



**InSight
Crime**

ANALYSIS AND INVESTIGATION
OF ORGANIZED CRIME

The Battle for Apure: Chavismo and the ex-FARC

InSight Crime



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Inviting War into Venezuela



The photos showed five dead bodies laid out in the dirt, each with a gun or grenade close to an outstretched hand. The official report stated these were guerrillas who were killed in a firefight with security forces.

But the wounds visible in the photos were not consistent with those sustained in combat. According to forensic experts [commissioned](#) by Human Rights Watch (HRW), there was evidence the bodies were positioned and the weapons planted. Witness testimonies collected by HRW described the victims being dragged out of their homes with their T-shirts over their heads before being loaded into armored trucks.

“They wanted to show the president and the leadership that they had killed guerrillas. But the truth is they didn’t kill any guerrillas. That was my family, which they took from their home,” a family member of the victims, who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, told InSight Crime.

The killings had all the hallmarks of falsos positivos (false positives) as they are called in Colombia: dead civilians dressed up as Marxist rebels. Between 2002 and 2008, the Colombian military responded [to pressure to show results](#) by murdering

an estimated 6,400 innocent civilians, then dressing them up as guerrillas to present them as combat kills.

But this was not Colombia. This was Venezuela. Not in the past, but now.

The alleged extrajudicial killings took place in March 2021 in the border state of Apure. They came just days after the Venezuelan military had launched major military operations targeting the 10th Front, a dissident faction of the now-demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC), known as the *ex-FARC Mafia*. As the fighting escalated, Apure witnessed more and more of the horrors associated with Colombia's guerrilla war: mass displacement, firefights and ambushes, kidnapped soldiers, landmines, and accusations of arbitrary detentions and torture committed by security forces.

For decades, *Venezuela has berated Colombia*, as its civil conflict drove hundreds of thousands of desperate Colombians into the neighboring country. Yet today, the flow of criminality and displacement is moving in the other direction. And while in Colombia, the war was the product of generations of complex social, political, economic, and criminal factors, in Venezuela, the government had invited the warring factions into the country.

The President and the Guerrillas

Colombia's armed conflict and organized crime have been seeping across the Venezuelan border little by little for decades. But the invite to Colombian guerrillas to come across was issued by former President Hugo Chávez, the founder of the "Bolivarian Revolution."

There is *evidence* the FARC reached out to Chávez as a potential political ally after the then-army lieutenant colonel led an attempted coup in 1992. However, it was after he became president in 1999 that the relationship began in earnest.

Seized FARC communications show that from as early as 2000, the FARC was directly communicating with the man who *would become* their main interlocutor with the government, Ramón Rodríguez Chacín, a member of Chávez's inner circle who would go on to hold the position of minister of interior and justice, among other roles.

"I reiterate my willingness to cooperate, which constitutes, as I have said, a revolutionary obligation and a matter of personal affection," Chacín wrote to a FARC commander in 2001.

However, the events of the following year pushed this political cooperation towards a full strategic alliance. First, in April 2002, Chávez was briefly toppled from power

in a United States-supported coup. The hardline right-winger Álvaro Uribe was then elected president in Colombia, promising an assault against the Marxist rebels that would deploy the full force of the country's [US-funded military](#).

Determined to hold on to power in the wake of the coup, Chávez saw the FARC rebels as a strategic tool, a bulwark against foreign intervention from an increasingly hostile Colombia and its military patron, the United States. The FARC, forced onto the defensive by Uribe's military onslaught, saw a [safe haven](#) in Venezuela – a place to hide and plan operations.

In the years that followed, the Venezuelan military began to turn a blind eye to the guerrilla presence and even actively aid the rebels.

“The government supported them a lot, in every way: arms, medicine, trucks and trucks of food,” a former political leader in Chávez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela - PSUV) in the border region told InSight Crime. The leader, who did not want to be identified out of fear of political persecution, described visiting several FARC camps and meeting with local guerrilla commanders during the course of his political work for the PSUV.

According to the seized FARC communications and US investigations, detailed in numerous indictments and sanctions listings, senior figures within the Chávez administration began cooperating directly with the guerrillas. They allegedly provided the rebels with [fake identification documents](#) and security to operate freely in the country, solicited their help to [provide military training](#) to security forces and militia groups loyal to Chávez, [laundered the guerrillas' money](#) and [funneled arms](#) to their fighters.

Most gravely of all, the FARC, the military, and leading members of the Chávez government began cooperating in drug trafficking, according to the evidence made public in [US indictments](#), [sanctions listings](#), and the [testimonies](#) of former senior Chavistas turned informants. These accounts were confirmed by numerous sources that spoke to InSight Crime, including retired military generals, former PSUV and Venezuelan Communist Party leaders, former officials in the Chávez government, former Chávez appointed diplomats, as well as residents and human rights workers in the border region.

Chávez, determined to maintain political unity and the support of the armed forces at all costs, allowed it to happen.

“For Chávez, the only way for him to maintain loyalty and keep himself in power was to be permissive, and so he permitted a lot of members of the military and a lot of public officials from his government to get involved in drug trafficking,” Mildred Camero, a former director of Venezuela's National Commission Against Illicit Drug Use (Comisión Nacional Contra el Uso Ilícito de las Drogas – CONACUID) in the Chávez administration told InSight Crime.

“I told President Chávez this was happening. I did a report for him on it, and what was the response? They removed me from my position,” she added.

The list of Chavistas sanctioned or indicted by the United States for their alleged FARC ties to date [includes](#) former vice-presidents, government ministers, intelligence chiefs, diplomats, military commanders, and state governors. Among them is Chávez’s hand-picked successor, current President [Nicolás Maduro](#).

The result of this cooperation was an influx of guerrillas into Venezuela. By 2010, Colombian intelligence estimated there were 1,500 FARC guerrillas stationed in Venezuela, in addition to fighters from another leftist insurgency, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN). The state of Apure became one of the main operating bases for both groups. Three of the FARC’s seven fighting divisions, known as blocs, were active in the border region. Among them were the Eastern Bloc and its 10th Front.

Once established in Venezuela, the FARC ran criminal and military operations and began to replicate the local-level social and political work they carried out in Colombia. Free from the risk of attack, they were able to make themselves a part of community life.

“We have learned to live alongside the guerrillas. Even the ranchers with a little bit of money and power have become their allies,” said a rancher in Apure, who did not want to be identified for security reasons.

The FARC didn’t just coexist with the local communities. They also set themselves up as the de facto authorities, bringing security and stability where the state could not. “The guerrillas don’t interfere with the citizens in the zone. The guerrillas mess with those who rob, who kill, who mess with them, who inform on them,” said the rancher.

Colombia’s War in Venezuelan Lands

In 2016, the FARC leadership signed a peace accord with the Colombian government and agreed to demobilize their forces following negotiations in which Venezuela played a vital role as an interlocutor and guarantor.

By that point, several FARC splinter groups had already formed. Some of the most important ones were already consolidating control of former FARC territories and criminal economies in Venezuela. In FARC-controlled regions of Apure, residents say, the demobilization changed little. As before, the 10th Front held sway.

However, that continuity on the ground has masked a more volatile reality. The relatively stable and mutually beneficial strategic alliance that had flourished between the FARC and the Venezuelan state under President Hugo Chávez has broken down

amid factional disputes and ever-shifting alliances. With tensions mounting, in late 2020, President Maduro decided that the 10th Front had overstayed its welcome in Venezuela.

After an initial one-off assault in September 2020, the military launched the first of what was to be a series of operations aiming to drive the 10th Front out of the country in late January 2021. As has happened so often in Colombia, the fighting quickly degenerated into human rights abuses of the civilian population.

While there were several skirmishes through February, the first major operation of the campaign came on March 21, when the military launched an attack on the camp of one of the 10th Front leaders, Fabian Guevara Carrascal, alias “Ferley.”

Following the offensive, at least 2,800 Venezuelans fled their homes to escape the fighting and sought refuge in Colombia. Many fled because the guerrillas, who appeared to have been tipped off about the operations, warned residents of the coming conflict, locals told InSight Crime.

“A pastor [from the displaced community] told me, ‘the guerrillas themselves came, and they told us to leave because the government was coming and they would think we were guerrillas, they would attack us, massacre us,’” said the local priest in a nearby town, who wanted to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals.



The guerrillas, it appeared, had melted away into the forest. But they had also protected their retreat. According to official reports, the day after the attack, two soldiers died, and anti-personnel mines laid by the ex-FARC wounded nine more. While landmines have long been a favored tactic of guerrillas in Colombia, making it one of the most heavily mined countries globally, this marked the first recorded incident in Venezuela since it [declared itself a landmine-free country](#) in 2013.

As the search for the guerrillas intensified, the police's Special Actions Force (Fuerza de Acción Especial de la Policía Nacional Bolivariana – FAES) – which is [notorious for carrying extrajudicial killings](#) – joined the hunt. According to the witness testimonies [collected by HRW](#), the FAES raided houses in and around the border town of La Victoria, dragging residents from their homes, throwing them to the ground, beating them and threatening to kill them.

They eventually reached the house of Luz Dey Remolina and her husband Emilio Ramírez Villamizar. They whisked the couple away along with their son Yefferson, and Emilio's brother Ehiner. Hours later, the family, along with a fifth victim, Julio César Jiménez Millán, would reappear in the FAES' photos of their "combat kills."

The three men from the Ramírez family were agricultural day workers, taking whatever work they could find on local farms, while Luz Dey was a housewife, according to the family member who spoke to InSight Crime. Julio César had arrived in Apure just days before to take a job in a bakery, local residents told InSight Crime.

The following day, another 1,000 to 1,200 Venezuelans fled for Colombia, [according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#). The flow of refugees continued to climb, eventually reaching 5,877, [according to the UN-led initiative, the Interagency Group on Mixed Migratory Flows \(Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos - GIFMM\)](#). However, this was likely an underestimate as many [stayed with friends or family](#) and did not register with the authorities.

Many of the displaced soon went back to Venezuela, but some returned to find security forces had looted their homes, local residents, political and community leaders told InSight Crime. According to the local priest who spoke to InSight Crime, not even the church escaped their attentions in one town.

"They entered the church, which was locked up, they broke down the door," he said. "They went inside, and they took everything, even the priest's collection box, they opened it up and stole the money inside."

After the military's initial assault, the ex-FARC regrouped and [began to launch counter-attacks](#). And as the pressure mounted on the security forces, so did their abuse of a population they saw as guerrilla collaborators.

Security agents began to round up local residents and, apparently without evidence, warrants, charges, or any due process, accused them of being guerrilla informants and detained them.

“At that moment I didn’t understand why they had taken me so I asked the captain who arrested me and he said they had brought me there because someone had said I was passing information to the FARC, and that I had to talk and I had to tell the truth,” said one woman who was detained but later released, who InSight Crime is not identifying for security reasons. “He told me, ‘You have no rights.’”

In some cases, those detained were beaten and even tortured, according to multiple accounts collected by InSight Crime and [human rights organizations](#).

While the total number of detained is unknown, on April 5, [Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino announced](#) that by that point, 33 people had been arrested, 14 of whom would be tried in a military court on charges of treason. Since then, there [have been reports](#) of further arrests of ranchers and farmworkers accused by the military of collaborating with the ex-FARC.

The series of abuses made clear that despite their ringside seat to Colombia’s war, the Venezuelan military had not learned from their neighbor’s experience. For generations in Colombia, indiscriminate military assaults, human rights abuses and the stigmatization of civilian populations obliged to coexist with guerrillas have, in the long run, strengthened the insurgents by delegitimizing the state. And now, locals in Apure say, the same thing is happening in Venezuela.

“Residents feel safer with the guerrillas, there is a relationship there that dates back years, the guerrillas don’t interfere with them, but the government does,” said a religious leader in the border town of Amparo, who did not want to be named for security reasons.

The state’s credibility with border communities in the fight against the 10th Front is also strained by a truth all too evident to those in the region, one which goes to the heart of why the government launched the campaign in the first place: While the state is finally attacking guerrilla groups in Apure, it is very pointedly not attacking all the guerrilla groups in Apure.

“They were all united,” said the rancher. “[Now] some guerrillas have a direct relationship with the Venezuelan government, while the others do not.”

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Apure's Proxy War



The fighting that erupted in the Venezuelan state of Apure in early 2021 was on the surface a classic guerrilla conflict. The national military was given a mission to rid the region of “terrorists” and was deployed against a small band of insurgents, who claimed to be fighting for their leftist ideals. But behind this façade was a shadowy array of both state and underworld actors all seeking access to their own slice of wealth and power.

When the Venezuelan government announced military operations near the Colombian border in Apure, it declared its target was “drug trafficking terrorists,” “irregular armed groups,” “organized crime groups,” and “bloodthirsty criminals.” It soon became clear they were talking about one group: the 10th Front dissidents of the now demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC).

The news caused confusion. Before its demobilization in 2017, the FARC had cooperated closely with the Venezuelan government, and the 10th Front had not only smoothly taken over former FARC territory in Apure, they had also maintained the rebels’ connections and alliances with both local communities and the local military and political structures. In Apure, people considered them to be allies of the state, and yet the state was now attacking them.

The exact motivations of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in ordering the assault against the 10th Front are not known. However, what is clear is that, since the demobilization of the FARC, Apure had become a tinder box of competing interests, where different factions of the military and the ruling Chavista political movement were locking horns, and a guerrilla cold war was beginning to run hot.

At Home in Venezuela: Rise of the Second Marquetalia

The story of the current conflict in Apure did not start with ideology or revolution, but with egos, greed and frustrated ambition unleashed by the founding of the ex-FARC group, the Second Marquetalia, in 2019.

The group's two principal founders, Luciano Marín Arango, alias "Iván Márquez," and Seuxis Pausias Hernández Solarte, alias "Jesús Santrich," were among the FARC's most well-known and revered commanders prior to the insurgents' demobilization in 2017.

Márquez was seen as the second most senior member of the FARC governing body, the Secretariat (Secretariado). Santrich was a member of the Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central) – the broader leadership group from which Secretariat members were elected. Both were primarily political figures, dedicated to building support, alliances and networks at home and abroad.

When talks with the Colombian government formally began in 2012, the FARC dispatched both men to Havana, Cuba, as part of the delegation tasked with making peace. Márquez was the chief negotiator. After the final agreement was signed, both were set to become congressmen for the new FARC political party.

However, in April 2018, Santrich was arrested and accused of attempting to broker a ten-ton cocaine deal during a [controversial DEA sting operation](#). After Santrich was released, re-arrested, then re-released, both he and Márquez disappeared.

They resurfaced in a [video released](#) in August 2019. Flanked by some of the FARC's most notorious military commanders, they announced their return to the armed struggle under the banner of the Second Marquetalia – named for the mythic birthplace of the original FARC. While Márquez claimed to be in Colombia, [the Colombian military said](#) it was likely the video was shot in Venezuela.

"This is the continuation of the guerrilla struggle in response to the state's betrayal of the Havana Peace Accords," Márquez declared.

Initially Márquez and Santrich hoped to link up with existing FARC dissidents led by then Miguel Botache Santillana, alias "Gentil Duarte," who had [been working](#) to unify the numerous ex-FARC factions around the country under his command.



EX-FARC MAFIA

The Second Marquetalia

The Second Marquetalia was formed in 2019 by leading demobilized FARC military commanders and political leaders who had grown disillusioned with the Colombian government's failure to implement peace accords and were fearful of legal persecution.

The new group revived former FARC fighting units, coopted existing dissident networks, and even set up new units all around Colombia. These units respond to the orders of the central command based in Apure, Venezuela, but it is likely that, in most cases, they are largely autonomous in day-to-day operations. However, while the Second Marquetalia has succeeded in seizing control of zones strategically important for criminal economies such as drug trafficking, it has struggled to build military strength or assert control over large territories.



Leader: Luciano Marín alias "Iván Márquez"

Areas of influence in Colombia



insightcrime.org

September 2021


Source: Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE): "Las caras de las disidencias, cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución"; InSight Crime investigations.

Duarte, too, had been part of the first peace delegation sent to Cuba. But then in 2016, the guerrilla leadership dispatched him to the department of Guaviare to restore order after a FARC front broke from the peace process and went rogue. Duarte instead disappeared with \$1.35 million of guerrilla cash and joined the dissidents, becoming one of their most senior and visible leaders.

In an account confirmed by Colombian intelligence, Duarte's third-in-command, alias "Jonnier," described the summit to the Colombian conflict monitoring group [Fundacion Paz y Reconciliacion](#). According to the guerrilla leader, Márquez expected to simply take the reins from Duarte.

"When Márquez arrived, he was very arrogant, he wanted to carry on as the commander in charge of the FARC that had continued in resistance," Jonnier said. "We told him that we had not called them here to hand over what we had managed to rescue from the FARC peace process."

Márquez and Santrich's efforts to convince other ex-FARC factions around Colombia to join them were similarly frustrated, and the Second Marquetalia began to look like a guerrilla army of many commanders but few soldiers.

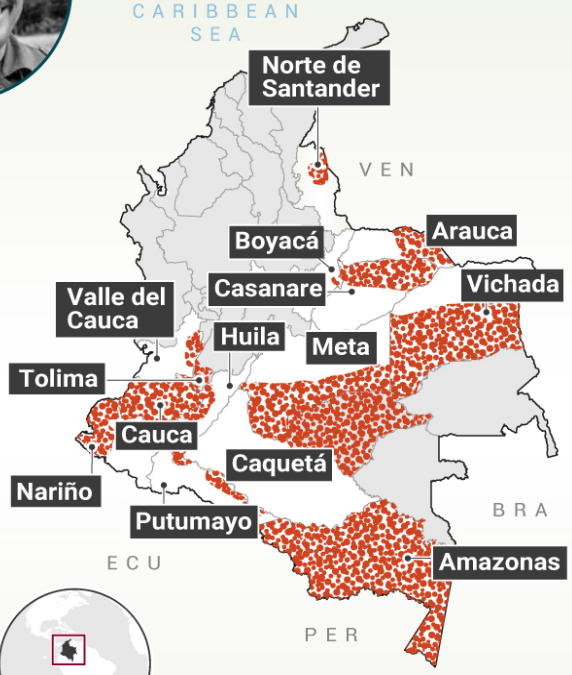
**EX-FARC MAFIA / Duarte's Dissident Network**

Since breaking away from the FARC peace process while talks were still ongoing, Miguel Botache Santillana, alias "Gentil Duarte," has succeeded in building the biggest and most powerful ex-FARC network active today.

The dissident network is not one unified, hierarchical structure, but an umbrella group in which the central leadership group coordinates between largely independent ex-FARC units dispersed around Colombia. Some, such as the ex-FARC blocs commanded by Duarte and other top leaders, control huge swathes of territory and maintain formidable fighting forces. Others are small networks operating in just a handful of municipalities, usually those strategically important for criminal economies.

Leader: Miguel Botache Santillana, alias "Gentil Duarte"

Areas of influence in Colombia



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Source: Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE): "Las caras de las disidencias, cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución"; InSight Crime investigations.

The Second Marquetalia based operations not in Colombia, but in Venezuela, where both Márquez and Santrich had a long history. For years they had carried out political work in the country, with Márquez working out of an office in Caracas, according to seized FARC communications. They built up connections that ran to the top of Chavismo, and Márquez met with President Hugo Chávez in 2007.

Even before the official announcement of their return to arms, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro had publicly stated Márquez and Santrich were welcome in the country after they had gone underground, calling them "men of peace."

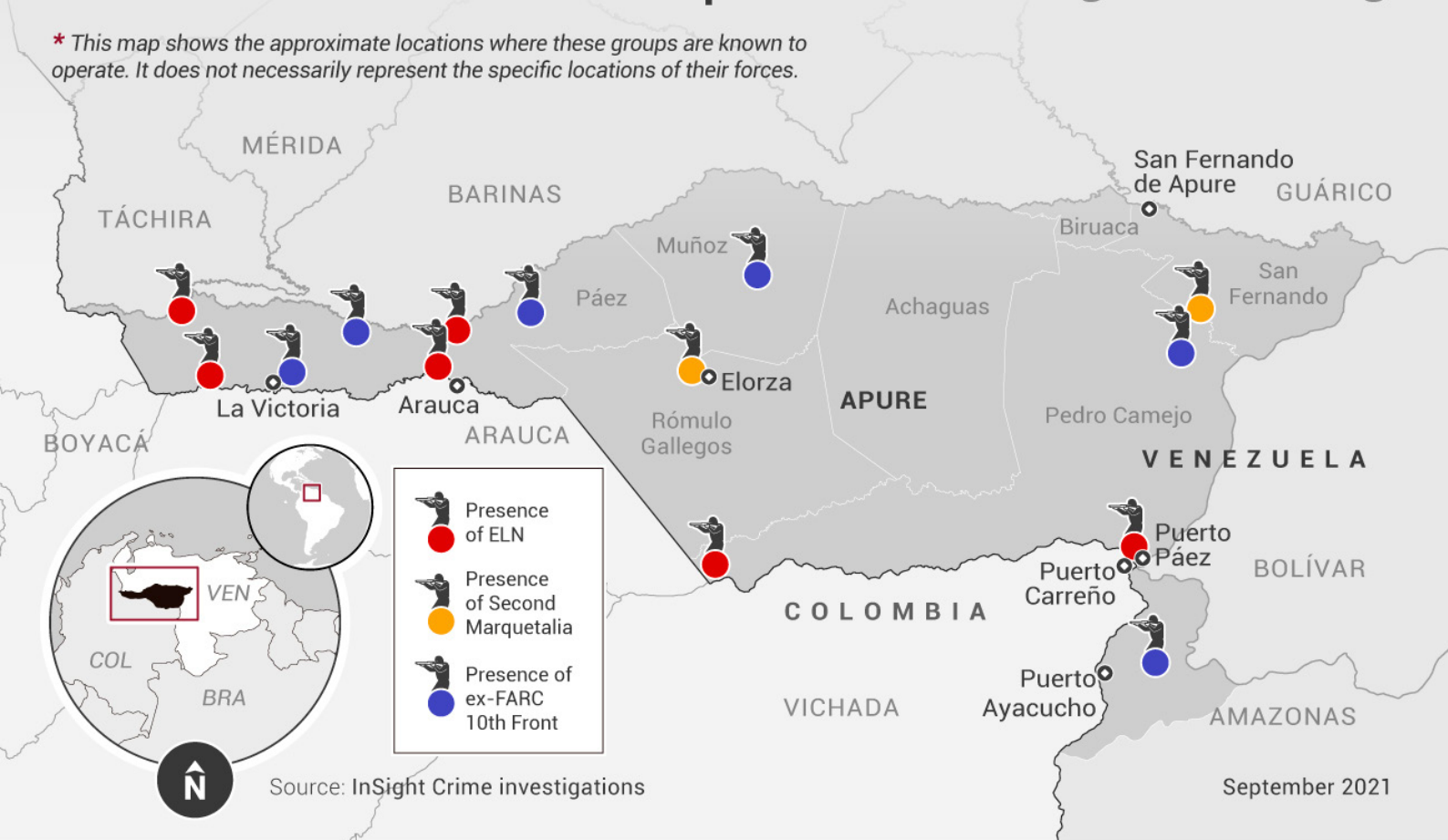
The Second Marquetalia set up in Apure, which had acted as a hub of FARC operations in Venezuela for three decades. There – say local residents, community leaders, political leaders, human rights workers, and former officials, who all spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity for security reasons – the rebels set up a new base of operations near the town of Elorza in the municipality of Romulo Gallegos.

To finance their operations, they turned to drug trafficking, dispatching cocaine-laden aircraft from clandestine airstrips, the sources report. At no point, did the Venezuelan authorities intervene.

Guerrilla Presence in Apure

[insightcrime.org](https://www.insightcrime.org)

* This map shows the approximate locations where these groups are known to operate. It does not necessarily represent the specific locations of their forces.



The new rebel group also would have had to smooth the way with the biggest rebel group operating in Apure, and across the border in the Colombian department of Arauca – the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN). Several sources report that the Second Marquetalia leaders staged summits with ELN leaders even before announcing the formation of the movement.

Once entrenched in Apure, and with their drug business up and running, the Second Marquetalia sought once again to expand and recruit other ex-FARC factions. While they could not compete with Duarte in military strength and territorial presence, they did have political connections and money.

However, there was one problem: the Second Marquetalia were not the only guerrillas in Apure laying claim to the FARC name. There was also the 10th Front, a FARC dissident group that was allied with Gentil Duarte's network.

The 10th Front: Heirs to the FARC in Apure

While Márquez and Santrich were attempting to rebuild the FARC from the top down, the 10th Front had been seeking to rebuild in Apure from the bottom up. And while the Second Marquetalia had inherited the FARC's top-level political connections in Venezuela, the 10th Front had inherited its local networks on the ground.

The dissident front was led by Jorge Eliécer Jiménez Martínez, alias “**Jerónimo**” or “**Arturo**.” According to human rights workers who worked with ex-combatants across the border in Arauca during the demobilization process, Arturo was released from prison as part of the amnesty program in the peace process.

However, Arturo had fallen out with the previous FARC 10th Front commander, and when he arrived in the region his name was not on the lists of demobilizing fighters. “[The commander] said he was not going to recognize him because he was a deserter and an ally of paramilitary groups,” said one of the sources, who asked not to be identified for security reasons. “So [Arturo] went to work, gathering people together to set up a new version of the 10th Front.”

From the start, Arturo received support from Duarte's dissidents, according to numerous sources in the region that spoke to InSight Crime, as well as [investigations](#) by conflict monitoring groups and local media. While largely autonomous in running their affairs locally, the group's control of border crossings [granted Duarte an important outlet](#) for cocaine shipments.

Arturo's new dissident 10th Front moved quickly to [consolidate control](#) over former FARC territories in Apure and Arauca. They sought to take over criminal economies on both sides of the frontier.

For local residents in Apure, long accustomed to living side by side with the guerrillas, there was little to distinguish one moment from the next.

“There has been coexistence [with the guerrillas] for years. They have been here for nearly 20 years, since Chávez became president,” said a local rancher, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. “Both sides live here and they share together.”



EX-FARC MAFIA /

The 10th Front

The 10th Front dissidence was formed during the FARC demobilization process by mid-level commanders and guerrilla fighters who either did not stand down or who abandoned the peace process.

The group is firmly rooted in the Arauca-Apure border region. There, it has taken over former FARC territories, while maintaining the guerrillas' community ties, social and political role, corruption networks, and control of cross-border criminal economies, above all smuggling and drug trafficking. It is led by local commanders, and largely operates autonomously. However, it receives support from and coordinates actions with Gentil Duarte's national leadership group.



Leader: Jorge Eliecer Jiménez Martínez, alias "Arturo" or "Jerónimo"

Areas of influence in Colombia



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September 2021

Source: Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE): "Las caras de las disidencias, cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución"; InSight Crime investigations.

As they built up their forces, the guerrillas capitalized on these community ties to recruit Venezuelans into their ranks, according to both Colombian military intelligence published by [Reuters](https://www.reuters.com), and local sources in Apure.

"They offer money and food to people to draw them in, very few people are forced to join." a priest in a town in ex-FARC territory, who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, told InSight Crime.

The 10th Front also maintained the FARC's historic alliance with the local military, with both sides making no effort to hide the collusion, multiple sources in guerrilla-controlled territories in Apure told InSight Crime.

“The guerrillas live side by side with elements of the armed forces as if they were neighbors,” a local journalist, who asked to remain anonymous out of security concerns, told InSight Crime. Another local journalist described to InSight Crime how on a visit to the border town of La Victoria, he was asked to commentate on a soccer tournament featuring teams from both the 10th Front and the military.

There is evidence the relationship went much further than peaceful coexistence and that the military and the 10th Front also cooperated in criminal economies. Local residents, community leaders, political leaders and a local contraband smuggler all described to InSight Crime how the guerrillas and the military were dividing up the profits from cross-border smuggling.

However, while the 10th Front’s smooth takeover of the FARC’s territories and local connections gave a sense of stability on the ground, the arrival of the Second Marquetalia had complicated the panorama and trouble was looming.

The Wars Within the War

By the time the Second Marquetalia leadership arrived in Apure, Duarte – and by extension the 10th Front – had already rejected their overtures. But that did not stop them from headhunting key 10th Front actors who had the local knowledge they needed to help establish themselves in the region.

One of their first targets was Robert Abril, alias “Porrón,” a demobilized former FARC finance chief, who the 10th Front had pressured into joining their ranks by kidnapping his father, according to one of the human rights workers in Arauca.

“They called [Porrón] in to meet with Santrich and Marquez, who said, ‘Come, you are one of us, you can help us, there is money, help us organize all of this,’” he said. “So he told the 10th Front he would not continue with them, that he was going with Marquetalia.”

The 10th Front responded to the betrayal by launching an operation to kill Porrón in La Victoria. Although Porrón escaped the raid, [six people were left dead](#). The attack also killed the possibility of the two sides coexisting in Apure, much less reconciling. And it ramped up wider tensions between the Second Marquetalia and Gentil Duarte.

The 10th Front’s relationship with the ELN was also beginning to fray, according to the human rights workers. In 2020, [one report](#) in the Venezuela media even claimed there had been armed clashes after the ex-FARC moved into ELN territory.

However, when the attack finally came, it was neither the Second Marquetalia nor the ELN leading the assault, but the Venezuelan military.

The first attack came in September 2020, when the Venezuelan army raided 10th Front camps. However, that was just a prelude to what was to come. In late January 2021, the military began the first of a series of operations that marked an unprecedented assault against guerrillas in Venezuela, which would continue until May.

The 10th Front responded with a counterattack, targeting military positions and units. They also made it clear who they blamed for the violence – the Second Marquetalia.

In an audio recording that circulated in April, apparently recorded by a 10th Front commander, the speaker called for dialogue with the Venezuelan military and the Maduro government while launching a tirade against the “traitors to the revolution,” the “sellouts” who “returned to arms without an army” and whose “only interest is their personal enrichment.”

He also fired a warning to the Venezuelans: “The traitors are with you on the inside, they walk with you, eat with you, you embrace them and greet them with the mask of a false revolutionary,” he said.

Duarte’s dissidents quickly declared their support for the 10th Front and joined in the verbal attack on the Second Marquetalia in a video statement made by Jonnier.

“[The Second Marquetalia] want to proclaim themselves the true revolutionaries, when their actions towards those of us who remained in armed resistance have been nothing but slander, deception, and betrayal,” he said.

“[T]hese men finance a few officials in the Venezuelan government so that they do their dirty work, to facilitate their interests and to satisfy their personal appetites in a way that is disloyal and traitorous.”

The guerrillas were not the only ones to come to this conclusion. InSight Crime spoke to numerous sources, including human rights workers in Arauca and Apure, community and political leaders and residents in Apure, members of the political opposition, national and local journalists, investigators, and conflict analysts in Venezuela and Colombia, and former Venezuelan military members. All of them agreed: the Venezuelan military attacked the 10th Front at least in part to benefit the Second Marquetalia.

“There is only one person with the high-level contacts in Venezuela who can pick up a telephone and call a general to ask him to bomb his enemies,” said the human rights worker. “Thinking about who would have these contacts, there is only Iván Márquez.”

“This is a struggle between two factions of the old FARC to control a territory that is very favorable for illegal operations such as drug trafficking,” a retired Venezuelan military general told InSight Crime. “The Venezuelan armed forces are supporting

those who are closest to President Maduro, and this is why they are in the game, not to drive out an enemy that is illegally in Venezuelan territory but to favor a sector of the FARC.”

Other [media reports](#) suggested the ELN may also have lobbied for the attack after the 10th Front began to encroach on their territory and the criminal economies they control, although InSight Crime could not confirm that with sources in the region.

However, it is unlikely Maduro would deploy the full force of the Venezuelan military just to settle guerrilla disputes. Sources say there were likely also broader strategic calculations in play.

Another possible motivation was to play to an international audience that had been increasingly critical of the Maduro regime’s evident support for guerrilla groups, according to Iván Simonovis, a former police chief, political prisoner, and more recently special commissioner for security and intelligence in the Venezuelan opposition’s self-declared “interim government.”

“I believe the regime said, ‘We are going to wash our hands of this, we are going to neutralize this guerrilla group and then it will seem like we are combatting the guerrillas while we are removing this problem for Mr. Márquez and Mr. Santrich,’” he told InSight Crime.

Several other sources, including people with inside knowledge of the inner politics and criminal activities of the Maduro regime, say the conflict was likely also a result of factional tensions within Chavismo.

“There is an internal division within the regime. Some support the Second Marquetalia, while there is another sector that maintains connections and does business with Gentil Duarte,” a former prominent member of the Venezuelan Communist Party (Partido Comunista de Venezuela – PCV), which was part of the Chavista coalition until 2020, told InSight Crime.

The 10th Front’s fate was then sealed, the same source suggested, because they refused to pay more to their allies in the Venezuelan military.

“Some generals from a sector of the armed forces demanded these dissidents increase the money they pay as a sort of ‘quota’ for being in the territory,” he said.

Other [reports also point](#) to factions of the military growing frustrated with the 10th Front over the division of extortion rights, claiming the rebels were not sticking to the agreed territories.

While these reports and theories remain unconfirmed, together they point to a broader truth that was becoming increasingly evident for those on the ground in Apure: While the FARC had always been willing to play by the government's rules along the border, the 10th Front dissidents were getting beyond its control.

“They were getting stronger, gaining money and gaining power, and the government cannot allow anyone to have absolute power except them,” a contraband smuggler in Apure with experience navigating the region's complex criminal dynamics told InSight Crime.

Whatever the reasons, Maduro was committed, and willing to risk his own reputation and the lives of Venezuelan soldiers to hunt down the 10th Front guerrillas and drive them from the country.

3

The Venezuelan Military: Outfought and Outmatched



On April 23, 2021, two Venezuelan military helicopters landed near the town of La Victoria in the border state of Apure filled with soldiers dispatched to hunt dissident Colombian guerrillas. The hunters quickly became prey.

Two days later, the guerrillas of the 10th Front of the demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) called on a local priest to come and collect the bodies of the soldiers they had slain in their ambush. They recorded the priest and his assistants retching from the stench as they loaded corpses into a truck. The video [was then published](#) on the internet.

[Human rights observers](#) talked of 12 bodies recovered, but the final death toll may have been higher. Two days later the guerrillas again contacted the priest to ask him to look for yet more bodies. Another priest from a nearby town, who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, told InSight Crime: “He called me to ask what to do and I told him ‘don’t get involved because you are going to get ill from this.’”

There was no official report on the number of dead. The Venezuelan authorities did not even acknowledge the ambush had taken place.

“This was completely silenced, a lot more died,” said the priest.

But there was one thing they could not deny: The guerrillas had also captured eight soldiers. Two weeks after the attack, the ex-FARC first sent out a letter to the Red Cross naming the soldiers and calling on international agencies to facilitate their release. Then they began publishing proof of life videos.

“We have been captured by the FARC, we have been treated well, we have received food, medicine and at this time we are fine,” Lieutenant Colonel Jhancarlo Bemón says in the first of the messages. “I believe this situation can be resolved with dialogue.”

It would prove a turning point in the fighting between the Venezuelan military and the 10th Front, which by that point had been ongoing for three months. In the wake of the attack, reports of [dissension](#) and [desertion](#) in the ranks of the armed forces grew. And the guerrillas, after withstanding the biggest military campaign in Venezuela’s recent history, now held hostages they could use as bargaining chips.

Venezuela Tastes Guerrilla Warfare

The first military mission against the 10th Front in Apure was launched in September 2020, with the objective of capturing or killing Fabián Guevara Carrascal, alias “Ferley,” the 10th Front’s finance chief. Although the military claimed to have killed 15 guerrillas and destroyed three ex-FARC camps, four soldiers were killed and Ferley escaped.

Hostilities resumed in late January 2021, and throughout February there were [sporadic clashes between the security forces and the ex-FARC](#), while the authorities staged raids [targeting the guerrillas’ drug trafficking networks](#). But it wasn’t until late March that the conflict intensified.

On March 21, the military launched “Operation Bolivarian Shield 2021” with a major offensive in the municipality of Páez. [According to the Ministry of Defense](#), the military confronted the guerrillas, capturing 32 people, destroying six camps, and killing an ex-FARC commander, while losing two soldiers in the fighting.

While it was presented as a victory by the military, residents, community leaders and journalists in Páez told InSight Crime that the operation was a failure. By the time the military arrived, the guerrillas had already slipped away. Even the arrests were not what they appeared, with human rights organizations [immediately denouncing the military](#) for arbitrarily detaining farmers and agricultural workers.

The 10th Front began to fight back. On the night of March 23, [a guerrilla cell attacked a customs base](#) in the town of La Victoria with explosives. In the [days that followed](#), there were firefights, aerial bombardments by the military, and guerrilla attacks against security forces positions.

The number of security agencies deployed to the region multiplied. Residents of the town of Guasdalito, where the security forces set up their operating base for the campaign, told InSight Crime that in addition to the army, the National Bolivarian Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional - SEBIN), the police Criminal Investigations Unit (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas – CICPC), the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB), and the police Special Action Forces (Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales - FAES) all had operatives in the camp. In mid-April, the military **even announced** the deployment of 1,000 members of the civilian volunteer force, the Bolivarian militias, to the region.

The deployment of soldiers, police, special forces, intelligence agencies and militias gave the security forces a huge numerical advantage. With their jets, helicopters, and armored vehicles, they also enjoyed a huge advantage in firepower. Yet the 10th Front, with its **estimated 300 fighters** did not present conventional targets: hidden amid the civilian population and moving freely across the border.

“They thought they were going to destroy [the 10th Front quickly], but it was the opposite. When the government attacked them, it made them furious,” said a religious leader in Guasdalito, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.

Decades of armed struggle in Colombia had left the ex-FARC fighters skilled in asymmetrical warfare, while their years operating out of Apure meant they knew the local terrain and had close ties to the communities. This gave them the intelligence that kept them a step ahead of the security forces.

“These people have spent years working [in Apure], and they are friends of all the local farmers,” said a rancher in Apure, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. “The guerrillas know every last thing that happens here.”

It was not only the communities, though. The military stationed in the region was accustomed to cooperating with, not combatting the 10th Front. Locals even describe the two sides patrolling together.

“In trucks, on foot, they did the rounds together, because they worked together. They didn’t fight,” said the religious leader.

After it became evident the 10th Front had received advanced warnings of coming military operations, military intelligence launched an investigation into information leaks and connections between military officials and the ex-FARC, **according to a report in El Nacional**. So far, **two colonels have been arrested** and accused of colluding with the 10th Front, while the brigadier general in charge of the military base of Guasdalito was also **removed from his position** under mysterious circumstances.

Battle for Apure Timeline

November 19

Military operation targeting 10th Front leader "Ferley" reportedly leaves 15 guerrillas and 4 soldiers dead.

January 31

Confrontation between the 10th Front and FANB in the eastern Apure municipality of Pedro Camejo marks beginning of the battle for Apure.

March 21

The FANB escalates the conflict with an assault on guerrilla positions in the 10th Front stronghold of the municipality of Urdaneta and the arrest of 32 people accused of colluding with the 10th Front.

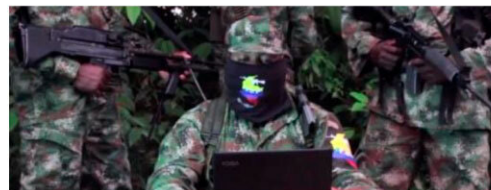
March 25

The FAES kill five local residents in La Victoria and present them as guerrillas killed in combat.



May 10

The 10th Front make a public statement announcing they are holding the soldiers captive and calling for international agencies to facilitate their release.



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Jan 31 to Feb 13

Clashes between security forces and the 10th Front in Pedro Camejo and Atures municipality in the north of the state of Amazonas leave several dead and more wounded as the military and police destroy eight guerrilla camps and eight clandestine airstrips, and seize 192 packets of cocaine.



Mar 21 to Apr 16

Approximately, 5,800 people are displaced from Urdaneta as they flee military raids, bombardments, firefights and guerrilla attacks.

March 23

The 10th Front counterattacks against security forces positions near La Victoria.

April 23

10th Front guerrillas ambush an army unit in the sector of La Capilla, killing an estimated 12 soldiers and capturing eight more.

May 28

The military begin to withdraw from the conflict zone in Urdaneta.



May 31

The Ministry of Defense announces the soldiers held captive by the 10th Front have been freed.

September 2021

Source: Media and official reports

The Military Retreats

Although the 10th Front was embarrassing the military, they were also seeking a way out of the conflict. Publicly, they called for negotiations, while privately they began reaching out to the many political connections they had made over the years, calling on them to help broker a solution.

According to journalist and military expert Sebastiana Barráez, in early April, meetings were staged between the 10th Front, members of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – PSUV), the Venezuelan

Communist Party, (Partido Comunista de Venezuela – PCV), and representatives of various other political movements that have been part of the Chavista “Bolivarian Revolution.”

A former member of the PCV, who asked not to be identified for political reasons, confirmed the meeting between the rebels and the political movements, saying his personal contacts in the PCV had been involved. The PCV were brought in due to their long-standing ties to the guerrillas, especially in Apure, he added.

“The PCV has historically maintained relations with the FARC,” he said. “There are farms in Apure that were expropriated [by the government] that are managed by members of the PCV, they look after them, administer them and they settle accounts with the FARC, with whom they have economic relations.”

But it was only after the 10th Front captured the eight soldiers that the panorama began to shift.

At first, the government remained silent, with Defense [Minister Vladimir Padrino López](#) only publicly acknowledging that the soldiers had been taken on May 15, more than three weeks after the ambush. The following day, the 10th Front released another [proof of life video](#) featuring all eight hostages, who pleaded with the government to negotiate their release.

Then, on May 28, the military forces began to withdraw from the region, with soldiers and armament shipped out and control points shut down. Three days later [Padrino López](#) announced the hostages were free. The military had rescued them, he claimed, in “Operation Centennial Eagle.” But no details were provided of the operation then or since, and there were no reports of any operations or confrontations in the area.

[Reports](#) of the 10th Front celebrating in the streets of La Victoria and nearby towns as the security forces withdrew added to the humiliation for the Venezuelan military.

The Price of Defeat

Official reports recognize 12 deaths between the initial operation in September and the military withdrawal in late May, while [media reports](#) talk about at least 20 dead. However, the true death toll remains a mystery.

In some cases, not even the families of the soldiers sent to fight in Apure know if their sons are dead or alive. For some, the first time they became aware their family members had gone missing was when they did not come home with the rest of their unit after the conflict died down.

InSight Crime spoke to family members of two soldiers who disappeared in the conflict, First Sergeant Abraham Belisario and Sergeant Major Danny Vásquez, both of whom were sent to Apure from the Turiamo naval base in the state of Aragua.

“I found out what had happened by social media. No one told me anything,” said a family member of Belisario. Afterwards she went to the naval headquarters in Caracas looking for information where she was received by a general.

“He told me to have a lot of faith. That is what everyone has said: that I need to have faith,” she said.

The family of Vásquez last heard from him on April 21, when he contacted them to tell them they were taking away their phones. Two days later he sent a message to his wife, but when his family tried to call his phone, it was switched off.

A month later and Vásquez’s commanding officer visited the family house to return his phone and other possessions. But he gave no information on Vásquez’s whereabouts. “When I wrote [to the officer] he did not give me an answer, he simply told me he had no information,” said the family member. “I asked him if they were still looking and he told me yes, that there was lieutenant commander on the case, but that was the only thing he told me.”

The military in Apure had neither the training nor the equipment for the fight. Some of the soldiers sent to the region, including the disappeared Danny Vásquez, had no more than 15 days of special training in Caracas to prepare them for what was awaiting them in Apure.

The 10th Front had effectively exposed how the capacity of the Venezuelan military has been degraded, not only through neglect but also through the government turning it into a political tool whose primary purpose is not to defend the country but to maintain the Chavista regime, said a retired military general, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

“The armed forces are morally depressed because they have been used, ideologized, politicized,” he said. “They have lost their objective, their reason for existing.”

As it became ever more apparent that the military was becoming bogged down in a deadly conflict, soldiers began to desert their posts. In mid-April, [El Nacional reported](#) the military had issued 21 arrest warrants for deserters.

Following the April 23 ambush, desertion rates [leaped further](#), according to press reports, and discontent in the ranks began to bubble over, evidenced by audio recordings of anonymous soldiers that began [to circulate](#) among the media.

“I am pissed! I don’t even know what to think,” said one.

However, it was not only the conditions and the risks that were demoralizing the rank and file military, say former military members. Tensions also mounted as it became clear that the government's claim to be defending the country from "terrorists" was little more than a cover.

"They sent them [to Apure] with the argument that they were going to combat an enemy that was penetrating the national territory," said the general. "But when [the soliders] realized that they were going to fight a faction of the FARC to benefit another faction of the FARC, then the conviction was always going to build that they don't want to go and fight."

For President Maduro, who is [reliant on the loyalty of military](#) to cling to power, the conflict has left him in a precarious position, especially as soldiers begin to ask the question he cannot afford them to ask, a question one former soldier living in Apure posed: "When they see it is a fraud, that it is not clear why you are fighting, and there are people personally benefiting from this conflict, a solider is going to ask himself 'why my life?'"

Despite the rumblings of discontent in the ranks following the military's chastening experience on the battlefield, the government's campaign against the 10th Front has continued.

For the moment, the tactics have changed, with the military not directly confronting the guerrillas but targeting the communities that gave the rebels an advantage in the conflict. [Allegations of arbitrary detentions](#) have continued, with [local media reporting](#) around 130 arrests of alleged FARC collaborators in July and August alone. Video footage obtained by InSight Crime also shows soldiers forcing residents from their homes saying they were used by "friends of the terrorists."

Despite the price he has already paid, Maduro seems intent on reestablishing order and the balance of power that made the FARC-Chavista alliance so profitable to both sides for so many years. Communities in the border region, meanwhile, are bracing for another wave of Colombia's war to hit Venezuela.

"[The 10th Front] don't want to fight, but they say if the state gets crazy then they are going to respond. These people are ready and things could get even more ugly than last time," one resident in La Victoria, who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, told InSight Crime.

4

The Fallout from Apure and the Enemy Within



The Colombian guerrillas have won a battle against the Venezuelan military in the state of Apure, but they will never win the war. Nevertheless, the fighting made one thing clear: The Venezuelan state can no longer control the criminal forces it has so long tolerated.

The battle between the 10th Front dissidents of the demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) and the Venezuelan military, exposed an important reality. Once-unified political movements, both within the Venezuelan State and the guerrillas, have degenerated into factional rivalries and competition over criminal economies. The result: increased instability and violence.

Whether the fighting in the border region and the human rights abuses that resulted represent a small taste of Colombia's civil conflict inside Venezuela or a sign of what is to come remains to be seen. Either way, the conflict will likely have a lasting impact on political and criminal dynamics in Venezuela.

For President Nicolás Maduro, the decision to launch a full-scale military intervention in Apure now looks like hubris. It exposed the limitations of the military and security forces at his command, and this will not have passed unnoticed by rivals, at home and abroad, political and criminal. And perhaps the most damaging aspect for Maduro is it will have strained his legitimacy with the military itself. Troops were sent to fight and die in what appears to have been a campaign to benefit the president and his allies rather than in defense of the country. Maduro is reliant on the military to stay in power, and if its soldiers and generals are unwilling to fight his battles for him, he could find himself increasingly vulnerable.

However, Maduro and his political faction made some gains. Using the excuse of purging the military ranks of 10th Front collaborators and those responsible for the failures in Apure, several senior military officials [have been arrested or removed from their position](#). In their stead, [Maduro](#) has placed loyal allies in these roles and tightened his control over the armed forces, mirroring [his attempts](#) to appoint loyalists in key political positions to shore up his grip on power.

The conflict has also deepened the rifts between factions of the ex-FARC Mafia. The events in Venezuela will likely hasten a process [already apparent in Colombia](#), where the remains of the demobilized insurgency are coalescing around two rival and contrasting poles of power. Both claim the right to call themselves the FARC, but both are looking more and more like drug trafficking organizations than insurgent armies.

On one side is the dissident network led by Miguel Botache Santillana, alias “[Gentil Duarte](#),” which has military might, extensive territorial control and some revolutionary credibility on the ground, as it rejected the peace process early. On the other is the [Second Marquetalia](#), which has famed commanders with top-level connections in both politics and drug trafficking, but little military strength. Its leaders carry the stigma of the failures of the peace process they negotiated with the Colombian government. The panorama is further complicated by the presence of numerous small, independent [ex-FARC networks](#).

In Venezuela, the 10th Front, allied to Duarte, claimed an important victory, showcasing their military expertise and their community support in the border region, and sending a clear message that any future attempts to dislodge them will come at a high price. However, the state persecution of the 10th Front looks set to continue and the group, accustomed to operating in Venezuela with near-total impunity, now finds itself in hostile terrain.

For the Second Marquetalia, the victory of the 10th Front represents a setback. Its rival in Apure has shown its strength, while former comrades-in-arms around Colombia [have publicly blamed](#) the Second Marquetalia for the conflict, denouncing its leaders as traitors to the revolution. This was then compounded by the [reported killing](#) of one

of the group's top leaders, Seuxis Pausias Hernández Solarte, alias "Jesús Santrich," in the Venezuelan state of Zulia in May 2021. The loss of Santrich was not only a blow to the group's leadership structure, it also suggests the Second Marquetalia commanders are no longer completely safe in Venezuela.

However, the fact that the Venezuelan military attacked the Second Marquetalia's main rival in Apure while leaving its interests and personnel untouched is a powerful indicator of the group's strong position in Venezuela. In addition, in the middle of the conflict, the former FARC commander and one of the guerrillas' most notorious drug traffickers, Géner García Molina, alias "John 40," appeared in [Second Marquetalia videos](#) and signed his name to their statements. Until that point, John 40 had been considered part of the core leadership group of Duarte's dissidents. His public backing of the Second Marquetalia represents a major boost to the group, especially for its drug trafficking networks.

The guerrilla group that has arguably benefited the most from the conflict is the one that did the least: the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN). While there were [some reports](#) the ELN had encouraged the Venezuelan military to intervene against the 10th Front, all sources consulted in Apure made clear these guerrillas were content to sit on the sidelines during the fighting. As such, they have seen their rivals weakened without risking anything themselves.

When President Hugo Chávez first invited Colombia's insurgents into Venezuela, he made a Faustian bargain. He gained a powerful ally for his "Bolivarian Revolution," which he was able to leverage for political, strategic and economic gain. But he also invited in a potent armed force with no guarantees he would be able to control it. While the Chávez era is now fading into memory, Venezuela will continue to pay the price of the pact he made.



InSight Crime is a foundation dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime.

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