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Beyond the FARC, Colombia's 'Other' Armed Groups Remain a Potent Threat

By *Anastasia Moloney*, on 24 Jan 2012, *Briefing*

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BOGOTA -- The Colombian government is under increasing pressure to crack down on drug gangs and bolster an inefficient judicial system following a recent forced curfew across parts of northern Colombia by one of the country's main drug gangs.



Earlier this month, the Urabenos, one of Colombia's main drug trafficking groups, distributed [menacing leaflets](#) in dozens of municipalities in six Colombian provinces, ordering the inhabitants not to leave their homes.

"We don't want to see anyone walking around or doing any kind of work," one leaflet said, adding that the imposed shutdown was in retaliation for [the recent killing by Colombian police of the group's leader](#), who was wanted in the U.S. on drug trafficking charges.

It was a threat most took seriously. For nearly two days, residents closed shops and stayed off the roads, and the offices of local mayors remained shut. Some areas, including the Caribbean tourist destination of Santa Marta, became ghost towns.

The 1,200-strong Urabenos are one of several powerful drug trafficking groups, along with the Rastrojos, the Paisas and the Aguilas Negras, to have emerged following the demobilization of Colombia's right-wing paramilitary groups from 2003 onward. Their ranks are made up of former mid-level paramilitary leaders, fighters who never laid down their arms and drug smugglers.

The Urabenos take their name from their power base in Uraba, a northwestern region near Colombia's border with Panama. The area is coveted by drug traffickers for the outlets it offers to both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, from which cocaine destined for the U.S. is transported through Central America and Mexico.

In response to the enforced shutdown, the Colombian government has deployed hundreds of additional police and soldiers to the Urabenos' stronghold areas, while offering million-dollar bounties for information leading to the arrest of the group's leaders. So far, the government has arrested more than 50 gang members.

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“The Urabenos have been advised. We’re coming after them,” Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos said recently during a security meeting with his military chiefs and defense minister.

But while the government has vowed to step up its fight against the Urabenos and other drug gangs, most analysts say the Colombian authorities have underestimated the group’s power, reach and ability to instill fear among local communities.

“In terms of the violence they can exert, they are very serious, especially in rural areas, but also in cities and towns,” said Jorge Restrepo, head of the Conflict Analysis Resource Center, a think tank in Bogota.

“But [the Urabenos] are not a threat . . . to the state’s survival. It’s more of an institutional threat. They have an interest in infiltrating local institutions, like schools, churches, unions and the police. And what they can’t buy, they will use violence to get,” Restrepo added.

For decades now, Colombian authorities have focused their resources and attention on waging a nearly 50-year-old war against the country’s two main left-wing guerrilla groups -- the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN).

This has allowed the influence and violence generated by the Urabenos and other drug gangs to grow, a problem now considered a significant security threat in Colombia.

“The previous government was trying to re-elect itself, and its sole focus was on waging war against the guerrillas. That meant that the reaction against the Urabenos and other illegal groups from the national police was belated,” said Restrepo.

“The government is finding that it needs to re-strategize its response to organized crime,” he added.

A U.S.-backed military campaign against the FARC and ELN guerrillas [has led to improved security overall](#) and a decline in kidnapping rates in some areas of Colombia since the offensive began more than a decade ago.

But security remains fragile in some areas, and conflict-ridden zones, particularly along Colombia’s jungle borders and in southern provinces -- continue to see high levels of violence. The recent curfew enforced by the Urabenos underscores the persistent threat posed by armed groups nationwide.

The rise of new drug trafficking groups, which are estimated to have 4,000-10,000 members in total, stems largely from the failure of the Santos administration as well as that of his predecessor, former President Alvaro Uribe, to dismantle the local power structures and systems of patronage that the paramilitaries set up and controlled amid a reign of terror during the 1980s and 1990s.

Many analysts say the controversial peace process with paramilitary groups, which led more than 30,000 fighters to lay down their arms during Uribe’s time in office, was flawed.

“The disarmament was incomplete,” said Restrepo. “Most of these groups have very strong links with local power structures. There are countless cities and towns in which elected officials still have links with organized crime.”

The nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch, which has long criticized the government’s failure to stem the rise of criminal groups like the Urabenos, stated in a 2010 report entitled “[Paramilitaries’ Heirs](#)” that the government has done little to follow up on “regular reports of toleration . . . by state agents or public security forces” of the



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paramilitaries' successor groups.

Stemming the violence attributed to drug gangs, [which drives thousands of Colombians from their homes every year](#), is as much a judicial issue as a security problem.

The Colombian government recently announced the appointment of 16 new regional judges and proposed a new law that makes it easier for police to arrest, detain and prosecute drug traffickers.

But critics doubt such ad hoc initiatives are enough.

“The justice system is quite inefficient to mount a successful investigation against organized crime,” Restrepo said, pointing to a lack of focus and resources, but also of “a coordinated and integrated strategy.”

As Colombia struggles with the legacy of its paramilitary groups and the continuing drug trade, it is likely the Urabenos and other drug gangs will remain a security threat for some time to come.

Anastasia Moloney is a journalist based in Bogotá, where she has lectured on U.S. foreign policy in Latin America at the Javeriana University. Her coverage of Colombian politics, education, human rights and culture has appeared in the London Times, the Guardian, the Independent, the Times Higher Education Supplement and the Times Educational Supplement, among other publications.

Photo: Colombian police, Bogota, Colombia, Jan. 16, 2012 (photo by Flickr user mattlemmon, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic license).

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