

Human Security for an Urban Century

LOCAL CHALLENGES, GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES



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(Front cover:) "La Chinga", a 13-year-old gang member from Medellín, Colombia, points his gun at the camera. Children growing up in cities are often at heightened risk of being recruited into organized armed criminal groups. The average age of recruitment for child gang members has been estimated at between 11 and 14, and has been falling in recent years.

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**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing
in Publication**

Human security for an urban century:
local challenges, global perspectives /
Humansecurity-cites.org

Also available in French under:
La sécurité humaine pour un siècle urbain.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-9782610-0-9

1. Cities and towns — Safety measures.
2. Conflict management.
3. Crime prevention.
4. Urban policy.

I. Humansecurity-cites.org

HV7431.H858 2007 363.32 C2006-907021-0

DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION OF PARAMILITARIES IN COLOMBIA:

Implications for urban security in Medellín

Brodie Ferguson, Research Associate, Conflict Analysis Resource Center, Bogotá

Until recently, the presence of armed criminal gangs, guerrilla militias and paramilitary groups in Medellín — Colombia’s second-largest city with over two million inhabitants — resulted in the city having one of the highest per-capita murder rates in the world.¹ While levels of violence remain high by international standards, the city has experienced impressive reductions in key indicators which can be attributed to a variety of local and national security initiatives.

The current process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) being carried out nationally within the framework of the Justice and Peace Law, a national peace plan passed in June 2005, has had especially strong implications for public security in Medellín. DDR programs targeted the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and their urban proxies beginning in late 2003

following the AUC’s announcement of a unilateral ceasefire. That November, 860 paramilitaries belonging to Medellín’s AUC-linked Cacique Nutibara Bloc (BCN) publicly laid down arms, the first of a series of 37 collective

demobilizations in which over 30,000 combatants have disarmed.² These demobilized combatants have been resettled throughout roughly one third of Colombia’s municipalities, with the largest number by far being resettled



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Paramilitaries linked to the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) publicly surrender their arms in Medellín as part of a peace agreement signed with the government. (November 2003)

in Medellín. As a result of the ceasefire and demobilization, reported homicides in Medellín have shown a remarkable decline, dropping some 45 percent in 2003 and an additional 40 percent in 2004.³

Nonetheless, there are some clear negative implications of the way in which DDR is being conducted in Colombia's cities. A primary concern with this process is that ex-combatants are simply being recycled into security-related jobs in licensed firms

Paramilitaries may have demobilized at least partially because they can continue to consolidate their power in Colombia's urban centres.

as well as in the informal sector. Federal legislation permitting the arming of security-providing bodies makes it possible for demobilized paramilitaries to re-arm themselves as part of private security firms.⁴ In August 2005, the Ministry of the Interior and Justice announced the creation of a *guardia cívica* (civic guard), whereby demobilized combatants would provide unarmed security in parks and commercial centres and at public

events. These and other concerns, such as reports that the BCN has been promoting the creation of neighbourhood security bodies run by BCN ex-combatants, have drawn robust criticism of the DDR process from groups such as Amnesty International.⁵

There are also concerns that close links between paramilitary groups and organized crime networks make the participation of ex-combatants in criminal activities all too likely. Reports suggest that the BCN has drawn considerable strength from relationships with criminal gangs operating in the poorer neighborhoods of Medellín.⁶ In 2000, there were an estimated 8,000 youths linked to criminal gangs in the city, engaged in activities ranging from petty crime and extortion to drug trafficking and social cleansing.⁷

A recent study by the Universidad Nacional de Colombia's Institute for Political Studies and International Relations and the Conflict Analysis Resource Center found that while paramilitary demobilization has resulted in a nearly 50 percent decline in homicides in Colombia, the number of criminal acts has increased.⁸ While gross human rights violations such as massacres may have been successfully addressed by the demobilization process, the growth of crime and the intermingling of ex-combatants and organized crime syndicates suggests that paramilitaries may have demobilized at least partially because they

can continue to consolidate their power in Colombia's urban centres.

This is but one example. The post-conflict experiences of San Salvador and Guatemala City provide a clear reminder of the need for careful monitoring of the disarmament and reintegration components of a DDR program. Despite impressive reductions in homicide rates in recent years in Medellín, the number of weapons turned in by demobilized armed groups has fallen well below expected, suggesting that ex-combatants are keeping their arms for use in criminal activity or resale on the black market, with unknown potential for renewed political violence. Careful attention must be given to the control of these weapons if improvements in urban security are to be maintained in the wake of the demobilization of Colombia's paramilitary groups. ●

1 Departamento Nacional de Estadística.

2 Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (2006).

3 Office of the Mayor of Medellín (2005).

4 Decree 1612, 31 July 2002.

5 Amnesty International, *Colombia: The Paramilitaries in Medellín: Demobilization or Legalization?* (London: Amnesty International, 2005).

6 Human Rights Watch, *Smoke and Mirrors: Colombia's Demobilization of Paramilitary Groups* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2005).

7 Juan Carlos Vélez Rendón, "Conflicto y guerra: la lucha por el orden en Medellín," *Estudios Políticos*, 18 (2001).

8 Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, *¿Hacia un Post-Conflicto Benigno? Desmovilización, Reinserción, y Criminalidad en Colombia* (2006).