Colombian security forces attacked a camp belonging to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on March 26 in Vistahermosa, Meta department, killing 36 members of the guerrilla group and capturing three. The operation, which Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos said resulted in the deaths of more FARC members than any other single strike in the 50-year-long conflict between the Colombian government and Marxist guerrilla groups, came shortly after a similar action in Arauca state in which 33 FARC members were killed and 12 were captured.

By Colby Martin, Stratfor

The operations were launched as part of an aggressive new Colombian counterinsurgency strategy dubbed Operation Espada de Honor ("Sword of Honor"), created in response to the increasing violent activity by the country's guerrilla groups. The plan expands the list of targets for security forces and the locations where they will engage guerrillas, with the goal of crippling the FARC both militarily and financially.

Espada de Honor is the latest of several plans by the Colombian government to combat militancy in the country. To fully understand the plan and its implications, it is helpful to examine the nature of Colombia's guerrilla groups, previous government counterinsurgency strategies and how the FARC has reacted to them.

Limitations to Colombian Security

Colombia's central government has never been able to control all of its territory. The Magdalena River Valley represents the heart of the country, where -- along with the cities of Bogota, Medellin and Cali -- most of the country's population lives. It is isolated from the rest of the country by Andes mountain ranges on either side. Outside the heartland is a combination of jungles, mountains and plains, largely uninhabited with limited infrastructure development.

Even with U.S. military aid, the logistical challenges involved in projecting power into Colombia's hinterlands make extended deployments unsustainable. Military operations outside the core have never been able to establish the security conditions needed to permit effective law enforcement on a large scale or for a significant period of time. The Colombian state is thus largely absent from the hinterlands, and the economic inequality in these regions is severe, giving rise to criminal organizations and insurgent groups.

This would not be a point of contention if not for the fact that the regions outside Colombia's core are rich in extractive resources such as oil, gold, precious stones and rare earth elements -- as well as marijuana, coca and opium poppies. The state and insurgent and criminal groups are in competition for these resources, and the state is trying to secure the regions, regardless

of limitations. Because the government lacks the resources to properly address the underlying issues of lack of development and inequality, eliminating insurgent groups is almost impossible. Instead, the government must concentrate on inhibiting their ability to operate and attempt to secure its interests as it seeks ways to improve conditions in the countryside.

Colombia has been in conflict since its creation as a republic in 1819. In the past 50 years, the conflict has centered on Marxist insurgences and the cocaine trade. Each new government plan to deal with these insurgencies has evolved from previous plans, though since the late 1990s, its strategies have been increasingly based on U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine.

Plan Colombia

In the late 1990s, President Andres Pastrana attempted to peacefully resolve the conflict with the FARC. Under Plan Colombia, Pastrana asked the United States, Europe and others for aid, both to combat the FARC and other insurgent groups and to address poverty and the lack of development in Colombia, issues he considered the underlying causes of the insurgency. This was intended to be coupled with peace negotiations in a demilitarized zone in San Vicente del Caguan, Caqueta department.

However, the plan that was actually implemented in 2000 focused much more on drug eradication and counterinsurgency than on development.

Nearly 80 percent of counterinsurgency funding, all of which came from the United States (which has spent nearly $7 billion in Colombia since 2000), went to the Colombian military and police, while developmental aid from other countries never fully materialized. Peace talks failed, the military moved into the demilitarized zone and the conflict escalated. Security operations were focused on the southern and eastern areas of Colombia, which were considered strongholds of the FARC and, not coincidentally, two of the main coca-producing regions in Colombia.

Plan Patriota

In late 2003, President Alvaro Uribe began to implement a counterinsurgency strategy titled Plan Patriota ("Plan Patriot"), a second phase of Plan Colombia. Uribe felt that in order to truly defeat the FARC, the military needed to take the fight to the guerrillas. Under the plan, the military would target high-value FARC leaders, drive the guerrillas out of strongholds in southern and eastern Colombia and hand control over the territory to civilian leadership. Along with this, the Colombians began a top-to-bottom overhaul of their military with support from the United States.

The tactics used during Plan Patriota were consistent. First, intelligence was gathered on locations of FARC camps and leaders. After the targets were acquired, fixed-wing attack aircraft and helicopters would bomb the targets to soften defenses, disorient the defenders and kill as many guerrillas as possible before special operations forces swept through the target area in order to capture or kill remaining combatants and collect any intelligence. Computers, thumb drives, cellphones and other documents were collected in these operations. This intelligence led

to more successful operations against the FARC and its supporters.

The plan successfully reduced the FARC's capabilities and membership. There were about 16,000 murders in 2008, down from nearly 30,000 in 2002, and the FARC's membership was reduced from about 17,000 to 9,000. The FARC also was driven away from traditional base camps closer to coca and cocaine production sites and forced to look for new routes and base camps. The successes of Plan Patriota laid the foundation for the tactics used in Operation Espada de Honor.

Plan Rebirth

The success of Plan Patriota did not destroy the FARC, but it did force the group to change how it operated. In late 2008, after realizing it could not succeed in direct confrontations with Colombian security forces, FARC leadership devised Plan Rebirth. Under the plan, the group retreated to its traditional strongholds, decentralized its leadership and formed into smaller units. The group also changed tactics accordingly, relying more on hit-and-run ambushes, improvised explosive devices and small, mobile sniper teams that allowed the guerrillas to strike government forces without engaging them directly in conventional combat.

The FARC's target set also changed to focus more on strategically valuable, less-secure linear infrastructure such as transportation and oil pipeline networks. The group's reasoning was twofold: First, it could use the threat of these attacks to extort "revolutionary taxes" from companies operating in the area. Second, because the government relies on energy and resource extraction for economic growth, these attacks could give the FARC leverage in any future negotiations. The tactic appears to be somewhat successful; Emerald Energy has shut down operations in the San Vicente del Caguan region in the past year, and others, including Occidental Petroleum Corp., are threatening to do the same unless security improves. Nevertheless, foreign direct investment continues to increase, giving the Colombian government more targets to protect and more reason to attempt to control the FARC.

Operation Espada de Honor

Operation Espada de Honor, then, is an attempt by the Colombian government to aggressively counter the FARC and other hostile organizations in areas where the groups and Colombia's economic interests overlap. The end goal is to reduce the "capacity" of the group by 50 percent over the next two years and limit its ability to attack the state or its interests.

The new strategy will continue to target the group's leadership but also expand its focus to eliminate 15 of the FARC's 67 fronts that represent its most powerful economic and military forces. According to Colombian newspaper El Espectador, the 52 remaining fronts are no longer in direct contact with FARC leadership, operating as criminal gangs and making agreements with everyone, including former enemies. Colombian armed forces commander Gen. Alejandro Navas recently estimated the FARC's current membership at between 8,000 and 9,000, although the true number is difficult to discern.

The operation will continue to focus on the FARC's traditional southern and eastern strongholds

as well as the Catatumbo region and the departments of Arauca, Cauca, Valle, Narino, Tolima, Putumayo and Vichada. The military will also improve its intelligence capabilities through the creation of a joint fusion center among all branches of the armed forces and national police and increase the size of the army by 5,000 troops and the National Police by 20,000.

Notably, though the FARC is currently the primary target, the operation also changes how the state combats what it calls bandas criminales, or "bacrim" -- criminal groups with roots in the United Defense Front (AUC) paramilitary organization. Traditionally, the military has dealt with guerrilla insurgencies by groups such as the FARC and National Liberation Army, while the National Police has dealt with bacrim with support from the navy. In the announcement for Espada de Honor, it was mentioned that the military would now be leading the fight against the criminal organizations as well.

Implications

Operation Espada de Honor is less about a major strategic shift in the war against insurgency and crime than it is an admission by the Santos government that the end of the violence in Colombia is not around the corner. The government has put aside the goal of completely defeating the FARC and other groups, instead focusing on strategically defending its interests by disrupting the enemy through tactical offensives.

Just as the United States has learned in Vietnam and Afghanistan, insurgencies are very difficult to completely stamp out. Certainly, an armed victory over the FARC, or even a negotiated settlement, will not be the end of armed criminal groups in Colombia. The geographic limitations, severe inequality and cocaine trade all create the conditions in which Colombia will continue to struggle to control its territory. The new importance of the military in the fight against the insurgencies makes it clear that the government was never able to establish effective control over the outer areas of the country. Without this control, the regions where the conflict rages cannot begin to solve the underlying problems of inequality and lack of development.

In the short term, the expansion of targets and locations will increase the likelihood of violence. The operations could also reduce the amount of cocaine coming out of Colombia as the government endeavors to cut the FARC's funding and the targeted organizations try to hunker down and survive. Over time, the operation could lead to a further decentralization of the FARC as more leaders are captured or killed, including midlevel leaders. Rank-and-file members could decide to desert in order to survive the onslaught. This dynamic would create even more violence as remaining FARC members fight with organized-crime groups and drug traffickers for control over the highly lucrative territory. It is the monopolization of control by one group or another, including the government, that reduces the threat.

However, it is important to remember that this escalation in the conflict does not mean these competing gangs pose the same existential threat to the state as a large Marxist insurgency with 20,000 fighters does. But as long as there is a market for cocaine and the extractive resources found in Colombia, insurgencies and criminal groups will have the means and motivation to continue the conflict.

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