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The Last Man Standing? The Rise of Colombia's Urabeños

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The Urabeños are today's dominating criminal power in Colombia. Born in the aftermath of the demobilisation of Colombia's paramilitaries in 2006, as part of the new generation of drug trafficking syndicates that emerged at that time, dubbed the BACRIM, the Urabeños can trace a direct line from the paramilitary AUC, which had its roots in the infamous Medellin cartel of Pablo Escobar.

This paper aims to tell the history of their expansion in Colombia and abroad and their triumph over more then 30 other BACRIM. That history is less about permanent gang wars than about how the Urabeños managed to seal fruitful alliances with the other main actors of the Colombian underworld – BACRIM, FARC, ELN – thus building a complex and far-reaching criminal network.

Nevertheless, this paper will suggest that the Urabeños do not have the monopoly of criminal power and a perfect hegemony over drug trafficking in Colombia, as they still encounter local resistance by other BACRIM, such as the Rastrojos in Buenaventura and the Oficina de Caribe in Santa Marta. Furthermore, the central command structure of the organization – the Estado Mayor or Board of Directors – does not have direct control over more than a fraction of those that use the franchise name. Many regional chiefs that may sit in the Board of Directors are financially self-sufficient and run all manner of criminal activities in their criminal fiefdoms.

Considering the possible future of the Urabeños, this paper concludes that while the franchise may eventually change its name, as the centre of gravity moves to other parts of the country then Urabá – where it was originally founded –, its nature as a fluid criminal network will remain.

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Colombia's organized crime world is now dominated by one group: the Urabeños. They are the new face of drug trafficking in the country, the latest mutation in the ever changing criminal landscape. Has Colombia's underworld gone a full circle, with a single structure now dominating the country's cocaine trade?

In the aftermath of the demobilisation of Colombia's paramilitaries, a new generation of drug trafficking syndicates, dubbed the BACRIM (from the Spanish "Bandas Criminales" - Criminal Bands), were born. In 2008 there were more than 30 BACRIM, and until the end of 2012 there was a bitter war for domination between the rival groups. Today one has emerged triumphant: the Urabeños, now called by the government "clan Usuga", or as they prefer to refer to themselves, the "Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia" (AGC).

The term "autodefensas" harks back to the paramilitary army of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC), which demobilised in 2006. The name "Urabeños" comes from the area in north-western Colombia, that of Urabá, where the group was founded, and which remains its stronghold. The Urabeños can trace a direct line from the paramilitary AUC, which had its roots in the infamous Medellin cartel of Pablo Escobar. The question is therefore, have the Urabeños managed to replicate the position held by their Medellin cartel predecessors?

While there is certainly an unbroken line in terms of history, geography and even personalities from the Medellin cartel to the Urabeños today, this paper will argue that the Urabeños, the nature of today's cocaine trade and that of organised crime, are radically different to that of the 1980s.

The History of the Urabeños

Urabá, which means "promised land" in the indigenous tongue, was the cradle of the paramilitaries. It was here that the first paramilitary groups set up by the Castaño brothers, who were part of the Medellin Cartel, was born. The Autodefensas Campesinas de Cordoba y Urabá, the ACCU, were the prototype paramilitary group and formed the nucleus of the national paramilitary movement, the AUC, launched in 1997.

Urabá has long been outlaw country, with the presence not only of paramilitaries, but well before them Marxist rebels of the People's Liberation Army (EPL) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). There has been historically little trust in the state, and less affection for the security forces. While the Urabeños have spread across Colombia, Urabá and parts of Cordoba remain their principal stronghold. This is where much of the Urabeños command is based, as well as the presidency of its "board of directors," or Estado Mayor.

The region is crucial drug trafficking real estate, providing access to coca crops located in the Nudo de Paramillo, the mountains of Bolívar and the jungles of Chocó. It sits astride one of the most important drug movement corridors from the centre of the country to the departure points on both the Pacific and Atlantic seaboards.

When the paramilitary leadership was ordered to turn itself in and was locked up first in a facility in La Ceja, Antioquia, and then the high security prison of Itagui outside Medellin, several key commanders refused to surrender. The most senior of them was Vicente Castaño, from the dynasty which founded the AUC.

Castaño called the changes in the negotiations a betrayal, and set about rebuilding his power base. He turned to two trusted lieutenants: Daniel Rendón Herrera, alias "Don Mario," and Ever Veloza Garcia, alias "HH." The first was a money man, who had run the finances of the AUC's Centauros Bloc. He was also from Amalfi, the birthplace of the Castaños. HH on the other hand, had been with Vicente Castaño right from the foundation of the paramilitaries in 1994. He was his hatchet man, and a trusted military commander.[1] Castaño set about establishing a new group, which was initially called the "Bloque Heroes de Castaño."

Castaño was killed in 2007 at a property of his in Córdoba, on the orders of imprisoned paramilitary leaders who feared he would take over their drug routes and territory.[2]

1 McDermott interviewed Éver Veloza on multiple occasions in Itagui prison on the outskirts of Medellin during 2008.

2 Jeremy McDermott, 'Revealed: The secrets of Colombia's murderous Castaño brothers', November 7, 2008. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/colombia/3391789/Revealed-The-secrets-of-Colombias-murderous-Castano-brothers.html



This left Don Mario in charge. He felt comfortable in Urabá, where his brother, Fredy, alias "El Aleman," had commanded the AUC's Elmer Cardenas Bloc. El Aleman demobilized 1,500 fighters during three separate demobilization ceremonies in 2006. Don Mario knew many of them personally and quickly cobbled together a formidable fighting force of around 80 men. He then monopolized this important drug route, taxing traffickers for every kilo of cocaine that passed through his territory. It was a lucrative business. The tax was $400 per kilo.[3] And with up to 20 go-fast boats leaving the Gulf every week, each capable of carrying two tons of cocaine, Don Mario was making close to $20 million per month. The Urabeños were in business and by 2008, with the extradition of much of the AUC high command to the US, a war between different BACRIM, most commanded by middle-ranking paramilitaries, began in earnest.

Don Mario sought to expand from his Urabá heartland and moved south into the strategic region of Bajo Cauca and Medellín. He met resistance from other BACRIM, principally Los Paisas[4] and the Oficina de Envigado[5]. Don Mario had powerful friends, among them Guillermo Valencia Cossio, brother of then-Interior Minister Fabio Valencia Cossio, who ran the Attorney's General's Office in Medellin. However, he made too many enemies too quickly. His organization, which he called the "Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia" ended up embroiled in conflict with at least three other BACRIM.

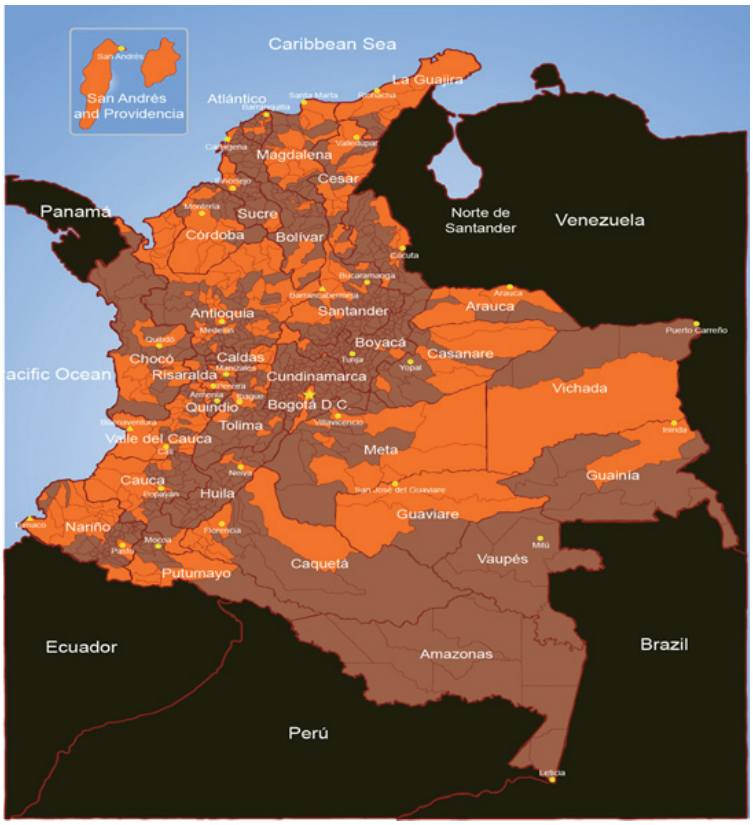
Don Mario needed help. Help with fundraising and help moving into Medellín. Vicente Castaño had presented him to a talented drug trafficker from Medellin during the AUC days, to whom he reached out: Henry de Jesus Lopez, alias "Mi Sangre".[6]

3 Semana, ' En pie de guerra', April 19, 2008. http://www.semana.com/wf_InfoArticulo.aspx?idArt=111095

4 See InSight Crime profile of Los Paisas: http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-colombia/paisas

5 See InSight Crime profile of the Oficina de Envigado: http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-colombia/oficina-de-envigado

6 See InSight Crime profile of Mi Sangre: http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/henry-de-jesus-lopez-mi-sangre



BACRIM PRESENCE ACROSS COLOMBIA 2008

Don Mario had met Mi Sangre while working for another Castaño associate and Amalfi native, Miguel Arroyave, the head of the AUC's Capital Bloc. Mi Sangre, whose roots lay in the Medellín mafia, the Oficina de Envigado, had been sent to Bogotá to work with Arroyave setting up the AUC Capital Bloc, which aimed to establish a number of "oficinas de cobro" in the capital. Oficinas de cobro were born in Medellin as regulators of the underworld and debt collection agencies. They also contracted the famed assassins of Pablo Escobar, the "sicarios" and have since become the building blocks of Colombian organized crime and the BACRIM. *For more details on the history and nature of the oficinas see the FES paper "The Changing Face of Colombian Organised Crime."*

Don Mario's antics had attracted the attention of the security forces. By late 2008, the government's reward for information leading to the capture of Don Mario had reached $1.5 million. He was the public face of the BACRIM.

It did not take the Colombian police too long to track Don Mario down; he was captured in April 2009. By this time, the Urabeños had presence in the provinces of Chocó, Antioquia and Cordoba, and had sent probing teams in the cities of Medellín, Cartagena and Santa Marta. Scouts had been dispatched to the provinces of Norte De Santander, Bolívar, Cesar and La Guajira. The Urabeños were looking for partners.

The Urabeños at this time numbered close to 350, most of them ex-AUC members. Don Mario had put the Urabeños on the map, but they were still a minor league BACRIM, one of over a dozen.

The Urabeños break out from their stronghold (2009-2012)

It could be said that the capture of Don Mario was the best thing that could have happened to the Urabeños. Firstly the security force pressure came off. With Don Mario in custody, the police turned their attention elsewhere. Secondly Don Mario was replaced by a leader with far greater ability and cunning: Juan de Dios Úsuga, alias "Giovanni".[7]

7 See InSight Crime profile of Giovanni: http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/juan-de-dios-usuga-giovanni

Giovanni and his brother, Dario Antonio Úsuga, alias "Otoniel,"[8] were part of key personnel within the AUC who had previously been rebels of the EPL. The EPL demobilized in 1991, but its members were attacked as traitors to the revolutionary cause by the FARC in Urabá.[9] Many former EPL fighters ended up in the arms of the nascent paramilitary movement, becoming founding members of the first paramilitary unit, the ACCU. Giovanni had worked with the AUC's Calima Bloc in Cauca, sent to watch over the Castaños' interests there,[10] while Otoniel worked with Don Mario and the Centauros Bloc in Meta.

Giovanni as leader gathered other former EPL guerrillas, among them Roberto Vargas Gutiérrez, alias "Gavilan"; Francisco José Morela Peñate, alias "Negro Sarley"; Jacinto Nicolas Fuentes German, alias "Don Leo," and Melquisedec Henao Ciro, alias "Belisario.". This group of former guerrillas became the disciplined and capable military core of the Urabeños and members of its "Estado Mayor," or board of directors.

With trusted and seasoned commanders primed, Giovanni build on the base Don Mari had left him and went on the offensive. It was now that the expansion of the Urabeños began in earnest, with trusted lieutenants sent from Urabá to take control of strategic drug trafficking real estate, preferably through alliances and agreements, but otherwise through violence.

Mi Sangre was key in this expansion. He was running large quantities of cocaine out of north-western Colombia and up to Mexican cartels, principally the Zetas. He was working with an old friend and Oficina de Envigado associate, Maximiliano Bonilla Orozco, alias "Valenciano," who not only had power in Medellín as head of one faction of the Oficina de Envigado, but also ran one of the splinter groups of the Paisas along the Caribbean coast.[11] The Urabeños were able to provide Valenciano with arms and ammunition to help him fight rival factions of the Oficina de Envigado in Medellín. In return Valenciano gave them access to his international cocaine connections.[12] The contacts gave the Urabeños access to new routes, new clients and more money.

The guerrilla background of the group's leadership provided the Urabeños high command with a better understanding of how to set up links with local communities in areas where they operated, and also gave them an advantage when dealing with the rebels of the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and last remaining faction of the EPL that still operates in Norte de Santander.[13] Relations with these rebel groups are now essential for the BACRIM, as the guerrillas control much of the drug crops in the country and supply coca base to the BACRIM.

The Urabeños not only forged agreements with "Valenciano" and his Paisas, but with several other criminal players: the BACRIM of Alta Guajira, run

by Arnulfo Sánchez González, alias "Pablo,"[14] and the Oficina del Caribe (run by family members of extradited AUC leader Hernán Giraldo).

By the end of 2010, the Urabeños were in a strong position. They controlled most of the main routes from Medellín north to the Caribbean. They had also managed to open another major land route to the Atlantic, via the department of César, which links the centre of the country to the Venezuelan border and the coast. In short, they had become one of the top three BACRIM in the country, trailing only the Rastrojos and the Popular Revolutionary Anti-Terrorist Army of Colombia (Ejército Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista Colombiano–ERPAC).[15]

They were about to get another boost, not though their own doing, but with the implosion of their principal rivals.

8 See InSight Crime profile of Otoniel: http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/dario-antonio-usuga-otoniel

9 Robin Kirk, "More Terrible than Death," 2003

10 Profile of Don Berna: http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/don-berna

11 Profile of Valenciano: http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/maximiliano-bonilla-orozco-valenciano

12 Profile of the Zetas: http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-mexico/zetas

13 InSight Crime, "Colombia's Forgotten Rebels Now at the Heart of Drug Trade," InSight Crime, August 13, 2011. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/colombias-forgotten-rebels-now-at-the-heart-of-drug-trade

14 InSight Crime, "La Guajira: Dynamics of a Conflict," November 21, 2010, http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/la-guajira-dynamics-of-the-conflict

15 See InSight Crime's ERPAC profile: http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-colombia/erpac



Urabeños areas of influence, 2011

By 2011, the Rastrojos were the most powerful BACRIM and the dominant criminal power in Colombia. They had a presence in up to 23 of Colombia's 32 departments[16] by some estimates, and had a rural military force estimated to be in excess of 1,000 fighters[17], as well as control over many oficinas de cobro, sicarios and money laundering networks.

They controlled the principal trafficking networks in the west of the country, and the north-east, with only parts of the Caribbean coast and the Eastern Plains lying outside their influence. Working closely with the drug trafficker Daniel "Loco" Barrera, they had established a plethora of international contacts. They had also secured a presence outside the borders of Colombia, controlling trafficking in Ecuador and on both sides of the Venezuelan border. Under the leadership of the Calle Serna brothers (Javier, Luis Enrique and Juan Carlos) as well as Diego Henao, alias "Diego Rastrojo," the rise of the Rastrojos had been meteoric. Their downfall would be equally precipitous.

At the start of 2012, persistent rumours emerged that Javier Calle Serna, alias "Comba," was negotiating with the US authorities.[18] Suddenly, the Rastrojos empire seemed to be built on shifting sands. In May 2012, Comba turned himself in to the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).[19] Just one month later, Diego Rastrojo was arrested in

16 Indepaz, "Informe sobre la presencia de narcoparamilitares 2011," 2011, http://www.indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/722_VII-Informe-presencia-narcoparamilitarismo-2011-INDEPAZ.pdf

17 InSight Crime, "Comba Cuts Deal and Rastrojos Lose Ground," May 8, 2012, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/comba-cuts-a-deal-and-the-rastrojos-lose-ground

18 InSight Crime, "Comba Cuts Deal and Rastrojos Lose Ground," May 8, 2012, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/comba-cuts-a-deal-and-the-rastrojos-lose-ground

19 InSight Crime, "Comba Cuts Deal and Rastrojos Lose Ground," May 8, 2012, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/comba-cuts-a-deal-and-the-rastrojos-lose-ground

Venezuela.[20] The last leader who could potentially have held the organization together, Comba's brother, Luis Calle Serna, turned himself in to US authorities in October.[21] This occurred just a month after the loss of the group's key international trafficking connection, Daniel Barrera, who was arrested in Venezuela that September.[22]

Suddenly, huge chunks of Colombia's drug trafficking world were up for grabs. The Urabeños seized the opportunity. Suddenly, they appeared to be everywhere, even breaking into the Rastrojos heartland on the Pacific coast and making alliances with oficinas de cobro in Cali and in the strategic port of Buenaventura. They appeared along the Venezuela border looking to take over crucial crossing points in the Norte de Santander department, and expanded once again into the Eastern Plains, where the ERPAC had fragmented after the death of its leader, Pedro Oliveiro Guerrero, alias "Cuchillo", in December 2010.

Giovanni sent emissaries to meet with other BACRIM leaders and invited them to join the Urabeños network. It made business sense and few wanted to take on the aggressive group from Urabá. Those who did were killed. Some of the groups that form part of the Urabeños network still have their separate identity, others have been absorbed into the franchise. Following is a list of many of the groups that have been absorbed by, or affiliated with, the Urabeños:

- Vencedores de San Jorge and the Héroes de Castaño (Antioquia and Córdoba)
- Aguilas Negras (Antioquia, Córdoba, Bolívar, Cesar and Norte de Santander)
- Los Traquetos (Córdoba)
- Los Nevados (Atlántico and La Guajira)
- Paisas (Antioquia)
- BACRIM del Alta Guajira (Guajira)
- Oficina del Caribe (Atlántico and La Guajira)
- Oficina de Envigado
- La Cordillera (Caldas, Risaralda, Quindío)
- Los Machos (Valle del Cauca)
- Renacer (Chocó)
- Oficina de Envigado (Medellín, Antioquia)
- Héroes de Vichada (Vichada, Guaviare, Meta)

Such was the success of the Urabeños under Giovanni's leadership, that he had become a priority target for the security forces and the DEA. All of the considerable resources of both national and international law enforcement were directed towards locating the Urabeños leader.

On New Year's Day, 2012, the mastermind of the Urabeños consolidation and expansion was killed in a police, in Argentina,[23] were huge blows to the Urabeños.

Otoniel has taken the place of his fallen brother. But he is not of the same calibre as Giovanni and many of the Urabeños leaders, its EPL core, have been captured or killed. The net around Otoniel has also begun to tighten.

There is still resistance to the Urabeños franchise and they do not have total hegemony over drug trafficking in the country, even in the areas that are not under guerrilla control.

The war for control of Buenaventura, one of the two drug trafficking prizes on the Pacific Coast, is far from over. At one point last year, it seemed the most powerful oficina de cobro in the city, the Rastrojos-affiliated "La Empresa," had been beaten by the Urabeños and their local allies. However, that was not the case, as demonstrated by continued fighting and high levels of violence in the area.[24]

The other prize on the Pacific Coast is the port of Tumaco in Nariño. Nariño is not only crucial as a

20 InSight Crime, "Rastrojos Founder Captured in Venezuela," June 4, 2012, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/rastrojos-founder-captured-in-venezuela

21 InSight Crime, "Last Rastrojos Surrenders to US," October 5, 2012, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/last-rastrojos-leader-surrenders-to-us

22 InSight Crime, "Capture of 'Loco' Barrera is end of an Era for Colombia," September 19, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/loco-barrera-captured-venezuela

23 InSight Crime, "Colombia Capo 'Mi Sangre' Captured in Argentina," October 31, 2012, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/mi-sangre-captured-argentina

24 James Bargent, "War for Cocaine Corridors Consumes Colombia's Busiest Port," InSight Crime, February 14, 2014. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/war-for-cocaine-corridors-consumes-colombias-busiest-port



departure point for drug shipments; it is also home to some of the most extensive coca plantations in the country. It is key drug trafficking real estate in part because it shares a long border with Ecuador, an important transhipment point for Colombian cocaine consignments. The Urabeños have made excursions into Nariño, but so far the group has been unable to establish a permanent presence there.

The department of Putumayo, also on the border with Ecuador, is another important location for the drug trade. Here, however, the FARC's mighty Southern Bloc holds sway, working with an oficina de cobro known as "La Constru," which is made up of former paramilitaries and local criminals acting out of the towns of Puerto Asís and La Hormiga. The Urabeños have sent emissaries to the department, but will likely be unable to establish a permanent presence without the blessing of the FARC.

Another drug trafficking hotspot is the department of Norte de Santander, where elements of the Rastrojos still wield considerable influence. Here, both the Urabeños and the Rastrojos have operations across the Venezuelan border.[25]

The Urabeños war against the Oficina del Caribe saw Santa Marta emerge as one of the most dangerous cities in the country in 2012. Both sides have suffered heavy losses and seen key regional leaders arrested, including the Urabeños commander Belisario. The national reach of the Urabeños means they are better equipped for a long battle, as the much smaller and localized Oficina del Caribe cannot take sustained losses. This makes an eventual Urabeños victory the most likely outcome.[26]

Holdout factions of the Rastrojos have also been battling the Urabeños in southern Chocó, causing mass displacements[27]. However, the region is increasingly falling under the control of the Urabeños-Renacer alliance.[28]

While there is a truce between factions of the Oficina de Envigado and the Urabeños, the latter certainly does not have control over the city of Medellin. On July 13, 2013, members of different factions of the Oficina de Envigado met with Urabeños leaders at an estate in San Jerónimo, about an hour's drive from Medellin.[29] The meeting resulted in the signing of a truce and cooperation agreement, which has been respected to date. Indeed, in October 2013 the murder rate in Medellín reached the lowest levels seen in three decades.[30] As of going to print, the truce is still holding and truce dissidents have been killed or made to see the error of their ways.

The Heroes of Vichada, one of the ERPAC dissident groups[31] that the government recognizes as a BACRIM, now dominates the eastern plains. Intelligence sources told InSight Crime that the Urabeños' Estado Mayor sent 150 men to support Martín Farfán Díaz, alias "Pijarbey," who heads the Vichada BACRIM, in his fight against another ERPAC dissident group, the Meta Bloc, led by Darío Andrés León alias "Jonathan." The Heroes of Vichada are still a real BACRIM, in the sense that they have a presence in more than one Colombian department, and run their own drug routes into neighbouring Venezuela. However, they are now part of the Urabeños' criminal network, although Otoniel has no direct control over the group. Pijarbey is expanding his reach, and is now in a position to resist the Urabeños if he feels they are encroaching on his territory.[32]

25 James Bargent, "Assault against Urabeños Reveals Groups Move into Venezuela," InSight Crime, September 5, 2013. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/assault-against-urabenos-reveals-groups-move-into-venezuela

26 James Bargent, "Arrests May Shake Up Urabeños War in Colombia's Caribbean," InSight Crime, February 13, 2013, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/urabenos-conflict-colombia-caribbean-los-giraldos

27 El Espectador, "Guerra entre 'Rastrojos' y 'Urabeños' deja pueblo fantasma en Choco," January 16, 2013, http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/articulo-396941-guerra-entre-urabenos-y-rastrojos-deja-pueblo-fantasma-choco

28 James Bargent, "Urabeños Absorb Local Crime Group in Colombia's Pacific," InSight Crime, March 25, 2013, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/urabenos-absorb-local-crime-group-in-colombias-pacific

29 Jeremy McDermott, "Medellin Truce Inches Groups Closer to Criminal Hegemony," InSight Crime, October 4, 2013. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/mafia-truce-brokered-in-medellin

30 Semana, "La otra paz que vive en Medellín," November 30, 2013. http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/pacto-de-paz-en-medellin/366521-3

31 Jeremy McDermott, "New Fighting for Colombia's Lucrative Eastern Plains," InSight Crime, February 12, 2013. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/new-round-war-colombia-eastern-plains

32 Kyra Gurney, "Narco-Paramilitary Boss Pijarbey Set to be Major Colombian Kingpin", August 20, 2014. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/narco-paramilitary-pijarbey-



Urabeños area of influence, 2013.

The Urabeños Today

Today the Urabeños are the only BACRIM with a national reach. The latest estimate put their numbers at 2650 men.33 For comparison purposes, this means the Urabeños are stronger than the ELN rebel group, and approximately a third of the FARC, the group with which the government is currently engaged in peace talks in Havana, Cuba. This number of Urabeños is misleading as today the network subcontract much of its work out to other groups or common criminals. The members of the Urabeños extended network, manpower that they can all upon to carry out specific tasks, is likely to number more than 10,000.

The Urabeños are organized into eight different blocs across the entire nation. However, this does not mean that Otoniel exerts direct control over all the elements within these blocs. Otoniel is simply the head of the Urabeños' "Estado Mayor," or board of directors. The other members of the board, many regional chiefs, are financially self-sufficient. They run all manner of criminal activities in their criminal fiefdoms. Otoniel has neither the strength nor power to dictate terms to these regional chiefs. The regional chiefs have their own protection teams, but in many areas rely on local oficinas de cobro, either rural or urban, to carry out specific criminal tasks. Many of the oficinas de cobro are also financially self-sufficient, and the regional chiefs may not have the ability to dictate terms to some of the stronger oficinas.

This means that the Urabeños bear little relation to the Medellin Cartel run by Pablo Escobar. Escobar was able to direct all those who formed part of the

major-colombia-kingpin

33 El Tiempo, " Tres 'bacrim' tienen la mitad de hombres que Farc", Sept 06, 2014. http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/justicia/integrantes-de-bandas-criminales/14495955

Medellin cartel. The Board of Directors of the Urabeños does not have direct control over more than a fraction of those that use the franchise name. To get things done, the directors have to pay the nodes or units that form the Urabeños criminal network if they want work carried out.

Otoniel and the Urabeños central command have also declared war on elements that have refused to obey orders, including the Oficina del Caribe in the Sierra Nevada and Santa Marta. However, this war has not yet been totally won, and taking this kind of military action is very much a last resort. The Urabeños today largely rely on cooperation and consensus. The different nodes in the criminal network cooperate in the interests of illegal businesses, and will work for the highest bidder. The glue that keeps the network together is profit. This is the free market at its most unregulated.

The Urabeños Board of Directors

Here are some of the identified members of the Urabeños' Estado Mayor or Board of Directors. There are certainly many more, operating from the shadows:

- Dario Antonio Úsuga David, alias "Otoniel," currently the "president" of the board.
- Roberto Vargas Gutiérrez, alias "Gavilán"
- Carlos Antonio Moreno Tuberquia, alias "Nicolás" (a former AUC paramilitary who is now a major drug trafficker)
- Marcos de Jesús Figueroa García, alias "Marquitos" (runs operations in La Guajira)
- Arley Úsuga Torres, alias "07" (captured). Following his arrest, his second-in-command, Luis Orlando Padierna, alias "Inglaterra," may have got a seat in the board.
- Rafael Álvarez Piñeda, alias "Chepe (captured). Chepe was the leader of a Paisas faction in Antioquia who joined the Urabeños.
- Daniel Rendón Herrera, alias "Don Mario" (captured, but still believed to have contact with the group)
- Alias "JJ" (believed to be a brother of Don Mario)
- Alias "El Señor de la M" (a Medellín narco-trafficker with roots going back to the Medellin cartel)

The heads of allied BACRIM and powerful oficinas de cobro may also have a place on the Urabeños board. It is possible, for example, that Greylin Fernando Varon Cadena, alias "Martin Bala," captured in May 2013 in Bogotá,[34] is a member of the Urabeños' Estado Mayor. From Cali, he was instrumental in the Urabeños' entry into the Valle del Cauca capital, and helped the group secure the loyalty of several oficinas de cobro in this Rastrojos heartland.

The Urabeños look abroad

The Urabeños are a transnational organized crime syndicate. Urabeños emissaries, or related oficinas de cobro, have been found in: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador[35], Honduras, Panamá, Peru, Venezuela and Spain. Facing security force pressures at home, Colombian organized crime has migrated, in what is known as the "cockroach effect." When the lights are turned on in a room, the cockroaches scurry for the dark corners. The same is true of organized crime and the light are now on in Colombia.

It is not a coincidence that many of the recent arrests of Urabeños leaders, or affiliated drug traffickers, have taken place outside of Colombia:

- Maximiliano Bonilla Orozco, alias "*Valenciano*," an Urabeños ally who was a leader of the Oficina de Envigado and a faction of the Paisas, was captured in Venezuela in November 2011.
- Alexander Montoya Usuga, alias "El Flaco," was arrested in La Ceiba, Honduras in July 2012.
- Henry De Jesús *López* Londoño, alias "*Mi Sangre," was* arrested in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in October 2012.
- Jacinto Nicolas Fuentes German, alias "Don Leo," was arrested in Lima, Peru, while allegedly seeking to set up an arms smuggling pipeline, in February 2013.

34 Miriam Wells, "Urabeños Capture May Shakeup Turf War in South West Colombia," InSight Crime, May 30, 2013. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/urabenos-capture-may-shake-up-turf-war-in-southwest-colombia

35 James Bargent, "Will Urabeños Bring Peace Among Ecuador's Crime Groups?" November 08, 2013. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/will-urabenos-break-peace-among-ecuadors-crime-groups

- John Fredy Manco Torres, alias "El Indio," an Urabeños-affiliated drug trafficker was arrested in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in, June 2013.

- Carlos Andrés Palencia González, alias "Visaje," accused of setting up an Urabeños oficina de cobro in Spain, was arrested in Madrid in November 2013.[36]

- John Marlon Salazar, alias "El Inválido", was captured in Madrid, May 2014. He is accused of running several Urabeños oficinas de cobro in the Iberian Peninsula.[37]

The Future of the Urabeños and Colombian Organised Crime

It is always difficult to predict the evolution of Colombian organised crime. Here however is a look at some of the possible developments:

- The president of the Urabeños board of directors, Otoniel, will be captured or killed. It is not a question of "if," more likely "when." He not only has the invigorated Colombian police intelligence apparatus chasing him, but also the DEA.

- With Otoniel's removal from the presidency of the Board of Directors, it is possible that the centre of gravity will move away from the region of Urabá, which give the franchise its name. The strength of the Urabeños has been in its core of former EPL and paramilitary fighters, men with a long criminal experience, military training, and the ability to win the hearts and minds of many of the local communities in which they operate. However this pool of hardened criminals is drying up, through the captures by the police, through violence and internal disputes. The new recruits for the Urabeños tend to be common criminals. These do not have the discipline or training of their predecessors, and thus the quality of the manpower upon which the Urabeños can call is getting diluted. So the future leadership of the criminal network may come from other regions of Colombia.

- There is the wild card, the Marxist rebels. The FARC, if they wanted, could become the most powerful drug trafficking organization overnight. The ruling body of the FARC, the seven-man Secretariat, denies any involvement in drug trafficking. The Secretariat members well know that drug-trafficking forms their most important earner, but this trade is not directed from above, but rather left in the hands of front commanders. This means that FARC drug-trafficking activities are not centrally coordinated. If they were, and the FARC decided to take control of drug trafficking in Colombia, they could do so, and quickly. The FARC, along with their ELN and EPL allies, have a stranglehold over coca cultivations. If they chose to stop selling coca base to the BACRIM, the Urabeños would find their drug trafficking operations crippled.

- Which brings us onto the criminalization of the guerrillas should a peace agreement be signed, and the potential birth of the FARCRIM. This has been discussed in detail in another paper, "The FARC, Peace and Possible Criminalization."38 That some elements of the guerrillas criminalize is inevitable. What is still to be determined, is whether these elements join the existing Urabeños criminal network, or set up a rival network, which will inevitably lead to confrontation and further violence.

- Increased Mexican involvement in Colombia. There is already evidence to suggest that the Mexican cartels are seeking to cut out the BACRIM middlemen, and negotiate directly with the FARC. The Mexican Cartels are now more powerful than the Colombians and dominate the supply of the US market. There is increasing evidence of Mexicans operating within Colombia.

- Exploitation of new markets. The Urabeños network is looking at other markets apart from the US. The recent arrest in Spain show that

36 Miriam Wells, "Are Urabeños Looking to Control Routes through Spain?" November 11, 2013. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/top-urabenos-capture-in-spain-points-to-groups-expansion

37 El Confidencial, "Así cayó 'EL inválido', el brazo ejecutor de los carteles colombianos en Europa", May 11, 2014. http://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/cataluna/2014-05-11/asi-cayo-el-invalido-el-brazo-ejecutor-de-los-carteles-colombianos-en-europa_128780/

38 See the InSight Crime special investigation at http://www.insightcrime.org/special-series/peace-with-farc



Europe is an important area of operations for the Colombians, but there is evidence they are working markets closer to home, mainly those of Brazil and Argentina. The phenomena of criminal migration, the "cockroach effect", is likely to continue and expand.

- The identification of top level drug traffickers is going to get harder and harder. The Colombians, unlike the Mexicans, now seek to avoid violence, to avoid attracting the attention of law enforcement. The business now is low-key, low profile. The members of the Urabeños transnational criminal networks do not strut around brandishing gold-plated Uzis machine guns. Instead they are armed with iPhones and the latest generation of encryption programs. They are often, to all outward appearances, successful businessman, buying and selling legal, as well as illegal, commodities. They still need access to criminal muscle like that provided by the Urabeños sicarios, but they prefer cooperation, persuasion and consensus to violence. They therefore attract little attention, and have become very good at carrying out their business under the radar, beyond the prying eyes of national and international law enforcement.

The Urabeños network may well change its name as its centre of gravity moves to other parts of the country, but its nature as a fluid criminal network will remain. The franchise that operates under the Urabeños name is a diverse and complex one. While command nodes like that of Otoniel can be identified and taken down the nature of the network is that other nodes can quickly step up and take their place, ensuring the business and the flow of narcotics continues largely unhindered. It is going to get harder and harder to track Colombian organised crime as it becomes more clandestine, more sophisticated and better able to camouflage itself in the legal business community. But so long as the extraordinary profits for the cocaine trade remain, Colombian organised crime will remain active in Latin America and beyond.

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