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

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PRACTICE NOTE**What if the FARC Demobilizes?**

Enzo Nussio* and Kimberly Howe†

Introduction

In September 2012, the Colombian government officially announced ongoing peace talks with the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). This gesture was the first of its kind since the failed negotiation process with the same guerrilla group during the government of Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) (see Villarraga 2009). The FARC remains the largest and strongest non-state armed group operating in the country, and can be traced back to as early as 1964. Observers of the current negotiations are largely optimistic about the prospects for peace and the end of the decades-long conflict.

A jointly created document entitled the ‘General Agreement for the Ending of Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Durable Peace’ (FARC and Gobierno de Colombia 2012) lays out the six points to be discussed during the negotiations. Point three on this list – ‘end of the conflict’ – envisages the ‘abandonment of weapons’ and the ‘economic, social and political reincorporation of the FARC into civilian life’. While other elements of the peace negotiations may be

equally fundamental, in this piece, we focus on this specific point and highlight some of the critical issues that might emerge *if* the peace process between the Colombian government and this guerrilla group is successful. The ideas presented here are based on several historical applications of former combatant disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) as a peacebuilding activity. We particularly attempt to extract implications from the demobilization of the paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) between 2003 and 2006 (Nussio 2011a), the ongoing desertion and reintegration of individual guerrilla members (Anaya 2007), and the accumulated knowledge about the structure and history of the FARC (Pizarro Leongómez 2011).¹ Although the peace process is likely to face many obstacles – and a complete failure is possible – we nevertheless remain positive about a negotiated settlement. As such, we reflect here on the critical issues that might need to be considered to support a sustainable and peaceful outcome.

What About Their Guns and Fighters?

Depending on the source, the size of the FARC is currently estimated at 8,000 to 10,000 combatants. How many of these might eventually demobilize? The AUC demobilization process could provide some indications; their leaders referred to some

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15,000 armed men during the negotiations, but more than 30,000 demobilized in the end (CNRR 2010). The government claims that the inflated numbers were a result of the demobilization of non-combatant members associated with the group, such as those who were in charge of logistics or acted as informants. Critics state that the AUC deliberately increased the number of participants in the demobilization process by recruiting people who were not eligible but nonetheless sought to take advantage of DDR benefits. Two top paramilitary leaders (Ever Velozza, alias 'HH' and Freddy Rendón, alias 'El Alemán') have confessed to engaging in this practice (El Tiempo 2011a; El Tiempo 2011b). Given that the FARC has been in existence for many decades, the group has large support networks in areas where they have long operated. According to the United Nations Integrated DDR Standards (United Nations 2006), people associated with the armed group but who are not necessarily combatants should be eligible for inclusion in the DDR process. The actual number to demobilize may thus be several times higher than the current estimate of FARC combatants.²

Regarding inflated numbers, it will be crucial to apply clearly defined eligibility criteria more strictly than was done under the AUC demobilization process. According to Decree 3360 of 2003, the government considered *all* persons appearing on the lists submitted by AUC leaders to be entitled to demobilization assistance. Such a criterion proved to be too simplistic and trusting in many ways and should be matched with additional controls and standards. The technical design of collective demobilization applied for the AUC, including international oversight by the Organization of American States (OAS), may offer a good model to replicate, as long as it adopts a policy of non-tolerance and prevents false combatants from entering into the process. The broader involvement of international observers in addition to the OAS might give the process more teeth.

A crucial issue associated with the demobilization of combatants relates to child soldiers. Data published in a recent study of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (El Tiempo 2012) indicate that about 50% of all FARC fighters joined this group when they were younger than 18 years of age and that youth recruitment has increased dramatically in recent years. It is difficult to calculate how many will still be underage at the moment of demobilization, but this topic is critical both in terms of providing differential assistance to former child and adult soldiers and given that commanders responsible for the forcible recruitment of minors may face judicial action.

With respect to disarmament, we have evidence that the AUC kept a stockpile of weapons hidden during its 2003–2006 demobilization process. These weapons may be in current use by post-demobilization armed groups.³ The maintenance of secret arsenals will also be an issue for the FARC, as will be their use and possession of non-conventional high-impact weapons such as homemade explosive material and landmines. These weapons should be explicitly included in the disarmament process. In addition, a more general parallel weapons reduction program involving the civilian population – framed as being connected to the FARC's disarmament – might help to reduce the number of illegal arms circulating in Colombia, thus contributing to lower levels of violence in the post-conflict period (Muggah 2006).

Will They Get Jobs?

The economic reintegration of former combatants has proven to be challenging in a number of DDR processes and will be so for the case of FARC soldiers. Many former AUC fighters and a significant number of guerilla deserters have moved to cities not only to find jobs but also to restart a more anonymous life, free from social stigma and possible threats from previous friends and foes (Nussio 2011b). However, the rural identity and skills of most FARC members should lead

to a less urban-focused economic reintegration process. However, this will only be possible if rural development – including large infrastructure projects – become a priority for the government. While the ‘rural question’ is the first topic on the negotiation agenda, unequal land tenure, forcible displacement, and rural underdevelopment have proved to be almost unsolvable difficulties in Colombia (UNDP 2011). A more rural-oriented DDR process also implies that the Colombian Reintegration Agency (ACR – the organization concerned with the reintegration of former combatants) needs to decentralize its services away from urban centers. The continued focus of service provision in urban areas could create an incentive for ex-combatants to move to cities.

One positive sign for economic reintegration comes from the participation of the Colombian Business Federation (ANDI) at the negotiation table. In addition, the Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP) has conducted research on the attitudes of Colombian businesspeople and have identified that they are interested in the peace process and supporting the economic reintegration of ex-combatants (FIP 2012).

An additional proposal is to convert some FARC fighters into a rural police and reintegrate others into the military forces, thus taking benefit of their existing skills. Experiences in Nepal and Kosovo may be instructive in this respect. However, both options will most probably face resistance in Colombia. When debating the integration of the AUC into the military forces, their massive human rights abuse history and involvement in drug-trafficking did not allow for the realization of such a policy (Guáqueta and Arias 2011). Similar reasons may be brought forward for the FARC.

What About Their Old and New Social Networks?

Achieving the social reintegration of former combatants is no easy task, but it is crucial for the ultimate success of any DDR process. Approximately 97% of ex-combatants

in Colombia claim that they need to be an active part of their communities in order to feel completely ‘reintegrated’ (Departamento Nacional de Planeación 2010). According to recent research conducted in Colombia, the social opportunities offered to ex-combatants in receiving communities are critical for their participation in local organizations (Kaplan and Nussio 2012). Hence, an increased focus on the community should contribute to a more positive experience for both ex-combatants, who have been largely stigmatized in earlier processes, and for community members, who have rightly complained about an exaggerated focus on demobilized people (Nussio 2012).

In addition to the creation of new networks, managing old networks will be a necessary component of the FARC demobilization process. Most literature on DDR has called for a complete dismantlement of command and control structures due to the risk of remobilization, such as experienced with the *Corporación Democracia* in Medellín (Guáqueta and Arias 2011). However, the former group dynamics might have a positive potential as well, especially in the case of the FARC fighters who have a strong in-group identity. Intentionally destroying this social anchor might lead to fragmentation and further increase their vulnerability to remobilization or engagement in illegal activities, as was the case for former fighters in Afghanistan (Zyck 2009). Also, leveraging networks and contacts among former fighters might facilitate the integration of ex-combatants into the job market (de Vries and Wiegink 2011).

Will They Participate in Politics?

According to a survey conducted by the FIP in 2008, half of the FARC combatants who have already demobilized attended ideological training sessions at least once a week when they were active. This finding can be interpreted as a strong indicator that the FARC maintains a political dimension and that they cannot be simply reduced to narco-terrorists, as government officials have

often referred to them (see also Ugarriza and Craig 2012).

Past experiences give a sense of what might be possible in the case of the FARC. The political reintegration model applied to the M-19 and other guerrilla groups in the early 1990s was largely successful thanks to a widely held perception that the M-19 was fighting for political ideals and not for private criminal interests (Palou and Méndez 2012). They participated in creating a new constitution, and many are important political figures today. Regarding the demobilization of the AUC, the political question was excluded from the debate for various reasons—among them the highly criminalized character of the paramilitaries (Guáqueta 2007). A middle ground between the two extremes may be necessary for a demobilization of the FARC. For ex-combatants, this would mean translating some of their learned ideology into the political sphere. However, direct participation might be limited to mid and lower-ranking ex-combatants. The conversion of top FARC leaders into congressmen could provoke negative feelings amongst the population due to FARC's involvement in massive human rights abuses against the civilian population. Also, their involvement ultimately depends on the transitional justice measures that will accompany DDR. Paramilitary leaders responsible for atrocities received a reduced prison sentence under the Justice and Peace Law (Pizarro and Valencia 2009). Creating similar legislation for the FARC would make the involvement of top leaders in big-P politics impossible. However, the reintegration program might be well advised to move the question of political reintegration away from party politics and political roles for current FARC leaders, and instead focus on ensuring that FARC members are able to become politically aware citizens who find a place in the existing political spectrum (see Söderström 2011). The newly created leftist *Marcha Patriótica* movement, which is especially interested in the rural question, may become an important platform for politically engaged former FARC combatants.

And What About Security?

Persistent or increased insecurity following the DDR of the FARC will be one of the largest concerns for citizens, practitioners and policymakers. Demobilization does not always lead to better security outcomes, as has been seen with the paramilitary process. Research showed that immediately after the close of the demobilization process with the AUC, rates of violence decreased (Restrepo and Muggah 2009). However, a longer-term view has indicated that the homicide rate is increasing in areas where reintegration is occurring, when holding constant other causes of homicide (Howe, Sánchez, and Contreras 2010). Violence has remained high in those areas of the country where there are opportunities to extract illegal rents and where local governance structures are weak (Howe 2012). The principal threat to security in Colombia since 2006 has been the surfacing of post-demobilization armed groups, which are variously referred to as successor groups, neo-paramilitaries or criminal gangs (*bandas criminales*, or BACRIM for short). There is substantial evidence that these groups have a variety of linkages with the former AUC (Massé et al. 2010). A similar outcome may emerge following the FARC DDR process depending on such issues as state capacity to control FARC-dominated areas, the evolution of drug-trafficking, the role of former mid-level commanders in the peace process, and recidivism among rank-and-file combatants.

State control over FARC-dominated territory

The FARC has largely been located in areas outside the reach of government forces. What will happen to these spaces from a governance perspective if the FARC demobilizes? Again it is possible to draw some inferences based on the experience of AUC demobilization. The AUC, in the locations where it was dominant, provided many state functions, including protection, to the local population. It also controlled many of the local state resources such as education, health,

and politics as well as economics (Duncan 2006). Their demobilization has led to a type of power vacuum whereby there is no legitimate legal actor with full territorial control. This dynamic has been linked to worsening security in former AUC dominated areas since DDR (Howe and Nussio, under review).

The FARC has been located in areas where the state is weak or non-existent. The areas under their control need to receive a rapid injection of genuine local governance, particularly in terms of protection while demobilization is being rolled out. FARC territory, as a result of their market activities (described below), is a valuable resource that other existing armed actors may attempt to seize. A legitimate force must be installed in these locations to prevent post-demobilization armed groups or successor groups that splinter from the FARC process from controlling this territory and beginning violent operations. These assertions are supported by several studies in Colombia that link increased state presence (in the form of arrests per homicides) to a decreasing homicide rate at the sub-national level over time (Echeverry and Partow 1998; Howe, Sánchez, and Contreras 2010). Policing may thus be a key activity to increase state presence and manage post-demobilization violence. However, a whole range of post-conflict security policies under the labels of 'interim stabilization measures' and 'second generation approaches' should be considered in Colombia (Colletta and Muggah 2009).

Drugs and illegal markets

In a context of limited state presence, the opportunity to extract revenues from illicit sources has contributed to elevated rates of violence since the DDR of paramilitaries in Colombia (Howe 2012). Therefore, such illegal rents should be a focus for authorities as they consider the demobilization of the FARC. The FARC has been a major player in the cocaine industry since the 1980s. They have been involved in the setting of prices, organizing markets, taxing production, and

directly managing commercialization and export. Cocaine, in addition to kidnapping and extortion, has kept the organization financially afloat for several decades. Some large landowners have benefited from FARC presence and have paid them to provide security and 'discipline' among peasants (Gutiérrez Sanín 2004). However, these illegal markets do not disappear with DDR, as is evidenced by the paramilitary process. Paramilitaries were heavily involved in the drug trade, charging protection fees to large land-owners and multi-nationals, benefiting from governmental contracts, and running shadow economies – to name just a few of their illegal activities. Their dissolution has not led to the collapse of illegal markets; instead, post-demobilization armed groups have (re-)surfaced to extract these rents in largely the same areas where the AUC was formerly operating (Granada, Restrepo, and Tobón 2009). Special care should be taken to ensure that top-level FARC commanders are not intending to sell their businesses like 'franchises' to post-demobilization armed groups, as occurred with the paramilitaries (Verdad Abierta 2012).

Mid-level commanders

One of the weaknesses of the DDR process with the AUC was that no special provisions were made for mid-level commanders. Mid-level commanders inhabit a special and powerful place in the ranks – both close to top-level commanders and influential over troops within the rank and file. They are the sub-group most likely to experience loss in terms of status and economy as the result of a demobilization process, and therefore should be recognized for their role as potential spoilers (Stockholm Initiative 2006; Themnér 2011). Many of the leaders of post-DDR armed groups are former mid-level commanders of the AUC (CNRR 2010; Massé et al. 2011). It will therefore be important to consider this special group of combatants during the FARC DDR process. The Program of Humanitarian Attention to Demobilized

People (PAHD) involves former mid-level commanders in preventing the recruitment of youth into armed groups and provides them with personal protection (Arias, Prieto, and Herrera 2010). Such initial ideas should be extended to the ACR and implemented more broadly.

Recidivism and post-demobilization armed groups

Will the foot soldiers of the FARC really stop fighting? Or will they enter into the ranks of the criminal gangs – the BACRIM – that currently have a presence in 24 of 35 departments in Colombia and which are estimated to have up to 10,000 members (CNRR 2010; Human Rights Watch 2010)? These groups commit human rights abuses against civilians and use violence as a way to gain territorial control for drugs and other illegal markets (Granada, Restrepo, and Tobón 2009). For demobilized AUC fighters, an estimated 15 per cent have re-engaged in some type of illegal activity, often related to the BACRIM (CNRR 2010). A second source of post-DDR violence could be splinter groups that do not demobilize and which offer a place for combatants who are unwilling to reintegrate into a legal lifestyle. It is possible that remnant groups from the FARC might constitute an additional BACRIM or may integrate into one or several of the existing organizations. Alliances between the BACRIM and the FARC have been reported repeatedly throughout the past years and would provide the necessary contacts for the period following conflict (International Crisis Group 2009).

We identify three specific factors relevant for recidivism in the FARC process – one relates to the history and identity of the FARC and the other two are based on lessons learned from the DDR of the AUC. The FARC is a vertically organized structure with very strict codes of conduct. Soldiers sign up for life, they are subject to tough disciplinary measures, and desertion is punishable by death. All wealth accumulated – through narco-trafficking, kidnapping, extortion,

etc.– goes directly back into the organization. Looting or any acts to obtain personal wealth are strictly forbidden, even within the higher ranks. The personal risk of joining the FARC is much higher than for the paramilitaries or regular army (Gutiérrez Sanín 2004; Gutiérrez Sanín 2008). Based on this type of organization, we can hypothesize the conditions under which recidivism is likely to occur. If there is a clear intention and commitment to disarm and demobilize amongst the mid and high-level commanders, the rank and file are likely to follow suit due to their history of following strict orders within a hierarchy. Their risk of joining post-demobilization armed groups is lower than that of ex-AUC because personal enrichment has neither been a part of their reason for joining the FARC nor a part of their soldiering experience. In the same vein, the vertical organization of the FARC makes a potential DDR process less vulnerable to dissident groups and remobilization than in the case of the AUC, which was a rather network-like umbrella organization with strong regional leaders. While members of the FARC may be pre-disposed to less recidivism than the former paramilitaries considering their organizational history, the Achilles' heel will be ensuring meaningful political participation and employment for a largely peasant-based cadre.

The second issue, which affects both rates of recidivism and security, is the protection of individual ex-combatants. Former members of the AUC have been disproportionately targeted by post-demobilization armed groups, and their security remains precarious (Munévar and Nussio 2009; Observatorio de Procesos de DDR 2010). Ex-members of the FARC may be sought out by criminal organizations because of their particular violent skill sets, connections, or intimate knowledge of valuable illegal markets. Ex-combatants may also be targeted by other members of the community – including ex-paramilitaries and victims – who may seek violent revenge. However, insecurity related to continued illegal networks rather than re-

venge among individual ex-combatants has been more common in recent years. Earlier peace processes with guerrilla groups have been accompanied by an upsurge of right-wing paramilitary violence (Romero 2003). The legal political arm created by the FARC during the peace process in the 1980s (the Unión Patriótica) was one of the foremost victims of such rightist violence. As a consequence, effective protection mechanisms for former FARC members must be put into place in order to dissipate their accumulated fears. Research has shown that demobilized paramilitaries who face violent threats often choose independent security strategies including rejoining armed groups. This decision-making tactic stems from high level of distrust in formal institutions. A lack of trust in legal protection mechanisms thus could jeopardize the success of a potential FARC demobilization process (Nussio 2011b).

Third, continuous juridical insecurity for both high-ranking and rank-and-file ex-combatants has contributed to remobilization for former AUC combatants. Breaking their agreement with AUC leaders, the government of Colombia extradited 18 of top AUC commanders to the United States on drug charges (FIP 2009). An estimated 19,000 rank-and-file ex-combatants have persisted in juridical limbo for years (Palou and Méndez 2012). With the timely presentation of a constitutional amendment that passed congress in May 2012 (the 'Legal Framework for Peace'), the Juan Manuel Santos administration seems prepared to give the FARC demobilization a clearer and more stable juridical framework, which may contribute to less recidivism.

Conclusions

If the FARC and the government reach an agreement over the terms for peace in Colombia, the DDR process will certainly face a rocky road ahead. Disarmament might not be complete, and fake recruits are likely to appear on the lists of demobilized people. Economic reintegration of ex-combatants will take time, and related rural reforms will

face resistance and opposition. Political and social reintegration will continuously reopen old sores, and remnant armed groups will persist, or new groups will emerge to exploit illegal rents generated from drug-trafficking and extortion.

Despite these challenges, the chances for success are better than for previous demobilization processes. Most importantly, if the negotiations come to a satisfactory end, the armed conflict will finally have been overcome. This will dramatically reduce the number of potential spoilers to the peace agreement, and will also allow for a clearer distinction between criminal and political violence, a line that has been difficult to draw in the past. Additionally, foreign governments (including the US which qualifies the FARC as terrorist organization) and international organizations have so far taken a very positive stance towards the Colombian peace initiative following the official announcement of President Santos. This is in direct contrast with the rather skeptical position (especially from the United Nations) during the peace talks with the AUC.

The DDR process with the FARC will depend not only on the issues mentioned in this article but also on broader issues related to peacebuilding, violence reduction strategies, and wider development policies (see Rettberg 2012). In fact, DDR will tap its full potential only if embedded in a wider peacebuilding framework and if managed with realistic expectations. However, there are some benefits DDR generates on its own. According to a survey conducted by the FIP, for former combatants, the Colombian Reintegration Agency is the most trusted of all state institutions. DDR is thus not only a technocratic tool to deal with experts in violence, it may also have the potential to build trust amongst a significant post-conflict population. Especially for formerly antagonistic insurgents, the creation of institutional trust is crucial for an enduring peace. ■

NOTES

- 1 Between 2002 and 2010, around 52,000 combatants demobilized in Colombia. Some 31,671 of them belonged to the AUC and demobilized in a collective process between 2003 and 2006 after negotiations were held between the government and the AUC leaders. The remaining 20,000 combatants were deserters mostly to the FARC guerrilla and to a lesser degree, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and other smaller guerrilla groups and the AUC prior to its collective demobilization.
- 2 If the ELN decides to participate in the process, this number will be larger. According to current estimates, the ELN counts on about 2,000 active members. In September 2012, ELN leader alias 'Gabino' announced the ELN's interest to participate in the peace process with the FARC.
- 3 Interview with a paramilitary ex-combatant in Bogotá, May 2010.

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