The FARC's Missing Leaders
Several top-ranking members of the old FARC guerrilla organization, now a political party, may have deserted the peace process. This has sparked fears that they might join the growing ranks of the ex-FARC mafia, and boost these dispersed criminal groups' national and international power.
The second-ever national council, in August, of the FARC party -- created following the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) guerrillas -- had some worrying absentees. Among them was second-ranking party member Luciano Marín Arango, alias “Iván Márquez,” who was also the former FARC guerrillas’ chief peace negotiator, and a historic member of the insurgency’s top command -- the Secretariat. Former high-ranking FARC commander Hernán Darío Velásquez, alias “El Paisa,” was another no-show.

They were among nine confirmed FARC leaders who had given up their security details and were seemingly out of contact with the FARC party. Official sources brought the number of missing commanders named to at least ten:

1. Luciano Marín Arango, alias “Iván Márquez”
2. Hernán Darío Velásquez, alias “El Paisa”
3. José Benito Cabrera, alias “Fabián Ramírez”
4. Henry Castellanos, alias “Romaña”
5. Élmer Caviedes, alias “Albeiro Córdoba”
7. José Manuel Sierra, alias “Zarco Aldinever”
8. Alberto Cruz Lobo, alias “Enrique Marulanda”
9. Luis Gustavo Cuéllar, alias “Manuel Político”
10. Olivio Merchán Gómez, alias “El Loco Iván”

It is so far unclear whether these figures are simply unaccounted for, or have abandoned the peace process completely. One most concerning possibility is that some will join the ranks of the criminalized dissident groups (or ex-FARC mafia).

All of the absent commanders were based in reincorporation zones in Colombia’s southern and eastern regions, where the FARC dissidents are more powerful and organized than anywhere else in the country. Speculation is that Iván Márquez and El Paisa may even have crossed the border into Venezuela, where one of the original dissident leaders – Géner García Molina, alias “Jhon 40” – is running drugs on the border with Venezuela and Brazil.
Should these veteran figures desert into criminal ranks, they will bring decades’ worth of prestige, experience and in some cases drug trafficking expertise with them. They also risk encouraging many other demobilized fighters, already disillusioned by the election of a right-wing president and slow-moving peace process, to follow in their footsteps. Iván Márquez has a strong following among ex-combatants, perhaps even more than FARC leader and now party president, Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, alias “Timochenko,” himself.

**Ex-FARC Mafia Attempts to Reunite Dissident Factions Across Colombia, Could Soon Have National Reach**

- The most powerful ex-FARC mafia network in the Eastern Plains has been spreading its tentacles across Colombia, in an apparent attempt to reunite far-flung ex-guerrilla elements into a coordinated criminal structure.

- Notorious ex-FARC drug trafficker Jhon 40 -- part of a powerful FARC dissident-turned-criminal network based in the Eastern Plains -- was apparently dispatched to the drug hub Catatumbo, on the northern Venezuelan border. Catatumbo has historically been an enclave of the FARC, National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) guerrillas and Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL) narco-guerrillas, who for years preferred to coexist peacefully. However, when the FARC were taken out of the equation, war broke out between the two remaining groups.

- Jhon 40’s appearance there a few months ago, far from his base alongside the Eastern Plains dissidence, is apparently aimed at organizing the remnants of the FARC’s 33rd Front and establishing control of drug routes in different corners of Colombia.

- The revival of the 33rd Front could help consolidate a new ex-FARC structure with national and transnational reach. It could also exacerbate the Catatumbo war. Should the ex-FARC side with the either the EPL or the ELN, it could sound the death knell of the other side.

- A powerful leader of the same ex-FARC network in the Eastern Plains, Miguel Botache Santillana, “Gentil Duarte,” has apparently worked to spread the network’s influence to other parts of the Venezuelan border as well. Intelligence
sources told InSight Crime that Gentil Duarte reached out to the ELN in Arauca department earlier this year, meeting with one of the guerrilla group’s most belligerent and controversial leaders, Gustavo Aníbal Giraldo, alias “Pablito.”

- Other ex-FARC commanders’ advances have been rejected. A Gentil Duarte emissary reportedly tried to strike up a relationship with former FARC member and current drug trafficker Pedro Oberman Goyes Cortés, alias “Sinaloa,” in Putumayo. But Goyes apparently refused the offer, leading to an outbreak of violence in the area. InSight Crime believes that Putumayo has seen a silent transition from the FARC’s demobilization for the simple reason that the same FARC members continue to run cocaine trafficking activities as before the peace process. The incursion of competing ex-FARC mafia elements could disturb this status quo, and seems to be happening already.

- An increasingly coordinated dissident network across Colombia will pose one of the greatest challenges to the government of new president Iván Duque, who entered office on August 7.

ELN Kidnaps State Agents, Jeopardizes Peace Talks With New President

- As President Duque’s new government contemplated whether or not to pursue peace talks with the ELN, the guerrilla group kidnapped seven security force officers in Arauca and Chocó departments. The two ELN factions responsible are among the most opposed to the peace process.

- Their leaders – Ogli Ángel Padilla, alias “Fabián,” and alias “Uriel” in Chocó, west Colombia, and Gustavo Aníbal Giraldo, alias “Pablito,” on the eastern border with Venezuela – have shown a relative unruliness and independence from the ELN leadership, which does not have a strong hierarchical structure. These blocs have jeopardized the peace talks on more than one occasion by continuing to kidnap and carry out violent acts. In west Colombia, Fabián and Uriel sit on highly strategic drug routes, and have been expanding with vigor over the past few years.

- It is likely that these powerful war fronts will show the most resistance to any call for a peaceful exit.
• During Duque’s presidential campaign, he was tough on the ELN talks, demanding that the group suspend all criminal activities if a deal was to be reached. Continued kidnapping may well be the line in the sand for his government’s negotiations with Colombia’s last guerrilla army.

Colombia’s Urabeños Further Weakened as Command Crumbles

• Once Colombia’s most powerful drug trafficking organization, the Urabeños have suffered the loss of yet another top leader in an intense state crackdown that has gravely weakened the group.

• Carlos Antonio Moreno, alias “Nicolás,” was considered to be the main drug trafficking actor within the Urabeños’ command node. In early August he was captured, only months after the death of fellow leader and key financier Aristides Manuel Meza, alias “El Indio.” The Urabeños’s finances have taken a significant blow.

• As well as the fall of its leaders, the group has loss of dozens of tons of cocaine at the hands of security forces over the past few months, with InSight Crime hearing from several sources that the Urabeños have been unable to pay some of their members on the ground.

• Along with the declaration by Urabeños top leader Dairo Antonio Úsuga, alias “Otoniel,” that he is willing to surrender to authorities, this has precipitated a fracturing of the group’s power. Factions are now splitting off and becoming increasingly independent in and around the organization’s heartland on the Caribbean coast, in strategic areas like Bajo Cauca (northeast Antioquia), which could well be the group’s downfall.

Medellín’s Divided Oficina Seeks Peace

• Medellín’s notorious Oficina de Envigado organization – the local heir of Pablo Escobar’s drug trafficking empire – has revealed attempts to fix the group’s violent internal divisions while also suffering a series of blows to its leadership.
• Imprisoned Oficina top leader Juan Carlos Mesa, alias “Tom,” is reportedly seeking a deal with opposing factions of the Oficina organization and the gangs they control to end their conflict in Medellín. Tom reportedly also sent a letter to President Duque requesting, not for the first time, that the government negotiate a surrender with his group.

• Over the past few decades the Oficina has evolved into a federation-like structure with increasingly independent and disjointed factions. Indeed, recent months have seen rivalries among Oficina factions associated to a wave of violence in Medellín. A deal between these opposing elements would reinforce the five-year-old “pax mafiosa” keeping the peace between different criminal groups with a stake in Medellín, although it is unlikely to receive any government support. Furthermore, Tom’s outreach may be a ploy to gain leverage and delay his impending extradition to the United States.

• Furthermore, in August authorities arrested several top Oficina leaders: alleged successors to Tom, who was himself arrested in December 2017. But the Oficina’s federation-like rather than hierarchical structure also makes it resistant to the fall of its bosses. And the Oficina’s days as a significant international drug trafficking organization are past. While some elements of the group are still involved in transnational activity, it mainly acts as a regulator for independent drug traffickers. This means that crackdowns on the group’s leadership does not directly weaken the Medellín-based traffickers who use their services, and who are now working with Colombia’s highest-ever cocaine production.