



Colombia in show of force as Uribe is sworn in again

By Andy Webb-Vidal in Bogotá

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More than 30,000 Colombian troops and police were on maximum alert in Bogotá yesterday to prevent a terrorist attack from marrring the start of President Alvaro Uribe's unprecedented consecutive four-year term.

Mr Uribe's first investiture, in 2002, was thrown into bloody chaos when insurgents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or Farc, launched a mortar attack on the presidential palace, killing 21.

In the past week suspected leftwing Farc guerrillas have killed at least 30 people, mostly soldiers, across the country. Yet even if the swearing-in passes off peacefully, one key question will remain: can Mr Uribe, the first Colombian president in a century to embark on an immediate second term, sustain improvements in security and go down in history as the man who ended the country's four-decade-old conflict?

Juan Manuel Santos, Mr Uribe's new defence minister, admits it will be an uphill struggle to build on impressive improvements such as a 62 per cent reduction in kidnaps from 2,122 in 2003 to 800 last year.

"We now enter a more difficult phase," Mr Santos said in an interview with the Financial Times. "We have to redouble our efforts but the security indicators are not going to continue improving at the same extraordinary rate as they have done so far: it's almost impossible to keep up the same pace."

With financial support from Washington, which sees Mr Uribe as its main ally in the region, over the past four years the Colombian military has pushed the Farc deep into the southern and eastern jungles that border Ecuador and Venezuela.

Farc guerrillas now regularly cross over into remote regions of neighbouring countries, where they can rest and restock on provisions, complicating the capture of Farc commanders.

Latin America's oldest guerrilla movement remains powerful and well armed and has transformed itself into the world's largest cocaine cartel.

Mr Santos said one "paradox" to be dealt with was the fact that while narcotics seizures had risen and the area under cultivation for drugs dropped, the annual tonnage of cocaine shipped had barely fallen, suggesting productivity had increased.

Another thorny issue is how Mr Uribe can advance in dismantling outlawed paramilitary forces, a process that has caused controversy in its aim of balancing peace with legal redress for the victims of massacres.

Officially, more than 30,000 paramilitary combatants have laid down their arms in the past three years. However, most top commanders, some of whom are responsible for atrocities, have yet to spend a day behind bars.

Michael Spagat, a Colombia expert at the Royal Holloway College in Britain, said the government would need to do more to persuade private businesses to provide steady employment to the mostly young ex-combatants, several hundred of whom are believed to have joined new paramilitary outfits or criminal gangs.

"It's an economic problem to a big degree," he said. "These people don't have a lot of marketable skills beyond good experience in pulling a trigger."

Mr Uribe needs to find ways to win foreign assistance in the reintegration of demobilised combatants as civilians, Mr Spagat added.

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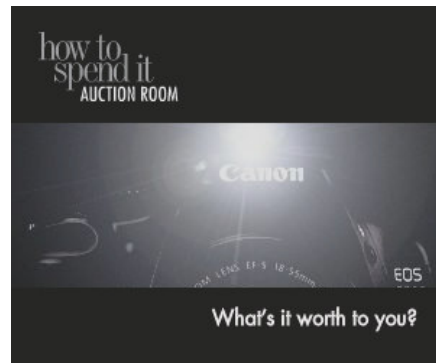
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