

Alvaro Uribe has more work to do

While Colombia's President has dealt FARC a crippling blow, his country is still an unholy mess

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Globe and Mail
July 14, 2008

The liberation of hostage Ingrid Betancourt by Colombian forces is a disaster for the country's premier guerrilla army, the FARC. It's been one of those years for the FARC, nothing seems to be going its way. The ideological purity and ruthless methods for which it's notorious have been eclipsed by the organization's managerial incompetence. A series of mishaps has brought the peasant army's very existence into question.

Colombia's President, Alvaro Uribe, is feeling very pleased with himself - and with good reason. The Bush administration, too, has warmly applauded FARC's bungling, which has seriously damaged the organization's ability to sustain its armed resistance to the Colombian government.

But both Bogota and Washington should restrain themselves before celebrating too hard. Colombia is still in an unholy mess and, in the area of human rights, the government has nothing to crow about as the murder of trades unionists continues to mount with no sign of the perpetrators being brought to justice.

And, for all the billions that the U.S. has channelled into Colombia's anti-narcotics program, once again the area of the country under coca cultivation is up; purity levels of the drug on U.S. streets remain high; and retail prices have reached record lows.

If the demise of the FARC continues, Mr. Uribe's government would do well to start focusing on some of the appalling injustices it has either permitted through inaction or even encouraged with the collusion of its corrupt secret police and its right-wing paramilitary allies.

No tears should be shed over the FARC's current difficulties. For all its liberationist rhetoric, it long ago ceased to be much more than an organized criminal syndicate in fatigues. Recently, it has suffered the psychological blow of its founder's death by heart attack. Furthermore, there have been some high-level defections to the government side, while other commanders have been captured or killed.

But not even the government's spectacular success in freeing Ms. Betancourt inflicted as much damage on the FARC as an incident earlier this spring when the FARC's "foreign minister," Raul Reyes, was killed during an incursion by Colombian forces into

Ecuadorean territory. In the aftermath of the attack, the Colombian military retrieved one of his laptop computers.

That little machine has been delivering up its secrets ever since, offering evidence of intense links between the FARC and Colombia's neighbouring governments. And top of the list of FARC accomplices, it would seem, has been President Hugo Chavez in neighbouring Venezuela. Mr. Uribe has accused his Venezuelan counterpart of having underwritten FARC operations to the tune of \$300-million according to information apparently contained in the laptop.

This revelation is the only credible explanation as to why Mr. Chavez suddenly changed the habits of a lifetime last month and appealed to the FARC not only to give up all its hostages, but to give up the armed struggle to boot. "The guerrilla war," he suggested, "has passed into history." So it looks like the FARC is losing its external lifeline as well. Even Fidel Castro has since asked the FARC that they hand over their remaining hostages.

It's too early to write the obituary. The FARC still has from 10,000 to 15,000 men, women and children under arms, and its forces still control a territory almost the size of Switzerland.

Regardless of the FARC's fate, it is time for Mr. Uribe to act against those of his own supporters who are involved in a different type of terror campaign. This year alone, 28 trade unionists have been murdered, according to human-rights organizations. For some years now, Colombia has been the most dangerous place in the world for unionists to exercise their rights. The think tank, the Washington Office on Latin America, has also registered more than 500 extra-judicial killings in the past five years, cases in which people detained by the security services are later found dead.

The Colombian government also sits on the second-largest population of internally displaced people in the world. More than three million Colombians, mainly peasants, have been removed from their homes, often in violent circumstances. Some were caught in the crossfire of the war with the FARC. Most of the refugees live in barrios on the periphery of Colombia's major cities. While these are quiet places during the day, at night they are controlled by drug cartels and competing extremist organizations. The plight of the refugees has been largely ignored by the Colombian government and demands urgent attention.

But the biggest challenge facing Mr. Uribe remains the coca industry. It will be highly instructive to see if the FARC's gradual demise has an impact on Colombia's most famous export. So far, despite the injection of billions into its anti-narcotics efforts in Colombia, Washington has watched helplessly as coca not only continues to satisfy demand in the U.S., but expands its markets rapidly in Europe. Furthermore, the ferocious violence associated with the cocaine trade has now spread to northern Mexico and Brazil's major cities, while the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency has recently

proclaimed Guinea-Bissau in West Africa to be the world's first narco-state because of its role in distributing cocaine from South America to Europe.

If the decline of the FARC is not accompanied by a significant reduction in the production and distribution of cocaine, Washington should finally recognize the facts and abandon its hopelessly compromised War on Drugs. Otherwise, Colombia can expect to continue its bloody decade.

The end of the FARC is no bad thing - but there are still many bad things happening.

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