

Backgrounders

FARC, ELN: Colombia's Left-Wing Guerrillas

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Introduction

Civil conflict in Colombia, one of the United States' closest allies in Latin America, has left as many as [220,000 dead \(PDF\)](#) and 5.7 million displaced over the last half century. Territorial disputes among the military, left-wing guerrillas, and right-wing paramilitaries have wracked much of the country's rural areas even as Colombia's economy has [surged](#) (in 2014, its economy was poised to grow 5 percent) and [overall violence](#) has fallen. Renewed talks between the government and the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) may end the hemisphere's longest-running armed conflict.

History and Ideology

The FARC and ELN were founded in 1960s in the wake of more than a decade of political violence in Colombia, known as *La Violencia* (1948–58). Excluded from a power-sharing agreement that ended the fighting, communist guerillas took up arms against the government. FARC was composed of communist militants and peasant self-defense groups, and the ELN's ranks were dominated by students, Catholic radicals, and left-wing intellectuals hoping to replicate Fidel Castro's communist revolution in Cuba. Right-wing paramilitary groups formed in the late 1960s after the Colombian Congress passed legislation that allowed citizens to form local self-defense organizations. The largest paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, was on the U.S. State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations until July 2014 (the group formally disbanded in 2006, but splinter groups remain).

Although some say the ELN is more ideological than the FARC, the two groups have similar programs. Both oppose U.S. influence in Colombia, the privatization of natural resources, and rightist violence, and claim to represent the rural poor against Colombia's wealthy. The FARC is primarily a rural organization while the ELN's supporters tend to be in urban areas. In some parts of the country they cooperate; in others they have clashed directly. Both are [designated](#) by the State Department as foreign terrorist organizations.

"The FARC is the critical group," says [Michael Shifter](#), president of the Inter-American Dialogue, speaking of both groups' bilateral negotiations with the government. "If there's an agreement with the FARC, that would be a major advance. If there's an agreement with the ELN and not the FARC, then there's still a real problem."

The Crackdown

Both groups have been in decline since Alvaro Uribe came to office in 2002 in the wake of failed peace talks led by his predecessor, Andres Pastrana. Having campaigned on taking an aggressive stance against the guerrillas, Uribe cracked down on the FARC and ELN, and Colombian society saw [dramatic drops in violence](#). These moves boosted the Uribe administration's popularity but [human rights groups have accused \(PDF\)](#) the police of corruption and the government of collusion with right-wing paramilitaries.

The FARC had [just more than seven thousand](#) members in 2013, down from sixteen thousand in 2001, the Colombian government says. The group operated in as much as [one-third of the country in the early 2000s](#), mostly in the jungles of the south and east, but by 2014 its ranks were diminished. The ELN, which operates mainly in northeastern Colombia, is [estimated to have about 1,400 members](#), far fewer than it had in the late 1990s. The ELN has been weakened by advances by [paramilitaries](#), competition with the FARC, and more aggressive government security forces.

Financing Operations

The FARC and ELN historically generated much of their revenue from the international drug trade and ransoms from kidnappings. Estimates of the income the FARC derives from the sale of narcotics vary widely. InSight Crime, an online publication that specializes in organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, put a [conservative estimate at \\$200 million in 2012](#), while Colombian Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzon said the figure could be [as high as \\$3.5 billion](#). The U.S. government alleges the group [accounts for \(PDF\)](#) 60 percent of Colombian cocaine exported to the United States, and the U.S. Treasury has frozen the assets of several FARC members it asserts are significant narcotics traffickers. The FARC also profits from rural extortion and, more recently, from [illegal gold mining](#). The ELN's primary income source is also drug trafficking, a shift from the ransom and extortion payments that accounted for much of its funding in the 1980s and 1990s.

Kidnappings and Acts of Terror

The FARC and ELN both have histories of using [terrorism and kidnapping](#) for leverage and income. In one of its most notable kidnappings, the FARC abducted presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt in 2002. The group held her and three American military contractors until 2008, when Colombian forces rescued them and twelve other hostages. Other notable incidents include the assassination of a former culture minister in 2001 and the hijacking of a domestic commercial flight in 2002. Colombia's National Center for Historical Memory estimates that guerrilla groups kidnapped twenty-five thousand people between 1970 and 2010.

In 2012, in preparations for peace talks with the Colombian government, the [FARC renounced](#) kidnapping. The group continues to attack infrastructure projects, targeting the country's economy. A 2014 [Human Rights Watch report alleges](#) that in southwestern Colombia, the FARC perpetrates violence against civilians with impunity.

Plan Colombia and Rebels' Foreign Ties

Guerrilla and paramilitary involvement in the international drug trade has meant that outside governments—particularly the United States, the largest market for Colombian cocaine—have an interest in promoting peace and dismantling the country's trafficking networks. Between 2000 and 2011, the United States [provided more than \\$8 billion](#) in mostly military assistance through

Plan Colombia. In addition to their security alliance, the United States and Colombia have close economic ties: the United States is Colombia's largest trading partner, with a bilateral free trade agreement that entered into force in 2012.

Support from the United States has helped Colombia thwart the FARC, but these ties have led to tensions between Colombia and its neighbors—particularly the leftist governments of neighboring Venezuela and Ecuador.

During Uribe's crackdown, both the FARC and ELN sought refuge in rural areas bordering Venezuela and Ecuador. Both rebel groups frequently cross into neighboring territory to avoid Colombian military sweeps. In 2008 one of the FARC's senior leaders, [Raul Reyes, was killed](#) during Colombian airstrikes on a jungle encampment on the Ecuadorian side of the border.

Following Reyes's death in 2008, the Colombian military claimed to have found documents that indicated Venezuela and Ecuador were providing material support to the FARC. According to these documents, Venezuelan President Hugo [Chavez gave the group \\$300 million](#). Venezuela denied the allegations and said the funds were to secure the release of hostages.

In 2009 the *New York Times* [reported](#) continued contact between the rebel group and high-ranking officials in the Venezuelan military and intelligence services. Tensions peaked in November 2009 when Chavez mobilized troops at the border, accusing Colombia of conspiring with the United States to attack Venezuela. When Santos took office in 2010, both he and Chavez [agreed to "turn a new page"](#) in the countries' relationship.

Despite such tensions, Chavez facilitated communication between the Colombian government and the FARC, particularly between 2007 and his death in 2013. He [helped secure the release](#) of two hostages in 2008 and was involved in talks with the FARC that laid the groundwork for negotiations with the Colombian government.

Prospects for Peace

The Colombian government has held intermittent peace talks with the FARC and ELN since the 1980s. The groups have been sufficiently weakened that they are now willing to negotiate with the government. The current talks began between the FARC rebels and the Santos administration began in secret in 2010 and were made public in 2012 in Havana. The governments of Cuba, Norway, Venezuela, and Chile are acting as hosts, [mediators, and observers to the talks](#). The negotiations have a five-point agenda:

- land reform,
- political participation,
- drug trafficking,
- victims' rights and reparations, and
- disarmament of the rebels and implementation of the peace deal.

The two sides have been able to reach draft agreements [on the first three points](#), but victims' rights and the group's disarmament have proven more complicated. "They are now involved in one

of the trickiest issues, focusing on the rights of victims, which necessarily touches onto questions of transitional justice and how much impunity or prosecution [to pursue], which is one of the most emotionally difficult and visceral issues for the public," says [Cynthia Arnson](#), director of the Latin American program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Both sides have acknowledged committing human rights violations and have agreed that victims have a right to "[truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees that violations will not be repeated \(PDF\)](#)". However negotiators are struggling to define who should be considered victims (6.7 million people have registered as victims of parties to the conflict) and agree on how to bring perpetrators to justice.

The purpose of the talks is "not to humiliate the FARC but to persuade the guerrillas to swap their guns for votes."—Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos

One of the central principles of the negotiations is that "[nothing is agreed until everything is agreed](#)"; there will be no partial application of the accords. Santos has also refused to implement a cease-fire during the talks, saying that doing so would create an incentive for the insurgent group to prolong the process. If an agreement is reached, Santos has said, he will put the terms before a popular referendum.

Santos's reelection was widely seen as a vote in favor of continuing the talks. But [rebel attacks on Colombia's oil infrastructure](#) in July 2014 and the capture of army [General Ruben Dario Alzate](#) in November threatened to jeopardize progress. Public confidence in the talks dropped slightly following the infrastructure attack, and Santos suspended negotiations following Alzate's abduction. However, when FARC announced plans to release the general, Santos said he would resume negotiations.

Santos, who modeled elements of the negotiations on the UK–Irish Republican Army peace negotiations in the 1990s, told the Guardian that the purpose of the talks is "not to humiliate the FARC but to persuade the guerrillas to [swap their guns for votes](#)." Some observers have cited the example of the M-19 movement, a Colombian guerilla organization that in the late 1980s became a nonviolent political party. (It later disbanded, and its members joined other left-leaning political parties.)

A truce could bring about major changes in Colombia; rural development and reintegration programs for both victims and rebels are expected to be part of any settlement. Santos has called for a "[Marshall Plan](#)" for Colombia, appealing for international support to finance rural redevelopment, whose costs lawmakers estimate could run at least \$45 million over the next ten years. Even if a peace referendum is passed, rebuilding Colombia's countryside may produce challenges of its own. Says Arnson, "I would not underestimate the difficulties in implementation—in terms of violence and in terms of implementing all the terms that have been subscribed to."

Additional Resources

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos outlines his peace plan [in this September 2014 address](#).

This *Washington Post* article explains how the Colombian government [weakened the FARC](#).

The U.S. [State Department Fact Sheet](#) explains U.S.-Colombian ties.

The National Center for Historic Memory's report [iBasta Ya! \(PDF\)](#) (Enough Already!) chronicles Colombia's decades of civil conflict. (In Spanish).

Bogotá-based reporter John Otis assesses the FARC's current role in illegal drug production, taxing, and trafficking in this [Wilson Center report \(PDF\)](#).

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