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ENVELOPE

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HEADER

P 040040Z DEC 01  
FM DIA WASHINGTON DC  
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P 031503Z DEC 01  
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5272  
INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 8995  
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 6805  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ 4175  
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 7002  
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 2671  
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 2218  
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CONTROLS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/02/11

BODY

TAGS: PHUM, PINS, PINR, PTER, PGOV, MARR, SOCI, CO  
SUBJECT: NOTES FROM THE FIELD: BARRANCABERMEJA  
REF: A) BOGOTA 488, B) BOGOTA 4390, C) BOGOTA 4566  
CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR ANNE W. PATTERSON. REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

1. (X) EMBOFFS VISITED THE MAGDALENA RIVER OIL PORT OF BARRANCABERMEJA NOVEMBER 6-8. SOURCES ACROSS THE IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM CONFIRMED THAT PARAMILITARIES HAVE EXPELLED BOTH THE FARC AND ELN FROM THE CITY AND ARE NOW ITS DOMINANT NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS. BOTH GOC AND NGO CONTACTS AFFIRMED THAT PARAMILITARIES HAVE BENEFITED FROM WIDESPREAD GUERRILLA DEFECTIONS AND HAVE IMPLEMENTED A TWO-PRONGED CAMPAIGN TO RETAIN POWER BY WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS WHILE HARASSING, AND AT TIMES

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B1, 1.4(b)(d)  
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to 12/2/21

<del>EXCISE</del>	
DEPT OF STATE APPEALS REVIEW PANEL (ARP)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	RELEASE IN FULL
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION RELEASED
<input type="checkbox"/>	ORIGINAL DECISION UPHELD
Exemptions <u>B1 1.4(b), 1.4(d)</u>	
ARP Action Cert <u>U4</u>	Date <u>9-9-09</u>

Dept. of State, ISS/IPS, Margaret P. Grafeld, Dir.

( ) Classify as ( ) Extend as (d) Downgrade to \_\_\_\_\_  
Date 9/11/05 Declassify on 12/2/21 Reason \_\_\_\_\_

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Dept. of State, RPS/IPS, Margaret P. Grafeld, Dir.  
( ) Release (X) Excise ( ) Deny (X) Declassify in part  
Date 7/1/05 Exemption B1(b)(d)

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MURDERING, THOSE THEY SUSPECT OF HARBORING GUERRILLA SYMPATHIES. WHILE LARGELY EXCLUDED FROM THE CITY, BOTH THE FARC AND ELN MAINTAIN A STRONG PRESENCE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AND HAVE ADJUSTED THEIR TACTICS TO CONFRONT THE PARAMILITARY ASCENDANCY. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WARNED EMBOFFS ABOUT A POSSIBLE GUERRILLA ASSAULT ON THE CITY, BUT LOCAL NGOS DISMISSED SUCH RUMORS. MILITARY AND POLICE OFFICIALS REPORTED THAT BARRANCABERMEJA IS CALMER THAN AT ANY TIME IN RECENT YEARS, WHICH IS PROBABLY A CONSEQUENCE OF THE PARAMILITARIES' POLICY OF NOT ATTACKING GOVERNMENT FORCES. ALTHOUGH GOC CIVIL AND MILITARY AUTHORITIES DOCUMENTED SUCCESSFUL LAW ENFORCEMENT AND MILITARY ACTIVITIES AGAINST PARAMILITARIES, LOCAL NGOS CONTINUE TO SUSPECT COLLUSION BETWEEN GOC SECURITY FORCES AND PARAMILITARY FORCES. FOR THE AVERAGE RESIDENT OF BARRANCABERMEJA, THE LATEST CALM IN THE INSURGENT STORM, WHATEVER ITS ORIGINS, IS BOUND TO BE A WELCOME, IF TEMPORARY, RELIEF. END SUMMARY.

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 A HISTORY OF GUERRILLA DOMINANCE  
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2. (U) ON NOVEMBER 6-8, EMBOFFS VISITED THE INLAND MAGDALENA RIVER PORT OF BARRANCABERMEJA, LOCATED 320 MILES NORTH OF BOGOTA IN SANTANDER DEPARTMENT. SITE OF COLOMBIA'S PRINCIPAL OIL REFINERY, BARRANCABERMEJA LIES AT THE HEART OF A REGION RICH IN PETROLEUM, PRECIOUS METALS, AND COCA, AND IS A PRIZE LONG COVETED BY COLOMBIA'S ILLEGAL ARMED GROUPS. THE REGION SURROUNDING BARRANCABERMEJA WAS THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY (ELN), AND BARRANCABERMEJA WAS TRADITIONALLY CONSIDERED THE ELN'S PRIMARY URBAN STRONGHOLD. IN THE EARLY 1990S, THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES OF COLOMBIA (FARC) ALSO ESTABLISHED A PRESENCE IN AND AROUND BARRANCABERMEJA. GOVERNMENT SECURITY FORCES PROVED UNABLE TO DISLODGE EITHER REBEL GROUP FROM THE CITY.

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 PARAMILITARIES TAKE CONTROL  
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3. (S) ACCORDING TO

ELN AND  
 FARC FORTUNES IN THE CITY BEGAN TO DECLINE IN EARLY 1998, WHEN PARAMILITARY FORCES AFFILIATED WITH THE UNITED SELF-DEFENSE FORCES OF COLOMBIA (AUC) STARTED A CAMPAIGN TO ELIMINATE GUERRILLA INFLUENCE IN THE CITY. THE AUC CAMPAIGN RECEIVED GREATER POPULAR SUPPORT WHEN THE GOC ANNOUNCED PLANS TO CREATE

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AN ELN DEMILITARIZED ZONE ACROSS THE MAGDALENA RIVER IN SOUTHERN BOLIVAR. [ ] EXPLAINED THAT AFTER A YEAR AND A HALF OF STEADY, MERCILESS PRESSURE, THE PARAMILITARIES' COUP DE GRACE TOOK PLACE ON DECEMBER 23, 2000, WHEN TEAMS OF PARAMILITARIES FANNED OUT THROUGHOUT THE CITY'S NORTHERN NEIGHBORHOODS, WARNING SUSPECTED GUERRILLA SYMPATHIZERS TO LEAVE OR DIE; MOST COMPLIED WITH THE FIRST OPTION (REF A). THIS FINAL BLOW BROKE THE BACK OF BOTH THE FARC'S AND ELN'S URBAN CADRES AND USHERED IN A PERIOD OF PARAMILITARY DOMINANCE IN BARRANCABERMEJA.

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GUERRILLA DEFECTIONS FEED THE PARAMILITARY ADVANCE  
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4. (S) A CRUCIAL ASPECT OF PARAMILITARY ASCENDANCY IN BARRANCABERMEJA HAS BEEN THE WIDESPREAD DEFECTION OF GUERRILLAS, PARTICULARLY MEMBERS OF THE WEAKENED ELN, INTO THE RANKS OF THE AUC. [ ]

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[ ] COMMENTED THAT THE STRONGEST EVIDENCE AGAINST MOST OF THE NEARLY 100 PARAMILITARIES [ ] INDICTED THIS YEAR RELATES TO CRIMES THEY COMMITTED AS GUERRILLAS. THERE IS ALSO EXTENSIVE ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE THAT POINTS TO LARGE NUMBERS OF GUERRILLA DEFECTIONS. [ ]

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BARRANCABERMEJA, RECALLED THAT DURING A CHARITABLE VISIT TO BARRANCABERMEJA'S HIGH-SECURITY PRISON, HIS WIFE RECOGNIZED A GUERRILLA OPERATIVE WHO HAD KIDNAPPED HER A YEAR EARLIER -- IMPRISONED IN THE PARAMILITARY WING. [ ]

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] SHARED THE

HARROWING ACCOUNT OF A FORMER ELN OPERATIVE HE CALLED "JAVIER", WHO FOUND HIMSELF FACE TO FACE WITH FOUR ARMED MEN ON HIS DOORSTEP THE NIGHT OF THE AUC'S FINAL PUSH INTO BARRANCABERMEJA. AFTER THEY ACCUSED HIM OF COLLABORATING WITH THE ELN AND GAVE HIM FOUR HOURS TO LEAVE HIS HOME OR DIE, "JAVIER" PROTESTED THAT HE HAD NEVER COLLABORATED WITH THE GUERRILLAS AND SHOULD NOT BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SINS OF OTHERS. ONE OF THE FOUR MEN THEN LOWERED THE BANDANA FROM HIS FACE, REVEALING HIMSELF TO BE "JAVIER"'S FORMER ELN COMMANDER. ("JAVIER" 'S LIFE WAS SPARED

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THE PARAMILITARIES CONSOLIDATE THEIR POSITION  
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5. (S) ONCE ESTABLISHED AS THE CITY'S DOMINANT FORCE,

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PARAMILITARIES INSTITUTED SEVERAL MEASURES TO CONSOLIDATE THEIR PRIVILEGED POSITION. TO COMPLEMENT RURAL INCOME FROM NARCO-TRAFFICKING, PARAMILITARIES CO-OPTED BARRANCABERMEJA'S NOTORIOUS GASOLINE CARTEL. ACCORDING TO [

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] THE CARTEL SIPHONS OFF NEARLY 4000 BARRELS OF GASOLINE A DAY FROM THE ECOPETROL PIPELINE, REPRESENTING LOSSES TO ECOPETROL -- AND POTENTIAL INCOME FOR THE PARAMILITARIES -- OF NEARLY USD 30 MILLION A YEAR. (NOTE: AT POLICE HEADQUARTERS, EMBOFFS SAW OVER 1500 GALLONS OF STOLEN GASOLINE THAT POLICE HAD CONFISCATED THE PREVIOUS WEEKEND.) POLICE AND NGO SOURCES REPORTED THAT THE AUC USES STOLEN GASOLINE NOT ONLY AS A SOURCE OF FINANCING, BUT ALSO TO PURCHASE THE LOYALTY OF THE LOCAL POPULATION, MANY OF WHOM RECEIVE A GASOLINE QUOTA TO SELL AS FAMILY INCOME.

6. (C) PARAMILITARIES HAVE INSTITUTED OTHER "HEARTS AND MINDS" STRATEGIES AS WELL, SUCH AS FINANCIALLY SUPPORTING WIDOWS, ORPHANS, AND THE ELDERLY, SPONSORING COMMUNITY BLOCK PARTIES AND NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS, AND ENFORCING POPULAR VIGILANTE JUSTICE ON THIEVES, VAGRANTS, AND LOCAL TROUBLEMAKERS (REF B). THE AUC HAS ALSO INITIATED A POLITICAL ACTION PROGRAM.

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BOTH [ DESCRIBED A PARAMILITARY-ORGANIZED CONFERENCE IN THE AUC-DOMINATED TOWN OF SANTA ROSA, 65 MILES NORTHWEST OF BARRANCABERMEJA, THAT GATHERED THE PRESIDENTS OF LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS FROM BARRANCABERMEJA AND ELSEWHERE TO RECEIVE INSTRUCTION ON THE PARAMILITARIES' REGIONAL POLITICAL STRATEGY. TO A LARGE EXTENT THE PARAMILITARIES' EFFORTS HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL; AS [ ] CONFESSED, "MANY RESIDENTS OF BARRANCABERMEJA NOW SEE THE PARAMILITARIES AS LIBERATORS."

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THE DARK SIDE  
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7. (S) BELYING THEIR EFFORTS TO PORTRAY A "SOFTER, GENTLER SIDE", HOWEVER, PARAMILITARIES IN BARRANCABERMEJA AND OTHER REGIONAL CITIES CONTINUE TO HARASS, INTIMIDATE, AND SELECTIVELY ASSASSINATE UNION ACTIVISTS, NGO REPRESENTATIVES, OTHER PRESUMED GUERRILLA SYMPATHIZERS, AND THOSE WHO THREATEN THEIR FLOW OF ILLEGAL INCOME. IN THE WEEKS BEFORE EMBOFFS' ARRIVAL, PARAMILITARIES MURDERED THREE LEADERS OF BARRANCABERMEJA'S PUBLIC TRANSPORT UNION. SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE COLOMBIAN OIL WORKERS UNION (USO) WERE ALSO MURDERED DURING THIS SPAN. TWO DAYS AFTER EMBOFFS LEFT BARRANCABERMEJA, PARAMILITARIES

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DISMANTLED, PIECE BY PIECE ON THE EVE OF ITS INAUGURATION, A COMMUNITY ACTION CENTER SPONSORED BY THE WOMEN'S POPULAR ORGANIZATION (OPF), A LOCAL WOMEN'S NGOS THAT SPECIALIZES IN AID TO DISPLACED PERSONS. ON NOVEMBER 12, ECOPEPETROL'S CHIEF OF SECURITY WAS FOUND BOUND, GAGGED, AND EXECUTED ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF BARRANCABERMEJA. GOC POLICE INVESTIGATORS SUSPECT HE WAS MURDERED BY PARAMILITARIES TO STOP HIS INVESTIGATION OF THE PARAMILITARY-DOMINATED GASOLINE CARTEL.

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A STRONG GUERRILLA PRESENCE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE  
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8. (S) DESPITE AUC ASCENDANCY IN THE CITIES, THE FARC AND ELN CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN A STRONG PRESENCE IN THE SURROUNDING COUNTRYSIDE. BOTH

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WHO TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE CITY FREQUENTLY, REPORTED ENCOUNTERS WITH LARGE FARC AND ELN (AS WELL AS AUC) UNITS IN SOUTHERN BOLIVAR DEPARTMENT WITHIN THE PAST FEW MONTHS. THEIR ACCOUNTS, WHICH ARE CONSISTENT WITH INFORMATION PROVIDED BY COLOMBIAN MILITARY AUTHORITIES, SUGGEST THAT FARC UNITS ARE CONCENTRATED IN THE COCA-RICH CIMITARRA RIVER VALLEY, MOST ELN UNITS IN THE EASTERN FOOTHILLS OF THE SAN LUCAS MOUNTAIN RANGE, AND MOST AUC UNITS ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF REGIONAL URBAN CENTERS.

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X NEW FARC/ELN TACTICS IN RESPONSE TO THE AUC  
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9. (S) THE INCREASING REGIONAL STRENGTH OF THE AUC HAS APPARENTLY FORCED COLOMBIA'S TWO MAIN REBEL GROUPS TO ADJUST THEIR TACTICS. FOR EXAMPLE, MULTIPLE SOURCES REPORTED THAT THE FARC AND ELN NOW OPERATE JOINT FIELD UNITS AND MORE CLOSELY COORDINATE MILITARY ACTIONS. THESE EFFORTS HAVE REPORTEDLY MET WITH SOME SUCCESS. ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] IN EARLY AUGUST A JOINT UNIT AMBUSHED AND KILLED 15-20 PARAMILITARIES TRAVELING BY BUS OUTSIDE SAN PABLO. THE ELN ITSELF, WHICH HAS SUFFERED FINANCIALLY SINCE PARAMILITARIES TOOK CONTROL OF BARRANCABERMEJA, ALSO APPEARS TO BE CONSERVING ITS RESOURCES AND MORE CAREFULLY FOCUSING ITS SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES. COLOMBIAN NATIONAL POLICE OFFICIALS IN BARRANCABERMEJA ARE CONVINCED, FOR INSTANCE, THAT RECENT ELN CAR BOMBS -- PLACED IN OBVIOUS BUT UNINHABITED AREAS -- HAVE BEEN DESIGNED TO TARGET THE NATIONAL POLICE'S LIMITED NUMBER OF EXPLOSIVES EXPERTS. (NOTE: SEVERAL POLICE EXPLOSIVES SPECIALISTS IN THE REGION WERE KILLED OR

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MAIMED INSPECTING OR ATTEMPTING TO DISARM ELN CAR BOMBS IN THE TWO WEEKS PRIOR TO EMBOFFS' VISIT. END NOTE.)

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RUMORS OF A GUERRILLA ASSAULT

11. (C) DURING THEIR VISIT, EMBOFFS HEARD CONSISTENT REPORTS FROM GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS OF A RUMORED "RETAKE" OF BARRANCABERMEJA BY COMBINED FARC AND ELN FORCES. MILITARY OFFICIALS WERE ON HIGH ALERT AND HAD ASKED FOR ADDITIONAL TROOPS TO DEAL WITH SUCH A CONTINGENCY. LOCAL NGO'S, ON THE OTHER HAND, DISMISSED SUCH RUMORS AS SOME SINISTER GOC-AUC PLOT.

INSISTED THAT THE GOC/AUC (HE MADE NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE TWO) HAD CONCOCTED THE STORY TO DISTRACT THE POPULATION AND DRAW PUBLIC ATTENTION AWAY FROM CONTROVERSIAL LABOR AND PENSION REFORM LEGISLATION OPPOSED BY ORGANIZED LABOR.

CLAIMED THAT RUMORS OF A GUERRILLA ATTACK

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WERE A GOVERNMENT INVENTION TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT FAVORABLE TO A CRACKDOWN ON UNIONS AND NGOS.

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POLICE NOW ABLE TO CONDUCT INVESTIGATIONS

12. (S) THE SOCIAL CONTROLS PLACED BY PARAMILITARIES ON THE CIVILIAN POPULATION APPEAR TO HAVE IMPROVED CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH GOVERNMENT INVESTIGATIVE OFFICIALS AND SECURITY FORCES OPERATE. AS RECENTLY AS 10 MONTHS AGO POLICE RARELY VENTURED INTO BARRANCABERMEJA'S NORTHERN NEIGHBORHOODS FOR FEAR OF BEING SHOT AT OR ATTACKED BY HOMEMADE ROCKETS AND BOMBS. TODAY, IN THESE SAME NEIGHBORHOODS, POLICE OFFICERS PATROL THE STREETS AND ENGAGE IN THEIR OWN BRAND OF COMMUNITY POLICING. BARRANCABERMEJA USED TO BE CONSIDERED THE "BOMB CAPITAL" OF COLOMBIA. HOWEVER, NEARLY ALL OF THE 65 EXPLOSIVE DEVICES THE POLICE HAVE SEIZED AND/OR DEACTIVATED THIS YEAR IN BARRANCABERMEJA WERE DISCOVERED DURING THE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF THE YEAR. TECHNICAL INVESTIGATIVE CORPS (CTI) INVESTIGATORS TOLD EMBOFFS THEY CAN NOW CONDUCT CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATIONS AND COLLECT BODIES IN NORTHERN BARRANCABERMEJA, WHEREAS SECURITY CONDITIONS TEN MONTHS AGO OBLIGED THEM TO CONTRACT WITH A LOCAL FUNERAL HOME TO COLLECT CORPSES ON THEIR BEHALF.

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13. (S) DAS AND POLICE OFFICIALS REPORTED THAT DESPITE CONTINUING PARAMILITARY CRIMES, THE OVERALL LEVEL OF VIOLENCE IN BARRANCABERMEJA HAS DECLINED SIGNIFICANTLY SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR. CTI INVESTIGATORS RECALLED THAT THERE WERE AN AVERAGE OF 10 MURDERS A WEEKEND IN FEBRUARY, BUT THAT WEEKENDS NOW PASS WITHOUT A SINGLE KILLING. [ ] NOTED THAT OF THE 380 MURDERS COMMITTED IN BARRANCABERMEJA THIS YEAR, 70 OCCURRED IN JANUARY, BUT ONLY 20 IN OCTOBER.

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NGO SUSPICIONS OF GOC-PARAMILITARY COLLUSION

14. (S) LOCAL NGOS INTERPRET THE RELATIVE PEACE IN BARRANCABERMEJA AS EVIDENCE OF COLLUSION BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND PARAMILITARIES. BOTH [ ] JUSO AND [ ] OF THE OFP ASSERTED THAT PARAMILITARISM IS STATE POLICY. BECERRA COMPLAINED THAT GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAD DONE NOTHING TO IMPEDE A PARAMILITARY-ORGANIZED, ANTI-OFP RALLY THAT COMPETED WITH ONE OF [ ] WHILE [ ] HAD TO SPEND WEEKS JUMPING THROUGH BUREAUCRATIC HOOPS TO GET PERMISSION FOR THE OFP TO MARCH. RUEDAS ASSERTED THAT STATE OIL COMPANY ECOPETROL

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KNOWINGLY CONTRIBUTES TO PARAMILITARY COFFERS BY WORKING EXCLUSIVELY WITH PARAMILITARY-CONTROLLED CONTRACTORS, WHO HIRE OFF-DUTY PARAMILITARIES TO WORK ON THE ECOPEPETROL COMPOUND AND USE THEIR ECOPEPETROL-PROVIDED PROFITS TO FUND THE AUC. [REDACTED] CLAIMED THAT A PARAMILITARY RECENTLY ARRESTED FOR MURDER WAS EMPLOYED AT THE TIME AS AN ECOPEPETROL GUARD, AND POINTED TO CONTRACT MANUAL LABORERS CARRYING CELL PHONES AS OBVIOUS EXAMPLES OF PARAMILITARY INFILTRATION OF ECOPEPETROL.

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GOC OFFICIALS DOCUMENT EFFORTS AGAINST PARAMILITARIES  
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15. (C) DAS, POLICE, AND MILITARY OFFICIALS PROVIDED EMBOFFS WITH EXTENSIVE DOCUMENTATION OF RECENT SUCCESSES IN COMBATING PARAMILITARISM. BEFORE ARRIVING IN BARRANCABERMEJA, POLOFFS TRAVELED TO BUCARAMANGA, CAPITAL OF SANTANDER DEPARTMENT, TO MEET WITH [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] GAVE POLOFFS A REPORT DOCUMENTING 14 MAJOR BRIGADE OPERATIONS IN 2001 TARGETING PARAMILITARIES, WHICH RESULTED IN 17 PARAMILITARY DEATHS, 183 ARRESTS, AND THE SEIZURE OF LARGE CACHES OF ARMS, AMMUNITION, EQUIPMENT, AND DOCUMENTS. IN BARRANCABERMEJA, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] PROVIDED STATISTICS INDICATING THAT THE BATTALION HAD CAPTURED OVER 60 AUC THIS YEAR, AS COMPARED WITH JUST 20 FARC AND 10 ELN. DAS OFFICIALS SHARED WITH EMBOFFS A LIST OF 100 PRESUMED PARAMILITARIES ARRESTED THIS YEAR, INCLUDING THE LEADERS OF THE ORGANIZATION'S POLITICAL AND MILITARY BRANCHES IN BARRANCABERMEJA (REF C). [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] A LIST OF THE 825 SUSPECTS POLICE HAVE ARRESTED THIS YEAR, A SIGNIFICANT PERCENTAGE OF WHOM ARE LINKED TO PARAMILITARISM. ACCORDING TO [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] ALL BUT THREE OF HIS ACTIVE "SECURITY OFFENSE" CASES INVOLVE PARAMILITARISM.

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X COMMENT  
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16. (C) GOC SOURCES, WHILE CAREFUL NOT TO APPEAR LIKE PARAMILITARY APOLOGISTS, ARE CONVINCED THAT BARRANCABERMEJA IS BETTER OFF TODAY THAN IT WAS A YEAR AGO, WHEN STILL DOMINATED BY GUERRILLAS. THE POLICE AND MILITARY CLAIM THAT THE [REDACTED]

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PARAMILITARIES' INCREASED PRESENCE HAS REDUCED CHAOS AND VIOLENCE IN BARRANCABERMEJA, BUT THEIR SUCCESS OWES MUCH TO THE FACT THAT, UNLIKE THE ELN AND FARC, PARAMILITARIES DO NOT ATTACK GOC SECURITY FORCES PATROLLING THE CITY. IT IS THIS VERY FACT, HOWEVER, THAT CONVINCES LOCAL NGOS THAT PARAMILITARIES ARE IN CAHOOTS WITH GOVERNMENT FORCES. ALTHOUGH THEY GRUDGINGLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE REDUCTION IN OVERALL VIOLENCE, THEY INSIST THAT THE CITY IS NOW MORE "BARBARIC". HOW THE AVERAGE RESIDENT OF BARRANCABERMEJA TRULY FEELS IS HARD TO SAY. HOWEVER, A REDUCTION IN RANDOM VIOLENCE AND AN INCREASED STATE PRESENCE IN BARRANCABERMEJA'S POOR NEIGHBORHOODS IS LIKELY A WELCOME CHANGE FOR MOST RESIDENTS, ALTHOUGH IT FALLS FAR SHORT OF THE GENUINE RULE OF LAW WHICH, WE BELIEVE, THEY AND MOST COLOMBIANS CRAVE. *J*

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