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War, Peace and Light Weapons in Colombia : A Case Study

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Increasingly, studies within the field of small arms and light weapons have begun to focus on the relationship between armed conflict and proliferation. In this regard, two distinct approaches are materializing: assessments of the political, social and economic effects of weapons availability and use; and analyses of the interrelations between proliferation and the causes and nature of armed conflict. In his presentation, Daniel García-Peña focused on the second, linking the issues of war, peace and light weapons in the context of the internal armed conflict in Colombia that has lasted for at least thirty-five years. The multi-faceted nature of small arms proliferation, he argues, poses distinct challenges and possibilities for the current political dialogue between the parties, the elucidation of which form the underlying objective of this presentation.

Colombia is currently both the top importer of small arms and light weapons in the western hemisphere, and the last remaining conflict-torn country in the region. In García-Peña's view, the dynamics of proliferation can be attributed to at least three distinct, although inter-related, factors: the internal armed conflict; organized crime (principally narco-trafficking); and criminality and social violence (such as street crime). The huge demand generated by these three factors is met by ample supply from black-markets in neighboring countries and elsewhere; the influx of military aid to the army and police (mainly from the U.S.); and is in effect facilitated by the ineffectiveness of arms regulation policies.

The Internal Armed Conflict

Although the current, 35-year old conflict in Colombia is in many ways distinct from other conflicts in past centuries—notably the war between conservative and liberal parties during the 1940s and 1950s known as ‘La Violencia’—it nonetheless shares certain underlying causes that historically have fueled the country’s long series of civil wars.

The current conflict began in the 1960s with the creation of two main guerrilla groups—the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army). Founded in 1964, both had social and political roots in Colombia’s long history of socio-economic exclusion that created great disparities between the wealthy and the poor. While the FARC was primarily a peasant-based organization championing the cause of land reform, the ELN represented university students, workers and catholic priests involved in liberation theology. Despite the formation of other guerrilla groups in the 1960s (notably the M19 and EPL), the FARC and ELN are the only ones still at war today and, as such, the primary actors in the current peace process.

For most of their history, the FARC and ELN were involved in low-level rural conflict and insurgency and were hardly noticed in the large urban centers, despite the gradual intensification of their activities. Concurrently, small peasant organizations, known as ‘self-defense’, or paramilitary groups, were armed by the Colombian army and authorities to combat the insurgents. Following the large increase in drug-trafficking in the 1980s, and the corresponding influx of drug money, the small self-defense groups were transformed into major paramilitary organizations due to their links with the former, and operated legally between 1968–1989. As a result the conflict was galvanized and came to the fore.

In addition to its long history of violence, Colombia has also been a pioneer in attempts to achieve negotiated settlements. In 1984 the government signed a peace agreement with the FARC, and in 1989–1990 talks with the M19, EPL and several other groups led to their disarmament and demobilization. The former, however, ended in failure. The ‘Patriotic Union’, the legal opposition

party created for FARC members by the accords, became the target of paramilitary groups, leading to the assassination of 2,500 of its members between 1986-1991.

In García-Peña's opinion, these failures weigh heavily on the current peace process, and in particular on how the issue of arms and disarmament is considered. The failure of the 1980s peace process, together with the influx of drug-trafficking, led to an escalation of the war in the 1990s and a resulting humanitarian tragedy, with over 30,000 people killed and 1.2 million people displaced internally. Due to the nature of the war being fought and the exclusive use of small arms and light weapons, the overwhelming majority of the victims are civilians or non-combatants.

As a result of the war's escalation, the capacity of the different armed groups to obtain weapons was transformed. While previously weapons were obtained directly from the battlefield, or through corrupt officials, the escalation of the conflict led to an increase in the financial capacities of each group to acquire weapons on international markets, such as those in Central America that were flooded with surplus weapons in the 1980s following the cessation of civil wars. According to García-Peña, paramilitary groups have tried to acquire weapons from ex-Sandinista forces in Nicaragua, and corrupt officers of the Venezuelan national guard. Furthermore, these groups benefit from arms pipelines from the U.S. that consist of legally purchased weapons acquired and re-sold by drug traffickers. On the other hand, an increasing number of Belgian FAL weapons have been acquired from the Venezuelan security forces by the FARC and the ELN, and many of their explosives have originated in neighboring Ecuador due to its porous border with Colombia. Finally, according to García-Peña, confiscated weapons provide evidence that Colombian guerrillas have been able to establish important contacts in Eastern Europe and Russia, illustrating that the capacities of these groups have altered significantly.

These patterns of arms acquisition, coupled with massive amounts of military aid to the Colombian security forces (the highest after Israel and Egypt), have inexorably led to an 'internal arms race', leading all parties to upgrade their armaments in the quest

for superior firepower. Thus, in García-Peña's opinion, even though the internal conflict continues to be fought largely with small arms and light weapons, their quantity and quality has increased substantially in the past decades, paralleling the increased organizational and financial capacity of all groups.

Organized crime

Organized crime constitutes the second major factor determining the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Colombia. In addition to narco-trafficking, the principal form of organized crime and source of instability, non-negligible groups also include mafia involved in the emerald trade and other contraband. Contrary to popular notions, however, drug trafficking is not a monolithic enterprise, but rather a chain of illicit activities organized by distinct groups of actors. As a result, narco-trafficking as a whole is chaotic, with significant differences and competition between groups.

According to García-Peña, eight different 'stages' can be distinguished within the chain of illicit activities constituting the phenomenon of narco-trafficking: 1) the growing of coca, where Columbia has replaced Peru and Bolivia as the main producer; 2) the primary production stage, where coca is transformed into paste; 3) the secondary production stage, where cocaine is produced from the paste; 4) the transportation of cocaine from Colombia to North America and Europe; 5) the wholesale distribution stage, which takes place in the 'consumer' nations; 6) the retail distribution stage, where the drugs are spread out; 7) the consumer stage; and finally 8) the money-laundering stage.

The fact that the first three stages take place in Colombia, while the rest (which generate most of the profits) take place elsewhere, is significant to understanding the relation to small arms. First, the almost exclusive focus of counter-narcotics efforts on production in Colombia represents a failure to acknowledge that most funds are generated in the world market. Second, each group of actors located throughout the chain of drug trafficking

generates a distinct demand for arms. While in the first stage, coca growers do not require weapons beyond self-defense, a demand for more sophisticated weaponry is generated at the transportation stage, which involves the heavily-armed cartels. From the perspective of small arms proliferation, the counter-narcotics focus on Colombian primary production is misplaced.

With regard to the use of small arms, a clear distinction exists between narco-traffickers and the groups involved in the internal armed conflict. Groups involved in the transportation of drugs are usually lightly equipped for reasons of mobility and security, and hence generate a relatively smaller demand for weapons. On the other hand, the financing of the drug trade has fueled small arms and light weapons production and benefited armed groups. First, drug production usually takes place in areas where rebel groups are active (especially the FARC, in the south), and which profit from 'revolutionary taxes' levied on production (usually 40-60 per cent of the guerrillas' incomes). Second, the cartels are closely linked with paramilitary groups, explained in part by the fact that drug traffickers have bought lands that are under the protection of the paramilitary groups.

The interaction between drug traffickers and the armed groups in Colombia has eroded the government's capacity to address the violence associated with their activities, despite its unprecedented efforts. In 1998, for instance, the government devoted a large amount of resources to confiscating cocaine. This effort has had the result of draining the state's capacity in the armed conflict and reinforcing corruption among its officials. In addition, counter-narcotic efforts have become increasingly viewed as a military problem. Although distinct from the armed conflict, the militarization of anti-narcotics operations has inevitable impacts on the former. The use of military force escalates the internal armed conflict owing to the geographical overlap of these activities, and certain policies—such as the aerial fumigation of coca crops—increases the scope of, and incentives for, production, by increasing prices. Both have an impact on the demand for small arms and light weapons as discontented peasants increasingly turn to the guerilla groups, which, by capturing social discontent, thus increase

their social and political bases.

As an example of the blurring boundary between the armed conflict and the drug war, García-Peña cited the Colombian government's creation of a dedicated battalion to combat the drug war, previously the reserve of police forces. Funded and trained by the U.S. (which has refused to aid counter-insurgency efforts), the anti-narcotics battalion operates in the south, and often against the guerilla groups. In his view, this represents the essence of the 'internal' arms race: notwithstanding the genuine need of the security forces to augment their equipment, such expansion is matched by the guerilla groups through increases in 'revolutionary taxes' on production and the kidnapping of wealthy individuals

Criminality and Social Violence

Criminality and social violence together constitute the third major factor underlying small arms and light weapons proliferation and use. Several factors have contributed to the creation of a general sense of societal insecurity and a corresponding recourse to small arms by otherwise law-abiding citizens. The progressive arming of the population has been galvanized by a domestic production of small arms and light weapons, a long-lived 'arms culture', and the proliferation of private security groups paid by wealthy individuals to carry out the 'social cleansing' of undesired social groups. Statistically, these different forms of social violence are equally, if not more, serious than the other structural forms of violence. Approximately 10 per cent of Colombia's 25,000 - 27,000 annual murders have been linked to the internal conflict; 20 per cent to organized crime; and 70 per cent to street criminality. Overall, 70 per cent have been committed with the use of small arms.

In an effort to combat criminality and social violence, the Colombian government in 1993 passed a series of strict gun-control laws that established a two-permit system allowing for the bearing of a weapon and the retention of another at home or

work. Through a campaign to legalize existing arms, the government hopes to acquire some degree of control over the 1.3 million legal weapons currently outside the army, 900,000 of which must be kept at home and 400,000 of which can be borne. According to García-Peña, this strategy is problematic due to the fact that the authority to issue permits is vested in the military. This has led to corruption and the leakage of weapons into rebel and paramilitary hands.

Despite being responsible for a small percentage of deaths and violence, there is no doubt that the internal armed conflict is closely linked with other forms of violence. In many cases, the armed conflict has provided both a cover and motivation for other forms of crimes, and idealized the use of weapons and violence as means to such ends. In addition, both armed conflict and drug-trafficking have distracted the attention and resources of the Colombian government, to the detriment of its effort to combat other forms of social violence. Last of all, the activities of all armed actors can only have the effect of increasing the market for arms in Colombia.

Combating the Proliferation and Effects of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Colombia

In García-Peña's view, the first crucial step to combat small arms and light weapons proliferation is a strategic preventive measure to end the internal armed conflict and relegitimize the state by imposing the rule of law. The current peace process has made the achievement of peace—mainly with the FARC—a top domestic priority, to which end a demilitarized zone the size of Switzerland has been established in southern Colombia. Despite being broken off and restarted several times, this process continues to yield concrete results, the most significant of which is a twelve-point agenda agreed upon by the government and the FARC. While a similar process initiated with the ELN under the Samper administration failed due to an exclusive focus on the FARC, recent discussions raise the possibility that formal talks will once

again resume.

Negotiations with the FARC and ELN are inevitably conditioned by the peace processes of the past. The failure of the 1984 peace process due to the assassinations of 'Patriotic Union' members has led the guerilla groups to demand the exclusion of arms issues from negotiations, as evidenced in its omission from the twelve-point agenda. This demand stems from the guerrillas' belief that the retention of arms is the only guarantee for the process and any eventual agreements, and their desire to focus more on the socio-political causes of the conflict. Such issues, they argue, must be addressed and resolved before beginning discussions on disarmament. The issue of disarmament, according to García-Peña, is simply not on the table, contrary to what others would wish and conventional logic would seem to dictate.

Given these conditions, García-Peña expressed his belief that the peace process will be drawn out. In this context, and given the emergence of a significant civil movement against the war, the implementation of humanitarian law is vital for the viability of the peace process. In addition, several other tasks must also be accomplished before the signing of any peace accords:

1. The Colombian state has an obligation to dismantle all paramilitary groups. Even though no longer under the direct control of the army, they have been granted a significant degree of de facto autonomy owing to their neglect by the former.
2. The counter-narcotics effort needs to be demilitarized, mainly through the development of non-violent techniques to address the production and transport of drugs.
3. More attention needs to be paid to gun control legislation, including security sector reform and redefining the role of the police and army.
4. There exists a need to study and prepare for a long process of "armed peace". Given that the armed groups have refused to countenance arms issues on the agenda, an alternative arrange-

ment must be envisioned whereby the guerilla groups will retain their weapons provisionally before being incorporated into the institutions of the Colombian state.

Questions and answers

Q.: Who are the producers of the arms entering Colombia? It is commonly stated that 80 per cent of these arms are of U.S. origin.

A.: In terms of Colombia's total arms imports, the figure of approximately 80 per cent is probably correct. However, within the security forces, Colombia produced Israeli-designed Galils and in the past German G-3s, which make up the majority of the arms used. Although purchases in the past have been made with a series of countries, including Russia, Brazil and Israel, most of the military equipment now comes from the U.S. With regard to illegal imports, 65 per cent of the arms confiscated from drug traffickers originated in the U.S., in addition to the arms purchased in Central American black markets. Furthermore, many guerrillas are armed with U.S. weapons. According to García-Peña, this situation is not surprising given the extent of the U.S. market for arms and its status as a central location for illegal drug activities.

Q.: First, despite the fact that the paramilitary groups are no longer under the control of the army, arms legally acquired by the army continue to fall into the hands of the former. Could you shed light on this inconsistency? Second, could you expand on the role of the paramilitary groups in the peace process? Third, could you expand on the differences between the police and the military in terms of the reliability of these organizations?

A.: Despite having been declared illegal in 1989, paramilitary groups continue to operate with either the active or tacit consent of the Colombian army. Furthermore, no effective measures were

taken to dismantle them, a fact which underlines the responsibility of the Colombian state in the current conflict. In addition, the paramilitary groups receive sympathy and support from members of the Colombian elite who distrust the army, the local population and segments of the army itself. This ambiguous status is underscored by the fact that, while in 1997 the army made 366 attacks against the guerrilla groups, the paramilitary groups were only attacked seven times, hardly enough to erode their legitimacy. Finally, the lack of a clear divide between the army and the paramilitary groups is highlighted in the context of weapons: many weapons registered and legalized by the army for wealthy Colombians are later used to arm paramilitary groups.

The question of the role of the paramilitary groups in the peace process is a delicate one. While peace processes must be as inclusive as possible, García-Peña believes that two preconditions must be met before the paramilitary groups are incorporated. First, there is a need to 'wage war in order to create peace', in order to create a clear divide between the army and the paramilitary groups. Second, a certain amount of progress must be achieved in negotiations between the guerrillas and the government. Only once these preconditions have been met can the decision to incorporate the paramilitary groups into the peace process be discussed. Due to their responsibility for 75 per cent of civilian casualties as part of their tactics of total elimination in order to identify and isolate the guerrillas, however, at no point should they be attributed the same status as the latter, and hence be allowed to benefit from the amnesty provisions.

With regard to the question of police corruption, García-Peña expressed his opinion that four to five years ago they were the most corrupt institution in Colombia. Since then, and as a result of the removal of 5,500 police officers, the organization has become far more efficient in countering the drug trade. This, together with their ability to clarify their mission more easily than the army, has led to an overall improvement of the situation. Nonetheless, other questions persist. In addition to functioning primarily as an anti-

narcotics, as opposed to a national police, organization, the use of military-style weapons in areas where guerrillas are active has led to their substitution for the army in the conflict. In García-Peña's, opinion, only the resolution of the internal armed conflict can restore the police force's true function.

Q.: In its operations, the Colombian army must remove considerable amounts of weapons from circulation. What happens to these weapons?

A.: The most important arms destruction project took place in the context of the successful peace process of the early 1990s, during which arms turned in by the M19, EPL and several other small groups were destroyed. In general, however, arms confiscated in combat are refurbished and used by the Colombian army, with the exception of Belgium-made FAL weapons that are stockpiled. Approximately 1.3 million legal weapons are in circulation, while the estimate of illegal arms ranges from 2 - 5 million.

Q.: In the context of criminality and social violence, what types of weapons are used? This is a way to gauge the link between small arms and light weapons proliferation and their effects. Second, has any data been gathered on the proportions of deaths and injuries that have occurred as a result of the use of military-style weapons?

A.: Almost all the deaths in the context of the internal armed conflict are due to the use of military-style weapons. Approximately 70 per cent of crimes utilize hand-guns; there are cases of military-style weapons used in common crime, but they account for approximately 6 per cent of casualties. The gray areas, namely organized crime, account for 30 per cent of all casualties, of which 70 - 75 per cent are attributable to hand-guns.

Q.: The 2001 conference preparations on small arms and light weapons are using the joint work of the OAS convention as an example. How has the OAS Convention positively influ-

enced the internal peace process in Colombia?

A. : Colombia had a leading role in the discussions leading to the OAS Convention. The Convention has not yet produced tangible effects. It is the hope of the government that the international framework created by the Convention will allow more serious efforts, both within it and at the bilateral level. Significant progress has been made in bilateral meetings between Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador on the issue of arms and borders.

Q. : Have there been any programs to ensure the reintegration of former combatants into civilian life?

A. : The reintegration of 5,950 combatants into civilian life between 1989 - 1993 had important positive results, despite many initial mistakes and problems. These include the establishment of a National Office for Re-Integration, and programmes which now include education for ex-combatants, monthly salaries for 2-3 years, and also political guarantees in the form of privileged access to local city councils and the national congress. The experience of Colombia in administering these reintegration programmes has been fairly successful, barring some minor bureaucratic and financial problems. For instance, only 37 individuals have returned to the guerrilla groups. On the other hand, while there has been an emphasis on the economic and social aspects of reintegration, very little has been accomplished in regions in which guerrilla's operate or the broader social context; this has led to much ill-feeling by peasants who have suffered and resent the treatment afforded exclusively to the guerrillas.