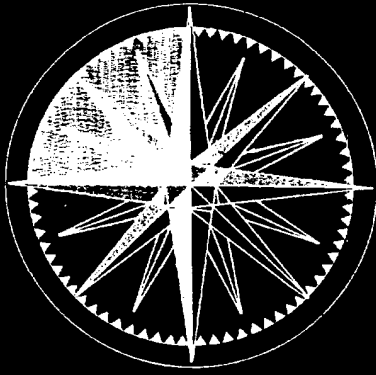


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BANDITRY AND INSURGENCY IN COLOMBIA

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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BANDITRY AND INSURGENCY IN COLOMBIA

"La violencia," as Colombians call the public disorder which has plagued their country since 1948, has claimed 150,000 lives, disrupted the social and economic health of many parts of the country, and provided a background for political unrest that resulted in the overthrow of two governments. The rural violence began as a contest between Colombia's two traditional parties, the Liberal and Conservative. It soon degenerated, however, into unbridled criminality characterized by savagery and sadism. During the past four years it has lost ground before a determined government campaign of military pressure and civic action.

Communist insurgency is related to the criminal violence but distinct from it and more dangerous. Several groups have engaged in insurgency, but so far with little success, and the Communist Party has placed its principal emphasis on legal action. There have been recent indications, however, that the party now may be planning greater stress on guerrilla warfare and that it may have international backing for a larger effort. If this develops, insurgency, which is not now considered a threat to stability in Colombia, may develop new dimensions.

Political Violence and Banditry

Political violence is common in Colombian history. Following a model of widespread banditry during the colonial period, it erupted frequently during the nineteenth century in the form of coups, revolutions, and civil wars, as well as banditry. In 1930 sporadic guerrilla warfare broke out between partisans of the two traditional parties but died out in the wider interest generated by the border war with Peru in 1932. The assassination of popular Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in 1948 again

brought tensions to fever pitch, set off five days of mass destruction in Bogota and other cities, and gave new impetus to rural strife.

Pent-up frustrations and hatreds found release in an orgy of violence far beyond the control of scattered public security forces. Conservative and Liberal groups formed in the countryside with almost religious fervor to attack each other with the most brutal disregard for life. The armed forces, which became in effect instruments of the ruling Conservative Party, were used for

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INSURGENCY AREAS IN COLOMBIA



ELN guerrillas in training



Colombian Army patrol in Communist guerrilla territory



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ruthless repression of the Liberals. Bandits, who were liable to summary execution, were defined as all those over 16 years of age who hid or fled from the armed forces. During this time no area of the country was free from violence. The rural violence disrupted transportation, and food shortages, economic dislocation, and inflation increased in severity.

A military coup in 1953 put Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in power to end the political and economic chaos. There was a temporary respite from disorder, but Rojas' gradual adoption of authoritarian methods brought a resurgence. Rojas was overthrown in 1957 as a result of his failure to overcome the country's complex problems. The leaders of the Conservative and Liberal parties agreed to a 16-year truce, embodied in the National Front agreement, which was approved by a plebiscite and put into effect in 1958. The agreement called for alternation of the presidency between two parties and parity of representation in Congress and departmental (state) and municipal (county) legislative bodies.

Violence once again diminished. The Liberal and Conservative partisan groups tended to settle down in specific regions, and the old guerrilla chiefs became more or less peaceful local leaders. Organized bandit gangs, composed of criminals who had earned a living for years by looting and robbery, continued

to operate, however. To this day, although with dwindling frequency, these groups have engaged in cattle rustling, theft of coffee crops, the "protection racket," kidnaping for ransom, armed robbery, hijacking, and similar activities. They have established reigns of terror in the areas in which they operated.

Measures of the Valencia Administration

President Valencia, who was inaugurated in 1962, early addressed himself to eliminating the national disgrace, as it was by then considered by many Colombians. Since the beginning of his administration the Colombian armed forces and police have carried out vigorous operations against bandit gangs, combining military action with civic action and psychological warfare.

The success of these campaigns is illustrated by the fact that in 1962 there were 2,919 deaths attributed to rural violence while in 1965 the figure was down two thirds to 1,079. The first six months of 1966 have shown a corresponding drop. The figures also show a sharp relative increase in bandit deaths and a relative decrease in deaths of victims of banditry. By January 1966 there remained only 15 active bandit gangs, of which 9 were Communist.

Communist Influence In Rural Areas

In 1934 Victor Merchan, a Communist, organized a group of

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peasants in an area near the town of Viota, about 50 miles southwest of Bogota. By 1940, Communist control of the area had become absolute, and it was "administered" by the Colombian Communist Party as the "independent Republic of Tequendama." Communist militia still control the area, and it is only recently that the government has had any influence in the enclave. It is still considered completely safe by the PCC, which uses it as a meeting place (the Tenth Congress of the PCC was held there in January 1966), the site of the PCC training school, and a safe haven for fugitives.

Because of its usefulness along these lines the area has not been used to mount offensive operations, which would invite government retaliation. Government policy has been directed toward slowly eroding Communist control rather than direct military action, which would result in loss of life and thus discredit the government. There are probably now about 50 armed militia in Viota.

Another enclave at Sumapaz, farther to the south, has had a similar history; however, it has not been as tightly sealed as has Viota. There are possibly 300 inactive but organized guerrillas in Sumapaz.

Beginning in the early 1950s the PCC began propagandizing among Liberal bandit gangs in the departments of Tolima and Huila with a view toward

establishing a third enclave. The party won a number of the bandits to the Communist cause, among them Manuel Marulanda (Tiro Fijo) and Ciro Trujillo, now the two most important Communist guerrilla leaders.

However, although their sympathy was won it was not possible to establish an enclave, and the PCC was indecisive as to what to do with the bandits. Also, ideological conversion was not enough to transmute the bandits into insurgents. Although they now called themselves Communists, they continued to act more from motives of profit than from political convictions.

The lack of reliable communications and the need for decentralization imposed by security consideration also contributed to weak PCC control over the Communist bandit-guerrillas. The PCC leaders in Bogota and the bandit groups in the mountains have maintained loose contact, but in general each group has gone its own way.

Active Communist banks now exist in southern Colombia in the Marquetalia, Riochiquito, El Pato, Guayabero, and Medellin del Ariari regions. The Colombian Army, which estimates that there are from 200 to 300 Communist effectives in this area of southern Colombia, has kept up steady pressure on them since 1964 as an extension of its anti-bandit campaign. Military operations and civic action programs have limited the freedom of action of the guerrillas and whittled away at their strength and influence.

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Differences Over
Communist Tactics

Colombia's PCC followed normal Communist procedure during the 1950s. Power was to be achieved through legal means or by a coup at an appropriate time. Emphasis was on obtaining a mass following in the cities, with formation of a united front and penetration of labor and student groups. The success of Castro in Cuba, however, led many Communists and Communist sympathizers in Colombia to a desire for more aggressive action. They pointed out that the traditional methods had been successful nowhere in Latin America and had little prospect of ever being successful. They contended that guerrilla warfare was the only way for Communism to come to power in Latin America. The Cubans had proved that it was possible and had pointed the way.

Such attitudes were encouraged by the Cubans. The PCC leaders clung to the old position, however, and various groups espousing a Marxist guerrilla war began to develop. Among the more important of these are the Workers-Students-Peasants Movement (MOEC), the Army of National Liberation (ELN), and the Communist Party of Colombia - Marxist/Leninist (PCC-ML).

The MOEC, formed in 1959, has been violence-oriented from its beginning. It has received some support from Cuba and has been especially close to the Chinese. In April 1966 four MOEC members, believed to be the first

of a group of ten persons, left Colombia for a four-month political and guerrilla training course in North Korea. Possibly as many as 150 MOEC members have been trained in North Korea, North Vietnam, and Communist China. Although the MOEC, with from 200 to 300 activists, is believed to have potential for guerrilla warfare, its violence has so far been largely confined to urban terrorism on a small scale. At present it is largely inactive and divided into several factions competing for leadership, but it could join forces with one or more of the other leftist groups.

In 1963 the Youth of the Liberal Revolutionary Movement (JMRL) broke from its parent organization, the MRL, a moderate-leftist branch of the Liberal Party, to set up an independent movement to work for Marxist "socialism." At the same time the ELN was established as the armed wing of the JMRL and immediately exhibited its character of violence by a series of bombings in Bogota and other cities. The ELN has received limited financial assistance (possibly no more than \$25,000) from Cuba and training of some of its members in Cuba. In January 1965 it carried out a successful attack against the small town of Simacota in the Department of Santander. The raid, however, was not followed up, and ELN guerrilla activity was relatively quiescent until early 1966, when a series of clashes with government authorities occurred.

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At this time, rebel priest Camilo Torres joined the ELN guerrillas. While a faculty member at National University in Bogota, Torres had begun a reform movement which became increasingly leftist oriented. In mid-1965 his political activities brought him into direct conflict with the church hierarchy, and the dispute became a cause celebre which vaulted him into prominence as a national leader. His decision to join the ELN gave the guerrillas a brief psychological and propaganda boost, but ELN activities practically ceased with the death of Torres during a clash with an army unit in February. The ELN may now have as few as 50 men in the field.

The PCC-ML was formed in 1964 by members of the PCC who broke with the party over the issue of "armed struggle" versus the "peaceful way" to power. The PCC-ML immediately sought Chinese recognition and support. Recognition was quickly granted, but the Chinese have been niggardly with material support, apparently providing little more than a few thousand dollars and some training. The PCC-ML is attempting to organize guerrilla warfare, but its leaders are now criticized for the same vices of indecision and bureaucracy for which they had previously criticized the PCC leaders. In its turn, the PCC-ML has been wracked with dissension and schism. It is estimated to have a very limited potential for guerrilla action in the coming months.

Current Line of the PCC

Faced with the formation of competitive Marxist organizations and the defection of many party members, the PCC has developed a line which it considers original. The Colombian theses had apparently crystallized by August 1965, when Secretary General Gilberto Vieira-White wrote in Problems of Peace and Socialism: "In Colombia, partisan warfare is not yet the principal form of struggle. The peasants' guerrilla movements are maintained and developed in certain specific regions, particularly those which have suffered attacks by the army.... In regions where the guerrilla movement has sprung up and been maintained it has become the principal form of struggle and the axis around which mass action is developed, broadened, and strengthened."

This idea was more clearly expressed and formally adopted by the PCC in the political resolution of the party's Tenth Congress in January 1966: "In Colombia there is opening an original revolutionary way, based on the use of all the methods and forces of mass struggle, combined according to concrete local conditions and general conditions. Peasant guerrilla war is one of the highest forms of mass struggle and only prospers and grows where it is linked with the masses. At present, although peasant guerrilla war is not yet the main form of struggle, it is becoming more important every day."

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Such a position serves a number of purposes. Being sophisticated and ideologically correct, it is persuasive and is the soundest argument formulated by any Latin American Communist party for not rushing into guerrilla warfare. It keeps the PCC within the limits of legality in Colombia, permitting it to pursue the other "methods and forces of mass struggle," such as participation in elections, labor agitation, overt propaganda, etc. It has not, however, preserved the unity of the party.

It is difficult to judge the sincerity of the PCC position. The party gives considerable local and international propaganda support to the guerrilla movement, but so far there has been little evidence that it has provided any real guidance or significant material help to the guerrillas. The more knowledgeable leaders may feel that the time is not yet ripe, and they may be frightened by the serious reverses suffered by their Venezuelan neighbors, who had embarked on the path of armed insurrection. Bureaucratic lethargy may also be an inhibiting factor.

Nevertheless, there have been indications that the PCC leaders may take their policy seriously. [REDACTED] the National Executive Committee decided "to support to the highest degree" the guerrillas in southern Colombia. The PCC is also apparently considering accepting an overture from the ELN for collaboration. The PCC and ELN are

compatible in aims and ideology, and their respective leaders have never quarreled. It would be logical for the two groups to collaborate in a serious guerrilla war.

The PCC leaders apparently would like to take over the ELN, even though they consider the ELN leaders "adventurers." The PCC leaders feel that with proper reorganization, training, and direction the ELN might be a worthwhile insurgency force. The ELN leaders, for their part, undoubtedly would like to receive assistance from the PCC, but they would probably resist being taken over by the party. Each group has something to offer the other, and if their problems can be worked out, collaboration could become a reality within the coming months, especially if there is pressure for it from Cuba and the USSR.

In late April and early May 1966, Communist bandit leaders in southern Colombia set up the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), apparently with the blessing of the PCC. The formation of this group has been given considerable publicity by Radio Havana. Also, the Hanoi radio reported on 9 June that the deputy commander of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam "warmly greeted" the formation of FARC. Such propaganda support suggests that the PCC may indeed be making a serious effort to step up guerrilla warfare in Colombia and that this policy may have international Communist backing.

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All of the insurgent groups have at one time or another been interested in some form of coordination of the various guerrilla forces. The latest of these attempts, worked out in early 1966, was "Plan Aurora" (The Dawn)-- reportedly a plan of the ELN, the MOEC, and the PCC-ML for coordinated insurgency. During April 1966, however, leaders of the ELN, reflecting on the failure of the plan to achieve results, decided to work only with the PCC.

Outlook

In mid-1966 the public order situation in Colombia appears bright. The bandit problem, which has plagued the country for years, is under control. The leftist guerrillas are split into several groups and are either inactive or on the defensive. The Colombian economy is not strong, but it is relatively stable and is making some progress. National elections were

held in March and in May in a tranquil atmosphere, and no political crises exist at this time. Poverty, inflation, and other causes of unrest are present but the people seem to have rejected violence as a means of solving their problems. The armed forces are strong and united behind the government. They are reasonably enlightened, and they have gained valuable counterinsurgency experience through years of combating guerrillas and bandits. As it appears now, the various insurgent movements together or independently are capable at this time of only limited urban violence or isolated guerrilla actions.

Nevertheless, if the PCC is really anxious to begin serious insurgency through the FARC and the ELN, and if the party receives substantial assistance from Cuba or the USSR, the situation could change drastically.
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