

Small Arms and Latin America Threats to US Interests

The following section identifies four direct and indirect threats to US interests and lives that are fueled by SA/LW, the latter three of which are attributable to the four-decade old war of attrition in Colombia.⁷ These threats include:

- the acquisition of large quantities of SA/LW by international terrorists hostile to the US and its allies;
- violence committed against US soldiers and civilians by the Colombian illegal groups;
- the pernicious effects of Colombian cocaine and heroin shipped to the US; and
- foreign terrorist exploitation of the criminal infrastructure that flourishes in Colombia as a result of the SA/LW-fueled war and lawlessness.

Each of these four threats is a direct manifestation of, or is exacerbated by, the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.

Threat: Latin America as a Source of Weapons for Foreign Terrorists

Existing evidence suggests that Hezbollah, al Qaeda, the IRA and other foreign transnational terrorist organizations connected to the region are not heavily dependent on Latin American black market weapons.⁸ Nonetheless, three recent examples of terrorist organizations tapping — or attempting to tap — into the gray and black SA/LW markets in the Western Hemisphere underscore its potential as a source of arms for terrorists.

The first case is mentioned in the US State Department's report, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*. During a July 2002 raid of the apartment of Fajkumar

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Sabnani — an alleged Hezbollah associate living in Ciudad de Este (Paraguay) — Paraguayan authorities found evidence of illegal activities, including letters detailing transfers of assault rifles and military equipment. According to press reports, police also found bomb-making materials and authorization for Sabnani to use \$30 million for arms trafficking.⁹

The second case centers on Conor Claxton, an IRA cell leader in Florida. His associate Robert Flint — a Californian with a history of drug running in Colombia and gun running for the IRA — claims that in May 1999, Claxton asked his advice on how to ship “big weapons” (i.e. a 20-foot container of heavy weaponry) out of Buena Ventura, Colombia. Flint allegedly told him that

...Buena Ventura is on the west coast of Colombia and he would have to come through the Panama Canal. I told him the best way out of Colombia was through the north coast of Colombia into the Caribbean. He asked me what about a trawler. Either he had a trawler or felt I had access to one. He asked me how would he load a trawler with arms and inquired about the rigging on the trawler...He said he had plenty of places to land a trawler in Ireland.¹⁰

In February 2000, the *Sunday Times* of London reported that the Irish National Police Force (GARDAI) and the FBI were investigating the partial shipment of a 20-ton arms cache into Londonderry that allegedly included sniper rifles and machine guns from Colombia and Venezuela.¹¹ The results of the investigation have not been made public.

The final case involves two Lebanese diamond traders, Aziz Nassour and Samih Osailly, who are under investigation for helping al Qaeda convert \$20 million held in bank accounts into West African diamonds.¹² Evidence unearthed by *Washington Post* journalist Douglas Farah, an investigative team assembled by the Organization of American States, and the London-based organization *Global Witness* revealed a plot by Nassour and Osailly to acquire large quantities of weapons — including AK-47s, anti-tank weapons, two- and four-barrel anti-aircraft guns, sniper rifles, and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles — from Shimon Yelenik, an Israeli arms dealer operating out of Panama who is linked to the diversion of 3000 Nicaraguan AK-47 assault rifles to the Colombian paramilitaries.

According to documents collected by investigators, in January 2001 Yelenik forwarded an email from a “guy/alfa” to another Israeli, Ori Zoller, who is the proprietor of an arms dealership in Guatemala¹³ and another suspect in the diversion of assault rifles to the AUC. “Guy/alfa” is presumed to be Nassour, who often went by the code name “Alfa Zulu.” The email states that the weapons were to be delivered to Liberia and were for his “friends in Africa.” Nassour had many “friends in Africa,” including

- Ibrahim Bah, a representative of former Liberian President Charles Taylor’s thuggish regime. Bah fought with Islamic guerrillas in Afghanistan and later with Hezbollah in Lebanon;¹⁴
- the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which caught the world’s attention in the mid-1990s by mutilating civilians to deter them from cooperating with government forces; and
- al Qaeda operatives with whom Nassour allegedly worked to convert bank account funds into diamonds.¹⁵

A few days later, the list of weaponry was faxed by Zoller to General Roberto Calderón, Inspector General of the Nicaraguan Army. General Calderón responded with a list of prices for the weapons, but existing evidence indicates that the deal fell through shortly afterward.¹⁶

Global Witness concluded that Charles Taylor and the RUF were the intended recipients of the aborted weapons deal. Whether some of these weapons would have found their way to other criminals is anyone’s guess. What can be concluded with some certainty is that African arms and diamonds traders who had done business with al Qaeda were looking for large quantities of weapons that, in the hands of terrorists hostile to the United States, could have taken many hundreds of lives. Among the most worrisome of the weapons on Nassour’s list are the “SAM 7” missiles. The Nicaraguan military has 2000 SA series man-portable air defense systems (SA-7s, SA-14s and SA-16s) in its inventory,¹⁷ which — in the hands of trained terrorists — could be used to shoot down commercial airliners.¹⁸

Furthermore, the fact that an international arms merchant operating out of Africa, which is also awash in small arms, sought weapons in Central America is indicative of its potential as a source of weapons for transnational terrorists.

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Threat: Kidnapping and Murder

The Colombian illegal groups and the criminal networks with which they cooperate are the most prolific kidnapers in the world, and Americans are regular targets. Between 1992 and 2001, 51 US citizens were kidnapped by the FARC and ELN, and at least ten of them were murdered.¹⁹ More recently, two journal-

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ists working for the Los Angeles Times spent 11 days in late January 2003 as captives of the Domingo Laim front of the ELN. According to one of their abductors, the journalists were lucky: “[t]he FARC might have killed you; they have killed others before.”²⁰ A month later, the FARC murdered one American civilian contractor and abducted three more after their single-engine plane went down in FARC territory.

The violence associated with the internal war, and the threat to Americans venturing into or near this war zone, is likely to continue in the near future as the FARC, ELN and the Colombian government ratchet up the tempo of the decades-old conflict. Shortly after taking office in 2002, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe threw down the gauntlet, declaring that “[f]or Colombia the only road is the restoration of order and authority. I will not give up until we defeat the violent groups who are abusing the people.”²¹ To accomplish this goal, Uribe has increased both the size and power projection capacity of the Colombian armed forces.²² This capability will be augmented by the integration of military assets provided as part of US military aid programs.²³ Since 1999, the US has provided an estimated \$2.28 billion in military equipment



Mortar Tubes Discovered After the FARC's Deadly August 2002 Mortar Attack on the Presidential Palace.

SOURCE: Embassy of Colombia, Washington DC

and training to the Colombian government, including 71 helicopters.²⁴ Furthermore, legislative constraints on the use of US military aid have been reduced. In August 2002, the US Congress lifted restrictions that had limited the use of US military aid to counter-narcotics operations. As a result, US-trained Colombian units can now use US-supplied equipment and weapons to engage in a “unified campaign” against drug runners and terrorists, allowing them to engage the illegal groups directly.

The FARC responded to President Uribe’s policies with a bloody spate of attacks in both the countryside and cities. As if to dispel any doubts that they were serious about “mak[ing] urban attacks, so the oligarchies feel the war” during the hardliner Uribe’s administration, the FARC rained mortar shells on the presidential palace on the day of the new president’s inauguration speech. Seven months later, a car containing 200kg of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil exploded outside of “El Nogal” nightclub in Bogota, killing 35 people and injuring around 160. While the FARC denied responsibility, US and Colombian authorities state that they have evidence of its involvement.²⁵

In short, the improvement in the Colombian armed forces’ ability to engage the enemy, and the FARC’s bloody response to Uribe’s hardline stance, suggests that the violence that imperils the lives of US military contractors, journalists and missionaries is unlikely to subside soon.

US support of the Colombian government’s escalation could focus more FARC-perpetrated violence at US citizens and personnel.²⁶ Evidence of FARC intentions to target Americans in response to the shift in US policy surfaced almost immediately after the policy change was announced. In August 2002, Colombian police intercepted a radio message from a FARC Commander during which he declared “[w]e must find where the gringos are because they have all declared war on us...You are obligated to fight them as well.”²⁷

Since that declaration, there have been several attacks on Americans, some of which are directly linked to Uribe’s US-funded campaign against the illegal groups. For example, the FARC and ELN abducted the two LA Times journalists to pressure Uribe to halt his intensified military campaign in Colombia’s Arauca province, where US military personnel were training Colombian counter-insurgency units.²⁸

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As long as the conflict in Colombia continues to threaten US interests, and as long as the US continues to respond to that threat by putting personnel in harm's way, the probability of losing additional Americans to the conflict will remain high. Curtailing the flow of weapons that stock the Colombian illegal groups' arsenals will complement other initiatives aimed at bringing the conflict — and US involvement in that conflict — to an end.

Threat: The Drug Trade

According to the latest data from the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), nearly 20,000 Americans lost their lives to drug-induced health problems in 2000.²⁹ Addiction wreaked various levels of havoc in the lives of millions of other American cocaine and heroin users, approximately 450,000 of whom entered drug treatment programs in 2000.³⁰ The economic toll of this drug abuse is staggering. The ONDCP estimates that the cost in dollars of drug use — including health care expenses and productivity losses — totaled \$160 billion in 2000.³¹ Colombian criminals produce and distribute 90 percent of the cocaine³² and between 22 and 33 percent of the heroin³³ consumed in the United States. These statistics underscore the cost of failing to rein in the Colombian drug trade, which is inseparably intertwined with the internal conflict and thus with illicit arms transfers. Curbing the flow of SA/LW would help to reduce the war-fighting capability of the Colombian illegal groups, thereby helping to bring an end to the war and the lawlessness in which the Colombian drug trade thrives.

Threat: Collaboration between the Colombian Illegal Groups and Foreign Terrorists

Over the past few years, several experts have voiced concern about the possibility of lawless areas in Latin America — including areas in Colombia — becoming areas of activity for international criminals, including terrorists.³⁴ The House International Relations Committee went as far as to assert that “Colombia is a potential breeding ground for international terror equaled perhaps only by Afghanistan...”³⁵ While Colombia is no Afghanistan and — barring utter catastrophe — will not become one, the globalization of international crime and the Colombian government's inability to wrest control of vast swaths of the country from the illegal groups has allowed Colombian criminals to tap into the expertise and resources of foreign criminal terrorist organizations and vice versa.

The FARC is alleged to have established ties with terrorist and criminal organizations from several continents, including the Japanese Red Army,³⁶ ETA, and the PIRA,³⁷ as well as crime syndicates operating out of the Former Soviet Union.³⁸ Hezbollah, which has already capitalized on the lawlessness of the Triple Frontier region at the borders of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, also allegedly “attempted to forge close ties with the FARC” in the 1990’s.³⁹

While the threat posed by transfer of foreign terrorists’ skills, contacts and weaponry to the Colombian illegal groups is highlighted frequently in the media, references to the reverse are less common. Crime infrastructures are two-way streets, however, and there is a danger that, after establishing contact with the Colombian groups, foreign terrorists would use pre-existing Colombian criminal infrastructures to engage in attacks on the United States, or against US interests elsewhere. The immediacy of this danger is illustrated by the 2003 arrest of 19 Chinese men who were planning on entering the United States illegally via a human smuggling ring. The men had traveled to the Colombian city of Cali — a hub of document forgery — to acquire “top quality fake Japanese passports.”⁴⁰

