

## Colombia: Making Military Progress Pay Off

### I. OVERVIEW

Almost six years of intense security operations against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) by the administration of President Álvaro Uribe are beginning to produce tangible results. Government forces killed several important rebel field commanders in 2007 and two members of the central command in March 2008, including second-in-command Raúl Reyes, and have severely disrupted insurgent communications, prompting a loss of internal cohesion and decreasing illegal revenues. However, this progress has come at the cost of severely deteriorating relations with Ecuador and Venezuela and increased risk of political isolation after the controversial bombing raid on Reyes's camp inside Ecuador. Military gains can pay off only if combined with a political strategy that consistently pursues a swap of imprisoned insurgents for hostages in FARC captivity, reestablishes much needed working relations with neighbours along borders and strongly advances integrated rural development to consolidate security and broaden Colombia's international support.

Achieving the hostages-for-prisoners swap is a key challenge for the Uribe administration. The issue has acquired great political significance in Colombia and internationally since mid-2007 and has contributed to increasing tensions with Venezuela. After an initial initiative of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who seeks the liberation of Colombian-French citizen Ingrid Betancourt, and Uribe's unilateral release of some 180 FARC prisoners in May 2007, the government authorised Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in August 2007 to facilitate a swap. Uribe officially sought to end Chávez's involvement three months later, however, in the absence of results and following an open display of bias towards the FARC. The FARC unilaterally released six hostages in January and February 2008 (of a total of some 45 so-called "political" and another 700 "economic" hostages, with the latter not being considered part of any deal at this point) as a gesture of support for Chávez. This did nothing to advance a deal, however, despite the support of a group of friendly countries, among them France and Brazil.

The 1 March attack on the FARC camp in Ecuador that produced Reyes's death triggered the most serious

political crisis in the Andean region in many years, Colombia's condemnation in the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Río Group and a break in relations with Ecuador. It also seemed to slam the door shut to further unilateral releases of hostages and a humanitarian agreement. The insurgents insist on and Uribe rejects the demilitarisation of two municipalities. Meanwhile, there is evidence that the FARC is adapting its method of operation and long-term strategy and, as in the past, may well survive the recent government military escalation. Its ability to use Venezuelan and Ecuadorian sanctuaries presents a major challenge for Uribe's security policy.

The Uribe administration should not put all its eggs in the military basket. It needs to promptly design and implement a complementary strategy that would allow it also to gain political ground on the insurgents as well as recover broader international backing, especially regionally. Moving forward with the hostages-for-prisoners swap is crucial. The strategy should focus on:

- devising strongly conditioned political incentives to advance the hostages-for-prisoners swap with the FARC, including either internationally monitored demilitarisation of Florida and Pradera municipalities or another area of similar size that would serve as the site of negotiations for 45 days on the basis of a prior agreement with the FARC that the hostages and prisoners would be released during that period;
- engaging Ecuador immediately and Venezuela subsequently in order to reinforce border cooperation and prevent the use of sanctuaries, including by enhancing the communications and helicopter mobility of the new OAS monitoring mechanism;
- redesigning the role of the group of friendly countries by giving it a limited mandate specifically for the hostages-for-prisoners swap and calling on Brazil to assume a leadership role; and
- expanding considerably investment in infrastructure for rural development so that economic alternatives to coca cultivation, better governance and rule of law can provide the basis for sustainable security in territory freed from the FARC.

## II. THE HOSTAGES-FOR-PRISONERS SWAP

### A. URIBE

President Uribe has reiterated his commitment to the release of the hostages but has shown no flexibility towards the fundamental FARC demand for a demilitarised zone (DMZ) in Florida and Pradera municipalities (Valle del Cauca department) in which to negotiate the swap. Even though security experts believe the demilitarisation of the municipalities for a limited time under international observation would not constitute a major military risk,<sup>1</sup> the government refuses to accept the demand. It considers that relinquishing territorial control and endangering civilian lives would contradict its Democratic Security Policy.<sup>2</sup> Uribe's original electoral campaign vigorously criticised the Pastrana government for permitting zones (*despejes*) in which the FARC never abided by the "demilitarised" requirement and essentially were permitted to control much of the area. He has opposed such zones in populated areas ever since, although he has indicated a willingness to accept smaller areas for talks under Church or other neutral party control.

The presence of influential agro-industrial consortiums in the area, in particular sugarcane plants whose business interests could be affected, has also influenced the government's decision to reject a DMZ in Florida and Pradera.<sup>3</sup> Sources close to the government say Uribe fears the zone would be perceived as a political defeat and would allow the FARC to regain political visibility.<sup>4</sup> The government refuses to grant the FARC the political recognition it demands. Uribe, who continues to consider the FARC a "terrorist group", has consistently defended the view that Colombia is a democracy, where any non-violent political group has the option to seek power through peaceful political activity, which removes the justification of armed

revolution.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Uribe administration perceives the FARC's quest for political recognition not merely as a way to regain some legitimacy, but also as part of its "strategic plan" to destabilise the government through combined military and political action.<sup>6</sup>

The national political climate has reinforced the government's stance. On 4 February 2008, over four million people marched against the FARC. The rejection of the FARC by the general population has been recognised by all political forces. An important faction of the left-wing Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA) party has denounced the FARC's inhumane practices and clearly distanced itself from the insurgency, which it does not recognise as a legitimate left-wing force.<sup>7</sup> The opposition Liberal party and, of course, the pro-Uribe coalition parties have also voiced their rejection of the FARC as a belligerent force and have saluted the government's proposals to move towards a hostages-for-prisoners swap.<sup>8</sup> Even the victims' families, which on previous occasions only criticised the government for not facilitating a swap, are now also voicing their frustration towards the FARC.<sup>9</sup>

Against this backdrop, Uribe has sought formulas for a hostages-for-prisoners swap that seek to reduce any political gain for the FARC. On 7 December 2007, two weeks after the dismissal of President Chávez of Venezuela as the designated mediator,<sup>10</sup> he accepted the Catholic Church's proposal for a Zone of Encounter (ZOE) – roughly 150 sq. km in a sparsely populated area where no clearance of army troops or police

<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former peace adviser, Bogotá, 19 February 2008 and security expert, Bogotá, 20 February 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Farc buscan una salida digna, dice Comisionado", *Colprensa*, 20 March 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Bogotá/Cali, 8 April 2008; Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 9 April 2008. Pro-Uribe Valle del Cauca Governor Juan Carlos Abadía and Agriculture Minister Andrés Arias have launched a strong campaign against a demilitarised zone, arguing that it would harm the economic development of the region.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group interview, former peace adviser, Bogotá, 19 February 2008.

<sup>5</sup> "In other Latin American countries guerrillas fought dictatorships and did not finance themselves with drug trafficking money ... any use of force for ideological, political or religious reasons against democracy is terrorism. ... moreover, these groups kidnap, recruit children, murder children... and use landmines", Rueda de Prensa de los presidentes Álvaro Uribe Vélez y José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, SNE, 23 January 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, Bogotá, 22 February 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interview, congressman, Bogotá, 17 February 2008.

<sup>8</sup> "Piedad Cordoba ha sido fundamental para la liberacion de las secuestradas"; Cesar Gaviria", *El Espectador*, 18 February 2008.

<sup>9</sup> On 6 March 2008, victims' organisations, along with human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and supported by the left-wing Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA) as well as leaders from other parties, organised an anti-paramilitary march that was much smaller than the 4 February march but still drew an estimated several hundred thousand in some twenty major cities. Subsequently, Colombian human rights groups have reported threats from new illegal armed groups, raids on offices and the killing of several activists.

<sup>10</sup> See section II.B. below.

would be needed – for negotiations. Sources close to the government say Uribe is ready to reconsider the size and location of the zone and is perhaps even prepared to allow FARC representatives to carry weapons during the talks, as long as their national and international visibility during the process is limited.<sup>11</sup>

At the government's request, France, Switzerland and Spain<sup>12</sup> have agreed to support the Church's proposal, but are less engaged as official facilitators than on previous occasions.<sup>13</sup> Spain no longer has an official emissary for the swap and has shown reluctance to fully commit to efforts with questionable chances of success.<sup>14</sup> French and Swiss emissaries remain active, but their governments have made it clear they believe that without more room for manoeuvre, and possibly the backing of Senator Córdoba and the Venezuelan government, the ZOE proposal is unlikely to be accepted by the FARC.<sup>15</sup>

Recent FARC communications reject the Church and Spain as valid facilitators for allegedly siding with the administration and criticising the Venezuelan government. They further reduce the likelihood of adoption of the ZOE proposal, but the FARC has previously altered its position on such matters almost overnight depending on its assessment of political gain. It is possible that if Venezuela were to support Church involvement, it might change its mind again.<sup>16</sup>

According to government and independent estimates, it may still be possible for the government and the FARC to reach agreement on a hostages-for-prisoners swap – based on demilitarised municipalities or sparsely populated regions with no or little military/police presence – a side benefit would be immediate pressure on the smaller rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), to agree to a similar deal. hold between 200 and 400 hostages.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, were a swap with the ELN to take place, it would add pressure on the FARC to accept a similar deal.

Government officials argue that increasing military pressure and the health conditions of the hostages will eventually leave the FARC no other option than unilateral release.<sup>18</sup> As an incentive, the government issued a decree on 27 March allowing the release of imprisoned insurgents, including those responsible for serious crimes, such as kidnapping, in return for the unilateral release of hostages.<sup>19</sup> Concurrently, Uribe has ordered security forces to locate and surround camps where hostages are held.<sup>20</sup> This is a dangerous move, which brings back memories of failed military rescue operations, such as the one in 2003 in which a former defence minister and the then governor of Antioquia department were killed by their captors. It also could give the insurgents an excuse to blame the government if any hostages died for whatever reason as a result of the military manoeuvre.

---

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interview, source involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 11 February 2008.

<sup>12</sup> In October 2005, Peace Commissioner Luis Restrepo travelled to Europe and requested establishment of an International Facilitation Commission made up of France, Spain and Switzerland and charged with outlining a proposal for the negotiation of a hostages-for-prisoners swap. In December 2005, the government agreed to the Commission's proposal to create a "security system" for a meeting between the government and the FARC, in a 180km area in Bolo Azul (Valle), for 45 days. During this period, international delegates and the International Committee of the Red Cross would secure the area and provide safe passage for government and insurgent delegates. "Sistema de Seguridad para un Encuentro Humanitario en la Cordillera Central", internal document, December 2005. The FARC dismissed the proposal by claiming it was never received.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interviews, sources involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 8, 13 February 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interview, source involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 8 February 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interviews, sources involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 8, 13 February 2008.

<sup>16</sup> The chance of Spain playing a role seems far less likely, given the confrontation between King Juan Carlos and Chávez in November 2007. "Spain's king to Chavez: 'Just shut up'",

---

Agence France-Presse, 10 November 2007, at <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jRV9BQppSHTkw7DzwfFauINrYcCg>.

<sup>17</sup> Considering the ELN's apparent military weaknesses, it is at least unlikely that it has the capacity to hold 400 kidnap victims, as the government says. "Proceso de Dialogo Gobierno Nacional – Ejercito de Liberación Nacional, ELN, 2005-2007", Oficina del Alto Comisionado Para la Paz, Bogota, August 2007; Crisis Group interview, independent peace analyst, Bogotá, 15 April 2008. For background, see Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°16, *Colombia: Moving Forward with the ELN?*, 11 October 2007.

<sup>18</sup> The guarding of each hostage is said to require up to twelve combatants, and is costly in terms of supplies and medicine. Crisis Group interview, demobilised fighter, Bogotá, 18 February 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Presidential Decree N° 880, 27 March 2008. The proposal is questionable on legal grounds. According to the attorney general's office, the release of imprisoned insurgents would only be considered after the FARC had released the hostages. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has also objected to the release of human rights violators without observing the victims' rights to reparation, truth and reconciliation. "Guiding Principles for the Definition of Sentenced Persons Eligible for Receiving Benefits According to Decree N° 880 issued on March 27th, 2008", Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 28 March 2008.

<sup>20</sup> "Palabras del Presidente Álvaro Uribe, Consejo Comunal de San José del Guaviare", SNE, 29 March 2008.

On 30 March, following rumours about Ingrid Betancourt's critical health condition, the government authorised a humanitarian mission made up of representatives from France, Spain and Switzerland to provide her medical assistance and possibly negotiate her unilateral release. However, on 8 April the FARC rejected the mission and denounced its establishment as an attempt by the government to pressure it into further unilateral releases.<sup>21</sup> The insurgents reiterated their demand for the demilitarisation of Florida and Pradera municipalities as the only way to move towards negotiation of a hostages-for-prisoners swap.

## B. CHÁVEZ AND THE FARC

Following his rash dismissal as mediator in November 2007, Chávez unofficially continued in the role. Owing to long contacts, which go back to the Pastrana negotiations in the 1998-2002 period,<sup>22</sup> the insurgents clearly perceive him as an ally in the struggle against the Uribe government. The unilateral release of six hostages and of evidence that a large number of captives are still alive showed the importance the FARC assigns to the relationship with the Venezuelan government. The insurgents not only believe his "prestige in the continent" is a key factor in gathering international support for the swap,<sup>23</sup> but, perhaps more importantly, they see his involvement as a crucial element for reducing the pressure the Uribe administration is exerting on them and for attaining their strategic goal of political recognition.

The FARC's main interest in the swap is political.<sup>24</sup> Its demand for the demilitarisation of two municipalities has two main goals: first, to force Uribe to go against his pledge not to reproduce the Pastrana administration's

experience with a DMZ; and secondly, to regain the national and international visibility lost since 2002.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the FARC sees the swap as a way to promote its removal from international terrorism lists and obtain recognition as a belligerent force.

Acknowledging these objectives, Chávez proposed political recognition as a key step towards a swap. Following the unilateral release of the first two hostages on 10 January, the Venezuelan president called upon the international community to remove the FARC from its terrorism lists and grant it the status of a belligerent actor in the country's armed conflict.<sup>26</sup> This, he argued, would immediately force the insurgents to abide by international humanitarian law, release the hostages and stop kidnapping and could possibly also open the door to peace talks.<sup>27</sup> Members of the pro-Chávez coalition also passed a motion in the Venezuelan National Assembly supporting his call on the Colombian government to grant the FARC and the ELN belligerency status.<sup>28</sup>

The FARC welcomed Chávez's proposal,<sup>29</sup> but it soon became clear that the international community would not support unrestricted political recognition unless the FARC first released the hostages and ceased all practices banned by international humanitarian law.<sup>30</sup> Thus, despite acknowledging that

---

<sup>21</sup> Following the FARC rejection, the French humanitarian mission left Colombia. "Comunicado del Secretariado del Estado Mayor Central de las FARC-EP sobre la misión médica francesa", FARC-EP, 8 April 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, analysts, diplomats and retired army officers, Caracas, 31 March-3 April 2008.

<sup>23</sup> "FARC: factible, cita entre Chávez y Marulanda", *La Jornada*, 5 September 2007.

<sup>24</sup> In 2004, the FARC saw the swap as a way of recovering a large number of its mid-level commanders and reinforcing its chain of command. Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°4, *Hostages for Prisoners: A Way to Peace in Colombia*, 8 March 2004. However, sources involved in efforts to achieve a swap believe that these arguments have lost force and that the FARC could now regard the reintegration of imprisoned insurgents as a liability, because of the possibility they would serve as informants. Crisis Group interview, source involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 11 February 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, security expert, Bogotá, 20 February 2008.

<sup>26</sup> That release was preceded by weeks of apparently improvised efforts by, and several setbacks for, Chávez, including the Colombian government's discovery that the son, Emmanuel, of one of the two liberated women, Clara Rojas, who was born in captivity, was already in the custody of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF). President Uribe has consistently rejected giving political recognition to the FARC as a belligerent in a genuine armed conflict, instead calling the movement simply an illegal and terrorist armed group.

<sup>27</sup> Chávez's argument is flawed in that the FARC is obliged to abide by international humanitarian law, regardless of whether it is granted belligerency status. Aló Presidente N°300, Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información, 13 March 2008.

<sup>28</sup> "AN respalda propuesta de paz del presidente Chávez para Colombia", Asamblea Nacional, 11 January 2008, available at [www.asambleanacional.gov.ve/publico/noticias/det\\_noticias.php?co=918](http://www.asambleanacional.gov.ve/publico/noticias/det_noticias.php?co=918).

<sup>29</sup> According to the FARC, the proposal is a step "on the right track, as it foregoes conditioning and seeks to establish the basis for a political solution to the conflict", "Comunicado de las FARC sobre la liberación de los congresistas", Secretariado del Estado Mayor Central de las FARC, 27 February 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, sources involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 7, 13 February 2008.

unilateral release would be an important gesture, France, Spain, Switzerland and the EU reiterated their commitment to not granting the FARC belligerency status or removing it from terrorism.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the move from veiled support for the FARC through his humanitarian mediation to public political backing for its status as a legitimate belligerent actor has backfired on Chávez. lists.

Following the liberation of four additional hostages on 27 February, the FARC announced the end of unilateral releases and again demanded a DMZ.<sup>32</sup> The Uribe administration acknowledged the unilateral release as a positive step but refused to consider the demand. Chávez criticised the government's posture and proposed establishment of an ad hoc group of friendly countries to pressure it to abandon its conditions and seek new viable formulas for a negotiating venue.<sup>33</sup>

France, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Argentina and Switzerland have informally agreed to be part of the new ad hoc group, yet basically all (with the exception of Cuba and possibly Ecuador) have focused solely on achieving the humanitarian exchange and have not supported Chávez's other objectives.<sup>34</sup> Despite having only a loosely defined role, the group concept has given some legitimacy to Chávez's facilitation efforts and

shielded him from some criticism for pro-FARC bias.<sup>35</sup> Chávez hopes the group might also serve as a springboard for possible future peace talks and for finding alternative solutions to the military struggle.

However, Chávez's increasingly close relationship with, and public support for, the FARC has made Uribe very uneasy about his involvement. Chávez's animosity towards the Colombian government following his dismissal as formal mediator led Uribe to denounce his efforts as "legitimising" rather than "mediating against terrorist threats".<sup>36</sup> Sources close to the Colombian government believe that the unilateral releases in January and February may have been part of a pre-arranged strategy between Chávez and the insurgents to pressure the government into concessions.<sup>37</sup>

Following the 1 March 2008 attack by Colombian troops on Ecuadorian territory, which resulted in the death of FARC second-in-command Raul Reyes, the government stated that it recovered files from captured laptops which corroborate its information regarding links between Venezuelan government officials and the insurgents.<sup>38</sup> The documents are email communications allegedly between FARC officials and with Venezuelan and Ecuadorian officials. Although the context is not

---

<sup>31</sup> Spain, France, Switzerland and the EU showed their support for the Colombian government and reiterated their interest in the prompt release of the hostages. France and Switzerland asked for more room for manoeuvre in their efforts to facilitate a hostages-for-prisoners swap with the FARC. "Uribe dejó a las Farc contra las cuerdas, pero tendría que ceder para mediación de Francia y Suiza", *El Tiempo*, 26 January 2008.

<sup>32</sup> According to the FARC, its "will to arrive at an exchange with the government is framed in the unilateral release of 304 soldiers and police captured in combat, of Clara Rojas and Consuelo Perdomo, the four congressmen and the police officers in Putumayo, among others...What must follow now is the clearance of Florida and Pradera", Secretariado del Estado Mayor Central de las FARC, communiqué, 27 February 2007.

<sup>33</sup> "Chávez dice 'fuerzas' humanitarias cambiarán postura 'inamovible' de Uribe", EFE, 28 February 2008.

<sup>34</sup> The inclusion of a wide ranging international commission to undertake "Operation Emmanuel" in late December 2007 had set the stage. Then, during the summit between President Sarkozy and President Lula of Brazil in Guyana on 7 February 2008, the idea to consolidate the group was further discussed. The group would function in a similar way to the Contadora Group created to support the peace processes in Central America. "Presidente Chávez propone que emisarios de Gobierno y las Farc se reúnan con grupo de países amigos", *El Tiempo*, 28 February 2008.

---

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, source involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 11 February 2008.

<sup>36</sup> "Declaración del Presidente Álvaro Uribe Vélez, desde Calamar, Bolívar", SNE, 25 November 2007.

<sup>37</sup> The strategy was said to involve the unilateral release of the "civilian hostages" in return for the launching of an international campaign for political recognition of the FARC, followed by the establishment of the ad hoc group of countries to pressure the government to yield on a demilitarised zone for the release of "police and military hostages". Out of the 39 hostages left in captivity, six would be civilians, including two former politicians, Ingrid Betancourt and the three U.S. citizens. The rest would be police officers and soldiers captured during combat. Crisis Group interviews, sources involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 8, 11 February 2008.

<sup>38</sup> An Interpol commission has been charged by the Colombian government with establishing the authenticity of the documents by mid-May. U.S. diplomats insist that the documents fully substantiate Colombia's accusations against Chávez. While they state the documents also reflect communications between the Ecuador government and FARC officials, they make a distinction with respect to the nature of the relationship between the FARC and Ecuadorian officials, both in the past and during the Correa government. They also note the difficulty of reaching the border area, limited Ecuadorian military capacity and that government's desire to keep out of the Colombian conflict and say the most recent communications were linked to international efforts to secure hostage releases. Crisis Group interviews, senior U.S. embassy official, Bogotá, 4 April 2008 and State Department official, Washington DC, 27 March 2008.

always clear, Colombian security force officials claim the documents show that members of the Chávez administration and the FARC have been working on a strategy involving military, financial and political cooperation against the Uribe administration.<sup>39</sup> Even though Chávez has denounced the allegations as an attempt to discredit his humanitarian efforts, the reports have further clouded his international standing and undoubtedly made it more difficult for him to act as facilitator.

The Colombian government has concerns that Chávez will use the international support gained through his humanitarian efforts to isolate it within the region. Following the attack on Reyes's camp, Ecuador and Venezuela denounced Colombian military operations as an imminent threat to their territory. The government thus fears that the ad hoc group could increasingly become a regional forum in which to criticise its security policy.<sup>40</sup> With the Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. delayed, apparently indefinitely, in the U.S. Congress,<sup>41</sup> economic isolation is also a worry. The government has renewed fears that differences with Chávez and the ad hoc group could have trade consequences, especially with Venezuela and Ecuador, Colombia's second and third largest commercial partners respectively.<sup>42</sup>

Even though Brazil, Ecuador and Argentina continue to support the ad hoc group, each has its own view on what the group's role should be. Though the initial diplomatic crisis has subsided, Bogotá's continued denunciation of links between the Correa administration and the FARC have kept tensions high with Ecuador.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Colombian police interpret internal FARC communications as indicating that Chávez had agreed to make a \$300 million donation and provide old weapons to the FARC, although there is some ambiguity about the amounts. Document file extracted from Raúl Reyes's computer, *El Tiempo*, 3 March 2008, at [www.eltiempo.com/conflicto/noticias/ARCHIVO/ARCHIVO-3985321-0.pdf](http://www.eltiempo.com/conflicto/noticias/ARCHIVO/ARCHIVO-3985321-0.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, security specialist, Bogotá, 20 February 2008.

<sup>41</sup> "House Delays Deliberation of Colombia Pact", *The Washington Post*, 10 April 2008.

<sup>42</sup> During the recent diplomatic crisis, the Venezuelan government restricted imports from Colombia. Brazilian and Argentinean companies moved quickly to replace Colombian imports. Crisis Group interview, congressman, Bogotá, 17 February 2008.

<sup>43</sup> The death of Ecuadorian national Franklin Aisalia during the attack on Raúl Reyes's camp has sparked new controversy. While the Ecuadorean government claims that the killing of a citizen by a foreign government is a grave violation regardless of the circumstances, the Colombian government says intelligence reports confirmed Aisalia was a member of the FARC, and his presence in a "terrorist" camp made him a legitimate target. On 27 March 2008, Aisalia's body was repatriated to Ecuador.

As a result, Ecuador has come to see the group as a way of seeking political backing for its claims concerning the flow of refugees and the damages caused by aerial spraying campaigns, as well as other cross-border effects from Uribe's military strategy. Brazil believes the group should serve as a platform on which to reconstruct diplomatic relations between Colombia and its neighbours. In private, it has emphasised the importance of producing a hostages-for-prisoners swap, has reiterated that the solution to the Colombian conflict must be political and shown great concern about the Colombian attack on the FARC camp in Ecuador.<sup>44</sup>

France continues to perceive Chávez as an important actor in its quest to liberate Ingrid Betancourt. The priority President Sarkozy has given to ensuring the release of Betancourt has prompted his government to favour the Venezuelan president's role as facilitator.<sup>45</sup> France has promoted consolidation of the ad hoc group and has asked Uribe to consider reinstating Chávez as an official facilitator.<sup>46</sup> However, news about Betancourt's worsening health has led the French government to also employ other channels. Sarkozy has tried to pressure the FARC directly by publicly singling out High Commander Manuel Marulanda as the sole individual who would be responsible for her death. However, the FARC's rejection of the impromptu humanitarian mission sent on 30 March could prompt France to turn to Chávez again.<sup>47</sup>

The U.S. has shown little interest in supporting Chávez's efforts. Even though officials have said they are not opposed to any credible effort to release the hostages, including the three U.S. citizens held by the FARC since 2003,<sup>48</sup> Washington is highly unlikely to agree to any proposal not previously approved by Uribe.<sup>49</sup> In response

---

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Brazilian government officials, Brasilia, 11 and 13 March 2008.

<sup>45</sup> The French government has traditionally favoured a pragmatic stance. In December 2003, it attempted to negotiate the release of Betancourt without the Colombian government's consent. It is also believed to have maintained contacts with the FARC in Venezuela in late 2004 about which the Colombian government was not aware at the time.

<sup>46</sup> "Uribe admite que solicitó al canciller francés Bernard Kouchner no analizar temas sobre Venezuela", *El Tiempo*, 22 February 2008.

<sup>47</sup> "Sarkozy: 'Liberen a Ingrid Betancourt'", BBC Mundo, 1 April 2008.

<sup>48</sup> "EEUU apoya iniciativa creíble de canje", *El Universal*, 14 February 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Even during efforts to release the hostages by President Chávez and Senator Piedad Córdoba, the U.S. government requested the extradition of FARC member Herminso Cuevas, alias 'Mincho', on drug-trafficking charges. He was extradited on 22 September 2007.

to the FARC's request for the release of alias "Simón Trinidad" and alias "Sonia", sentenced to 60- and 17-year prison terms respectively in the U.S.,<sup>50</sup> in return for the release of the three U.S. citizens, the State and Justice Departments have said they would be willing to consider reduced sentences only once the hostages are released.<sup>51</sup> The initial interest shown by Democratic members of the Congress to meet with Chávez and serve as facilitators for the release of the three U.S. captives has subsided, following the allegations of Chávez-FARC links on Reyes's computer.<sup>52</sup>

### III. TOWARDS A MILITARY VICTORY?

Recent successful military strikes against the FARC leadership and other signs of rebel weakness have led government and security force officials to claim Colombia was nearing "the end of the end" of the FARC.<sup>53</sup> The government states that it intends to continue and even increase the military pressure so as to force the FARC to the negotiating table.<sup>54</sup> It also asserts a willingness to use the Justice and Peace Law as the legal framework for removing the FARC from the battlefield, which implies FARC leaders could expect to serve no more than eight years in jail.<sup>55</sup> However, Uribe clearly hopes for an outright military defeat of the FARC and its surrender under circumstances much different than those which accompanied the disarming and demobilisation of the paramilitary AUC. The AUC, though formally considered an illegal armed group guilty of atrocities

and drug trafficking, viewed itself as an ally of the armed forces against the insurgents and received direct, if illegal, help from some security agencies.

Sustained government military offensives since 2002 are starting to produce tangible results.<sup>56</sup> While initial operations forced the FARC into a "strategic retreat" and prevented it from launching larger attacks and accumulating forces,<sup>57</sup> the government believes its recent attacks are prompting internal collapse. The unprecedented death of two members of the FARC Secretariat, Reyes on 1 March and Iván Ríos on 7 March, are milestones in the long conflict. These deaths were preceded by strikes against other important commanders, resulting in the deaths of "J.J." on 6 June 2007, "Negro Acacio" on 1 October 2007 and "Martin Caballero" on 24 October 2007.<sup>58</sup>

The FARC's once stable command structure is believed to be faltering. The death of Ríos at the hands of his own men is a clear reflection of the loss in internal cohesion. Moreover, security force sources say that the lack of internal communication due to military pressure and technical surveillance<sup>59</sup> and the increasing demobilisation of experienced mid-level commanders are also affecting

---

<sup>50</sup> "Reyes: Simón como Sonia son parte sustancial del canje", ANNCOL, 11 February 2007. On 4 and 30 October 2007, Senator Piedad Cordoba met with Sonia and Simón Trinidad respectively. Allegedly both agreed not to become stumbling blocks for the swap. Piedad Cordoba, "Informe de Gestion Sobre Acuerdo Humanitario", 28 November 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interviews, foreign observer, Bogotá, 8 February 2008 and source involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 11 February 2008.

<sup>52</sup> The U.S. government had sent emissaries to facilitate the release of the U.S. citizens, Crisis Group interview, source involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 8 February 2008.

<sup>53</sup> "Estamos en el fin del fin, dice el general Freddy Padilla, comandante de las Fuerzas Militares", *Revista Credencial*, 6 July 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, former peace adviser, Bogotá, 19 February 2008. Crisis Group interview, source involved in efforts to achieve a swap, Bogotá, 11 February 2007. Crisis Group interview, expert on FARC, Bogotá, 8 February 2008.

<sup>55</sup> The Justice and Peace Law was passed initially to provide a framework for dealing with the demobilisation of the right-wing paramilitaries.

---

<sup>56</sup> After Operation Libertad I and II in Cundinamarca in 2002 and 2003, Operation Jorge Mora in Putumayo in 2004, and Plan Patriota launched in 2004 focusing on south eastern departments with large FARC presence, the government launched large offensives in Guaviare department in 2007 and is now moving towards Vaupés department. Crisis Group interview, security expert, Bogotá, 20 February 2007. In order to continue operations and maintain territorial control, the new consolidation policy envisions an increase of over 14,500 men for the army, over 2,400 for the navy, over 20,000 police officers and over 850 for the air force. "Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática: Fortalecimiento de las Capacidades del Sector Defensa y Seguridad", Departamento Nacional de Planeación – CONPES, 26 February 2007.

<sup>57</sup> The FARC went into a strategic retreat as security forces began launching large and sustained offensives. The insurgents moved from areas close to urban centres to more secluded rural ones, seeking to regroup and undertake isolated attacks. In general, the FARC has gone from a war of movement, in which large blocks launched attacks and consolidated territory, to more traditional guerrilla warfare, employing hit-and-run tactics in smaller groups.

<sup>58</sup> "J.J." was the leader of the Manuel Cepeda Vargas urban front; "Negro Acacio" was leader of the 16<sup>th</sup> front, operating in Vichada; and "Martin Caballero" was leader of the 37<sup>th</sup> front.

<sup>59</sup> The assassination of eleven regional deputies held hostage on 18 June 2007 and the announcement of the release of Clara Rojas's son Emmanuel while he was no longer captive are cited as recent cases of command and control failures. Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, Bogotá, 22 February 2008.

the chain of command.<sup>60</sup> As morale crumbles, government officials believe, political and ideological fissures will widen within the FARC leadership,<sup>61</sup> prompting power struggles which could lead the organisation to slowly fracture or even implode.<sup>62</sup>

According to security force sources, the FARC is also increasingly less operational. Government estimates show it going from more than 18,900 fighters in 2002 to between 9,000 and 11,000 in 2007, with only ten of its 71 fronts and units regularly active.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, financing is increasingly weak, even in areas where fronts have traditionally had a strong cash flow such as Norte de Santander and Guaviare departments.<sup>64</sup> Intelligence sources believe the FARC is present in only 50 per cent of the areas where coca is grown today, compared to 70 per cent of such areas in 2002. This represents an important reduction in its control over the drug trafficking operations which continue to be its primary source of income.<sup>65</sup>

The government is confident its security consolidation policy, launched in 2007, will prevent any possibility of a FARC resurgence. While improvements in air power, special forces, intelligence and security force coordination have allowed the government to deal strong blows to the

rebels,<sup>66</sup> officials know that advances in security will only be temporary if they cannot consolidate their control of territory.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the new policy focuses on expanding the presence of security forces in remote areas, in order to provide a foundation for civilian state institutions and integrated social investment programs, including rural infrastructure investment and economic alternatives to coca cultivation and reestablishment of the rule of law.<sup>68</sup> A case in point is the adjustment made in the allocation of U.S. Plan Colombia funding,<sup>69</sup> which is to provide more resources for such purposes so that it can be expanded well beyond the current objective of some 250 rural districts (*corregimientos*).<sup>70</sup>

There is reason to believe that the FARC is still capable to a degree of adapting and resisting, at least in the short to medium term. As Raúl Reyes said during an interview shortly before his death, “our fighters have learned from this confrontation and have acquired higher knowledge.... We learn from experience”.<sup>71</sup> Military pressure has forced its units to become smaller and less visible, favouring groups between three and twelve fighters sometimes dressed in plain clothes to avoid detection. Unable to carry out large strikes, units

---

<sup>60</sup> The average time spent in the organisation by demobilised fighters has risen from thirteen years in 2002 to twenty years in 2007. Crisis Group interview, high government official, Bogotá, 27 February 2008. In early 2007 the defence ministry established a special working group made up of former combatants and intelligence officers, charged with contacting mid-level commanders and inciting them to desert. Crisis Group interview, demobilised fighter, Bogotá, 18 February 2008.

<sup>61</sup> According to intelligence sources, there have been arguments between the orthodox communists and those supporting a Bolivarian ideology like that followed by President Chávez in Venezuela, Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, Bogotá, 26 February 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, demobilised fighter, Bogotá, 18 February 2008 and congressman, Bogotá, 19 February 2008.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, Bogotá, 22 February 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security expert, Bogotá, 20 February 2008 and high government official, Bogotá, 27 February 2008. A senior Colombian government official has indicated that there is information the FARC in some areas has been forced to give promissory notes for future payments (“bonos”) to coca farmers because of cash flow problems, Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 17 April 2008.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, Bogotá, 22 February 2008. Government estimates show FARC revenues have dropped from over \$1.3 billion in 2002 to roughly \$500 million in 2007. “Tendencias y resultados 2007”, Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 28 January 2008.

---

<sup>66</sup> Since early 2007, intelligence officers have received training from Israeli advisers on how to better extract operational information from demobilised fighters. British advisors are also providing assistance to intelligence agencies. Crisis Group interview, international observer, Bogotá, 8 February 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, high government official, Bogotá, 27 February 2008.

<sup>68</sup> Some of the specific goals of the consolidation policy between 2006 and 2010 include: an increase in the number of police stations in rural districts from 51 to 251 by 2010; promotion of 10,000 desertions from illegal armed groups; reduction in the number of kidnappings for extortion purposes by 13.4 per cent every year; and reduction in terrorist attacks by 8.2 per cent every year. “Metas del Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2006-2010”, Departamento Nacional de Planeación, December 2007. The consolidation policy also outlines implementation of the Integral Action Doctrine (DAI), which attempts to coordinate action between security forces and other state institutions. In order to carry out the doctrine, the government has established the Integral Action Coordination Centre (CCAI), under the president’s office, to draw together action between fourteen state institutions at the municipal level. While lacking a legal basis and proper institutional framework, it currently targets 51 municipalities and plans to expand to ten more. As a complement to CCAI, the government is also seeking to establish Regional Management Centres. The first pilot project for this regional strategy is in six municipalities in Meta department.

<sup>69</sup> See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°26, *Latin American Drugs II: Improving Policy and Reducing Harm*, 14 March 2008, pp. 4-5; 16-18.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5, 16-18.

<sup>71</sup> “FARC: factible, cita entre Chávez y Marulanda”, *La Jornada*, 5 September 2007.



have specialised in the use of landmines and explosives, attacks by snipers and selective killings (*plan pistola*) against specific police and military targets.<sup>72</sup> The FARC is also undertaking more intelligence operations, managing to infiltrate armed force commands to obtain classified information.<sup>73</sup> To compensate for losses, it has also started reinforcing its rural fronts with its urban militia.<sup>74</sup>

The FARC also appears to be modifying its long-term military strategy. In a recent message to the troops, High Commander Marulanda called for a “general offensive” against the government.<sup>75</sup> Intelligence sources believe this new strategy will try to regain legitimacy among the general rural population by avoiding harm to civilians, while focusing on high impact military targets. A series of more than five bombings in Buenaventura (Valle) and one on the police headquarters in Cali (Valle) already between January and April 2007<sup>76</sup> is believed to be a sign that certain FARC fronts began to adapt their strategy some time ago.<sup>77</sup> The call for a general offensive could also encourage a new generation of commanders to step up their military activity against the government in an attempt to gain more stature within the organisation.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, Bogotá, 22 February 2008.

<sup>73</sup> According to press sources, a computer found during a raid against a FARC camp contained the names of the officers in charge of military operations, strategic maps and the names of informants. The information was mostly military, but also involved the police and the Administrative Security Department (DAS). This classified information is believed to have been obtained from the Omega Task Force, the main group behind the successful operations in the south and south western territories against the FARC’s strongholds. “Infiltrado el Corazón de las fuerzas militares”, *Semana*, 28 July 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, Bogotá, 26 February 2008.

<sup>75</sup> “Saludo de Manuel Marulanda Velez Comandante en jefe de las FARC”, FARC-EP, 3 January 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, Bogotá, 22 February 2008.

<sup>77</sup> According to intelligence reports, there was a movement of over 1,500 insurgents in the central and western mountain ranges and the Pacific Coast in an effort to surround Cali. The purpose was to ensure a strategic corridor to the Pacific, mainly for drug trafficking. “¿Por qué está fallando la estrategia de la seguridad democrática en el Valle?” *Semana*, 10 April 2007. Between April and June 2007, the departments most affected by attacks against the public forces were Valle del Cauca and Nariño. In Valle attacks increased from fourteen during the same period in 2006 to 28 in 2007, with Buenaventura being the most critical area. “Boletín No. 17 – Informe Especial”, Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, 2 August 2007, pp. 51-52.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, congressman, Bogotá, 19 February 2008.

The government is also concerned that in reaction to military pressure and diplomatic tensions, the FARC will increasingly try to take refuge across the Venezuelan border.<sup>79</sup> An even larger Venezuelan sanctuary would be of great benefit to the insurgents, and Chávez’s national security policy, which is built around the possibility of an “asymmetric war” with external actors, particularly the U.S.,<sup>80</sup> might envisage the FARC as an additional “protective layer” in case of an attack against Venezuela.<sup>81</sup>

The dilemma posed by the presence of the FARC along the borders became further apparent following the attack on Reyes’s camp in Ecuador. While that strike dealt an unprecedented blow to the insurgents, it prompted the most serious diplomatic and political crisis between Colombia and Venezuela and Ecuador in many years. Chávez broke relations and ordered tanks and fighter aircraft to the border.<sup>82</sup> Ecuador (as well as Nicaragua) also severed diplomatic ties and denounced the Uribe government for violating its territory at the OAS and during the summit of the Río Group in Santo Domingo on 7 March. With U.S. support, Bogotá justified its action as self-defence against a terrorist group attacking it from neighbouring states.<sup>83</sup> But Colombia and the U.S. were isolated, as the resolutions passed by the OAS on 5 March 2008, the Río Group on 7 March and OAS foreign ministers on 17 March showed. The main thrust of those resolutions was unequivocally “to reject the incursion by Colombian military forces and police personnel ... [as] a clear violation of Articles 19 and 21 of the OAS Charter” and to require “the full apology” and “pledge by Colombia” that the attacks “would not be repeated under any circumstances”.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interview, high government official, Bogotá, 27 February 2008.

<sup>80</sup> Chávez has established new armed bodies such as the National Reserve and the Territorial Guard to protect the nation in case of invasion. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°19, *Venezuela: Hugo Chavez’s Revolution*, 22 February 2007, pp. 17-18.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bogotá, 27 February 2008.

<sup>82</sup> Only some 1,500 soldiers actually reached the border. Venezuela’s modern Russian-built fighter aircraft are still not operational, in particular because the pilots are still in training and so could not be deployed. Crisis Group interview, European analyst, Caracas, 3 April 2008.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior U.S. embassy and Colombian government officials, Bogotá, 4 April 2008.

<sup>84</sup> “Resolution of the Twenty-fifth meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs”, OEA/SER.F/II.25 RC.25/RES.1/08, 18 March 2008. The U.S., despite joining in the unanimous approval, dissented from the paragraph which condemned Colombia’s incursion into Ecuador, asserting that

The Uribe administration has used documents in Reyes's computer indicating cooperation between members of the Chávez and (less clear-cut) Correa governments and the FARC to press neighbouring states to comply with international provisions against harbouring terrorist groups. The final resolution adopted by the OAS asserted "the firm commitment of all member states to combat threats to security caused by the actions of irregular groups or criminal organisations, especially those associated with drug trafficking".<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, tensions remain with Ecuador and Venezuela, reducing the chances for the kind of cooperation along the borders that is much needed.

Venezuela announced the renewal of relations with Colombia and was credited at the final OAS session with reversing its previous bellicose stance and assisting in achieving a compromise that permitted the final resolution to be adopted unanimously. In the aftermath of the serious accusations of financial support for the FARC, the Chávez administration has announced new actions against supposed drug-trafficking landing strips on its territory, seized cocaine shipments and captured a senior Colombian-Venezuelan drug trafficker, Hermágoras González Polanco.<sup>86</sup> Reportedly, however, the U.S. is considering placing Venezuela on its list of state sponsors of terrorist groups. That would trigger significant potential sanctions against Venezuela but within the hemisphere would likely produce considerable sympathy for Chávez.<sup>87</sup>

Ecuador has not reestablished diplomatic relations and recently filed a case against Colombia at the International Court of Justice concerning aerial spraying to destroy coca crops. That case was long in preparation and is unrelated to the 1 March attack, however, and the chances for restoring some balance in bilateral ties, including greater rejection of FARC sanctuaries, appear

---

based on previous OAS and UN resolutions, Colombia's right to self-defence should also have been acknowledged.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, para 6.

<sup>86</sup> González was reputed to run the Guajira cartel in north western Colombia and was on the "U.S. wanted list". The U.S. authorities believe he had ties to the paramilitary AUC. He was born in Colombia but also holds a Venezuelan ID card. "High Level Drug Trafficking Suspect will be tried in Venezuela", *Los Angeles Times*, 11 March 2008, at [www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-gordito11mar11,1,3244908.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-gordito11mar11,1,3244908.story).

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior State Department and National Security Council officials, Washington DC, 7 April 2008; "U.S. finds possible Venezuela-FARC ties 'disturbing'", Reuters, 12 March 2008; and "Memo to Bush: Don't Accuse Chavez of backing terrorism", 13 March 2008, *Miami Herald*, at [www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N12208327.htm](http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N12208327.htm).

more promising than with Venezuela.<sup>88</sup> Correa recently stated that while he would reject Colombian or other foreign troop incursions, he also would view any renewed FARC presence as an "act of war".<sup>89</sup>

Economic and political uncertainties could also hamper Uribe's military strategy. There is concern that the simultaneous expense of high impact offensives and territorial consolidation will become excessive if there is an economic recession or more tax revenue cannot be assured. However, Colombia is expected to maintain for some time the steady economic growth it has enjoyed for the past four years, and in 2006 its congress approved an additional tax on a small number of wealthy citizens to finance the security policy. Over a four-year period (2007-2010), the new tax is estimated to produce COP \$8 trillion (around \$4 billion).<sup>90</sup> While it is uncertain whether the next U.S. administration will give Uribe the same backing as the Bush administration or instead will seek significant adjustments to Plan Colombia, these revenues could offset any major cuts, however unlikely, in Washington's assistance.<sup>91</sup>

It is standard counter-insurgency doctrine that physical control of territory can be sustained only if military action is followed by the positive benefits of a broader state presence. The Colombian armed forces have increasingly been able to achieve the former; the Uribe administration's 2007 security consolidation strategy recognised the necessity of the latter. Some 70 per cent of Colombia's peasant farmers live in poverty. Rural governance and economic infrastructure programs that benefit them would expand their options and diminish FARC drug-related revenues.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> "Ecuador Starts Action at UN World Court against aerial spraying by Colombia", 1 April 2008, [www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=26167&Cr=ecuador&Cr1=colombia](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=26167&Cr=ecuador&Cr1=colombia).

<sup>89</sup> *El Tiempo*, 18 April 2008.

<sup>90</sup> The new tax is levied on 7,400 natural persons and enterprises and amounts to 1.2 per cent of liquid assets. "El 1.2%, impuesto al patrimonio", *El País*, 16 November 2006; "Nuevas aeronaves y armas de precisión adquirirá el Ejército para guerra contra las Farc", *El Tiempo*, 14 April 2008. However, according to the comptroller general, the government should consider making this tax permanent in order to secure a stable source of income for its military spending. "La Contraloría plantea la permanencia indefinida del impuesto de guerra", *Caracol*, 2 April 2008.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, congressman, Bogotá, 17 February 2008. Crisis Group telephone interview, analyst, Bogotá/Quito, 19 March 2008. Latin America in general has not been an issue in the current U.S. presidential campaign.

<sup>92</sup> See recommendations in Crisis Group Latin America Report N°17, *Uribe's Re-election: Can the EU Help Colombia Develop a More Balanced Peace Strategy?*, 8 June 2006; Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°11, *Tougher Challenges*

In order to assure the continuation of his military strategy, Uribe also has hinted at the possibility of standing again for the presidency and has encouraged his coalition in congress to legislate his Democratic Security Policy into law. The still widening “parapolitica” scandal may complicate all Uribe legislative initiatives, however, particularly those that require more than simple majorities.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, even with assured personal and policy continuity and continued military pressure, the FARC may well not agree to negotiate without being offered political incentives, specifically government recognition of a “legitimate” armed conflict and readiness to discuss political and institutional reforms as part of a peace process.<sup>94</sup> Thus far, the government has only hinted at the possibility of discussing a constitutional assembly as part of a future agreement.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The issue of the FARC’s kidnap victims has regained a prominent place in the government’s agenda, but no real headway has been made to achieve a hostages-for-prisoners swap. The continuation of Chávez’s unofficial facilitation efforts is being exploited by the insurgents to regain some political visibility. Chávez’s efforts, however, have lost much of their force since FARC computer messages were uncovered linking the rebels and the Venezuelan government following the 1 March 2008 Colombian raid on the FARC camp in Ecuador. Recent government measures, including a decree allowing the release of imprisoned insurgents, have also proven unsuccessful. Essentially the matter is back to square one, as the FARC continues to demand and the government to reject the demilitarisation of Florida and Pradera municipalities.

Uribe’s intransigence has been reinforced by military successes. The killing of two members of the FARC secretariat and, generally, the signs of weakness shown by the rebels have led officials to claim that victory is close. With wide support for its security policy, and growing public rejection of FARC practices, the government seems confident it can force the insurgents

to surrender and demobilise, using legal mechanisms similar to those employed against the paramilitaries.<sup>95</sup>

A military strategy that is not complemented by a political strategy, however, stands a good chance of being insufficient. The FARC is already adapting to the new circumstances. It is also far less likely to trust the government’s goodwill with regard to post-demobilisation agreements than the paramilitaries were. With diplomatic tensions still high between Colombia and Ecuador and Venezuela and the consequent absence of border cooperation, the FARC’s ability to use sanctuaries presents a formidable obstacle to Uribe’s security policy. Even if the government succeeds in weakening the FARC further, it appears unlikely the insurgents would agree to negotiate without first being offered political incentives.

As a complement to its military strategy, the Colombian government should promptly design and implement a political strategy that would allow it to reestablish working relations with Ecuador and use the OAS border monitoring authority to obtain greater cooperation against FARC incursions and presence; subsequently it should seek to replicate the same mechanism with Venezuela. For humanitarian purposes and to broaden international support, it should make new efforts for a humanitarian exchange. As a first step, Uribe should consider offering the insurgents an internationally monitored demilitarisation of the Florida and Pradera municipalities (or an area of similar size) for 45 days, provided there is prior agreement the swap will occur during that period. The government should also give a clear mandate to the ad hoc group of friendly countries supporting a swap and balance Chávez’s role in it by inviting Brazil to be more active.

**Bogotá/Brussels, 29 April 2008**

---

*Ahead for Colombia’s Uribe*, 20 October 2006; and Crisis Group Report, *Latin American Drugs II*, op. cit.

<sup>93</sup> On the “parapolitica” scandal, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°20, *Colombia’s New Armed Groups*, 10 May 2007; and Crisis Group Report, *Latin American Drugs II*, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, expert on FARC, Bogotá, 11 February 2008.

---

<sup>95</sup> For background see Crisis Group Report, *Colombia’s New Armed Groups*, op. cit., pp. 22-25; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Tougher Challenges Ahead*, op. cit., pp. 5, 8.



**International Headquarters**

149 Avenue Louise, 1050 Brussels, Belgium · Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 · Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

E-mail: [brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

**New York Office**

420 Lexington Avenue, Suite 2640, New York 10170 · Tel: +1 212 813 0820 · Fax: +1 212 813 0825

E-mail: [newyork@crisisgroup.org](mailto:newyork@crisisgroup.org)

**Washington Office**

1629 K Street, Suite 450, Washington DC 20006 · Tel: +1 202 785 1601 · Fax: +1 202 785 1630

E-mail: [washington@crisisgroup.org](mailto:washington@crisisgroup.org)

**London Office**

48 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8LT · Tel: +44 20 7831 1436 · Fax: +44 20 7242 8135

E-mail: [london@crisisgroup.org](mailto:london@crisisgroup.org)

**Moscow Office**

Belomorskaya st., 14-1 - Moscow 125195 Russia · Tel/Fax: +7-495-455-9798

E-mail: [moscow@crisisgroup.org](mailto:moscow@crisisgroup.org)

**Regional Offices and Field Representation**

Crisis Group also operates from some 27 different locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

See [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) for details.

---

---