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# The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia: A Realistic and Imminent Danger to U.S. Security

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countries are compelled to spend millions of dollars each day to pay off debt with money that could be used for economic reform, education, healthcare, or a multitude of other beneficial areas. In fact, government spending on education and improving the health of its citizens has declined due to an increase in debt. This downward spiral has led to higher death rates, particularly among children. An estimated 21,000 children die each day from poverty-related causes, according to UNICEF's Progress of Nations 2000 report.<sup>100</sup> This figure implies the statistic of one child's death every four seconds, which amounts to fourteen children each minute.<sup>101</sup> In addition to poor healthcare, low-income countries have suffered from weak economic performance, which has resulted in a decrease in economic reforms.

Despite these seemingly high statistics, there are numerous organizations whose sole focus is to end, or lessen, third world debt. These groups include Jubilee 2000 UK / Jubilee Debt Campaign (JDC), Christian-Aid, Oxfam UK, World Development Movement, Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), and Tearfund. Of these organizations, JDC is the most significant in that it is highly involved in aiding third world countries. Their mission is to bring "an end to all unpayable poor country debts by fair and transparent means."<sup>102</sup> JDC hopes to amend government policy on debt in order to cancel all third world debt. They argue that the accumulation of debt by third world countries was unjust and is only making their economies worse.

Third world debt plays a critical role in how countries govern themselves. Countries that are unable to maintain a stable government and economy, such as Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen, are often dominated by stronger ones; therefore, the welfare of third world economies is at risk of being controlled by terrorists groups. In a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, Princeton N. Lyman explained that in east Africa, "some [immediate threats] arise from failed or

failing states that allow financial exploitation by terrorist groups or exploitation of internal conflicts to recruit members to terrorist networks."<sup>103</sup> Terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and al-Shabab have already demonstrated this by infiltrating numerous regions throughout Africa and seizing control of various aspects of society as a result of weak governmental security.

In order for third world countries to become more robust against infiltrations by terrorists groups, as well as reduce or even put an end to the debt crisis, governments and bank sectors should put a greater emphasis on analyzing their current financial situations. While numerous online resources such as PovcalNet, have been created to allow the public the ability to assess the current poverty calculations, this should not be viewed as the sole solution for such a wide-scale problem.<sup>104</sup> The Jubilee Debt Campaign suggests that a complete cancellation of all debt would be the ideal solution; however, this is unrealistic. Instead, debt should be analyzed as to what is payable versus unpayable, while having grants issued as opposed to additional loans, which frequently result in an exponential growth of debt. If such changes are implemented in resolving the debt crisis, third world countries would have a better opportunity to become stable as well as more secure against terrorist organizations.

The effects of debt on third world countries are alarming and will likely continue to increase. The deficit is affecting all aspects of society and has impacted relations between the rich and poor countries. Various campaign groups are working to desperately amend government policy on debt by analyzing the two types of debt, the possibility of issuing grants rather than loans, and making society more aware of the severity of this crisis, which are crucial first steps in empowering the third world to develop a better environment for its citizenry, and a worse one for subversive organizations.

<sup>100</sup> Shah, Anup. "Debt and the Effect on Children," Global Issues. 04 July 2000. <http://www.globalissues.org/article/33/debt-and-the-effect-on-children>, (accessed 13 March 2012).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Jubilee Debt Campaign UK, "Our Mission". <http://www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk/Our3720mission+2245.twl>, (accessed 13 March 2012).

<sup>103</sup> Lyman, Princeton, N. The Terrorist Threat in Africa, Council on Foreign Relations. <http://www.cfr.org/africa/terrorist-threat-africa/p6912>, (accessed 14 March 2012).

<sup>104</sup> "PovcalNet: An Online Poverty Analysis Tool," The World Bank. <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/index.htm>, (accessed 01 July 2012).

## The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

### *A Realistic and Imminent Danger to U.S. Security*

Andrew D. Grabau

*The United States is susceptible to a potential attack by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, a terrorist group known as FARC. Several guerilla tactics are viable for implementation military and civilian personnel in addition to clandestine operations. There is a 70 percent probability that FARC will soon engage in retaliatory, covert operations against key U.S. military installations in U.S. cities bordering the Gulf of Mexico.*

The history of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia can be traced to an early 1960s guerilla group of rebel peasants that was established as its transliterated acronym "FARC" in 1964. Through the 1980s, this terrorist group accumulated a large portion of its revenue from kidnapping and extortion. Many of the U.S. anti-drug policies of the 1990s inadvertently aided FARC and enabled the organization to increase its territory within Colombia.<sup>105</sup> FARC has engaged in multiple deadly firefights with the Colombian military and the DEA since the 1990s. In fiscal year 1999, the United States expanded its assistance to Colombia to \$317 million, and later to almost \$1 billion in 2000.<sup>106</sup> President Andres Pastrana attempted to negotiate a peaceful resolution with FARC in 1999, but was unsuccessful in the endeavor. During that year, the rebel organization was able to capture a third of the country's territory. By 2002, the massive rebel war machine and drug trafficking empire reached its peak.<sup>107</sup>

The United States, as an ally of the Colombian military, has caused significant setbacks to FARC's

<sup>105</sup> Peceny, Mark and Michael Durnan, "The FARC's Best Friend U.S. Antidrug Policies and the Deepening of Colombia's Civil War in the 1990s," Latin American Politics Society vol. 48, no.2. July 2006. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2006.tb00348.x/abstract> (accessed 17 March 2012), 97.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>107</sup> McDermott, Jeremy. "Colombia's FARC Rebels: End to Kidnap a New Start?," BBC News. 27 February 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17177643?print=true>, (accessed 17 March 2012).

strategic objectives since 2001; however, U.S. involvement did not immediately deter the terrorist group's financing methods. In 2002 alone, the guerillas were responsible for almost all of Colombia's 2,882 kidnappings, which amassed millions of dollars in ransom.<sup>108</sup> The group also held three Americans captive for four years, releasing them in 2006; this demonstrates their willingness to kidnap American personnel.<sup>109</sup> For years, the United States has been funding and training the AUC, or the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia, to fight against FARC forces. In addition, the U.S. has allocated massive financial support to the Colombian government for the sole purpose of destroying the terrorist faction.

Since the beginning, FARC's leadership structure has consisted of a seven-man council. In 2008, the Colombian military launched a massive raid with the support of U.S. intelligence against a FARC camp located across the border in Ecuador. The raid resulted in the deaths of key leaders Raul Reyes and Ivan Rios, with the eventual elimination of top commander Manuel Marulanda two years later. The dismantling of leadership, in conjunction with captured intelligence, struck a massive blow to FARC and its capabilities. Intelligence recovered in the raid indicated that Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa, along with Venezuela, had been rendering financial support to FARC and providing a safe haven in Ecuador.<sup>110</sup> A Colombian bombing raid dispatched FARC commander Mono Jojoy in September of 2010, while a similar raid the following year resulted in the death of FARC's chief leader and commander, Alfonso Cano. The President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, called it the "most devastating blow to the group in its decades-long insurgency."<sup>111</sup> Now that five of the original seven council commanders have been killed, FARC's strength has decreased and its operational ability has been limited.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>109</sup> Sullivan, Mark. Latin America: Terrorism Issues. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2008). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RS21049.pdf>, (accessed 14 March 2012), 2.

<sup>110</sup> Beittel, June. Colombia: Issues for Congress. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2011). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32250.pdf>, (accessed 14 March 2012), 10.

<sup>111</sup> McDermott, Jeremy. "Top FARC Rebel Leader Alfonso Cano Killed in Colombia," BBC News. 05 November 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-15604456>, (accessed 28 March 2012).

Junior level leaders in FARC have been extradited to the United States to face drug trafficking charges, which gives FARC another reason to retaliate. An organization that has endured 48 years, the longest of any terrorist group, is certainly capable of recovering from these strategic blows. In doing so, FARC will remember its enemies: Colombia and the United States. While FARC's hope of a dominant takeover in Colombia is most likely futile, it is predictable that they will commence a retaliatory strike against U.S. citizens or military targets.

In comprehending FARC's threat to U.S. security, the group's military capability and recurring strategic themes must be analyzed. FARC's troop strength has significantly dropped to an estimated 8,000 fighters, a mere half their number in 2002.<sup>112</sup> After having much of its communications systems infiltrated and the majority of its leadership eliminated, an external view would suggest that FARC is crippled indefinitely. Yet this may not be the case; FARC had the audacity to execute four hostages in 2011. The guerrillas' financial supply still continues to flow in millions of dollars every year. In 2008, it was estimated that the organization made almost \$500 million annually.<sup>113</sup> By 2012, FARC has likely lost close to \$200 million to each year's revenues because of military defeats.

Colombia's terrorist group has advanced its weaponry throughout the years. Upgraded landmines, assault rifles, RPGs, and tactical gear have made FARC more lethal. The group seemingly used improvised explosive mines against Colombian soldiers, which demonstrates their advanced weapons training.<sup>114</sup> A disturbing government report on March 26, 2008 claimed that Colombian officials had "recovered 66 pounds of depleted uranium that had been acquired by FARC."<sup>115</sup> One Colombian police report in 2008

stated that Venezuela had sent \$300 million to the group's leadership, and that FARC was "seeking uranium on the black market and had plans for a radioactive 'dirty bomb.'"<sup>116</sup> This confirms the findings of the 2008 raid, which displays FARC's serious pursuit of dirty bombs that could be used against the United States for retribution.

A second aspect of FARC's military capability is its recent buildup of allied support. Key alliances with nation states and terrorist cells in South America have strengthened FARC both internally and externally. The captured computer files found in 2008 strongly indicate that FARC has extensive negotiations, cooperation, and possible support from the government of Ecuador as well as a strong relationship with President Chavez of Venezuela, which dates back to 1992. Chavez's support includes current political patronage, secret financial funding, and possible military aid.<sup>117</sup> A 2010 State Department report affirmed that Chavez's government has not been proactive in arresting Venezuelan government and military officials linked to FARC; meanwhile, U.S. officials testified in October of 2011 that FARC is still procuring shelter locations across the border in Venezuela.<sup>118</sup>

Two additional components of this relationship must be observed. The first is that Venezuela, for all intents and purposes, is a sworn enemy of the United States. Venezuelan refineries are irreplaceable to U.S. oil, and Chavez may use this as a playing card to support a FARC operation against America. Secondly, Venezuela is known for to accommodate Iranian intelligence agents and Hezbollah recruits. The cooperation between South American countries and anti-American Middle Eastern groups lends truth to the adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The government of Ecuador has provided a safe haven for FARC for many years, but recently seems to have begun withdrawing support. Cuba has also maintained strong yet discreet relations with FARC in addition to the ETA, a strong terrorist and liberation

<sup>116</sup> Windrem, Robert. "Colombian Conflict Poses Growing Threat to U.S.," MSNBC. March 5, 2008. [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23490329/ns/nightly\\_news/t/colombian-conflict-poses-growing-threat-us/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23490329/ns/nightly_news/t/colombian-conflict-poses-growing-threat-us/), (accessed 28 March 2012).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>118</sup> Sullivan, Latin America: Terrorism Issues, 7.

<sup>112</sup> McDermott, "Colombia's FARC Rebels: End to Kidnap a New Start?", 1.

<sup>113</sup> Pherson, Randolph H. and Sarah Beebe. *Cases in Intelligence Analysis: Structured Analytic Techniques in Action*. (Thousand Oaks, California: CQ Press, 2012), 159.

<sup>114</sup> Kouri, Jim. "FARC Terrorists Kill Colombian Soldiers, Threaten US Police Advisors." *Canadian Free Press*. 21 March 2012. <http://www.canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/45395> (accessed 2 April 2012).

<sup>115</sup> Walsler, Ray. "The FARC files, Colombia, and International Terrorism." *The Heritage Foundation*. 28 March 2008. <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2008/03/the-farc-files-colombia-and-international-terrorism>, (accessed 28 March 2012).

group in the Spanish Basque region.<sup>119</sup> If the Cuban government decides to provide even a temporary safe haven for FARC, the group could use Cuba as a launching point for a retaliatory strike on select American targets in the Gulf of Mexico. Lastly, the Colombian terrorist group has become more lethal in the past six years in the areas of advanced terrorism and explosives; this is likely because the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had dispatched personnel to Colombia to provide advanced terrorist tactics training and bomb-making expertise.

Throughout its history of violence and rebellion, FARC has consistently utilized one effective method to accumulate more military power. This method would certainly be plausible if FARC decides to engage in covert strikes on the Gulf Coast against Americans and military targets. Stratfor labels it the "Carrot-and-Stick Strategy."<sup>120</sup> The Colombian government has been insistent about establishing peace negotiations with the revolutionary group for decades, though FARC has traditionally used dialogue to build up its military strength. An example of this is the ambush in March 2012 that killed 11 Colombian soldiers which was conducted on the same day that FARC announced it was ready to release hostages.<sup>121</sup> The faction will routinely increase the tenacity of offensive strikes on key investments in Colombia, such as destroying the CamonLimon-Covenas pipeline in 2012, or kidnapping high-profile citizens until the Colombian government returns to the negotiation table.<sup>122</sup>

This tactic would certainly be implemented if FARC engaged in kidnapping U.S. citizens along the Gulf Coast, in addition to bombing targeted infrastructure. FARC would sporadically increase its amount of kidnappings while dangling the carrot of hostage releases until the U.S. extends its hand of

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>120</sup> Stratfor Analysis, "Colombia: The Farc's Carrot-and-Stick Strategy," Stratfor. <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/colombia-farcs-carrot-and-stick-strategy>, (accessed 01 April 2012).

<sup>121</sup> Kouri, Jim. "FARC Terrorists Kill Colombian Soldiers, Threaten US Police Advisors".

<sup>122</sup> Stratfor Analysis. "Colombia: The Farc's Carrot-and-Stick Strategy". Stratfor. <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/colombia-farcs-carrot-and-stick-strategy>, (accessed 1 April 2012).

diplomacy. The organization would then demand that the U.S. end financial and tactical support to the Colombian military, in addition to requiring the extraction of U.S. personnel from Bogota. Realistically however, FARC would only end its operations if it felt that it had drained a satisfying amount of leverage of America's political leverage and strength from the region.

In studying FARC's capabilities and attack strategies, the following is a projection of most likely scenarios. The U.S. Army Southern Command, known as USSOUTHCOM, should be prepared for the possibility of a retaliatory FARC operation against U.S. military and civilian assets, both within Colombian and United States boundaries. The first projected strategy is a possible "nightmare" scenario.

One such potential series of developments is this: FARC could conceal several small covert ops teams in cargo ships leaving Havana bound for Gulf cities like New Orleans, Miami, and Texas. Due to known weaknesses in U.S. port security, FARC could successfully gain illegal entrance. Upon gaining a foothold, FARC could target drilling rigs, oil fields in Texas and New Orleans, or oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. Three small teams, with advanced training by the IRA, could target at least three separate sites and devastate the American economy in a matter of days. A second permutation of a nightmare scenario could involve the targeting of U.S. narcotics agents in Colombia; FARC could use the same strategy and methods to deliver a blow to USSOUTHCOM in Miami, the Joint Interagency Task Force-South in Key West, or US Army South at Fort Sam Houston in Texas, although this would be a significantly more difficult operation.

In either scenario, direct covert operations against the United States would certainly provoke retaliation upon FARC, or would at least commence a withdrawal from Colombia through diplomacy. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the longest running terrorist organization, will not soon forget America's intervention in their affairs in Colombia. Therefore, we must now anticipate FARC's long-awaited revenge in the form of direct attack upon the United States. With this potential threat on the horizon, America must remain vigilant as it stands against the threat of terrorist organizations.