The Colombo-Venezuelan Guerrillas: How Colombia’s War Migrated to Venezuela

#BinationalGuerrillas
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The Colombo-Venezuelan Guerrillas: How Colombia’s War Migrated to Venezuela

For twenty years, Venezuela was a refuge for Colombia’s Marxist guerrillas, a place where they could hide out from the military, run criminal economies, and carry out political work with impunity thanks to their friendly relationship with the government of President Hugo Chávez. But today, it is so much more. Guerrillas such as the ELN have spread deep into Venezuelan territory, they are filling their ranks with recruits, taking control of communities, and interfering in politics. Today, they are binational guerrilla groups.

The product of five years of fieldwork along the Colombia-Venezuela border and beyond, this investigation reveals the Venezuelan operations of Colombia’s guerrillas and explores the far-reaching implications for both countries of their evolution into Colombo-Venezuelan groups.
Rebels and Paramilitaries: Colombia’s Guerrillas in Venezuela

For the last two years, Venezuelan states along the Colombian border have experienced firsthand the death and destruction of a war they had spent half a century observing from a distance.

Colombia’s Marxist guerrilla groups had long been welcome in Venezuela, at least since the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez. But now, certain factions have become distinctly unwelcome, and subject to a sustained Venezuelan security force offensive, bringing with it airstrikes, gunfights, assassinations, landmines, kidnappings, disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and abuse. The evils of Colombia’s civil conflict have appeared in Venezuela.

For decades, Colombian rebels had taken advantage of a porous border, isolated terrain, and a friendly government to use Venezuela as a sanctuary beyond the reach of the Colombian military.
But over the years, the guerrilla presence in Venezuela has been evolving, a process that accelerated with the demobilization of Colombia’s biggest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC), in 2016.

Today, dissident factions of the FARC, known collectively as the ex-FARC Mafia, and the last remaining national insurgency, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN), not only station their forces and shelter their leaders in Venezuela, they also control drug routes, illegal mining operations, and other criminal economies in Venezuelan territory. They fill their ranks with Venezuelan recruits, build up support networks within the Venezuelan population, and position themselves as the de facto authorities in Venezuelan communities abandoned or neglected by the state. And they fight over resources and territory.

The guerrilla factions and fronts operating along the border are now as Venezuelan as they are Colombian. They are binational groups, and they pose a binational security threat.

“In Venezuela, it has a strategic sanctuary and they are living the revolution they could never do in Colombia,” said Luis Trejos, an academic and expert in Colombia’s conflict, about the ELN. “That is why it has bet so heavily on Venezuela.”

The Binational Evolution

Although the FARC and the ELN began using Venezuelan territory in their campaign to overthrow the Colombian state as far back as the 1970s, it was events in the early 2000s that sparked their evolution into binational groups. First, came the collapse of a peace process between the FARC and the Colombian government in 2002, which saw the rebels lose their safe haven in the demilitarized zone they had been granted during negotiations. Then came an unprecedented military campaign ordered by former President Álvaro Uribe and bankrolled by US aid.

The military pressure pushed the guerrillas to the furthest edges of Colombia, including the border with Venezuela, where they found an ally in leftist President Hugo Chávez. The insurgents and the president not only shared political views, but they also shared enemies – Colombia’s right-wing government and its patron, the United States.

As the relationship between the insurgents and the Chávez government deepened, the rebels went beyond using Venezuela as a simple hideout to making it an important base of operations. The country offered the guerrillas
new territory in which to finance themselves through drug trafficking and other criminal economies, secure access to arms and supplies, and carry out political work. Moreover, their leaders could plan military campaigns free from the fear of persecution.

But the peace process between the FARC and the Colombian government, which formally started in 2012 with Venezuela acting as a facilitator and guarantor, served as the catalyst for the guerrillas to take the final steps toward becoming truly binational groups.

Before a final peace deal was signed in 2016, several FARC fronts rejected the negotiations and broke away. Splinter groups along the border, such as the Acacio Medina Front in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas and the 10th Front in Apure, based the bulk of their forces, their economic interests, and their leadership not in Colombia but in Venezuela.

Three years later the FARC second-in-command and lead negotiator in the talks, Luciano Marín Arango, alias “Iván Márquez,” abandoned the peace process and rearmed. He sought to refound the FARC calling it the Second Marquetalia (Segunda Marquetalia), named after the FARC's birthplace in the 1960s. He set up in Venezuelan territory, establishing his headquarters in the border state of Apure.

The FARC peace process offered the ELN a historic opportunity to expand into former FARC-controlled territories, which the rebels seized on, both in Colombia and Venezuela. They swept into Venezuelan regions rich with criminal opportunities in the states of Zulia, Táchira, Apure, and Amazonas.

By the end of 2020, according to the Colombian military, over 70 percent of guerrilla leaders from both the ELN and the ex-FARC were based in Venezuela. The ELN had approximately 900 fighters stationed in the country, representing nearly 40 percent of its total estimated force, and the ex-FARC had around 500, representing approximately 20 percent of dissident fighters.

Today, these guerrillas are not only in Venezuela seeking refuge from Colombian security forces, but they also control multimillion-dollar criminal interests. Since the FARC demobilization, InSight Crime investigations in Venezuela have uncovered evidence that the guerrillas profit from drug trafficking, illegal mining, contraband smuggling, and extortion in at least eight different states across the country.

But beyond looking to secure strategic and economic benefits, Colombia’s guerrillas are also extending and deepening their roots, filling their ranks with Venezuelan recruits and building up support and political networks in Venezuelan communities.
As in Colombia, the guerrillas capitalize on extreme poverty, exacerbated by years of economic crisis in Venezuela, to recruit from among the desperate.
“They come offering not political talks but money and food, which are scarce in Venezuela,” a human rights worker in Amazonas in southern Venezuela, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime. “People are susceptible to that, they say ‘I’m not getting any help from the Venezuelan state, and I’m going to die of hunger, so I might as well go with these people.”

“The guerrillas have also built up logistics and intelligence networks in Venezuela. While these civilian embedded cells are known as militias in Colombia, in some parts of Venezuela they are referred to by a more Venezuelan term: colectivos, referring to the socio-political armed groups allied to the Chavismo political movement.

“They began recruiting youths aged 15 to 20 years old and they trained them like the famous colectivos. These groups are now the guerrillas’ first line of action,” said a local government official in Táchira, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

The guerrillas also imported the socio-political model they have perfected in their strongholds in Colombia and are replicating it in the abandoned corners of Venezuela, where they take on governance functions in the absence of the state.

For many communities, the ELN or the ex-FARC are now de facto authorities, imposing their social rules and norms, regulating economic activities, and even setting up their own parallel justice systems.

“They have their own legal system. If you break the rules, they take you to trial,” said a local journalist in Táchira, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. “When you see a dead body thrown onto the trochas [clandestine border crossings] it is because at the trial they decided that person was to be executed.”

For those living in these communities the guerrillas have brought something else familiar to generations of Colombians — fear that at any moment and for whatever reason, you could be the next victim of their wars.
“Living in the border is not easy. It means sleeping with one eye open, being aware that from one moment to the next you could fall victim to a bullet or a shootout that has nothing to do with you,” said a local political leader in the state of Apure, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

“Today, anyone who lives along the border has to be willing to maintain relations with the armed groups there. It is an obligation, no matter what you want to do,” he added.

**Guerrillas Without a Revolution**

While the ELN and the ex-FARC factions in the border region are now indisputably binational armed groups, what is less clear is what type of armed group they are when they cross the border into Venezuela. Are they insurgents, or pro-government paramilitaries?

“The ELN is a binational guerrilla group but it is also a bipolar guerrilla group,” said Charles Larratt-Smith, an academic who specializes in Colombia’s conflict and guerrilla groups. “The ELN has always been a Marxist guerrilla group, an insurgency that challenges the Colombian state. On the Venezuelan side of the border, though, the ELN still has this function of imposing order on communities and the civilian population. But at the same time, it is not in confrontation with the Venezuelan state.”

Far from trying to overthrow the Venezuelan government, the guerrillas often present themselves as defenders of the government of Nicolás Maduro and Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution, according to residents, local authorities, and human rights workers in the border region.

“The ELN has said to the indigenous communities that it is here with the authorization of the government, that Chávez gave it permission to be here, and it is here to defend the country from the empire [the United States] and the Colombian oligarchy,” said an indigenous rights activist in Amazonas, who did not want to be identified for security reasons.

The guerrillas’ dedication to preserving rather than overthrowing the government goes far beyond rhetoric. In investigations carried out in every state on the border, InSight Crime collected extensive evidence that the guerrillas have established ties to local political leaders in order to be able to operate with impunity and have acted to keep their allies in power.

These connections were on display in several states in the regional elections that took place in November 2021. The ties were most obvious in the state of Táchira, where the ELN intervened in the close-run race for governor between
the opposition-aligned incumbent and Freddy Bernal, a Chavista stalwart who has allegedly colluded with guerrilla groups since the 2000s.

The ELN ordered residents to vote for Bernal, threatened election witnesses, and maintained an armed presence at polling stations, according to multiple local sources who spoke to InSight Crime.

“They held meetings to organize people to vote for Bernal. They always spoke about how people had to vote for ‘Comandante Bernal,’” said a municipal official in northern Táchira, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.

As well as being political allies, the guerrillas are also business partners with elements of the Venezuelan state in the border region.

Sources up and down the border describe the same dynamic: guerrillas paying off state officials to be able to traffic drugs with impunity and dividing up the profits from contraband smuggling, extortion, and illegal mining.

An indigenous community leader in Amazonas, who did not want to be named for security reasons, described how the profit-sharing works in the Yapacana region, an illegal gold mining hub and stronghold for the ex-FARC’s Acacio Medina Front.

“All the businesses pay their ‘quotas,’ and it is divided up between the FARC, the ELN, and the National Guard and the Army,” he said.

The guerrillas’ political and economic ties with the Venezuelan government have laid the groundwork for strategic cooperation with state security forces, acting as shock troops or carrying out the state’s dirty work.

In 2020, the ELN united with the military to confront the Rastrojos, a criminal successor to Colombia’s right-wing paramilitary groups.

In the final days of a bitter conflict, the Venezuelan military launched an assault against the Rastrojos that forced them to seek refuge across the border in Colombia, according to reports in La Opinión. The ELN was already in position, waiting for the military to drive them into their hands. A social leader in a border area that was an epicenter of the fighting, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, confirmed months later that the ELN had taken control of the border crossings.

“Where there was any trace of paramilitaries, they burned the houses and knocked them down,” said the social leader. “Now, the ELN is governing with the protection of the army.”
Insurgents or Paramilitaries?

The guerrillas’ actions in Venezuela have cast them into a role chillingly familiar to Colombians. They are taking on the form of their bitterest enemies: the paramilitary counterinsurgents that allied with the state to wage a dirty war against the rebels and their supporters in Colombia.

Just like the ex-FARC and the ELN in Venezuela, Colombia’s now-demobilized counterinsurgents were military allies of the Colombian security forces and criminal business partners with corrupt elements of the state. Their tentacles reached deep into Colombian politics, and they were allowed to brutalize communities and enemies alike in the name of protecting the establishment.

El ELN: ¿Son los insurgentes de Colombia los paramilitares proestatales de Venezuela?

**VENEZUELA**

**OBJETIVOS**

- Aumentar sus fuerzas económicas y militares y establecer vínculos con un estado amigable

**CARACTERÍSTICAS**

- Actúan como una fuerza paraestatal defendiendo los intereses del régimen y mantienen alianzas con cuerpos de seguridad
- Establecen sistemas de cogobernanza a través de alianzas con el Estado
- Manejan economías criminales en alianza con cuerpos de seguridad y figuras políticas

**COLOMBIA**

**OBJETIVOS**

- Tomar el poder por medio de una insurgencia armada

**CARACTERÍSTICAS**

- Atacan cuerpos de seguridad e infraestructura estatal
- Regulan el orden social a través de un sistema de gobernanza paralela
- Se financian a través de economías criminales
“In Venezuela, the ELN is a paramilitary group, not an armed insurgency. There, they support the government, while here in Colombia they struggle against it,” said Trejos.

Many of Colombia’s paramilitary groups, though, used counterinsurgency as little more than a cover for building drug trafficking empires. And with the ELN also, there are doubts about whether the guerrillas are truly ideologically committed to defending the Chavista government and the Bolivarian Revolution, or whether it is an alliance of convenience and profit.

“Here in Venezuela, their objectives are different. They are a criminal group, a gang, [and] an armed group in search of business,” Liborio Guarulla, a former governor of Amazonas, told InSight Crime.

Whether they are insurgents, paramilitaries, or just criminals, the ELN and the ex-FARC mafia represent the principal security threat in both Venezuela and Colombia. They have the ability to control communities, forge alliances with security forces and political networks, and manage criminal economies. And they are battle-hardened by decades of fighting.
On the night of May 4, 2022, an explosion cut through a guerrilla camp in the Venezuelan border state of Zulia.

The bomb, placed by unknown hands, claimed the life of one of Colombia’s most wanted men: Miguel Botache Santanilla, alias “Gentil Duarte,” commander of the biggest and most powerful network of dissidents from the demobilized guerrilla group the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC).

For decades, Venezuela had been a safe haven for leaders of the FARC, whose insurgent war to overthrow the Colombian government began in the 1960s. Senior commanders such as Duarte could live free from fear under the protection of the Venezuelan state led by President Hugo Chávez and later his successor Nicolás Maduro. But Duarte was the fourth senior ex-FARC commander assassinated in Venezuela in the space of a year.
The killings came as Venezuela became a battleground between two rival factions of FARC dissidents, both claiming to be the true heirs to the FARC, and both seeking to take over former FARC territories, alliances, and criminal economies in the country. The rivalry between them, the deaths of leaders on both sides, and the constant persecution by the Colombian security forces have left these two networks in disarray.

For the FARC dissidents, known collectively as the ex-FARC Mafia, Venezuela is no longer a safe haven. Instead, it is proving to be a cemetery for their most important commanders and the final resting place for their dreams of rebuilding the FARC's guerrilla army and rekindling their lost revolution.

**Venezuela and the First Dissidents**

By early 2016, it was clear the FARC, after years of negotiating with the Colombian government in Cuba, were reaching an agreement to bring an end to their insurgency after half a century of fighting.

On July 10, 2016, the commander of the FARC's historic 1st Front, Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández, alias “Iván Mordisco,” issued a statement saying that he and a group of fighters under his command were rejecting the peace talks and forming a splinter group that would continue the FARC's armed revolution.

“We do not agree with the disarming of the FARC because we believe those arms belong to the poor of Colombia, that the only objective of the bourgeoisie is to disarm us, so they can subject the poor to their whims and force them into modern slavery,” read the communiqué, which ended with a call to arms to other FARC members disillusioned with the process to join them.

The FARC leadership dispatched Gentil Duarte, a senior guerrilla commander and negotiating team member, to bring the mutiny to order. For three months, they heard nothing, and Duarte was presumed dead. But then he reappeared at Mordisco's side and declared he too was breaking away from the peace process. This alliance would shape the first phase of the post-FARC era began to take shape. The ex-FARC Mafia was born.

Although their main focus was on rebuilding FARC networks in Colombia, Duarte's dissidents recognized from the beginning that Venezuela would be important: a refuge and perhaps more. For decades, Venezuela has been an ally for the Colombian guerrillas, as former President Hugo Chávez saw the FARC not only as ideological bedfellows but also as a strategic bulwark against a hostile Colombia and its military patron, the United States.
The importance of Venezuela and the Chávez government to the FARC was spelled out in seized guerrilla communications.

“The formation of dissident factions of the old FARC in Arauca originated with the military strengthening they received from the self-appointed 1st Front.”

“The destiny of Latin America and the Caribbean lies in deepening the revolution of National Liberation that Venezuela is living today,” read one 2005 email between rebel commanders.

The relationship turned Venezuela into a refuge for FARC forces and leaders, a supplies and logistics hub, and then a source of criminal income. Duarte and Mordisco were keen to continue this tradition and get a foothold in the neighboring country.

The two rebel commanders struck an alliance with another FARC leader who wanted no part of the peace process: Géner García Molina, alias “John 40,” who had long focused more on the riches of the drug trade than the revolutionary struggle. Since the early 2000s, he had been based in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas.

John 40 not only offered financial muscle and drug trafficking expertise, he could act as a bridge to the Acacio Medina Front, a dissident faction based in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas that had shown little interest in trading peace for the lucrative gold mines and drug trafficking routes they controlled in Venezuela.

As discontent with the peace process and uncertainty about the future spread among the demobilizing FARC forces, new dissident networks began to form in the Venezuela border region, some with the aid of Duarte and his network.

Among them was the 10th Front, operating between the Colombian department of Arauca and neighboring Apure in Venezuela. According to the Colombian human rights ombudsman, Duarte and Mordisco sent arms and resources to the dissidents led by a mid-level commander who had been kicked out of
the peace process, Jorge Eliécer Jiménez Martínez, alias “Arturo.” With their help, Arturo turned a small group of guerrillas that had run away from a demobilization camp into a binational armed group with an estimated 300-plus fighters.

“The formation of dissident factions of the old FARC in Arauca originated with the military strengthening they received from the self-appointed 1st Front,” the Ombudsman report states.

They were later joined by a dissident group from the 33rd Front led by Javier Alonso Veloz García, alias “John Mechas.” The group had joined the post-FARC war for control of the cocaine production hub of Colombia’s northeast Catatumbo region and set up camps in the bordering Venezuelan trafficking hotspot of Zulia. After launching his dissident group in 2018, Mechas declared his fealty to Duarte’s network in 2020.

The alliance with the 10th and 33rd Fronts, and business arrangements with the Acacio Medina Front, meant Duarte’s burgeoning dissident network now had access to crossing points into three Venezuelan border states for the cocaine produced in their territories in Colombia. It also meant they had allies that controlled safe spaces where they could operate with virtual impunity thanks to the ties between the guerrillas and the Venezuelan state, which had been nurtured for decades by the FARC and was now being maintained by the dissidents.

“Nothing changed with the peace agreement. There is no peace here. The peace was for Colombia, while those people just emigrated to Venezuela,” said a resident of the ex-FARC controlled Pedro Camejo municipality of Apure, who asked not to be named out of fear of reprisals.

The Second Marquetalia and the Fight to Be the New FARC

While Gentil Duarte was attempting to rekindle the FARC’s armed insurgency, the guerrilla leaders who had negotiated the peace deal were preparing for a new life as politicians. Among those set to take up seats in Colombia’s Congress were the FARC’s second-in-command and lead negotiator in the talks, Luciano Marín Arango, alias “Iván Márquez,” and one of the rebel’s most famed political leaders, Seuxis Pausías Hernández Solarte, alias “Jesús Santrich.”

But when a controversial undercover operation by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) led to Santrich’s arrest in Colombia on drug trafficking charges, it sparked a chain of events that would end with Márquez and Santrich abandoning the peace process and recruiting some of the FARC’s most infamous commanders to join them in a new dissident faction.
After going underground for several months, Márquez and Santrich reemerged in August 2019 to announce they were re-founding the FARC under the banner of the Second Marquetalia -- a name that pays homage to the mythical birthplace of the FARC.

The Second Marquetalia established its headquarters not in Colombia but in Venezuela. Multiple sources in the Venezuelan state of Apure and neighboring Arauca told InSight Crime the ex-FARC commanders arrived one by one to the town of Elorza, where they used their connections to set up drug trafficking networks.

Márquez and Santrich had close ties to the Venezuelan government dating back to their FARC political work in the country in the 2000s. Maduro even publicly welcomed them into the country when they first abandoned the peace process, calling them “leaders of peace.”

The welcome was not so warm from the ex-FARC commanders who had set up operations in Venezuela, while Márquez and Santrich were playing politician. According to an account by one commander from Duarte’s dissident network, as the most senior FARC commanders to abandon the peace process, the Second Marquetalia leaders had expected to pull rank and simply assume control of everything Duarte and Mordisco had built. But the original dissident commanders saw them as traitors for having negotiated with the Colombian government and surrendered their arms.

Spurned by Duarte and his network, the Second Marquetalia sought to stake an alternative claim to being the true heirs to the FARC by recruiting dissident factions around Colombia while operating from the safety of Venezuela.

Two alternative poles of power began to emerge from the remnants of the FARC. Duarte’s network had greater military might and control over swathes of strategically important territory in both Colombia and Venezuela. The Second Marquetalia had the star power of its commanders in Colombia and top-level political connections in Venezuela.

In the Second Marquetalia’s new home base of Apure, this rivalry led to conflict with Duarte’s local representatives: the 10th Front.

“Those that made the deal [with the government] broke the rules because it suited them, and the others saw that as a betrayal,” said a local political leader in Apure from a leftist party with traditional ties to the FARC, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.

Violence erupted in Apure almost immediately, and local media reports were filled with warnings of a coming “war of the dissidents.”
The breaking point came in 2021, when the Venezuelan military, elements of which had previously worked with the 10th Front, suddenly attacked the faction. While the exact events that led to the assault are not known, numerous sources told InSight Crime that the fighting in Apure was a proxy war, with the military attacking the 10th Front at least in part to eliminate an obstacle for the Second Marquetalia.

But the military campaign did not go as planned, and the civilian population paid the price, suffering displacement, arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings.

“The army tried to ambush them to wipe them out, but they couldn’t find the guerrillas, so they took revenge on the people,” a local journalist in the conflict zone, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime.

After months of fighting, the military suddenly pulled back, humiliated by the kidnapping of eight soldiers. The retreat came after the 10th Front released the eight soldiers, and it seems likely the guerrillas exchanged the soldiers’ lives for the withdrawal of the military forces.

The Second Marquetalia appeared to have lost the first round of proxy battle. But with the military targeting the 10th Front’s support network and economic interests with mass detentions and anti-narcotics operations, it was still well placed to win the war. Its outlook improved even further when ex-FARC commander turned drug broker John 40 switched allegiances from Duarte’s network to the Second Marquetalia.

But the group suffered a severe blow in May 2021 with the assassination of Jesús Santrich in the Venezuelan border state of Zulia.

No one claimed responsibility for the attack, and conflicting rumors swirled. One had Santrich killed by the 10th Front, another by US mercenaries out to collect the Colombian government bounty, and another laying the blame at the door of the Venezuelan National Guard.

The Second Marquetalia had a different story to tell. In a public statement, it claimed a unit of Colombian military commandos had ambushed Santrich, attacking the truck he was traveling in with rifle fire and grenades, then cutting off his left little finger as proof before being extracted in a helicopter.

The operation was just the start. In December, unknown assailants killed two more of the group’s most infamous commanders: Hernán Darío Velásquez Saldarriaga, alias “El Paisa,” and Henry Castellanos Garzón, alias “Romaña.” Someone, it appeared, was hunting down the Second Marquetalia leadership one by one.
Enter the ELN

At the end of 2021, the Second Marquetalia was reeling from the mysterious deaths of their commanders, and the 10th Front faced constant pressure from the Venezuelan military. The next year, 2022, started with a bloodbath.

On January 2, the people of Arauca, across the border from Apure, woke to the sound of gunfire. Bodies began to appear, many with bullet wounds consistent with execution-style killings. Over the three days that followed, the death count rose to 27. A new player had entered the conflict: the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN).

The ELN had operated in both Apure and Arauca for decades, and both sets of FARC dissidents had reportedly smoothed the way for their return to Apure with the group. The 10th Front made agreements with the ELN to divide territories and criminal economies, according to an investigation by La Silla Vacia, while the Second Marquetalia staged summits with ELN leaders, among them the ELN’s top commander in the region, Gustavo Aníbal Giraldo, alias “Pablito,” according to Colombian intelligence reports published by El Tiempo.

There were reports of tensions between the ELN and the 10th Front going back to 2020, and local residents in guerrilla-controlled sectors of Apure described how relations became increasingly strained by the 10th Front infringing on ELN territories and abusing the local population.

“People began to complain to the ELN because the 10th Front was charging exorbitant extortion fees,” a local public official in a guerrilla-controlled municipality in Apure, speaking on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime.

The ELN sat out the first stages of the fighting when the Venezuelan military launched its assault against the 10th Front. But the killings of an ELN finance chief and a mid-level commander in late 2021, allegedly by the 10th Front, provoked it.

After the New Year’s slaughter, which appeared to target the 10th Front’s support network and alleged collaborators, the guerrilla rivals attacked each other – and the civilian population that was caught between the two sides as they hunted for their enemies’ civilian “collaborators.”

“You don’t know if you are with the ELN or the FARC, who should I support, who should I help, who should I protect?” said a rancher in Apure, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals.
The ELN and the Venezuelan military directly coordinated operations against the FARC dissidents, according to testimonies collected by Human Rights Watch. In the face of the onslaught, the 10th Front sought support from its allies in the Duarte dissident network. Operating under the banner of the Joint Eastern Command, the 10th Front was supported by 33rd Front as well as the 28th Front, which was active on the Colombian side of the border.

The Joint Command, though, was short-lived. Forced to retreat into Colombian territory, the 10th Front was left vulnerable to a more traditional enemy – the Colombian military. On February 24, the Colombian army dealt the group a decisive blow by killing the 10th Front leader, Arturo, along with 26 fighters, in an operation in Puerto Rondón, Arauca.
Venezuela and the Future of the Ex-FARC Mafia

All that now remains of the Joint Command and Duarte’s dissidents in Venezuela is John Mechas’ 33rd Front in Zulia. Gentil Duarte had turned to Mechas as he was fleeing operations by the Colombian military. He thought he would be safe in Venezuela after suffering at least two attacks on his camps in Colombia in 2021, according to reports in Colombia’s El Tiempo newspaper.

But as with Santrich, El Paisa, and Romaña, Duarte’s search for a safe haven only led to his death. And as with the Second Marquetalia commanders, the events surrounding his death remain a mystery.

While media reports and the Colombian government pointed the finger at his ex-FARC rivals and the ELN, the guerrillas themselves again laid the blame on the Colombian military, claiming they had blackmailed one of Duarte’s people into planting a bomb by his bed while he slept.

Two months later, the Colombian government reported Duarte’s rebel partner and natural successor, Iván Mordisco, had been killed in an air raid in southern Colombia. While later reports suggested he had survived the attack, the network is still facing a leadership crisis and an uncertain future, not only in Venezuela but also in Colombia.

If there was any celebration in the Second Marquetalia faction, it was short-lived. Just over a month after the reports of Duarte’s death, Ivan Márquez was the victim of an assassination attempt.

Initial reports suggested that Márquez died in the attack. But it was later confirmed he was only wounded, with Colombian authorities telling media he had been taken to a Caracas hospital, where he was being cared for under the protection of the Venezuelan government.

The attack on Márquez, who enjoys top-level political protection in Venezuela, reinforced the notion that the country, at least the border states, offer no security to the Colombian rebel leaders. Márquez will be unlikely to unite the remaining FARC dissident, even if he does recover and attempt to re-enter the fight.

In Venezuela, at least, the post-FARC wars look set to end with a surprising winner: the Acacio Medina front, led by Miguel Díaz Sanmartín, alias “Julian Chollo,” a commander with neither the rebel credentials of the original dissident commanders nor the fearsome reputations and storied histories of the Second Marquetalia leaders.
While the other ex-FARC factions were turning on each other, Chollo and his Acacio Medina Front, which are based almost entirely in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, remained neutral. And while the other factions have competed over territory and criminal economies, the Acacio Medina Front only expanded into regions with no rival guerrilla presence. 

Duarte is dead. Márquez is wounded and weakened, and, according to comments made to the media by officials from the new Colombian government of President Gustavo Petro, is once again seeking an exit from the conflict. But Julian Chollo is safely entrenched in the gold mining hub of Atabapo, in Amazonas, where local sources say he gets protection from local military and government allies.

“He is the king of Atabapo,” said a local journalist, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. “He rules there more than the governor of Amazonas, more than the mayor of Atabapo.”

The Acacio Medina Front is now the most powerful ex-FARC mafia faction left in Venezuela. But its long-term future may depend on whether it can continue to avoid conflict with the principal winners of the post-FARC border wars: the ELN.
The Acacio Medina Front is now the most powerful ex-FARC mafia faction left in Venezuela. But its long-term future may depend on whether it can continue to avoid conflict with the principal winners of the post-FARC border wars: the ELN.

On the morning of October 7, 2009, prison guards in the west Colombian state of Arauca were tasked with a simple but terrifying task: transfer to Bogotá one of Colombia’s most notorious prisoners, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN) commander Gustavo Aníbal Giraldo, alias “Pablito.”

As they were preparing to leave, a woman in a bullet-proof vest pulled up on a motorbike in front of the prison gates, according to accounts from the time. While her escorts unleashed a barrage of gunfire, she tossed Pablito a gun. He shot and killed his guard, broke free, and was bundled into the back of a waiting Toyota truck. Within minutes, Pablito had crossed the Arauca river into Venezuela.

But Pablito not only fled to Venezuela, he moved his operations there. And he brought the most successful insurgency model in the ELN’s history with him.
He built up his forces in the western Venezuelan state of Apure while laying down deep roots in local communities and establishing far-reaching ties to the Venezuelan state.

Then in 2016, the ELN was presented with an historic opportunity: Its guerrilla cousins, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC), signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government. The FARC had set up even more extensive operations in Venezuelan territory than the ELN and built ties to the state that ran to the very top. Their promise to disarm and demobilize would leave a power vacuum in a swathe of strategically important territories rich in criminal economies on both the Colombian and Venezuelan sides of the border.

Pablito recognized the opportunity and pushed hard to seize it. In doing so, he would help turn the ELN into the most powerful insurgency in the Americas and the strongest non-state armed actor in Venezuela. Simultaneously, he positioned himself as one of the most powerful commanders in the ELN leadership.

“He is the [guerrilla commander] that is the most consolidated, has the most people, and the most presence in Venezuela,” Sebastian Zuleta, an expert in peace negotiations and the Colombian conflict, told InSight Crime. “I don’t think you can understand the expansion of the ELN without understanding the role of Pablito.”

**Pablito’s Migration**

At the time Pablito fled to Venezuela, he was overseeing a complex military-political insurgency machine based in the eastern border state of Arauca that far eclipsed anything the ELN had managed to build anywhere else in the country.

The Eastern War Front (Frente de Guerra Oriental – FGO) was the richest front in the ELN, largely thanks to its extortion of the oil sector. It was also the most militarily powerful.

Not only did Pablito command fearsome guerrilla units, he also oversaw a militia network embedded in the civilian population. Its members collect intelligence, channel communications, manage criminal economies and networks of front businesses, and carry out assassinations and hit-and-run attacks against Colombian security forces.

Pablito and his front wove themselves into the fabric of society in Arauca. They coopted civil society by infiltrating social movements. They captured local
politics by getting hand-picked governors and mayors elected. And they set themselves up as the de facto authorities in communities throughout the state, imposing their own rules, regulations, and social norms enforced at gunpoint.

This was the model that Pablito brought to Venezuela when he escaped prison in 2009.

By that time, the ELN were no strangers to the country. They had been crossing the border since as far back as the 1970s. After the election of leftist firebrand Hugo Chávez created a friendly environment for Colombia’s insurgents in the border region, Pablito’s Eastern War Front began setting up operations and taking territory in the Alto Apure region and along the banks of the Arauca river separating the two countries.

But when Pablito crossed the river, Venezuela went from being the Eastern War Front’s hideout to serving as its command center for both military and financial operations. And that command center was protected by the Venezuelan state.
When InSight Crime first visited the region in 2011, one Colombian oil sector contractor described how he had to cross the river into Venezuela to make extortion payments at an office run by the ELN. When it was time to renegotiate the terms of their agreement, he was summoned to a meeting with Pablito himself, who was operating out of a ranch near the Apure town of El Nula. The ranch, according to local rumor, had been expropriated by the Chávez government and donated to Pablito.

As Pablito had done in Arauca, his arm of the ELN inserted itself into the social fabric of local communities in Apure.

These days, their urban militia networks keep close tabs on communities they control, according to residents who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity for fear of angering the guerrillas. The guerrillas’ social control extends as far as domestic disputes and cases of infidelity, residents say. The rebels are also spreading their ideology through local schools, where children are taught about imperialism, class struggle, and the legitimacy of the ELN’s revolution.

“It has been a job of ideological and psychological softening up,” a journalist in Alto Apure, who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, told InSight Crime. “They have been winning over the population as the ‘good guys’ who treat the community well, who help them when they’re sick and provide social support. And this helped them penetrate the population.”

**New Underworld, New Opportunities**

Three years after Pablito fled to Venezuela, the FARC started peace talks with the Colombian government, spurring the ELN to start planning for huge changes in guerrilla dynamics.

The ELN launched a dual strategy: war and peace at the same time. After years of backchannel talks, the ELN leadership formally announced their own peace process with the government in 2016. But they were also waging an expansion campaign of unprecedented ambition, to capitalize on the vacuum soon to be left by the FARC.

Pablito by this time had been appointed a member of the ELN’s Central Command (Commado Central – COCE). But while the rest of the COCE decamped to Havana, Cuba for the talks, Pablito, cynical of the prospects for peace and a reluctant backer of the process, remained in the field, where he was at the forefront of the military expansion.
“Pablito was not even interested in the process, and so he took advantage of the obvious disconnection between the COCE in Havana and the political and military structures in Colombia and Venezuela to make these structures grow in the way he wanted,” said Zuleta, who has previously advised the Colombian government on peace talks with the ELN.

The Eastern War Front expanded southwards, in both countries, moving into new territories in the states of Vichada in Colombia and Amazonas in Venezuela. The Front, by this time operating as a fully binational group, used strikingly different approaches in each country.

In Venezuela, the Front used the methods developed in Arauca: establishing a military presence and building up urban militia networks while coopting communities and elements of the state.

Heavily armed, uniformed guerrillas set up camps and presented themselves to communities as defenders of the Bolivarian Revolution and friends to the local population, residents told InSight Crime.

“They spoke to the community leaders to offer their services, saying they were going to support us and provide security,” said a cultural leader from the indigenous Huottöja community in Amazonas.

As they have expanded in Venezuela, they have also strengthened by recruiting Venezuelans -- among them minors -- multiple sources in several different border states told InSight Crime.

“Just when we thought we were free of these groups, these new ones we don’t know arrive.”

“The guerrillas sweeten them up by offering them work, offering to pay them, and as we are in this situation where there is no work, they go with enthusiasm,” said a religious leader in an ELN-dominated municipality in Apure, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

In Colombia, by contrast, the ELN’s advance was quiet. The group did not set up camps, but it did establish intelligence networks, according to police, government officials, and residents in Vichada’s capital, Puerto Carreño. Instead of coopting communities, it set up front businesses and used them
to launder money and secure supplies. Now, the soldiers only come to the Colombian side to traffic drugs, murder enemies, recruit -- or take off their uniforms and hit the bars.

The ELN guerrillas in Vichada are “100% Venezuelan,” Colonel Edilberto Garcia, commander of the Colombian National Police in Vichada told InSight Crime.

“They have been based in Venezuela for many years, and they have very strong connections there,” Garcia said.

In addition to the Eastern War Front, the Northeastern and Northern War Fronts also led similar advances into former FARC territories along the border and into Venezuela, expanding into the states of Norte de Santander and La Guajira in Colombia, and into Táchira and Zulia in Venezuela.

“Just when we thought we were free of these groups, these new ones we don’t know arrive,” a municipal official in San Juan de Cesar, La Guajira, told InSight Crime in a 2018 interview.

Again, the expansion was binational, and again the ELN moved into new territories in Venezuela using the military-social-political model perfected by Pablito. During InSight Crime investigations in ELN territory in Venezuela, sources described the same patterns: social control, political outreach, construction of community networks -- and the armed menace behind it all.

As the expansion gathered pace after the FARC demobilized throughout 2017, both the Eastern War Front and the other War Fronts began to move far beyond the former FARC territories and into Venezuela’s interior, setting up operations in states such as Anzoátegui, Barinas, Guárico, and even near the eastern border in the gold mining hub of Bolívar.

In many of these new territories, the ELN used violence as a tool of expansion, often with the tacit or even overt blessing of the Venezuelan state.

The ELN confronted rivals and enemies up and down the border, and even in interior states. They have battled, among others, Colombian paramilitary successor groups such as the Rastrojos and the Urabeños, as well as the Venezuelan megabanda Tren de Aragua in Táchira, the mining gangs known as sindicatos (unions) in Bolívar, and La Zona, a smuggling gang based in the Guajira region of Zulia.

The guerrillas honed their tactics through decades of warfare in Colombia. They have directly assaulted their rivals, and they have picked them off with assassinations. They have undermined their enemies’ public support by murdering and displacing suspected “collaborators,” and they have solidified their own control by waging “social cleansing” campaigns targeting anyone not abiding by their code of conduct or identified as potential obstacles to their advance.
“For a while, fear reigned here,” a resident of the Amazonas town of Puerto Ayacucho, who did not want to be identified for security reasons, told InSight Crime. “By six o’clock, everyone was shut up in their houses, and [the guerrillas] would take away anyone who was still on the streets.”

The biggest battle of the ELN’s binational expansion, though, would be with the group whose position they were seeking to usurp -- the remnants of the FARC, known as the ex-FARC mafia, which had also been trying to fill the vacuum in Venezuela left by the guerrilla demobilization.

Pablito had successfully taken on the FARC before. Between 2005 and 2011, he directed a conflict with the FARC’s 10th Front that marked the bloodiest episode of Arauca’s brutal history. The ELN held off a militarily superior enemy by withdrawing their forces to Venezuela, while ruthlessly attacking the civilian population in FARC-controlled areas and sharing intelligence with the Colombian military, which used the information to take out the FARC leadership, according to an account of the conflict by researcher Charles Larratt-Smith.

That conflict ended with a negotiated agreement with the FARC to divide territories and control of criminal economies. But when the dissident remnants of the 10th Front began to violate the pact, a new conflict erupted in late 2021, leading the Eastern War Front to respond with the same tactics it had used in the previous confrontation – including attacks on civilians.

“Over 100 indigenous families have been driven from their homes by the ELN, and no one knows how many murdered and disappeared,” said a political leader from the Apure branch of a leftists party with traditional ties to the FARC, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

“Why are they attacking the civilian population so much?” he asked, answering his own question: “Because they say it is the FARC’s social base.”

As the conflict escalated in early 2022, the ex-FARC accused the ELN of once again colluding with the Colombian military to attack them. There is no evidence of ELN cooperation with Colombian forces, but clear evidence has emerged of the ELN collaborating with the Venezuelan military, which has been fighting its own conflict with the 10th Front for more than a year.

The two sides have even carried out joint operations targeting the civilian population in ex-FARC lands, according to a report by Human Rights Watch whose findings were backed up by sources who spoke to InSight Crime.

“The ELN is in Venezuelan territory acting as if it were part of the government,” said the political leader from Apure.
The New Owners of the Venezuela-Colombia Border?

Since the first conflict between the 10th Front and the ELN in the 2000s, the balance of power had tipped. Now, it was the ELN that had the superior numbers and superior firepower. They also had an alliance with the Venezuelan military and a willingness to use the most brutal tactics. The 10th Front were soon driven back from Apure to Arauca, where the Colombian military located and killed the group’s leader Jorge Eliecer Jiménez Martínez, alias “Arturo.”

The campaign bore all the hallmarks of Pablito. But two weeks before Arturo’s death, news emerged that cast doubt on his role.

According to Colombian intelligence reports obtained by newspaper El Colombiano, Pablito, who had not been seen in public since early 2019, might be dead. In April 2021, the report claims, Pablito had been struck down by appendicitis. After being taken for surgery at a secret location, he suffered serious complications from an infection.

The ELN quickly denied the reports, and when InSight Crime spoke to a highly-placed intelligence source in the Colombian military months later, the source said Pablito is alive and in El Nula, Apure -- the same town where he was managing operations when InSight Crime visited in 2011.

Dead or alive, Pablito’s legacy will endure. Pablito played a central role in the ELN’s transition into a binational group in the border region. And he was the most important driving force behind an expansion that saw the ELN replace the FARC as arguably the most powerful armed group not only in Colombia but also in Venezuela.

In Venezuela, InSight Crime has mapped the presence of ELN operations in 40 municipalities in 8 states, more than double the 11 municipalities in four states where we have confirmed the presence of FARC dissidents, and far more than any other illegal armed group in the country.

The ELN is in the process of establishing a chokehold on the border. With a presence in 19 out of the 20 Venezuelan municipalities that border Colombia, including every border municipality in the states of Zulia, Amazonas, and Táchira, it controls more clandestine border crossings, drug production zones, and smuggling routes than anyone else, including the Venezuelan state. And it is establishing a foothold in the interior. InSight Crime has also traced its presence to 10 municipalities in four states outside of the border region, including in the gold mines of Bolívar.
Control of these regions means the chance to profit from the criminal economies they contain, and InSight Crime investigations have confirmed the ELN’s active participation in drug trafficking, illegal mining, extortion, and contraband smuggling in Venezuela.
The ELN still does not have the political contacts the FARC developed. There have been no photo ops with Venezuelan presidents, and the ELN’s leaders have never been name-dropped in presidential speeches. But on the ground in the border region, they are now the principal strategic ally of the Venezuelan military and likely have more municipal mayors and councilors under their influence than the FARC ever did.

The personal connections between the presidential successor to Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, and former grandees of the FARC allegedly date back as far as the 2000s. There are many that believe that Maduro still favors his longtime allies among the ex-FARC commanders that have returned to the armed struggle. But whatever Maduro’s personal preferences, the state he governs has moved on. The era of the presidency of Hugo Chávez and the FARC has transitioned into that of the Maduro regime and the ELN.
Venezuela and the ELN’s Love-Hate Relationship with Drug Trafficking

In the border area where northeast Colombia’s Catatumbo region meets the northwestern Venezuelan state of Zulia is one of the world’s most seamless cocaine corridors.

Every step of the cocaine supply chain from coca cultivation to international export can be found within a few hundred kilometers. On the Colombian side of the border, the security forces have been impotent in efforts to stem the drug flow, while on the other side the Venezuelan authorities and are actively involved in facilitating the trade.

Today, control of this area rests in the hands of a group that insists it does not traffic drugs – the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN), a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla insurgency formed in Colombia in the 1960s.
The ELN’s rejection of the drug trade was at one point sincere, but its denials have become harder to sustain. Drug trafficking has been infiltrating its revolution for well over a decade, but the ELN’s takeover of the Catatumbo trafficking corridor over the last five years marks an evolutionary leap, turning its Northeastern War Front (Frente de Guerra Nororiental) into the owners of one of the world’s most important cocaine production centers and a major supplier dealing directly with Mexican cartels.

The ELN’s expansion along the Colombian-Venezuelan border over the last five years expands far beyond the Catatumbo-Zulia region. The rebels now stand on the cusp of controlling a stretch of border that runs thousands of kilometers from the Caribbean coast to the Amazon rainforest. With it, the group has positioned itself to be the gatekeeper of trafficking routes used to move an estimated 250 tons of cocaine every year.

**The Temptations of the ELN**

When the cocaine trade swept across Colombia in the 1980s, the ELN stood apart. The group’s leaders condemned the “drug trafficking bourgeoisie” and issued directives banning their regional fronts from seeking a slice of the incredible wealth that was on offer. But as the ELN watched its guerrilla cousins in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) use cocaine money to build an insurgent army that dwarfed its own, bit by bit, its resistance began to weaken.

When coca crops began to spring up in its territories, the ELN started charging farmers a type of tax known in Colombia as gramaje. Soon, in some regions, the guerrillas were also providing protection for coca crops, laboratories, and drug routes, and even supplying precursor chemicals.

“It became obvious that they had to participate somehow because they needed the money,” Mathew Charles, a journalist and academic specializing in Colombian criminal dynamics, told InSight Crime. “Officially, the central command says they’re not involved, that all they do is tax the traffickers that use their territory. But we know that’s not the case.”

The demobilization of the FARC in 2017 completed the ELN transformation from a drug trade puritan to a major transnational player. When the FARC turned over their arms after striking a peace deal with the Colombian government, they left a vacuum in some of Colombia’s most prized stretches of drug trafficking real estate. The ELN was well-positioned to capitalize in many of these areas and nowhere more so than Catatumbo.
Catatumbo is a lawless land of sweeping valleys and towering mountains where armed groups rule and the security forces tread lightly and seldom. The department of Norte de Santander, where Catatumbo is located has over 40,000 hectares of coca crops that could yield over 300 metric tons of cocaine a year, according to the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC). It also has a wealth of cocaine processing laboratories and isolated cross-border rivers that are perfect smuggling routes.

When the FARC withdrew from Catatumbo, the only thing standing between the ELN and control of the region was the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL), a small splinter cell of a long-demobilized rebel army that had abandoned the revolutionary struggle in favor of controlling cocaine labs and trafficking routes in Catatumbo.

“The ELN and the EPL began to occupy territories left by the FARC, but the agreement had always been that the FARC took care of the illegal crops, the ELN provided supplies for coca production, and the EPL sold the product,” said a member of an international aid organization working in Catatumbo, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. “The ELN started to break these agreements as it realized that the EPL had a lot of money because of the sales and because they took care of processing labs.”

Little remains today of the EPL. And while a small dissident faction of the FARC has returned to the region, the ELN is by far the most powerful armed group in Catatumbo and the most important actor in the Catatumbo drug trade.

By 2018, the ELN and the EPL were at war. The fighting was bitter and bloody and thrust the region into a humanitarian crisis. But the ELN began to push back the EPL and take control of more and more of Catatumbo -- and its coca crops, processing laboratories, and trafficking routes.

The ELN now rules over tens of thousands of hectares of coca-cultivating territories where, in addition to protecting existing plantations, it forces local farmers to plant new ones, according to investigations by the International Crisis Group. The ELN uses its territorial control to ensure it has control over the trading of the coca base -- an intermediate phase in cocaine production -- these farmers produce.

“The drug market is not an open market where you sell to the highest bidder,” said a drug trafficking expert and investigator based in Norte de Santander, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. “If you are cooking [producing coca base] in the ELN's zones, you sell to the ELN.”

This coca base is then processed into powdered cocaine in crystalizing laboratories, which in Catatumbo include “mega-labs” that can produce upwards of 3.5 metric tons of cocaine per month. Colombian authorities allege that the ELN is one of the lab owners.
Completing the Cocaine Chain

Control of Catatumbo on the Colombian side of the border turned the ELN’s Northeastern War Front into one of the biggest cocaine suppliers for drug traffickers shipping cocaine from the Caribbean coast and helped them establish ties to international buyers. But the ELN secured a place at the table of transnational players with its simultaneous expansion into the state of Zulia across the border in Venezuela.

The ELN’s expansion into Zulia in the wake of the FARC’s demobilization stood in stark contrast to its campaign to take over Catatumbo. In Catatumbo, where the ELN faced competition for its claims to the territory, local communities suffered mass displacements, confinement, and targeted killings of civilian “collaborators” as the ELN fought to wrest control of the area from the EPL. But in Zulia, where there were no competitors to fill the vacuum left by the FARC, the ELN won over local communities with a charm offensive.

“The ELN has made the community see it as a group that has a just cause, that is not an illegal group but a real army,” said a resident of the ELN-controlled municipality of Guajira in Zulia, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.

By ingratiating themselves into local communities, the ELN quietly spread throughout the state, which acts as a transnational launchpad for drug shipments. In Zulia, there are dozens of clandestine airstrips used by light aircraft carrying cocaine shipments to Central America and Mexico. Access to and, in some cases, control of these airstrips allows the ELN to profit from every step in the cocaine supply chain that begins in Catatumbo and ends with drug-laden flights out of Venezuela.

“The guerrillas are in charge of security, setting up roadblocks, and watching over the airstrips, making sure everything works as it should do,” said a farm owner who runs a ranch in ELN-controlled territory where airstrips are located in Zulia.

The ELN has also taken over municipalities where cocaine production has been slowly taking root. As a recent InSight Crime investigation revealed, authorities have discovered large-scale coca plantations in ELN-dominated territories while cocaine laboratories have proliferated in the same municipalities.
ELN Participation in Drug Trafficking in Catatumbo and Zulia

1. Coca cultivation

The ELN maintains its own coca fields while also providing protection to independent growers who sell their product exclusively to the ELN.

2. Coca base production

Although most of the farmers process their own coca, there are reports that the ELN owns some laboratories and hires Colombian and Venezuelan workers to collect and process the leaves.

3. Converting coca base into cocaine hydrochloride

The group owns some crystallization labs where the base is processed and converted into cocaine hydrochloride, according to Colombian authorities. In other cases, it provides protection to laboratories.

4. Transporting the cocaine

The guerrillas oversee shipping the cocaine to the Caribbean and Central America using their control of strategic drug corridors on the border and clandestine airstrips in Venezuela. The group works with Mexican cartels, to whom it sells drug shipments.
Zulia also offers virtual impunity for the ELN and the guerrillas maintain close ties with elements of the Venezuelan state there. Numerous InSight Crime sources in ELN-controlled territories, speaking on condition of anonymity, describe how the ELN collaborates with the military at all levels to facilitate and protect their trafficking operations. Under the state-drug trafficking axis collectively known as the Cartel of the Suns, as long as the right people are paid, shipments can move through checkpoints unchecked, aircraft can land on landing strips hidden in plain sight, and fly unseen through monitored airspace.

“Here, there is a perfect alliance between the municipal, state, and national governments, the armed forces, drug traffickers, and the guerrillas,” a former Chavista official in central Zulia, speaking on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime in an interview conducted in 2021.

Securing access to clandestine airstrips where aircraft can take off and land with little fear of intervention represented more than one more source of drug trade income for the ELN. It also represented a cocaine crossroads where they could hand over shipments directly into the hands of the world’s biggest buyers -- Mexican cartels.

For years, there have been reports that Mexican cartels have sent emissaries to both sides of the Colombia-Venezuela border to broker cocaine deals and oversee production. And now that the ELN is increasingly enmeshed in cocaine production and trafficking, the guerrillas have become trusted suppliers and brokers of processed cocaine for the Mexicans, according to media investigations, the Colombian authorities, and InSight Crime investigations in the region.

Colombian officials have reported to the media that the rebels' main Mexican connection is the mighty Sinaloa Cartel. The drug trafficking expert in Norte de Santander told InSight Crime this relationship was forged during the ELN’s conflict with the EPL, which was allegedly backed by the Sinaloa Cartel’s rivals, the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación - CJNG). The Mexicans dispatched emissaries to the region to liaise with the guerrillas when the fighting put cocaine shipments at stake.

“The Jalisco Cartel started supporting the EPL while the others [the Sinaloa Cartel] supported the ELN,” said the drug trafficking expert.
The New Gatekeepers of the Border

Different geographical conditions and trafficking dynamics mean the ELN will not be able to replicate the Catatumbo-Zulia supply chain elsewhere. But the entire length of the frontier offers trafficking opportunities for whoever controls the crossings. In most places, that is the ELN. With control of one of the most prized trafficking territories in Venezuela currently up for grabs, it is well-placed to position itself as the most important actor in drug trafficking across the Colombian-Venezuelan border.

Although there is evidence of incipient cocaine production in the Venezuelan state of Apure and rumors of it in other border states such as Amazonas, there are no coca cultivation zones in the border region that compare to Catatumbo or other epicenters of cocaine production in Colombia. But there is a multitude of trafficking corridors that lead by land, water, and air to the Caribbean, Brazil, Guyana, Suriname, and even directly to Europe.

The ELN’s role in these routes varies from region to region, but it is ascending.

In areas such as the northern tip of the border where the Colombian department of La Guajira meets Zulia, or the central region of the Norte de Santander to Táchira crossings, the ELN controls clandestine border crossings known as trochas. Anyone using the trochas, including drug traffickers, must pay the guerrillas’ “taxes” to secure safe passage.

“The guerrillas get a slice of all the money that enters through the trochas,” a journalist in Táchira, speaking on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime.

Further south, the ELN’s control of river crossing points into the Venezuelan states of Apure and Amazonas also allows it to charge traffickers to move shipments across the Orinoco River that separates the two countries.

Elsewhere, though, ELN trafficking cells have a more direct role, making deals with traffickers to move shipments from ELN-controlled production zones in Colombia to dispatch points in Venezuela.

On the Vichada-Amazonas border, for example, Colombian police told InSight Crime the ELN manages two routes: one along the Meta River and the other along the Vichada River. Uniformed guerrillas are rarely seen transporting drugs, the police said. Instead, the ELN uses civilian trafficking cells that can maintain a low profile as they head for the border under guerrilla protection.

A similar modus operandi was also reported to InSight Crime by a local source further to the south in Guainía, who described how the ELN recruits indigenous youths to transport drugs.
“We have lived side by side with the guerrillas on this drug trafficking route for years,” said a local government official in Puerto Inírida, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. “We work with transporting [drugs], and acting as guides, but we are forced to do it.”
For the ELN, there is now one final piece of the puzzle: Apure, a central border state that is a hotspot of clandestine airstrips as well as another region where cocaine production is beginning to take root.

Although the ELN has long controlled border crossings into Apure, until recently the transport and dispatch of cocaine shipments has largely been handled by two ex-FARC dissident factions, the 10th Front and the Second Marquetalia.

But since the start of 2022, the ELN has all but driven the 10th Front from Venezuela while the Venezuelan military has dismantled much of the ex-FARC’s faction’s drug trafficking infrastructure. The Second Marquetalia, meanwhile, has been brought to its knees by a string of mysterious attacks that have killed or wounded all of its most important commanders.

The weakening of the ex-FARC has removed the major obstacles that would have blocked the ELN from claiming Apure’s coca crops, cocaine laboratories, trafficking routes, and narco-airstrips. It may even find in the remnants of the Second Marquetalia, which has maintained good relations with the ELN until now, a network that is prepared to use its expertise and contacts to run these operations as a de facto wing of the ELN.

If the ELN does take over trafficking in Apure, it will control border crossings along the whole frontier, at least three cocaine production zones on both sides of the border, and international cocaine dispatch points in three Venezuelan states.

The Venezuelan border is not the only place where the ELN has capitalized on the demobilization of the FARC to move deeper into the drug trade, with the guerrillas also taking steps into transnational trafficking in regions such as the department of Chocó along the Pacific coast.

For the moment, the rebels still lack the international connections and logistical know-how to compete with Colombia’s leading cocaine trafficking networks on a transnational level, but with their territorial reach and military capacity, they have the potential to transform themselves into one of Colombia’s most powerful drug trafficking organizations.

Nevertheless, the relationship between drugs and the ELN remains complex, and the guerrilla group is still primarily an insurgent organization.

“To believe that it is a criminal group is not to understand the complexity of this organization, they maintain a strong political component,” Luis Trejos, an academic and investigator who is an expert in Colombia’s conflict, told InSight Crime.
Colombia’s history is littered with examples of involvement in the drug trade corrupting guerrillas’ political aims, and the ELN’s leaders surely know the risks. Since the election of the left-wing peace advocate Gustavo Petro as president of Colombia, those leaders have been raising the prospect of peace talks with the Colombian government. And the two fronts that will likely be hardest to convince to join any process are the same two fronts currently growing wealthy and powerful from the Venezuelan drug trade -- the Northeastern and Eastern War Fronts.
President Gustavo Petro has offered Colombia a tantalizing vision of “Total Peace”: a negotiated end to all the armed conflicts that have plagued the country for generations. At the top of his list is the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN).

The prospect of a demobilized former guerrilla -- Petro was once a member of the M19 rebel group -- who has risen to the presidency through victory at the ballot box convincing Colombia’s last major insurgency to lay down their arms and pursue its political aims peacefully is enticing. And it is a vision the ELN leaders have publicly bought into.

“We also feel responsible for delivering this mandate for changes in Colombia, including that there is peace,” the ELN’s lead negotiator, Israel Ramírez, alias “Pablo Beltrán,” told EFE in September, in an interview republished by Colombia’s El Tiempo.
But the obstacles Petro faces are many. And among the biggest is one that may lie outside his control: Colombia’s troubled neighbor, Venezuela.

The ELN is no longer just a Colombian group. Today it is a binational group, and the safety, criminal wealth, military support, and political alliances that the Venezuelan regime provides to the guerrillas are a spoiler to peace in Colombia. And while the Venezuelan government has so far expressed support for a renewed peace process, it is far from clear what role it will play, as the connections between the guerrillas and the Venezuelan state have also helped the autocratic regime of President Nicolás Maduro consolidate power.

“For the next Colombian government, any peace negotiations will have to pass through Venezuela, and this is going to impact binational and diplomatic relations,” said Charles Larratt-Smith, an academic and co-author of the study “Why is it so difficult to negotiate with the ELN.”

“As long as the ELN is allowed to operate in Venezuelan territory, then there will be no peace.”

**Venezuela and an Elusive Peace in Colombia**

In the six decades since the ELN began its revolution, seven different Colombian presidents have tried to negotiate with this rebel group, but not one has been able to reach an agreement with the guerrillas. While each failure was unique, in each case negotiators struggled to overcome many of the same obstacles Petro faces today.

The rebels’ demands are complex and in the past have extended beyond specific issues such as poverty and underdevelopment and into wholesale political changes to Colombia’s political and economic model.

Negotiations are also complicated by the nature of the ELN. The group is not a rigidly hierarchical, centrally commanded insurgency but a federation of semi-autonomous regional networks known as War Fronts. The ELN’s decision-making process requires these often fractious fronts to come to a consensus for major decisions.

In addition to these longstanding obstacles, Petro will also have to overcome the legacy of the failures of the 2016 peace accords with the ELN’s insurgent cousins, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – **FARC**).

The state’s failure to deliver on pledges of rural development and of helping demobilized fighters safely reintegrate into society has eroded trust in the Colombian state and its promises.
“One of the challenges now is why would the ELN believe anything the Colombian state offers when they’ve seen how it has largely failed to make significant inroads with demobilized [FARC] communities?” said Mathew Charles, a journalist and academic at the University of Rosario in Bogotá who studies criminal dynamics in Colombia.

The state’s failure to occupy the territories left by the demobilizing FARC also created an underworld vacuum, which in many places the ELN has filled, taking over former FARC territories and criminal economies. This strengthening has changed the balance of power for any negotiations.

“The FARC arrived at the negotiating table in Havana in a moment of military and political decline, while the ELN is on the rise,” said Luis Trejos, an academic at Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla and an expert on the conflict in Colombia.

Perhaps the most important element of this rise has not been in Colombia at all but in Venezuela.

Two of the ELN’s strongest and most belligerent fronts, the Eastern War Front (Frente de Guerra Oriental) and the Northeastern War Front (Frente de Guerra Nororiental), have long used Venezuela as a refuge and a source of income. But their post-FARC expansion has seen them take the final steps toward becoming binational groups.

Aided by their relationships with local political leaders and the military in Venezuela, the fronts now operate with near-total impunity along much of the Colombia-Venezuela border and even beyond. There, they have taken over lucrative criminal economies including drug trafficking, gold mining, and contraband, while building socio-political networks within communities and military alliances with the Venezuelan security forces.

“As long as they continue to consolidate power and expand in Venezuela, the Eastern War Front, at least, will have even fewer incentives to negotiate,” said Sebastián Zuleta, an expert in peace negotiations and the Colombian conflict, who has advised the Colombian government on talks with the ELN.

The Eastern and Northeastern War Fronts have both balked at the ELN’s past attempts at peace negotiations. Both fronts voted against peace talks at the ELN’s 50th-anniversary conference in 2015. And the Eastern War Front’s most important commander, Gustavo Aníbal Giraldo, alias “Pablito,” delivered the death blow to a peace process that began in 2017 when he allegedly ordered a bombing of a Bogotá police academy that killed 22 cadets and injured 70 others in January 2019 -- reportedly without the knowledge of the ELN’s other national leaders.

Since the FARC’s demobilization, their increasing strength along the Venezuelan border has made these radical fronts the wealthiest and most ideologically influential factions within the ELN. They now have little reason to submit as they expand, no matter what deal the leadership strikes.
The Colombo-Venezuelan Guerrillas: How Colombia's War Migrated to Venezuela

Latest Round of Negotiations between Guerrillas and the Colombian Government

2010 - 2012
The FARC and the Colombian government of Juan Manuel Santos participated in secret exploratory peace talks, with the support of then-Venezuelan President, Hugo Chávez, and then-Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro.

2016
Several commanders including Miguel Botache Sentillana, elías “Gentil Duarte,” refused to accept the peace deal and formed dissident factions.

February 2017
Formal peace talks between the ELN and Colombian government started.

October 2017 - January 2018
The ELN and Santos administration implemented a hundred-day bilateral ceasefire.

December 2018 - January 2019
The ELN implemented a unilateral ceasefire.

January 2019
The ELN bombed a police cadet graduation in Bogotá days after the end of the guerrillas’ unilateral ceasefire. President Iván Duque called off negotiations shortly after.

September 2012
Formal peace talks between the FARC and Colombia were announced.

June 2014
The exploratory phase for peace talks between the ELN and Colombian government was announced.

June 2016
Colombia and the FARC reached a peace agreement in June, a final version of which was ratified by Colombia’s congress in November.

August 2018
Santos’s presidency ended without a successful agreement with the ELN, and right-wing Iván Duque assumed the presidency after running on a platform that campaigned against the FARC peace deal. Duque refused to continue negotiations until the ELN released all hostages.

August 2019
Some of the most influential FARC negotiators announced a return to arms, claiming that the Colombian state had “betrayed the peace accords” and accepting Maduro’s welcome for them to return to Venezuela.

Source: Open sources
“There are many powerful commanders, above all Pablito, who will never agree to any conditions that the Colombian government suggests or applies because now they have their project on the Venezuelan border,” said Larratt-Smith.

A Venezuelan State Reliant on Guerrilla Criminality

While the ELN is now a binational group, it is not a binational insurgency. Far from attempting to overthrow the Venezuelan state, the guerrillas have instead acted as a paramilitary force supporting the Maduro government. And so any new peace process must involve the Venezuelan government.

Petro appears to recognize this. On September 13, he sent an official letter to Maduro requesting that Venezuela act as a guarantor in peace talks with the ELN. Maduro accepted within hours, stating on a television show that, “Colombia’s peace is Venezuela’s peace.”

Petro’s move to involve Venezuela in the process mirrors the FARC process when former president Hugo Chávez was a key player in bringing the insurgents to the negotiating table in 2012. And although Chávez died less than a year into the talks, Maduro continued to support the peace process after succeeding him as president.

This support at least in part came from a shrewd political calculus. For years, the Chávez government had cultivated relations with the FARC not only out of ideological sympathy but as a strategy to undermine a hostile Colombia and its military backer, the United States. By 2012, a change of government in Colombia had seen a thaw in relations and a change in priorities. At the same time, Venezuela was keen to dispel any international accusations of supporting terrorism.

There are striking similarities today. Recent years have seen relations between Colombia and Venezuela hit new lows, while the Venezuelan government entertained serious fears about a US invasion launched from Colombia to remove Maduro from power.

Once again, there was a strategic advantage for the Venezuelan government to allow the guerrillas to operate in the border region. This was laid bare in Colombian intelligence reports published by Noticias RCN in July 2022, which InSight Crime has not been able to independently verify, which reported how the ELN had drawn up plans to deploy as a paramilitary force to protect the Maduro regime in the event of a foreign invasion.
With the arrival of Petro, though, diplomatic relations between the two countries have been re-established for the first time since 2019. There have even been efforts to restore relations with the United States, which although tentative and limited, are at least a sign that military action is no longer on the table.

“Once Colombia convinces Venezuela that it is not a threat to its sovereignty, that’s when Venezuelan cooperation on the ELN will come,” said Trejos.

With these geopolitical shifts, the current climate could favor Venezuelan support for a peace process. However, Maduro’s internal political calculations are very different from Chávez’s in 2012.

“Now, it is much more complicated because the Venezuelan government, and these armed groups have a mutual need for each other,” said Zuleta.

This mutual need stems from the ways that the guerrillas have helped Maduro cling to power, weathering economic, social, and political crises. Today, the guerrillas continue to help prop up the state.

The Venezuelan military continues to cooperate with the ELN. The guerrillas have partnered with the security forces to target enemies that represent a security risk or an obstacle to the regime’s objectives, such as the Colombian criminal militia the Rastrojos, the renegade FARC dissidents of the 10th Front, and the mining gangs of Bolívar.

“The military and the guerrillas] have an agreement, practically a corrupt business that they run together on the border.”

The threats to Maduro have been political as well as military. The guerrillas have helped in this area as well, especially in the border region, which is a traditional hotbed of support for the Venezuelan political opposition. There, the guerrillas have interfered in elections, according to various media reports and InSight Crime sources on the ground. In areas where the opposition has won elections, the ELN’s presence is often strong enough to prevent opposition administrations from governing freely.

“The municipal government has to work with the guerrillas. If you are from the opposition, you have to accept that and respect their rules and regulations,” a local government official in a border municipality in Táchira, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime.
Venezuela’s economic decline poses a threat more pernicious but ultimately even more challenging than these direct military and political threats to Maduro’s power.

Venezuela's economy is still suffering from years of hyperinflation, rampant corruption, and punishing international sanctions. This left the government teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, starved of foreign currency, and unable to pay living wages to the security forces and other branches of the State.

Once again, the criminal activities of the ELN have offered respite from these challenges.

The guerrillas’ control of territories in the mineral-rich states of Amazonas and Bolívar helps the state claim a share of the gold produced in illegal mining operations. Trading this gold internationally has helped the government skirt US sanctions and provided sorely needed foreign income to the government.

The guerrillas also share profits from mining as well as other criminal economies such as contraband, fuel smuggling, and drug trafficking, with Venezuelan security forces, according to multiple current and former security forces officials, local and national political sources, experts, investigators, and community sources in the border region, who all spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

As the government does not have the resources to pay living wages to security forces, it permits police and military of all ranks to pad their income with this dirty cash to keep them loyal.

“[The military and the guerrillas] have an agreement, practically a corrupt business that they run together on the border,” said Romel Guzamana, an indigenous National Assembly representative for the state of Amazonas.

The state’s alliances with the ELN helped Maduro weather the storms of Venezuela's political and economic crisis and he has now reached what may be his most stable position of power in years. The opposition is weakened and divided, international relations are thawing, and the Venezuelan economy has stabilized and seen limited growth. For Maduro, maintaining an active ELN may still outweigh the benefits of facilitating a peace process.

“There is a parasitic and symbiotic relationship between the Maduro government and the ELN, and this will be very difficult to undo,” said Zuleta.
Mutual Spoilers or Mutually Dependent on Peace?

For the moment, it is looking increasingly likely that a new ELN process will begin, and that Venezuela will offer its public support to Colombia’s President Petro.

The doubts that loom largest are how sincere Maduro’s involvement in the upcoming peace process will be, and how the mutual dependence of the Venezuelan state and the now binational Eastern and Northeastern War Fronts of the ELN will affect both the fronts and the Venezuelan government’s willingness to fully participate.

Even if Maduro can be convinced that brokering peace is once again more politically beneficial than enabling war, he may find the ELN is now too deeply entrenched in Venezuela and has grown too powerful for him to control.

“If, for whatever reason, the moment arrives when they [the ELN and Venezuelan regime] no longer need each other, then I can’t see the ELN picking up its tents and its arms and going back to Colombia. It is going to stay there,” said Zuleta.

The Venezuelan military has already learned painful lessons about taking on entrenched guerrilla groups. When the military attempted to drive the FARC dissident 10th Front out of Apure in early 2021, the campaign ended with a humiliating withdrawal. And the much larger and stronger ELN would make for a much more formidable opponent.

“What happened with the 10th Front would be child’s play compared to what would happen if they confronted the ELN,” said Zuleta.

This alone could be enough to deter Maduro from truly supporting Petro’s plans for peace with the ELN -- or at least to hedge his bets by playing both sides. For both Petro and Maduro -- and for Colombia and Venezuela -- the stakes are high.

“I believe Venezuela is going to find itself at a crossroads, if it supports Colombia in finding a negotiated resolution to the conflict with the ELN but the process is not successful, then it could pay the price of an armed conflict in Venezuela,” said Trejos, who has extensively studied Colombia’s armed conflict and peace processes.

The ELN’s internal divisions, the rising strength of Colombian rebel elements in Venezuela, and its growing Venezuelan constituency, combined with the symbiotic relationship with the Maduro regime mean a swift resolution to peace negotiations remains a distant prospect.
InSight Crime is a think tank and media organization that seeks to deepen and inform the debate about organized crime and citizen security in the Americas by providing regular reporting, analysis, data, investigation, and policy suggestions on how to tackle the multiple challenges they present.

It does this by fusing investigative journalism with academic rigor, building its analysis from extensive ground research, which includes speaking to all the actors, legal and illegal. As well as its published work on this website, it works with a network of experts and partners in the region to provide bespoke risk analysis, diagnostics, and opportunities for positive intervention.

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