

Right-wing paramilitaries, the heirs of the infamous death squads, have started to re-emerge in Colombia

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Global Research, September 13, 2010
Al Jazeera 9 September 2010

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

In recent years, the image of Colombia has changed – particularly since Alvaro Uribe, the country's former president, took office in 2002. The notorious left-wing group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), has been weakened, paramilitary groups have been disarmed and cocaine production has dropped.

But this new image does not reflect the reality in rural villages and towns, where people continue to live at war and the FARC are just one of many threats they face.

It is in these places – far away from the improved security seen in Colombia's main cities – where the former paramilitary group, the Self Defense Units of Colombia, also known as the AUC, have been replaced by smaller but equally dangerous groups.

These groups are referred to as the heirs of the AUC, which was tasked with fighting left-wing rebels. Their method, known as 'draining the water to kill the fish', involved carrying out massacres of innocent civilians and provoking mass displacement. Human rights groups say they may have been responsible for the deaths and disappearances of at least 120,000 people.

When Uribe came to power he implemented a security plan that involved increasing the presence of the state in Colombia's most remote regions by sending the military there. The objective was to weaken the presence of left-wing rebels in the areas they used to control.

He also negotiated a truce with the AUC, with 30,000 men handing over their weapons in a televised ceremony.

The Justice and Peace Law, which offered reduced sentences to paramilitary members in return for information on the atrocities they committed, was also passed.

But, travelling around Colombia, we met people who spoke about groups with names like the Black Eagles and the Ratsrojos.

They said the faces were the same as those they used to see and that the men who had handed their weapons in to Uribe's government had simply moved on to these smaller, but equally as dangerous, groups.

The government refuses to call them paramilitaries, insisting that they are criminal gangs working for drug cartels. But the tone of the threats made by these groups are distinctly

right-wing.

For many analysts, the failure of demobilisation can be explained by the fact that while the men may have handed their weapons in, the power structures at the core of the groups were never touched. Land owners, drug cartels and even politicians backed the actions of the AUC.

The extent of these links have only recently started to be revealed with the eruption of the 'parapolitics' scandal.

The Heirs takes a close look at these right-wing groups and the threat they pose to human rights, indigenous groups and anybody who stands in their way.

The victims of the AUC and these new groups continue to wait for information on what happened to their loved ones. Many hope that Juan Manuel Santos, the country's new president, will finally bring them peace, if not justice.

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