

**Subject:**..... Colombia: Whether individuals threatened by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC), National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) or United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) can avoid such threats by relocating to Bogotá or another region of the country (May 2002-July 2003)

**Regional Office:**... 7

**From:**..... Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

A number of Colombia experts consulted by the Research Directorate characterized the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) and United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) as groups that are capable of carrying out operations throughout the country (AI USA 30 June 2003; United States 30 June 2003; Georgetown University 30 June 2003; Stetson University College of Law 7 July 2003). The Refugee Unit of the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá similarly considers the FARC and AUC to have national striking power, while noting that the FARC's supremacy in some rural areas has been "successfully challenged by paramilitary and army incursions" (Canada 29 Apr. 2003a).

An adjunct professor in the Department of Government at Georgetown University, who has written extensively on Colombian politics and is a specialist on drug-trafficking, political violence and negotiations with armed insurgent movements, indicated that the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) also has the capacity to undertake activities throughout Colombia (30 June 2003). This information was corroborated by Amnesty International (AI) USA's country specialist on Colombia, who added that while the threat posed by the ELN, FARC and AUC is much greater in their respective "areas of control," all three are able to "mount attacks in major cities" (9 July 2003). However, the president of the Free Country Foundation (Fundación País Libre), a Bogotá-based non-governmental organization that assists victims of abduction and their families, claimed that although the ELN has a "scant" (*escaza*) capacity to conduct operations in Bogotá, it has a "high" (*alta*) capacity to engage in intelligence gathering along the Caribbean coast and in Santander, Norte de Santander, Arauca, Valle del Cauca, northern Boyacá and eastern Antioquia (11 July 2003). In an April 2003 report, the Refugee Unit of the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá stated that the ELN "cannot credibly claim to have national striking power given the number of places where they have no presence" (Canada 29 Apr. 2003a).

In a telephone interview, a consultant who advises the United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS) Resource Information Center (RIC) on Colombian matters indicated that there has been an apparent increase in the level of cooperation between the FARC and ELN over the past 12 to 15 months (United States 30 June 2003). A Stetson University College of Law associate professor, who served as a district judge in Medellín between 1983 and 1986 and currently specializes in the legal dimensions of narcotics trafficking and guerrilla insurgency, also addressed the issue of cooperation among armed groups in the following terms:

The FARC and ELN have a vast network of intelligence that they have been known to share when it is expedient to do so, particularly in areas of the country where they are aligned *en masse* against government entities, as is the case, for instance, in the oil production regions of northeastern Colombia, such as in Arauca department (7 July 2003).

Furthermore, according to a number of sources, the FARC, ELN and AUC have a significant presence in Colombia's urban centres, including Bogotá (ibid.; Georgetown University 30 June 2003; AI USA 9 July 2003). For example, in the view of the Georgetown University adjunct professor,

Each [of these groups] has instituted a strategy of creating urban militias connected to their regular armed fighters. Indeed the FARC may have as many as 12,000 urban militias, highly concentrated in Bogotá and Medellín but also in many of the medium sized urban centers such as Bucaramanga and Villavicencio. The AUC also has close ties with urban militias and youth gangs. The militias from both the left and the right are not as closely scrutinized or controlled and often degenerate into armed criminals and *sicarios* [hired killers] (30 June 2003).

According to the RIC consultant, paramilitary groups, which have made it a priority to follow the FARC wherever it is operating, are active in Bogotá, building on existing gang structures in order to undertake criminal activities such as extortion (United States 30 June 2003).

The associate professor at Stetson University College of Law indicated that members of the FARC, ELN and AUC are present in "nearly all the urban centers of any note in Colombia" (7 July 2003). In addition to Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín, these include Cúcuta, the capital of Norte de Santander Department in northeastern Colombia (where the ELN have been very active), Bucaramanga, the capital of Santander Department, and Buenaventura, the port city of the Department of Valle del Cauca, which is an important port of origin for illegal drugs and weapons trafficking conducted by FARC guerrillas and organized drug trafficking groups. They are also established in Barrancabermeja, Cartagena, Santa Marta, Cartago, and Villavicencio. The paras [paramilitary groups] and guerrillas are organized into urban fronts (*frentes*), working out of the poor neighborhoods (called *urbanizaciones*), often on the outskirts of the cities and in the case of some cities like Medellín, in the hillside slums known as *comunas* (Stetson University College of Law 7 July 2003).

In the view of the Canadian Embassy's Refugee Unit, the poorer districts of Colombian cities, particularly those inhabited by internally displaced people, can be "considered to be porous and accessible to FARC agents" (Canada 29 Apr. 2003a). While the ELN "show[s] strength" in Cali as well as operating a small, primarily intelligence gathering unit "out of southern Bogotá and Soacha [Cundinamarca]," the Refugee Unit noted that the group has suffered heavy losses in the past two years, both in its combatant ranks and funding base (ibid.).

The sources consulted by the Research Directorate differed in their assessment as to whether individuals threatened by the FARC, AUC or ELN could successfully avoid such threats by relocating to another region of the country.

Both the RIC consultant and the AI USA Colombia country specialist indicated that the armed groups' capacity to locate and target threatened individuals remains unchanged since Alvaro Uribe Vélez assumed the office of president in August 2002 (United States 30 June 2003; AI USA 9 July 2003). According to the Georgetown University adjunct professor, both the guerrillas and paramilitary groups often employ highly sophisticated data bases and computer networks. An individual who is threatened in one area of the country will not be notably safer by relocating to another. Depending on the nature and reasons for the threat, the victims can be pursued relentlessly. There are countless stories of men and women receiving threats in Bogotá or Medellín after relocating from another area and attempting to live anonymously in the big city. Many have been killed after

seeking refuge in another part of the country. There are also cases of people leaving the country for a period of months or years, and then being killed after returning. Memories are long and data is systematically recorded and analysed (30 June 2003).

Similarly, the associate professor at Stetson University College of Law indicated that: In the last several years it has become increasingly difficult for an individual to escape the long arm of the guerrilla and para [paramilitary] groups. ... They are mobilized and enjoy a network of contacts throughout the country. ... Remember, too, that Colombia is one of the most class-conscious and rigidly stratified countries in the western world. It is virtually impossible to relocate from one part of the country to another without someone taking note. Regional identity is very important. Skin color, colloquial mannerisms and customs, speech inflections and social orientation to the external environment all work to make it difficult for a Colombian individual to hide his or her roots or social origins. ...

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Many of the rural poor have nowhere to go to flee the war than to the *comunas* of the major cities. There they think they are safe, not understanding the extent to which the guerrillas and paras have infiltrated and controlled the urban peasant communities. Neighbors inform on them and their locations are exposed. Family members left behind are harassed, intimidated, tortured, and killed in an effort to reveal the location of those being sought. For the middle and upper classes of individuals who have been victimized by extortion and intimidation at the hands of the guerrillas, it is even more difficult to escape. The guerrillas have sophisticated intelligence-gathering capabilities. They can track one's physical whereabouts through the use of taxi drivers, domestic servants, airlines and travel agencies. They have access to private bank records and credit card activities, and they can track someone down based on their paper trail. They can eavesdrop on family members to determine where a target is located, or bribe acquaintances for information. ... Rural peasants stick out in a crowd, as do any individuals who are not native to an area. ... Moreover, the system is so rife with corruption that it is not difficult to buy information and bribe government officials to inform on someone's whereabouts. ...

...

The bottom line is that if the guerrillas and paras [want] to find you, chances are very good that they can do so. Moreover, there is strong evidence that the FARC and ELN, and paras are operating on foreign soil, in neighboring countries to Colombia, in Costa Rica, and overseas destinations of Colombian [expatriates] such as Miami, Madrid, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. This situation abroad expands their reach. The FBI, for example, is acutely aware that the guerrillas have fronts operating in Miami and South Florida conducting operations such as money laundering, trafficking of humans, illegal document smuggling, weapons smuggling, drug trafficking, and intelligence gathering and recruitment. Many Colombians who thought they had fled the dangers in Colombia have settled in Miami only to have someone from the FARC contact them to let them know that they are still being watched (7 July 2003).

In contrast to the above statements, a senior associate at the Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP) who has coordinated the organization's Colombia program since 1997 stated that, in his opinion,

relocating elsewhere in Colombia can usually bring some increased safety, unless one is a national figure, because guerrilla and paramilitary fronts don't usually have such great coordination. However, a recent arrival to a village or neighborhood is usually viewed with suspicion, so displacing oneself is not that easy either (9 July 2003).

According to the Canadian Embassy's Refugee Unit, internal flight is possible for individuals who are threatened by armed groups other than the FARC or AUC, since these groups do not have "national striking power" (Canada 29 Apr. 2003b). The Refugee Unit added that the ELN is the "largest of these non-national groups" (ibid.). While both the FARC and AUC do have the capacity to act throughout Colombia, the "overwhelming majority of threatened and displaced persons are of limited interest to [these groups] once they stop their community/political activities and leave" their region (ibid. 29 Apr. 2003a). The Refugee Unit further stated that For [refugee] applicant[s] to use the claim that they cannot flee internally, [they] must satisfy the interviewing officer that they have a stature and role in the conflict that would justify a high level of motivation in FARC or the AUC to follow them across a large country (ibid. 29 Apr. 2003b).

As well, the Refugee Unit claimed that the AUC in particular has excellent intelligence gathering capacities, and that if either this group or the FARC really want to locate an individual, both groups have the resources to do so (ibid. 29 Apr. 2003a). In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a senior refugee officer at the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá indicated that he has not observed "any changes in internal flight alternatives linked causally to the Uribe presidency" (ibid. 14 July 2003).

Drawing upon his experience in working with abduction victims, the president of the Free Country Foundation indicated that while it would be difficult to locate individuals in Bogotá, Medellín or Cali, making enquiries would probably be sufficient to do so in other cities and regions, provided that the targeted individual has not changed his or her identity (Fundación País Libre 11 July 2003). The president was of the opinion that, once an individual has been located, it would "relatively simple" (*relativamente sencillo*) to arrange an assassination, even in instances where the victim is protected by "hard security measures" (*esquemas de seguridad dura*) (ibid.).

The president also noted that the likelihood of relocation ending the threat posed by an armed group is dependent on two principal factors (ibid.). First, one must consider the reach of the armed group in question, with the FARC for example having a significantly higher capacity to act throughout the country than the ELN (ibid.). Second, one must assess the reasons why an individual is being sought (ibid.). If, for example, the targeted individual is a witness in a court case and can identify an important member of an armed group, every effort will be made to locate and kill this person, regardless of where he or she may be hiding (ibid.). However, even in instances where there is less motivation to track down threatened individuals, the president stated that they would still have to relocate to a new residence if they live in Bogotá, or leave their hometown if they reside elsewhere (ibid.). Furthermore, depending on the reason for the threat, such individuals may also be advised to avoid all contact with people and places that an armed group could exploit to learn their present whereabouts (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

#### References

Amnesty International (AI) USA, New York. 9 July 2003. Correspondence from a Colombia country specialist.

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Stetson University College of Law, Gulfport, Florida. 7 July 2003. Correspondence from an associate professor.

United States. 30 June 2003. Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, Resource Information Center, Washington, DC. Telephone interview with a consultant.