



The Sierra de la Macarena Drugs and armed conflict in Colombia

By Ricardo Vargas¹

The recent history of armed conflict and the drug economy in Colombia's Sierra de la Macarena National Park and surrounding areas can be summarised by two central government decisions. The first was Operación Emperador, begun in early 2005 as part of the Patriot Plan (Plan Patriota) in this area. The second was the onset of the aerial spraying of coca crops grown in the park and its surrounding buffer zones.

The government opted for forced manual eradication in the first instance, following domestic opposition to fumigation and, above all, international pressure spraying over national parks. It saw this policy as a means to mount a strategic attack on the economic structures of the FARC in this area. These operations against illicit crops began on 19 January 2006 - in the course of which 28 casualties were sustained, according to Ministry of Defence figures: 13 police, 10 members of the Mobile Eradication Groups (MEG),² and 5 soldiers.

They culminated on 3 August 2006 following the deaths of five members of the MEG, killed by a high power land mine camouflaged amongst the coca bushes. President Uribe then announced the resumption of aerial spraying of the remaining coca crops in the park.

At the beginning of 2005, a combination of military offensives and aerial fumigations pushed into various parts of the Bajo Ariari and the edges of the Güejar river in the southeast of the Meta province, the municipalities of Puerto Rico (Puerto Toledo sector), Puerto Lleras (Villa la Paz), and Vista Hermosa (Mata de Bambú). Foreseeing the grave consequences these operations would

have for the region's inhabitants, the departmental government organised a meeting for 28 March 2005, with the (failed) intention of creating the conditions for forming agreements with the communities, to arrange alternatives to growing illicit crops. However, the imbalance of power faced by regional leaders wishing to intervene in decisions deemed questions of national security became a new matter for frustration in the region.

The official security offensive was supplemented by the development of paramilitary groups like the Bloque Centauros, which attempted to blockade the economic activity of communities in areas listed as under guerrilla influence. The actions of this group in the lower regions of the Sierra de la Macarena, occupying strategic seats of municipal government, contributed to a crisis that particularly affected the civilian population.

The community action councils and guilds of Bajo Ariari reported cases of selective assassinations, disappearances, threats, and forced displacements³ as part of what they

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2. Mobile Eradication Groups for Forced Manual Eradication of Illicit Crops (MEG) (Grupos Móviles de Erradicación Manual Forzosa de Cultivos Ilícitos - GME)

3. These reports appear in documents from: the Permanent Committee for the Defence of Human Rights; the Inter-ecclesiastical Committee for Justice and Peace and other Human Rights organisations, "Report 19 - Meta Information Update - Bajo Ariari, Puerto Lleras, Puerto Rico and Vista Hermosa "Forced Disappearances, arbitrary de-

considered to be "joint actions" between the Autodefensa paramilitary groups and the commanders and soldiers of the Colombian army's Joaquín París Battalion, who were notable mainly for their inaction.

The Paramilitaries aimed to neutralise support for the FARC, preventing the movement of food, medicines and consumables. In this way, they achieved changes (in their own favour) to the structure of taxes on the coca paste trade, and gained dominance in an area historically under guerrilla influence, dating back to the colonisation processes of the 1960s onwards.

Throughout 2005, there were military operations against possible support for the guerrillas, paramilitary actions for strategic positioning in the areas around the Sierra de la Macarena, aerial fumigations of coca plantations, with the resultant impact on the local economy, and also guerrilla incursions against the State and paramilitary offensives. These factors combined to produce a crisis in the region.

In the context of this developing confrontation, and bearing in mind the historic strength and dominion of the FARC in this area, 27 December 2005 saw a significant armed action when the guerrillas ambushed a military unit, killing 29 people. The principal response from the government was a direct attack on the cultivation of coca and the trade of coca paste in the area, the main source of guerrilla funding. The FARC, for its part, maintained its counter offensive capacity, carrying out lethal actions against the police securing these operations and against members of the MEG, using anti-personnel mines.⁴

The extension of violent actions in 2006 caused a 63.71 per cent increase in homicides in Meta province, with 124 in the first three months of 2005 and 203 in the same period of 2006. This figure translated to an increase in the per capita murder rate from 64.18 per hundred thousand inhabitants to 105.7, a figure which significantly surpasses the national rate for the same period (38.75 per hundred thousand for 2005 and 34.92 for 2006).⁵

This is particularly noticeable in some municipalities in the department that faced a critical security situation, such as Puerto López (367 per cent increase in homicides),

Puerto Rico (244 per cent), Vistahermosa (230 per cent) and Puerto Lleras (133 per cent).

The Balance Sheet

One of the principal conclusions that can be drawn from these events is that the Colombian government's decisions about this region confirm its current anti-drug policy to be fundamentally in line with the fight against sources of funding for the guerrillas. This brings with it many consequences deserving of analysis, and shows evidence of many notorious mistakes.

In the first place, it can be seen that management of the topic of illicit coca cultivation has been subjected to a focus and decision-making process typical of the operations against the internal armed conflict. Even if it is true that the illicit cultivation is a key source of finance for insurgent groups, an excessive focus on security matters introduces serious problems for the sustainability of the policy.

The lack of clarity between the management of eradication techniques, the counterinsurgent strategy and anti-drug objectives has generated a murky relationship between means and ends, loosening the strategic aims. In this context, this has resulted in an intensification of the technical use of manual eradication in the area, principally as a response to the FARC attack of 27 December. That is where the difficulties started.

With this decision, the squads of eradicators became the frontline of the counterinsurgency operation. The first difficulties were ob-

tention, forced displacements", 18 January 2005. Bogotá. Communities of Puerto Toledo - Puerto Rico, Villa de la Paz - Puerto Lleras, Mata de Bambú - Vistahermosa "Letter to the governor of el Meta, Edilberto Castro Rincón", 20 April 2005; Defenders of the People of el Meta "Letter to the director of the Alternative Development Programme USAID", 23 May 2005; Commission of negotiators delegated by the community action councils and the guilds of the river Güéjar region, "Situation of the inhabitants of the Ariari region", 20 September 2005.

4. See Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, Coyuntura de Seguridad No.12, (Security and Democracy Foundation, Security Circumstances No. 12) May 2006, Bogotá.

5. Ibid. p.83.

served when eradication actions were carried out in accordance with military conventions, forbidding the use of transistor radios and imposing silence on the day labourers for security reasons. All of this created a crisis for the recruits, who were psychologically prepared for the task of pulling up coca plants, but not for a military operation. The large number of eradicators initially contracted (930) created further problems, making the situation unwieldy and difficult to manage under the pressure of armed conflict.

As a result, there was a high desertion rate in the MEG in the initial phase of the operation, and the government found itself obliged to reduce the group to only 240 workers. This demonstrates the levels of improvisation with which the initial operation was undertaken. The government encouraged the continuation of the eradications, with the president himself accepting the eradicators' demands for housing subsidies. This deal between the government and the forcible eradicators stands in stark contrast to the complete lack of dialogue with the communities inhabiting the area.

Secondly, the errors made in the fight against drugs, viewed from another perspective, become mistaken decisions about the war. If the aim of the operation was to prevent the FARC from continuing to use coca in this area as a means of financing the war, then vital strategic conditions for the success of this aim were lacking: the region's civilian population was completely ignored, and treated as an intrinsic part of the armed organisation.

This was one of the most serious design faults in the strategy. As a result, the population of the area was forcibly displaced (although the guerrillas also contributed to this process in some areas, even forcing some inhabitants to leave). In any case, the State did nothing to win support. It did not even attempt to generate a different perception of the occupying forces that burst violently into the region.

The design of the counterinsurgent operation should not have been focussed on the eradication of coca plantations, but on winning acceptance of state presence in this territory. From this perspective, dealing with the coca would have been one of the elements

of the strategic design, but not the central aspect. The decisions that affect the goal of reaching legitimate affirmation of the State are of an entirely different order, such as:

- The design of an organisational plan for the territory and the mapping of the social and cultural characteristics of the area, in order to understand sub-regional specifics and help optimise the State's approaches to these localities.
- The development of a strategy combining the protection and sustainable environmental management of zones dedicated to a particular purpose, and the design of productive projects that require handling in a way that is adapted to the ecological characteristics of the territory (agro-forestry systems, land use models for forestry and pasture management, etc.)
- In this same context, the preparation of a strategy to win the "hearts and minds" of the inhabitants of the territory would be required. As has been observed, due to the errors in the design of Operación Colombia Verde (Operation Green Colombia) in the area, the government ended up establishing a dialogue with the forcible eradicators, but never recognised the existence of settler populations within the park. They did nothing to enhance mutual development, such as examining the technical viability of the communities' proposals to deal with the area's problems, nor did they consider the environmental, economic or socio-political management of the dynamics of occupation and conflict in the Sierra de la Macarena.
- The critical mass of institutional interest in this territory, from bodies such as the Universidad Nacional of Colombia and the Von Humboldt Institute, should have been considered and evaluated. The experience of forest management programmes in the area, in which the Parks Unit of the Ministry of the Environment, Housing and Territorial Development continues to play a fundamental role, and the development plans currently underway as a result of international cooperation were not taken into account. (For example, the Laboratorio de Paz del Meta, supported by the European Union, under the influence of the UNDP)

- The design of a public policy geared towards the strengthening of local and regional institutions, the extension of democracy, the promotion and support of communal social organisation, freeing up their autonomy and improving their decision making capacity in the context of local institutional life, and, in this way, strengthening their participatory role.

These elements should have been incorporated into the treatment of illicit coca cultivation. This would have required processes of prior coordination and agreement with the communities within the framework of a macro programme for the region, with the participation of local powers and the departmental government.

None of this was done. Instead the government opted for a short-sighted operation, with a conspicuously military-counterinsurgent focus, and for the militarisation of the area in order to protect the development of actions that, as can already be seen, do not guarantee in any way the medium or long term sustainability of the initial achievements.

Various state authorities published reports relating to this operation, measuring its progress in terms of the number of hectares manually eradicated with a view to winning greater public recognition of the project, in light of the hostile context of conflict in which the proposed operations were being put forward.

In this sense, the government presents the issue in terms of a dispute between manual eradication and aerial spraying (a discussion which revolves around a central question of the elimination of the source of insurgent funding, and thereby completely distorts consideration of the central problem). Today they reiterate the argument that the loss of 28 lives in the course of the operation has "demonstrated" - from the point of view of the government - that aerial eradication is better suited to the security conditions in guerrilla controlled areas.

This inference obscures the responsibility of those who took the decisions and leads to conclusions that confuse the real nature of the problem. In this way, they dodge the complex plot lines that weave around the issue, and the real problem remains impris-

oned within a controversy whose terms are too narrowly defined. Suffice to say, they have reduced the problem to a merely technical one, blurring any strategic questions about politics.

For their part, the guerrillas clearly saw, from the beginning, the hand that president Uribe was playing, and they proposed to fight it. They achieved this with relative ease, as the area was one traditionally under their control. The death toll among police and eradicators bears witness to the power the insurgents have always had in this area, and the final balance sheet of the operation presents a grim cost-benefit analysis. However, even more worryingly, the government persists in reducing the problems of la Macarena to the guerrilla control of coca, and to a controversy between two possible techniques for its eradication.

Finally, it is difficult to believe that the economic power of the guerrillas really hung in the balance in la Macarena. Figures supplied by the Anti-Narcotics Police about the economic impact of State actions upon guerrilla funding from this region establish losses to the FARC of 675 million dollars, resulting from the eradication of all the coca plantations in the area.⁶

Such calculations were based on a productive potential of 6 kilos of cocaine per hectare, which means a loss of 27 tonnes in the estimated 4,500 hectares within the area in question. The figure in dollars was worked out based on the street value of cocaine at the time in US cities with high consumption, as if the FARC controlled these markets. These statistics are presented for the benefit of domestic public opinion. They do not, in any way, reflect the reality of insurgent participation in the narcotics market, although they have led to serious errors in the design and evaluation of anti-drug strategies.

6. See National Police report (Anti-Narcotics Directorate (DIRAN), National Police Association (ANP) News Agency) "Two months of the 'Colombia Verde' (Green Colombia) operation have seen the eradication of a thousand acres of coca in the Macarena National Park", translated from www.policia.gov.co, March 2006. The director of the institution stated that: "Attempting to take the bankroll away from the guerrillas is not an easy process. The process in la Macarena consists of the eradication of coca which represents the FARC's most important source of funding."

In reality, the 4,500 hectares of coca plantation in the Sierra de la Macarena produced 33,750 kilos of coca paste per year, and the guerrillas made an average of 500 thousand Colombian pesos per kilo on this, based on their role as intermediaries with the drug trafficking capital. This adds up to a total loss of 7,670,000 dollars in the event of the complete destruction of the coca plantations in the area. However, the capacity to re-establish production is estimated as a period of six months. In other words, with the FARC in a position to substitute the coca production of the Macarena for production in more secure areas, the actual estimated losses would be half of its total annual income from the region, or around 3,835,000 dollars.

This figure must be viewed in relation to the cost of the operation to the government, plus US security support (by 15 June 2006, Washington had supplied 2 million dollars in logistical, aerial and communications support).⁷ Holland also took responsibility for part of the labour costs of the MEG (which amounted to around 500 thousand dollars by July 2006).⁸ Add to this the labour cost of the police (a conservative estimate of another 500 thousand dollars), and the total cost of the operation comes to around three million dollars.

This presents very discouraging results. They have invested 3 million dollars to deliver a 3,835,000 dollar economic blow to the guerrillas. The loss of 28 lives among the police and civilian eradicators must be added to this, presenting disastrous final results in terms of the strategic scope of the operation.

Other consequences following on from the operation are:

- The decisions of the government generated a perception that devalues manual eradication, as it was mistakenly used in a context of war. This technique requires a series of regulations in terms of anti-drug policy, which, if well planned, can at the very least reduce the impact on the environment and people's health caused by aerial spraying. Its use in the context of prior coordination and majority agreement with the growers, based on clear agreements about development alternatives, can contribute to resolving situations of conflict, as sectors that decide to continue

to maintain themselves through illegal production find themselves acting against the will of the majority in a given area. It can be a low impact tool in cases where coca crops are situated in the middle of alternative development programmes that are seriously affected by aerial fumigation, as happened to the COSURCA cooperative's organic coffee crops in the Cauca region in May and June of 2005. This programme, supported by AID and the UNODC, was sprayed by the Colombian government's own aeroplanes, losing its organic certification and causing an estimated 2,663,664 dollars in damages.⁹

- The intensification of the controversy between manual and aerial eradication has contributed to obscuring the social, economic, political and environmental background to the problem of illicit coca production. In essence, the technique used in the eradications cannot be a substitute for politics. A serious evaluation of events in la Macarena up to August 2006 must understand the technique used for coca eradication as a tool, and not the central axis of the strategy.
- Making decisions against illicit production as strategic decisions in the war (in this case, the over-emphasis on the fight against guerrilla finances) obscures the presence of unarmed civilian populations who suffer the consequences of the decisions taken by all the armed actors, including the State security services.
- Lastly, but by no means least in this context, decisions against illegal production, taken as strategies of war, nevertheless affect the function of local and departmental institutions and regional development plans. These are then ignored, as is their capacity to intervene and look for

7. Presidency of the Republic, Social Action, "1.800 hectares have already been eradicated in La Macarena", 8 June 2006, on www.red.gov.co

8. Calculations based on a daily wage of 27.000 Colombian pesos. See "22 muertos obligaron a fumigar Parque La Macarena" (22 deaths force the fumigation the Macarena Park) in *El Tiempo*, 4 August 2006, Bogotá.

9. See Lutheran World Relief, "Eradicating hope in Colombia: fair trade, organic coffee farms damaged by 'Plan Colombia' herbicide spraying", 2006, Baltimore.

solutions to the problems that are aggravating the dynamic of the war. State handling of security issues avoids the involvement of these local authorities.

Re-establishing fumigation is not going to legitimise or win acceptance of the State's activities in the territory of the Park. It is not going to protect the Park from the environmental deterioration generated by the critical interventions of social and military actors in the war, in a situation in which many problems can be identified which go beyond the simple cultivation of coca. However - as has been shown here - it is also not going to really affect the FARC's "bank-roll". What it will do is create well-fertilised territory for the prolonging of the armed conflict.

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