The assassination of social leaders: a form of resistance to the peace process

JUNE 2018
June was one of the months that saw the greatest number of attacks against social leaders in Colombia this year. The Colombian Observatory of Organized crime registered at least 17 assassinations in June, bringing the total number of social leaders assassinated in the first half of 2018 to approximately 78. Although the exact figures vary depending on the source consulted, it is apparent that the Colombian state faces an immense challenge when it comes to guaranteeing the security of social leaders in the country.
The significance of these attacks goes beyond their social and humanitarian impact. The fact that many of these leaders are on the front lines between the population and the country’s criminal groups suggests that their deaths could be the result of changing criminal dynamics in the region. One example is that of Carlos Prado. A social leader in the municipality Olaya Herrera, Prado was allegedly assassinated by Ex FARC Mafia.¹

Orlando Negrete Ramírez’s assassination in Tierralta, Córdoba, serves as another example. His murder seems to have been the result of a criminal reorganization in southern Córdobo between criminal group including the Urabeños, dissident elements of the FARC, and the criminal band known as the Caparrapos.²

The death of social leader Francisco José Guerra in Ituango, Antioquia may have been related to a similar dynamic. In Antioquia, evolving criminal dynamics between dissident elements of FARC’s 36th Front, the Urabeños and their former allies the Caparrapos have plunged the department into a spiral of violence and crime. This violence is reflected by the fact that, since 2016, at least 41 social leaders have been assassinated in Antioquia.³

Although the assassinations of social leaders may not be directly related to the shifting criminal landscape, they are proof that a new criminal dynamic has begun to emerge in Colombia. The targeted assassination of community leaders suggests that criminal groups are pursuing a violent strategy to silence and intimidate everyone who might stand in their way.

1. The return of glyphosate fumigation

- The practice of aerial fumigation with the herbicide glyphosate began in 1999 as part of Plan Colombia, a US sponsored aid program to fight drug trafficking in the country. It did not end until 2015, when President Juan Manual Santos suspended aerial fumigation during peace talks held with the now demobilized FARC.

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• Aerial fumigation has been heavily criticized ever since it was first implemented due to the associated health risks for civilian populations and the severe environmental consequences. Farmers were forced to move constantly due to the relentless fumigation.

• President Juan Manual Santos has authorized the reintroduction of aerial fumigation, but only with unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones. Drones spray pesticides from a lower altitude, supposedly preventing much of the environmental damage typically caused by aerial spraying.

• The reintroduction of aerial fumigation with drones is not guaranteed to reduce illicit crop levels, which have been on the rise since 2015. However, it marks the return of a strategy that has been fundamental to the government’s fight against drug trafficking.

2. The Naya: The fight for the drug trafficking corridor continues

• The rural sub-region that lies between the departments of Valle del Cauca and Cauca is known as the Naya, and is home to coca crops, cocaine producing laboratories, and an international trafficking route by which drugs are smuggled to Central or North America. Criminal groups are currently fighting for control over this strategic drug trafficking region.

• Members of one of the region’s warring factions publicly introduced themselves in a video sent to the media. In the video, the United Force of the Pacific (Fuerzas Unida del Pacific - FUP) presented themselves as a new group of FARC dissidents.

• Both the FUP and their rivals have consolidated control over territories within the region. The FUP moves in the higher parts of the Naya mountains, while their primary rival, a group calling itself the Defenders of the Pacific (Defensores del Pacifico) maintain a presence in the lower regions, especially in the municipality of López de Micay in Cauca.

• Groups associated with Mexican cartels seem to be forging alliances with the FUP, while the Urabeños have begun to establish a presence in the region by sending emissaries to purchase cocaine.
3. **Puerto Valdivia: threatened by criminal groups**

- The conflicts in the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia have reached the municipality of Puerto Valdivia where the Caparrapos and the Urabeños continue to fight one another.

- The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) has also intensified its presence in the region, and dissident elements of the FARC continue to occupy the area. Both the ELN and FARC dissidents have joined the territorial fight for control over the drug trafficking corridor.

- This violent situation has restricted the mobility of local civilian population and authorities, especially in rural areas. The last attack registered in the region occurred on June 11th when armed criminals attacked a police patrol in a rural zone, killing two officers.

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