar* or CNGSB) to develop comprehensive military and political strategies for their "struggle" against the Colombian Government. Guerrilla violence in Colombia intensified following the June 1992 collapse of peace negotiations between the CNGSB and the Colombian Government.

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## FARC & ELN LINKS TO THE DRUG TRADE

### INTRODUCTION

The most common connection between Colombian insurgents and drug trafficking appears to be through ad hoc "alliances of convenience" with drug trafficking organizations. Guerrillas are known to fund their armed struggle through extortion and by providing protection services. Independent guerrilla involvement in Colombia's domestic drug production, transportation, or distribution appears to be limited. DEA has no evidence that either the FARC or ELN ever has been involved in the transportation, distribution, or marketing of illicit drugs in the United States or Europe.

### EXTORTION & SERVICE CONTRACTS

Colombian guerrilla groups traditionally have supported their activities through extortion and kidnapping, with ranchers and other wealthy individuals the typical victims. Over the years, some FARC and ELN units have extended this practice to include the extortion of "revolutionary taxes" from drug traffickers operating in areas under their control. However, the insurgents' main source of income continues to be from non-drug-related kidnapping and extortion.

Intelligence indicates that several FARC fronts demand "taxes" from cocaine traffickers of \$30 or more for each kilogram of cocaine produced in or transported through their area. Reportedly, several FARC units in Huila Department extract a tax from farmers involved in opium poppy cultivation. According to one source, the FARC demands that farmers pay a 20 percent tax on every kilogram of opium gum sold.

Some FARC and ELN groups have negotiated de facto "service contracts" with drug traffickers. In exchange for money or weapons, these guerrillas provide security for drug crops, cocaine laboratories, and clandestine airstrips.

The Colombian National Police (CNP) have reported a FARC presence at illicit opium poppy fields in Cauca, Huila, Quindio, and Tolima Departments. Almost 80 percent of Colombia's opium poppy cultivation is found in areas of operation for five FARC units (the 2nd, 6th, 13th, 17th, and 21st Fronts). Several times since May 1993, CNP helicopters and aircraft spraying opium poppies in Huila Department have come under ground fire from automatic weapons. Insurgents probably were responsible for these systematic and well-coordinated assaults. The timing of the attacks, which did not start until 16 months after the initiation of aerial eradication, suggests that some insurgents may have acquired a heightened interest in protecting opium poppy fields. This aggressive defense of the opium poppy crop may be a reflection of other problems plaguing the insurgents. Political reform in Colombia and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have eroded the FARC's traditional bases of support.

Certain insurgents may have assisted drug trafficking groups in storing and transporting cocaine within Colombia. In May 1993, individuals linked to an unspecified FARC unit reportedly had warehoused 5 metric tons of cocaine near the Panamanian border in Choco Department. In June 1993, the OCHOA organization of the Medellín Cartel reportedly had recruited individuals with ties to the ELN to transport cocaine shipments from a farm in Antioquia to the port city of Turbo.

Certain insurgents also may have provided security services to high ranking drug traffickers. For example, after his July 1992 escape from Envigado Prison, drug kingpin Pablo ESCOBAR may have recruited insurgents or former insurgents to provide personal security and attack his enemies.



## INDEPENDENT DRUG TRAFFICKING OPERATIONS

Colombian security forces frequently have claimed that many units of the FARC are involved in independent coca cultivation and laboratory operations. For example, the Colombian Army claimed to have destroyed a small cocaine conversion laboratory in Arauca owned by the 45th FARC Front in March 1991. In March 1993, ranking Colombian national security officials alleged that the FARC was involved in the production and export of cocaine to the United States. Colombian Army Commander General Hernán Guzmán even stated that the FARC had become the "country's third drug cartel."

Despite these allegations, the independent involvement of insurgents in Colombia's domestic drug production, transportation, and distribution is limited—although some insurgents may be engaged in localized opiate trafficking within Colombia. Elements of the 17th FARC Front in Huila Department, for instance, reportedly have acted as "brokers" for farmers wishing to sell opium gum/morphine base to traffickers in Bogotá and Pereira.

There is no evidence that the national leadership of either the FARC or ELN has directed, as a matter of policy, that their respective organizations directly engage in independent illicit drug production, transportation, or distribution. On occasion, individuals linked to Colombian insurgent groups have become involved in drug trafficking for personal gain.

DEA has no evidence that the FARC or ELN have been involved in the transportation, distribution, or marketing of illicit drugs in the United States or Europe.

**It is doubtful that the FARC or ELN could develop an international drug transportation and logistics infrastructure.**

Furthermore, it is doubtful that either insurgent group could develop the international transportation

and logistics infrastructure necessary to establish independent drug distribution networks in the United States or Europe.

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## INSURGENT-TRAFFICKER RELATIONSHIPS

The relationship between drug traffickers and insurgents in Colombia is characterized by both cooperation and conflict. Insurgents benefit from the revenues generated by providing their "services" to drug traffickers. Drug traffickers, in turn, benefit in that the presence of insurgents in areas used for drug cultivation, processing, and transportation inhibits counter-drug operations.

Colombia's drug traffickers and insurgents do not have shared objectives. The FARC and ELN are in open rebellion against the Colombian Government; their actions are designed to undermine it. Colombian drug traffickers, in contrast, are wealthy, violently aggressive capitalists who wish to exploit, not destroy, Colombia's political system and free market economy. Drug traffickers do not seek fundamental change in Colombia's political or economic system; their objectives are met through the corruption or intimidation of government officials, which allows them to traffic in drugs, and the manipulation of Colombia's free market economy to facilitate money laundering.

**Insurgents benefit from the revenues generated from providing their "services" to drug traffickers.**

Press and intelligence sources have reported numerous cases of violent conflict between Colombia's drug kingpins and insurgents. For example, in December 1981, the Medellin Cartel formed death squads, called "Death to Kidnappers" (*Muerte a Secuestradores* or MAS), in response to the M-19 kidnapping of the youngest sister of the OCHOA brothers. The MAS squads killed over 100 M-19 members before the OCHOA sister was released unharmed in February 1982. In September 1992, the 6th Front of the FARC kidnapped

a sister of Cali Cartel kingpin Jose SANTACRUZ-Londono and demanded a \$12 million ransom. SANTACRUZ allegedly refused to pay any ransom and retaliated by kidnapping or killing some 20 individuals associated with the FARC. In January 1993, the 6th FARC Front released Cristina SANTACRUZ unharmed.

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## CONCLUSIONS

Some elements of the FARC and ELN are involved in the illicit drug trade at the cultivation and laboratory stages, with their activities largely confined to extortion or providing security services. The independent involvement of Colombian insurgent groups in Colombia's domestic drug production, transportation, and distribution appears to be limited. DEA has no evidence that Colombian insurgent groups are engaged in the illicit drug trade in the United States or Europe.

Still, insurgent involvement in Colombia's domestic drug cultivation and processing has increased in recent years. This situation may be attributed to two historic developments:

- political reform in Colombia has eroded public support for the guerrilla's political agenda; and
- the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has deprived the FARC and ELN of outside financial and ideological support.

In response to these political trends, insurgent groups have been compelled to seek alternative sources of income. The net result is that some

**It is not anticipated that insurgents will challenge the cartels' domination of Colombia's illicit drug trade.**

FARC and ELN units have become little more than well-armed bands of thugs that sell their services to drug

traffickers. DEA does not anticipate, however, that the insurgents will ever challenge the cartels' domination of Colombia's illicit drug trade. Furthermore, the most important link between the illicit drug trade and Colombian insurgents will continue to be one of low-level, tactical accommodation between traffickers and insurgents.

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## DISTRIBUTION

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