Catatumbo: The undisciplined EPL and its war with the ELN
The criminal dynamics in Catatumbo have intensified over the past year. Following the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC), the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) and the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL) have both attempted to expand into territories previously controlled by the defunct guerrilla.
However, several blows to the EPL’s leadership, including Victor Bavarro alias Megateo’s death in 2015, Guillermo Leon Agurre alias David León’s capture in 2016, and the possible disappearance of Jader Navarro Barbosa alias Caracho, have left the group without a clear chain of command. This has prompted some members of the EPL to expand their drug trafficking businesses, breaking alliances and impacting local communities in the process.

Since March 2018, the EPL has clashed with the ELN’s Eastern War Front (Frente de Guerra Oriental) in Catatumbo, a region in the northeastern department of Norte de Santander. These violent confrontations have resulted in massive displacement and selective assassinations throughout the region.

- The alliance between the ELN and the EPL in the region began to deteriorate following the FARC’s departure. Reports suggest that ex-combatants from the FARC joined the ranks of the EPL, strengthening the group and enabling it to confront the ELN.

- An EPL pamphlet confirming its territorial war against the ELN and announcing an armed strike beginning April 15 further contributed to displacement in the region.

- The ELN appears to have gained the upper hand in the conflict, having consolidated its presence in municipalities previously controlled by the EPL such as EL Tarra, San Pablo and Convención. Meanwhile, the EPL has sought to take control of areas bordering Venezuela that have historically been dominated by the ELN.

- The two groups are disputing 16,000 hectares of illicit coca crops, cocaine production laboratories, the famous “pata e grillo” (gasoline used to produce low-purity cocaine) and international drug trafficking routes in the Venezuela border region.

**Jesús Santrich captured and accused of drug trafficking**

- On April 10th, the National Police and the investigative unit of the Attorney General’s Office (Cuerpo Técnico de Investigación – CTI) captured Seuxis Paucias Hernández Solarte, alias “Jesús Santrich”, and Marlon Marín, Iván Márquez’s nephew, for drug trafficking.
• Santrich’s capture was a critical development for the implementation of the FARC peace agreement. His arrest created an internal division within the FARC between those who believed the ex-guerilla was innocent and those who would leave it up to the courts to determine his culpability.

• Iván Márques, one of the most important leaders of the FARC political party was at the forefront of the group that upheld Santrich’s innocence, even likening his arrest to “judicial persecution”. Following his colleague’s capture, Márquez decided to move to the rural zone of the Colombian department Caquetá and not to return until Santrich was freed.

• Santrich’s capture has cast the judicial security of the ex-FARC guerillas into doubt. The lack of clarity as to when Santrich committed the crime and the ongoing debate between different judicial bodies about the role Santrich played in drug trafficking have deepened concerns held by large segments of the demobilized FARC.

The dissidence led by alias “Guacho” and the assassinated Ecuadorean journalists

• Ecuadorean national Walter Arizala, better known as alias Guacho, is leader of the FARC dissident group the Oliver Sinisterra Front. In recent months, Guacho has positioned himself as one of the most powerful actors in the Colombia-Ecuador border region. He has allegedly committed various terrorist attacks on both sides of the border in an effort to control strategic drug trafficking zones. His criminal exploits include attacks against energy towers, homicides, drug trafficking, kidnapping, and even the detonation of a car bomb in Esmeraldas, Ecuador.

• One of the most shocking acts perpetrated by the dissident group was the kidnapping and murder of two journalists and a driver from the Ecuadorean newspaper El Comercio. Shortly thereafter, the group kidnapped and murdered an Ecuadorean couple in Nariño, demonstrating its control in the southwestern Colombian department.

• The criminal activities of Guacho and the Oliver Sinisterra Front have sparked a political crisis between Colombia and Ecuador, prompting Ecuador to back out of hosting the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the ELN. Guacho is currently the principle military objective in both countries.
Return of the second wave of “extraditable”

- A growing amount of evidence suggests that drug trafficking capos and paramilitary commanders are returning to the country upon completing prison sentences in the United States, and that they may be behind rising homicides in Cali and Medellín.

- Capos who have recently returned to the country include: Ever Veloza, alias HH, the feared former commander of the Bananeros and Calima blocs of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC); Carlos Alberto Rentería, alias Beto, a member of the Cali Cartel leadership and Javier Zuluaga, alias Gordo Lindo, a capo from Valle del Cauca who bought a franchise of the AUC in order to sneak into the peace process as a paramilitary commander.

- These names were added to a long list of former drug traffickers and paramilitary commanders who had already returned to the country like Perra Loca, el Químico, el Negro Asprilla, Tornillo, Cejas, el Mocho, Camisa Roja and el Socio o Pipe Montoya.

- Many of these capos and commanders likely returned to take revenge on those who betrayed them and to recover lands and assets from front men. Still, it is not clear whether they will actively participate in sub-regional criminal dynamics in the future.

- In the last six months, a growing number of homicides exhibit characteristics that correspond to the modus operandi of mafia organizations: bodies with signs of torture, others dismembered, wrapped in bags and hidden in trunks of cars, or thrown in the streets.

Confrontations between the Caparrapos and the Urabeños in Bajo Cauca, Antioquía

- Several high-level captures have weakened the Urabeños command structure in the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia, causing the criminal group to fragment. The Caparrapos, a former paramilitary splinter group also operating in Bajo Cauca, took advantage of the Urabeños misfortune and declared war on their former allies for control over the region. The ensuing conflict has resulted in various displacements.
• Alias “Ratón” is thought to be the leader of the Caparrapos and has allegedly allied with the Medellín-based criminal group “Los Triana” and dissident elements of the front 36th, both of which are invested in weakening the Urabeños. In addition, an alliance between the Caparrapos and the ELN is not out of the question considering the ELN is seeking to strengthen its influence in the region. The Urabeños, on the other hand, are led by alias “Gonzalito” in the region and can likely count on the support of the criminal group “Pachelly”.

• The municipalities with the highest levels of violence, forced displacements and assassinations are Tarazá, Caucasia, Cáceres, Yarumal and Andes; areas characterized by their direct connection to the municipalities of Briceño and Ituango and the Nudo del Paramillo National Reserve. Between April 13 and 15, various clashes between the Caparrapos and the Urabeños have resulted in the displacement of 43 families from the urban center of Tarazá. In total, around 781 households have been forced to flee this year due to violence. These areas contain either coca crops or important drug routes and are therefore disputed due to their strategic importance for drug trafficking.