



Ecuador at Risk: Drugs, Thugs, Guerrillas and the Citizens Revolution

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The FARC In Ecuador: The Early Days

The elasticity of the Ecuadoran judicial system, both on a national and international level, are part of what makes it attractive for outside criminal groups. Among the plethora of transnational challenges facing the country, the primary threat is the FARC.

The FARC is the oldest guerrilla army in the Western Hemisphere and one of the oldest in the world. The group was founded by less than two dozen men in 1964 from the remnants of the Liberal Party militias in Colombia that fought in "*La Violencia*," the vicious civil war of the 1950s between the Liberal and Conservative parties in Colombia. Leaders of the FARC, who declared themselves Marxist-Leninist, formed a largely rural force that for most of the next three decades were not among the largest or most feared non-state armed groups that appeared in Colombia throughout the 1960s to the early 1990s.¹

Over time, the FARC and various other insurgent groups grew in different parts of Colombia. These included the Chinese-backed Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación-EPL*), the Cuban-backed National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional-ELN*) and the M-19 nationalist movement. The EPL and M-19 movements negotiated peace settlements with the government in the early 1990s, while the ELN remains a fighting force but has lost most of its military strength and political following.

¹ For a more detailed look at the FARC and Reyes documents, see the following papers: Farah, "What the FARC Papers Show us About Latin American Terrorism," NEFA Foundation, April 1, 2008; Douglas Farah, "The FARC in Transition: The Fatal Weakening of the Western Hemisphere's Oldest Guerrilla Movement," NEFA Foundation, July 2, 2008; Douglas Farah, "The FARC's International Relations: A Network of Deception," NEFA Foundation, Sept. 22, 2008; Douglas Farah, "Lessons Learned From the Campaign Against the FARC in Colombia," NEFA Foundation, Nov. 16, 2008

Figure 1: FARC Flag



The FARC continued to grow, reaching a peak of about 18,000 combatants in the 2004 period. Unlike most rebel groups, the original founders of the group have lived long lives and retained significant influence over the group. Their leaders, until the killing of Reyes, were more likely to die of old age in the hills than in combat. Jacobo Arenas, the founder of the FARC, died in the jungle hills in August 1990. His successor and long-time second-in-command, Manuel Marulanda (AKA “Sure-shot”) died in March 2008 of a heart attack. Both were in their 70s when they died.²

Reyes was the first member of the general secretariat since the FARC's founding to be killed by Colombian government forces. Two days later a second member of the FARC secretariat was killed, this time by his own bodyguards, and data from his personal computers was also recovered. The assassination of Iván Rios (aka Manuel Muñoz Ortíz) at the hands of his own security detail, was widely viewed as a sign of deep internal stress within the FARC. The assassins cut off Rios' hand and presented it, along with the computers and other data, to a Colombian military unit.³

² For a more detailed look at the evolution of the FARC and the role played by Arenas and Marulanda, see: Alfredo Molano, “The Evolution of the FARC,” NACLA Report on the Americas, September/October 2000, accessed at: <http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/colombia/molano.htm>

³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7284222.stm>

The FARC's survival has been possible in part because the FARC was not as dependent as most other non-state armed groups on external sources of financing, most of which evaporated with the end of the Cold War. Instead, the group established a strong nexus with criminal activity, including drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, allowing it to finance itself following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Marxist bloc.

One of the ways the FARC managed its transition to a drug trafficking entity was to help move the cultivation of the coca leaf, the raw material for making cocaine, from its historic cultivation centers in Peru and Bolivia to Colombia. New varieties of the coca leaf, able to grow in more humid climates, were introduced, in order to move the cultivation to Colombia, largely in areas where the FARC was the primary political and military force. This shift in cultivation strategy was one of the factors that greatly increased revenue streams of the FARC.

In recent years the internal dynamic of the Colombian conflict have changed radically. From 1997-2004, as the FARC stepped up its involvement in the cocaine trade, four significant things happened.

The first was the FARC became a much improved fighting force, using its money to import new weapons, foreign trainers and recruit a new generation of fighters by offering salaries higher than the army could afford to pay. The size of the FARC forces doubled in those years, from about 9,000 combatants to 19,000.

In 1997 and 1998 the FARC inflicted a string of 18 consecutive defeats of the army, regularly mobilizing units of 1,500 to 2,000 troops to attack military outposts manned by a few hundred men.⁴ The FARC had also used its drug revenues to rearm with sophisticated Soviet bloc weapons, and were consistently able to outgun the military.⁵

In addition, the FARC had begun to exchange technology and methodologies with other terrorist groups, including Spain's ETA and the Provisional Irish Republican Army, greatly increasing its operational capabilities, particularly in the field of explosives.⁶ Much of the upgrading of the FARC's military capabilities came during 1999-2002, when the FARC was granted a safe haven the size of Switzerland in order to carry out the ultimately unsuccessful peace talks.

The second major shift came as coca cultivation grew in Colombia under FARC protection, beginning in the mid-1990s. The cultivation drew thousands of migrants to coca growing regions in search of work and land. Many of the areas of cultivation are near the Ecuadoran border. For the first time in its history, the coca growers

⁴ Author interviews with current and former Colombian military and police officials.

⁵ Douglas Farah, "Colombian Rebels Tap E. Europe for Arms; Guerrillas' Firepower Superior to Army's," Washington Post, Nov. 4, 1999, p. A1.

⁶ For a more complete look at the FARC's relationships with other groups, see: Douglas Farah, "The FARC's International Relations: A Network of Deception," op cit.

gave the FARC a peasant base in territory where the government exercised almost no real control.

The third was that the army, riddled with corruption and mired in internal conflict, for the first time found itself facing defeat by the FARC. Historically rather than fight the rebels the army had relied on paramilitary groups allied with large landowners to carry out the brunt of the fighting, a strategy that led to massive human rights violations including attacks on the civilian population carried out with impunity. The paramilitary groups by the mid-1990s were as involved in the drug trade as the FARC, and the military had become penetrated at very senior levels by drug traffickers, and could do little to confront the FARC's rapid expansion.

Dismayed by the situation, a new generation of generals assumed control of the military and realized the war, after almost 40 years, had turned against them. In an effort to understand their own institution, the new leadership in 1998 commissioned a broad survey of its officer corps to determine morale, capacity and analyze the general breakdown of the institution.⁷

The army, air force and navy leadership seldom spoke to each other and often failed to coordinate operations. Intelligence gathering was minimal and the primary work of the army was patrolling streets or guarding stationary targets such as power lines, bridges and dams.

Offensive, intelligence-driven operations were almost unheard of, in part because so little intelligence was being gathered. Rather than being debriefed after capture, FARC rebels were almost always executed or put in jail to rot. There were virtually no clandestine operations being run, and even the basic configuration of the FARC high command and order of battle were little understood, despite the conflict having dragged on for decades.⁸

The restructuring coincided with the initiation of Plan Colombia, the \$6 billion U.S. aid program to combat drug trafficking. Some \$4.5 billion over the past decade has been focused on the military and police, including extensive aerial eradication programs to destroy coca plantations.

The combination of the radical restructuring of the military, a new strong emphasis on intelligence gathering and sharing, and outside aid greatly enhanced the military's operational capabilities and a counter-offensive against the FARC with devastating results.

⁷ Author interview, Gen. (r) Jorge Enrique Mora, commander of the army (1998-2000) and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2000-2002.

⁸ Information on the state of the Colombian military was gathered in a series of interviews with six current and past senior military and police officials, all who held senior commands at in the period under discussion.

This led to the fourth and crucial factor that has most affected Ecuador. The Colombian military's relatively rapid success in clearing the center of the nation of FARC presence and establishing government presence there, often for the first time in the nation's history.

The FARC, having grown to some 18,000 combatants, now can field less than half that amount and controls far less territory than it did even five years ago. In 2002, the FARC had a significant presence in 400 municipalities and was present in 23 of the nation's departments (states). In 480 of the nation's 1,100 townships, the mayors could not be physically present because of death threats from the FARC.⁹ Now the rebel presence has been reduced to only 100 municipalities and 17 departments and all 1,100 mayors live in the municipalities where they were elected.

The military offensive not only led to the death of Reyes and other senior commanders, but successful operations also weakened the FARC and sapped the morale of the organization. The most severe blow to the FARC was the dramatic July 15 army rescue operation that freed 15 of the FARC's highest value hostages. These included former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three American contractors.¹⁰ The holding of the hostages had been of great political and psychological value to the rebels. Not only did it prove the group could capture and hold senior political figures and U.S. citizens, but the negotiations for the freedom of these hostages had given the FARC new opportunities to establish contacts with a host of governments, and a pretext for maintaining a political infrastructure in Venezuela.

These blows of the deaths of the leadership and the hostage rescue, taken together, have significantly weakened the FARC military and lowered morale within the organization. As evidence, intelligence analysts and officials point to two main indicators: the increasing desertions of senior-level FARC commanders who have been in the rebel movement for years, and the growing complaints in intercepted FARC communications about hunger and the lack of basic necessities, such as boots and clothes, among the rank and file combatants.

⁹ Author interview, Gen. Oscar Naranjo, commander of the Colombian National Police.

¹⁰ Chris Kraul, "15 Hostages Freed as FARC is Fooled in Cunning Operation," Los Angeles Times, July 3, 2008, accessed at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-hostages3-2008jul03.0.3051652.story>



Figure 2: FARC Leader Manuel Marulanda (left) and his Second-in-Command Raul Reyes (right) during 2002 peace talks with the government. Both are now dead.

The result has been that FARC's long-standing use of Ecuador as a rearguard area for rest, medical attention, diplomatic outreach and resupply has changed from being a convenience to a vital lifeline for the FARC's survival.

As the following maps show, between 2002 and 2008 the FARC lost most of its corridors that allowed it to move drugs from coca growing regions and processing centers in the southern part of the country toward the north. While a 2009 map is not yet available, FARC territory shrank even further last year. What are left are the east-west corridors of access to Ecuador and Venezuela. Under constant harassment, the guerrillas (as well as other armed groups, including remnants of the paramilitary organizations that have maintained their drug trafficking structures), have become increasingly ensconced in the border region.

As the FARC has come under military and economic pressure, two of its fighting fronts have become increasingly important to the maintenance of the guerrilla units. The 48th Front is responsible for most of the organization's drug trafficking infrastructure, money collection and medical supplies. The 29th Front is responsible for importing weapons, manufacturing explosives and other munitions, and other

logistical operations. Both of these fronts operate on the border with Ecuador, and will be examined in some detail below.

One of the unintended consequences of the Colombian attack on the Reyes camp in Ecuador is that, given the international outcry in its aftermath, it will be very difficult to repeat without igniting a regional war. Rather than being at great risk, those using the border areas are now safer in many ways than they were before.

Another consequence of the Colombian attack was the shutting down of all information sharing between Colombian and Ecuadoran police and military intelligence units for more than one year. While sharing has begun again on a limited basis, the level of cooperation is far from optimal and the level of trust on both sides remains extremely low.¹¹

The Politics of the FARC in Ecuador

The FARC's extensive relationships inside Ecuador did not begin with the government of Rafael Correa, although close allies of his in the government have been tied to direct support activities of the FARC.¹² The significant FARC infrastructure in Ecuador dates back at least to 2003, when the organization made its first significant push to achieve some level of international recognition among Latin American political parties and broad leftist networks that continued to operate even after the end of the Cold War.

Because Colombia and Ecuador share a 365-mile border, defined by the San Miguel River and other waterways that are bordered on both sides by thick jungle, it has been a FARC sanctuary for decades. It has traditionally been a region where the border was little more than a line on the map, with little impact on daily life. It was also a region where irregular forces on all sides of the Colombian conflict could escape the fighting. In addition, in the 1970s and 1980s Ecuador also had a spate of small armed movements, some of them allied with groups in Colombia, and the country was known as a safe haven for those facing political persecution elsewhere.

Changes began as the FARC moved into cultivation of the coca leaf and large-scale cocaine production in the late 1990s. The Colombian side of the river hosts some of the areas of most intense coca cultivation in the country (see maps below), including the departments or states of Putumayo and Nariño. Because of this, the region has been -- and continues to be -- prized by all sides in Colombia's conflict, and home to some of its most violent fighting among the FARC, paramilitary groups and other

¹¹ Author interviews in Ecuador and Colombia.

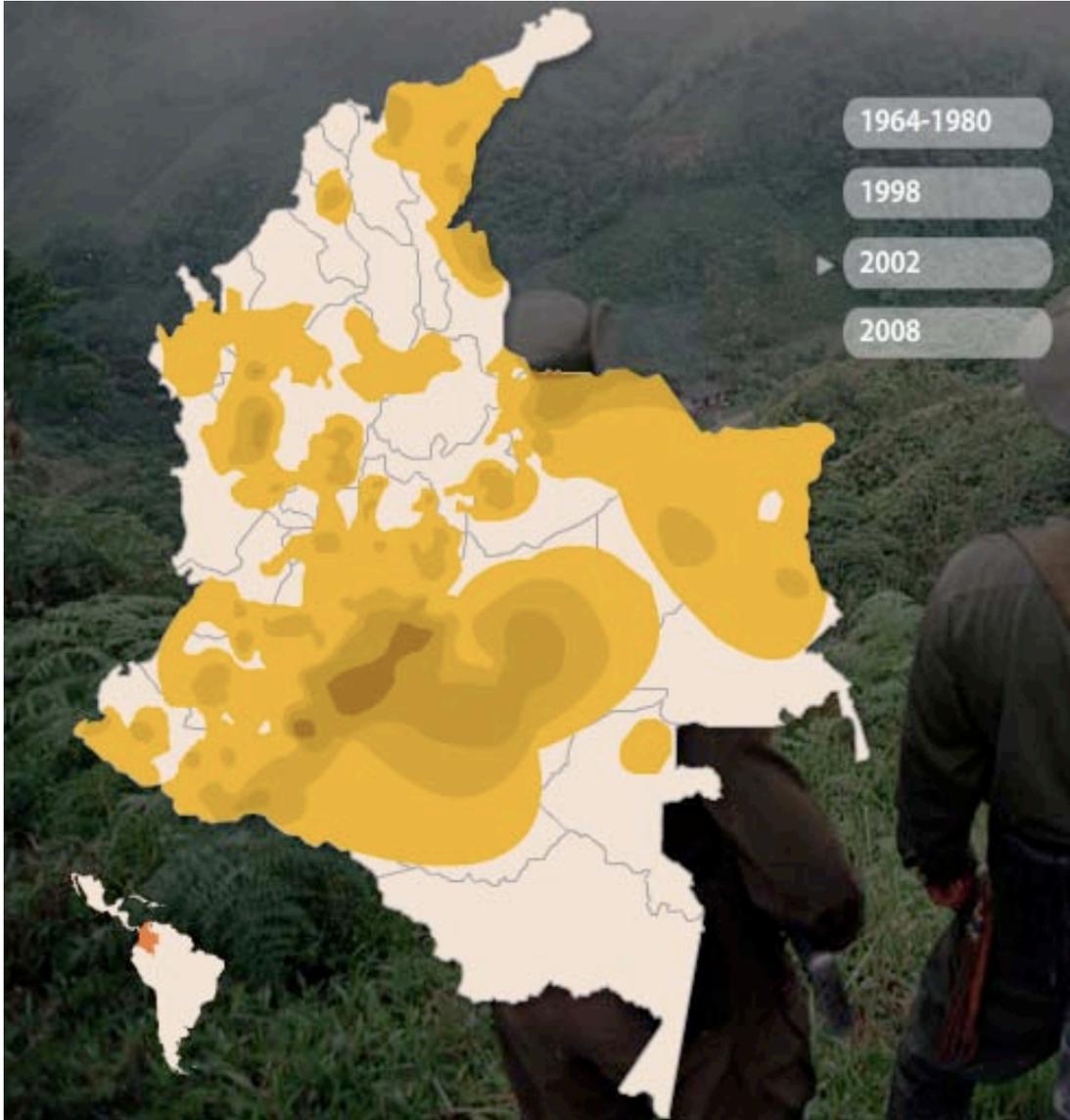
¹² These include Correa's minister of national security, Gustavo Larrea, given the alias "Juan" by the FARC, and Larrea's vice minister, José Ignacio Chauvín. Chauvín in turn has been tied to Raul Reyes of the FARC, as well as an important drug trafficking network led by Edison Ostaiza. For details see: "Los Redes Alrededor de Ostaiza y Chauvin," *Hoy*, Sept. 9, 2009; and Arturo Torres, *El Juego del Camaleón: Los Secretos de Angostura*, Eskeletra Editorial, Quito, 2009.

non-state armed actors. As is clearly visible by comparing the maps of the FARC's territorial presence in 2002 and 2008 and the coca cultivation map, the FARC controls the vast majority of the coca growing territory on or near the Ecuadoran border.

By 2003, following the collapse of peace talks with the Colombian government, the FARC launched an international diplomatic offensive in order to win regional support for its position that it should be recognized as a "belligerent force" and removed from the U.S. and EU list of terrorist organizations. Another goal was to promote a "humanitarian agreement" in which the FARC would exchange its kidnap victims for FARC prisoners being held by the Colombian government.

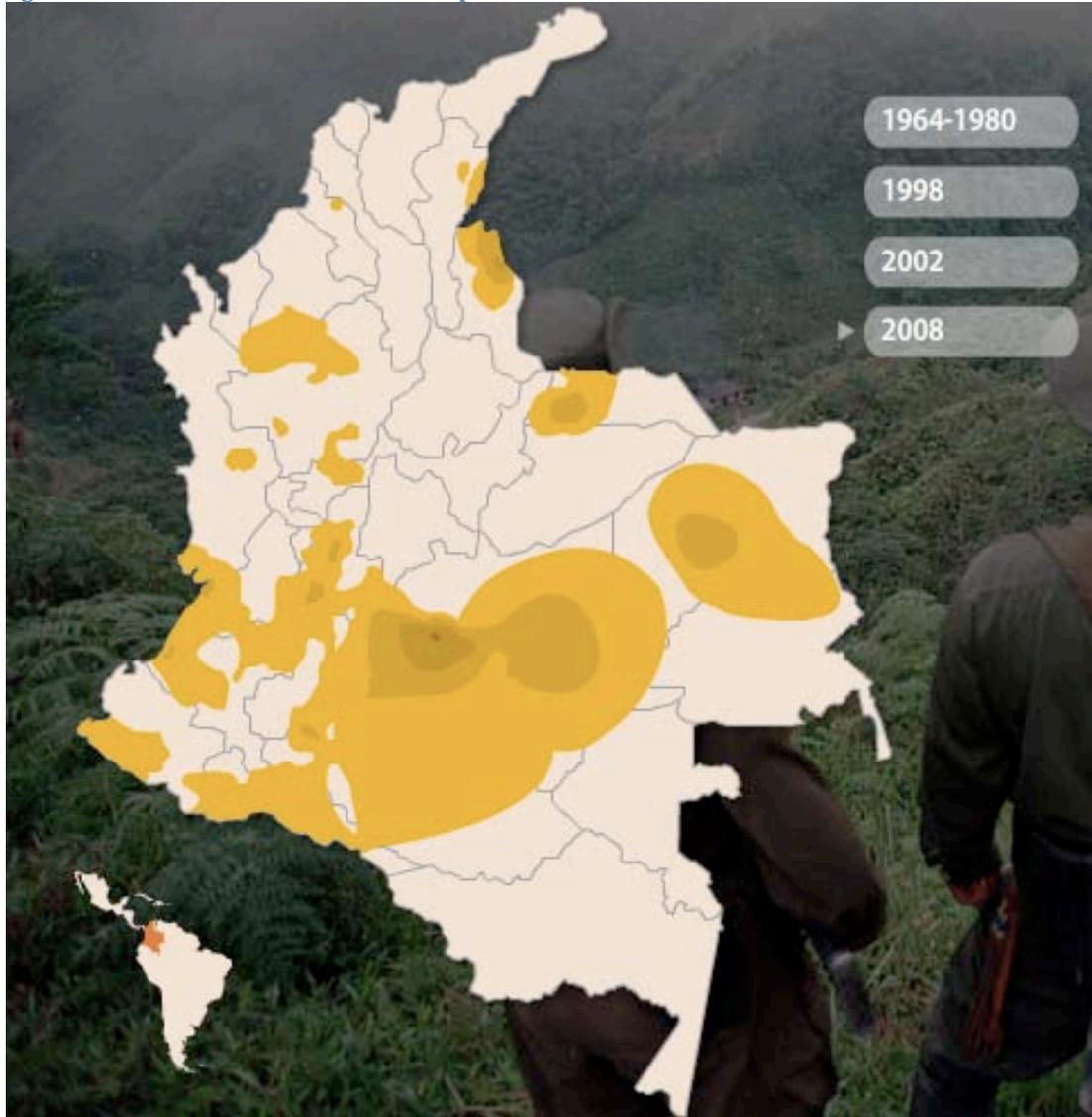
FARC Territorial Presence 2002

Figure 3: Source, International Crisis Group



FARC Territorial Presence 2008

Figure 4: Source: International Crisis Group



The FARC's work in Ecuador was coordinated by a senior member of the FARC's International Commission named Nubia Calderón de Trujillo, who used the aliases "Esperanza" and "Ana Maria." A Feb. 11, 2004 internal communiqué signed by the FARC high command officially noted the "Readjustments in the Work Plan of the International Commission," among them, "Esperanza is now responsible for the work in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia."¹³

Calderón was responsible not only for the diplomatic representation of the FARC, but for procuring safe houses, enrolling the children of senior FARC commanders in school and setting up meetings for other senior FARC representatives. She was in Angostura when it was bombed, but managed to escape, although badly wounded. She eventually made her way, with the help of senior Ecuadoran officials, to the Nicaraguan embassy in Quito, where she was granted political asylum.¹⁴

A May 9, 2003 e-mail from Reyes to FARC senior commander Manuel Marulanda shows that the FARC had already been investing in safe houses in Ecuador by that time. The person referred to as is senior FARC commander Simón Trinidad.

The note states that:

At this time there are good opportunities to talk with different people in the government and allied friends. They have offered guarantees so Ricardo can enter the country. Do you authorize Ricardo to enter the country, and if so we can take advantage of the trip and talk to some people...

According to Ricardo, they are offering 120,000 dollars for our property on the beach and 45,000 for the house that you ordered we buy with him. As you know, these properties are in his name, and to sell them he will have to sign the documents. I asked Ricardo if we were earning money with these sales, or if we are trying to sell them to save our investments, but I don't have an answer yet. I won't authorize any sales without your permission.¹⁵

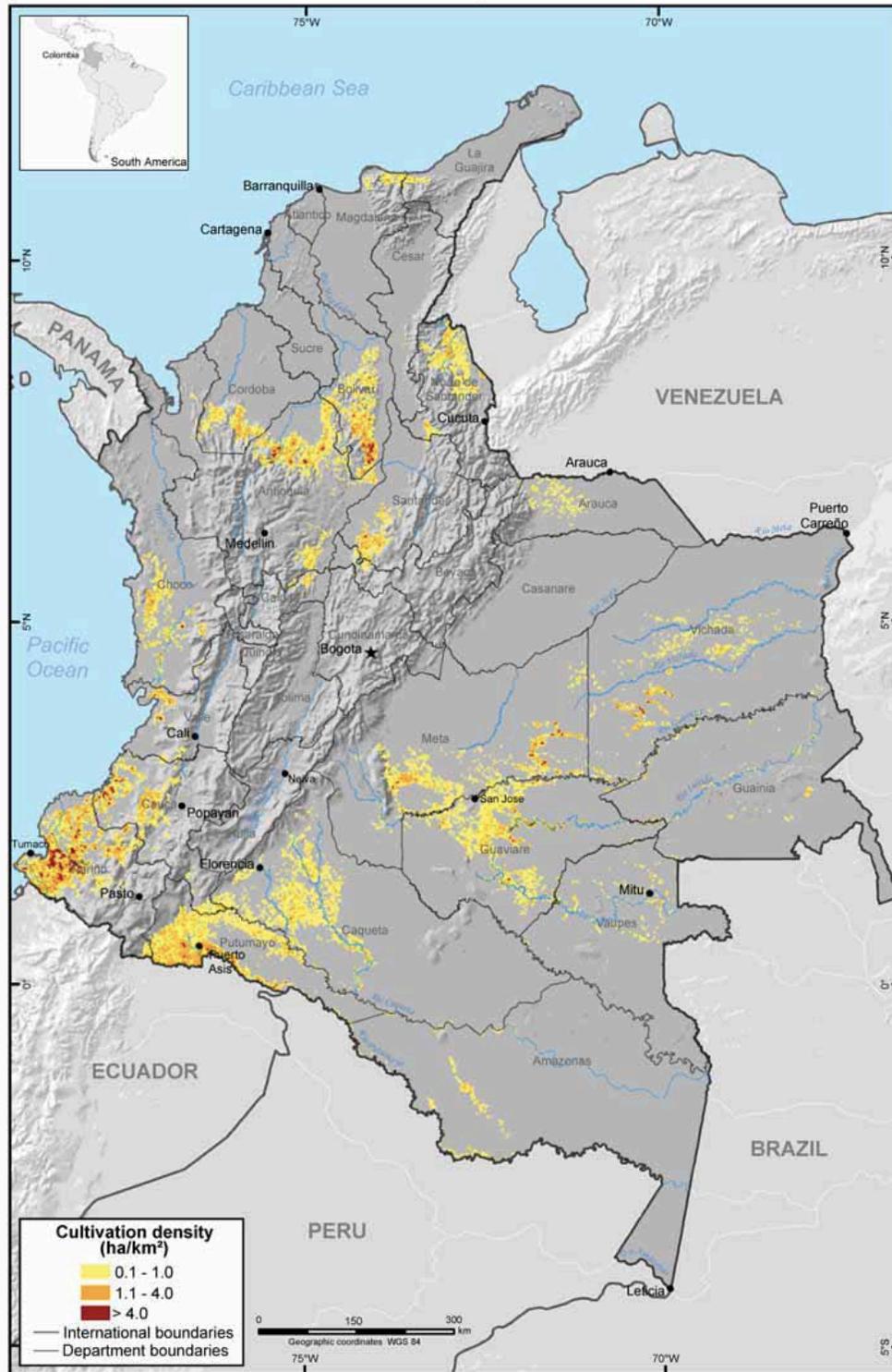
But it was not all smooth sailing. The FARC had held high expectations that the government of Lucio Gutiérrez, who took office in January 2003 after running on a strong leftist platform, would befriend the insurgency. There are hints in the Reyes documents that the guerrillas also financed his campaign, but the amount of help is not specified. Rather, Reyes warns of the risks of giving to other Ecuadoran candidates, noting that "we gave to others and they did not respond."

¹³ Document in possession of the author. Unless otherwise noted, the Reyes computer documents cited are taken from the official dossier presented by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to his Ecuadoran counterpart on its Ecuadoran counterpart on March 29, 2008, and titled: "Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador."

¹⁴ Torres, op cit., pp. 162-3 and author interviews in Ecuador and Colombia.

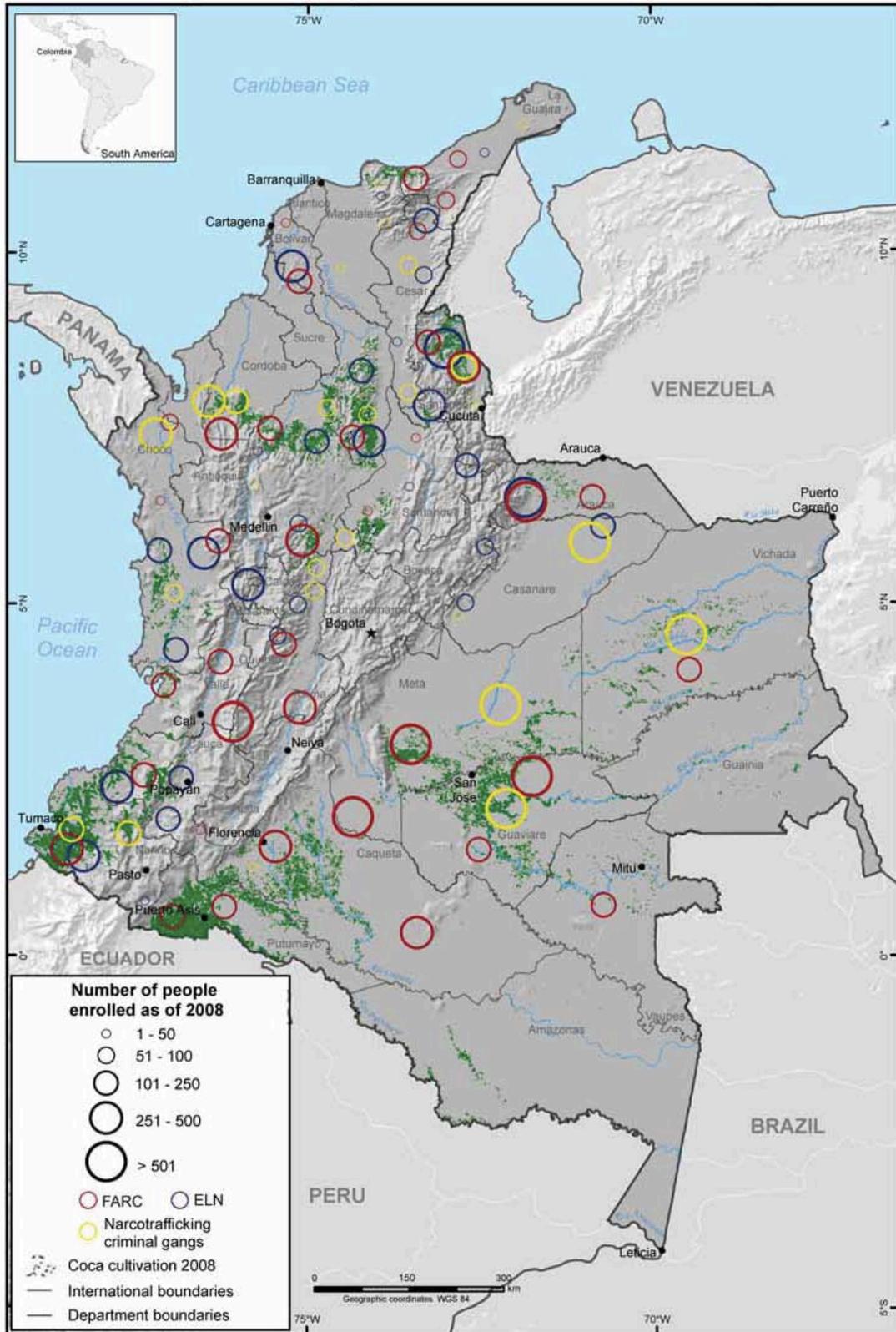
¹⁵ "Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador," op cit.

Coca cultivation density in Colombia, 2008



Source: Government of Colombia - National monitoring system supported by UNODC
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used in this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations

Illegal armed groups and coca cultivation in Colombia, 2008



Sources: for coca cultivation Government of Colombia - National monitoring system supported by UNODC; Ministry of Defence and National Police for number of persons enrolled in armed groups. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used in this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations

Instead of befriending the FARC, however, Gutiérrez moved rapidly to consolidate a strong relationship with the United States, leading FARC leaders to denounce him as a traitor.

Gutiérrez also authorized one of the few successful operations against a FARC leader in Ecuador -- the January 2004 arrest of the FARC's chief financial officer known as Simón Trinidad, but whose real name is Juvenal Ovidio Ricardo Palmera Pineda. A joint Colombian-Ecuadoran operation captured Trinidad in Quito, where he was using a false Ecuadoran identification card. He was later extradited to the United States, where he is serving a 60-year sentence for conspiring to hold three U.S. intelligence contractors hostage.¹⁶

The FARC and The Correa Campaign

The FARC leadership's deep disillusionment with Gutiérrez may explain in part their eagerness to see Correa elected. There are indications that Gutiérrez was willing to aid the Colombian and U.S. governments in capturing further senior FARC officials. It is worth noting that following 9/11 the United States began to apply new pressure across the region for governments to break their ties and tolerance for the insurgent group. This message was reinforced following the downing of a U.S. aircraft in Colombia in 2003 and the capture of three U.S. contractors, the same three that Trinidad was convicted of holding hostage and who were freed in the 2008 rescue operation.

As the FARC's internal position in Colombia weakened and the importance of the border region with Ecuador grew, Reyes, a long-time leader of the FARC's diplomatic branch, moved permanently to the border region and began spending more and more of his time on the Ecuadoran side. He also sent his children to school in Quito, until they graduated from high school and moved to Havana, Cuba.

A short note to Reyes dated Dec. 30, 2004 reported secret Ecuadoran information as a warning, noting briefly that "Friendly Ecuadoran officials let me know that the Ecuadorans know the location of Reyes."¹⁷

As the election time drew closer, the Reyes e-mails reflect a growing interest in the outcome and felt that either of the major candidates could be helpful. In an Oct. 4, 2005 e-mail Reyes wrote that he had a "very interesting meeting with the

¹⁶ Although found guilty of conspiracy to hold hostages, four attempts by the U.S. government to win a conviction on charges of drug trafficking all ended in mistrials. Venezuelan President Chávez reportedly paid for a least a portion of Trinidad's legal defense. See: Maite Rico, "Los Papeles de las FARC Acusan a Chávez," *El País*, May 10, 2008.

¹⁷ "Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador," op cit.

Ecuadoran delegation, at a time of political confrontation, where both contenders offer to build bridges where currently there are rivers."¹⁸ Reyes goes on to note that "we have the people who can help them on the border region, and despite the risks to ourselves we can help orient people to vote for the selected candidates. But be careful, they are picking us up on both sides of the border. The most complicated issue is financial help...because the elections are on top of us and there is not time to consult the entire secretariat. However, it is to our advantage to give whatever small thing we can, as we did with those who did not reciprocate."

On Oct. 9, 2006, Calderón wrote to Reyes to request a meeting with Gen. René Vargas, who was at the time a senior officer of the state petroleum company, Petroecuador, and later Correa's ambassador to Venezuela.

On Oct. 11, 2006 another member of the FARC secretariat, Ivan Ríos weighed in enthusiastically on helping the Correa campaign.

Comrades of the secretariat, warm greetings. I agree with the need for solidarity with our Ecuadoran friends that are working in Correa's campaign. His position relating to the FARC is valuable. It could be the beginning of the FARC as a belligerent force. I agree we should help guide the campaign in the border region. We need to act quickly, as the elections are very soon. Comrade Raúl should tell us where the Caribbean Front and the Jose Maria Front should send the money.¹⁹

The next day, formal notification of the FARC's agreement to give the money was sent to members of the secretariat by Marulanda, the top commander:

The Secretariat is in agreement of giving help to the friends in Ecuador. My proposal was \$20,000, Jorge [Briseño] proposes \$100,000 and offers to put up \$50,000. He authorized me to get it from Joaquín and get it to you. Comrade Alfonso is also in agreement...If you can get the money on loan from another front while we get the money together to reimburse you, so much the better. You can tell our friends immediately and before it is too late, the amount of the help, and based on this they can begin to work on getting a loan that we will be able to pay.

At the bottom of a Nov. 21, 2006 letter to the secretariat, Reyes gave a breakdown of the \$100,000 he said went to Correa's campaign: "Of the \$100,000 given to the Correa campaign, the Eastern Bloc gave \$50,000 and the Southern Bloc gave

¹⁸ This appears to be a reference to Leon Roldós, another, minor candidate for the presidency who, according to several media reports, sent emissaries to meet with the FARC, hoping to be the favored candidate. RCN, a major Colombian radio station, broadcast a special edition on July 13, 2009, reading documents from the Reyes computer that discuss the visits of Roldós' emissaries. Similar allegations appeared in a major Spanish newspaper. See: Maite Rico, "El Dinero Perdido de las FARC," El País, Aug. 2, 2009.

¹⁹ "Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador," op cit.

\$20,000. The other \$30,000 is owed by the other five blocs, and they owe it to the 48th Front."²⁰

While Correa has strenuously denied any financial help from the FARC, further evidence of the transaction was later found in a video captured in another FARC camp more than a year later.

The video, captured by the Colombian military in May 2009 and made public in July by the Associated Press, shows Jorge Briceño (AKA Mono Jojoy), the FARC's top military commander, reading a statement announcing the death of the FARC's senior commander, Manuel Marulanda, to an assembly of combatants.

He then goes on to read Marulanda's last statement of Marulanda to the troops he had lead for more than four decades. Among the points the commander made was how badly the FARC had been hurt by the death of Reyes and the exposure of the information contained in his computers, including the information about the "help in dollars we gave the Correa campaign and subsequent conversations with his emissaries, including some agreements, as we all now know, that were very compromising regarding our ties to our friends."²¹

Correa decried the video as a "set up" aired to hurt the image of Ecuador and his presidency, and reiterated his vow that he had not taken FARC money for his campaign.²²

But there are serious indications that the Correa administration, if not Correa himself, was moving to accommodate the FARC's interests, particularly in the transition between Correa's election and his taking office.

A Jan. 5, 2007 note from Reyes to his chief, Marulanda, made clear what the FARC was hoping to obtain.

At the end of the month we are expecting a visit from Col. Brito, the emissary of Rafael Correa. Our idea is to normalize communications with his government, coordinate the next exchanges of prisoners and reach bilateral agreements. For example, request that when they capture our troops in Ecuador they be turned back over to us, and not be turned over to any Colombian authority, among other items. You can help guide us on this.

The Bi-national Commission is being strengthened, made up of members of the PCCC [Clandestine Communist Party of Colombia, the civilian wing of the FARC] and Ecuadoran friends, so we can denounce the violations of Ecuadoran

²⁰ "Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador," op cit.

²¹ A summary of the video and the relevant part of the tape can be seen here:

<http://www.caracolradio.com/nota.aspx?id=846873>

²² Eduardo Garcia, "Ecuador's Correa Says FARC Video is a Set up," Reuters, July 18, 2009.

*sovereignty by [Colombian President] Uribe's troops, and show the damaging effects of fumigation [the aerial spraying of glyphosate to kill coca plants].*²³

A June 27, 2007 note from Iván Márquez to Reyes contains the first full descriptions of a fateful meeting that would lead to Reyes' death. In it, Márquez lays out the plans for the meeting of the biggest FARC front group, which was planning to meet in Quito at the end of February 2008. The meeting of the Bolivarian Continental Coordinator (*Coordinadora Continental Bolivariana--CCB*) was to be a coming out party of sorts for the FARC. The CCB was billed as a coalition of progressive forces, when in fact, it would be driven and controlled by the FARC.

The note said that several members of the CCB could be meeting directly with Correa, but added, "I am not so sure. Anyway, their lobby with our friends from *Alianza Pais* (Correa's party) is indispensable to meeting our goals."

The goal, Márquez wrote, was to get the Correa government "institutionally linked" to the CCB so that "he makes it his own." Another goal was to organize a "type of anti-imperialist carnival" of protests in front of the U.S. Embassy.

In fact, the proposed meeting, which did occur at the end of February 2008, was an attempt to tie Correa publicly and unequivocally to the FARC through the CCB.

According to documents in the Reyes computer, the CCB was created in August 2003, and by December had an anthem, a flag, a newspaper called "Bolivarian Mail," letterhead stationery and a logo. "The CCB is work of the FARC, the Bolivarian Movement composed of the José Maria Córdoba and Caribbean blocs," a Dec. 7, 2003 FARC document said. The document said "Comrade Alfonso," referring to Alfonso Cano, who is now the FARC's commander-in-chief, had been informed of each of the steps taken, and that the first executive meeting had been held "in one of our camps" to "lay out the specific tasks and responsibilities for the activities that are currently underway. Among our tasks is the creation of a Bolivarian movement, the establishment of the CCB in each country, etc."²⁴

The CCB soon established a significant presence across Latin America, attracting the sympathy of numerous leftist political organizations and NGOs, many committed to 'non-violence'. According to a March 11, 2005 report on the CCB's activities in 2004, there were already active groups in Mexico, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Chile. International brigades were operational in the Basque region of Spain, as well as Italy, France and Denmark. Work was underway in Argentina, Guatemala and Brazil. The number of organizations that were being actively

²³ Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador," op cit.

²⁴ Documents provided by Colombian officials, in possession of the author.

coordinated by the CCB was listed at 63, and there were "political relations" with 45 groups and 25 institutions. The CCB database contained 500 e-mails.²⁵

The FARC made little effort to hide its pleasure with Correa's election or the direction in which he was taking Ecuador. In an unusual act, on Sept. 30, 2007, following the election of the constituent assembly, Reyes videotaped a congratulatory message from the FARC to the president and the people of Ecuador.

This overwhelming victory, with support of more than 70 percent of the people and the victory of Rafael Correa in the past elections, are part of the inexorable triumph of a people who have said yes to profound changes with the desire to build a new country in peace, with justice and on the road to socialism. We are convinced that this new constitution is the beginning of the countdown, the beginning of the end of inequality in a brother country."²⁶

Meanwhile, the contacts with Correa's inner circle continued apace.

A Jan. 18, 2008 letter from Reyes to the Secretariat is the clearest statement of those relationships, and appears to indicate a willingness of the Ecuadoran officials to change their military command structure on the border to accommodate the FARC's wishes.

We met with the minister of national security of Ecuador, Gustavo Larrea, who we will call 'Juan' from now on. On behalf of president Correa he brought greetings for comrade Manuel and the Secretariat. He said the following:

- 1. The president is interested in formalizing relations with the FARC, carried out by 'Juan.'*
- 2. They are willing to coordinate social activities with the people who live on the border and exchange information to control paramilitary delinquency in their national territory.*
- 3. They are willing to change the commanders of the military and police to get rid of those hostile to the communities and civilians there, and ask that we help them by providing information.*
- 4. They reiterate their decision not get involved Colombia's internal conflict by supporting the government of (Alvaro) Uribe. They believe the FARC is an insurgent organization of the people with political and social programs they can understand.*
- 5. They ask if politically we are interested in being recognized as a belligerent force. They share the same idea as Chávez on this.*
- 6. They will sue the state and government of Colombia before the International Court for the damages the aerial spraying has caused.*

²⁵ March 11, 2005 e-mail from Iván Ríos to Raúl Reyes, provided by Colombia officials, in possession of the author.

²⁶ Torres, op cit., p. 117.

7. *Next year they will cancel the gringo license to operate the Manta base.*
8. *They propose strengthening their commercial and political ties with Asia, particularly China, Vietnam, and North Korea.*

The letter goes on to discuss ways the FARC and Correa could cooperate on the Humanitarian Exchange, and the threat that Uribe, “representing the interests of the White House,” poses to the region. Correa’s emissary also offered “documents and protection” to a FARC representative in order to establish better relations in Ecuador.

“We established methods of communication and left open the possibility of meeting again in a month or two to follow up and further discuss these issues.”²⁷

On Jan. 28, 2008, Reyes wrote another note to be hand delivered to Xavier Garaicoa, the solicitor general (*procurador general*) of Ecuador, showing another close connection to Correa's inner circle.

*From our trenches we send you a Communist, Bolivarian and brotherly greeting while wishing you every success in your job as solicitor general, named by President Rafael Correa, an office we are sure you will use to serve the people of Ecuador. We have received with satisfaction your message of solidarity with our organization, in benefit of the Colombian people and thank you for you offer to use your good offices on our behalf.*²⁸

Among the final e-mails Reyes wrote was a Feb. 28, 2008 missive to other members of the secretariat:

I will summarize the recent conversation with the emissary of president Correa:

1. *He asks to speak personally with the Secretariat in Quito. He offers safe passage guarantees and transportation for the border to the meeting site.*
2. *He would like an answer in the shortest possible time, including a date.*
3. *He asks if we would prefer (the security arrangements) be handled by the military or his ministry for state security.*
4. *He wants to discuss with the FARC the Humanitarian Accord, the policy on borders, a political solution, Ingrid (Betancourt), and the role of Chávez. He wants to coordinate with us on border issues.*
5. *He wants to explain the purpose of Plan Ecuador, with which he hopes to mitigate the harmful effects of Plan Colombia (the U.S.-backed effort) on the border region.*
6. *For Plan Ecuador he asks us for training courses on how to organize the masses along the border, who would then be placed by the government in a position to*

²⁷ "Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador," op cit.

²⁸ "Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador," op cit.

coordinate with the FARC on the border. Some of these people are part of our clandestine party or (our group) led by the 48th Front (of the FARC).

The document says the FARC leaders explained that any decision would have to be made collectively and would take time, but that “we made clear our interest in contributing to the ties of brotherhood along the border.” Reyes also notes that, “per our conversations with the emissary, the relationship Chávez-Correa is not at its best. In addition, Uribe is constantly calling Correa to get help in working out his difficulties with Chávez.”

Reyes then adds a cautionary note:

"I am still worried about a strike against us if we accept the invitation (to visit Correa), given the high concentration of intelligence services and the corruption of that country, where the government remains very weak."²⁹

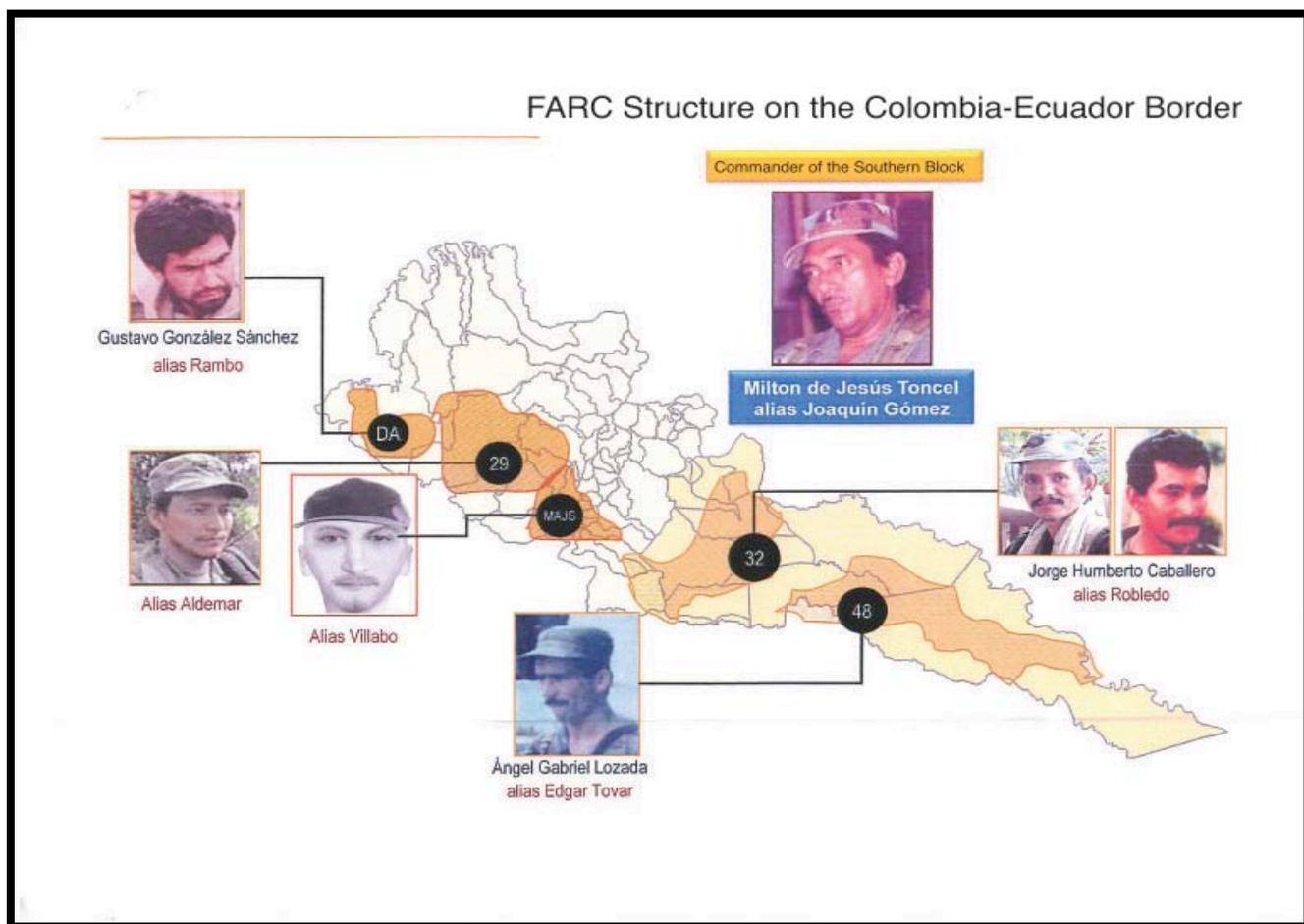
The next day Reyes was dead.

The FARC's Military Structure on the Ecuadoran Border

The two most important fronts of the FARC operating along the Ecuadoran border are the 48th and 29th, both of which form part of the Southern Bloc, commanded by Milton de Jesus Toncel, AKA Joaquín Gómez.³⁰ According to U.S., Mexican, Colombian and Ecuadoran intelligence, the 48th Front, commanded by Ángel Gabriel Lozada, AKA Edgar Tovar, is responsible for moving more than 200 tons of cocaine a year, largely through Ecuador. His front has multiple, high-priority jobs that explain why Reyes, one of the most trusted and longest serving members of the FARC secretariat, resided in the area and was in constant physical and radio contact with Toncel and Lozada. The 48th Front abuts the border near several small towns on the Colombian side, and is in close proximity to the departmental capital of Lago Agrio (officially known as Nueva Loja, but seldom called that). The logistical importance of Lago Agrio, an oil production center settled originally in the 1960s by oil workers, will be discussed in detail below.

²⁹ Documentos Computadores Alias 'Raúl Reyes' Para Difusión Ecuador," op cit.

³⁰ The FARC is commanded by a seven-member secretariat, dispersed across the country. Militarily it is made up of five blocs and a varying number of fronts within each bloc. The Colombian military intelligence states the FARC has 62 fronts, down from 66 three years ago, and that its combat strength has dropped from 18,000 to about 8,500 . For the most complete look at the FARC's military structure, see: http://wapedia.mobi/en/FARC-EP_Chain_of_Command_Gomez_replaced_Raul_Reyes_as_a_member_of_the_secretariat_following_Reyes'_death.



The 48th Front is not only responsible for moving the cocaine through Ecuador, but also for storing the cocaine produced by other fronts, including the 29th, for transportation and sale, as well as for receiving payments for the cocaine shipments.

Another primary responsibility of the front is to ship in, from Ecuador, the precursor chemicals for making cocaine, including a product called "white gasoline," a waste product from the oil refining that occurs in the region, similar to kerosene. Because it is viewed as a waste product, it is not illegal and is often sold to the FARC, and is vital in the cocaine refinement process. A third important responsibility is to procure medical supplies for the fighting fronts, as well as access to medical care for the more severely wounded who need to be evacuated to the Ecuadoran side of the border. Last, but certainly not least, the 48th front protects access to vital rest and recreation areas for combatants on the Ecuadoran side, including discothèques, bars and relatively cheap brothels.³¹

³¹ The description of the different responsibilities of the 48th Front come from debriefing senior FARC deserters who belonged to the front for several years, as well as briefings from Colombian, Ecuadoran, U.S. and Mexican intelligence officials.

While the 48th Front handles most of the cocaine, the 29th Front, to the north, is responsible for acquiring weapons and munitions from Ecuador. This is made easier in some cases, particularly the acquisition of different types of explosives, because the region is oil producing and explosives are often used for legitimate purposes. However, the FARC is increasingly using homemade land mines as a way to attack and slow down the Colombian army, and much of the materiel for the mines is acquired in Ecuador. In addition, the FARC maintains a large munitions factory for making mines, grenades and other items on the Colombian side of the San Miguel River.³²

The Importance of Lago Agrio (Nueva Loja) and the Border Region

One of the regions of Ecuador most affected by the Colombian conflict and the presence of both FARC and paramilitary groups is the jungle province of Sucumbíos and its capital, Lago Agrio.³³ Long a known haven for FARC commanders, the town of some 15,000 sits near the San Miguel River, the border with Colombia. The muddy brown waters flowing through the dense triple canopy jungle can be crossed in a matter of minutes by dugout canoes with outboard motors, leaving hundreds of miles of the border impossible to adequately patrol.

The Reyes camp was located a few miles downriver from Lago Agrio and was 1.5 miles inside Ecuadoran territory. In October 2009, the Colombian government officially notified the Ecuadoran government that the FARC continued to maintain at least a dozen camps, housing about 1,800 troops, in the Lago Agrio region.³⁴

Among the numerous refugees from Colombia seeking safety from the multi-pronged conflict in Colombia, there are also FARC sympathizers and family members actively encouraged to cross the border in order help with supply lines and serve as messengers and lookouts. Several thousand of these people were granted Ecuadoran identification cards as part of a program pushed by Ignacio Chauvín, a key official in the Correa government who also served as one of the main points of contact for the FARC. The NGO who let the effort was ALDHU, later shown to be one of the main front groups of the FARC.

"We can't check everyone, we try to do what we can, but have FARC sympathizers or members gotten accredited as refugees? Of course," said one refugee worker. "Most

³² This information comes from debriefing senior FARC deserters who belonged to the front for several years, as well as briefings from Colombian, Ecuadoran, U.S. and Mexican intelligence officials.

³³ While the town has been formally renamed as Nueva Loja, everyone refers to it as Lago Agrio, meaning "Bitter Lake," named for Bitter Lake, Texas, the home of the Texaco oil company which began oil exploration in the region in the 1960s.

³⁴ "FARC Tendría Decena de Campamentos en Ecuador," La Hora Ecuador, Oct. 25, 2009, p. B1.

of them are legitimate, but some are sent for other purposes. There is little we can do about it."³⁵

The Angostura commission report enumerated the problems centered on Lago Agrio and its periphery, noting that

*The logistical structure of the FARC's 48th Front, aided by a network of militia members "transplanted" to the border region; the institutional weakness of the Colombian government in the area; the infiltration of guerrilla units and columns; the construction of laboratories for making drugs in Ecuadoran territory; a border population that is 85 percent to 90 percent Colombian; the limited logistical capacity of the government forces, mean that not only our borders but our national sovereignty are threatened.*³⁶

A three day visit by the author to the region in October 2009, found that many of the conditions that make border areas valuable remain, despite a concerted effort by the governments on both sides of the border to reassert control.³⁷ In the past two years, the Ecuadoran government has established a permanent army presence of several thousand soldiers to compliment the traditional naval (riverine) and police contingents at a cost of several million dollars a year. The Colombian government has retaken control of San Miguel, the main town on the Colombian side of the river, and its environs from the FARC.

While the government presence has made it more difficult for the FARC, paramilitaries and other drug trafficking organizations to operate with complete ease, it appears to have done little to significantly diminish the level of these groups' activities in the town.

Several anomalies are clearly visible in the town and on the border region. In the town of a few thousand, whose residents are mostly poor, there are several very large shopping centers, primarily selling clothing and cellular telephones, in addition to very large numbers of Chinese made motorcycles and outboard motors.

The amount of stores and merchandise is far out of proportion to normal business in a town of that size and economic scale. A second glaring anomaly is the number of full-service pharmacies -- dozens within a few blocks of each other -- enough to supply a city many times the size of Lago Agrio. A third anomaly is the number of private doctors who operate in this small town, most who have signs outside their windows advertising 24-hour service and cell phone numbers to call for medical attention any time. Given the lack of generally available health care, and the dilapidated public hospital most people are forced to use, such convenient medical service does not seem directed at the general population.

³⁵ Author, interview, Oct. 20, 2009.

³⁶ Huerta Montalvo et al, op cit. pp. 91-92

³⁷ Author visit to Lago Agrio, Coca, San Miguel and other town Oct. 21-24, 2009.

In fact, it is an open secret in Lago Agrio that the FARC and other Illegal Colombian Armed Groups (*Grupos Ilegales Armados Colombianos*-GIAC, in the language of the region), use the town as a resupply base for food, medical supplies and attention.

Given Ecuador's dollarized economy (the Ecuadoran Sucre was abolished in 2000 following a collapse of the Ecuadoran banking and financial systems), and the fact that most drug transactions are carried out in dollars, it is probable that many of the businesses in Lago Agrio and the surrounding area are used to launder and hold cash for the FARC and other criminal groups. The dollarization effectively removes the need to exchange money obtained from drug trafficking and other illicit transactions into another currency.

The long-standing Ecuadoran policy of tolerating the presence of some Colombian non-state armed actors, under specific and limited conditions, has not changed. These conditions are essentially that the Colombians not wear uniforms, do not carry guns or carry out violent attacks on the Ecuador side of the border.

In exchange, the combatants are given access to a large number of bars, brothels and cheap hotels that cater to them located in zones just outside the center of Lago Agrio. One city official who recently tried to shut down a popular brothel was promptly executed and his body left in the street as a warning to others.

"Fear has led authorities to not want to talk about or confront the FARC," said a local political official. "Everyone is afraid of the consequences. We know that if you shut down a brothel or a bar you will get threats, and those threats are often followed through on, so the danger is very real."³⁸

The Angostura committee found out just how real the threat was, despite its high profile presidential mandate. Its members secretly interviewed an Ecuador community leader, who described the local GIAC structures. Both the meeting and the content of the meeting were kept secret.

Nonetheless, "a few days after the meeting, [the informant] was killed by unknown gunmen. The actions speak for themselves, painting a picture of a border where Ecuadoran peasants and indigenous inhabitants have been displaced, being replaced in some cases by 'displaced people planted by the FARC,' who facilitate drug trafficking and the activities of non-state armed groups."³⁹

What has changed is the relationship of the Ecuadoran military and the FARC on the ground in this border region. As described in numerous interviews, the relationship has grown closer in recent years. The causes are multiple, but the overall tolerance and creation of a permissive environment is based on the unquestionable reality

³⁸ Author interview, Oct. 20, 2009.

³⁹ Montalvo et al, op cit., p. 94.

that if the FARC wanted to wreak economic havoc in the region it could do so with ease.

Lago Agrio and the surrounding area is the center of Ecuador's economically vital oil industry. Hundreds of miles of unguarded, above-ground pipelines and pumping stations crisscross the region. It would cost the Ecuadoran government tens of millions of dollars a year to protect their oil infrastructure, funds they do not have and expenditures the state can avoid by simply not antagonizing the FARC.

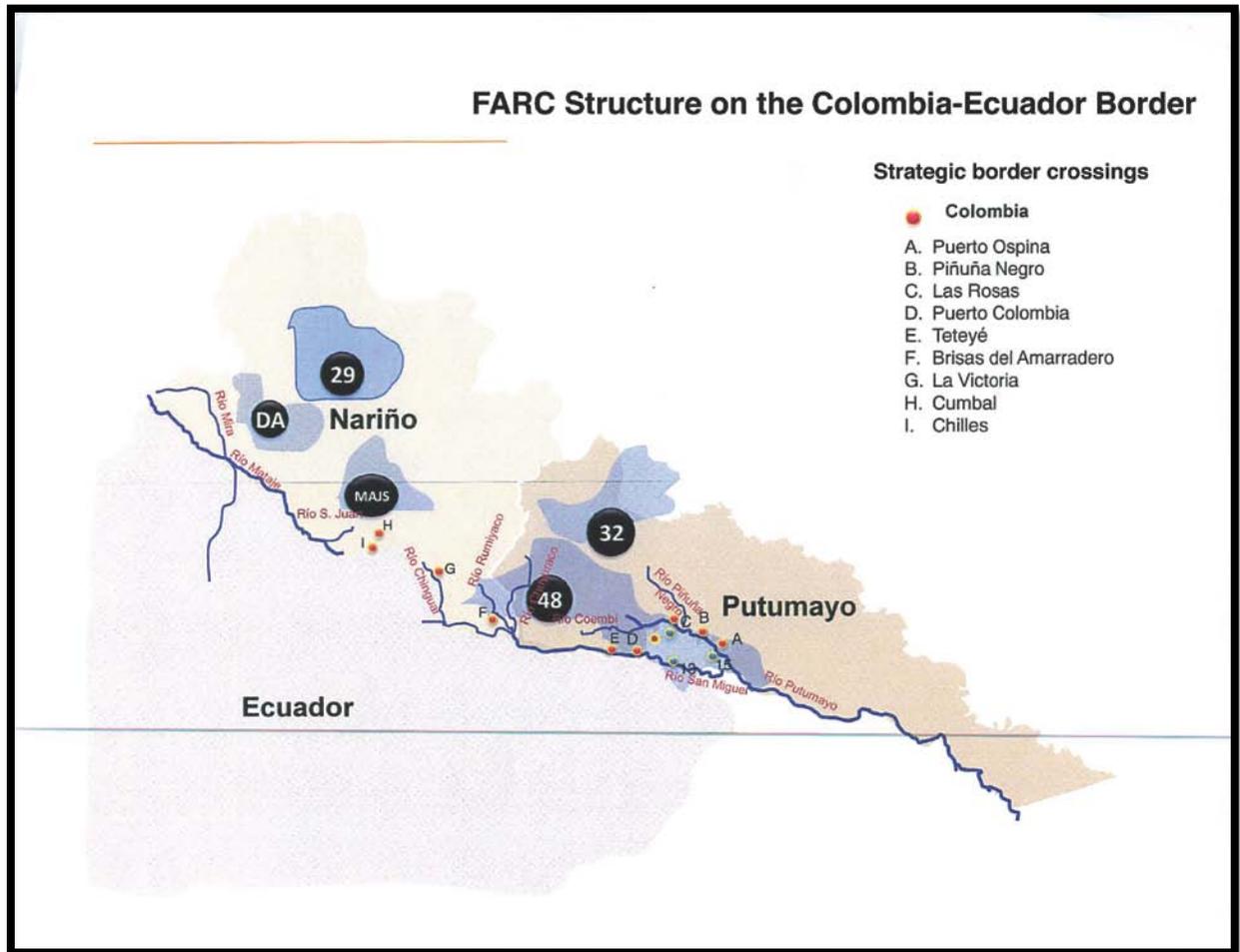
The basis for the growing closeness was two-fold: First, there was a common interest in attacking paramilitary groups that were entering Ecuadoran territory to hunt down and execute FARC members. Second, was the FARC's increased need for precursor chemicals, primarily *gasolina blanca* from the Ecuador side, where the product was relatively easy to obtain due to the fact that it is an oil producing region and the main storage tanks are in the Lago Agrio vicinity.

After allowing the FARC to retaliate against the paramilitary groups operating in the area, senior Ecuadorian military commanders then entered in to more direct economic relationships with FARC that have significantly increased the flow of cocaine across the border in the Lago Agrio region.⁴⁰

The Angostura committee found that a Colombian citizen, Marcial Eduardo Campaña, violently drove Ecuadoran farmers from a region near an ecological reserve and then "built, in the middle of the inhospitable jungle, a complex to house 60 people. This place became a great center for warehousing precursor chemicals, drugs and weapons. It was a meeting point for the FARC and drug traffickers of various nationalities."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Author interviews in Lago Agrio region and debriefings of senior FARC desertors.

⁴¹ Montalvo et al, op. cit., p. 93. This information was confirmed independently by a high-level FARC deserter who had been to the center.



There is a high cost to Ecuador for the Colombian military presence on the border. In order to keep the FARC from resupplying itself through Ecuador, virtually no legal commerce is allowed between the two countries in areas where legal crossings are allowed. For example, the two-lane paved road and cement bridge over the San Miguel River, once a thriving point of trade, is now virtually abandoned. Only a handful of vehicles cross the bridge every hour.

"Since the Colombian army took control a couple of years ago they don't allow us to take anything to Colombia to sell," said one resident. "They think it all goes to the FARC. But it is killing us. This is the road for legal commerce. If the FARC wants something, they aren't going to take it across the bridge by the police checkpoint. They are going to smuggle it across the river like they always do."⁴²

Despite some increased state presence in the Lago Agrio region, the border remains a desolate place where the state is seldom seen. Of particular concern are the villages that are directly on the river that is the border. According to a recent private study by an NGO affiliated with the Catholic Church, almost none of the schools on

⁴² Author interview, Oct. 19, 2009.

the border have teachers, academic materials, electricity, running water or sanitation facilities.

"One can honestly say that there has been zero investment of the state on the border," said the author of the report. "They won't build roads or do anything because they say the irregular forces from Colombia will take advantage of any infrastructure. But if help doesn't come, then what are these people supposed to live off of? They will live off of crime or whatever the irregular groups ask them to do, because they have no alternative. In the end, if we have problems of guerrilla cells, crime etc. it is our own fault."⁴³

The Role of Oliver Solarte and Ties to the Correa Campaign

Ecuadoran, Colombian and Mexican intelligence services, as well as FARC deserters who worked with him, say a Colombian known as Oliver "The Fat Man" Solarte (whose real name is Olidem Romel Solarte) is the FARC's drug czar. He is in charge of not only aggregating the drug loads from different fronts, but for directly negotiating the sale of cocaine to different buyers.⁴⁴ Although he does not officially have standing as a senior FARC commander, Solarte is reported to be the single most important person in the organization's drug trade through Ecuador.⁴⁵



Figure 5: Oliver Solarte, the FARC's point man for cocaine trafficking in Ecuador

Using the Ecuadoran riverside hamlet of Puerto Nuevo as his base of operations, described as "the heart of drug trafficking in Ecuador," Solarte reportedly controls three large HCL labs, two in Colombia and one in Ecuador. Each is capable of

⁴³ Author interview, Oct. 19, 2009.

⁴⁴ Colombia's deputy defense minister, Sergio Jaramillo, took the unusual step of identifying Solarte by name at a regional drug trafficking conference. See: Eduardo Castillo, "Official Links Mexican Drug Gangs, Colombia Rebels," Associated Press, Oct. 7, 2008.

⁴⁵ The information on Solarte comes from extensive debriefings with senior FARC deserters who worked directly with Solarte, as well as a review of intelligence files in Colombia and Mexico, and a review of the extensive, though fragmented, public information on his role with the FARC's cocaine trade. The author's sources corroborated much of the excellent reporting in Arturo Torres' El Juego del Camaleón, op cit. See also: Juan Forero, "Ecuadoran Town a Hub For Drug-Running Rebels," The Washington Post, May 20, 2009.

housing 40 workers and, depending on the availability of the coca leaf, precursor chemicals and security situation, can work around the clock, with different shifts of workers.

In order to retain control of the town and its environs, Solarte has brought his family over to buy up or take possession of property, giving himself a built-in security network of trusted family members who can notify him of any attempt to arrest him. Unlike most senior FARC operatives, Solarte has a wife and two children that live among the different safe houses he has in the Puerto Nuevo area. He also reportedly owns a small supermarket and a disco in the town.

Puerto Nuevo is one of a string of hamlets that have grown in both size and sophistication in recent years, due mostly to the influx of Colombians seeking refugee status. Colombian officials have aerial maps of the region going back several years, showing each year how more towns are settled just inside Ecuador, and how existing hamlets grow. "These towns have no real commerce," one Colombian intelligence official said. "They have a few houses, a few bars and a few whore houses. What real peasant would build a town like that?"

In addition to serving as a safety net, Solarte's relatives reportedly handle the main FARC bank accounts in Lago Agrio, and hold title to many of the properties that he controls. One of those renting a property to Solarte, according to the Angostura commission, was Gen. René Vargas, who served as Correa's ambassador to Mexico.⁴⁶

Besides his handling of the flow of drugs to the outside world, Solarte is the FARC's main regional contact with the Ecuadoran military and judicial officials, and is the one who sends money to pay the bribes to free any member of the FARC who is captured or is having legal difficulties in Ecuador. "If anyone is picked up, Solarte has the lawyers all ready and they call and get them out before the prison door closes," said one former FARC operative. "All they have to tell the judge or police is: 'Oliver sent me.' His word is the law there."

Solarte also manages two clinics for the FARC in Lago Agrio, and one in Quito for the most seriously injured combatants.

Originally a common criminal captured by the FARC in about 1995, Solarte reportedly pled for his life, with the promise of using his criminal connections to help the FARC in the drug trade. Over time, and as the Ecuadoran border region grew, so did Solarte's power and importance.

Described as overweight and ruthless Solarte, originally from the town of Mocoa, 70 miles north of Lago Agrio, is also in charge of collecting the money from the cocaine buyers, often on behalf of other fronts of the FARC. He maintains numerous money counters to count the bills when they are delivered. One FARC deserter who worked

⁴⁶ Huerta Montalvo et al, op cit, p. 105.

with Solarte described how the money was taken to safe houses or jungle laboratories in large plastic bags, then dumped on a large tarp to be counted, bundled and divided among the different FARC leaders.

Solarte's ties to the Ecuadoran military were not cheap, but they have been extremely useful. One FARC deserter intelligence officials say was present at the meeting, described how an Ecuadoran general arrived at one of Solarte's homes on the border in order to warn the the FARC operative of an impending Ecuadoran military sweep of the zone. The military had orders to go house to house in order to confiscate weapons and arrest anyone in possession of weapons. Thanks to the general's warning, the FARC was able to hide its guns and the general received a bag with \$15,000 in cash.

The Growing Mexico Connection

Among Solarte's most important tasks has been to nurture and manage the growing relationship between the FARC and Mexican drug trafficking organizations, particularly the Tijuana cartel.⁴⁷ This is a change from the traditional FARC way of operating, which was in alliance with major Colombian-led drug trafficking organizations, particularly the Northern Valley Cartel (NVC) during the years it was led by Juan Carlos Ramirez (AKA *Chupeta* or "Lollipop").⁴⁸ While the FARC had become a major cocaine producing group, it generally acted as a wholesaler to other Colombia groups that maintained international trafficking structures. The FARC would piggy back their drugs onto those loads, and reap a significant, though reduced profit.

At the same time, Mexican drug cartels could not extend their reach to South America, which was under the control of powerful Colombian organizations. Over the years the Colombian organizations increasingly relied on Mexican organizations to move the drugs from Mexico or Central America northward, but did not allow the Mexicans to enter the South American market as direct purchasers.

Several factors explain the shift, which has accelerated over the past three years. The first is the demise of traditional, large Colombian cartels. With the demise of the NVC, the elimination of the Medellín and Cali cartels, and the fragmentation of other drug trafficking organizations, the FARC emerged as the premiere drug producing organization. However, as noted, the FARC does not have international, autonomous transnational trafficking structures. Ramirez, before his arrest, helped broker a series of meetings among the FARC and different Mexican organizations.

⁴⁷ The information of the Mexican connection comes from debriefing a senior FARC deserter directly involved in the trade, and Colombian Mexican counter-narcotics officials.

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that Ramirez rose to prominence as a member of the Diego Montoya organization, which strongly supported the right-wing paramilitary groups fighting the FARC. However, Ramirez, who lived in Brazil for several years before his arrest in Sao Paulo in August 2008, became a primary supplier of cocaine to the 48th Front.

Those relationships have since blossomed, allowing the Mexican cartels increasing access to FARC cocaine production. While Solarte is the primary gate-keeper of which potential buyers have access to FARC hierarchy, on the Mexican side of the business the gatekeeper is a Mexican from the Tijuana cartel. One FARC informant said the Mexican used the nickname, "Cachi."

Intelligence officials said Cachi was the nickname of Jefferson Ostaiza, discussed below, who was the primary drug liason between the Mexican organizations and the FARC. Both sources said senior Mexican traffickers from the Tijuana and other cartels brought their own security details, were usually heavily armed and carried a satellite telephone and computer to stay in touch with their home bases. Through Cachi and Solarte, they have regular access to the 48th Front's military commander, Edgar Tovar.⁴⁹

The way it worked was this. The Mexicans would come in through Guayaquil or Quito to Puerto Nuevo, but they came with Cachi's permission. That is where everyone comes, because it is under Solarte's control. They all pass through Lago Agrio on the way. There is a partnership among the Mexican organizations and FARC commanders. The level of trust has grown. If they [(the Mexicans)] need coke, they can take it and pay later. The money always comes in. The money is mostly in \$100 bills, but some of it is in smaller bills, some of it is Colombian pesos, some if it is Euros. But mostly it is \$100 bills. They would dump the money in a big pile on a plastic tarp and we would have to count it for hours.⁵⁰

Mexican officials say the relatively small Tijuana cartel has been able to establish its presence in Ecuador at the expense of the larger Sinaloa and Gulf cartels because the larger organizations are engaged in a bloody war in Mexico for territory, market share and with the state. This has limited their ability to project strength and vie for market share in Ecuador.

Semi-Submersibles and the Pacific Route

According to Mexican law enforcement officials, the Mexican organizations are taking full advantage of the shift in cocaine trafficking routes to the Pacific, a route that allows them to increasingly use semi-submersible ships to move multi-ton loads of cocaine in ways that are very difficult to detect. While cargo containers, tuna boats and other traditional methods are still in use, Colombian and Mexican officials now estimate that more than half of the cocaine leaving Colombia (and a large majority of the drugs leaving through Ecuador), are now shipped via this newer method.

⁴⁹ The account is based on a detailed debriefing by a senior FARC deserter and interviews with Colombian and Mexican counter-narcotics officials.

⁵⁰ Senior FARC deserter, in interview with author in Colombia.

Semi-submersibles, or fast-moving boats that ride just above the waveline, have been used for the past decade and are almost impossible to detect by radar or overflying aircraft. In the past two years the drug traffickers have made significant technological strides in manufacturing the vehicles, increasing their range, safety and carrying capacity. There has been a corresponding increase in their use by drug trafficking organizations.

The vessels are now able to travel from the Colombian and Ecuadoran launching sites on the Pacific, all the way to Mexico, or at least El Salvador and Guatemala, without refueling. If more fuel is needed it is often provided by fishing boats sent to a meeting point, easily located with GPS technology. The boats can carry up to 10 tons of cocaine, but average between 5-6 tons per shipment.

While it used take 90 days to manufacture the boats, it now takes about 35, as the technology for building the fiberglass-hulled vessels has improved and the drug traffickers are now able to prefabricate and standardize construction. The average cost per vessel is about \$1 million, and they are often sunk after one trip, a part of doing business.⁵¹



Figure 6: Semi-Submersible Detected by U.S. Coast Guard

⁵¹ Author interviews with Colombian, U.S. and Mexican intelligence officials. Interestingly, the first attempts by the Colombian drug traffickers to move to this type of shipment came in 2000, when the cartels were found to have plans to construct a Russian submarine, and had acquired most of the necessary parts. The groups then moved to homemade semi-submersibles, a technology pioneered and likely copied from, the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka. While few of the crafts are built in Ecuador, many are built near the border region in Esmeraldas and launched almost immediately into Ecuadoran waters.

Admiral James Stavridis, when he was head of the U.S. Southern Command, responsible for Latin America, described semi-submersibles as

....a new and dangerous threat technology, vessels that can carry drugs, terrorists or weapons of mass destruction to our shores.

In ever-increasing numbers, these stealthy, pod-like vessels depart expeditionary shipyards nested deep in the dense jungles and estuaries of the Andes region of Latin America. Carefully ballasted and well camouflaged, they ride so low in the water that they are nearly impossible to detect visually or by radar at any range greater than 3,000 yards. Loaded to capacity with tons of drugs they plod steadily and generally unobserved at less than ten knots toward designated drop-off points.⁵²



Figure 7: Semi-submersible ready to be launched.

The owners of the semi-submersibles are fully aware of two factors that favor the use of the vessels, in addition to the low visibility of the crafts. The first is that no Central American nation has the naval capacity to interdict the semi-submersibles, so the risk is small on that front. The second is that the United States cannot interdict the craft in the territorial waters of another nation without explicit and time-consuming permission, virtually guaranteeing they will at least have time to dump the drugs before being seized.

While many of the vessels drop their loads along the Central American coast, with GPS locators so go-fast boats or fishing boats can pick up the loads easily and then

⁵² Admiral James Stavridis, "Semi-Submersibles: An Emerging Threat in the Americas," Air & Space Power Journal, July 1, 2008.

move them by land, some of the craft make it all the way to the port of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico.

Mexican officials are also seeing a significant expansion of ancillary cartel operations in Ecuador, particularly illicit human trafficking. Because it has one of the most lax visa policies in the world, Chinese, Indian and African human smuggling networks are increasingly stashing their human cargo in Ecuador because it is the easiest place to stop. From Ecuador, the smugglers move their cargo through Central America to Mexico, then to the United States.

Ecuador has also become increasingly attractive as a money laundering center for Mexican cartels and other transnational criminal organizations, as it has been for the FARC. Because Ecuador's official currency is the dollar, and the restrictions on moving large quantities of money in and out are lax and relatively unenforced, Ecuador (along with Panama and El Salvador, also dollarized economies) has proved enticing. Another attraction is the significant bank secrecy laws in Ecuador, advertised by different offshore banking centers as among the most stringent in the world.⁵³ A recent university study in Ecuador estimated that \$500 million to \$1 billion a year was laundered through Ecuadoran financial structures.⁵⁴ Law enforcement officials estimate the amount to be significantly higher, while other academics believe the amount of money that actually stays in the Ecuadoran financial structure is negligible and therefore does not distort the overall economic picture.

One of the indicators of the growing illicit business between Mexico and Ecuador is the large increase -- 45 percent from 2006 to 2009 -- in the number of business visas being requested by Ecuadorans that would allow them to reside in Mexico. Most of those applying do not have the requisite legal business partnerships in Mexico that would allow for such a visa.⁵⁵

In addition, Ecuadoran officials have requested assistance from Mexico in identifying the source of funds for several Mexican investors in Ecuador, particularly in the tourism sector, a usual favorite for money laundering because so much of the business dealings are in cash.

The CCB, the Death of Raúl Reyes and the Unraveling of the FARC

⁵³ See, for example: http://www.panamalaw.org/ecuador_banking.html, which boasts that "Ecuador is not signing any OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) tax treaties and is not even giving lip service to the OECD. This means they have no intention of sharing any information regarding taxes at all ... Your privacy will be protected in Ecuador better than almost any other country."

⁵⁴ Carlos Espinoza, "Una Amenaza Silenciosa: El Narcotráfico en Ecuador," *Polémica* magazine, Universidad San Francisco de Quito, July 2009.

⁵⁵ Interview with officials of the Secretaría de Gobernación, Mexico.

As discussed above, one of the FARC's primary front groups is the CCB, founded with the help of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. The decision to hold the second general congress of the CCB in Quito played a direct role in the Colombian government's decision to launch the attack on the Sucumbíos camp to kill Raúl Reyes. The meeting, which drew representatives of ETA and other small armed groups in Latin America, acted as a catalyst that led to investigations of the close ties of senior officials in the Correa government to the insurgent group, and, through those relationships, to international drug trafficking organizations. The most important unresolved question in the face of the overwhelming evidence that such alliances existed and perhaps continue to exist, is whether Correa himself knew of the ties.

The CCB congress, which the Reyes documents show the FARC monitored closely, was held in Quito Feb. 24-27, just days before the Angostura bombing. Colombian officials grew increasingly alarmed when their human intelligence sources reported a series of international delegations attending the CCB flew to Lago Agrio, then trekked into the jungle to meet with Reyes in a show of international solidarity with the FARC. One group of Mexicans filmed a video of Reyes giving a fiery address to the CCB, a video that was played when the CCB congress opened in Quito.⁵⁶ The Angostura committee noted that this "revolutionary tourism" should have been detected and stopped by Ecuadoran authorities.⁵⁷ The Mexicans killed in the camp with Reyes were part of a CCB delegation that had been invited to meet with Reyes.

Given the indications that the Reyes camp had been established and utilized for several months and served as both a command and control center and a tourist destination for various designated terrorists, Colombian intelligence pressed its human intelligence sources for the exact location of the camp and the sleeping quarters within the camp. Because of the canopy cover in the area, aerial photography was of little use, although electronic intercepts helped locate the camp's location. When Reyes' presence was confirmed there, Colombian president Uribe gave the order to attack without notifying Correa. Colombian officials feared that, given the Ecuadoran military's seeming tolerance for a high volume of visitors to the camp without taking any measures to shut it down, any joint operation would be compromised.⁵⁸

The Ecuadoran government says that the president was unaware of the CCB's meeting in Quito, and was not informed by his intelligence services of the camp or the confirmed presence of Reyes in it. Rather, they portray the whole episode as a plot by a handful of officials sympathetic to the guerrillas that has been overblown in an effort to damage Correa's national and international image.

⁵⁶ In 2009 the CCB officially became the Continental Bolivarian Movement (*Movimiento Continental Bolivariano - MCB*) at its Third Congress, held in Caracas, Venezuela in December 2009. See: <http://www.conbolivar.org/>

⁵⁷ Huerto Montalvo et al, op. cit., p. 36.

⁵⁸ This explanation was provided by senior Colombian intelligence officials.

The Ostaiza Connection

The main protagonist in the structure linking the Correa government to the FARC and drug trafficking is Ignacio Chauvín, the former under secretary for political affairs in the Ministry of National Security. Chauvín is currently charged with drug trafficking in Esmeralda province, but is not in prison. He continues to be embroiled in a scandal surrounding the multiple irregular rulings that have been handed down in his drug trafficking case, whittling the charges and potential jail time down at each step, changing venues illegally and raising serious questions of judicial corruption. The attorney general recently announced an investigation against several lawyers and judicial officials for dragging the case on, perjury and other crimes.⁵⁹



Figure 8: Chart from El Comercio newspaper showing the relationships among drug traffickers, FARC and its front groups, and Ecuadoran government officials.

Chauvín, a 34-year-old political activist, was the leader of the Simón Bolívar Brigades (*Brigadas Simón Bolívar-BSB*) before taking the senior government

⁵⁹ "Chauvin: Caen Jueces, Ahora tras los Fiscales," Hoy (Quito), Jan. 5, 2010.

position. The BSB mainly operated on the Ecuadoran side of the Colombia-Ecuador border. The Angostura commission described him as "strongly tied to drug trafficking and the FARC guerrillas, acting under the guise of a human rights activist. With the support of Juan de Dios Parra he became a leader and activist in ALDHU, concentrating his efforts in the Colombian-Ecuadoran border, particularly the provinces of Sucumbíos (Ecuador) and Putumayo (Colombia). There he developed relationships with guerrillas such as Freddy Castillo, one of the men closest to Oliver Solarte, who in turn is one of the most wanted men for his trafficking in drugs, weapons and precursor chemicals on behalf of the FARC."⁶⁰



Figure 9: José Ignacio Chauvín (left) and Juan de Dios Parra.

The Angostura commission described the BSB as "nothing less than an arm of the CCB, which in turn is the political arm of the FARC."⁶¹ The committee noted that "The CCB was born as an international political project of the FARC, with a strategy of creating a regional support structure through ideologization, creating chapters in each country in an effort to build support for insurgent, anti-imperialist causes, including its own cause."⁶² While denying ties to drug trafficking, Chauvín acknowledges visiting Reyes at least seven times between December 2007 and the end of February 2008, when Reyes was killed. Colombian and Ecuadoran officials suspect Chauvín, who remained inexplicably incommunicado for hours after the

⁶⁰ Huerta Montalvo et al., op. Cit., p. 105.

⁶¹ Huerta Montalvo et al., op. Cit., p. 105

⁶² Huerta Montalvo et al., op. Cit., p. 106.

attack and has not given a coherent account of where he was, had left the Reyes camp just hours before it was bombed.⁶³

Working closely with Chauvín to get the CCB congress organized was Juan de Dios Parra, a Chilean national, and the organization he led, the Latin American Association of Human Rights (ALDHU). Parra and Chauvín, in turn, were both close friends and collaborators of Gustavo Larrea, who Correa chose to take the super-ministerial portfolio of minister of national security, an office designed to coordinate various other ministries. Larrea, a former head of ALDHU, personally brought Chauvín into the ministry.⁶⁴

Larrea is identified in the Reyes documents as a primary contact for the FARC under the codename "Juan." As described above, according to the FARC documents Larrea, who had access to the nation's most classified intelligence, offered to change the police and military commanders in the border region in order to keep the FARC from being harassed in the region. Larrea has admitted meeting Reyes but says that, unlike the Angostura commission report alleges, he did not meet the FARC commander in Ecuador. Rather, he contends, his contacts were aimed at trying to get the FARC to release kidnap victims.

But Chauvín had other close friends that proved to be the direct nexus between the FARC and the transnational cocaine trade.

These were the Ostaiza brothers (Édison, Miguel and Jefferson), whom Colombian, to whom Ecuadoran and Mexican officials tied major purchases and transshipment of FARC cocaine to Mexico. In a series of raids in 2007 and 2008, Ecuadoran police confiscated several multi-ton loads of cocaine belonging the 48th Front of the FARC. The ring was said to be run by the Ostaiza brothers (Édison and Miguel are in prison and Jefferson remains a fugitive).

According to Ecuadoran reports, the primary front company the Ostaiza brothers used to launder their drug proceeds with the FARC was "Jooamy EMA," a company created on Dec. 14, 2006. It was through that company that Brito, Chauvín and others were most closely tied to the Ostaizas. The police investigation of the company began with "Operation Green Hurricane" in October 2007, when 3.7 tons of cocaine were seized, and investigators slowly unraveled the tangle of

⁶³ Author interviews.

⁶⁴ By far the most comprehensive public information available on the relationships of Chauvín, Larrea, and Parra through ALDHU, as well as their relationship to different drug trafficking organizations can be found in the outstanding series of reports by a five-person investigative team of the El Comercio newspaper. Much of the information here is derived from those series of reports after verification with other sources. See: "El Narcotráfico Pretendió Inmiscuirse con el Gobierno," El Comercio (Quito), Jan. 11, 2009; "Los Coqueteos Con el Poder Ahora Pasan la Factura a la ALDHU," El Comercio (Quito), Feb. 8, 2009.

relationships in the company. Chauvín admitted a friendship and frequent business and social meetings with the Ostaizas, but said he was unaware of their ties to drug trafficking.⁶⁵

Also tied to the Ostaiza brothers, according to Ecuadoran and Colombian reports, was Col. (ret) Jorge Brito, a national hero for his role in the brief 1981 conflict with Peru and a well-known supporter of Correa. According to Fabricio Correa, the president's brother, Brito offered the campaign money from the FARC, which Fabricio says he refused.⁶⁶

Another prominent government official who appears related to the Ostaiza brothers is Gen. (ret). René Vargas Pazzos. who, as mentioned above, was named by Correa to the important post of ambassador to Venezuela, and in 2003 wrote a letter of reference for Nubia Calderón, a senior FARC commander.

Given the significant ties of those close to Correa to both the FARC and its related drug trafficking organizations, a question of primary importance is what did the president himself know and when did he know it. There can be little doubt, in part because of the admissions of Chauvín and others that corroborate the contents of the Reyes document, that senior members of Correa's government sought to curry favor with the FARC and very likely took money from the rebels.

In the best light, as Ecuadoran officials argue, the Correa government was simply engaging with the FARC in an effort to help free hostages on humanitarian grounds as part of an effort toward regional peace. In this interpretation, Larrea, Chauvín and the others who secretly sympathized with the FARC went far beyond the mandate approved by Correa without informing the president and without his authorization.⁶⁷

But the Reyes documents, other documents, and testimony from FARC deserters show the negotiations between the Correa government and the rebels were at least perceived by the FARC to be from the highest level. The FARC clearly believed its contributions to the Correa campaign were known to the candidate, and that in

⁶⁵ For a more complete account of the operation, see: "De Angostura a la Multinacional del Narcotráfico," *Hoy* (Quito), March 1, 2009.

⁶⁶ Huerta Montalvo et al, *op. cit.*, p. 115. There is more corroboration for the charge that Brito delivered the FARC money to the Correa campaign. Following the death of Reyes, Ecuadoran officials found a hand-written notebook that was originally thought to be the personal diary of Reyes. However, the document was, in fact, the notes of Julio César Vizuete an academic who said he had interviewed Reyes 13 times and written down the thoughts and statements of the FARC leader. In his notes he names Brito as the middleman in the deal.

⁶⁷ This theory has currency even with those who are not that close to Correa, such as Col. Mario Pazmiño, who was head of military intelligence at the time of the Angostura bombing. "They are still lying to the president," he said, and said that intelligence regarding the location of the Reyes camp was not passed up the chain of command. See: "Al Presidente Correa Lo Siguen Engañando," *Semana* (Bogotá), July 12, 2009.

exchange there would be certain policies enacted that would allow the FARC significant access to Ecuadoran territory.

Another interesting factor is Reyes' apparent disillusionment with Larrea, Chauvín and others in the Correa administration. The disillusionment seems not to stem from a failure of the Ecuadoran officials to fulfill their end of the bargain, but rather because the officials grew increasingly greedy in their involvement in the drug trade.

The primary evidence of this is a hand-written notebook found by Ecuadoran officials in the Reyes camp. After initially declaring the notebook to be the personal diary of Reyes, it was discovered the document was in fact the notes of Julio César Vizúete an academic who said he had interviewed Reyes 13 times and written down the thoughts and statements of the FARC leader. In his notes, quoting Reyes, he names Brito as the middleman in taking money to the Correa campaign.

But over time Reyes, according to the document, grew increasingly angry with the Ecuadorans, buttressing the claims by Correa loyalists that, despite the representations made by Larrea and others, Correa did not deliver what the FARC wanted.

"Trusting Correa was suicide," the document quotes Reyes as saying on Feb. 9, 2008. "All the money we gave his campaign didn't help us worth a damn." Further on, Reyes reportedly claims that Larrea and Chauvín are "traitors" because "they are only interested in doing business with the product (*la merca*, slang for cocaine). Nacho [short for Ignacio] Chauvín is another fraud, he has failed us and is only working on doing deals with the Ostaizas." On various occasions he accuses Chauvín, Larrea and others of acting as double agents, of being protected by the CIA in their drug dealings, and of being spies who passed on FARC secrets to Colombian intelligence.

The document, whose author is in prison for helping the FARC, contains many musings on the distrust Reyes feels, and the premonition that he would soon be dead. It also portrays a leader who is deeply conflicted by how deeply the FARC has become entrenched in and reliant on the cocaine trade for survival but who is unwilling and unable to withdraw from the business. He also appears desperate to finalize the hostage release in Ecuador in order to strengthen not only Correa, but his own internal position in the FARC as well.⁶⁸

The notebook, released by the Ecuadoran government, is interesting because it clearly corroborates much of the information in the Reyes computer, but seems to exonerate Correa from direct knowledge of events.

⁶⁸ Document in possession of the author.

The Challenges Ahead

The challenges facing Correa and his administration are enormous, and how Correa will navigate them is unclear. Correa himself seems at times ambiguous on how democratic a path he will pursue.

Ecuador, long off the international radar screen, is rapidly becoming a major global crossroads where transnational criminal organizations meet and do business with little fear of having their activities disturbed or detected. Multiple factors, from Ecuador's geographic location on the Pacific coast and proximity to Colombia and Central America, to the dollarization of its economy and its extremely lax visa policies have played a significant role in this development. In addition, the collapse of most government institutions, including the judicial system, has led to a significant breakdown in the rule of law.

In addition to problems of drug trafficking discussed previously, Ecuador has become increasingly attractive for Russian organized criminal groups, both for weapons sales to the FARC and to launder money, often on behalf of Mexican drug trafficking organizations. The permissive environment, lack of functioning institutions, easily-corrupted judiciary, porous borders and ineffective or nonexistent anti-money laundering efforts have also made Ecuador attractive to a host of Latin American criminal organizations, particularly for money laundering activities.

Chinese triads, particularly those involved in smuggling human beings, have greatly increased their presence in Ecuador, largely because their illicit cargo can enter without visas. According to a senior U.S. official, in every major case of non-Mexican and non-Central American illegal immigrants entering the United States in the past year the migrants have transited Ecuador. This includes East Africans, Southeast Asians and Central Asians.⁶⁹

But at the heart of most of these challenges, as the Angostura report noted on multiple occasions, is the deep entrenchment of the cocaine trade and narco money, and with it, a violent non-state armed actor seeking the violent overthrow of a democratically elected government in a neighboring country. This is an issue that Correa has largely chosen to ignore, and, when forced to acknowledge, has chosen to obfuscate and minimize.

But as Huerta Montalvo, the head of the Angostura committee and a friend of Correa said:

We are running around like spoiled children, fighting amongst ourselves and thinking we are making a revolution. But we are missing the deeper problem...I

⁶⁹ Author interview.

*wouldn't dare say (Ecuador) is a narco-state, but there is infiltration at every level of society and disturbing complicities. There is a de-institutionalization that goes beyond what we cover in the report.*⁷⁰

There is no question, as noted earlier, that the Colombian conflict has taken a heavy toll on Ecuador. To confront the FARC and other groups that have their roots in Colombia is a costly proposition in a time of scarce resources. But not confronting the armed group is more costly. Again, as Huerta Montalvo said:

*The guerrillas kidnap, and that is a crime against humanity. They use gas canister bombs against civilians, and that is terrorism. They are tied to drug cartels, and that is narco-terrorism. I believe...we should not fear words, because if we do, sooner or later we will have to take actions.*⁷¹

Yet Correa's actions have been ambiguous. While attacking the bearers of bad news regarding the ties of his government officials to the FARC, and to drug trafficking, he has distanced himself and the government from those individuals under investigation. However, while distancing himself, he has also appeared to retaliate against those carried out the most significant operations against the government officials, including reshuffling vetted units that worked with U.S. agencies after the units led to investigations of Correa allies.

There is a reasonable possibility that Correa, on a personal level, was seeking to engage the FARC solely to facilitate the release of hostages and other humanitarian reasons. However, given his closeness to Chávez, the declared support of the Bolivarian revolution for the FARC, and Correa's apparent reluctance to publicly condemn the FARC's well-documented human rights abuses, it is not clear he views the organization as either dangerous or criminal. Also, given his well-known penchant for micro-managing issues, he almost certainly knew, or could have known of the meetings of senior officials of his government with FARC commanders in Ecuadorian territory.

At best it shows extremely poor judgment by the president to surround himself with people who maintained contacts with non-state armed actors and met with them repeatedly on national territory and did not communicate that fact, or the contents of the discussion, to the nation's commander in chief. At worst it shows a complicity in the dealings or a willful ignorance of the behavior and actions of his subordinates.

The question of Correa's knowledge of the FARC financing for his campaign also remains unresolved. There is ample evidence that the FARC, at the very highest level, decided to fund his campaign and collected at least \$100,000 and mobilized its supporters in the border region to vote for him. There is some evidence that the

⁷⁰ "El Cartel Nuestro de Cada Día," op cit.

⁷¹ "El Cartel Nuestro de Cada Día," op cit.

money was accepted, although it is not conclusive. What remains unknown is whether Correa, as a candidate, knew or had reason to know of the contribution.

There are also significant challenges in the areas of governance and democracy. The Correa government, wrestling multiple challenges on many fronts, has chosen to concentrate most of the power in the hands of the president, arguing that this is necessary to give the country a chance to re-institutionalize. This is a dangerous strategy, given the nation's new constitution and Correa's own autocratic governing style. It is unlikely that a system of clear checks and balances, and centers of power outside of the executive, will be allowed to emerge.

While not pursuing the Bolivarian revolution with the same degree of authoritarianism and anti-American fervor as Chávez in Venezuela, Ortega in Nicaragua and Morales in Bolivia, Correa has clearly cast his lot with this profoundly anti-democratic group and process. His visceral desire to attack and silence the media that opposes him and to publicly insult those who challenge him indicates he harbors a dangerous *caudillismo* tendency that bodes ill for democracy.

However, as of yet, Correa, outside of his attempts to silence TV stations and publicly humiliate his antagonists, has taken none of the formal actions that Chávez, Morales and Ortega have taken to criminalize the political opposition, exert direct control over the military, or tamper with voter registrations.

Correa's willingness to host Iranian banks despite international sanctions against them, his ties to Chávez and Ahmadinejad, his overt hostility to the United States,⁷² his expanding ties with Russia and China at the expense of U.S. global interests, and his seeming lack of interest in tackling organized crime, combine to ensure that relations with the Obama administration are likely to remain rocky.

Correa has publicly justified his warming relationship with Russia and decision to purchase Russian weapons as necessary to counter U.S. aid to the Colombian military and modernize the Ecuadoran military.⁷³ However, as with many issues related to Correa, the visit ended inconclusively. Russia publicly expressed its desire that Ecuador recognize the independence of Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two breakaway republics from Georgia, and said they expected Correa to take the step while visiting Moscow in October 2009. Correa promised to study the proposal, but has not acted on it, and, as Russian newspapers reported, also received no Russian credits.⁷⁴

⁷² A recent example is Correa's unsubstantiated public charges that right-wing extremists were plotting to overthrow his government by funding parts of the indigenous movement. The indigenous movement, which strongly supported Correa during the elections, has broken with him over proposals to allow mining on their territories, as well as have the state take over water rights. See: "Ecuador Prez: U.S. Extremists Plot to Destabilize," Associated Press, Jan. 2, 2010.

⁷³ Javier Mozzo, "Ecuador to Seek Defense Deals with Russia," Reuters, Oct. 10, 2009.

⁷⁴ "Ecuador Seeks Closer Ties With Moscow," Euronews, Oct. 29, 2009.

No issue is more immediately pressing for Ecuador than negotiating the dual relationships with Colombia and Venezuela. Colombia's Uribe and Chávez are in permanent confrontation. But Correa seems to recognize that, despite his ideological kinship with Chávez, his economic and social stability rest much more on his relationship with Uribe. This dependence has been demonstrated in recent months as Correa has been forced to buy electricity from Colombia to avert an even more severe energy crisis than he is already facing.

There is little doubt that for Ecuador to move forward in combating transnational threats posed by the FARC, transnational criminal groups and Mexican drug cartels, it must unite with Colombia to face the common threats.

Huerta Montalvo of the Angostura Commission has said that the myth that Ecuador is an island of peace in a turbulent region, and only a transit country for the drug trade, "is now a thing of the past. What the Angostura investigation has shown is that the axis of everything is drug trafficking."

Asked what could be done to improve the situation, Huerta Montalvo answered:

*"Accelerate the normalization of relations with Colombia, understanding that we both have the same problems. We are brothers in the same drama, and we have to unite... We need a continental alliance, and Hugo Chávez and others have to decide whether or not drug trafficking and terrorism are crimes against humanity. We have to confront the problem, not leave it as a taboo."*⁷⁵

Without a united front on the most vital issues of national security -- narcotics trafficking, terrorism, transnational crime and the corruption that enables them -- little progress can be made against non-state armed groups that are truly transnational in reach and wealthier than any single state. The challenge to Correa is to carry out his "citizens' revolution" within a democratic framework while dealing collectively with transnational challenges that could consume Ecuador.

⁷⁵ "El Cartel Nuestro de Cada Dia," op. cit.