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Colombia's Civil War

KEY PLAYERS:

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[President Alvaro Uribe](#)
[Colombian Military](#)
[FARC](#)

[ELN](#)
[AUC](#)

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)

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The FARC, with some 17,500 members, is active throughout Colombia and headquartered in the south of the country, where it largely governed a region about the size of Switzerland for over 40 years. Its primary mission is to overthrow the state and establish a communist-agrarian state.

The FARC is governed by a seven-member secretariat, chaired by its 71-year old original founder, Manuel Marulanda. Some 30 percent of the FARC is female and most are younger than 19.



"[The FARC resolves to] collect the TAX FOR PEACE from those persons or corporations whose wealth is greater than \$1,000,000 in U.S. dollars...Those who do not attend to this requirement, shall be detained. Their liberation shall depend upon the payment of the determined sum.

PUBLISH AND COMPLY."

-- FARC leader Jorge Briceño announces Law 002, its kidnapping and extortion policy, in April 2000

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[The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#)

The FARC finances its operations through kidnapping and ransom, extortion, and narcotics trafficking. It also targets anyone suspected of conspiring with the military and paramilitaries.

According to military analysts, the FARC earns between \$250 and \$300 million through criminal acts, of which 65 percent comes from the drug trade.

The FARC's conventional "guerrilla" weapons include explosives, landmines and bombs camouflaged as necklaces, soccer balls, and soup cans.

They have also orchestrated prison revolts, attacked against police and military personnel and regularly set up roadblocks to "protect" villages from military or paramilitary infiltration. According to reports, the FARC forcibly enlists any persons between the ages of 13 and 60 to work coca or poppy plantations, and serve in the military. The FARC have also targeted religious leaders and banned any spiritual expression.

The FARC has its roots in Colombia's La Violencia, the country's ten-year civil war, beginning in the late 1940s.

During a hard-line military dictatorship, dissident members of the Liberal and Communist parties left mainstream politics to establish their own communist and agrarian "independent republics." The largest cooperative, which had 1,000 members, was located in Marquetalia, a rural municipality high in the Andean plains. According to FARC lore, it was led by an 18-year old peasant named Manuel Marulanda.

After the civil war, in the late 1950s, the Colombian government struggled to reassert its control over the state and cracked down on all subversive groups, including the communist republics in southern and central Colombia.

In 1964, the Colombian military, using a loan from the US, launched a napalm attack against the independent republic of

Marquetalia. The attack prompted the survivors to declare war against Colombia and founded the Southern Bloc.

Two years later, at an annual conference of guerrilla leaders, the Southern Bloc expanded their military agenda into a nation-wide "Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia," with revolutionary left-wing "focos" throughout Colombia. Marulanda remained the commander-in-chief of the militia.

Marulanda's lifelong friend and second-in-command, Jacobo Arenas, considered the FARC's political founder, envisioned an agrarian and communist state with small-sized industries. Arenas integrated a political mission with the FARC's military strategy to overthrow a government it perceived as elitist and corrupt.

Unlike the ELN, the FARC was not directly inspired by the Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro or the Soviet Union. The FARC's ideology, instead, contained highly nationalist and anti-capitalist rhetoric rooted in early progressive ideology.

While Arenas approved of using criminal means to finance its revolutionary end, he did not wholly endorse the FARC's cultivation and trafficking of narcotics.

The FARC maintains its revolutionary operation by collecting "war taxes" from residents, businesses, and landowners in the regions they control.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the FARC established its own schools, judicial system, health care, and agrarian economy, and created its own de facto state in remote regions of southern Colombia.

During this time, the FARC expanded to 27 battalions throughout the country -- the largest left-wing group in South America. It, however, remained strongest in Colombia's rural areas and became known for improving health care, schools, and infrastructure in these remote locations.

With the increasing public support for the FARC and leftist politics, former president Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) initiated cease-fire negotiations with the FARC. In May 1984, the government and the FARC signed La Uribe peace accords, under which the FARC was permitted to form a legitimate political party, the Unión Patriótica.

The UP party -- comprised of disarmed guerrillas, former Communists, and Gaitanist Liberals -- espoused anti-corruption policies, harsh penalties against narco-traffickers and progressive land and economic reforms.

As the UP won more municipal and national elections, it became a major target of right-wing death squads and paramilitaries, which had become more systematic in their elimination of guerrillas and suspected leftist sympathizers.

Pablo Escobar's "MAS," and Fidel Castaño's powerful paramilitary called the ACCU orchestrated assaults against the UP and any communist sympathizers.

At least 3,000 UP members, including presidential candidates, mayors and legislators, have been murdered or have disappeared

since 1984. The assassination of a leading UP presidential candidate renewed FARC violence as many UP party members came to view military tactics as their only path to achieve political influence.

With the diminished hope of legitimate political participation, the FARC, having seized control of coca and poppy fields throughout the country, began to collect "coca taxes" from farmers, residents and workers of narcotics plantations. This dramatically increased their revenue.

When Arenas died in 1990, the FARC expanded its involvement in the illicit drug industry. The FARC's leadership reinterpreted Arenas' ideology to include the legalization of narcotics, arguing that Colombia could profit from the US expensive addiction.

By the mid-1990s, the FARC derived 65 percent of its income from narco-trafficking. With this massive revenue source, the FARC modernized its weapons and launched a military and political campaign called "the Bolivarian Movement for a New Colombia."

The FARC purchased contraband arms, expanded its military ranks, and initiated a public relations campaign within the cities and universities.

From 1996 to 1998, the FARC struck fear in the Colombian government with a series of major military victories over the national army. Most notably, the FARC overtook a military base in Las Delicias, taking dozens of Colombian troops as hostage.

With growing concerns about the FARC's military capability, Colombians held demonstrations and protests to urge the government to reinstate peace talks with the FARC during the late 1990s.

As an incentive to bring the FARC to commit to a cease-fire, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana offered the guerilla group a demilitarized zone around its historic stronghold in southern Colombia -- an area comprising 42,000 sq km populated with nearly 120,000 residents.

Even with the official demilitarized zone (DMZ), the peace talks largely remained unproductive during its three years. The biggest result of the three-year peace talks occurred when the FARC released several hundred of its hostages, some of whom had been held for years.

Still, the FARC frequently terminated peace negotiations, claiming the Colombian military and paramilitaries were infiltrating their zone. The FARC demanded that the government recognize it as a legitimate political group, release imprisoned members and implement economic and land reforms.

While the public grew increasingly impatient with the fruitless peace talks, guerrilla fighters executed a series of shocking and brutal attacks.

In mid-2001, the FARC's violent acts included the kidnapping and murder of Consuelo Araújooguera, a popular former minister of culture, and the wife of Attorney-General Edgardo Maya. Guerrillas also kidnapped former governor Alan Jara, who was riding in a United Nations vehicle, and three German aid workers.

In 2002, the FARC hijacked a Colombian airliner and took passenger Sen. Jorge Gechem Turbay as its hostage, the fifth congressman the FARC had kidnapped since June 2001.

The FARC announced its new policy, the "Law 002," which mandated that anyone with assets of \$1 million pay "war taxes" or else they would be kidnapped.

On Feb. 23, 2002, with the peace process in total shambles, the FARC kidnapped presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who wrote extensively in support of peace talks and about government corruption.

The FARC resumed its war against the Colombian government, swearing to disrupt the economy and launch a murder spree against government supporters. Pastrana responded with a massive military incursion into the FARC's former autonomous region, the first within nearly ten years.

-- By Liz Harper, Online NewsHour

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