

Colombia Wants to End Avalanche of Mercenaries Fighting in Ukraine

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The involvement of Colombian mercenaries in the Ukrainian conflict highlights the structural roots of the paramilitary phenomenon that has plagued the Latin American country for decades. In this context, Colombia and Russia agreed to create a working group to address the issue, especially since hundreds of Colombian mercenaries have died fighting in the Ukraine conflict.

The meeting, led by Russian **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov** and Colombian **Foreign Minister Luis Gilberto Murillo**, took place amid growing concern about the participation of former Colombian military personnel in international conflicts. The decision, announced after the meeting in Moscow in November, seeks to establish joint mechanisms to mitigate the impact of this problem, which threatens Colombia's internal politics and global security.

Colombian **President Gustavo Petro** tweeted on November 27 that "mercenary work must be banned in Colombia," adding that to prevent recruitment by private contractors, raising the "standard of living" of soldiers was necessary. He also called for "criminal punishment" for those using mercenaries in foreign conflicts, thereby supporting the bill his government introduced to the Colombian Congress in August to approve the United Nation's International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries.

The creation of the Russian-Colombian working group reflects a necessary response to political pressure on Bogota due to increased military and ex-military personnel involved in conflicts abroad, especially in Ukraine. There is an alarming number of Colombian military and ex-military personnel captured or killed in combat against Russian military forces in Ukraine.

Nonetheless, the phenomenon is not limited to the crisis in Ukraine but is part of a broader trend in which former military personnel, paramilitaries, and guerrillas from the South American country are recruited to participate in conflicts in different parts of the world. Some media outlets, such as Cuestión Pública, estimate that around 4,000 former members of Colombia's Public Force participate in foreign conflicts.

As mentioned, the bill will include measures to criminalize the use, hiring and training of mercenaries, an essential step considering the avalanche of Colombian mercenaries that affects not only Ukraine but also other countries in conflict, such as Libya and Sudan.

Another concern is, obviously, the ramifications in Latin America. For example, former

members of the Colombian military are recruited by Mexican drug cartels not only for training but also for paramilitary operations on the ground.

Privatized war and military training in Colombia are rooted in the influence of Israel's Mossad and American companies, such as Blackwater, and are linked to drug trafficking and extractive economies. In effect, Colombian mercenarism has been fueled by a system that perpetuates violence as a tool of control. The training that Colombian soldiers receive, based on American and British techniques, makes them ideal combatants for international conflicts and criminal activities.

Resolving the mercenary problem in Colombia lies in addressing both the structural causes and the regulations that allow its proliferation. Fully implementing the Peace Agreement signed in Havana in 2016 between the Colombian government and militant groups, which includes measures for substituting illicit crops and economic development in the areas most affected by the conflict, is critical.

The agreement between Colombia and Russia represents a significant step in controlling the export of mercenaries and their impacts. However, the problem transcends national borders. Colombia has a long tradition of internal conflict and a highly trained military that is poorly paid and vulnerable. The solution requires political will and a structural change in the power dynamics perpetuating violence. The only way to find peace is through dialogue and policies that dignify soldiers and deactivate patterns of war.

Until this occurs, though, Colombians will continue to be tempted to fight in Ukraine due to the promise of thousands of dollars a month. Although Colombians can earn more money fighting in Ukraine than having a conventional job at home, more than 300 of the 2,000 believed to have gone to the Eastern European warzone have been killed, while hundreds more have been wounded or deserted their positions.

Even if Colombian mercenaries survive unscathed, they still face other issues. Recently, two Colombian soldiers returning home were detained in Venezuela and sent to Russia, where they have been charged with mercenary activities.

With Colombian nationals exposed to financial rewards in Ukraine, caveated with a likelihood of imprisonment, injury or death, Murillo also confirmed that peace efforts were part of his discussions with Lavrov: "We delivered a message of peace regarding the war between Russia and Ukraine, encouraging political and diplomatic dialogue." Only through peace will Colombian lives stop being wasted in far-off Ukraine, but as it appears, the Kiev regime is still holding out from any negotiations with Moscow.

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