

called “Armando Ríos” disappeared, and Orinoquía returned under control of the state, after which a series of civic programs were initiated to benefit the population and regain their trust. The population, no longer feeling a loaded gun at their head, quit providing support to the FARC. As happened in Cundinamarca, crime decreased and peace returned. The various armed groups had to give up their sedentary life and start out on a trek that continues today, always fearing an attack, always trying to survive with the hope of fighting again some day.

Thus the Armed Forces have begun to exercise control over an expanding area of Colombia.



*Plan Consolidación*, initiated during President Uribe's second term, build on the success of *Plan Patriota*, continuing within the same strategic parameters, though obviously adapting its operating guidelines to new circumstances and technology. This latest plan has made it possible to strike

the enemy in ways that show how the FARC is trying to survive. In fact, that organization is experiencing a continuous downward trend, one that makes its final destruction predictable.

Victory, however, should not be celebrated prematurely. Far from being the consequence of a series of short-term operations, the impact sought by each one – the end of the FARC – will result from a strategic event caused by a series of successes on many if not all fronts. The FARC will over time come to understand that its inability to mobilize the masses – always low – has become nil; that at the current rate of decline, its troops will be unable to undertake any significant military project, in part because of its reduced ability to recruit new support or troops.<sup>10</sup> Its military capacity will become even more restricted and its political isolation will become more acute than normal, despite the ability to hide behind kidnapped hostages, shields used to maintain a political advantage. When its resources are exhausted, all this government pressure will bring home the fact that it cannot achieve its strategic plan and that the end is inevitable. FARC leaders will undoubtedly continue efforts to demonstrate their viability as guerrillas, continuing to cause

death and destruction, as their collective agony draws to a close.<sup>11</sup>

#### ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED

The FARC's defeat, following the reduction to its current situation will be an event undoubtedly occurring in a not-too-distant future. It will lead to extremely significant effects, such as the fact that a democratic country, using democratic methods, has defeated an insurgency that based its military activities on terrorism and funded them through drug trafficking. Colombia has not changed its constitution to confront the FARC, nor has it declared martial law. Furthermore, it has reduced the jurisdiction of military criminal courts, allowing civil courts to decide cases involving accusations of human rights violations against members of the Armed Forces. Nevertheless, for the overall defeat of the FARC to be viable, some independent variables must be accommodated.

One major factor that can contribute to this victory is continued support from the U.S. government, the only country to contribute significant assistance to Colombia's war effort.

The following are suggestions for continuing and enhancing that support:

- o Achieving a free trade agreement as an essential component in consolidating the economic and commercial development in Colombia's regions currently afflicted by the actions of violent groups. This will allow inhabitants to overcome the conditions that allowed the current problem to develop: doing otherwise would prolong the conflict. The civilian population will, to the extent that its conditions continue improving, force the FARC to see that its action is sterile and futile.
- o The support by the U.S. given to Colombia's Armed Forces through various programs must continue emphasizing the use of technology for mobility, indispensable assets in countering what little capacity the FARC still has to launch significant actions, but, even more importantly, for better protection of civilian population.
- o The “shock” programs for peasant regions, such as the Forest Guardian Families, enables families located in coca-growing areas to eradicate the drugs and receive a subsidy for starting new alternative crops. Similar programs of the Colombian government should continue, and be supported by American government agencies, continuing the hope of many families trapped in the spider web of coca growing.

<sup>10</sup>The FARC can replace one of three troops it loses, a pronounced decline rate. A Ministry of Defense report shows that during 2007 the FARC experienced a 50% increase in desertions.

<sup>11</sup>FARC leader “Tirofijo” has spent his life isolated from the world's reality, which undoubtedly justifies his stubborn refusal to recognize his political isolation.

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# REGIONAL INSIGHTS

#5, MARCH 15, 2008



## THE DEFEAT OF THE FARC

by General Carlos Ospina-Ovalle

**Abstract** *The Colombian insurgents, known as the FARC, came close to achieving a strategic decision point in their effort to overthrow the government by achieving two principal objectives, controlling a center of deployment and occupying a rear echelon. The Colombian Armed Forces' 2002 Plan Patriota effectively destroyed that strategic advantage, forcing the FARC to retreat. While the military threat to Colombia has been reduced, the insurgents have not been defeated; income from drug trafficking may keep the insurgency alive for the near future.*

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) officially began its activities in 1964, building on what was then called the “Second Guerrilla Conference of the Southern Bloc,” that is, the conferences outlining the group's objectives and plans.<sup>1</sup> In those days, the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) supported the group, assisting it materially and philosophically while the state and society attempted to recover from the terrible violence and vendettas between the Liberal and Conservative parties, killing hundreds of thousands, poisoning the very soul of the peasants, in the process unconsciously preparing them for the growth of the FARC. Although the group was initially known as a self-defense movement hunted down by political rivals, it quickly evolved into an extremist organization rejected even by the formal Communist party for insisting on using violence to attain power.

#### OBJECTIVE AND STRATEGY OF THE FARC

At its seventh conference, the FARC leadership made two strategic decisions, abandoning its status as a peasant self-defense organization by adopting the merciless illicit drug trade as an acceptable means of financing its operations.<sup>2</sup> A lack of adequate funding led to this decision, coldly adding drug trafficking to the list of illicit activities used then and now for that purpose. The strategic plan was formulated in a series of critical events staged gradually and surreptitiously, seeking to develop and transform the organization from a guerrilla group to a guerrilla army, in the process gradually taking control of the areas around the main cities. The final phase in the overall strategy sought to isolate and degrade the armed forces' capability so that, when events dictated the timeline, the FARC could launch a final military offensive accompanied by a popular uprising in the cities causing the government to collapse.

Bogotá was identified as the main epicenter of the social contradictions in Colombia where this final offensive would climax. Obviously, there was ample time during the lengthened phases leading to the final assault for an intense effort to indoctrinate the peasants, an armed campaign aimed at liberating specific areas, weakening and obliterating the presence of the state, defeating

the Armed Forces in those locales, and destroying Police stations, thereby forcing the departure or submission of local, regional, and national authorities. The guerrillas would thus gain control of each region, linking them into a large network under their control. The FARC thus sought to surround the capital city with combat troops without their presence being detected, in order to gradually block access routes and prepare for the final offensive.

The decision on drug trafficking stated the belief that its indirect contact would not hurt the organization's image, because this allowed the FARC to act as a governing entity, collecting taxes or usage tolls from local producers and traffickers, transporters of precursor chemicals and the owners of landing strips.<sup>3</sup> However, high profits led the organization to rapidly penetrate the business, and drugs became such a revenue-generator that the insurgents' structure was adjusted to complement the business. An effort was made to not involve a majority of the group by delegating the responsibility to specific individuals, two of those being “Negro Acacio” and “John 40.”<sup>4</sup> Their task was to control the networks, contacts, and flow of drugs out of Colombia, often exchanging coca for weapons. Over time, the FARC became dependent on drug trafficking, and in many locations created its own laboratories – though this did not

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reduce extortion, kidnapping and investments in other sectors of the economy. Despite evidence to the contrary, insurgent leaders always emphatically denied being drug traffickers.<sup>5</sup>

#### TAKING POWER BY FORCE OF ARMS

Contrary to what many analysts conclude, the FARC's model for attaining power was not conspiratorial or Leninist, that is, a strategy in which urban rebellion constitutes the climax of a lengthy process. On the contrary, the urban phase is seen as a complement to the rural struggle. After liberating large areas of Colombia, the rural component would asphyxiate the cities through continuous defeat until the government's forces assumed a defensive posture. In other words, the FARC adopted a primarily Maoist approach, using two of its fundamental components, time or prolonged warfare and the mobilization of peasants, as the decisive force that not only provides recruits but also offers its unconditional support to the point of following the army's campaigns. However, the FARC departs from the teachings of Mao Zedong in the sense that its political organization preponderates over the military, and the peasant base support – what Mao calls “the masses” – has been replaced with income from the drug business.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the FARC follows the teachings of Mao on rural revolutionary practice, but it has failed to gain full support among the masses. Armed combat is thus its most important activity and the prime motivator of policy. In this way the FARC more closely resembles a *foquista* movement.

By using this strategic thinking the FARC took the strategic initiative, little by little beginning to control territory, organizing its strategic rear areas and lines of communication, while the national Armed Forces stuck to a strategy of defeating the FARC in a single blow, trying to apply a strategy of destruction rather than emphasizing territorial control. The principal indicator of success for the Armed Forces became the number of insurgents killed in combat, following the body-bag count example of the U.S. military

#### FARC CONFERENCES

THE FARC LEADERSHIP MEETS IN A CONFERENCE EVERY SIX YEARS TO DEVELOP LONG-RANGE PLANS, USING ITS SECRETARIAT TO RESEARCH SPECIFIC ISSUES FOR THE AGENDA. DECISIONS ARE IMPLEMENTED BY A PLENUM OF THE SENIOR EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE. EIGHT CONFERENCES ARE KNOWN TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE; THE SCHEDULE IS INTERRUPTED BY COMBAT ACTION. THE MILITARY'S INITIATIVE MAY HAVE DISRUPTED PLANS FOR THE NINTH CONFERENCE IN 2007, THOUGH A FARC COMMUNIQUÉ ANALYZED THE LEADERS' "STRATEGIC PLAN FOR TAKING POWER" AND CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO TAKE OVER COLOMBIA'S POLITICAL POWER THROUGH FORCE OF ARMS.

in Vietnam, and comparing statistics over time despite an obvious downward trend visible in the data. Therefore, starting in 1995, the FARC carried out major attacks successfully, as it had already begun organizing itself into companies and columns mobilized throughout the Colombian territory, using lines of communication prepared, incredibly, through the middle of the jungle. These connected river arteries with land routes and formed a true network of riverine and land-based communications system reaching from the Ecuadoran border to the Venezuelan border, all leading inexorably to Bogotá.

This strategy explains why on September of 1997 the guerrillas could attack the under-strength and isolated 53rd Battalion of Mobile Brigade VI in the region of El Billar near Peñas Coloradas in southern Colombia, destroying its troops and then avoiding detection by reinforcement troops inserted too late to effectively intercept them. The operation was a repeat of the August 1996 attack on Las Delicias, a region close to El Billar, in an equally dense and inhospitable jungle. Approximately 1000 guerrillas destroyed the facilities of a company-sized army base, killing most of the 136 troops assigned there. Some FARC columns deployed from very distant locations to participate in the action, and then returned along the same routes to their original bases in relative security.

Subsequently, during the existence of the so-called “demilitarized zone,” the FARC took advantage of the reduction in combat operational tempo to improve and consolidate those lines of communication.<sup>7</sup> The FARC undeniably had territorial control and used it to implement a strategic plan. In eastern Colombia it took over the area south of San José del Guaviare, re-naming it “Armando Ríos” to honor one of its members fallen in combat, and continued controlling the coca trade it had previously organized. Local authorities simply submitted and were left at the FARC's mercy after the government forces had withdrawn. Other parts of the country suffered also, but the FARC's most serious project was to put into action what it called its “center of deployment,” surrounding Bogotá with two groups (with approximately 800 troops), one in eastern Cundinamarca commanded by “Aldinever,” and the other in the west controlled by “Buendía.” The strategic plan continued tightening the ring surrounding Bogotá without calling its attention to the government or Colombian Armed Forces.

At the same time, the FARC conducted a series of campaigns to divert the government's attention toward other parts of Colombia. Until 2001, the war had been one of movements, generated by what the FARC called the “new way of operating,” culminating in July of 1999 with the attack on Puerto Lleras and Puerto Rico, both

on the eastern plains in the Department of Meta. After this tremendous tactical defeat at the hands of the Armed Forces, “Mono Jojoy” ordered no more such actions, preferring to await more favorable conditions for more successful attacks.<sup>8</sup> In 2001 the columns surrounding Bogotá were already active, and all that remained was to occupy some areas of Boyacá (east of the capital city) to complete its encirclement. Despite some tactical setbacks, the FARC's position was strong, closely positioned to launch a major offensive, backed by its strategic achievements in occupying a center of deployment and a safe rear echelon.<sup>9</sup>

#### PLAN PATRIOTA

To counter such activity, the Armed Forces launched the *Plan Patriota*, an operation conceived by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Colombia in 2002 in support of President Alvaro Uribe's Democratic Security Policy. This project should not be confused with *Plan Colombia*, an anti-drug trafficking operation originated during the Pastrana administration. *Plan Patriota* was supported by the U.S. government, despite a previous policy preventing aid for Colombia's counterinsurgency effort. The policy change was significant for Colombia, and recognizes the FARC's role in trafficking cocaine: helicopters used by *Plan Colombia* could not be used in carrying out portions of *Plan Patriota* because they belonged to the U.S. Department of State and could only be used for counter-drug operations. The policy change allowed Colombia to develop combat plans that complement the main objectives of stopping the drugs and the insurgents.

*Plan Patriota* did not aim to inflict heavy, fatal blows to the FARC, but instead sought to neutralize its strategic plan, recovering areas under its control. The plan gradually led the FARC to a defeat through two parameters – secrecy and the use of time as a decisive factor. The first offensive took place in Cundinamarca, and was designed to destroy a section of the ring surrounding Bogotá. The action caught the insurgent group by surprise, accustomed as it was to short operations or continued combat for permanent control of the contested areas. After six months of suffering continuous defeats the FARC realized it was losing and abandoned the area with the few surviving troops available. The defeat was of such a magnitude that even “Buendía,” head of FARC operations in the region, died in combat, together with most of his command. Many insurgents surrendered though a few escaped to the north, seeking refuge in the immense jungles and in the organization's safe rear areas. This had been perhaps the biggest strategic defeat of the FARC in its history, as its center of deployment – the hope of the final offensive – had been completely broken up, not to speak of the immense loss of materiel and personnel. The insurgents' leaders recognized the magnitude of the defeat, having never expected such a sustained operation. Their retreat led to a decrease in crime in Cundinamarca, especially kidnapping and extortion.

Despite its significance, this operation was not given much press

exposure because of little desire within the Armed Forces' leadership to inform the FARC of the new strategy being applied against it. Without wasting time, a new phase was initiated, this time attacking the FARC's rear areas in the jungles of eastern Colombia where the commanders or *cabecillas* had lived undisturbed, and the only region in Colombia where military operations had never been conducted. At this point in its history the FARC lost its strategic offensive. Its principal concern rapidly changed from offense to defense, seeking to survive, hoping the Army's operation would end and the troops deploy elsewhere. Such continual pressure has weakened the guerrillas, and allowed the local government to recover its authority.

The new phase of *Plan Patriota* against the FARC's rear areas was a destabilizing blow. Its gains, made over such a long period of time, its resources, control of the civilian population, easy communication, as well as camps where its troops and leadership had lived so well and so quietly, were all lost. The Secretariat began a series of movements and evasion designed to avoid capture, which – together with the desire not to be detected – isolated it from the rest of the organization to the point where it became a capital crime to know where the senior leadership lived. At the same time, FARC fronts were hit to such an extent that their losses imposed an organizational restructuring, adopting smaller units as the norm. Most of the “caches” or clandestine stores of arms and other materiel, carefully guarded for the final offensive, were captured by the Armed Forces. The region

#### MILITARY TERMINOLOGY

*FOQUISMO* WAS EXPLAINED BY REGIS DEBRAY IN HIS BOOK *REVOLUTION IN THE REVOLUTION* (HAVANA, 1967), ADVOCATING A CUBAN-STYLE REVOLUTION, ADAPTING MAO'S THEORIES TO FOCUS A GUERRILLA'S POWER IN ORDER TO GENERATE THE PEOPLE'S REVOLUTION IN A GIVEN AREA.

*STRATEGIC INITIATIVE* IS ACHIEVED IN A REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE AS A GROUP GRADUALLY SEIZES TERRITORY, IN THE PROCESS ALSO INCREASING THE NUMBER OF MILITANTS. POPULATION AND PRODUCTION CENTERS ARE GRADUALLY SURROUNDED, SEEKING BY CONTINUAL AND STEADY ADVANCE TO MAKE THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION UNTENABLE.

A GUERRILLA'S *STRATEGIC REAR AREA* MUST BE SUFFICIENTLY SECURE THAT ALL THE ORGANIZATION'S COMMANDERS AND LOGISTICAL SUPPORT CAN CONGREGATE; PHYSICAL CONTACT WITH FIGHTING FORCES IS REQUIRED, IF ONLY ALONG COMMUNICATION ROUTES SUCH AS THE “HO CHI MINH TRAIL” DURING THE VIETNAM WAR.

THE *STRATEGY OF DESTRUCTION*, ALSO CALLED *SINGLE POINT STRATEGY*, SEEKS TO DESTROY AN OPPONENT IN A SINGLE BATTLE. ALSO KNOWN AS THE *EXTENDED-LINE STRATEGY*, IT WAS USED UNTIL WORLD WAR I, AND INVOLVED SEEKING TO ENVELOP AN ENEMY THROUGH FLANKING MANEUVERS USUALLY COUNTERED BY EXTENDING THE LINE OF COMBAT.

<sup>1</sup>Pedro Antonio Marín, alias Manuel Marulanda Vélez, alias Tirofijo, founder and leader of the FARC, has absolute control of the group. See his *Campaign Notebooks* for a history of the initial phases of the war, at <http://www.cedema.org/uploads/CuadernosdeCampana.pptf>, published in 1973.

<sup>2</sup>These decisions were confirmed and enhanced during the Eighth Conference in 1993.

<sup>3</sup>The Seventh Conference authorized collecting taxes from the largest dealers and producers in regions under FARC control.

<sup>4</sup>Colombian bandits and guerrillas all use aliases. “Negro Acacio” led a front, a unit consisting of 300 to 350 men dedicated to the control of drug trafficking near the Venezuelan border until killed in combat; his success led to an extradition requested by a U.S. judge. “John 40” led a front dedicated to drug trafficking.

<sup>5</sup>A Colombian National Intelligence Council document (unpublished, dated February 24, 2005), determined that 45.8% of the FARC's income in 2003 came from drug trafficking. *Semana* (March 3, 2007) cited a Ministry of the Treasury report translated that percentage to \$6 billion.

<sup>6</sup>Manuel Marulanda complained that “the inhabitants of the region who have radios turned out to be collaborators.” In areas the FARC assumed it dominated, many inhabitants still attempted to communicate with the government authorities. *Semana* (March 7, 2007).

<sup>7</sup>Then-president Andrés Pastrana removed the state's presence from 42,000 square kilometers, using it to negotiate with the FARC. The insurgents used the area to reorganize and regroup, exfiltrating units from this zone to attack other areas. After three years, the FARC's intransigence forced the cancellation of the demilitarized zone.

<sup>8</sup>“Mono Jojoy,” Jorge Briceño, rose through the ranks to become a senior member of the Secretariat and its principal strategist.

<sup>9</sup>*Operación Berlin* destroyed a FARC column in Santander.