The FARC, the Peace Process and the Potential Criminalisation of the Guerrillas

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1. Executive Summary

Once again the possibility of ending nearly 50 years of civil conflict is being dangled before Colombia. While the vast majority of the Colombian public want to see peace, for themselves and especially for their children, the enemies of the peace negotiations appear to be strong, and the risks inherent in the peace process are high.

As soon as he took office in August 2010, President Juan Manuel Santos began to explore the possibility of peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In August 2012, he announced to the nation that exploratory dialogues had been taking place with rebel representatives in Cuba. Formal negotiations began in October 2012, in the Norwegian capital of Oslo. These talks are continuing, once again in Havana, Cuba. According to the two negotiating teams, progress is being made.

President Santos has staked most, if not all, of his political capital on these negotiations. This political capital is being eroded as the civil conflict continues apace, while opponents of the process, including former President Alvaro Uribe, miss no opportunity to undermine the peace process. Public support is already beginning to wane.

The talks face herculean hurdles, as almost five decades of civil conflict have entrenched positions, polarised society and left countless victims. Even if negotiators reach an agreement, there is a very real risk that elements of the FARC will refuse to turn themselves in, or simply criminalise and keep millions of dollars, which currently fund the revolutionary struggle, for themselves. Indeed, some form of criminalisation of rebel elements is inevitable.

The FARC fund their fight through a variety of criminal activities. Unlike the Central American revolutionary struggles of the 1980s and 1990s, the FARC never received significant support from Cuba or the Soviet Union. The FARC have always been self-financing, and have turned themselves into perhaps the richest insurgent movement in the world. They have been accused of being one of the planet’s most powerful drug trafficking organisations, but this tells only part of the story.

Income from coca base, cocaine, heroin and marijuana certainly provide the rebels with a large percentage of their income. Since abandoning kidnapping for ransom (one of the government preconditions for sitting down to peace talks), the FARC have increased their extortion demands across the country and diversified their fundraising to include gold mining.

There are no reliable figures on the FARC’s annual income. However, maintaining around 8,000 armed rural fighters and an estimated 30,000 militiamen could cost up to $200 million a year. FARC earnings are believed to exceed that, although it is unlikely that all of this money ends up in the movement’s coffers. In their fundraising, the only thing that differentiates the FARC from organised crime is ideology, and the fact that profits are, for the most part, used for the rebel cause.
However, it is not the money alone that may prompt elements of the rebel army to criminalise or refuse to hand in their weapons. FARC guerrillas have status in their predominantly rural communities. While many have little to no formal education, they are respected and even revered. The idea of becoming subsistence farmers, or security guards in a city they do not know, will hold little appeal. The fighters who control the units on the ground, where the coca is grown and the gold is illegally mined, are not the political operators who could have prominent roles in a post-conflict situation. Some are barely literate and have never been to a city, but command forces, and earn huge sums of money.

With the dismantling of the Medellín, Cali and Norte del Valle Cartels, and the demobilisation of the paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), the FARC are the most powerful illegal army still standing. Should the rebels, or even elements of the group, decide to go into business for themselves, they could quickly become the most powerful criminal syndicate in Colombia.

This paper will explore three scenarios for the potential fragmentation of the FARC and the possible criminalisation of elements of the organisation.

1. The first possible fragmentation scenario is during negotiations, if elements within the FARC decide either that their interests are not being represented at peace talks or that the leadership is “selling out the organisation”. There is precedent for this, with a faction of the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación– EPL) refusing to join negotiations that ended with the demobilisation of that group in 1991.

2. The second scenario is once a peace agreement is negotiated, and could occur if certain rebel elements believe that the agreement is unsatisfactory, that it does not justify the sacrifice of those who have died in the revolutionary fight, or that continuing the armed struggle is preferable. There is a risk of this if the interests of particular units or leaders do not get addressed during talks.

3. The last scenario is once an agreement is signed, and after demobilisation of the rebel army occurs, in which elements of the FARC criminalise, returning to the same illegal activities as before, but now keeping the money for themselves. The example of the AUC post-2006 provides a solid precedent for this, with numerous cases of former paramilitaries, and even entire units, moving back into organized crime, particularly drug trafficking.

During previous peace negotiations, there was never a significant concern of FARC fragmentation. What has changed and why are the conditions different in 2013?

Part of the answer to this lies in the fact that the conditions are now more favourable for peace than they were in the past. In 1999, when the last round of peace talks were launched, the FARC were at the zenith of their power. They had inflicted a series of defeats on the Colombian military and were circling the principal cities of Bogotá, Medellín and Cali. They had moved from a traditional guerrilla war to a war of movement and, in accordance with the 1982 FARC strategic plan, they were planning to move to a war of positions, which would divide the country in two along the line of the Eastern Cordillera (Andes mountain range) and threaten Bogotá. The FARC were negotiating from a position of strength and believed that taking power by force of arms was a real possibility. They never really negotiated in earnest.
Today it is the government that has the upper hand. Indeed, it could safely be argued that the FARC have been strategically defeated by the US-backed security forces. Certainly their stated aim of overthrowing the government and imposing a socialist regime is now nothing but a pipe dream. Some analysts have insisted the rebels are now in terminal decline. Regardless of the varying interpretations of the FARC’s current position, the rebel group has just a small percentage of the territorial influence or military capacity that it boasted in 1999. President Juan Manuel Santos is negotiating from a position of strength, and even as talks progress, the military continues its campaign to consolidate territory around the country and take down guerrilla commanders.

However, it is precisely the decimation of the FARC’s leadership, particularly its more ideologically committed and politically active leaders, that has increased the risk of fragmentation and criminalisation of elements of the rebel army. Added to this is a weakening of the command structure and the breakdown of units, often into groups of less than six fighters, which inevitably has an effect on discipline. Finally, there is the existence of agreements, and perhaps even alliances, between the FARC and the new generation drug trafficking groups that emerged after the demobilisation of the AUC, known by the government as “BACRIM” (from the Spanish “bandas criminales” – criminal groups).

Since the breakdown of last peace talks and the end of the safe haven in 2002, the FARC have not been able to maintain centralised training camps and new recruits have not undergone the same military training or political education as their predecessors. High levels of desertion have shown the ideological weakness of many FARC members. All of this means that the government is presently dealing with a very different FARC to that of 1999, and even more so compared to the organisation that engaged in earlier negotiations in the 1980s and early 1990s.

There are several factors that might lead FARC units to break away or criminalise, and these will be explored in the paper:

- Lack of contact with the Secretariat or even bloc commanders
- Close relationship with the BACRIM or other criminal groups
- Presence of coca, marijuana or poppy crops in area of operation
- Involvement in drug exportation
- Location along the borders and/or near potential embarkation points for drug shipments
- Presence of illegal gold mining in area of operation
- Lack of political instruction or ideology within unit
- Lack of representation of interests by negotiators
- Poor leadership, discipline and training

There is a significant risk of elements of the FARC breaking away or criminalising. The government must be aware of this during peace negotiations, once any agreement has been signed and, even more so, should the rebel army demobilise. This risk must be analysed, steps taken to prevent the break-up of the rebels, and measures enacted to ensure any fragmentation or criminalisation does not destroy the chances of ending the nearly five decade civil conflict.
2. Scenarios of Possible FARC Fragmentation or Criminalisation

Three possible scenarios for the fragmentation and/or criminalisation of the FARC are studied in this paper. The first could occur during peace talks, the second once an agreement is reached, and the last once the group has demobilised and elements of the rebels stay in, or return to, the field, continuing with the same illicit activities in which the FARC currently engage.

There are those who argue that the FARC are already divided, and that elements have already criminalised. Military intelligence believes that of the 67-odd fronts of the rebel movement, only 15 still strictly follow the orders of the Secretariat. There may be some truth in this, although it does not mean that the other fronts have broken away from the FARC, but rather that their contact with the Secretariat is sporadic.

There are certainly many remote fronts that have not seen a member of the Secretariat for over a decade. Command and control has been greatly weakened since the end of the safe haven in February 2002 and the launching of the government’s Democratic Security Policy. The guerrillas have broken down into small units known as Tactical Combat Units (Unidades Tácticas de Combate), sometimes with as few as four fighters in each. Even in a conventional army, maintaining discipline with such small and disperse units, and such a decentralised command, would be a challenge. The inability of the FARC to concentrate in any one place for even a small period of time for fear of aerial bombardment has affected all aspects of command and control. The rebels were unable to physically gather together for their Ninth Conference in 2006, and it apparently had to be carried out virtually, using emails. These conferences are extremely important events for the FARC, as they are when appointments to the Central General Staff are made and replacement figures for the Secretariat designated. It is during these meetings that FARC doctrine and strategy are set out.

Levels of desertion also reveal a rebel army in crisis. The worst year for the FARC, in every sense, was 2008. During that year almost 3,500 guerrillas deserted, taking with them a treasure trove of intelligence on the organisation for the intelligence services to pick through. Since 2008, desertion levels have fallen significantly, with around 1,000 cases reported in 2012. One of the ways the FARC have reduced the number of desertions is to pay more attention to their recruitment, falling back on their traditional areas of influence, and recruiting people from communities, or families, with close guerrilla ties.

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3 Colombian Defence Ministry, "Logros de la Política Integral de Defensa y Seguridad para la Prosperidad", February 2013. Available at: http://www.mindefensa.gov.co/irj/portal/Mindefensa
The two-month unilateral ceasefire declared by the FARC from November 2012 to January 2013 suggests that there is still discipline, along with basic command and control of the fighters. Even the harshest critics of the ceasefire cannot deny that hostile actions by the FARC fell by more than 80 percent over the two months. The ceasefire showed that none of the seven FARC blocs or fighting divisions were openly opposed to talks and, with a few exceptions, the ceasefire was respected across the country. The department with the most violations of the ceasefire was Cauca (at least 11 major violations). This should come as no surprise. Cauca has seen the highest level of conflict over the last year, with the powerful 6th Front and the Jacobo Arenas Mobile Column carrying out sustained operations to counter the increasing deployment of Colombian security forces. Most of the “violations,” then, could be seen as defensive actions by the FARC, who were reacting to army operations. Indeed, the 6th Front released a communiqué stating that they were respecting the ceasefire, but that the army had launched “a massive military operation” against them.4

Perhaps the most worrying violations took place in Antioquia, home to the Northwestern Bloc, or Iván Ríos Bloc, where five major violations were registered during the ceasefire. Here, just two days into the truce, the 36th Front blew up two electricity pylons in a direct violation of the ceasefire, which pledged to halt attacks on infrastructure. The 36th Front later issued a communiqué admitting responsibility for the attack, but claiming that the ceasefire order had not reached the unit which carried out the action.5 Either the 36th Front was sending a message to the FARC high command (see the section “Case Study: Iván Ríos Bloc” for more details on this), or communication between FARC units in the region is extremely poor. The possibility that they had not received the order seems unlikely, as the ceasefire had been announced well before it was put into effect.

A second violation by the same bloc occurred in December 2012, when elements of the 34th Front attacked the municipal police station in Murindó, Antioquia. Some reports received by InSight Crime suggest that the attack was a distraction intended to allow a drug shipment to move through Chocó. Whatever the motivation, it was a direct and unprovoked violation of the ceasefire.

While there are varying tendencies and philosophies within the FARC, the command structure, organisation and unified leadership of the movement has been one of its greatest strengths, and has allowed it to survive 49 years with no major divisions.

At the heart of the FARC are two structures. The Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central), which has around 30 members, and the seven-man ruling body, the Secretariat. Even in the darkest days of the FARC, in 2008, when the movement’s founder, commander-in-chief and Secretariat member, Pedro Antonio Marín, alias “Manuel Marulanda”, died and two other Secretariat members were killed (Luis Edgar Devia Silva, alias “Raúl Reyes” and José Juvenal Velandia, alias “Iván Ríos”), there was no interruption in the leadership or operations of the FARC. The fallen Secretariat members were quickly replaced.

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5 El Tiempo, “Frente de Farc que voló torres dice que ‘no sabía del cese del fuego’”, 25 November 2012. Available at: http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/frente-de-farc-que-volo-torres-dice-que-no-sabia-del-cese-del-fuego_12399831-4
The chain of command within the FARC is very strong and clearly delineated (see illustration below). Not only are there clearly defined command positions at every level, with detailed responsibilities; there are also designated replacements. It is this structure that has maintained discipline within the rebel army and prevented any notable fragmentation.
However, as with any large organisation, there are internal divisions. One of the principal fractures has historically been between the military side of the organisation and the political one. Initially, when the FARC was founded, these two sides were represented by Manuel Marulanda, as the military head, and Luis Alberto Morantes, alias “Jacobo Arenas,” as the political ideologue. However after the death, through cancer, of Jacobo Arenas in 1990, and the decimation of the FARC political party, the Patriotic Union (Unión Patriótica), the military side of the organisation came to dominate. Jacobo Arenas’ successor as the lead political ideologue of the FARC was Guillermo León Sáenz Vargas, alias “Alfonso Cano”. He took over as commander-in-chief of the FARC after the death of Manuel Marulanda in 2008 and began instituting radical changes within the organisation, renewing emphasis on political work and building up militias.

Cano also sought to address another of the fault lines within the FARC: the tension between its rural peasant base and the more intellectual urban guerrillas. The latter represent the potential future of the struggle, which may lie in the urban centres where the majority of the Colombian population resides. The urban element now dominates the upper echelons of the FARC, with almost the entire Secretariat made up of educated and more urban leaders. It is also worth noting that there are different political tendencies in the FARC. There are the diehard Marxist-Leninists, who still believe in a Soviet-style communist regime, and, at the other end of the spectrum, the “Bolivarian” socialists, who see the regime of former President Hugo Chávez as a more realistic form of government.6

None of these divisions have ever been publicly exposed by senior members of the FARC. Using the Central General Staff, conferences and lively internal debate, the seven-man ruling body has always managed to avoid any major schisms, and that seems to still be the case today.

However, the FARC are certainly hurting at the moment in their command and control structure. They want the opportunity to re-establish contact with the more disconnected fronts, rotate commanders, get a grip on finances, and inform and sound out all the disparate units of the movement on their attitude to talks and any possible agreement.

These needs are driving the most pressing and constant demand of the FARC in Havana: a bilateral ceasefire.

**Scenario 1: Fragmentation during Peace Talks**

Some argue that the government is not actually talking to the entire FARC, but rather to certain elements, citing, among other things, the profile of the negotiators in Havana. Those representing the FARC are certainly not representative of the entire rebel army. Indeed, looking solely at the members of the negotiating team in Cuba, there is little to inspire confidence, especially compared to the guerrilla negotiators in 1999. The team in Havana is an overwhelmingly political one and, apart from chief negotiator Luciano Marín Arango, alias “Iván Márquez,” there are no military

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6 Interview with member of the FARC’s Bolivarian Movement, Bogota, February 12, 2013.
commanders or leaders who have any serious credibility with the fighting rank and file. The FARC tried to address this, in part, by sending Jorge Torres Victoria, alias "Pablo Catatumbo", the head of the Joint Western Command, or Alfonso Cano Bloc, to Havana in April.

Observers such as former FARC hostage Sigifredo López have interpreted the absence of representatives of the powerful Eastern and Southern Blocs at the negotiating table as evidence that these fighting divisions do not support the peace process. Lopez has stated that the government is in reality only negotiating with about 30 percent of the FARC.

There may be other explanations for the current composition of the FARC negotiating team in Havana. During the failed peace process conducted by then-president Andres Pastrana between 1999 and 2002, the negotiators were military commanders from the Eastern and Southern Blocs. However, little progress was made, and much of the drawing up of the agenda and the fine details were actually handled by some of the more politically astute members of the FARC. It may well have been determined that the current negotiations, mainly political and economic in nature, are better suited to the more highly educated, political wing of the FARC. As chief negotiator and head of the FARC's International Front, Iván Márquez has brought with him people he knows and trusts to handle the negotiations.

With the FARC's military losses over the last decade, particularly of middle-ranking commanders, the organization needs its veteran leaders in the field, to keep up morale and discipline and to coordinate the guerrillas’ much-reduced operational and military capacity. The top military leadership cannot be spared at such a crucial moment. They are needed to maintain the military pressure that is, and will continue to be, a crucial part of the negotiations for the rebels.

It could also be that the FARC are not really negotiating in earnest, and therefore do not need their heaviest hitters sitting in Havana. Historically the FARC have used peace negotiations and ceasefires to build up their military strength, organise their finances, and plan the next phase of their struggle to overthrow the state.

The FARC have taken the allegations of internal divisions seriously enough to issue a denial. FARC commander-in-chief “Timochenko” (real name Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri) released a statement in January this year denying any such divisions existed.

“There are no divisions, or anything that even looks like that”, Timochenko told the Communist Party newspaper “Voz”.7

There is a precedent for a Colombian rebel group fragmenting during peace negotiations: that of the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL). Most of this group demobilized in 1991, but a faction refused to enter talks and is active to this day, even requesting a seat at the current peace talks in Havana. This EPL faction was historically led by Francisco Caraballo, who

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7 EFE, “Jefe máximo de las FARC desmiente que haya divisiones internas por la paz”, 13 January 2013. Available at: http://www.americaeconomia.com/politica-sociedad/politica/jefe-maximo-de-las-farc-desmiente-que-haya-divisiones-internas-por-la-paz
argued that the revolutionary war could never be abandoned.⁸ (See “Case Study: The EPL and 'Megateo’” for further details).

There is no hard evidence of a division within the FARC at this point in the negotiations, and the risk of any significant elements breaking off is small. However the FARC does need to get information down to its units on the ground, as field investigation suggests that many fronts are uninformed of what is happening in Havana and that this is generating uncertainty. Many local commanders, uncertain of what may happen in the future, are beginning to look out for their own interests, building up personal war chests and hoarding cash. Should this tendency increase, the risk of fragmentation and criminalisation will increase as well.

Scenario 2: Fragmentation after a Peace Agreement is Signed

In this scenario, a peace agreement is reached with the FARC leadership and most of its membership. There is, however, a risk that some of the more remote fronts, which perhaps have not been consulted about the details of the agreement, or whose particular interests have not been addressed, will decide to continue the armed struggle. They might set themselves up as a “Real FARC” reminiscent of the dissident factions of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) – the Real and Continuity IRA – who continued their violent struggle in Northern Ireland after the Provisional IRA signed the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

The FARC still think of themselves as a principally military organisation. Giving up fighting will be a very tough proposition for many. Indeed FARC founder Marulanda told writer Arturo Álape that "a guerrilla group that does not fight has lost the reason for its existence”.⁹ Many FARC members live to fight. Unless one of the members of the Secretariat decides not to adhere to the agreement, it is likely that this sort of fragmentation would occur only with some of the more "disconnected" guerrilla units. The FARC are smart enough not to leave their more powerful and moneymaking fronts in the hands of commanders they cannot trust. Indeed there are cases of commanders of key fronts being removed, and even submitted to revolutionary justice and shot, after failing to obey orders or pay their dues to the Secretariat.

One such case may have involved Noé Suárez Rojas, alias “Grannobles”, who once commanded a powerful Interfrente, or mini-bloc, (10th, 45th, 28th and 38th Fronts, along with the Alfonso Castellanos Mobile Column) in Arauca. He had previously been sanctioned in 1999 by the FARC high command for killing three US indigenous rights activists. He was protected from harsher punishment by his brother, Víctor Julio Suárez Rojas, alias “Mono Jojoy”, the head of the FARC’s most powerful fighting division, the Eastern Bloc. Mono Jojoy was killed in an aerial bombardment in September 2010. Upon his death, Grannobles was summoned from his lair in Venezuela in 2011, amid accusations that he was not delivering money to the Secretariat, was not leading the rebels in

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combat, and was living the high life in Venezuela.\textsuperscript{10} There have been reports that he was tried in one of the FARC’s "revolutionary tribunals" and executed in January 2012.\textsuperscript{11}

If there is any significant opposition to a peace agreement, it is likely that Timochenko and the FARC Secretariat would refuse to sign, rather than allowing the FARC to break apart. The importance of the unity of command is such that it is unlikely that the guerrillas will even get to the point of signing an agreement unless they have the entire Secretariat and the vast majority of the Central General Staff on board.

**Scenario 3: Elements of the FARC Return to their Criminal Activities after any Demobilisation is Complete**

This is a strong possibility with a recent precedent in the AUC. The paramilitary army demobilised over 30,000 members, but the AUC went on to spawn over 30 new criminal structures that the government labelled the “BACRIM". Many of the BACRIM, with the exception of the Rastrojos, whose roots lay in the Norte del Valle Cartel, were formed by middle ranking paramilitary commanders, most with close ties to the areas in which they operated. These commanders had run, or been involved in, criminal activities for the AUC, and following demobilisation, went into business for themselves.

When one studies the geography of the FARC, its numbers and its criminal activities, it becomes clear that the chance of some elements of the movement going into business for themselves is quite high. This would be one of the most difficult challenges the FARC would face in the post-demobilisation period, assuming the movement sought to stay together and transform into a political force. Maintaining control of up to 8,000 fighters and 30,000 militiamen, many used to handling large quantities of cash, with very few skills that are marketable in the legal sense, will be extremely difficult.

There is another unpromising precedent seen in the case of the AUC, regarding the demobilisation legislation of the Peace and Justice Law. Even now, six years after the AUC formally demobilised, only a handful of cases have been processed by the Attorney General’s Office. The low credibility of the justice system reduces chances that it could handle the legal side of any FARC demobilisation. This in itself may drive many back into the struggle, or back towards the criminal activities they once engaged in.

Another unhappy precedent is that of the Patriotic Union. The establishment of this party in the 1980s was the FARC’s one and only incursion into mainstream politics. Two presidential candidates, eight congressman and dozens of local deputies and mayors were murdered, along with as many as 3,000 members of the political party. Should the government prove unable to protect any current members of the FARC who enter politics at a local or national level, this could prompt

\textsuperscript{10} InSight Crime interviews in Arauca (Colombia) and Venezuela, June 2011.

\textsuperscript{11} Nuevo Arco Iris, "El fin de ‘Grannobles’", 3 September 2012. Available at: http://www.arcoiris.com.co/2012/09/el-fin-de-grannobles/
many to take up arms once again. The continued killings of trade union members and those pushing for land restitution have shown that there are still elements that could derail the peace process by assassinating FARC members who come out of hiding. It would be difficult to overestimate the impact that the decimation of the Patriotic Union has had on the FARC psyche.
3. Case Study: The EPL and “Megateo”

While the demobilisation of the M-19 rebel movement is perhaps the most famous guerrilla peace deal in Colombia’s history, the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL), which demobilised in 1991, has been the largest insurgent force to make peace so far.

The EPL, formed just three years after the FARC, in 1967, was Maoist in its thinking. At its height it numbered almost 4,000 fighters and had a presence in the departments of Antioquia, César, Córdoba, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Santander and Risaralda. It signed a peace agreement on February 26, 1991, with 2,556 members turning themselves in, along with more than 800 arms.

However, the group was divided throughout the negotiation process, and a large section of the movement, under the leadership of Francisco Caraballo, refused to take part in talks. A steady desertion of EPL fighters from the radical faction that refused to surrender occurred in the lead-up to the signing of the peace agreement, and these fighters took their weapons with them.

Caraballo was arrested in June 1994, which led to the further disintegration of the EPL groups still in the field. According to analyst Camilo Echandia, there were 13 registered EPL units, comprised of some 400 fighters, in 1995, four years after the demobilisation. However, only four of these units actually registered any activity that year. One of these was the “Libardo Mora Toro” Front in Norte de Santander, formerly led by Caraballo, which is now the last active EPL force in the country. The front is currently led by Víctor Ramón Navarro, alias “Megateo”. Megateo was 15 years old when the EPL officially demobilised, and was part of the EPL’s urban divisions (militias) in San Calixto, Norte de Santander.

Historically, this EPL faction in Norte de Santander had made its money from bank robbery and kidnapping. Today the group, numbering less than 100 fighters, controls much of the coca and cocaine trade running through the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander. Megateo acts as a broker for coca base and cocaine, working with the FARC and ELN and supplying BACRIM like the Rastrojos. Megateo is now a significant player in Colombia’s drug trade and is being pursued not only by Colombian security forces, but by international law enforcement agencies.

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The relevance of the EPL peace process as a possible precedent for the FARC is not limited to the fragmentation of the group and the establishment of a “criminal” organisation like that formed by Megateo. By the end of 2011, the Colombian drug trade was dominated by former members of the EPL. The most powerful drug trafficking organisation at the time, the Rastros, was led by Javier Calle Serna, alias “Comba”, a former EPL combatant from Putumayo. He refused to demobilise in 1991 and left Putumayo for the city of Cali, where he was able to put his peculiar skill set to use as a hired assassin, working his way up the ranks of the Norte del Valle Cartel until he became the most trusted lieutenant of Wilber Varela, alias “Jabon”. He later killed Varela in Venezuela, in January 2008, and took control of the Rastros.

The Rastros’ bitter rivals, the Urabeños, have a central command populated almost entirely by ex-EPL fighters. At the end of 2011, the Urabeños’ top leader was Juan de Dios Úsuga, alias “Giovanni” (killed in January 2012 by police). Úsuga had been an EPL fighter in Urabá, along with his brother Dario Antonio, alias “Otoniel”. They had demobilised, but found that the FARC began targeting former EPL fighters and members of the EPL political party, “Esperanza, Paz y Libertad,” in the region, so they joined a new paramilitary group forming there. This group became the Peasant Self-Defence Forces of Cordoba and Urabá (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá – ACCU), the prototype paramilitary force officially constituted in 1994 that was to become the nucleus of the nationwide paramilitary army the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de

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15 See InSight Crime, “Comba Profile”. Available at: http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/javier-antonio-calle-serna-comba
Colombia – AUC. Giovanni and Otoniel, along with a large number of former EPL fighters, formed a core within the ACCU and used the skills they had learned under the EPL to fight their former allies in the FARC and the ELN.

By the end of 2011, much of the Urabeños’ top command was made up of former EPL fighters. In addition to the Úsuga brothers, there was Robert Vargas, alias "Gavilán", Francisco Morelo Peñata, alias “Negro Sarley”, Melquisedec Henao, alias “Belisario”, and Jacinto Nicolás Fuentes Germán, alias “Don Leo”. If 20 years after demobilisation the underworld was dominated by the EPL, which was only a fraction of the size of the FARC and was never that deeply involved in the drug trade, what can we expect from FARC members in the future of Colombian organised crime?

Another notable former EPL capo was Diego Murillo, alias "Don Berna", the successor of Pablo Escobar. He was a key player in the PEPES (People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar), which helped take down Escobar, and he later took over Medellin using the Oficina de Envigado, which he built into a highly sophisticated organised crime syndicate. He also became a powerful player in the AUC, taking the title of “Inspector General”. Until his extradition to the US in 2008, he was arguably one of the most powerful drug traffickers in the country.

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16 See InSight Crime, “Don Berna Profile”. Available at: http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/don-berna
4. Criminal Activities of the FARC and Rebel Earnings

The FARC engage in criminal activities to fund their struggle to overthrow the state. There is very little difference between the way they and the BACRIM raise money. The only difference is where the money goes: to fund a cause or for personal enrichment.

The FARC now have two principal streams of income. The most significant is drug trafficking. The second is extortion. After this come involvement in mining, particularly gold but also coltan, and then their legal investments in lands and businesses in their areas of influence. The finances of certain fronts were hit when the group renounced kidnapping in February 2012, one of the government’s preconditions for sitting down to peace talks. Should FARC elements break away, they could again turn to kidnapping for ransom as a means of raising revenue.

The FARC and Drug Trafficking

“I wanted to be definitive in this: no FARC unit, according to documents and decisions that govern us, can grow, process, trade, sell or consume hallucinogenic or psychotropic substances. Everything said to the contrary is propaganda.”

– FARC commander-in-chief Alfonso Cano, in an interview with the Spanish publication Público, 11 June 2011.17

Another, more recent denial of the FARC’s involvement in the drug trade came on March 17, 2013, from Ricardo González, alias “Rodrigo Granda”, one of the FARC negotiators in Havana, who said that such accusations made him laugh and insisted that “you aren’t talking to any drug traffickers here; you’re talking to an armed group.”

So the FARC continue to maintain that they are not drug traffickers, and that they simply impose a tax on all economic activities in the areas they control, among them the drug trade, which they call the “gramaje”. However, there is abundant evidence of FARC participation in every link in the drug chain, including the export and transnational level. All members of the FARC Secretariat and the Central General Staff have standing US extradition warrants on drug trafficking charges. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) does not need to build individual cases against FARC leaders; all they have to do is prove that a captured FARC leader is a member of either of these two rebel command structures and it is enough to secure a conviction for drug trafficking.18

In terms of numbers, military capacity, territorial control and earnings from the drug trade, the FARC is one of the most powerful drug trafficking syndicates in Colombia, and perhaps the world.

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18 InSight Crime interviews with US Embassy officials, Bogota, January 2013.
Most FARC fronts that operate in coca growing areas levy taxes on the coca farmers (up to $50 per kilo of coca base), and on the buyers of coca base (around $200 per kilo). Fees are also charged on drug laboratories in these areas, the transit of cocaine shipments, and the departure of flights carrying drugs. At a local level, the FARC not only charge taxes on the purchase of both coca base and cocaine, but have a monopoly on all drug transactions in their territory. Any coca farmer seeking to sell coca base without paying the FARC runs a high risk. Any buyer seeking to purchase coca base or cocaine from FARC territory without permission could be shot.

However, the involvement of several FARC fronts in the drug business goes far beyond simple protection and “taxes”. There are also fronts involved in the crystallisation of cocaine, either directly operating cocaine laboratories or subcontracting this to others under their supervision.

A kilo of coca base costs around $1,000 in Colombia. However, earnings from cocaine are significantly higher, depending where the drugs are sold. In Colombia’s interior, a kilo of cocaine (around 90 percent pure) will sell for at least $2,000. If that kilo is brought to the border, its value rises to $3,000. That kilo in a neighbouring country (Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil, Panama) is worth $4,000-$6,000. Get that kilo to Central America and it is worth $8,000-$12,000. Arrival in Mexico secures $12,000-$15,000. On the US mainland, that same kilo is worth at least $25,000, while in the United Kingdom that number reaches $60,000. The FARC are routinely moving cocaine into neighbouring countries, and there is evidence that they are also able to move shipments up to Central America, if not further afield.

There is a vast discrepancy in estimates of how much cocaine is being produced in Colombia. In 2010, the White House presented a figure of 260 metric tons. The US State Department’s International Narcotics Control Strategy Report put the number at 270 tons, while the United Nations reported 375 tons.

If one engages in some (equally) crude calculations, splitting the difference between these estimates, one can estimate that around 300 tons of cocaine are produced each year. InSight Crime actually believes this figure to be on the low side. The FARC control around 60 percent of coca crops, possibly more, according to the government. If the FARC were just charging “taxes” on coca base, the rebels would be earning $45 million a year (60 percent of 300 tons is 180 tons, multiplied by the $250 profit that the FARC earn from a kilo of coca base). Working on the premise that a decent chemist can get a kilo of cocaine from a kilo of coca base, if the FARC were dealing cocaine in-country (at $3,000 a kilo) then gross earnings would be closer to $500 million. If the FARC were exporting that same amount of cocaine to Central America, the figure would be $1.8 billion. The truth is a mixture of the above calculations. Most of the guerrilla fronts deal in coca base. A smaller percentage also handles some cocaine, while the principal drug trafficking fronts (see map) are engaged in exportation. A realistic figure of FARC earnings from the drug trade would be well over $200 million.

The FARC turned towards cocaine exportation during the failed peace process with former President Andres Pastrana (1999-2002). Key to this was the 42,000 km² safe haven or “despeje” given to the rebels, their precondition for sitting down to peace talks. This safe haven provided the perfect meeting point for the FARC, in both the legal and illegal spheres. While journalists, politicians, businessmen and international delegations made their way to the FARC “capital” San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá, arms dealers, drug traffickers, and members of other groups on international lists of terrorist organisations (Basque separatist group ETA and the Provisional IRA among them) also met behind the scenes.
During the three years of FARC occupation, the planting of coca crops tripled in the five municipalities that composed the safe haven, and international drug contacts were made. One of the best documented cases was that of Carlos Charry, alias “El Doctor”, who, apparently on orders of Eastern Bloc commander Mono Jojoy, established connections with the Arellano Félix cartel in Tijuana, Mexico in 2000. This was not an isolated incident. In November 2002, a US court accused Mono Jojoy of negotiating the delivery of 20 tons of cocaine to the Guadalajara Cartel. In 2003, the United States convicted Eugenio Vargas Perdomo, alias “Carlos Bolas”, a rebel from the 16th Front, of running a cocaine network via Suriname that swapped drugs for arms.

Since 2008, there has been a steady stream of reports of the FARC supplying Mexican cartels with drugs. There appears to be a long-established connection between the Sinaloa Cartel and the FARC’s 48th Front. The 48th Front moves large quantities of coca base and cocaine into Ecuador via the Colombian department of Putumayo. The FARC have also been traced moving cocaine shipments into Venezuela, using the 33rd, 16th and 10th Fronts. The FARC’s 57th Front, situated on both sides of Colombia’s border with Panama, also moves cocaine into Central America. In November 2012, Panamanian police clashed with FARC rebels on the border, killing one and seizing bags of cocaine. Along the Pacific coast, there have been numerous reports of the FARC loading cocaine shipments into drug submarines or semi-submersibles, most bound for Central America and Mexico. These shipments have been mainly associated with the 29th and 30th Fronts.

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21 Ibid
23 InSight Crime carried out field research in Putumayo in December 2012, investigating the drug trade and the FARC’s 48th Front.
25 InSight Crime carried out field research in northern Colombia and Panama in November and December 2012.
What is certain is that many FARC leaders have international contacts with major transnational drug trafficking organisations. They also have access to both coca base and cocaine. These connections mean millions of dollars for whoever has them, and could be used by FARC members whether they were still part of the organisation or not.
Alliances with BACRIM

Whereas in the last chapter of Colombia’s civil conflict (1997-2006), the guerrillas and the AUC paramilitaries fought for control of coca crops, the paramilitaries’ successors, the BACRIM, are not interested in fighting the guerrillas. They are more mafia structures than illegal armies, and while they still have a limited military capability, they cannot hope to take on the FARC. Instead, they want to purchase coca base and cocaine from the guerrillas and sell it to their international partners.

This is an ideal situation for the FARC. They keep control of coca producing areas, which ensures their continued influence over one of their political bases, the “cocaleros” or coca-growers, and the “raspachines”, those who harvest coca leaves. They earn pesos for their day-to-day operations by selling coca base, and occasionally cocaine, to the BACRIM and other, independent, buyers. However the purchase of weapons and munitions on the international black market requires US dollars, and the easiest way for the FARC to earn dollars is to export cocaine themselves.

There have been reports of FARC-BACRIM relationships in Antioquia, Cauca, Caquetá, Chocó, Córdoba (the army captured members of the Urabeños and an emissary from the FARC’s 58th Front together in a drug laboratory), Nariño, Norte de Santander, Meta, Putumayo, and Valle del Cauca.

There is evidence that the nature of the FARC-BACRIM relationship has gone well beyond the buying and selling of coca base. During field research in Antioquia and Córdoba, cases came to light where the BACRIM had paid for coca base not just in cash, but with supplies, which are often hard for the FARC to get in the Nudo de Paramillo, where they are essentially surrounded by the security forces and have little access to urban centres. There have been repeated allegations that the Rastrojos have supplied the FARC with arms in exchange for drugs. Military and police sources in Cauca (Antioquia) also told InSight Crime that there was evidence that certain BACRIM figures, through penetration of the security forces, were providing intelligence to the FARC

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33 RCN, “La U denuncia que en el Meta se aliaron Farc y bacrim para controlar el narcotráfico”, 15 May 2011. Available at: http://www.rcnradio.com/node/86786
34 El Colombiano, “Capturado jefe de "Los Rastrojos" que servía de enlace con las Farc”, 22 November 2010. Available at: http://www.elcolombiano.com/BancoConocimiento/C/capturado_jefe_de_os_rastrojos_que_servia_de_enlace_con_las_farc/capturado_jefe_de_los_rastrojos_que_servia_de_enlace_con_las_farc
36 InSight Crime spent seven weeks in the region in 2012.
regarding Colombian army operations. There have even been rumours of the FARC providing military training to BACRIM members.

While the FARC negotiators in Havana have denied any kind of relationship with the BACRIM, it is clear that over time certain FARC commanders have established links and even personal relationships with BACRIM leaders. The BACRIM would like nothing more than to secure access to drug crops and coca base by bringing guerrilla elements into their networks. They would be able to offer very high incentives to local rebel commanders who could guarantee them a steady supply of drugs. This means that the fronts with BACRIM contacts present a far higher risk of potential criminalisation than others. The same is the case with FARC members who have links to transnational criminal groups like the Mexican cartels. The Mexican organisations have already moved down the drug chain, seeking to remove the middlemen. They would be happy to secure a steady supply of cocaine from rebels and not have to pay the BACRIM for their brokering services.

FARC Earnings by Bloc and the Chances of Fragmentation or Criminalisation

Caribbean Bloc or Martin Caballeros Bloc

This is the weakest bloc in economic terms. Based mainly in Venezuela, it has a presence along the border in both the Cesar and La Guajira departments. Made up of the 19th, 41st and 59th Fronts, it earns money from extortion and may be involved in smuggling petrol from Venezuela to Colombia. The criminalisation of this bloc is unlikely, as it is tightly controlled by Iván Márquez and has close ties to Timochenko and to the newest member of the Secretariat, Hermilo Cabrera Díaz, alias “Bertulfo”. It also has the greatest presence at the negotiating table in Havana. In addition, it lacks access to significant criminal income and in military terms is extremely weak, perhaps able to field 300 fighters at most.

Magdalena Medio Bloc (BMM)

This is the bloc with the closest ties to the current leadership, as Timochenko led this FARC division and continues to have day-to-day control over its units in Norte de Santander. Current bloc commander Félix Antonio Muñoz Lascarro, alias “Pastor Alape”, is a close associate of Timochenko, and runs the BMM units in Sur de Bolívar, Antioquia and into Santander.

However, this bloc is deeply involved in drug trafficking, not only imposing the usual taxes on coca production in Sur de Bolívar and Norte de Santander, but also smuggling drugs into neighbouring Venezuela. Both Timochenko and Pastor Alape have long been in the sights of international law

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enforcement agencies, with the US Department of State offering up to $2.5 million for information leading to the arrest of either man.

Like the Caribbean Bloc, the BMM has a permanent presence on the Venezuelan side of the border. It is believed to work with corrupt elements in the Venezuelan security forces, both to secure logistical support (weapons, munitions and medical supplies) and to smuggle drugs. A significant percentage of the estimated 200 tons of Colombian cocaine passing into Venezuela is handled by the FARC, and some of this is delivered to corrupt elements in the Venezuelan Armed Forces, known as the “Cartel of the Suns”.39

While this bloc, and units within it, are unlikely to break away from the FARC central leadership, its control over a large amount of transnational criminal activity would offer significant opportunities for FARC members to continue in illegal activities after demobilisation. The existence of drug crops (as well as gold mines) in the BMM’s area of operations, its control of cross border smuggling routes, and its contacts with international cocaine buyers all mean that elements of this bloc are sitting on key drug trafficking real estate with all the contacts needed to operate at a high level in the drug trafficking world.

**Eastern Bloc**

The most powerful FARC bloc in terms of numbers and territory, the Eastern Bloc, has also had the most overt involvement with drug trafficking. While the current head of the Eastern Bloc, Jaime Alberto Parra Rodríguez, alias “Mauricio Jaramillo” or “El Médico”, was instrumental in the secret negotiations that led to the formal launch of peace talks last year, he retired from the process and there are currently no representatives in Havana from the FARC’s strongest fighting division.

Until the launch of the peace process with President Andres Pastrana in 1999, the Eastern Bloc was, militarily, one of the most active. However, after 2002 it adopted an increasingly lower profile and, today, despite its size and military capacity, it maintains the lowest levels of hostilities of all the blocs compared to its offensive capacity. This was the case even before Mono Jojoy, the bloc’s former commander and the FARC’s field marshal, was killed in an aerial bombardment in September 2010. The Eastern Bloc was the principal objective of the Democratic Security Policy of former President Alvaro Uribe. Its stronghold in La Macarena, in the eastern province of Meta, became the first consolidation zone for the government, and the target of the military’s first Joint Task Force.

All of this has meant that the command and control of the Eastern Bloc has been one of the hardest hit. The bloc has also effectively been divided in two, with the northern elements in the Arauca department essentially separated from the rest of the bloc ever since the guerrillas lost control of movement corridors through the department of Casanare.

This weakness in command and control, combined with a deep involvement in drug trafficking, places units within the Eastern Bloc at a higher risk of criminalisation. Under Mono Jojoy, the Eastern Bloc embraced the earnings from the drug trade. The 16th Front, in the departments of Guainía and Vichada, was one of the pioneers in exporting cocaine in bulk. Under the leadership of

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39 See InSight Crime, “Cartel de los Soles Profile.” Available at: http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-venezuela/cartel-de-los-soles
Tomás Medina Caracas, alias "Negro Acacio", the 16th Front exported up to 20 tons of cocaine a month, working with Brazilian drug trafficker Luiz Fernando da Costa, alias "Fernandinho Beira-Mar" ("Fredy Seashore"). Their partnership came to an end after Beira-Mar was arrested by the Colombian army in April 2001, in the jungles of Guainía. Under Negro Acacio, the 16th Front became the principal money-maker for the entire Eastern Bloc. Indeed, it may have become the biggest moneymaking front in the entire rebel army.

This drug trade revenue flow was halted in September 2007, when Negro Acacio was killed in an aerial bombardment along with many of the 16th Front’s senior commanders. This was a serious blow to the Eastern Bloc’s finances, but these export networks, and the running of the Frontier Commission on the borders with Venezuela and Brazil, are now being rebuilt by Élmer Mata Caviedes, alias “Albeiro Cordoba”. He is FARC aristocracy, the son of FARC founding member and former Secretariat member Noel Matta Matta-Guzmán, alias “Efraín Guzmán”, who died in 2003. Albeiro Cordoba now controls a mini-bloc, or Interfrente, made up of the 1st, 16th, 39th and 44th Fronts, and is responsible for much of the Eastern Bloc’s drug trafficking operation.

The Eastern Bloc is also home to one of the most notorious of the FARC’s drug traffickers, the former head of the 43rd Front, Gener García Molina, alias “Jhon 40”, who allegedly handled up to 100 tons of cocaine a year. Jhon 40 became synonymous with the growth of narco-culture within the FARC. He became notorious for hiring prostitutes, wearing Rolex watches and generally living the high life. For a long time he was forgiven his excesses, because he provided the FARC with a steady stream of income. However, there is evidence that in 2010 he was brought before one of the FARC’s “revolutionary tribunals” and sanctioned. Recent reports from intelligence sources suggest that he has been rehabilitated and brought back into the fold to rebuild finances by bloc commander Mauricio Jaramillo.

Due to the Eastern Bloc’s involvement in the drug trade, alliances with the BACRIM, and dispersed nature, there are some elements of the bloc that are highly vulnerable to breaking away from the movement and, perhaps, criminalising. Control of coca crops and routes into both Venezuela and Brazil, as well as contacts with the BACRIM (the remnants of the Popular Revolutionary Anti-Terrorist Army of Colombia - Ejercito Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista Colombiano - ERPAC) and Brazilian groups all feed a high risk of criminalisation in the second and third fragmentation scenarios.

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**Southern Bloc**

The second most powerful fighting division of the FARC after the Eastern Bloc, the Southern Bloc, is also without a representative at the Havana peace talks. This stands in stark contrast to the 1999 peace process, when the two top commanders of the bloc, Milton de Jesús Toncel Redondo, alias “Joaquín Gómez” and Jose Benito Cabrera Cuevas, alias “Fabián Ramírez” were lead negotiators.

These two commanders are still in charge of the Southern Bloc, and as a consequence, it is one of the best-led and most disciplined fighting divisions in the rebel army. Joaquín Gómez, who is a member of the Secretariat, was educated in the Soviet Union, and is a diehard Marxist-Leninist. He belongs to the more orthodox wing of the FARC, has a very strong military reputation within the rebel army, and would be unlikely to agree to anything other than a generous peace agreement that resolved the majority of FARC demands.

Unlike the Eastern Bloc, the Southern Bloc has continued to engage in a high number of hostilities directed against the security forces and oil infrastructure and assets.

The Southern Bloc is also deeply involved in drug trafficking. Its 48th Front, based along the border with Ecuador, handles large quantities of cocaine, and may well have direct ties to Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel, which has operatives in the Ecuadorian province of Sucumbíos.42

Despite their deep involvement in the drug trade, and their links to Mexican drug traffickers, it is not likely that elements of the Southern Bloc will break off from the movement. The greatest risk here would be in scenario two, in which the leadership of this bloc could resist an agreement if it does not satisfy the more diehard elements of the FARC. Sources close to the Southern Bloc command have stated that this FARC fighting division is continuing its long term planning and military operations, and has little interest in what is happening in Havana.43

**The Joint Western Command (Comando Conjunto de Occidente, now also called "Bloque Alfonso Cano")**

This is the FARC fighting division that is currently most active militarily, engaging in daily combat with the security forces along the Pacific coast and the Western Cordillera (Andes mountain range). Under the command of Jorge Torres Victoria, alias “Pablo Catatumbo”, who was the right-hand man of FARC commander-in-chief Alfonso Cano until his death, this bloc has access to drug crops in Cauca, Nariño, Valle del Cauca and the south of Chocó, as well as innumerable departure points along the Pacific coast. In addition to dealing in coca and cocaine, it is also believed to earn money from marijuana and heroin.

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42 InSight Crime investigations in Putumayo, Colombia, December 2012.
43 Interview in Bogota, 16 May, 2013
There are two highly prolific drug trafficking fronts in this Bloc, the 29th and the 30th. The 30th Front is based around the biggest port on the Pacific coast, Buenaventura. The 29th Front, operating in Nariño, sits astride some of the densest coca cultivations in the country. The powerful 6th Front, meanwhile, is believed to handle large quantities of marijuana, both for domestic consumption and for export to Venezuela.

This bloc is at high risk of criminalisation or fragmentation. The head of the 6th Front, Miguel Ángel Pascuas Santos, alias "Sargento Pascuas" is one of the last surviving “Marquetalians”, the rebels who were with Manuel Marulanda when the army attacked the town of Marquetalia in Tolima in 1964, giving birth to the FARC. Getting this historic and hardline figure on board with any peace agreement would be crucial. He holds legendary status in the FARC, and the 6th Front is one of the militarily most active and aggressive in all of Colombia. Should he not be won over by the agreement, the prospects of a breakaway faction forming would be greatly increased in Cauca. Due to links to drug trafficking and gold mining, it is very likely that rebel elements would criminalise in scenario three, after demobilization, in the departments of Nariño, Valle del Cauca and Cauca.

The Joint Central Command (ComandoConjunto Central, also known as “Adán Izquierdo Bloc”)

This bloc, along with the Caribbean bloc, is very weak. Leading up to the death of Alfonso Cano in November 2011, the bloc took heavy losses as the army hunted for Cano and hammered the units that were protecting him. Now the bloc is largely restricted to the south of the Tolima department, and relies almost exclusively on extortion to finance itself, although one report indicated that the 21st Front was selling marijuana to local markets.

The bloc now numbers perhaps 400 fighters. Due to the leadership of Alfonso Cano, this was traditionally one of the more ideologically committed blocs in the FARC, engaging in sustained political work with local communities in Tolima.

The Joint Central Command is unlikely to criminalise, but will certainly be looking for a generous peace agreement, one that justifies the death of Alfonso Cano and satisfies the hard core FARC fighters in the area where the movement was born in 1964. This bloc is at risk of continuing the armed struggle if it believes that a “dishonourable” peace agreement in signed with the government.

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45 El Espectador, " Policía halla enterrada una tonelada de marihuana", 6 February 2013. Available at: http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/bogota/articulo-403210-policia-halla-enterrada-una-tonelada-de-marihuana
5. Case Study: Ivan Rios Bloc

The Ivan Rios Bloc has been chosen as the case study for this paper because it is perhaps the weakest of the FARC’s divisions in terms of command and control, and therefore runs the highest risk of fragmentation and criminalisation. This bloc, also known as the Northwestern Bloc, operates mostly in the Antioquia, Córdoba and Chocó departments. It has been commanded from Venezuela by Iván Márquez (who leads the FARC negotiating team in Havana) since the death of José Juvenal Velandía, alias “Iván Ríos”, in March 2008, at the hands of his own bodyguard. Iván Márquez cut his military teeth as a front commander in Antioquia before being promoted to the Secretariat.

The day-to-day command of the bloc is in the hands of Luis Carlos Úsuga Restrepo, alias “Isaías Trujillo”, who, though having almost legendary status within the bloc, is now in his seventies and in delicate health. As a result, there is little coordination between the different fronts in this bloc, although they do maintain a high level of hostilities, mainly targeted at infrastructure and transport companies, as well as attacking army patrols with explosives.

If the ideological aspect of their activities was removed, the FARC units in the Iván Ríos Bloc could immediately become one of the most sophisticated and most powerful organised crime syndicates in the region.

Finances of the Bloc

The FARC in this region earn money from drug trafficking, extortion and gold mining. On the drug trafficking side, the FARC not only deal in coca base, selling much of this to the BACRIM (Urabeños, Rastrojos and Oficina de Envigado), but also crystallise cocaine, which they sell a percentage of to the BACRIM, and run their own export routes, principally via Panama. This latter part of the business is handled mainly by the 57th Front, which sits astride the Panamanian border.

This is the FARC bloc that earns the most from gold mining. Much of this income comes from a “tax” levied on heavy digging machinery and dredges used to extract gold by the informal, and largely illegal, gold miners. The taxes on each machine range from 3 million pesos (US$1,600) to 10 million pesos (US$5,500), depending on the amount of gold being extracted. To give an idea of the scale of illegal gold mining, in the Bajo Cauca region (between Antioquia and Cordoba) interviews with local mining associations indicated that up to 1,000 mechanical diggers were operating in nine
municipalities,\textsuperscript{49} with this machinery generating over $2 million per month in extortion payments. Though not all these mines are in FARC territory, InSight Crime estimates that the Iván Ríos Bloc makes over $3 million a month from gold mining.

\textbf{5\textsuperscript{th} Front}

This front has a presence principally in the Urabá region of Antioquia, although it also reaches into Córdoba and Chocó. Founded in 1971, it was the first FARC front in the region, and gave birth to several of the others, including the 18\textsuperscript{th}, 47\textsuperscript{th} and 58\textsuperscript{th} Fronts. This was the founding front of what is now the Iván Ríos Bloc.

\textsuperscript{49} InSight Crime carried out field research in the region for more than five weeks during 2012.
The risks of elements of this front criminalising have grown significantly recently, with the deaths of two of the front’s leaders. In August last year, alias “Valenciano” was killed in combat with the army and in February 2013, the front commander, Luis Carlos Durango, alias “Jacobo Arango” was killed in an aerial bombardment. Jacobo Arango had spent 37 years in the FARC ranks, and was one of the most respected commanders in the Iván Ríos Bloc. His death leaves a vacuum in the command structure of this bloc.

Another blow to the front occurred when security forces attacked the camp of the front’s second-in-command, María Elda Ramírez, alias “Mayerly”, who had barely escaped with her life a month before. Mayerly was apparently identified and located by undercover police agents masquerading as drug traffickers. She allegedly handled drug sales for the 5th Front, and a notebook found in her camp detailed sales of up to 800 kg of coca base a month, which generated over $1 million a month for the front.

The area in which the 5th Front operates is also one of the heartlands of the Urabeños, and the 5th Front has close ties with this BACRIM group, as well as carrying out complex business negotiations. Intelligence seized from Mayerly’s camp indicated that she had direct dealings with Dario Antonio Úsuga, alias “Otoniel”, the head of the Urabeños. It is believed that Jacobo Arango, whose family name is Úsuga, was Otoniel’s cousin, and that family middlemen facilitated business with the Urabeños. Another Úsuga in the FARC, and apparently part of the same clan, is the operational head of the Iván Ríos Bloc, Luis Carlos Úsuga Restrepo, alias “Isaías Trujillo”. Family connections with BACRIM leaders also raise the risk of criminalisation.

9th and 47th Fronts

These fronts have been all but dismantled. Situated in the southern extreme of Antioquia, where it borders the Caldas department, these fronts have been hit hard by the security forces, and their leadership has either been killed or has deserted. Gabriel Arcángel Galvis Montoya, alias “Eliécer”, the 9th Front’s second-in-command, was killed in July 2012. The 47th Front never recovered from the desertion of its commander, Elda Neyis Mosquera García, alias “Karina”, in May 2008. The FARC

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do have ambitions to retake the area once dominated by these two fronts, but so far have had little success.\textsuperscript{55}

18\textsuperscript{th} Front

This is probably the strongest front, in military and political terms, in the Iván Ríos Bloc, with around 250 fighters and at least 300 militiamen. It is led by Alfredo Alarcón Machado, alias “Román Ruiz”, perhaps the most politically active commander in the entire bloc. Despite enduring constant security force offensives, by not one but two military Joint Task Forces, the 18\textsuperscript{th} Front is still relatively intact, perched in its mountain eyrie of the Nudo de Paramillo.

This front makes its money from the sale of coca base and from extortion, principally of gold mining. It is very active militarily, and is conducting a constant harassment campaign to inhibit the construction of a hydroelectric dam in Ituango, one of the municipalities it dominates.

The front has links to the BACRIM, selling coca base to Rafael Alvarez Piñeda, alias “Chepe,” the leader of the Paisas, who now works with the Urabeños.66 This connection has existed for many years, and intelligence sources indicate that the relationship between Chepe and the FARC is a strong one. However, there have also been clashes between the FARC and other Urabeños factions in Córdoba, making it appear that no comprehensive agreement with the Urabeños high command exists.

Should Román Ruiz die or be killed in combat, it would be a serious blow to the ideological component of the Iván Ríos Bloc. It is Ruiz who runs the regional elements of the Clandestine Communist Party of Colombia (PC3), the FARC’s clandestine political network, which apparently reaches all the way into the city of Medellin.

34th Front

This front was founded and led by Isaías Trujillo, but he was promoted to operational head of the bloc, and Ancízar García Ospina, alias “Pedro Baracutado”, now commands it. The front once numbered over 400 members, but current estimates put its strength at around 150. While it still operates in western Antioquia, its main strength is now hidden deep in the jungles of Chocó. It makes money from drug trafficking, arms smuggling, extortion and illegal mining. This was one of the fronts that openly violated the FARC’s two-month ceasefire, declared between November 2012 and January 20, 2013. According to police, there were at least three blatant violations of the truce during December 2012 by this front alone.57 One source told InSight Crime that an attack on the police station in Murindó in December was intended to distract security forces from the movement of a drug shipment on its way to a departure point in Chocó.

There are elements of three BACRIM operating in Chocó: the Urabeños, Rastrojos and Renacer. There is no hard evidence of a relationship between the 34th Front and these groups, but nor are there any reports of clashes, which suggests that at the very least there are territorial agreements between them to avoid conflict.

The 34th Front maintains a steady stream of attacks on the security forces and has managed to impose an armed stoppage on the road linking Antioquia and Chocó, preventing any movement. In March 2013, the front attacked police protecting a land restitution commission, suggesting that the rebels may have seized land in the region. Security force presence is weak in Chocó and criminal activity (drugs, gold, arms smuggling and illegal timber) rife. The presence of multiple BACRIM and transnational criminal groups makes criminalisation here very likely in scenario three (after demobilisation).

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56 See InSight Crime “Chepe Profile”. Available at: http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/rafael-alvarez-pineda-chepe

This is perhaps the most active front in the Iván Ríos Bloc, and may lead the entire FARC in the use of explosives. Under the leadership of Ovidio Antonio Mesa Ospina, alias “Anderson”, this front has conducted a constant campaign against electricity infrastructure, transport companies and the security forces. Anderson has had a chequered past with the FARC, almost being shot by a “revolutionary tribunal” in 2002, after his girlfriend was killed in combat and he turned to drink. He was previously a fighter in the Aurelio Rodríguez Front. However, Iván Ríos saw his potential, and moved him into the 36th Front, where he became indispensable, taking over its leadership in 2003. Under Anderson, the 36th Front has become a pioneer in the use of explosives. These improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are used not only against infrastructure targets, but against military foot patrols and even vehicles. Anderson is not known to be very active politically, and does not get on well with the political chief of the front, alias “Olmedo”.

Anderson is not a member of the general staff of the Iván Ríos Bloc, which means that, despite turning the 36th Front into the most belligerent and one of the richest units in the bloc, he is still only a junior commander. Local sources in the municipality of Anorí suggested to InSight Crime that the first violation of the FARC ceasefire in November 2012, when the 36th Front blew up two electricity pylons, was a message from Anderson to the Secretariat, warning them to pay attention to him. Anderson is the perfect example of how difficult it could be to bring certain field commanders into the legal sphere. He does not have a senior position in the FARC hierarchy and is not well educated or political, meaning he would have few legal opportunities in any post-conflict scenario. However, he does command a large number of fighters, have close relations with local communities, earn a great deal of money, and may even have contacts with Mexican cartels.

The 36th Front earns money from gold mining, extortion and coca base. Field research in the municipalities where the 36th Front is active suggests that Anderson earns $350,000 a month from gold mining, another $150,000 from extortion and at least $200,000 from the drug trade, principally the sale of coca base. That is $700,000 a month for a front that numbers just over 100 fighters and up to 600 militiamen.

Anderson, then, has a great deal of money to play with, does not appear especially ideological in his outlook, and feels neglected by the FARC high command. All of these factors indicate a risk of criminalisation.

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58 InSight Crime interview with Colonel Diego Luis Villegas Muñoz, Commander of 25th Mobile Brigade, 6 September 2012, Tarazá, Antioquia.
Mario Vélez

This was initially a Mobile Column and offensive unit for the Iván Ríos Bloc. However, due to a lack of coherent command within the bloc, the Mario Vélez has become just another front, based around the municipalities of Cáceres and Valdivia in Antioquia. It makes its money from coca base and extortion, again principally from the illegal gold mines. It is led by Duberney Tuberquia, alias “Remorado,” whose partner is the daughter of Isaías Trujillo, and it has around 70 fighters. It sells coca base to the BACRIM. This front works very closely with Anderson of the 36th Front and might well follow his lead if required to make a decision on how to respond to a peace deal.

57th Front

The 57th is one of the FARC’s richest units. It sits astride the border with Panama, has access to both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, and runs cocaine directly to Mexican cartels. Military intelligence intercepts reveal constant radio traffic between the fronts in the northern case study area and the 57th in Chocó, clearly indicating that they are intimately linked in the interests of the drug trade. While coca base travels towards the 57th, arms and munitions move in the opposite direction towards Bajo Cauca.59

This front is led by Gilberto de Jesus Torres, alias “El Becerro”, who handles much of the Bloc’s drug trafficking. Sources in Panama stated that El Becerro is believed to spend most of his time on the Panamanian side of the border and even stays occasionally in Panama City, which has long been a negotiating centre for FARC drug deals (Anayibe Rojas Valderrama, alias “Sonia”, used Panama City to finalize deals.60 She was extradited to the US and convicted of drug trafficking in 2004).

El Becerro has long had an agreement with the Urabeños, forged by their first leader Daniel Rendón Herrera, alias "Don Mario” (arrested in April 2009). This agreement is believed to include not only delineation of territory and movement of drug consignments, but may also include pooling drug shipments. There are no reliable estimates on the earnings of this front, but InSight Crime estimates them to be very high, over $50 million a year. This front is believed to have international drug trafficking connections, including with Mexican cartels, and is not very active militarily. This group could easily criminalise if the right conditions presented themselves.

58th Front

The 58th Front operates where the Nudo de Paramillo drops into Córdoba. It has 120 fighters. Its leader is Jhoverman Sánchez, alias “Manteco,” an aggressive military commander who does not look

59 InSight Crime interviews with military officials, Tarazá, Antioquia, 6 September 2012.
60 InSight Crime conducted interviews in Panama City in December 2012.
for agreements with his BACRIM counterparts. This front has traditionally fought the hardest with the Urabeños and their AUC predecessors. Sustained battles have taken place between this front and the Urabeños in the Tierralta municipality in Cordoba.\(^6\)

While this front does not appear to be very politically active, Manteco hates the BACRIM and would not be interested in any alliance with them, no matter what the financial benefits might be. This front is not a rich one, but does earn money from coca crops and extortion. This front is not at high risk of criminalisation, though this could change if Manteco were to be killed.

**Aurelio Rodriguez Front**

Once based in Risaralda, this is another front that has been driven into the jungle of Chocó and much weakened. Led by Martin Cruz Vega, alias "Rubin Morro", for whom the government recently offered a 425 million peso (US$ 230,000) bounty,\(^6\) this front numbers perhaps 60 fighters, down from over 200. Rubin Morro is a member of the Bloc's General Staff and is one of the more senior commanders in the Iván Ríos Bloc. He is from the more traditional wing of the FARC and likely to remain loyal to any decisions made by the Secretariat.

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\(^6\) InSight Crime field research, Cordoba, October 2012.

\(^6\) *El Espectador*, "Millonarias recompensas por cabecillas de las Farc en Chocó", February 1, 2013.

http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/articulo-402428-millonarias-recompensas-cabecillas-de-farc-choco
6. Conclusions

While there is no doubt that the FARC have only a tenuous control over some of their more remote fronts, there is no evidence of any overt dissident faction within the movement at the moment. The two-month unilateral truce revealed that most of the units in the FARC are adhering to the orders of the Secretariat. The Eastern and Southern Blocs, where allegations of inconformity have been strongest, were the two blocs which most respected the truce. Likewise, almost all guerrilla units have obeyed the Secretariat's demands to halt the practice of kidnapping, despite the corresponding financial losses suffered by many fronts.

There is little risk of the FARC fragmenting, or criminalising more than they already have, during peace talks. There is urgency on the part of the Secretariat for a bilateral ceasefire, so that they can put their house in order, speak to all the local commanders, impose discipline on the more autonomous fronts, and ensure that all the key positions are filled by trusted commanders.

The ongoing policy of the Colombian armed forces to kill “high-value targets” increases the risk of fragmentation/criminalisation. As the older, more ideologically committed FARC commanders are killed, the likelihood increases that discipline will break down. The new generation of guerrillas, recruited after the ending of the safe haven in 2002, have had much less ideological formation, much less contact with the higher echelons of the movement, and much less training. This generation is now reaching a point where they could become replacements not only for column commanders, but even front commanders in certain areas.

If the FARC are not given a chance to resolve current issues, and lose yet more high profile and ideological leaders, then the risk of fragmentation and/or criminalisation becomes higher in the second scenario, once a peace agreement is reached. The negotiators currently in Havana are not of sufficiently high, or military, profile to sell any deal to the rank-and-file on their own.

The risk of FARC elements criminalising in scenario three, once an agreement has been signed and demobilisation has occurred, is very high, even almost inevitable. The only way to minimise this is to aid the FARC in its transition from an irregular army to a political party. This must involve ensuring it has the ability to employ many of its fighters and supporting the movement during the immediate post-conflict period.

There is, perhaps, also a misconception about the pressure on the rebels to sign a peace agreement. There can be no doubt that their 1982 “Strategic Plan for the Taking of Power” is now impossible to achieve. The possibility of moving once again from a traditional guerrilla war to a war of movement is extremely remote, unless the FARC can gain enough anti-aircraft missiles to neutralise the state’s
greatest advantage: its air power. There have been indications that the FARC have bought some missiles, but not enough to alter the strategic balance.

However, an outright military defeat of the FARC, as in the case of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, is also unlikely. While the Tamil Tigers were a far more innovative rebel group, their geographical room for manoeuvre (Sri Lanka is just over 65,000 km²) in the northern part of the island was severely restricted, as was their funding, and the organisation relied on a single, charismatic leader (Thiruvenkadum Veluppillai Prabhakaran). As has already been seen, the FARC command structure is extremely resilient, funding is still plentiful, and the FARC suffer from few geographical restrictions, with the department of Meta (over 85,000 km²) bigger than the entire island of Sri Lanka. FARC income is still far higher than its expenditure and this means that the rebels can continue to fund themselves almost indefinitely, unless the government somehow manages to do away with the drug trade.

Thanks to Alfonso Cano, and his “Plan Rebirth” and “Plan 2010”, the FARC have successfully adapted to the changing conditions of the civil conflict, and have managed to minimise some of the state’s greatest advantages. The present-day fighting in Colombia is increasingly similar to that of the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland, with rebels operating in civilian clothing, hiding among the civilian population, using explosives and snipers, and performing ever less conventional attacks on security forces. There are even indications that the rebels have managed to increase their territorial presence since 2010, thanks principally to militiamen.

The war has changed from a traditional counterinsurgent one to a judicial one. The only way to dismantle the increasingly powerful militia networks is to build cases against individual members, arrest them and condemn them. While the police and military have experienced a quantum leap in their abilities since 1998, the judiciary has not kept pace, and now presents the Achilles Heel in the entire security policy of President Santos.

It is worth noting that the casualties inflicted on the security forces by the FARC during 2011 (2,089 wounded, 483 dead), were almost equivalent to those of 2002 (1,537 wounded, 699 dead). While the nature of rebel attacks has changed dramatically over the last decade, with far fewer large-scale ambushes or pitched battles with security forces, the ability of the FARC to inflict casualties, now predominantly through the use of explosives, mines and snipers, remains high.

The great increase in attacks on infrastructure, which have become the centrepiece of the current FARC offensive strategy, have an enormous economic cost for the country. Attacks on the oil, gas and energy sectors are hitting the soft underbelly of the Colombian economy. For the guerrillas, these attacks present a cheap and relatively safe method of inflicting damage on the state, and are in keeping with their rhetoric against the international exploitation of Colombian resources, as well as giving weight to their extortion demands on the sector.

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64 Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, Del Caguan a La Habana; Los Cambios de las FARC, March 2013.
The decrease in the FARC’s military capacity has been offset, somewhat, by an increase in its political activity. One of Alfonso Cano’s key messages when he took over as commander-in-chief was that the guerrillas had to return to their roots and engage the local communities in their areas of influence. Cano was able to sell this in military, as well as political, terms. If local fronts wanted to ensure high quality recruits who would not desert at the first sign of trouble, they would have to engage politically with the local communities. If they wanted to prevent infiltration into their areas, and into their ranks, they would have to get the local communities on their side. If they wanted to be able to hide their fighters when the security forces flooded an area, again, they would need the local communities to protect them. It was a no-brainer for the FARC, and almost all the fronts took the message to heart. From 2009 onwards, FARC fronts started making a great deal more effort to influence, and even control, the grassroots community organisations of the Community Action Boards (Juntas de Acción Comunal – JACs). Most villages have their own JACs, which serve as the conduits for state interaction with local communities. During field research over the last two years in Antioquia, Córdoba, Cauca and Putumayo, InSight Crime has seen a significant increase in FARC interaction with the JACs in their areas.

The FARC also believe, perhaps erroneously, that the tendencies at a regional level are moving in their favour. The move towards left-wing governments, from El Salvador down to Argentina, has been seen by the FARC as an indication that the left is gaining strength in the region, and that with this trend their political relevance and recognition will inevitably increase.

All of this means that the FARC do not have to sign an agreement with the government right now. The rebels are going to want significant concessions that justify an end to the conflict and show that the last 50 years of struggle have had concrete results, both for their fighting rank-and-file and the communities that live under their influence. Timochenko does not want to be the FARC commander who presided over the breakup of the movement, or who “betrayed” almost five decades of revolutionary struggle.

Colombia has a unique opportunity. Never have the conditions for a peace agreement been as propitious as they are now. It is almost inevitable that sectors of the rebel army will become criminalised. The percentage that follow this path, however, will depend on the generosity of the agreement the government negotiates with the Secretariat, the opportunities presented to demobilised fighters, and the efficiency with which state institutions, especially the judiciary, are able to process the results of the peace deal and fill the vacuum that exists in FARC-dominated areas.