

The people of Colombia have experienced significant political instability and violence over the past century. While many factors have contributed to this situation—the drug trade, a protracted insurgent conflict, nationwide corruption—small-arms proliferation remains among the most serious of the country’s problems. Addressing the issue of small-arms trafficking in Colombia poses enormous challenges, largely because the movement of these weapons is difficult to monitor and measure and does not conform to traditional definitions of a security threat.

For this analysis, the term “small arms” refers to man-portable personal and military weapons, ranging from handguns to assault rifles to surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). These weapons are defined as *small arms* because they possess a number of characteristics that facilitate their rapid movement around the world. They are, by definition, small (and light), which allows for easy transportation across national borders and between continents. Small arms are also for the most part impervious to the environment, which allows for their repeated use in a wide range of climates and circumstances. Finally, small arms exist in legal white markets, semi-legal gray markets, and illegal black markets—resulting in a plethora of ways in which states and nonstate actors can access and distribute these arms.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Small arms are purchased in three different markets: white, gray, and black. White markets for military weapons include weapons bought and sold by authorized private manufacturers or state-owned enterprises. Gray markets occupy the space between white-market activities and the illegal trade in small arms. In the gray market, a state may arrange for an arms transfer to an illegitimate actor for political or economic pur-

Small-arms trafficking patterns can serve as a useful tool for analyzing political violence in two major ways: First, they can pinpoint specific weapons flows and networks—many of which mirror emerging zones of conflict; second, they can provide insight on the behavior of particular groups and their intentions. The second point is particularly true of ammunition—supplies of ammunition tend to be depleted far more rapidly than weapons stocks and, therefore, need to be replaced on a more consistent basis. In short, examining the specific manner by which arms and munitions are acquired and distributed may provide real-time information about the strategies behind a particular conflict and its likely future evolution.

## **PATTERNS OF ARMS TRAFFICKING INTO COLOMBIA**

An analysis of small-arms activity in Colombia can be broken down into three distinct categories: the users of the weapons, the external sources and transportation routes for these munitions, and internal trafficking patterns.

### **Weapons Users**

Two main leftist guerrilla organizations currently exist in Colombia—the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) or the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) or the National Liberation Army. Both of these groups have stated their intentions to seize control of national power, although both groups have also submitted reform agendas as part of their on-again, off-again peace negotiations with the government of Colombia. Currently, both groups are preoccupied with consolidating, defending, and, where possible, extending their respective bases of territorial control. Sustained access to weapons and ammunition supplies is crucial to this objective and, particularly in the case of FARC, is widely regarded as being directly proportional to each group's organizational strength, power, and influence.

FARC has experienced rapid growth of its membership since the early 1990s and now has approximately 15,000 members (not includ-

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poses, but conceal the transfer in legal channels. Black-market activities are completely illegal. These markets are more fully discussed in Chapter Five.

ing coca farmers who might directly or indirectly support FARC). Over this same period of time, the ELN lost recruitment momentum; it now has half as many members as FARC. The expansion of FARC has put stress on its logistical capabilities: New members require their own weapons and access to a consistent supply of ammunition, forcing FARC to explore new arms sources and distribution routes (described in the next section).

The general trend appears to be for guerrillas to purchase their weapons in small quantities, most of which are of the military-grade, 7.62-caliber variety; there is no reliable evidence at this point to confirm reports that the group has acquired surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). There have been signs, however, of a possible shift in FARC's purchasing patterns toward "bulk buying." While the extent of this change should not be overstated, it could indicate that the group is seeking to step up the scale of its insurgent violence, possibly in response to U.S. support for Plan Colombia, which FARC sees as a threat to its funding sources and a direct military threat to the organization itself through the introduction of U.S. Blackhawk helicopters in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Paramilitaries constitute a second user group for small arms in Colombia. The country's paramilitaries are organized under the auspices of a loosely networked conglomeration known as Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) or the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia. The paramilitaries actively oppose FARC and the ELN and operate primarily in areas where state military strength is perceived to be weak.

Like arms acquisitions by guerrillas, arms acquisitions by paramilitaries tend to be small scale. However, as with FARC, there have also been isolated instances of larger arms shipments being received by the AUC; again, this situation probably reflects a short-term effort to augment the group's supplies in response to a growing membership. Most of the AUC's arms are of the 5.62-caliber variety, although there

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<sup>2</sup>According to a U.S. State Department Web site ([http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/colombia/fs\\_000719\\_plancolombia.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/colombia/fs_000719_plancolombia.html)), the government of Colombia developed Plan Colombia in 1999 as an integrated strategy to meet the most pressing challenges confronting Colombia today—promoting the peace process, combating the narcotics industry, reviving the Colombian economy, and strengthening the democratic pillars of Colombian society. Plan Colombia is a \$7.5 billion program.

are signs that the group is now switching to larger 7.62-caliber (.51mm) munitions. Reports indicate that the 7.62-caliber ammunition is easier to acquire in regional black markets, which may explain the shift. Additionally, this shift to larger-caliber munitions suggests that the AUC is also expanding its arms acquisition operations beyond its traditional sources, indicating designs by the AUC to counter heightened FARC activities.

Private citizens constitute the third user group for small arms in Colombia. Citizen demand for arms primarily reflects the endemic civil, political, and criminal violence that plagues the country, combined with a general lack of confidence in the state's overall institutional viability and authority. Most private citizens' arms acquisitions focus on personal weapons, such as revolvers and pistols, although military-style weapons are also periodically sought and traded.<sup>3</sup>

Arms trafficking is on an upward spiral among all three user groups, which has, in effect, contributed to an internal "arms race" in Colombia. FARC and the ELN buy weapons to attack the existing government and to challenge the government's monopoly on coercive force. These actions by FARC and the ELN cause the AUC to step up its own acquisition initiatives to counter the guerrillas, which, in turn feeds into the heightened civil violence and prompts private citizens to increase their own gun purchases for personal protection. Thus, while small arms have always been part of the political conflict in Colombia, the current arms trafficking situation is much more intense and dynamic than in the past, and it now affects virtually every aspect of Colombia's rural and urban life.

### **External Sources and Transportation Routes**

Several factors contribute to the rapid and relatively free flow of small arms into Colombia, including its position as a geographic bridge between Central and South America, borders that are

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<sup>3</sup>Criminals and transnational criminal organizations also contribute to a demand for small arms in Colombia. In this analysis, criminals are interpreted as being either (1) normal citizens seeking to purchase weapons; (2) suppliers of weapons on Colombia's internal market; or (3) facilitators of weapons purchases for paramilitary and guerrilla organizations in the international market. The analysis does not, however, specifically focus on criminal acquisition patterns.

“porous” and difficult to monitor, a government presence that is mostly concentrated in the cities of the Andean mountains and that is essentially nonexistent in southern Colombia, and marine outlets that provide access to both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The arms flow problem is further magnified by the availability of Cold War-era weapons stockpiles in Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador and the alleged assistance of regional sympathizers in Cuba and Venezuela.

Most small arms appear to move from external sources into Colombia through black-market routes.<sup>4</sup> Weapons are rarely trafficked or purchased in bulk; rather, weapons “trickle” into Colombia by ones or twos, or perhaps by the dozen. Cumulatively, however, these shipments can amount to a substantial volume of arms during the course of just a single year.

Central America represents the single largest source of illegal weapons to Colombia, with five countries—El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica—accounting for more than a third of all arms shipped into the country. Similarly, former Cold War conflict zones (notably Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala) have become a “magnet” for small-arms dealers, as witnessed by the proliferation of unscrupulous entrepreneurs who acquire and sell arms to paramilitaries and guerrillas alike, depending on who is the highest bidder.

In addition to being a source for small arms, Central America also acts as an important transit route. From 1998 to 2001, Panama was the single largest transshipment point for weapons into Colombia. Munitions are smuggled out of Panama either by land (mostly across the densely forested Darien Gap), by sea (generally via the Pacific seaboard in the case of FARC or Caribbean ports in the case of the AUC), or by air (with most flights destined for Magdalena or Choco). Currently, an estimated 50 percent of all illegal weapons arriving in Colombia by sea are trafficked through Panama.

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<sup>4</sup>We collected information on small-arms trafficking from January 1998 through September 2001. The figures in this report all stem from that collection effort. During that period, more than 75 percent of the illegal small-arms trafficking in Colombia originated outside of the country. See the Appendix for more details.

Honduras and Nicaragua also constitute important routing hubs, especially for arms originating in El Salvador. The three most important collection and distribution points in these two countries are Catacamas in Honduras and Eteli and Managua in Nicaragua. Although Costa Rica is not as important a routing hub as Panama, Honduras, or Nicaragua, statistically significant flows of arms pass through Costa Rica, with most weapons originating in Los Chiles (which borders Nicaragua), Puerto Armuelles (which borders Panama), or Santa Ana (which lies on the Guatemala–El Salvador border).

Outside of information pertaining to Panama, there is very little detailed information on the transportation methods used to smuggle weapons into Colombia from Central America. However, on the basis of the general terrain and types of port cities in Central America, it would appear that most arms are brought into Colombia by either motorboats designed to navigate in shallow waters or small fishing vessels. If land routes are chosen, traffickers seem to focus on hiding weapons and ammunition within legitimate shipments of produce, such as potatoes and cereal, as they are being transported to towns for sale. The significance of these smuggling patterns is that they lend themselves to small-scale activity and preclude the need for forged user-end certificates, sophisticated coverups, or any other method typically used by state-sponsored traffickers or criminal syndicates to illegally transport arms. This type of activity would suggest that effective interdiction of weapon flows from Central America into Colombia requires a more active, targeted, systematic, and strategic policy than the general international monitoring regulations and/or enforcement.

Colombia's immediate neighbors (Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, and Panama) all act as both sources and transit routes for small-arms trafficking. However, these states are not equipped with caches of available weapons the size of those that exist in Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. As a result, traffickers typically purchase weapons from criminal organizations, obtain them from legal markets, bribe private security forces, or raid government military stockpiles.

Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador act as source countries for small arms in South America. Munitions moving from Venezuela

generally include black-market items that have circuitously traveled from Mexico, Israel, Brazil, or Spain. Certain weapons have also been traced back to the Venezuelan armed forces. Although there is no definitive evidence at this point that links the administration of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to a deliberate policy of arming Colombia's guerrillas, it is possible that sympathetic individual members of the Venezuelan military have supplied both weapons and ammunition to FARC and the ELN.

Most guns from Brazil are thought to originate from the Iguazu Falls. This area is part of the so-called "tri-border" region that links Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, and which is a well-known source for weapons, drugs, and money laundering. FARC agents have also been arrested in Tabatinga (Brazil) and Leticia (Colombia), which together form a pivotal point for black-market activity in general and arms trafficking in particular.

Arms flowing into Colombia from Ecuador and Peru emanate mostly from stolen military stocks or supplies that have been illegally resold by members of private security firms. In the case of Ecuador, individual citizens have been known to inject weapons into the Colombian black market either for direct profit or as partial payment for kidnap ransoms.

The most significant role that Colombia's Latin American neighbors play in arms trafficking, however, is as transshipment and transit points. Supplies enter Colombia by several means and via a number of collection and distribution hubs. Land routes provide the guerrillas with their most constant supply of small arms, with most flows of arms crossing over the densely forested and swampy Venezuelan, Ecuadorian, and Brazilian borders, either by road (in the case of Venezuela and Ecuador) or by river (in the case of Brazil).

Weapons shipments that come into Colombia by air and by sea are generally grouped together in larger bundles than those transported over land. Traffickers primarily use fishing vessels to transport weapons directly into Pacific or Caribbean ports, although they also occasionally pack arms in plastic bags and drop them offshore for later collection by smaller boats, which then transport the arms to prearranged destinations, such as inlets and coves. While Panama accounts for the bulk of shipments that come in by sea, significant

volumes are also smuggled from Ecuador. The main travel route for those shipments is from Esmeraldas (Ecuador) to the Colombian Pacific ports of Tumaco and Buenaventura.

Just under a half of all illegal weapons that arrive in Colombia by air are flown in planes departing from Brazil. Munitions are generally flown, either directly or via Suriname, to small landing strips in FARC's demilitarized zone (DMZ)<sup>5</sup>—five FARC-controlled municipalities in south-central Colombia—or to the Guainia and Vichada Departments.<sup>6</sup> Mostly small, single-engine charter planes, each of which is able to carry up to one ton of cargo, are used to transport the arms. In terms of numbers of weapons, this equates to approximately 100 AK-47s, not including ammunition.

FARC and the AUC are striving for consistency in their arms shipments from external sources. Both groups are currently fighting for control of regions in Colombia that provide the best access to land and sea routes and have explored relationships with criminal organizations to negotiate “bulk purchases.” High-volume purchases, however, remain the exception to the rule, with most weapons from Central and Latin America continuing to trickle into Colombia through black markets.

## PATTERNS OF ARMS TRAFFICKING INSIDE COLOMBIA

Most of the illegal small arms that originate from inside Colombia's borders are stolen from production facilities or are sold through the black market by Colombia's security forces. Many of these weapons have been traced to Industria Militar (Indumil), the main manufacturing company that produces munitions for the Colombian security forces. Arms are either stolen and then sold by factory workers and guards or are directly raided from government storehouses by FARC, the ELN, or the AUC themselves. Military personnel sympathetic to the aims of either the guerrillas or (especially) the self-defense militias are also known to have illegally distributed assault weapons and ammunition, demonstrating at least a limited interaction between Colombia's security forces and the country's internal black market.

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<sup>5</sup>As of January 2002, the DMZ is no longer in existence.

<sup>6</sup>A Colombian *department* is a political division akin to a state or province.

Three primary smuggling routes exist in Colombia. The first uses water and land routes to transport weapons from Ocana, via Cucuta and Pamplona, to Bucaramanga and Barrancabermeja. The second runs from the Gulf of Uraba (located near the border with Panama), along the Chigorodo-Dabeiba highway to Medellín. The third draws on an inner-city patchwork of collection and distribution hubs that have formed within the capital city of Bogotá and that feed market neighborhoods in San Victorino, El Cartucho, Patio Bonito, Ciudad Bolívar, and Corabastos. Most of the traffickers within the capital operate in small cells of no more than ten members who take and fill orders directly on the streets or, in the case of more-complicated requests, via messenger services.

## SECURITY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For at least two reasons, the proliferation of small arms in Colombia is directly relevant to the United States:

First, FARC is one of the largest and most well-funded militant organizations in the world. Although FARC has engaged primarily in guerrilla warfare within Colombia's rural regions, since 2002 the group has increased its capability to conduct attacks on major cities. With the advent of the "war on terrorism," FARC could focus more attention on U.S. targets. Moreover, our analysis demonstrates that FARC was able to supply its rapidly expanding membership with weapons relatively easily from 1998 through 2001 (the period of this study). This expansion appears to be closely correlated to perceived increased threats, as discussed above, from the U.S.-backed Plan Colombia. Thus, we conclude that FARC has the resources and ability to strategically manage its weapons supplies and could pose a threat to the United States should it choose to do so.

Second, small-arms transfers have had a negative impact on regional stability in Latin America. Ready access to weapons has helped to both entrench and empower guerrilla and paramilitary forces in Colombia. Not only has this situation threatened the security of the fourth-largest economy in Latin America, it has also triggered highly deleterious cross-border flows of refugees, drugs, and violence that have already had a negative impact on Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador.