

# THE **FARC** AT THEIR WORST MOMENT IN HISTORY

MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE  
REPUBLIC OF COLOMBIA



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**A**fter four years of the Democratic Security policy, and then the implementation of the Policy for the Consolidation of Democratic Security as of 2006, there is no doubt that 2007 and 2008 **are the worst two years in the entire history of the FARC.**

To fully understand the current situation of that organization, we have to examine the three basic dimensions of their “revolutionary project”: the political dimension, the military dimension, and the international dimension. Those three factors are closely related and mutually interdependent.

In each sphere, the different parts of the organizational structure of the FARC must combine their actions and efforts around a great final objective. That objective is to seize national political power through violence, with recognition and acceptance from the international community.

In line with that overall objective, and based on the historical premise that no insurgent movement can be viable without mass popular backing, the FARC’s political objective is to build, maintain, and expand its popular support bases. These bases must sustain not only the armed structures by becoming the source of logistical supplies, refuge, recruiting, and intelligence, but they are also the basis for the political movement that will provide leverage and backing for the seizure and exercise of power.

On the military level, the objective is to use violence as a means for establishing territorial control in order to establish secure bases. That initial military control makes influence possible, so that eventually local political power can be seized and their political project can be developed. Expansion is then undertaken from these ‘beachheads,’ culminating in national control.

During its VII Conference in 1982, the FARC established their strategic plan towards a main objective: taking over Bogotá. To carry out the plan, they determined that the military structures should multiply, set base and ultimately control the eastern mountain range of Colombia, (where Bogotá is located) as to isolate this region from the rest of the country, surrounding more and more the country’s capital. All the military activities carried out by the FARC were focused towards achieving this objective.

Also during the 80’s, this organization made another important decision that would define a new direction in the execution of their plans. It was then when the FARC decided to get involved with the drug-trafficking business, an activity that soon turned into their main source of income. The FARC ended up becoming a huge drug cartel, this decision

instigated the use of terrorism as a mechanism of political pressure through the intimidation of society and the loss of their values and political orientation.

Finally, on the international level, their effort focuses on carrying out political and communications activities, in order to generate sympathy and acceptance among the international community for their project, with the hope that this acceptance will eventually lead to the political recognition that will ensure legitimacy once power has been gained.

This has been the FARC's plan, the strategy they have attempted to implement throughout the years. But today it is further than ever from becoming a reality.

## Assessment of the current situation of the Farc

The FARC's overall objective to seize political power in Colombia is impossible. Today's FARC is at the same point where they began over forty years ago, with one great difference: **today's organization has no future.**

The Colombian state has inflicted severe and decisive blows to the FARC in the political, military, and international arenas, leaving this organization far from the objective - father than ever before - that for decades has united thousands of combatants under the iron fist of the Secretariat.

It is important to recognize, however, that the FARC have not yet been definitively defeated and still represent a serious and clear threat to the national security of Colombia, in the measure that they continue to have significant military capacity, as well of sources of financing that still bring in major resources, in particular drug trafficking.

Although we are in the final stage of the confrontation, we have to understand that it is precisely this final phase that requires the greatest effort and persistence. This stage is the stage that will be the least forgiving of errors and the one that demands the combined efforts of not only the Armed Forces and the National Police, but also of all the other state institutions, the Colombian people, and the international community.

The following is an assessment of the current situation of the FARC in the political, military, and international arenas.

## The Political Arena

If the objective in this arena is to manage to bring society together around a revolutionary project, the FARC have failed with a loud thud.

According to the theory, there are three kinds of popular support for an insurgent project: voluntary, forced, and neutral. The first makes reference to those persons who agree with the insurgency's principles and objectives and decide voluntarily to support them according to their possibilities. Eventually this group becomes one of the main pools for the organization's recruiting. Forced support takes place no longer out of ideological agreement or shared vision, but through intimidation and threats, normally armed and violent. In practice, this leads to a support relationship, although less effective than voluntary support. And finally there is the position of neutrality or indifference, where even though no direct support is given to the insurgents, neither is there resistance to insurgent plans and activities.

Today the FARC are not able to produce any type of mass support. There are some small cores of voluntary support in very remote zones where historically the Colombian state has not been present and the people know no other authority apart from the FARC. In addition, there is an increasingly smaller proportion of Colombians forced to support the FARC in different activities under the threat of violent reprisals for disobedience. This situation is quickly changing as the Armed Forces and the National Police of Colombia have continued to establish greater territorial control over the great majority of the national geography. In these zones the FARC have lost their capacity to threaten and coerce the people and have thus lost any type of support from the communities they once kept in subjection.

In addition, the indifference once typical of the bulk of the Colombian population has today been transformed into an active and unanimous rejection of the activities of the FARC and of their very existence. This situation is reflected in the results of regular national surveys, where the FARC never have more than 3% approval rates. But perhaps where this rejection has best been made manifest was in the huge march on February 4, 2008 when around five million Colombians poured into the streets to protest against the FARC and their terrorist methods, particularly kidnapping. This manifestation was accompanied by marches by Colombians and people of different nationalities in the major cities of the world.

The FARC have no popular support. On the contrary, they are the object of solid rejection by the enormous majority of Colombians. This condition in and of itself makes it impossible for them to reach their objective.

In addition, to make things worse for the FARC on this front, *Operación Jaque* (Operation Check), carried out on July 2, 2008, whisked away from the FARC their main assets for exerting political pressure: the kidnap victims. In effect, the “high political value” kidnap victims were being used by the FARC to pressure the Colombian government to grant not only military, but also political and international concessions in exchange for their liberation. Under the mechanism of a “humanitarian accord” the FARC planned to position themselves as a political negotiating partner of the Colombian government with recognition from the international community. The backdrop of a military demilitarization and the establishment of a negotiating table for the liberation of the kidnap victims with the assistance of international observers and mediators would be the perfect scenario for the promotion and communication of their “revolutionary project.”

By losing a good portion of their “high-value kidnap victims,” the FARC also lost their muscle for extortion and manipulation for political ends.

## The Military Arena

The FARC have also been dealt the worst blows in their history in terms of military confrontation and forced retreats. They are in a phase when their armed power is being drastically weakened. They have lost the strategic initiative and are on the run. They do not have the capacity to undertake operations with a high concentration of men and means. They are in a stage of conserving their scarce forces, assigned primarily to protect their leaders, the kidnap victims, and their drug production infrastructure.

Huge cracks are already evident in the FARC structure in aspects such as:

- a. **Loss of leadership:** In the last four months and under various circumstances, the FARC have lost three of the seven members of the Secretariat, the highest-level command and control body for the organization. Those losses included Manuel Marulanda, historical leader and symbol of the cohesion of the organization. Raúl Reyes, in charge of political and international strategy, who acted as the organization’s main spokesman, was also lost, along with Iván Ríos, the youngest of the members of the Secretariat and the symbol of the FARC’s generation of renewal.

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Although the FARC have mechanisms for replacing their members in the different instances of the organization, losing nearly half the members of their highest leadership body in such a short period has had a negative effect precisely on command and control from the Secretariat toward the rest of the organization. It has also had a powerful psychological effect on morale for each member of the FARC by destroying the aura of invulnerability the organization's leaders had up until now.

In the particular case of the death of Tirofijo, not only does the absence of the mythical and rallying leader leave a vacuum, but it also opens the way to a situation of dissension and internal conflict as new leadership is consolidated. Although Alfonso Cano has appeared as the new commander of the FARC, what is certain is that this appointment did not come through official FARC channels and processes, which require a physical meeting of the full Central General Staff. This meeting did not take place because unceasing military pressure made the meeting impossible. The guerrillas have increasingly less freedom of movement and less security, which they need in order to remain in the same zone for any length of time. Therefore the naming of Cano is of questionable legitimacy under the organizational procedures of the FARC, therefore leaving room for dissidence and lack of unity around the leader. This is true for Mono Jojoy and Joaquín Gomez, commanders of the Eastern and Southern Blocks respectively, who contribute approximately 70% of the organization's income and control around 60% of its armed power. These two members of the Secretariat do not think Cano has sufficient merit and military experience to command the organization.

But in addition to its high leadership, the FARC has also been losing a growing number of its mid-level commanders. In operations carried out by the Armed Forces and the National Police "JJ," "Martín Caballero," "Negro Acacio," "Martín Sombra," "Limón," and "Karina," have all been captured or killed, several of them leaders with reputations of a mythical stature among the rank and file guerrillas.

An important number of mid-level commanders have also deserted the FARC through demobilization, having belonged to the FARC for an average of 5 to 10 years.

The loss of these mid-level commanders has even more of an impact on the FARC than the loss of their high commanders, because the middle level leaders provide cohesion in the organization and are the ones who guarantee proper exercise of command and control.

- b. Loss of territorial presence and influence.** As never before, the FARC's strategic plan put together in 1982 is completely undrawn. Bogotá, their main military objective is currently an unreachable one. Operation Liberty I carried out by the Public Force between 2002 and 2004 achieved the eradication of FARC presence in the

perimeters of Bogotá and in the entire Cundinamarca province (that surrounds the country's capital).

The increase in territorial control achieved by the Public Force, has also resulted, in the same proportion, in a loss of presence and influence of the FARC in most of the Colombian territory, including the eastern mountain range, their traditional point for strategic deployment.

As a result, the FARC have started the transit from an organization with national influence to an organization with local influence, with influence in regions where they still maintain some destabilization and financing capacity.

- c. **Loss of command and control:** The loss of leadership and the corruption and lack of discipline, aggravated by incessant military and police pressure and the increasing capacity for infiltration and communication interception by the National Security Forces, has dramatically reduced command and control capacity within the FARC. In other words, commanders at different levels in the organization have less capacity to exercise their authority by giving orders and instructions and having them be obeyed by their subordinates.

Without a doubt, the heaviest burden comes from the enormous communications restrictions that have been imposed in order to keep the different commanders and structures safe. These restrictions not only affect the regularity of communications, which must be increasingly fewer, but also the means of communication, with the use of telephones, cell phones, radios, and the Internet restricted and human runners preferred.

This absence of communication causes very serious problems for command and control: Orders and instructions from commanders cannot be transmitted, or when they are transmitted they do not always arrive on time. The coordination of actions implied by the participation of two or more structures becomes very complicated. Information does not flow within the organization and when it does flow, it flows unevenly and slowly.

The natural consequence is that the commanders have lost control over several of their fronts that are now acting independently. Those fronts have committed serious errors at a high cost to the organization and its leaders. There are several examples of this situation:

- **Emmanuel.** In the final days of 2007 an international commission traveled to Colombia after it was announced that the FARC would release three kidnap victims: Gloria Polanco, Clara Rojas, and her son Emmanuel, born in captivity. The release was frustrated because the FARC Secretariat did not know that Emmanuel

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was not in the power of the front in charge of taking care of him, but was in a Family Welfare shelter. The delivery failed, the international commission had to return with empty hands, and the child was identified and located just a few days later by the authorities. The FARC thus suffered a significant political reversal.

- **Ninth Conference.** Historically this conference has been the forum where the FARC determines its broad strategic guidelines for the medium run. All the members of the Central General Staff and the Secretariat attend the conference. On this occasion, however, the meeting could not be held, and the conference had to be limited to exchanging some letters in a very restricted way. It was the first time in history that they could not hold this conference.
  - **Assassination of the 11 Valle deputies.** In the midst of the confusion arising from the unannounced presence of another FARC squad, the leaders of the structure in custody of the deputies decided to kill them without permission from the Secretariat.
  - **Operation Check.** This operation put in evidence the absence of communication between Secretariat members, and in particular between the new commander Alfonso Cano with his different fronts, especially fronts of such importance as the ones with custody of the political kidnap victims who, as mentioned earlier, constituted the FARC's main asset.
- d. **Decrease in Income and Lack of Liquidity:** Actions by the National Security Forces have managed to significantly reduce kidnapping and extortion, two main sources of financing for the FARC. Likewise, as the national security forces have established greater territorial control, the FARC have lost their influence in many zones of the country, including several zones with extensive coca activity. This situation has forced them to release control of the business in those zones. Therefore the flow of income from those activities has been dropping significantly.

In addition, the FARC are in a liquidity crisis that has forced them to pay with IOUs and coupons the peasants who work on coca farms or in laboratories or who sell them coca base. This situation has become unsustainable over time and the peasants have begun to refuse to continue working for the FARC until the debts have been paid.

The forced distancing from drug trafficking has obliged several FARC fronts to partner with drug trafficking organizations and criminal gangs to try to stay in the business. They have also been forced to join forces with other criminal organizations to face state action.



- e. **Logistical Restrictions:** Because of this drop in income and the growing number of operations by the National Security Forces to seize large quantities of all types of replacements and logistical material, the FARC is in the midst of a logistics crisis.

The restrictions affect everything from uniforms – many of the guerrillas now use sweats – to access to medicine and medical services, food, personal hygiene items, and underwear. The change in lifestyle has been dramatic for the guerrillas, who receive increasingly small and sporadic rations of these and other items.

- f. **Loss of Combat Capacity:** The same things that are causing the FARC's major logistical restrictions are also causing restrictions on the materials directly associated with their combat power, such as ammunition, weapons, and explosives.

The interdiction operations, particularly in border areas, have intercepted shipments of millions of magazines, thousands of rifles and pieces of light artillery, as well as hundreds of tons of different types of explosives.

Another aspect that has substantially reduced the FARC's combat capacity has to do with recruiting. Currently the great majority of new recruits in the FARC are minors who are being sent into combat with practically no training.

In addition, they have begun to use their strategic reserves by means of mass call-ups of their urban militias. In other words, they are taking their militia out of the cities to incorporate them into their rural armed structures. This decision is also beginning to produce desertions among militia members, who are not used to living the guerrilla lifestyle in the mountains.

It can be also added the large number of guerrillas who have left combat. In the period from 2006 – to May 2008 the FARC have lost 17,274 of their members to demobilizations, captures, and casualties.

- g. **Low Morale:** Multiple testimonies by demobilized guerrillas tell of low morale among the guerrillas and a good part of their leaders, who, despite rigorous indoctrination, are beginning to realize that the FARC will never be able to meet their objective of seizing political power using force.

Factors such as the relentless military pressure, being constantly on the run without being able to stay in a single place for long, the growing logistical restrictions they are experiencing, and the hard blows inflicted by the Armed Forces and the National Police have produced a general pessimism and low morale that is affecting the entire organization.

Very telling are the declarations made by alias “Karina,” a guerrilla woman who was in the FARC for over 24 years and came to have significant power within the organization: “I decided on reinsertion because of Army pressure in the area.”

In addition, the corruption and the same low morale are generating enormous distrust among guerrilla members, as confirmed by Karina. “You have a lot of combatants by your side. But you don’t know what each one is thinking. Besides, some think about the economic situation and how so much money was offered for my life. Those things really put people to thinking.”

This fear is growing among the FARC, especially among leaders, after the assassination in March 2008 of Secretariat member Iván Ríos, by alias “Rojas” to collect millions in reward.

Because of these fears there have been purges, executions, and changes in the security structure so that leaders now allow only family members in their personal circles, fearing betrayal by their closest comrades.

- h. Growing Demobilization:** There is no doubt that this low morale has unleashed a chain reaction of individual demobilizations that is continually growing. In the period from 2006 – to May 2008, 5,316 FARC guerrillas demobilized, and from 2006 to 2007 the individual demobilizations from that organization went up from 1,565 to 2,480 combatants.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the fact that the number of demobilized guerrillas who have belonged to the FARC for 5 to 10 years has been increasing. In 2006, just 12% of the total demobilized FARC members were leaders who had belonged to the organization for 5 to 10 years. In 2007 that figure went up to 27%, and from January to May 2008 that sector represented 35.2% of the total demobilized guerrilla members.

This situation is of great importance, because it demonstrates that even guerrillas who have been in the organization for several years, who have been indoctrinated in the convictions and ideological principles of the FARC, have realized the impossibility of reaching the goal proposed by their commanders and recognized that they are immersed in a senseless struggle.

## The International Arena

In the international arena, the landscape is no better for the FARC.

In January 2008 when the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, asked the international community to recognize the FARC as a legitimate insurgent movement, taking them off the list of terrorists and granting them belligerent status, the response of the international community was a resounding and unanimous “no.” No government in Latin America, Europe, or any other region of the world agreed with the request and, on the contrary, several leaders of European countries as well as high officials of the European Union ratified their decision to keep the FARC on their list of terrorists.

Two months later, in March 2008 after the bombing of Raúl Reyes’ camp, the National Security Forces captured a computer and several hard disks belonging to that member of the Secretariat. The computer contained information that indicates that several leaders and political organizations in Latin America and other regions of the world had secret support relationships with the FARC. In the month of May, and after a rigorous technical study, the Secretary General of the Interpol confirmed that the information found in Reyes’ computers was not modified or altered by the Colombian authorities. The publication of the information and the fact that the Interpol certified that it had not been manipulated had a significant effect on the leaders and organizations mentioned, causing them to automatically distance themselves from the FARC.

In addition, as mentioned before, with the Check Operation the FARC lost their most important political asset, one especially important to them relative to the international community. World interest and especially the interest of France and other European countries in the fate of Ingrid Betancourt had led them to seek direct contact with the FARC and on occasion pressure the Colombian government to demilitarize in order to negotiate an exchange of kidnap victims for imprisoned guerrillas. The kidnapping situation was also a vehicle for the intervention of other Latin American leaders that the FARC considered basic to advancing their plans for international recognition.

Even though there are other political kidnap victims still in the power of the FARC, there are increasingly fewer reasons for international pressure on the Colombian government’s policy relative to this issue. On the contrary, the current conjuncture should serve to increment pressure from the entire international community on the FARC, so that they might unilaterally and unconditionally free the kidnap victims who remain in their power, desist from kidnapping other persons, and make the decision to begin a serious and committed process for political dialogue and negotiation with the government.

The existence of the FARC as an armed movement has no place in the world or in the Colombia of today. Even the leaders closest to their cause, such as the leaders of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Cuba have expressed their disdain for the use of kidnapping as a resource and have stated they do not agree with the FARC's continued armed struggle.

## THE FARC'S OPTIONS

Given its current condition in the military, political, and international arenas, this organization has very few options left. Some of the possible alternatives are presented below. The national government is preparing its respective plans and strategies for effectively responding to any of these possible situations.

### Political Negotiation

In response to the blows received, FARC leadership could recognize that armed struggle is definitely not the means for advancing their political pretensions. They therefore could decide to begin political negotiation with the goal of putting an end to the confrontation with the state and seeking legal democratic arenas for developing their project in order to submit it to the scrutiny of the Colombian people, who will determine in the last instance whether they will support it or not.

In response to this situation, the President of the Republic and the High Commissioner of Peace would establish the terms and conditions of that negotiation, ensuring a proper balance between peace and justice, exercising the principles of truth and reparation.

As was the case in the negotiation with the illegal self defense groups, surely the international community would watch over the application of those principles.

### Internal Breakdown - Fragmentation

Internal conflicts could sharpen relative to the best way to proceed and how to orient FARC actions in the medium run. Internal cohesion could break down and dissidence begin to form:

- An important percentage of the organization could decide to not recognize the leadership of Alfonso Cano or of the Secretariat as a whole and opt for beginning a political negotiation with the Colombian government.

- Another significant portion of the organization, under this scenario, could decide to stay in the armed struggle under the existing conditions, escalating their terrorism, especially directed toward urban centers and critical infrastructure.
- Minor structures could then take advantage of the internal breakdown and the growing loss of command and control to strike out on their own and form criminal bands or merge with existing criminal bands to engage in drug trafficking and other criminal activities.

With this situation, the national government would be willing to begin a negotiation process with a significant portion of the FARC under the criteria described above.

For the portion of the FARC insisting on armed struggle, the state would maintain military pressure in order to force political negotiation or dismantling as an illegal armed organization. The use of the resource of terrorism could contribute in the short term to generating a perception of strength and giving them a presence in the media, but in the medium run it would definitively finish off the little national and foreign support that they might still have, unstopably precipitating their defeat.

For those structures that decide to break off from the FARC and become criminal bands or function with existing criminal bands, the state would combat them with military methods until they are dismantled, without the possibility of establishing political negotiations.

## Conservation of Forces and Recovery in the Medium Term

The Secretariat could manage to retain cohesion in the bulk of the organization and decide to insist on armed struggle. They could continue the strategic fall back to conserve forces in hopes of a change of government in 2010 possibly more open to negotiation under more favorable terms, or that would allow them to buy time to regroup in a process similar to the one during the Caguán dialogues during the government of President Pastrana.

In this scenario, they would also look to reinforce assistance and support from sympathetic regimes in the region that might offer their territory for the establishment of rearguards, rest zones, training camps, and centers for logistical supply, as well as recruiting new men that would allow them to regroup their forces in the medium run. In addition they would continue to seek economic support and political recognition to improve their international image in search of legitimacy for an eventual negotiation.

This is doubtless the worst alternative the FARC could choose. In contrast to prior years and decades, confrontation no longer plays in their favor. Under the current conditions,

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each day that passes in which the FARC does not have the military and political initiative, and in which their retreat deepens, is a day closer to their end.

The state will continue its military, political, and international offensive and will leave them increasingly less room for maneuvering in those three arenas. The current conditions will only grow worse, particularly in the military arena, where attacks against the organization's leadership, finances, and logistics will continue. Demobilizations will continue to snowball, including more and more experienced guerrillas and high-level commanders.

On the international plane it will be increasingly difficult for a government or an organization to maintain any type of support to the FARC, especially if it persists in taking up arms against a recognized and legitimate democracy.

The FARC have paid an enormous political cost, sacrificing a great number of their men and prolonging the suffering of Colombians, without having attained anything other than their own decimation and the certainty of their defeat.