



Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia

Latin America Report N°95 | 27 September 2022

Headquarters

International Crisis Group

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • brussels@crisisgroup.org

Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction	1
II. Colombia's New Battlefields.....	4
A. A New Cast of Armed Groups	4
B. Behaviour toward Civilians.....	6
C. Approach to Security Forces	7
III. Security Goals in Theory and Practice	10
A. The Origins of the Military's Role.....	10
B. Continuing Onus on the Military.....	11
C. The Official Approach	12
D. Political Targets, Distorted Indicators	14
E. Operations from the Commanders' Perspective.....	16
IV. Institutional Constraints and Challenges Facing Colombia's Military	19
A. Personnel and Resources	19
B. Corruption.....	21
C. Human Rights Abuses	22
V. Community Perspectives	25
A. Fleeting Presence	25
B. Enemies Everywhere	26
C. Bearing the Costs	27
VI. A Way Forward.....	29
A. Goals and Indicators	29
B. Defining the Enemy	30
C. Operations.....	31
D. Planning for Consolidating Control.....	32
E. Accountability and Integrity	33
F. Aligning the Military with the Peace Process, the Petro Government and Rural Communities.....	34
VII. Conclusion	36
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Colombia	37
B. About the International Crisis Group	38
C. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2019....	39
D. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	41

Principal Findings

What's new? Military strategy in Colombia's rural areas has failed to contain the conflicts that arose following the 2016 peace accord with its largest guerrilla movement. Rural residents are paying the price. A newly inaugurated administration has promised to refocus attention on civilian protection, raising the prospect of major reform.

Why does it matter? The military is the only institution capable of responding to resurgent violence in the short term. Yet its emphasis on high-level captures and coca eradication undermines community safety. By changing its goals and methods, it can help build confidence, become more effective and better protect civilians from armed groups.

What should be done? Civilian government leaders should prioritise community protection in rural areas and embrace new indicators for gauging the military's success. The military should take fuller account of the costs of its operations to rural communities, discard those where costs outweigh benefits and work toward dialogue to rebuild community trust.

Executive Summary

Vowing to enact sweeping changes to the police and military, a new government is taking the helm in Colombia at a time of surging violence. Recently elected President Gustavo Petro, the first left-wing leader in the country's recent history, has pledged to honour the 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), press on with efforts to negotiate with and demobilise other armed and criminal groups, and move away from reliance on military force – an about-face from the outgoing government's credo. But armed outfits may reject or even take advantage of the government's entreaties for peace. Moreover, in the short term, the military is set to remain at the core of security policy. While force may often be required, top brass and civilian leaders need to assess candidly how strategies rooted in capture-or-kill operations and coca eradication have failed to curb violence and often worsened it. They should develop a strategy built around new metrics for success, operations that avoid treating entire communities as armed groups' accomplices and efforts to rebuild trust with rural people.

Colombia's latest generation of rebels and criminals pose daunting challenges. The conflicts simmering in rural areas, above all along Colombia's borders and the Pacific coast, bear only a slender resemblance to those of the past. Insurgents steeped in Marxist doctrine and hyper-violent drug trafficking cartels have largely given way to a fragmented contest for local dominion between dozens of groups, including dissident factions of the former FARC, post-paramilitary forces and smaller criminal bands. The rebel National Liberation Army (ELN) retains an authentic ideology, though it also has abandoned its pursuit of national power.

For almost all these outfits, illicit profit is the primary objective. Revenue in turn depends on assured territorial control, which is more easily achieved through coercion of local people than by seizing power in Bogotá or waging full-blown warfare against the state's armed forces. Armed groups now rarely seek combat with the military, although they do carry out targeted attacks on troops and police. Instead, their modus operandi is to entrench their presence by threatening, cowing and exploiting local communities.

Colombia's central government has traditionally leaned on the military to quell troubles in the countryside. The armed forces' unique characteristics undoubtedly appeal to elected leaders. Unlike most civilian state organs, the military can be deployed rapidly to the country's most inhospitable corners; its missions can range from fighting guerrillas to handling natural disasters and combating deforestation; and it has also traditionally been more popular than other institutions, although its egregious past crimes against civilians in wartime have taken a toll on its reputation, as have various recent corruption cases.

Yet the military has struggled to keep pace as the conflicts it is facing have evolved. The armed forces retain much of the same command structure, doctrine and strategic arsenal that they employed with reasonable success against the FARC, even though these are now backfiring to sometimes deadly effect. Numerical targets set by the former government have encouraged surgical offensive operations to capture or kill armed group leaders, and placed a premium on forced coca eradication, despite

concerns that these stir new cycles of violence. Armed groups retaliate against not only the military but also the communities whom they accuse of informing, collaborating with or failing to resist the troops. Meanwhile, armed group leaders, such as the Gulf Clan's Otoniel – arrested with much fanfare in 2021 – are swiftly replaced, coca is replanted and the illicit markets driving violence remain largely untouched.

Many brigade and other senior commanders understand the shortcomings of their actions. Aside from failing to curb armed threats, the prevailing approach undermines confidence in the military, and in turn, the state. Communities in violent zones see the military as just one more party to the conflict rather than a legitimate force protecting their interests. Civilians are at best leery of the military and, in some cases, manifestly hostile to it. Lacking confidence in soldiers to protect them from armed group retaliation, victims opt not to report crimes, impeding intelligence collection and making it more difficult for other state institutions to establish a foothold of public trust.

Transforming the Colombian state's approach to insecurity in its rural hinterland is now at the heart of President Petro's plans. Senior officials in the new government have spoken of achieving "total peace", including negotiations with remaining armed groups, demobilisation of criminal bands and a reshaped role for the military, with a focus on protecting civilians. A shift in this direction is welcome but will be arduous and full of political pitfalls. Petro will need to win the trust of an institution suspicious of his guerrilla past, yet which continues to play a critical role in maintaining state security. In the short term, the military remains the only force capable of responding to internal armed threats; retreating from this role could mean that violent outfits seize fresh opportunities to grow.

Changes to military strategy could help check insecurity in Colombia. The government could start by shifting the military away from metrics that prize captures, kills and hectares eradicated. Instead, it should use indicators of whether its operations are keeping people safer from exploitation and harm – eg, tracking the success of efforts to reduce assassinations of local leaders and protect families signed up for voluntary coca substitution programs. Bogotá's allies have a vital role to play in this realignment. Washington in particular must shift its funding model's emphasis from counter-narcotics to embrace other goals more effectively. The military should also narrow the criteria it uses to determine whom it can target in its operations, emulating the International Committee of the Red Cross in distinguishing more effectively between full-time armed group members and civilians who have no choice but to live under these outfits' sway. This step, in turn, can help lift the stigma from communities in conflict zones – which the military is often quick to brand as rife with enemies – and re-establish trust with rural dwellers.

Rebuilding confidence with aggrieved communities will be a long process requiring a fresh approach from the high command regarding a range of issues. In particular, the armed forces should show greater institutional commitment to cooperate with the transitional justice system created by the peace accord, so that there can be proper accountability for abuses that devastated communities. They should also redouble efforts to weed out corruption and abuse in the ranks.

While the task is imposing, it should not be impossible. Despite their differences, both the military and the government have an interest in crafting a policy that effec-

tively combats armed groups that continue to jeopardise security, while restoring the armed forces' previously high public standing among the communities that most need its protection. In order for Colombia to escape the patterns of conflict in which it is increasingly trapped, its military and civilian leaders will need to focus more on steps that can help it achieve lasting peace and security, and less on the tactics that too often have yielded only fleeting, illusory gains.

Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 27 September 2022

Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia

I. Introduction

Six years after the country's largest guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), laid down its arms following a peace agreement, other criminal and armed groups have spread across Colombian territory vacated by the former rebels and imperilled the residents' lives. After the accord was signed in 2016, violence in the countryside fell to an all-time low. Since then, however, the number of people killed annually in massacres has increased sixfold while political assassinations rose from just four in 2016 to 31 in 2022 so far.¹ Murders in parts of the country under the armed groups' sway have sown fear throughout much of rural Colombia, where, in the words of one humanitarian official, "there is a conflict of extremely low intensity but extremely high impact".²

The new left-wing president, Gustavo Petro, says he will work to bring "total peace" to the country. As a candidate, his promises to this effect won him strong support in the same rural conflict zones that heavily favoured the 2016 peace accord, for example along the Pacific coast.³ Now in office, his administration has detailed its plans. While carrying out the agreement with the FARC, Petro says, he will also seek negotiations with other guerrillas and press for demobilisation of criminal organisations.⁴ According to officials, tackling these security threats simultaneously will curb the violent competition among armed groups that ensued after the 2016 accord.⁵ Showing far-reaching ambition, the Petro administration has also said it will help Colombians address other drivers of conflict, such as land disputes, ethnic divides and illicit livelihoods.

As part of these reforms, Petro has promised to shift the military's focus toward "human security". In place of its current approach, which is oriented toward offensive targeting of armed groups and eradication of coca crops, the new government says it will emphasise community protection, expand human rights training to soldiers and apply civilian (rather than military) justice to those who break the rules.⁶ The administration says it will halt forced coca crop eradication and rely instead on negotiated approaches counting on farmers' consent.⁷ Officials have also argued for a less prom-

¹ "Totals of violence by year: 2016-2022", OCHA Monitor, UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs.

² Crisis Group interview, humanitarian agency official, Quibdó, January 2022.

³ "Las elecciones en un mapa: cómo la Colombia de los olvidados y del 'sí' al acuerdo de paz eligió al futuro presidente", CNN Español, 20 June 2022.

⁴ "Los Acuerdos de Estado con los firmantes de la paz, la sociedad y la comunidad internacional se cumplen", Gustavo Petro's plan for government.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, senator close to Petro government, Bogotá, June 2022.

⁶ "Por una seguridad humana que se mida en vidas", Gustavo Petro's plan for government.

⁷ "Respeto por los derechos humanos, base de la Policía Nacional", *El Tiempo*, 23 August 2022. As of 1 September, however, the military had yet to receive an order to cease eradication.

inent role for the military in rural areas overall, echoing the recommendations of Colombia's Truth Commission, which in its June report called for a reduction in troop numbers and deployment of more police in their stead.⁸

We are not going to repeat past policies ... that relied on the military to stabilise these areas. We are going to have a very different policy in the regions, in which the last resort is the armed forces, after trying other forms of intervention first.⁹

As it works to carry out these reforms, the Petro government will face hard realities in rural conflict zones, and the challenge of working with a military that is wary of the new president. The armed forces remain essential to providing security in rural areas, at least in the short and medium term. In many parts of the country, especially where two or more armed groups compete for control, the possibility of future negotiations has sparked a rush for territorial expansion.¹⁰ Even as Petro seeks to reform the military, he will undoubtedly need to make use of it.

Compounding the challenge, as a former guerrilla member and a long-time critic of the armed forces, the president is deeply mistrusted within their ranks. As part of its approach to addressing internal security threats, the military has long held – with limited justification in some cases – that guerrilla organisations blended in with and hid among left-leaning civil society organisations. While they did so in isolated instances, the military cleaves to the notion that it faces an “internal enemy”, with which it stigmatises political activists and the rural populations they claim to represent. Likewise, some in the military describe the new president as a wolf in sheep's clothing, who intends to use democratic means to serve guerrilla interests.¹¹ Rooting out the “internal enemy” dogma is another top recommendation of the Truth Commission, which says the belief accounts for troops' distrust of rural Colombians and for abuses carried out against civilians suspected of complicity.¹² Petro has endorsed doctrinal change on this point.¹³

⁸ “Informe Final: Hallazgos y recomendaciones”, Comisión de la Verdad, 28 June 2022, p. 853. The Truth Commission was created in 2017, as part of the peace accord's transitional justice system. The body recorded voluntary testimonies from thousands of conflict victims, perpetrators and third parties with a mandate to clarify collective responsibility and determine how to avert additional atrocities and achieve social reconciliation. On 28 June 2022, it presented a final report with recommendations focusing on the preservation of memory, improvements to the justice system, security reform and territorial development, among other things. The report documents the “false positives” scandal, in which members of the military extrajudicially executed more than 6,400 civilians between 2002 and 2008 and counted the killings as combat deaths.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, senator close to Petro government, Bogotá, June 2022.

¹⁰ Along the border with Venezuela, the guerrilla National Liberation Army has apparently sent personnel into Colombia to secure areas that it might eventually seek to use for demobilisation. The Gulf Clan is adopting similar tactics on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Arauca, July 2022; senior military officers, July and September 2022.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, senior military officers, June and July 2022.

¹² “Informe Final”, op. cit., p. 844.

¹³ “The doctrine of an internal enemy has to remain in the past”. Tweet by Gustavo Petro, @petrogustavo, president of Colombia, 2:40pm, 30 June 2022.

Inside the military, as well as within parts of the U.S. security apparatus that provide critical support, these beliefs nevertheless remain entrenched.¹⁴ Rather than viewing civilians in areas where armed groups are dominant as deserving of protection, these elements too often continue to see them as enemies worth targeting for their alleged collaboration with the state's adversaries. While some in the top brass favour talks with armed groups, hoping they can help stabilise the countryside, and appreciate the benefits of a greater civilian state presence in rural areas, these same officers say they fear a Petro government will be too sympathetic to rebels. "Negotiations can change everything ... but the difference this time is that we have a president who is ideologically aligned with the guerrillas".¹⁵ Resistance within the military to some of the reforms proposed by the Truth Commission and Petro, including expanding accountability mechanisms for abuses committed by the armed forces, transitional justice and civilian oversight, remains steadfast.¹⁶

This report aims to lay out the first steps in reorienting the Colombian military toward making the mission of protecting civilians its top priority, and thereby advancing the broader goals of peace and security. It seeks to understand why rural violence has resurged, how the military has handled it to date and how the armed forces can consolidate an effective role in maintaining peace. It is based on fieldwork throughout the Colombian countryside, including in the departments of Arauca, Bolívar, Cauca, Caquetá, Chocó, Córdoba, Guaviare, Norte de Santander, Nariño, Putumayo and Sucre. In preparing this report, Crisis Group conducted over 120 interviews, including with nearly two dozen brigade commanders, other key senior and mid-level military officers, senior members of the Petro administration, rural residents, clergy, civil society figures, diplomats, security experts, and local and national authorities, and drew from its extensive body of research and analysis relating to conflict in Colombia.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Critics who tell us to take the civilian population out of the conflict do not understand the nature of conflict today. These groups operate with one part that is armed and another part that is civilian. They are mixed into the community". Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, May 2022.

¹⁵ Crisis Group correspondence, June 2022.

¹⁶ "Mindefensa pide no responsabilizar a la fuerza pública de la violencia", *El Tiempo*, 1 July 2022. Petro has also pledged to move the police from the defence ministry to the interior ministry, a change that is unpopular with the security forces and would also need to pass through Congress.

¹⁷ Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°87, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, 26 February 2021; N°82, *Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace*, 6 October 2020; and N°76, *Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast*, 8 August 2019.

II. Colombia's New Battlefields

When the FARC laid down its weapons in connection with the 2016 peace accord, other armed and criminal groups rushed in to capture the guerrillas' lucrative trafficking routes and other illicit businesses. Today, these outfits have consolidated their control despite the military's counter-offensives, which have killed and captured hundreds of criminal leaders seemingly without weakening the sway of these groups. Many rural people express deep mistrust of the military, which some perceive to be one more armed group fighting for local control with little regard for residents' safety and well-being.¹⁸

A. *A New Cast of Armed Groups*

Armed groups in Colombia have grown more numerous in recent years. They fall into four broad categories: the last remaining leftist insurgency – ie, the National Liberation Army (ELN); post-paramilitary groups with roots in the “self-defence” forces that demobilised in the early 2000s; offshoots of the former FARC known as dissidents; and other criminal outfits.¹⁹

The groups have grown and changed significantly over time. The ELN was among the first groups to undertake a major expansion after the 2016 agreement, moving into former FARC territory along the Pacific coast in Chocó, stretching across the border with Venezuela in Arauca and Norte de Santander, and fortifying strongholds along the Magdalena river in Bolívar, Cesar and La Guajira.²⁰ Post-paramilitary groups, notably the Gulf Clan, but also the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), grew in size and secured access to vital trafficking routes. Today, the Gulf Clan is present across much of the country's north, from Chocó on the ocean to the Catatumbo region next to Venezuela.

As for the remaining two categories of armed group, FARC dissidents began to emerge from 2016 as a small number of mid-level former guerrilla commanders regrouped and sought out recruits with the goal of taking over illicit businesses. Today, there are at least two dozen such groups, loosely organised under two competing umbrellas: one, led by the former 1st and 7th Fronts, which never demobilised or joined the peace agreement; and a second calling itself the Segunda Marquetalia, founded by Iván Márquez, the FARC's former lead negotiator, when he fled in 2019 to Venezuela.²¹ Finally, a handful of criminal groups – operating primarily in cities –

¹⁸ “There are really three groups fighting for territorial control and the military is one of them”. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian agency official, Quibdó, January 2022.

¹⁹ The Colombian government considers all of these categories, except smaller criminal groups as described below, to be organised armed groups and therefore eligible for lethal targeting under the parameters of international humanitarian law.

²⁰ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°68, *The Missing Peace: Colombia's New Government and Last Guerrillas*, 12 July 2018.

²¹ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°92, *A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC*, 30 November 2021. In July, Márquez was reported wounded in an attack by unknown assailants in Venezuela. His death would have been the latest in a string of killings of senior Segunda Marquetalia members. “Iván Márquez' está herido en Caracas, según Colombia”, AP, 13 July 2022.

now account for a rising share of violence in Colombia.²² Larger armed groups, such as the Gulf Clan or ELN, sometimes contract these criminal bands to operate urban trafficking routes.

Despite their differences, groups in all four categories share certain features, partly inherited from its predecessors, that have complicated efforts to combat them. First, they rely on the fast circulation of both cash and people. All the groups that have grown since the 2016 accord have done so thanks to increased numbers in their ranks, including many recruits who are young and largely untrained.²³ Accumulating troops creates opportunities for violent expansion, but also obligations to feed, equip and pay the rank and file.²⁴

To achieve rapid growth, and often with the explicit goal of generating fresh revenue, these groups depend on a decentralised operating model, following a trend among guerrillas that began prior to the peace agreement. The ELN, FARC dissidents and post-paramilitary groups give substantial leeway to field commanders in everyday affairs.²⁵ While they remain under the apparent control of a national hierarchy, individual Gulf Clan fronts are able to take decisions – ranging from whether to assassinate someone to how to handle community relations – in areas they dominate. Rival fronts of the same organisation in southern Córdoba have fought one another in order to demarcate territory.²⁶ Decentralisation has the strategic advantage of safeguarding an armed group's stability even if individual leaders are removed. In contrast to the former FARC's highly stratified command system, very few individuals involved in criminal enterprises today understand more than the specific role they play. If they are captured or killed, or if they quit the group, the business remains intact.

At the same time, the role of ideology in most of the current crop of groups has declined sharply. Particularly in areas of active expansion, understanding of illicit markets is the most prized quality among commanders, while there is little incentive for groups to undertake political indoctrination of their forces. Among residents of areas where it operates in Chocó, the Gulf Clan is known as a “private military in the service of drug trafficking”.²⁷ Groups apparently aligned with the Segunda Marquetalia, whose leaders do preserve a Marxist discourse, act as capitalists on the ground; one allied front even refers to itself as *la empresa*, or “the firm”, in reference to its focus on illicit profit.²⁸ Meanwhile, in contrast to the former FARC's older and more educated leadership, dissident field commanders arrested in Cauca are in their twenties and, in the words of a senior military officer: “There is no ideology, no grievance,

²² Conditions in the city surrounding Colombia's largest port, Buenaventura, have grown particularly alarming. “Desplazamientos forzados masivos y confinamiento de comunidades afrodescendientes e indígena en el municipio de Buenaventura”, OCHA, 17 February 2022.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, military intelligence officer, September 2021; social leaders, Saravena, Aguachica and Quibdó, January, February and March 2022.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Santander de Quilichao, December 2021.

²⁵ In the cases of the ELN and FARC, this trend began in the years leading up to the peace agreement in the face of major military offensives. See Andrés F. Aponte González and Fernán E. González González (eds.), *¿Por qué es tan difícil negociar con el ELN?* (Bogotá, 2021).

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, local security analyst, Montería, February 2022.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, clergyman, Quibdó, January 2022.

²⁸ Julie Turkowitz, “Deep in Colombia, rebels and soldiers fight for the same prize: drugs”, *The New York Times*, 20 April 2022.

no social agenda, no political platform”.²⁹ Arguably the one exception is the ELN, whose national leadership continues to espouse a hard-left outlook, although its regional fronts’ practices vary greatly.³⁰

In any case, while the influence of ideology has waned, armed groups’ interest in exerting political control over local communities has not. Controlling land and commerce, mediating local disputes and punishing detractors form essential parts of the arsenal of territorial domination.³¹ It has a track record of considerable success. As a local government official put it succinctly, “The ones in charge are the armed groups”.³²

B. Behaviour toward Civilians

In general, armed groups in Colombia try to avoid direct confrontation with the military. Instead, they go about achieving their expansion into and control over strategically important territories by intimidating and co-opting local people. Residents describe themselves as living in a perpetual state of “mass kidnapping”.³³ A military officer explained: “The only way these groups have to maintain control of the business is through violence [against the population]”.³⁴

Armed groups’ first and most powerful lever of control is financial. Factions often try to become the prime engine of the local economy. Recruitment is one obvious example. The ELN excepted, armed groups are now paying salaries, many disbursing them on time more reliably than private firms or the state. In some cases, salaries translate into pay rates higher than the minimum wage (roughly \$260 per month). Even where salaries are lower than the legal minimum, they are often far higher and easier to acquire than the wages that come with most available salaried jobs. They also come with other benefits: a FARC dissident faction aligned with the Segunda Marquetalia along the Ecuadorian border, called the Comandos de la Frontera, pays entry-level foot soldiers about \$200-\$250 per month, promises the possibility of career advancement, offers vacations and family support, and even provides compensation if a combatant is killed.³⁵

For young people, particularly in remote rural areas, jobs with armed groups are not only the most attractive but often the only way to make a living.³⁶ “The Gulf Clan is the largest employer” in parts of Sucre state, a farmers’ organisation leader said. “Young people want to join these groups”.³⁷ In nearby Chocó, the Gulf Clan puts its

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Popayán, September 2021.

³⁰ In Arauca, a historical stronghold, the ELN retains its deep ideological support of the communitarian economy. On the other hand, in areas such as Chocó, on the Pacific coast, the new generation of commanders is less interested in indoctrinating the residents and more in extracting revenue. Crisis Group interviews, community and social leaders, Saravena, March 2022; international monitor, Quibdó, January 2022.

³¹ Kyle Johnson, “Los desafíos para la política de seguridad en 2022”, *Razón Pública*, 9 January 2022.

³² Crisis Group interview, Montería, February 2022.

³³ “Comunicado a la Opinión Pública: Las Organizaciones, Comunidades, Grupos y Sectores Sociales participan de los Consejos Territoriales de Paz, Derechos Humanos, Reconciliación y Convivencia del departamento de Córdoba”, press release, Montería, 8 May 2022.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, May 2022.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, April 2022.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, women social leaders, Montelíbano, August 2021.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Corozal, March 2022.

wealth on display, paying wages in public. It also tries to create good-will in the community, for example handing out gifts on holidays and sponsoring sports competitions.³⁸

Economic co-optation by these groups extends well beyond direct recruitment. Farmers in Putumayo who had sought to abandon coca cultivation after the peace accord have found themselves pressured to start growing again. “The groups pay farmers to plant, they provide the seeds [and] they pay them to maintain the plots”, said a military officer.³⁹ Community leaders in the region report that these same groups impose strict quotas on planting and demand that farmers sell their coca to them rather than to competitors.⁴⁰ Landless locals can be roped into picking coca, cooking for the farm workers during the harvest or trafficking. Although they are sometimes remunerated, many civilians say they are essentially forced to carry out these tasks.⁴¹

Each armed group also resorts to coercive measures to buttress territorial control, often beginning with intimidation of the local authorities, the elected Communal Action Councils. Armed groups lean on these councils in various ways. In coca-growing parts of Putumayo, the Comandos have demanded that councils conduct a census of the local population, monitor who is growing coca and organise protests against forced eradication.⁴² Along the Venezuelan border, in Arauca, councillors are forced to consult either the ELN or FARC dissidents (and sometimes both) on any major decision, leading to accusations from the military and from rival groups that they belong to one or another of these organisations.⁴³ Armed groups across the board also mete out harsh punishments to people whom they perceive to be failing to comply with their norms, ranging from meeting coca planting quotas to abiding by curfews as well as prohibitions on homosexuality or petty theft.⁴⁴

C. *Approach to Security Forces*

Hostilities between armed groups and the military are no longer at the heart of conflict in Colombia. Rival groups competing to control territory frequently spar with one another, but they try to limit their engagement with security forces.⁴⁵ The ELN is the

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, religious authorities, Quibdó, January 2022.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, April 2021.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, town council president, La Hormiga, April 2021.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, women community leaders, La Hormiga, April 2021. A number of groups also seek to provide local justice. In Cauca, for example, FARC dissident groups have sought to mediate in cases of alleged gender-based violence. Crisis Group interview, indigenous authority, Santander de Quilichao, August 2021.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, town council members, La Hormiga, April 2021.

⁴³ When violence between these groups erupted in January, many council members in rural Arauca fled into town or another department to avoid assassination for presumed collaboration with one side or the other. Crisis Group interviews, Communal Action Council members, Saravena, March 2022.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace*, op. cit.

⁴⁵ “Two groups confront each other when we are not present, because they do not want to confront the military. When we arrive, they disperse”. Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, May 2022. In 2021, the UN recorded fifteen incidents of combat between the military and armed groups, but 53 incidents in which armed groups attacked one another. The figures for 2020 are 107 and 702, respectively. “Mapa de Afectados: Colombia”, OCHA Monitor.

only remaining group that is explicitly fighting the state, and even it has abandoned its goal of gaining power in favour of mounting continuous “armed resistance” with the aim of demoralising the military and carving out its own territorial enclaves.⁴⁶ So long as the military does not seek to occupy a coveted patch of land, there is little benefit – and often a high cost – for armed groups to battle with the army.

That said, armed groups do often target the security forces on a smaller scale. They regularly undertake opportunistic, asymmetric attacks that are hard to anticipate or prevent. They stage increasingly frequent assaults on police stations and military outposts, using firearms or explosives. In 2021, 148 members of the security forces were killed in attacks ranging from car bombings to shootouts, making it the most violent year since 2016.⁴⁷ Several groups now appear to be intensifying their targeting of police as a way of exerting pressure on the authorities ahead of possible talks with the government.⁴⁸

These attacks have become so commonplace in some regions that they have curbed the military’s ability to patrol, let alone conduct offensive operations. In 2020 and 2021, the ELN and Front 33 of the FARC dissidents operating in Tibú, close to the Venezuelan border, scaled down fighting between them in order to focus on assailing the security forces, including with explosions at bases, shooting attacks, and assassinations of personnel and their families.⁴⁹ As a result, the police and military are scarcely visible in the municipality, despite the fact that it has one of the country’s highest ratios of soldiers to residents and its largest proportion of land used for coca production.⁵⁰

Armed groups have also grown adept at penetrating the military to gather intelligence. Offering lucrative payments, the ELN, Gulf Clan and some FARC dissidents have co-opted lower-level members of the security forces in order to glean advance notice of planned military operations, as well as to ensure that soldiers look the other way when illicit goods pass by their outposts. In some areas, the phenomenon is so pronounced that the military considers it one of the primary threats to security.⁵¹

The selective attacks upon and infiltration of the security forces contrast sharply with how the armed groups confront one another. Armed groups are apt to engage in firefights as they compete for control of illicit markets or trafficking routes. Rival FARC dissident fronts in the Pacific coast department of Nariño displaced thousands of civilians and confined others in their homes as they fought each other in 2021. Civilians described how militants opened fire in plain view of civilians, forced their way into homes and prevented the population from fleeing, in order to ensure that

⁴⁶ Luis Eduardo Celis, “ELN: Una guerrilla de ‘resistencia armada’ y perspectiva de paz”, *La Silla Vacía*, 12 February 2021. A senior brigade commander described the ELN’s actions as intended to “exhaust the enemy” rather than beat them. Crisis Group interview, March 2022.

⁴⁷ “Plomo es lo que hay. Violencia y seguridad en tiempos de Duque”, PARES, 8 April 2022.

⁴⁸ The Gulf Clan has killed over 30 police since the start of 2022, while the ELN has dramatically increased kidnapping of security forces since June. A brazen attack apparently by FARC dissidents left seven police dead on 2 September. “Atentado a policías en Huila: todo apunta a que disidencias están tras el ataque”, *El Tiempo*, 4 September 2022; “El ‘Plan Pistola’ del Clan del Golfo ya deja más de 30 policías muertos en 2022”, *El País*, 26 July 2022.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, international monitor, Tibú, June 2021.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents and social leaders, Tibú, June 2021.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, brigade commander, August 2021.

no adversary escaped.⁵² Competition between armed groups often entails murder of anyone perceived to have been allied with a rival organisation.

Sometimes the military becomes involved in hostilities between armed groups. Military officers say they often feel compelled to enter the fray because, in the words of one officer, “these confrontations lead to two immediate outcomes: displacement and confinement”.⁵³ In some cases, however, the military has taken advantage of such internecine fighting to intensify its own campaign against one or both groups. In Argelia, in the conflict-affected province of Cauca, the military took advantage of an assault on the ELN by FARC dissident Front Carlos Patiño to strike high-value ELN targets with the aim of breaking the group’s stronghold.⁵⁴ The military acted in a similar fashion in Chocó, as the Gulf Clan advanced against the ELN.⁵⁵ Military actions that harm one group often open opportunities for another, a consequence that rural Colombians describe as military favouritism and which can create perceptions of collusion.⁵⁶

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, victims and displaced persons, Maguñ Payán and Roberto Payán, September and October 2021.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, May 2022.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, October 2020 and September 2021.

⁵⁵ Airstrikes killed at least two senior ELN commanders in Chocó. Crisis Group interviews, senior military officer and intelligence officers, January 2022.

⁵⁶ According to a social leader in Chocó: “The military is pursuing the ELN more than the Gulf Clan. These attacks lead to internal disputes in the ELN, which the Gulf Clan takes advantage of [to gain control]”. Crisis Group interview, Quibdó, January 2022.

III. Security Goals in Theory and Practice

A long history of fighting insurgents in the countryside has moulded the Colombian military's outlook on the current conflict. Each Colombian government defines distinct security priorities for its term in office, but the armed forces' daily operations often bear strikingly little resemblance to these stated aims. A combination of institutional inertia, political pressures, quantitative targets and bureaucratic constraints help explain the failure to translate official intentions into action on the ground. Professed goals that have figured in official policy for more than fifteen years – for example, protecting civilians and consolidating the state's institutional presence in areas where it is lacking – have not always been paramount in shaping military behaviour.⁵⁷

A. *The Origins of the Military's Role*

The Colombian military's modern role as guarantor of internal security dates to the 1948 assassination of liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. His death sparked civil unrest between liberals and conservatives in the capital, and the clashes spread to other regions, inaugurating a tempestuous era known as "La Violencia". The police proved unable to quell the violence and were dissolved by presidential decree on 30 April 1948, leaving the military charged with fighting rural guerrillas associated with the Liberal party.⁵⁸ Colombia's subsequent participation in the Korean War introduced the military to counter-insurgency doctrine and reaffirmed the conviction that it should combat internal threats seen as serving communism.⁵⁹ By the mid-1970s, a full conflict had emerged in the countryside, pitting leftist guerrilla groups – including the FARC and ELN – against the state.⁶⁰

As in much of Latin America, counter-insurgent warfare in Colombia was tainted by shady alliances and serious breaches of human rights. Beginning in the late 1980s, the defence ministry passed statutes allowing for the creation of civilian self-defence groups and private security organisations that could support its fight with the guerrillas.⁶¹ Far-right paramilitary groups proliferated, often engaging in extrajudicial

⁵⁷ Protecting civilians first appeared in a government strategic program under President Álvaro Uribe and has remained on the official list of priorities under all subsequent governments. "Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática", Colombian Defence Ministry, 2007.

⁵⁸ Legislative decree 1403, 30 April 1948; "Evolución histórica-Policía Nacional", National Police website; Gustavo Gallón Giraldo, "La república de las armas (Relaciones entre Fuerzas Armadas y Estado en Colombia: 1960-1980)", *Revista Controversia*, no. 109-110 (1983), p. 20.

⁵⁹ In 1962, the Colombian army carried out the Latin American Security Operation (Plan Lazo or Plan Laso) based on U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine, formally shifting the military's role from guarding the borders to putting down rebellions. Adolfo León Atehortúa Cruz, "Colombia en la Guerra de Corea", *Folios*, no. 27 (2008), p. 72.

⁶⁰ César Del Río and Saúl Rodríguez, *De milicias reales a militares contrainsurgentes* (Bogotá, 2008), p. 322. For an account of the conflict based on the military's own archives, see Juan Esteban Ugarriza and Nathalie Pabón Ayala, *Militares y guerrillas: La memoria histórica del conflicto armado en Colombia, desde los archivos militares* (Bogotá, 2017).

⁶¹ "Reglamento de Combate de Contraguerrillas EJC 3-10", Colombian National Military, 12 November 1987; Presidential decree 356, 11 February 1994.

execution of alleged rebels, kidnapping and forcible displacement of poor farmers.⁶² Meanwhile, the worsening conflict, funded by a massive growth in the cocaine trade, and marked by assassinations of public figures and rural massacres, turned Colombia into a national security concern for the U.S. This in turn prompted a huge support package, Plan Colombia, which sought to strengthen the armed forces and looked to them to fumigate aerially illicit crops and recover the countryside from guerrilla control.

The 2016 peace agreement with the FARC appeared to usher in fundamental change in the military's place in Colombian politics.⁶³ The armed forces introduced a new doctrinal framework, focused on modernising the institution, as they took up the task of providing security for the demobilising guerrillas as well as the rural areas they were vacating. Meanwhile, the agreement placed the military's past behaviour under the jurisdiction of its Special Jurisdiction for Peace, with the aim of trying wartime offences, while militaries could provide voluntary testimony to the Truth Commission.⁶⁴ To date, 3,482 soldiers have either submitted to or been called to answer before the special jurisdiction, including dozens of officers who have admitted to committing war crimes and abuses.⁶⁵

B. *Continuing Onus on the Military*

In the years since the accord was signed, and despite these attempts to shift it to a peacetime role, Colombia's military has once again become the guardian of rural security. The armed forces were the previous government's preferred means of responding to nearly any emergency, whether involving armed conflict, crime, natural disaster, humanitarian relief or protection of sensitive infrastructure, notably in oil-producing regions.⁶⁶ Many of its operations take place in deprived areas where other state institutions are largely absent. One commander in such a region observed: "There is no military solution to the conflict here. But the only manifestation of the state that arrives is us".⁶⁷ In part because of its extensive presence and wide-ranging

⁶² These groups shared information with the military well beyond 1989, when they were made illegal, and even as they grew more violent. "The Sixth Division, Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia", Human Rights Watch, September 2001.

⁶³ "We had almost complete peace in 2016 and 2017. There were a lot of discussions [between the military and] the communities". Crisis Group interview, social leader, Arauca, March 2022.

⁶⁴ The military has provided classified information to these mechanisms, for example more than 200 documents regarding massacres, drug trafficking and crime. "Ministerio de Defensa dice que entregó 200 documentos reservados a la Comisión de la Verdad", *El Espectador*, 31 October 2021. As concerns individual testimony, the special jurisdiction can consider positive cooperation with the Truth Commission as a reason for lighter sentencing, but it is not required to do so.

⁶⁵ These crimes include the "false positives" scandal. "La JEP hace pública la estrategia de priorización dentro del Caso 03, conocido como el de falsos positivos", press release, 18 February 2021; "JEP en cifras", JEP website, 26 August 2022.

⁶⁶ In oil-producing areas like Arauca, Norte de Santander and Putumayo, numerous troops are devoted to guarding infrastructure such as pipelines. In other cases, private mining firms pay the military to protect installations, a practice that the armed forces have adopted largely for financial reasons. See "Convenios de Fuerza y Justicia", *Rutas del Conflicto*, 2019.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, brigade commander, January 2022.

role, the military has traditionally maintained the most citizen confidence among state institutions, though the level has fallen notably.⁶⁸

Military commanders point to the burden Bogotá places upon them as politicians direct them to resolve local crises or spearhead development projects.⁶⁹ An example of the government's propensity to lean on the military in emergencies came at the height of street protests in 2021, when President Iván Duque floated the idea of deploying soldiers to back police through a doctrinal mechanism known as "military support".⁷⁰ Although his government did not send soldiers into city streets, in part because even the suggestion stirred a major public backlash, behind the scenes the armed forces were deeply involved in quelling the unrest, for example through a joint command in the city of Cali, site of some of the worst strife, which drew top generals away from their usual focus on rural Cauca. Both national and local governments have requested military support of late through a type of operation known as Support in the Defence of Civil Authority.⁷¹ At the same time, military units stationed in the countryside are often expected to protect the police, which lack the wherewithal to patrol in areas affected by active combat.⁷²

These confused and fast-shifting demands have complicated the military's ability to allocate its most effective brigades and resources or even decide on clear and overriding long-term goals. As a result, the imperatives of civilian protection and territorial control have essentially been sidelined.⁷³ As an international security expert said: "They have too many priorities and they are getting pulled in too many directions".⁷⁴

C. *The Official Approach*

In 2019, the Duque administration designated seven objectives for security policy, among others safeguarding national sovereignty; protecting the civilian population; preserving biodiversity; and achieving formal state control over the entirety of na-

⁶⁸ In 2021, the military was the country's most trusted institution with 26.8 per cent of Colombians giving it high confidence, a drop of 10 per cent from 2019. Close to 82 per cent partly or totally trusted the military in 2007. "Encuesta de cultura política", DANE, 6 June 2022.

⁶⁹ One of these, the Future Zones, was intended to combine military and civilian efforts to enhance public services and economic development in 44 troubled municipalities. The program largely failed to change conditions in these areas. "El propósito de las Zonas Futuro es mejorar la seguridad en los territorios y generar desarrollo al cambiar economías ilícitas por economías lícitas: Alto Comisionado para la Paz", press release, Colombian Presidency, 29 January 2020.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°90, *The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests*, 2 July 2021.

⁷¹ "Manual Fundamental del Ejército MFE 3-28 Apoyo de la Defensa a la Autoridad Civil", Colombian National Military, 7 August 2016.

⁷² A commander described his frustration at being chastised by senior government officials for not protecting the police in an area where an armed group had attacked them. Crisis Group interview, November 2021.

⁷³ In his second term, Uribe created a series of Coordination Centres for Integrated Action, aimed at aligning military and civilian institutions. Once the military gained control over a determined area, the Centres coordinated political, economic and social institutions with the aim of consolidating the state's presence, but with limited success. Today, the military is in general more reactive, coordinating with other agencies on an ad hoc basis. "Colombia, 12 años tras la paz, la seguridad y la prosperidad. La transformación de las Fuerzas Armadas cambió el curso de la nación", Defence Ministry, 2018.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, May 2022.

tional territory.⁷⁵ The general command of armed forces is responsible for translating these pronouncements into a national Campaign Plan. The military, in turn, is charged with creating its own national campaign, while each brigade and unit must then interpret its own specific role and draft its own campaign plan documents. Each brigade and unit must then interpret its own specific role and draft its own campaign plan documents. The result is a plethora of overlapping national, sub-national and local plans with sometimes complementary and other times competing priorities that officials say are not widely read or understood within the armed forces.⁷⁶

Since 2019, the military has been operating under the aegis of a plan titled the “Bicentennial Campaign: Heroes of Liberty”, an overarching document that includes dozens of plans within it, for example to combat deforestation (Plan Artemisa), fight illicit economies (Plan Pedro Pascasio Martínez) and achieve state control over territory (Plan Horus).⁷⁷ The campaign identifies nineteen specific threats facing Colombia, including illegal armed and criminal groups, as well as drug and arms trafficking. The military campaign plan also defines weaknesses such as corruption and a feeble judicial system as threats.⁷⁸

Independent of the specific campaign plan, military operations are geared toward three lines of work: protection (for example, safeguarding infrastructure); reconfiguration (attempting to change battlefield dynamics in the state’s favour); and inflicting defeat (offensive targeting of the enemy). Within these guidelines, commanders have leeway to organise their activities. Each operation requires a written legal justification explaining the objectives, the enemy targets and the rules of engagement as well as naming the officers responsible for the results.⁷⁹

The military’s operations are also situated within one of two legal frameworks. Among the most important legal and operational decisions that commanders make is to determine which framework applies to the armed adversary in question.⁸⁰ In order to do so, they determine first whether the enemy organisation is an “organised armed group” for purposes of international humanitarian law. If it is, then the gov-

⁷⁵ The others were to replace illicit economic activities with legal ones, encourage innovation in the defence sector and strengthen professionalism within the forces. To achieve these goals, the defence ministry specified ten actions the military should take, such as focusing on citizen security, substituting illegal markets, dismantling armed groups, safeguarding the environment, protecting maritime routes and continuously improving the armed forces’ capabilities. “Política de Defensa y Seguridad”, Colombian Defence Ministry, January 2019.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, retired senior military officer, Bogotá, April 2022.

⁷⁷ “Política de Defensa y Seguridad”, Colombian Defence Ministry, January 2019.

⁷⁸ “Informe Ejecutivo: Logros y Retos Misionales, Vigencia 2021”, General Commander of the Armed Forces, 2021.

⁷⁹ “Orders of operations” are required for all operations and require signoff from the legal adviser. “Manual Fundamental del Ejército MFE 1.0 El Ejército”, Colombian National Army, 7 August 2016.

⁸⁰ “Manual Fundamental del Ejército MFE 6-27 Derecho Operacional Terrestre”, Colombian National Army, 2012; “Directiva Permanente 15 de 2016”, Defence Ministry, 22 April 2016; “Directiva Permanente 16 de 2016”, Defence Ministry, 17 May 2016. The International Committee of the Red Cross also releases an annual report enumerating Colombia’s internal or non-international conflicts. In 2022, this list did not coincide with Colombia’s, as it left off the battles with the Segunda Marquetalia and the Comandos de la Frontera, which the Red Cross does not categorise as organised armed groups. The Red Cross does denominate the ELN, FARC dissidents and the Gulf Clan as organised armed groups. “Retos Humanitarios 2022”, International Committee of the Red Cross, 23 March 2022.

ernment may apply the rules that govern armed conflicts and assert the authority to use lethal force against individuals based on their membership in the group. By contrast, if the group is not deemed an organised armed group, then the government applies human rights law; under that legal framework, security forces may arrest criminal suspects, but can use lethal force only when officers' lives are at risk.⁸¹

Senior officers insist that the rigour of the military's legal determinations has grown since 2016. As one officer told Crisis Group, the legal framework "dictates what we can and cannot do in the context of operations. ... Our operations start with this in mind, which is something that has changed a lot".⁸²

These distinctions become particularly important if there are reports of misconduct. In March 2022, the military undertook an operation in Putumayo's Puerto Leguízamo municipality intended to target a senior member of the Comandos de la Frontera, considered an organised armed group. The early morning raid gave way to clashes in a populated area, with residents later reporting that troops had killed a number of civilians, including a local council president, an Indigenous governor and a minor.⁸³ The military insisted that these individuals were either full members of the armed group or were actively firing on troops.⁸⁴ In the latter case, as participants in hostilities, they would be lawful targets under international humanitarian law, though only during the specific episode of combat.⁸⁵

D. Political Targets, Distorted Indicators

In practice, over the past four years, the government's emphasis on combating illicit activities and hitting back at armed groups, together with the need to respond to multiple crises, has distracted it from or even contravened its own officially stated priorities, such as territorial control and civilian protection. Perhaps the most pressing official demands stem from the indicators that the Duque government relied upon to quantify military operations' impact. Commanders say several metrics assumed exaggerated significance, including hectares of coca eradicated and numbers of people voluntarily demobilised, captured and killed.⁸⁶ Officials in Bogotá kept close tabs on these figures, encouraging commanders to meet numerical goals for their own sake, and rarely considering whether they advanced the best interests of the communities in question.⁸⁷

⁸¹ "¿Qué es el derecho internacional humanitario?", Colombian Committee of the International Red Cross, 2004. Crisis Group interview, Red Cross official, July 2022.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, May 2022.

⁸³ Valentina Parada Lugo, "Las inconsistencias del operativo militar en Putumayo que cobró la vida de civiles", *El Espectador*, 10 April 2022.

⁸⁴ "Versiones cruzadas sobre operativo militar en Puerto Leguízamo que dejó once muertos", W Radio, 13 April 2022.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, April-May 2022; Red Cross official, July 2022.

⁸⁶ Operational protocol says the military should aim for demobilisation first, followed by capture, with death in combat the last resort.

⁸⁷ A general recounted having attended monthly meetings with presidential aides, in which he was required to commit to percentage increases in captures and eradication – goals he would then be held to. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, October 2020. See also Nicholas Casey, "Colombia army's new kill orders send chills down ranks", *The New York Times*, 18 May 2019.

These metrics reflected, among other things, the focus placed on coca eradication as an imperative of Colombian security policy. Duque announced annual goals for the manual removal of illegal crops that rose each year during his term.⁸⁸ Each brigade in coca-growing areas was given a quota of hectares they needed to strip bare of the plant based on estimates of cultivation. U.S. assistance and political pressure has played a significant role in ensuring these operations remain a priority.⁸⁹ U.S. support for eradication has been a fixture for years. After the 2016 peace agreement, U.S. State Department funding for manual eradication jumped to \$26 million annually, up from a previous high of \$9.5 million in 2014.⁹⁰ Washington also supports crop eradication with fuel, aircraft maintenance, demining assistance and satellite information. But even with robust support from Washington, these operations are extremely taxing on manpower and resources. As an international security expert based in Colombia told Crisis Group:

No one has calculated the real cost of eradication. You are going to have one person eradicating, and he needs security, so that is maybe 90 support people, so that is 90 salaries. Plus, there are going to be landmines, so at least one person is going to get injured on a mine – and that is years of compensation. You are using six Black Hawks. A Black Hawk is \$4,500 per hour and you have to take several trips to get the eradicators into an area. Then you leave them there for some time, and they are going to need resupply, which is helicopters again.⁹¹

This enormous investment, often requiring up to 20 to 30 per cent of the relevant brigades' manpower, has yielded little payoff. The military estimates that as much as 85 per cent of denuded land is replanted with coca.⁹² The work, moreover, is demoralising for troops and often ends in confrontation with civilians.⁹³

Metrics that focus on high-level captures and kills as indicators of success have been similarly misguided.⁹⁴ Detentions have been prioritised not just for the elite units designed to undertake such operations but also for many regional brigades facing political pressure to bolster the numbers. Yet as one senior military official told Crisis Group, armed groups' ranks are easily repopulated: "Every day, we are capturing, but they continue to exist and to grow".⁹⁵ Commanders say security rarely improves following even the most important achievements, such as the apprehension of Dairo Úsuga, known as Otoniel, a Gulf Clan leader who spent three decades in armed and paramilitary groups. While politicians hailed his 2021 capture as equivalent to nabbing Pablo Escobar, the "king of cocaine" who headed the infamous Medellín cartel in the

⁸⁸ "Duque se fija como meta la erradicación de 100.000 hectáreas de coca en 2022", EFE, 4 January 2022.

⁸⁹ "Our number one, two and three issue is counter-narcotics". Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, November 2020.

⁹⁰ "Colombia: U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach", U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, international security expert, May 2022.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, December 2020.

⁹³ Crisis Group Report, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, op. cit.

⁹⁴ "Captures are our most important priority" in attacking the Gulf Clan, an officer said, "because we are trying to reduce their capacity". Crisis Group interview, brigade commander, March 2022.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior military official, May 2022.

1980s, commanders in affected areas noted few benefits.⁹⁶ “We captured Otoniel, but everything remains the same”, said another senior officer.⁹⁷

In contrast to the foregoing metrics, Colombian law includes one mechanism intended to encourage the military and other state institutions to place an emphasis on civilian protection, but thus far it has yielded mixed results. The State Ombudsman’s Early Warning System releases periodic alerts that legally compel the government to protect endangered communities. While the notion behind this system is to head off threats before they become serious, the military often responds with temporary interventions that meet their formal obligations but do little to subdue the danger – and may sometimes make matters worse.⁹⁸ For example, a commander might temporarily station extra troops around a town that is flagged as at risk. Yet when those troops later depart, the residents may be stigmatised by local armed groups as military collaborators, adding to the threat they already face from those groups. These reactive measures are common in areas where there are half a dozen early warnings at any given time. With dozens more active early warnings throughout the country, there is little internal or public scrutiny of results.

E. *Operations from the Commanders’ Perspective*

Brigade commanders who oversee operations in rural areas are responsible for balancing the military’s many priorities on a day-to-day basis. Operating under numerous constraints and pressures with insufficient resources, these commanders are often consumed by the need to respond to immediate threats while also meeting eradication targets and responding to early warnings from the Ombudsman. Aside from these imperatives, their other priority for the allocation of remaining personnel, flying hours and other capabilities is to conduct offensive (ie, capture-or-kill) operations against armed and criminal groups.⁹⁹

In order to conduct offensive operations, commanders must set up systems to collect and analyse intelligence – difficult work that can endanger the rural communities they are trying to protect.¹⁰⁰ Collection requires the military to overcome mistrust, which can be an uphill climb. Fearing retribution from armed groups, and concerned about the military’s intentions, civilians do not regularly report crime or armed group presence. Instead, the Colombian military relies on engagements with civilians in the field (ie, asking residents they happen to encounter what they have seen); undercover operations; paid sources; and information from captured or demobilised combat-

⁹⁶ “Captura de Otoniel es solo comparable con caída de Pablo Escobar”: Duque”, *El País*, 23 October 2021. Escobar surrendered to Colombian authorities in 1991. He later escaped and was eventually killed by police in 1993.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, January 2022. Another senior officer concurred. “Even though Otoniel was captured, we should think of [the Gulf Clan] as a living system”. Crisis Group interview, brigade commander, February 2022.

⁹⁸ The number of active early warnings, and how a commander has responded, form part of the standard presentation of results that each unit or brigade presents monthly.

⁹⁹ While the military’s preference is to capture its targets, the possibility that an operation will result in a lethal exchange and the target will be killed is sufficiently high that this report refers throughout to “capture-or-kill” operations.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, brigade commander, March and May 2022.

ants.¹⁰¹ Collection can entail great risks to physical safety, first and foremost for intelligence agents who in many cases will face death if armed groups discover them. Ordinary residents can also suffer backlash, even if not directly involved in intelligence work. The military at times publicly thanks communities for information that has led to a capture, which risks stigmatising the entire population as collaborators in the eyes of armed groups.¹⁰²

Offensive operations tend to rely on two tactics in particular to dismantle armed groups, the first of which centres around capture-or-kill operations. Because most brigades do not have the manpower or resources to set up permanently in rural areas, these operations are often surgical, meaning that forces enter an area, reach a target – whom they arrest or kill – and then leave. Increasingly, armed groups have learned that they can exploit the civilian population in order to thwart these efforts. For example, armed groups in departments including Cauca, Putumayo, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Chocó have coerced the population into intervening on their behalf by surrounding the military deployment and forcing soldiers to release captives. A military commander explained:

Sometimes when we have a capture, the community will protest but they admit to us later than they are obliged by the groups to do this and to retake the person we have arrested.¹⁰³

A second tactic that brigade commanders look to involves the use of strategic checkpoints and patrols to impede armed group movements and their illicit trade over certain preferred routes. But there are limits as to how far they can be used given Colombia's challenging topography. For example, in Nariño, the military identified key points along fourteen primary rivers, which they patrol sporadically to deter trafficking. Even so, there is only so much that can be achieved, in large part because most of the military's boats only operate in a certain water depth. "In middle-sized rivers we have some operational limitations, so we are mostly in large rivers. And the small rivers are mostly where the groups operate".¹⁰⁴ Still, commanders in the troubled Telembí triangle region say their increased presence along fluvial routes enabled the return of local mayors, many of whom were displaced due to clashes between armed groups in 2021.¹⁰⁵

The bottom line for many commanders is one of frustration. They say they are short on manpower and resources, as well as time to think about security beyond the short-term need to comply with indicators and other requirements. A number of commanders are vexed by their inability to craft an approach that could begin to reshape conflict in their localities. As a senior officer put it, "I am trying to put in place an intermediary strategy that has steps to protect the community. The soldiers and

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, brigade commanders and intelligence officers, September and October 2021, January and March 2022.

¹⁰² "The problem is when the military says that a capture is 'thanks to the community'. We have told them not to say this". Crisis Group interview, Afro-Colombian Community Council member, Tumaco, October 2021.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, brigade commander, October 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

the money we have are never enough. We have to prioritise”.¹⁰⁶ Commanders Crisis Group spoke to agree that they are not able to place proper emphasis on civilian protection as they must devote their attention to scoring hits on armed groups.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, February 2021.

IV. Institutional Constraints and Challenges Facing Colombia's Military

Colombia's military suffers from resource and budgetary constraints as well as internal bureaucratic and organisational challenges. A legacy of alleged corruption and human rights abuses also continues to take a toll on the military's effectiveness and its legitimacy in the public eye. While many individual military officials recognise the challenges posed by wrongdoing within the ranks, the military as an institution has not been forthright in addressing them or accepting responsibility.

A. *Personnel and Resources*

Problems with personnel figure high among the military's limitations. Employing nearly 300,000 people, the military does not lack for persons in arms.¹⁰⁷ But Colombia maintains a conscript army, and levels of professionalism are low among the rank and file.¹⁰⁸

All Colombian males are required to serve in the armed forces unless they can prove that they meet the criteria for exemption. The number of legal exceptions has expanded significantly in recent years, which has meant that fewer Colombians are signing up and that those who do often enlist because they have no other option.¹⁰⁹ In the words of a retired official: "The ones you get are there not because they want to be, but out of necessity".¹¹⁰ The military pays these conscripts less than the minimum wage, and there are very limited avenues either for advancement or for education and training for veterans. These incentives are unlikely to improve, despite pledges from the Petro administration to expand educational opportunities for soldiers. Already, 81 per cent of the Colombian military budget goes to personnel – including compensating and supporting over 200,000 veterans.¹¹¹ Pensions and other costs for these retirees are severely underfunded.¹¹²

Despite these difficulties, Colombia continues to rely on conscription as the basis for its military manpower. Brigades receive quotas for how many recruits they need to incorporate, and failing to meet them can affect an officer's evaluation.¹¹³ As quotas have risen in recent years, commanders have been left scrambling to find young men to fill the ranks, and many of those who arrive are less than fully committed to military service.¹¹⁴ Despite a highly skilled group of commissioned and non-commissioned

¹⁰⁷ These personnel are divided as follows: 250,000 in the military, 30,000 in the marines and 15,000 in the air force. Internal documents seen by Crisis Group.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, retired military officers and international security experts, Bogotá, May 2022.

¹⁰⁹ "Ley 1861 de 2017: Por la cual se reglamenta el servicio de reclutamiento, control de reservas y la movilización", Congress of Colombia, 4 August 2017, chapter 1, articles 11 and 12.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, May 2022.

¹¹¹ U.S. military estimate seen by Crisis Group.

¹¹² Internal documents seen by Crisis Group.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, retired army officer with knowledge of internal directives on recruitment, May 2022.

¹¹⁴ These quotas spurred members of the armed forces to take measures such as setting up checkpoints or undertaking raids in order to find young men who were eligible for mandatory service, a

officers, the problems with the conscript base mean that “a very small number of units have the actual capacity” to conduct sensitive operations.¹¹⁵ Added to these challenges, the military has only recently started to upgrade its personnel systems to help identify and assign individuals with specific skill sets to the tasks for which those skills are required.¹¹⁶

In making key appointments, political pressure on the armed forces has at times come to the fore. Despite its new personnel systems, there is evidence of favouritism in some appointments.¹¹⁷ Well-connected generals can influence who is placed where in certain units, a phenomenon known colloquially as placement *por vara* (by pointing a stick).¹¹⁸ At times, congressional deputies and senators also seek to shape these decisions, including asking the defence ministry to assign people to particular posts.¹¹⁹ This sort of influence may result in the appointment of officials who may be less qualified than other candidates. Soldiers say it also harms morale when troops see officers assigned based on proximity to powerful generals rather than merit.¹²⁰

Colombia’s labyrinthine military bureaucracy also produces its own inefficiencies. The military has created a high number of command positions, apparently in part to create leadership spots that mid-level troops can fill in order to meet promotion requirements. Despite reforms that began in 2016 to streamline chains of command, leadership remains diffuse and mandates can overlap. Within various parts of the military, many tasks require signoff or even direct management from the most senior level, overburdening the top brass.¹²¹

Equipment and budgetary constraints also affect the military’s ability to operate, particularly in distant terrain with little infrastructure. Along parts of the Pacific coast, the only viable routes inland are by river, and air support is vital to any operation where access is otherwise constrained. In one Amazon jungle jurisdiction roughly half the size of France, with few roads or other access points, the military has just one plane to prevent deforestation.¹²² Each brigade has a quota of hours for use of helicopters, planes and boats, and limits on maintenance and fuelling costs.¹²³ Because fuel and maintenance are paid in dollars, which have appreciated in value against the Colombian peso in recent years, available operating hours have dropped.¹²⁴ A brigade commander explained the dilemmas:

practice the new Defence Minister Iván Velásquez has prohibited. Tweet by @MinDefensa, Colombian ministry of defence, 6:50am, 8 September 2022.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, international security expert, Bogotá, May 2022.

¹¹⁶ “Modelo de Clasificación por Especialidades del Ejército Nacional”, Colombian National Army, 6 November 2016.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, retired army officers, May and June 2022.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, retired officer with knowledge of such cases, May 2022.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ “Decreto 1799 de 2000: Por el cual se dictan las normas sobre evaluación y clasificación para el personal de Oficiales y Suboficiales de las Fuerzas Militares y se establecen otras disposiciones”, Colombian Presidency, 14 September 2000.

¹²² Crisis Group interviews, European officials working on deforestation prevention, May 2022.

¹²³ Crisis Group interviews, brigade commanders in fluvial departments, April, October 2021 and January 2022.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, international security expert, May 2022.

I have 800km of river and three boats. Plus, we have to calculate our budget for gas – if we use it on one operation, that means we cannot use it for another. Our helicopter flying hours are the same – if we use them all at the beginning of the month, there are no more.¹²⁵

B. Corruption

Cases of corruption remain a stubborn problem within the military. Armed and criminal groups use their financial clout to enlist members of the security forces to inform on their colleagues and collaborate – or even participate – in illicit activities. Military officers have also in the past intentionally sought out relations with armed groups in order to combat or weaken a rival non-state outfit.¹²⁶ Accounts of reported collusion undermine public trust in the military, particularly in areas where several groups are competing to control territory. Officers' misbehaviour raises particularly acute concern among communities as to the motives governing military actions.¹²⁷

The most common type of infiltration of the military involves low-level corruption, in which an armed or criminal group pays soldiers for services, such as providing intelligence, redirecting patrols or looking the other way as trafficking takes place.¹²⁸ Demobilised members of armed groups have said in interviews that they try to recruit operations officers, who have some ability to influence troop movements.¹²⁹ Armed groups also try to forge relationships with retired soldiers, who understand military networks and can more easily penetrate them.¹³⁰ One commander said as many as 60 per cent of the Gulf Clan members who had been captured or demobilised in his area had previously served in the military.¹³¹

Higher-level corruption is also a problem, as illustrated by a number of scandals that have sullied the top brass. In one high-profile case, the Attorney General's Office is investigating a former commander of the armed forces – General Leonardo Barrero – for allegedly (during and after his time in uniform) furthering the interests of a criminal group, La Cordillera, tied to the Gulf Clan in Nariño.¹³² A conviction would be a particularly sharp blow to the military's efforts to portray itself as a bulwark of civilian protection, since Barrero was heading the mechanism intended to protect

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, military officer, January 2022.

¹²⁶ “‘Esta es la puta guerra’: General reconoce alianza con narcotraficantes para enfrentar disidencias de las Farc”, *Cambio*, 11 February 2022.

¹²⁷ “We can sit with the military and raise issues, but why should we, when the military is involved in narcotrafficking?”, asked an indigenous leader in Cauca after accusing soldiers at checkpoints of letting drug shipments pass through without inspection. Crisis Group interview, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020. Responding to similar cases, the military has expressed frustration that civilians do not report such incidents in a timely manner that would allow them to investigate. Crisis Group interviews, brigade commanders, September 2021, February–March 2022.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, brigade commanders, 2021 and 2022.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, international security source, Bogotá, May 2022.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, retired military intelligence officer, March 2022.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, brigade commander, January 2022.

¹³² “General Barrero, excomandante de FF.MM., sería ‘El Padrino’ del Clan del Golfo: Fiscalía,” Blue Radio, 15 February 2022.

endangered community and social leaders – including some killed by the Gulf Clan – at the time of several of his alleged crimes.¹³³

Officers say the military is weakened by corruption not only inside itself but also inside peer institutions. For example, breaking up illegal mining facilities requires the Attorney General's Office to be on the scene, which entails advanced coordination to ensure the correct prosecution personnel are present. But commanders complain that when they do coordinate, they too often see tipoffs to armed and criminal groups – something they suggest may be attributable to infiltration of prosecutorial staff.¹³⁴

The military prosecutes corruption in several ways. Those accused of infractions undergo disciplinary proceedings that, in the most serious cases, result in dismissal. Separately, cases are tried in the military penal system or by the Attorney General's Office. The latter can request jurisdiction over any open case, and similarly, the military penal system can send cases to civilian courts, as often happens when senior officers are accused of serious offenses.¹³⁵ Finally, the country's Inspector General can open disciplinary investigations of officers for failing to uphold their legal and constitutional duties. But reports of malfeasance often fail to rise to the surface; some soldiers say whistleblowers are rare due to fear of retaliation from superiors.¹³⁶

C. *Human Rights Abuses*

A historical legacy of military abuses and excessive use of force continues to cloud security forces' interactions with rural communities. Despite court proceedings and investigations into crimes committed by individuals, the military has yet to draw a line under its disreputable actions in the past, including by acknowledging institutional responsibility. Until it does so, it is likely to continue struggling to gain full public trust.

The role of military and police officers in atrocities committed, often under significant political pressure, during the FARC hostilities is well known in Colombia. Between 2006 and 2009, members of the military killed thousands of civilians (known as "false positives") and counted them as guerrillas as a means of topping up the number of combat deaths reported to their superiors and to state authorities.¹³⁷ High kill numbers were rewarded with promotions, extra days of vacation, and other incentives.¹³⁸ In one example of this racket, civilian "recruiters" paid by soldiers

¹³³ Commanders have also in some cases forged temporary alliances with a specific armed group in order to attack a common enemy. In February 2022, local media revealed recordings of a general in Cauca referring to cooperation with criminal group Los Pocillos in order to combat a FARC dissident faction. The tacit alliance resulted in the military taking credit for a raid later revealed to have been led by Los Pocillos, which left eight dead. Edison Bolaños, "La emboscada que enreda al Ejército en una alianza criminal en Cauca", *Cambio Colombia*, 14 February 2022.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, brigade commander, October 2020.

¹³⁵ "Directiva 003: Por medio de la cual se establecen lineamientos para definir la competencia de la Fiscalía General de la Nación para investigar a los aforados", Attorney General's Office, 2022.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, intelligence officer, December 2021.

¹³⁷ Details of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace investigation into the "false positives" can be found at "Caso 03: Asesinatos y desapariciones forzadas presentados como bajas en combate por agentes del Estado", Special Jurisdiction for Peace.

¹³⁸ "Batallón La Popa: soldado confesó que le dieron 100 mil pesos y arroz chino como premio por 'falsos positivos'", Infobae, 18 July 2022.

enticed poor, unemployed young people from urban areas such as Soacha, at the southern tip of Bogotá, with false promises of jobs, only to lead them to military forces, who killed them and dressed their corpses in guerrilla fatigues once they were in conflict-affected areas.¹³⁹

Some military units also engaged in direct cooperation over the years with paramilitary groups, which have been held responsible for a larger percentage of civilian deaths in Colombia's internal conflict than the FARC.¹⁴⁰ The armed forces provided the paramilitaries with weapons and logistical support in the fight against the guerrillas.¹⁴¹

Against this backdrop, the military has reformed its internal accountability mechanisms. After the "false positives" scandal came to light, then-President Uribe moved all cases against the military for serious crimes allegedly carried out during operations to the Attorney General's Office, rather than the internal penal system. Although a court later overturned this decision, the transitional justice system created by the peace accord now has jurisdiction over the false positive cases and other crimes carried out before 2016.¹⁴² Moreover, the attorney general retains the authority to take over any case from the military justice system, and in practice most controversial ones are now heard in civilian courts.¹⁴³

Even so, the military remains ambivalent when it comes to addressing its role in past abuses.¹⁴⁴ Although it has provided reports and documents to the transitional justice system, senior officers still decline to acknowledge responsibility on behalf of the armed forces as a whole, including before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the Truth Commission. Senior active and retired officers express deep misgivings about the judicial mechanisms holding their colleagues to account, which they view as placing the military and its alleged crimes on equal terms with the FARC guerrillas and their misdeeds.¹⁴⁵ Cases involving the military in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace generally lag behind those against the FARC, in part, judges say, because the armed forces have not been willing to cooperate, requiring investigators to piece together evidence from other sources.¹⁴⁶ Officers called before the transitional court report hav-

¹³⁹ Pressure on the military for combat deaths included both incentives and sanctions: commanders or brigades that reported a high number of kills were rewarded with extra holiday time and promotions, while poorly performing troops were removed or shifted to less high-profile roles. "Así recordaron en Ocaña las madres de Soacha", Centre for Historic Memory, 26 October 2018.

¹⁴⁰ "262.197 muertos dejó el conflicto armado", Centre for Historic Memory, 2 August 2018. The military contests these figures, arguing that the guerrillas were responsible for a larger share.

¹⁴¹ "Informe Final", op. cit., p. 337; "Los Lazos que Unen: Colombia y las relaciones militares-paramilitares", Human Rights Watch, 2000.

¹⁴² "Macro Caso 03: Asesinatos y desapariciones forzadas presentados como bajas en combate por agentes del Estado", Special Jurisdiction for Peace.

¹⁴³ "Anulan acuerdo firmado entre Gobierno y Fiscalía por Justicia Penal Militar", *El Espectador*, 11 December 2012.

¹⁴⁴ Colombia's allies, notably the U. S., also failed to address human rights concerns, continuing to provide aid directly to the military despite known abuses. Julie Turkowitz and Genevieve Glatzky, "Colombia's Truth Commission is highly critical of U.S. policy", *The New York Times*, 28 June 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, senior retired military officers, Bogotá, May 2022.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Special Jurisdiction for Peace magistrate, Bogotá, February 2022.

ing been advised by military-linked lawyers not to implicate more senior commanders, while those who have made public confessions have faced ostracism by peers.¹⁴⁷

Rural dwellers say the legacy of these abuses is not easy to overcome and deeply affects how they view the military today. Past crimes weigh heavily on perceptions of military collaboration with or indulgence of armed groups and their activities. To this day, when drug shipments pass unstopped, or when military operations appear to shift the balance of power in a particular group's favour, locals are apt to recall the times when ties between the military and paramilitaries were explicit and draw inferences about current relationships. A social leader from Arauquita remembers that immediately after the peace accord, the military appeared to be trying to cultivate trust among his community as farmers asked soldiers to pause forced coca eradication while they voluntarily removed the crops. Yet that trust collapsed because of misgivings about the past.

There was a remarkable change in the behaviour of the military. They were very different with the communities. ... We had spaces of confidence, but the community never believed the military, because in the past they have only invested in bombardments, displacement, clashes.¹⁴⁸

Still, when the military makes sincere efforts to address historical crimes, local populations tend to welcome it. In Montes de María, a region spanning parts of Bolívar and Sucre departments that suffered some of the worst incidents of paramilitary violence, community leaders say frank conversations with the marines (who have jurisdiction over the region), above all about military collaboration with the paramilitaries and the "false positives", have helped rebuild trust.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Bogotá, March and April 2022.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Arauca, March 2022.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, female social leader from Carmen del Bolívar, Maríalabaja, March 2022.

V. Community Perspectives

A. Fleeting Presence

The overwhelming complaint voiced by people living in conflict-affected areas is the absence of security forces outside urban centres. Yet while they long for a more robust security presence, they often reject the military's reliance on periodic patrolling, surgical capture-or-kill interventions and operations that target the illegal local economy, often to the residents' detriment. In short, they want security but not in its current form.

Charged with protecting populations spread out across huge and remote spaces, the military rarely has the capacity or the incentives to maintain permanent patrols in rural areas. But its absence reaffirms a commonly held sentiment in these areas that the Colombian state – whose main and often sole manifestation in these areas is the military – has decided to leave the civilian population to the mercy of armed and criminal groups. A local government official in Chocó said:

These armed groups are the ones in control. They create the rules, rather than the security forces. ... The national government has abandoned the territories to their fate.¹⁵⁰

Insecurity in these areas can reach alarming heights. In February 2022, the ELN announced an “armed strike” throughout areas it controlled, prohibiting citizens from opening shops, travelling on roads or even going outside. A community representative in southern Bolívar described how residents were left shut in with little to defend themselves beyond sticks and farm machetes.¹⁵¹ During a similar armed strike called by the Gulf Clan in May, social leaders in the northern department of Sucre complained that the military failed to patrol in rural districts.¹⁵²

Trust in the military as a guarantor of civilian protection suffers in oil- and mineral-producing regions, where residents often perceive (much of the time with reason) that the military devotes more resources to protecting infrastructure and private interests than to keeping civilians safe.¹⁵³ In Arauca, where there is roughly one soldier for every 30 inhabitants, the majority are deployed to protect the oil pipeline that runs through the region; meanwhile, rural communities go unpatrolled amid the most serious wave of violence since 2016.¹⁵⁴ “The armed forces are here to protect the oil sector, and nothing more”, a local government official said.¹⁵⁵

The military senses the acute public longing for protection. In Arauca and elsewhere, the armed forces often attempt to make up for their limitations with temporary or occasional patrols at key points. Yet these can entail even more risks for residents: despite it being prohibited in the military code of conduct, soldiers deployed

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Quibdó, January 2022.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Aguachica, March 2022.

¹⁵² Crisis Group telephone interviews, social leaders in Chalán, San Onofre and Ovejas, May 2022.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, brigade commander in resource-rich region, March 2022.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, international official, Arauca, July 2022; senior military officer, Arauca, March 2022.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Arauca, March 2022.

to remote areas often ask families to cook for them or provide lodging as they move through the territory.¹⁵⁶ This sort of compulsory hospitality can stigmatise a family or community. As an ethnic community leader explained:

When they [the military] come around, maybe they will ask to be fed or to stay the night at your farm. And then those people are marked as informants. Many innocent people have died this way.¹⁵⁷

B. *Enemies Everywhere*

In areas where armed groups are prevalent, community members describe a tendency for troops to treat them as though they are part and parcel of those groups. This attitude can manifest itself in verbal harassment and even bodily harm.

Locals regularly complain about the stigmatisation they suffer around checkpoints that the military commonly deploys along trafficking routes. While intended to keep tabs on illicit activity, the checkpoints can make life more difficult for innocent civilians.¹⁵⁸ Religious authorities in rural Chocó said soldiers often give young men a hard time at checkpoints, for instance demanding they provide river transport without payment.¹⁵⁹ Social leaders in southern Bolívar say young men are often detained without evidence of armed group membership and at times physically mistreated.¹⁶⁰

Because social leaders often do have to engage with armed groups, who exercise de facto authority in the areas they control, security forces tend to view these leaders with suspicion. Ethnic authorities in Chocó have tried to safeguard their autonomy from armed groups, in some cases through direct conversations to negotiate limits on these outfits' influence. When the military arrives, an observer notes, "the security forces accuse the ethnic authorities of being informants. They call them guerrilla fighters".¹⁶¹ This treatment essentially leaves ethnic authorities without an ally, seen as adversaries by armed groups and the state alike.

Poor farmers accused of taking part in deforestation or illegal mining complain that they are assumed to be part of criminal organisations, even when their role is minimal or involuntary. Their grievances often have merit: while sometimes individuals work with the armed groups of their own free will, much of the time they are coerced into participating in illicit ventures and threatened with harm if they do not. On other occasions, they perform functions for the armed groups out of desperate economic need. Operation Artemisa, a major law enforcement campaign aimed at combating deforestation, has tended to punish the impoverished farmers who cut

¹⁵⁶ "MFE 6-27 Derecho Operacional Terrestre: Anexo B", Armed Forces of Colombia, 2012; "Reglamentos de Operaciones y Maniobras de Combate Irregular: Second Edition", Armed Forces of Colombia, 2010, pp. 23-25.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, ethnic community leader, Arauca, March 2022.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, observer with human rights monitoring organisation, Arauquita, March 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, religious authorities, Quibdó, January 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, social leader from San Pablo, Bolívar, Aguachica, March 2022.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian agency official, Quibdó, January 2022.

down trees, while those who fund and promote these activities (often including economic and political elites) go free.¹⁶²

Civilians find themselves similarly caught between security forces and armed groups during forced eradication operations. When manual eradicators arrive, it is common for an armed group to compel the community to protest – essentially turning residents into human shields placed between two hostile sides.¹⁶³ If eradication is successful, it is the poor farmers – not the criminals – who suffer the most immediate economic loss. Traffickers can easily make up for small gaps in supply, but small-hold farmers stand to lose at least four months of income, accounting for the time from replanting to harvest.

C. *Bearing the Costs*

Operations intended to combat armed groups can cause direct blowback for civilians. Captures often spark waves of violence in their wake. Armed groups are increasingly adept at compelling communities, under threat of violence, to resist the military when it attempts to arrest one of their members. In the months leading up to the above-referenced capture of Otoniel, the Gulf Clan leader was hiding in an Indigenous reserve in southern Córdoba. In an effort to protect him, the Gulf Clan pressured the local Embera, who as an autonomous ethnic community have constitutionally protected rights to self-governance within their lands, to expel the military using their legal prerogatives. They attempted to do so, but also abandoned their homes for fear that fighting would break out between the military and Gulf Clan.¹⁶⁴

Conversely, when captures are successful, armed groups tend to retaliate directly against the local population. A commander explained: “These groups look around them and say, ‘Who was it who informed the military?’ And they kill those people”.¹⁶⁵ Violence also often unfolds within an armed group, as rival members compete to fill the gap left behind. Militants battle it out to advance within their group, and then to consolidate control both within the group and the community. After Otoniel’s arrest, military commanders in affected regions reported an increase in homicides as a result of “internal purges” intended to ensure that different parts of the organisation fell in line behind new leadership.¹⁶⁶

The military today describes its enemy as equal parts groups of armed fighters and networks of collaborators, who pose as civilians while performing vital support roles. Residents of the countryside, however, dispute this view, maintaining that it endangers actual civilians by making them military targets.¹⁶⁷

The benchmark for soldiers to decide who is a full-time enemy combatant is indeed blurred. Because the military views civilians as playing a primary function within

¹⁶² Crisis Group Latin America Report N°91, *A Broken Canopy: Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia*, 4 November 2021.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group Report, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, op. cit.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, social leader, Montería, February 2022. “Pueblo Embera katío anuncia desplazamiento a Montería ante regreso del conflicto al resguardo,” *La Piragua*, 21 April 2021.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, February 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, brigade commander, February 2022.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, Bogotá, May and September 2022; community leaders from Bolívar, Chocó and Arauca, January, February and March 2022.

an armed group, offensive operations can wind up capturing, wounding or killing individuals who community members say are civilians.¹⁶⁸ While the military tends to view all those participating in illegal activities as connected to armed groups, community members argue that this approach fails to recognise the day-to-day realities of living under coercive control. Elected local council members, for example, are often obliged by armed groups to call meetings; council members who try to resist or resign face violent reprisal.¹⁶⁹ Yet these same individuals may be considered by the military as having sufficient links to armed groups to be deemed targetable in military operations.¹⁷⁰ These grey areas can pit the military against many of the civilians who most need protection from armed groups.

¹⁶⁸ Although there are no codified international legal norms governing this debate, the Red Cross defines participants in hostilities as either persons whose primary activity is membership in an armed group or anyone actively engaged in combat at the moment of fighting. Civilians who occasionally play a role in these groups would generally be protected against lethal action unless they are actively involved in a firefight. “Interpretive Guidance of the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities”, ICRC, 2009.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, local council members and presidents, Mocoa and Orito, April 2021.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, Bogotá, May 2022.

VI. A Way Forward

The new government has endorsed a shift toward placing civilian protection at the heart of the military's mission. While it will take some months for the administration to complete a new security strategy, in his initial communication to soldiers on 2 September, Armed Forces Commander Major General Helder Fernan Giraldo Bonilla named his top two priorities as contributing to human security and protecting all Colombians. His message stressed the need to respect human rights, take into account the blowback from operations on civilians and measure success by improvements in overall safety rather than raw indicators.¹⁷¹

While the change in emphasis is welcome, actually executing a pivot along these lines will be no small challenge. The armed forces will need to make concrete changes that will enable them to strengthen control of territory while reducing violence in the most troubled settings. These changes are also fundamental to the longer-term goal of opening channels of communication and trust – today largely non-existent – between the military and rural communities.¹⁷² In pursuing these goals, however, the Petro government may face resistance in military circles. Key senior military officers say they do not yet understand what Petro's rhetoric will mean in practice, and voice concern that the president's promises to end forced eradication will be a windfall for illegal groups.¹⁷³

As it pursues reforms, the government will need to move with tact, being careful not to alienate the armed forces, whose support it will need. For example, the military's buy-in will be vital to the government's efforts to pursue negotiations with remaining armed groups. Violence has worsened in various areas since the election, in part because armed groups are seeking to consolidate their positions ahead of any future negotiations. Preventing prospective peace processes from aggravating insecurity will require close alignment between the civilian leaders preparing for talks and military commanders on the ground. Negotiators with experience in past peace processes insist that continued military pressure is often vital to ensuring that armed groups remain willing to talk.¹⁷⁴

A. Goals and Indicators

One way to begin moving away from the flawed metrics and toward the goals that Major General Bonilla outlined on 2 September is to change the former to align with the latter. The metrics upon which field commanders were evaluated under the previous government – primarily demobilisations, captures, kills and hectares eradicated – provide little real information about the military's ability to protect civilians and wrest control from armed groups. They are too often of limited use – and can indeed be counterproductive – in measuring durable progress in tackling security challenges.

¹⁷¹ "QSO 02 de Septiembre de 2022", Commander of the Armed Forces, 2 September 2022.

¹⁷² According to the Truth Commission, channels of dialogue would help "put the protection of life and the respective for human dignity at the centre" of security policy. "Informe Final", op. cit., p. 843.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, July and September 2022.

¹⁷⁴ "Without military pressure, none of these groups is actually interested in negotiating, even the ELN". Crisis Group interview, official involved in past and current peace talks, Bogotá, September 2022.

Of particular concern, they risk motivating the military to engage in operations against armed groups for the sake of hitting performance benchmarks, without regard for the effects on rural residents.

By adopting different measures of success, the defence ministry can help to reshape commanders' incentives and strengthen their pursuit of genuine improvements in community security. Without ceasing to fight armed groups, the military should measure its success based on metrics that relate directly to the security of local people. Rather than captures and kills, they should judge performance based on whether attacks on social leaders and other civilians are diminishing; what percentage of municipalities have a regular police or military presence; how many people are forcibly recruited into armed groups; and whether attacks on critical infrastructure are becoming less frequent. Among other benefits, these indicators would encourage commanders to revisit their tactics by requiring them to factor in the reality that surgical capture-or-kill operations often have the effect of putting civilians at greater risk of harm.

As regards rolling back the illicit economy, the metrics there need to change as well. Bogotá, urged on by Washington, has placed too much stock in the number of hectares of coca forcibly cleared, which entrenches a forced eradication policy that for years has failed to achieve lasting results. It instead should focus more attention on Colombia's many small-hold farmers who cultivate coca on modest family plots. For example, Bogotá might develop measures that gauge performance by the number of small-hold farmers who voluntarily rip out their coca plants as part of crop substitution programs – something that will in many cases require state support and protection, at least in the beginning.

Finally, field commanders often very reasonably point to the need for greater sensitivity to local conditions in the way the military approaches its mission, and the indicators by which they are judged should similarly reflect the very different situations into which forces are deployed. For example, the military might choose to emphasise reducing killings of social leaders in places such as Cauca, where the problem is severe. Countering deforestation and reducing the number of families reliant on coca might figure higher in protected forest and Amazon regions. In all cases, the military's ability to achieve specific goals will of course be affected by security conditions – with major improvements more challenging in places where it has to focus on providing basic security – and performance expectations should be adjusted accordingly.

B. *Defining the Enemy*

The military lacks consistent and coherent rules for defining what constitutes participation in hostilities or membership of an armed group in conflict with the state. Addressing this lacuna through a clearer definition of membership may help ensure that military rules of engagement reflect appropriate constraints.

At present, the military has considerable latitude to determine who constitutes an armed group member or a participant in hostilities. When dealing with alleged civilian support networks, the military decides what level of involvement makes an individual targetable. In the rank and file, the belief that the military is fighting a pervasive internal enemy persists and informs decision-making. But while there is little doubt that civilians sometimes engage with armed groups, they tend to do so as a result of the latter's coercive power. Communities and the military frequently disagree as to

whether these relations amount to armed group membership. For example, residents might challenge the idea that a local council president, forced into organising a meeting for an armed group, has in effect joined the group and should be targetable on that basis. The military's current standards too often lead to civilians in proximity to violent groups being treated as militants, undermining public trust and reducing the military's capacity to work with the affected communities.

One way to tighten up the definition of who can be targeted would be to adhere more closely to guidance from the International Committee of the Red Cross on armed group membership and direct participation in hostilities.¹⁷⁵ Under the guidance, only individuals who become functional combatants through continuous direct participation in hostilities, or who are actively engaged in combat at the moment they are targeted, are deemed permissible targets of lethal force.¹⁷⁶

These safeguards might help gradually usher in a much-needed change in the military's conceptions of the enemies it is fighting. Civilians in Colombia's conflict zones often have little to no choice as to whether they collaborate from time to time. Rather than attacking these civilians when they are peacefully going about their affairs, the military should seek the means of overcoming their isolation and offer them protection so that they are less susceptible to being pressed into occasional armed group service. Some in the military have already started to embrace this approach, but codifying it into law, doctrine and norms around engagement could catalyse a more general institutional change.

C. Operations

Surgical offensive operations aiming to capture or kill enemy combatants, which as noted are among the most common, often cause blowback for civilians as armed groups retaliate against the population for their alleged collaboration and/or purge communities to re-establish control. These operations should be used sparingly and – as would be encouraged by the new indicators recommended above – with a more careful balancing of risk and benefit. The military should consider, for example, whether the target's removal would affect an armed group's ability to operate, and balance any prospective weakening of the group against the possible harm to civilians. Likewise, and particularly in ethnically autonomous territories, military planners should evaluate the risk that residents would be coerced into impeding any capture, potentially thwarting the mission while providing armed groups with the opportunity to consolidate their grip on civilians in the process.

As discussed, some operations targeted at one group can have the unintended effect of benefiting another armed group in the area. Here again, the military should consider how to take these second- and third-order effects into account in determining whether the benefits of an operation outweigh the costs, including the perception of the local population, which may believe the armed forces to be working in favour of the interests of one illegal group over another. In these cases, the military should

¹⁷⁵ "Interpretive Guidance of the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities", op. cit.

¹⁷⁶ Even in operations against legitimate targets, the military must comply with principles of proportionality and distinction that would prevent unnecessary casualties.

evaluate the risks that a new armed group could occupy territory freed of a rival outfit, and the possibility that the newcomer would purge that area of alleged civilian supporters of its adversary. When undertaking operations that could have this effect, the military might consider leaving a more substantial ground presence over a longer time period.

Beyond creating room for these assessments, there are certain concrete steps the military should take immediately to halt activities that cause harm to civilians. Activities that fall into this category would include requiring civilians to offer meals or lodging to deployed soldiers. As noted, once the troops depart, families who provide this assistance can face stigmatisation or accusations of collaboration. Although the military code prohibits this practice, the ban should be better enforced. As for its intelligence work, the military should avoid publicly thanking communities for information that leads to an operational success. Caution and stronger protocols are also warranted regarding the recruitment and maintenance of sources. Security forces in some cases recruit vulnerable individuals who are likely to face violent reprisal if caught, for example girlfriends or family members of alleged criminals. At a minimum, the military could consider stronger protection protocols in these cases.

D. *Planning for Consolidating Control*

Colombia's new government is looking to disarm and demobilise more armed and criminal groups, either through peace talks or by pressing them to "surrender" to the courts. It is still too early to say what prospects these efforts have for success. Nevertheless, as part of planning, the new government and the military should begin considering the security forces' possible role in assuming short-term territorial control over areas from which armed groups withdraw, with the aim of avoiding the proliferation of violent outfits that followed the 2016 peace accord.

Current and retired military officers point to a number of approaches that could help assure longer-term territorial control. Perhaps the most ambitious is the creation of a rural national guard that would maintain a permanent presence and exercise a policing role.¹⁷⁷ Crucially, and unlike the military, this force would focus on building long-term relationships with residents of the countryside. The military would still be initially charged with occupying territory, as it is the only force capable of doing so, but it would play a critical role in training a newly recruited or repurposed corps of rural guards and handing over responsibility for security.

The government should also consider how to make best use of the resources and manpower currently devoted to forced coca eradication. If the Petro administration pauses or ends these operations, as it has promised to do, it could use the spare troops and assets to bolster voluntary crop substitution and rural development.¹⁷⁸ In particular, the military could provide protection for civilians who eradicate their own coca crops and assist in verification of compliance.

As part of its efforts to achieve "total peace", the government should also expand existing voluntary demobilisation programs for combatants. Today, only individuals

¹⁷⁷ See, for example, Carlos Alfonso Velásquez, "La fuerza pública que requiere el postconflicto", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 5 May 2015.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, July 2022.

deemed to belong to “organised armed groups” can join such a process, meaning that entire fronts, groups of militants and members of smaller criminal outfits that fall short of the government’s criteria are ineligible. Opening up access would enhance the number of routes out of armed activity for a wider array of armed group associates and criminals.

For a limited number of voluntary and well-vetted candidates who emerge from the demobilisation process, Colombia might consider the option of integration into the security forces. It has chosen this course in the recent past: prior to the peace talks, the military employed former guerrillas who had laid down their arms individually in roles such as guides in rural areas.¹⁷⁹ A number of former FARC combatants who demobilised following the peace accord have taken up legal work as bodyguards, including within a public force dedicated to protecting potential targets of violence.¹⁸⁰ Integration into the security forces could provide a lifeline for former fighters with few other skills to offer on the labour market.

E. Accountability and Integrity

Rooting out corruption and prosecuting abuses is vital to rebuilding the security forces’ credibility with the public. As a first step, Colombia needs to clarify how legal proceedings against military officers should be handled, and how these should, if at all, be distinct from cases against civilians. Colombia’s constitution enshrines a military jurisdiction to try cases related to misconduct during operations, but subsequent legal rulings and decrees have chipped away at its exclusive authority.¹⁸¹

At present, the legal process is confused, militating against efforts to deter or publicly clarify misdeeds. Cases of misconduct or criminal activity can fall under the jurisdiction of the military’s penal system or civilian courts, but there are no clear rules for which cases end up where.¹⁸² The attorney general can request cases, or the military can send cases to the civilian courts; others remain subject to internal prosecution. Cases prior to 2016 involving serious wartime crimes, meanwhile, fall under the oversight of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. Soldiers express anxiety over the confusion between court systems, arguing that it undermines willingness to report abuses since many in the rank and file are disinclined to expose their peers to civilian justice.

Petro has stated his support for eliminating the military jurisdiction altogether, which is a desirable long-term goal for all but the most minor infractions, given that it would improve transparency and help dispel concerns about preferential treatment by judges.¹⁸³ It is not, however, feasible in the short term, in large part because of limited capacity in the Attorney General’s Office as well as a lack of trained prosecutors

¹⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, retired military intelligence officer, July 2022.

¹⁸⁰ A number of reintegrated FARC fighters now work for the National Protection Unit, which offers protection for endangered social leaders, politicians and ex-combatants. “UNP confirma que reintegrados de las Farc hacen curso de escoltas”, Caracol Radio, 11 June 2017.

¹⁸¹ “Constitución Política de Colombia”, 1991, article 221; “Acto Legislativo 1 de 2015”, Colombian Congress, 25 June 2015.

¹⁸² “Auto 453/21: Conflicto Aparente de Competencia - Jurisdicción ordinaria y jurisdicción penal militar”, Colombian Constitutional Court, 5 August 2021.

¹⁸³ “Por una seguridad humana que se mida en vidas”, op. cit.

and judges. While these civilian authorities are being strengthened, the military justice system should take steps to increase transparency and accessibility. Immediate family members of victims should be allowed to sit in on hearings and public access to court proceedings and legal briefs should be permitted. Meanwhile, civilian leaders must remain vigilant to ensure that there is no bias in key military judicial appointments, especially in light of allegations of such favouritism under the previous administration.¹⁸⁴

The military could also do more to detect internal corruption, and to prosecute the offenders, through stronger counter-intelligence work to better understand when its ranks have been infiltrated by armed groups and improved protections for whistleblowers. Testimony from lower-level officers indicates that some are afraid to document abuses of power by their superiors. The military should find redress for this serious hindrance to its credibility and effectiveness. Whistleblowers need guarantees of anonymity, as well as independent reporting channels outside the normal chain of command.

Integrity within the armed forces should also be strengthened through changes to the appointment system. Personnel assignments are sometimes subject to favouritism and political intervention. The military could consider safeguards to ensure the best candidates are considered and mandate holders possess appropriate qualifications. Political leaders should resist the temptation to appoint allies in favour of fortifying meritocracy, as Petro's government pledges to do.¹⁸⁵ To boost confidence in the value of meritocracy within its ranks, the military could improve transparency around the process for naming key appointments, for example making public appointees' CVs and qualifications.

F. *Aligning the Military with the Peace Process, the Petro Government and Rural Communities*

Ensuring military commitment to the peace process with the FARC, and potentially with other armed groups, represents a core challenge for the Petro government. The 2016 peace agreement provides a roadmap for ending the cycle of conflict in rural Colombia; it includes reforms that would strengthen and diversify the rural economy, expand state services to these areas, reduce conflict around land ownership and find alternatives to the costly, exhausting work of forced coca eradication – all things that would improve the military's operating environment. But so far, the military has remained ambivalent toward it, in large part because of misgivings about the transitional justice system.

One step that might help encourage the armed forces to invest more in the agreement would be through the National Commission for Security Guarantees, a mechanism created by the accord and intended to combine expertise from the government, military, civil society and communities to draft a plan to combat or counter armed and criminal groups, particularly remnants of former paramilitary organisations. Under the Duque administration, the commission met infrequently and largely failed to

¹⁸⁴ "Las últimas 'jugaditas' del gobierno de Iván Duque en la Justicia Penal Militar", *Diario Criterio*, 20 August 2022.

¹⁸⁵ "Por una seguridad humana que se mida en vidas", op. cit.

make progress on concrete proposals, in part, members say, because the government used the space to share its own policies rather than discuss new ones. This body, in reinvigorated form, could be a central hub for efforts to build a comprehensive strategy toward the negotiated disarmament of armed and criminal groups. Close involvement in this commission would also enable the military to achieve a more trusting relationship with the government, and eventually with rural communities.

The Petro administration should also consider including the military in plans to hold regional dialogues as part of future peace negotiations. These forums would be intended to bring together local and national authorities as well as community leaders and civil society to map out plans for bringing armed conflict to an end. While a lack of trust among rural communities may curb the military's participation in these events at first, some senior officers have voiced their support for a regional approach to peace talks given the great diversity in Colombia's conflicts. They worry, however, that commitments made without their input could prove impossible to translate into the practice of military operations.¹⁸⁶

All these challenges are elevated by the wariness of Petro among the military, with some in its ranks even holding him in barely concealed contempt. Because of its size, territorial deployment and institutional powers, the military could delay or undermine reforms. The Petro administration will need to invest considerable energy in steering its relationship with the military in a more constructive direction by cultivating top officers on a day-to-day basis. It should also draw on the military's expertise in constructing its proposals, particularly through the academic and policy structures within the armed forces that are intended to update approaches to conflict. The U.S. and other allies can also help reassure an institution with which they have a longstanding relationship. The military must meanwhile continue to demonstrate its pragmatism and loyalty to the constitution.

Lastly, the armed forces need to take bold steps to build trust with rural communities. Pressure from armed groups, fear of being labelled informants and historical ill-will mean that conversations between conflict-affected civilians and troops are rare and laden with risk. Taking steps to implement the above recommendations may help create a better atmosphere for rebuilding trust. A more robust institutional commitment to and participation in transitional justice mechanisms and transparency for past crimes are perhaps the strongest signals that the military can send to people in the Colombian countryside. Support for the peace accord and good-faith measures to protect civilians during military operations could also help reopen channels of dialogue.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, September 2022.

VII. Conclusion

Protecting civilians has notionally stood at the heart of security policy in Colombia for over a decade, yet it has failed to become the guiding principle for most military operations. Today, the military largely understands civilian protection as rooted in surgical offensive operations against the country's many armed groups and forced coca eradication. Yet these same operations often place civilians directly at risk of violent retaliation while failing to dismantle armed and criminal groups or weaken the illicit businesses they oversee. The unintended harm caused undermines local trust in the security forces and strengthens armed groups' ability to exert social and territorial control.

The Petro administration has entered office with grand ambitions on various fronts, not least in security policy. Yet the space for radical reform is circumscribed, while cooperation with the armed forces is indispensable. The government promises to reform the military, seek peace with armed groups and rely less on offensive force to achieve its goals. But it will almost certainly need to turn to the security forces to deal with some of the intransigently violent outfits competing for territory and profit throughout Colombia. The military, for its part, has a crucial role to play in helping build safe communities, changing the way they view the state and encouraging legal livelihoods. Its contribution will need to begin internally, through updates to operational procedures and doctrine, as well as promotion of organisational integrity. Political leaders can guide the way by signalling their support for success metrics that make clear their desire for the military to adapt to the complex threats facing Colombia and embrace civilian protection as its primary goal.

Soldiers, however, cannot continue to be the predominant face of public authority in the countryside. There is no purely military solution to Colombia's rural insecurity. Nor can the armed forces be expected to shoulder all the state's work indefinitely. Through the reforms outlined above, the military can help foster more secure conditions in Colombia's rural areas, setting the stage for civilian authorities to move back into the lead.

Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 27 September 2022

Appendix A: Map of Colombia



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations and organizations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Global Challenges Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Stiftung Mercator, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

September 2022

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2019

Special Reports and Briefings

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South Latin America Report N°73, 28 February 2019 (also available in Spanish).

A Way Out of Latin America's Impasse over Venezuela, Latin America Briefing N°38, 14 May 2019 (also available in Spanish).

The Keys to Restarting Nicaragua's Stalled Talks, Latin America Report N°74, 13 June 2019 (also available in Spanish).

A Glimmer of Light in Venezuela's Gloom, Latin America Report N°75, 15 July 2019 (also available in Spanish).

Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast, Latin America Report N°76, 8 August 2019 (also available in Spanish).

Venezuela's Military Enigma, Latin America Briefing N°39, 16 September 2019 (also available in Spanish).

Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism, Latin America Briefing N°40, 20 September 2019 (also available in Spanish).

Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency, Latin America Report N°77, 25 October 2019 (also available in Spanish).

Peace in Venezuela: Is There Life after the Barbados Talks?, Latin America Briefing N°41, 11 December 2019 (also available in Spanish).

A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups, Latin America Report N°78, 20 February 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela's Crisis, Latin America Report N°79, 11 March 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19, Latin America Briefing N°42, 16 April 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace, Latin America Report N°80, 4 May 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, Latin America Report N°81, 8 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Bolivia Faces New Polls in Shadow of Fraud Row, Latin America Briefing N°43, 31 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace, Latin America Report N°82, 6 October 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle, Latin America Report N°83, 13 November 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°84, 14 December 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Venezuela: What Lies Ahead after Election Clinches Maduro's Clean Sweep, Latin America Report N°85, 21 December 2020 (also available in Spanish).

The Exile Effect: Venezuela's Overseas Opposition and Social Media, Latin America Report N°86, 24 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia, Latin America Report N°87, 26 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Risks of a Rigged Election in Nicaragua, Latin America Report N°88, 20 May 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land, Latin America Report N°89, 2 June 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests, Latin America Report N°90, 2 July 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°44, 30 September 2021 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia, Latin America Report N°91, 4 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll, Latin America Briefing N°45, 23 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC, Latin America Report N°92, 30 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Appendix D: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees

PRESIDENT

Comfort Ero

Former Crisis Group Vice Interim President and Africa Program Director

CO-CHAIRS

Frank Giustra

President & CEO, Fiore Group; Founder, Radcliffe Foundation

Susana Malcorra

Former Foreign Minister of Argentina

OTHER TRUSTEES

Fola Adeola

Founder and Chairman, FATE Foundation

Hushang Ansary

Chairman, Parman Capital Group LLC; Former Iranian Ambassador to the U.S. and Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs

G rard Araud

Former Ambassador of France to the U.S.

Carl Bildt

Former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Sweden

Sandra Breka

Member, Executive Committee and Board, European Endowment for Democracy

Maria Livanos Cattau

Former Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce

Ahmed Charai

Chairman and CEO of Global Media Holding and publisher of the Moroccan weekly *L'Observateur*

Nathalie Delapalme

Executive Director and Board Member at the Mo Ibrahim Foundation

Alexander Downer

Former Australian Foreign Minister and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom

Sigmar Gabriel

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice Chancellor of Germany

Mo Ibrahim

Founder and Chair, Mo Ibrahim Foundation; Founder, Celtel International

Wadah Khanfar

Co-Founder, Al Sharq Forum; former Director General, Al Jazeera Network

Nasser al-Kidwa

Chairman of the Yasser Arafat Foundation; Former UN Deputy Mediator on Syria

Bert Koenders

Former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations

Andrey Kortunov

Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council

Ivan Krastev

Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies (Sofia); Founding Board Member of European Council on Foreign Relations

Tzipi Livni

Former Foreign Minister and Vice Prime Minister of Israel

Helge Lund

Former Chief Executive BG Group (UK) and Statoil (Norway)

Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown

Former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme

William H. McRaven

Retired U.S. Navy Admiral who served as 9th Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command

Shivshankar Menon

Former Foreign Secretary of India; former National Security Adviser

Naz Modirzadeh

Director of the Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict

Federica Mogherini

Former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Saad Mohseni

Chairman and CEO of MOBY Group

Ayo Obe

Chair of the Board of the Gor e Institute (Senegal); Legal Practitioner (Nigeria)

Lubna Olayan

Chair of Executive Committee and Deputy Chairperson of Olayan Financing Company (OFC)

Meghan O'Sullivan

Former U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser on Iraq and Afghanistan

Kerry Propper

Managing Partner of ATW Partners; Founder and Chairman of Chardan Capital

Ahmed Rashid

Author and Foreign Policy Journalist, Pakistan

Ghassan Salam 

Former UN Secretary-General's Special Representative and Head of the UN Support Mission in Libya; Former Minister of Culture of Lebanon; Founding Dean of the Paris School of International Affairs, Sciences Po University

Juan Manuel Santos Calder n

Former President of Colombia; Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2016

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Former President of Liberia

Alexander Soros

Deputy Chair of the Global Board, Open Society Foundations

George Soros

Founder, Open Society Foundations and Chair, Soros Fund Management

Aleander Stubb

Director of the School of Transnational Governance; Former Prime Minister of Finland

Darian Swig

Founder and President, Article 3 Advisors; Co-Founder and Board Chair, Article3.org

Helle Thorning-Schmidt

CEO of Save the Children International; former Prime Minister of Denmark

CORPORATE COUNCILS

A distinguished group of companies who share Crisis Group's vision and values, providing support and sharing expertise to strengthen our efforts in preventing deadly conflict.

President's Council

CORPORATE

BP
Shearman & Sterling LLP
White & Case LLP

INDIVIDUAL

(2) Anonymous
David Brown & Erika Franke
The Edelman Family Foundation

Stephen Robert
Alexander Soros
Ian R. Taylor

International Advisory Council

CORPORATE

(1) Anonymous
APCO Worldwide Inc.
Chevron
Edelman UK & Ireland
Eni
Equinor
Ninety One
Tullow Oil plc
Warburg Pincus

INDIVIDUAL

(3) Anonymous
Mark Bergman
Stanley Bergman & Edward Bergman
Peder Bratt
Lara Dauphinee
Herman De Bode
Ryan Dunfield
Tanaz Eshaghian
Seth & Jane Ginns
Ronald Glickman
Geoffrey R. Hoguet & Ana Luisa Ponti
Geoffrey Hsu

David Jannetti
Faisel Khan
Cleopatra Kitti
Samantha Lasry
Jean Manas & Rebecca Haile
Dror Moreh
Lise Strickler & Mark Gallogly
Charitable Fund
The Nommontu Foundation
Brian Paes-Braga
Kerry Propper
Duco Sickinghe
Nina K. Solarz
Raffi Vartanian

Ambassador Council

Rising leaders from diverse fields who contribute their perspectives and talents to support Crisis Group's mission.

Christina Bache
Alieu Bah
Amy Benziger
James Blake
Thomas Cunningham
Matthew Devlin
Sabrina Edelman
Sabina Frizell
Sarah Covill
Lynda Hammes
Joe Hill
Lauren Hurst

Reid Jacoby
Tina Kaiser
Jennifer Kanyamibwa
Gillian Lawie
David Litwak
Madison Malloch-Brown
Megan McGill
Hamesh Mehta
Clara Morain Nabity
Gillian Morris
Duncan Pickard
Lorenzo Piras

Betsy (Colleen) Popken
Sofie Roehrig
Perfecto Sanchez
Rahul Sen Sharma
Chloe Squires
Leeanne Su
AJ Twombly
Theodore Waddelow
Zachary Watling
Grant Webster
Sherman Williams
Yasin Yaqubie

SENIOR ADVISERS

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

Martti Ahtisaari
Chairman Emeritus

George Mitchell
Chairman Emeritus

Thomas R. Pickering
Chairman Emeritus

Gareth Evans
President Emeritus

Kenneth Adelman
Adnan Abu-Odeh
HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal
Celso Amorim
Óscar Arias
Richard Armitage
Diego Arria
Zainab Bangura
Nahum Barnea

Kim Beazley
Shlomo Ben-Ami
Christoph Bertram
Lakhdar Brahimi
Kim Campbell
Jorge Castañeda
Joaquim Alberto Chissano
Victor Chu
Mong Joon Chung
Sheila Coronel
Pat Cox
Gianfranco Dell'Alba
Jacques Delors
Alain Destexhe
Mou-Shih Ding
Uffe Ellemann-Jensen
Stanley Fischer
Carla Hills

Swanee Hunt
Wolfgang Ischinger
Aleksander Kwasniewski
Ricardo Lagos
Joanne Leedom-Ackerman
Todung Mulya Lubis
Graça Machel
Jessica T. Mathews
Miklós Németh
Christine Ockrent
Timothy Ong
Roza Otunbayeva
Olara Otunnu
Lord (Christopher) Patten
Fidel V. Ramos
Olympia Snowe
Javier Solana
Pär Stenbäck