

Understanding Colombia Series

PARAMILITARY DEMOBILIZATION

In Brief

- The paramilitaries agreed to demobilize in 2002 after negotiations with the Uribe government.
- The Justice and Peace Law ensures lighter prison sentences for those AUC combatants that demobilize.
- Not all paramilitary blocks agreed to demobilize.
- There is growing concern that ex-combatants are rearming under smaller paramilitary militias.
- The reintegration program is criticized as being weak and inconsistent.
- The validity of the demobilizations has been called into question because of the on-going "para-politics scandal."
- Victims of paramilitary violence are not being offered the opportunity to testify with security or to hear testimonials.
- The US government appropriated up to \$20 million in aid for the demobilization process.

Background

The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) was founded in the April of 1997 as an umbrella of the many existing paramilitary groups founded by landowners, drug lords, and factions of Colombia's military. Their stated mission was to protect against guerilla organizations in northern Colombia. Since the start of the conflict, however, the paramilitaries are charged with killing the majority of the 2000 civilians that are victims to the war each year. Thanks to large donations and deep roots in the cocaine industry, the paramilitaries were the fastest growing actor in the conflict, nearly tripling in size since 1998. In late 2004, two large AUC factions—*el Bloque Bananero* and *el Bloque Catatumbo*—demobilized in grand fashion, with their leaders turning themselves in and the combatants handing over their weapons. The AUC was to completely demobilize by the end of 2006, a goal that was not achieved.



Logo of the
Autodefensas
Unidas de
Colombia
(AUC)

Important Facts

The 2002 Peace Process: The AUC entered into peace negotiations with the Uribe government in December 2002. In this setting, the paramilitaries agreed to begin demobilizing in July of 2003. When the process was to end in August 2006, approximately 32,000 paramilitaries had handed over their weapons.

The Justice and Peace Law: To combat objections—such as impunity for crimes committed, alleged drug-trade involvement, and requests by the US government for extradition—raised by the paramilitaries during the peace negotiation, the Colombian Congress passed the Justice and Peace Law in June 2005. There was outrage by several human rights activists towards this legislation because it appeared as a sort of concession to the paramilitaries. The Justice and Peace Law allowed for minimal jail sentences and it gave the Colombian government very few means to actually dismantle the paramilitaries effectively. Reacting to these concerns, the Constitutional Court revised the law in 2006, stating that demobilized paramilitaries have to hand over illegal assets, confess their past crimes, and divulge information regarding their organization's structure. Without complying to these conditions, ex-combatants would lose their privileged treatment.

Incomplete Demobilization: Not all blocks under the AUC entered into the demobilization process. In fact, there is clear evidence that many of the factions that did not demobilize are continuing to operate under mid-level leadership, as can be seen in the Meta Block. Moreover, many of those blocks that did officially demobilize are still involved in illegal activities. For instance, the Colombian newspaper *Semana* published transcripts of dozens of telephone conversations from paramilitaries held in Cell Block One in the Itagüí prison in 2008. These recordings reveal many illegal dealings via cell phones and email involving the right-hand men of demobilized AUC leaders—such as Salvatore Mancuso and Ramiro Vanoy.

Remobilization?: Compounding the fact that the paramilitary demobilization has not been complete, there is growing evidence that ex-combatants— who have gone through the Justice and Peace process—have rearmed under new paramilitary organizations, oftentimes known as the *Águilas Negras* (Black Eagles). Although these new groups do not yet have the reach of the AUC, it is alarming that their membership—as reported by the Organization of American States (OAS)— numbers about 3000 and is steadily growing.

Reintegration Program: The OAS mission has noted institutional shortcomings in the government's attention to ex-combatants. The Colombian government's Program for Reincorporation into Civilian Life (PRVC) contemplates a period of two years in which ex-combatants may access certain benefits. The Mission finds shortcomings in the provision of health benefits to ex-members of the AUC and their immediate families. Only 47% of ex-combatants who have been in the system for more than 6 months have been entered into the government's social security system. Psychosocial attention continues to be one of the PRVC's weakest points, with only 12% of ex-combatants participating in workshops during the second quarter of 2006. The Mission also found that the focus on education was insufficient. Moreover, there is difficulty in establishing clear statistics. There is on-going discrepancy between the number of demobilized combatants reported by the Colombian government and the number that are actually located by the National Police.

Para-politics scandal: The validity of the demobilization process has faced further scrutiny because of the current "para-politics scandal" in which many authorities in the Colombian government—from Congressmen to local mayors—have been implicated as having ties with the paramilitaries and with drug-traffickers. This scandal has caused the whole Uribe-AUC peace process to come under question.

Victims of Paramilitary Violence: The victims of paramilitary violence who wish to cooperate with the justice system face two major problems. First, the government cannot guarantee adequate security measures so that those individuals who testify will not be harmed. Second, currently, most victims are not being allowed to listen to the testimony that is presented at paramilitary hearings. For instance, about 650 victims have denounced Salvatore Mancuso for various crimes, yet the Attorney General's office has only admitted a small fraction of these victims into the room where the testimony is broadcast via closed-circuit television. Compounding these issues, there is no clear plan for dealing with the over three million internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in Colombia, many of which became refugees due to paramilitary violence. Aiding those IDPs who wish to return to their lands should be a central component of any reparations plan.

US Funding: In the Appropriations Act for 2006, the US Congress approved funding for the paramilitary demobilization process for up to \$20 million. The largest portion of this funding is allocated for the reintegration of ex-combatants despite the fact that there is great concern regarding the proposed Colombian government's reinsertion plan. Therefore, it is crucial the impact of this funding is carefully monitored so that members of the US Congress can make sure that US funding does not contribute to the strengthening of illegal organizations in Colombia.



Luis Carlos Restrepo, the Colombian Government's chief negotiator in the demobilization process of the AUC, collects a weapon from a demobilizing Paramilitary combatant.

(Web Photo)

For More Information

Center for International Policy

www.ciponline.org

Organization of American States

www.oas.org

The International Crisis Group

www.crisisgroup.org

Washington Office on Latin America

Take Action!

Write a letter or call your U.S. Congressmen/women asking them to support the careful monitoring of the paramilitary demobilizations in order to ensure that US funding is used efficiently and that it does not contribute to a weak process which may ultimately strengthen illegal forces in Colombia. To find the address and phone number of your senators and representatives, please visit www.congress.org

U.S. Office on Colombia

connecting civil society to policymakers



1326 9 Street, NW ~ Washington DC, 20001

www.usofficeoncolombia.org