Chapter Four

GUERRILLA STRATEGY

GRAND STRATEGY

A review of FARC operations during the 1990s suggests that the FARC is implementing the strategic plan laid out at its Seventh Conference in May 1982.\(^1\) In an interview published in *El Tiempo* on March 2, 1999, FARC leader Marulanda observed that the FARC’s military advances had brought the struggle to a new stage, in which the Colombian government had been forced to agree to negotiations. Marulanda stated that the FARC would not repeat “past errors,” such as the negotiations in the mid-1980s that led to the demobilization of the M-19 guerrilla movement, and would continue the struggle “until victory.”\(^2\)

Colombian analysts believe that the strategic objectives of the FARC are:

First, to consolidate its control of coca-growing regions in the southern and eastern part of the country. Control of the resources in these areas enables the guerrillas to build up their military capabilities and push into other areas.

\(^1\)The official FARC history states that this conference, which designated the FARC as a “People’s Army,” gave the movement, for the first time, “a clear operational and strategic concept,” requiring a readjustment of all of its command structure. See “Las FARC: 30 años de lucha por la paz, democracia y soberanía,” http://www.tierra.ucsd.edu/farc-ep/Nuestra_historia/.

Second, to expand the theater of operations to the entire country, so as to force the government to disperse its forces and reduce its ability to regain the military initiative. At the same time, the guerrillas seek to expand into economically strategic areas, such as the middle Magdalena valley and the central highlands. To do this, the FARC is striving to control a number of strategic corridors that link the FARC’s base in the *zona de despeje* to the Pacific coast and to northeastern Colombia and the Venezuelan border and permit the rapid movement of troops, arms, and supplies across the country. (See Figure 4.1.) Some of the most intense fighting over the past two years has been over control of these corridors.

Third, to isolate the capital, Bogotá, and other major cities. Perched at 6000 feet on the western slope of the eastern cordillera of the Andes, Bogotá is dependent on a few easily interdicted roads for land communications with the external world. The FARC and the ELN regularly sever road communications between the capital and the Atlantic coast, the Amazonian region, and the eastern plains.

In the last several years, the FARC has established seven new fronts in areas close to Bogotá, responding to both its strategic plan and to the development of poppy fields on the eastern slope of the Andes, which provide a source of income for the new FARC fronts.

The final stage in the FARC’s strategy would be a move to large-scale offensive operations, culminating in a general uprising. To this end, the FARC has been building urban support networks in Bogotá and

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3These are the Pan-American Highway, south and west to Girardot and Ibagué, and north to Tunja, Cúcuta, and the Venezuelan border; the road west across the Magdalena river to Caldas; and the road across the mountains to Villavicencio and the eastern plains.

4In a series of attacks on the road network in April 2000, the ELN blocked the Pan-American Highway south of Cali, the road from Pasto, the capital of Nariño department, to the Pacific port of Tumaco; blew up a bridge on the Bogotá-Medellín highway; and cut road communications leading to the northeastern cities of Barrancabermeja, Bucaramanga, and Cúcuta “Primer muerto por ‘paro armado,’” *El Tiempo*, April 11, 2000.

5The Salvadoran Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) pursued a similar three-stage strategy, culminating in the failed “final offensive” of November 1989. After the failure of the offensive, the FMLN concluded that there was no viable alternative to a political settlement.
Figure 4.1—Main Theaters of Operations
other cities. Beginning in 1996, the FARC inaugurated a new phase of the war, involving multifront attacks on military objectives and use of 60mm and 81mm mortars and homemade bombs fired from a tube, known as cylinder bombs.

These attacks inflicted major defeats on the Colombian army. On August 30, 1996, the FARC launched a surprise night attack on the military base at Las Delicias, in Putumayo. After 15 hours of fighting, the base was destroyed. Colombian army losses were 54 dead, 17 wounded, and 60 captured. In March 1998 at El Billar, in southern Caquetá, the FARC annihilated an elite army unit, the 52nd counter-guerrilla battalion of the Colombian army’s 3rd Mobile Brigade. The battalion had been stationed for six weeks in the town of Peña Colorada, deep in guerrilla-controlled territory, before receiving orders to conduct operations against the FARC infrastructure in the lower Caguan river. Spies and local sympathizers provided the FARC with intelligence on the battalion’s strength and movements, while the Colombian army commanders were unaware of massing guerrilla forces in the vicinity. On March 2, a force of 600–800 FARC guerrillas sealed off escape routes and attacked the battalion in hilly and forested terrain. Despite the Colombian air force’s deployment of Kfir, Mirage V, TAC-47, and OV-10 aircraft, overcast skies prevented the effective use of air power in support of the beleaguered battalion. An attempted airborne landing was aborted when the guerrillas covered landing clearances with antiair ambushes. By the time reinforcements were able to land, on March 4, the battalion had been destroyed as an effective fighting force, with a loss of 107 of its 154 men. In August 1998, FARC guerrillas attacked and destroyed an antidrug base at Miraflores, in southeastern Guaviare. In November 1998, 1000 FARC guerrillas overran Mitu, a provincial capital near the

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6The FARC has released some of the soldiers captured in combat, but has held most as chips to pressure the Colombian government to accede to guerrilla demands. Relatives and friends of the captured soldiers have periodically demonstrated in Bogotá demanding that the government secure their freedom. As of October 2000, the FARC held 528 soldiers and policemen. See “El canje,” Semana, October 16–22, 2000.

7David Spencer notes that the soldiers were issued only 280 rounds of ammunition each and were low on rifle grenades and batteries for radio-frequency scanners. Night-vision goggles, smoke grenades, and illumination flares were left behind because they were considered unnecessary weight. Three of the four battalion radios were put out of action in the initial guerrilla attack. David Spencer, “FARC Warfare Strategy and Tactics 1996–1999,” unpublished manuscript.
Brazilian border. The Colombian army recaptured Mitu only after the Brazilians granted permission for Colombian troops to land in Brazilian bases across the border.

Control of the zona de despeje, the 42,139 square kilometers in southern Colombia evacuated by the Colombian government as a condition for negotiations, constitutes a major strategic asset for the FARC. The FARC uses the zone as a sanctuary from which to launch operations, rest and refit its forces, move drugs and arms, and even hold prisoners and hostages. The FARC used the area as a base to launch a multifront attack involving 4000 fighters in July 1999 against the military bases and towns in the departments of Meta, Guaviare, Huila, Putumayo, and Caquetá.8

The FARC again launched major attacks in the region around Bogotá after the Christmas truce of December 1999. In early January 2000, some 800 FARC guerrillas attacked military and police positions in the towns of Une, Quetame, and Guayabetal 60 kilometers south of Bogotá, and cut off land communications between Bogotá and Villavicencio, the capital of the department of Meta and the largest city in the eastern plains.9 In the spring and summer of 2000 the tempo of multifront FARC operations slowed, although attacks on isolated police posts and infrastructure targets continued.

The frequency of mass guerrilla attacks in 2000 diminished in relation to the 1997–1998 period, which Colombia military sources attribute to the increased Colombian use of air power after the battle of Mitu (see the appendix). In addition, the new Colombian military leadership, which took the reins of the Colombian armed forces in 1998, understood the need to move away from a defensive posture and to undertake offensive operations. This led to the establishment of a 5000-strong rapid deployment force (RDF) under the operational control of the army high command.10 In the first six months of 2000, the armed forces conducted 1808 counter-insurgency actions, resulting in 504 insurgents killed in action, compared to 855 actions and

10Spencer and Noss, p. 7.
364 insurgents killed in action in 1999. In Operation Annihilator II, in September 2000, troops of the Colombian 13th Brigade cleared the FARC from the Sumapaz area, a strategic corridor extending from the eastern plains to the outskirts of Bogotá.

Some analysts believe that the FARC is using this time to train and refit its forces for a resumption of offensive operations at a later date. There is no question, however, that the FARC has the capability to return to the offensive on a large scale when it judges that the strategic situation is favorable. The action at Dabeida in October 2000, when FARC guerrillas killed 54 soldiers and policemen in heavy fighting, illustrates the limitations of the government’s reliance on helicopters for mobility.

The battle developed when 600 guerrillas from the FARC’s northwestern block attacked and captured the town of Dabeida, astride a critical corridor between the Urabá region of Antioquia and the department of Chocó on the Pacific coast. Another 400 FARC, ELN, and Guevarist Revolutionary Army guerrillas captured the town of Bagadó, in Chocó. The FARC’s strategic objective was to open a logistics corridor to the Pacific coast. The immediate tactical objective, however, was to lure the army reaction force into a prepared kill zone—a tactic that the FARC had been developing since 1996. The

13David Spencer notes that there is a seasonal pattern to FARC offensives, which tend to occur at mid-year and at the end or the beginning of the year. Time in between is used to prepare for further attacks. The Colombian army claims that December 2000 FARC attacks were blunted. Personal communication from David Spencer, December 2000.
14FARC second-in-command Jorge Briceño reportedly stated that the FARC was in a position to seize the departmental capitals of Villavicencio or Florencia but refrained while it was engaged in peace negotiations. Penhaul, p. 3. At a conference in Washington on September 27, 2000, the mayor of Quibdó, capital of Chocó department, noted that there were three FARC fronts, two ELN fronts, and two AUC (paramilitary) fronts operating in the department and that it was only a matter of time before Quibdó fell into the hands of subversive groups. Presentation by Arnobio Córdoba, mayor of Quibdó, at Georgetown University and National Endowment for Democracy Conference on “Local Government Amidst the Armed Conflict: The Experience of Colombian Mayors,” Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., September 27, 2000.
kill zone was surrounded by deep rifle pits connected to bunkers with overhead cover.  

The Colombian army 4th Brigade responded by dispatching 350 Special Forces troops to recapture Dabeida. The troops were to be transported in three sorties of five helicopters to an area six kilometers from the town. One of the helicopters was grounded because of mechanical problems; another one, a UH-60 Black Hawk, crashed after being hit by guerrilla fire, killing all 22 soldiers and crew members aboard. The three other helicopters were damaged by hostile fire and returned to their base after landing some 80 troops, who then came under fire from superior guerrilla forces. The Colombian commanders requested replacement helicopters for the damaged helicopters used in the operation, but they did not arrive until nightfall. The reinforcements did not make contact with the surviving troops until the following morning. By then, only 32 were still alive.  

The ELN has generally avoided military confrontations and has pursued an “economic strategy” consisting of attacks on the power grid and the communications infrastructure, “armed propaganda,” kidnappings, and airplane hijackings; this strategy reflects the organization’s military weakness in relation to the other actors in the conflict. Although the ELN’s long-term political objectives are compatible with those of the FARC, the two organizations have been competing for local control—there were reports of executions of ELN commanders in January 2000 by members of the FARC’s 9th front in Antioquia. On the other hand, FARC units have joined forces with the ELN in southern Bolívar against the advance of the paramilitaries and, as noted above, in the capture of Dabeida.

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15Spencer notes that at the battles of Puerto Rico, Puerto Lleras, and Vega Larga, the FARC set up kill zones with thousands of guerrillas and waited for the army to fall into the trap. In each of those cases, the army detected the kill zones and avoided falling into them; in Dabeida, the army fell right into the trap.


17“Guerra de guerrillas entre FARC and ELN,” *El Tiempo*, January 9, 2000. The ELN denounced the killings, but noted that it did not consider the incident the result of FARC policy but mistakes by individual FARC commanders.

The ELN’s short-term objective is control of its own demilitarized zone and equal status with the FARC in the peace negotiations. In May 2000, the Pastrana administration agreed in principle to establish a demilitarized zone for the ELN in the southern Bolívar department. Unlike the zone conceded to the FARC, which is located in a remote part of Colombia, the zone proposed for the ELN is a strategically important area, bordering on the Magdalena river, the country’s major river artery, and the oil-refining complex at Barrancabermeja. Moreover, for the past two years the area has been under the control of militias associated with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). As discussed in Chapter Seven, the plan to establish an ELN zone in the area was strongly opposed by the local authorities and population and, as of this writing, had not been implemented.

CONTROLLING THE GRASS ROOTS: THE LOCAL DIMENSION OF GUERRILLA STRATEGY

All of the guerrilla groups (as well as the paramilitaries) are seeking to expand their control of the grass-roots levels of government, that is, municipalities or townships (municipios) and rural areas (corregimientos). According to the most complete set of statistical data on violence and armed conflict in Colombia, the guerrilla presence has spread from 173 municipalities in 1985 to 437 in 1991 and to 622 in 1995, out of a total of approximately 1050 municipalities. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 show the expansion of the area of FARC activity from 1986–1987 to 1996–1997.

The growth of the guerrilla presence in the country’s agricultural backbone—the coffee-growing departments of central Colombia and

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20Echandía, p. 60.  
21Areas of guerrilla presence are defined as areas where guerrilla groups have carried out armed activities, including attacks on military and police units, and harassment, sabotage, and attacks on towns, government installations, and infrastructure. Darker areas denote greater guerrilla activity. Some caution needs to be used in interpreting the maps because all of the municipalities where guerrilla activity was registered are represented, possibly overestimating the geographic scope of the guerrilla presence. Nevertheless, the maps provide a gauge of the spread of guerrilla activity during this ten-year period.
the densely populated commercial agriculture areas—is particularly alarming. According to Echandía’s figures, the guerrilla presence in the coffee-growing region increased from 2 percent of the municipalities in 1985 to 53 percent in 1995. In commercial agriculture areas, the guerrilla presence went from 13 percent of the municipalities in 1985 to 71 percent in 1995.22

Guerrilla influence remains strongest in regions of “internal colonization” (west of the eastern cordillera) and “border colonization” (east of the eastern cordillera). This is Colombia’s agricultural frontier, the vast areas where migrants from the more established agricultural areas in Colombia have moved to find land. This is also where most of Colombia’s coca is produced. The guerrilla presence in internal colonization areas increased from 62 percent in 1985 to 93 percent in 1995; in the border colonization areas, it rose from 44 percent in 1985 to 81 percent in 1995.23

There are two stages of guerrilla infiltration and takeover of localities. The first stage is the arrival of a group of cadres charged with reconnoitering the terrain, identifying sources of income, and laying the groundwork for a guerrilla administration. This is followed by the arrival of a so-called public order commission—armed guerrillas who seek to gain public sympathy by imposing their own version of law and order, which generally involves actions against local criminals or other unpopular individuals.24 Once the guerrillas gain control of a locality, it becomes a source of support—financial and logistical—and a springboard for further expansion.

The Colombian government’s policy of decentralization, which devolved authority and resources to local governments, made the latter even juicier targets for the illegal armed groups. Municipal governments experienced an increase in resources from 2.6 percent of GDP in 1980 to 5.5 percent of GDP in 1994.25 Through their control or links to local officials, the guerrillas are able to tap into these

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22Echandía, p. 60.
23Echandía, p. 61. Definitions of these areas can be found in Echandía, pp. 31–42.
24Rangel, pp. 40–41.
Figure 4.2—Areas of Expansion of FARC Activity: 1986–1987

NOTE: Darker areas denote greater guerrilla activity.
SOURCE: Echandia, p. 95.
Figure 4.3—Areas of Expansion of FARC Activity: 1996–1997

NOTE: Darker areas denote greater guerrilla activity.
SOURCE: Echandía, p. 117.
resources. The guerrillas, in effect, replicate the functions and methods of the traditional political bosses or *gamonales*—they “recommend” individuals for jobs in the local bureaucracy, retain part of their earnings as “contributions,” demand payments for the award of public works contracts, and collect a cut of public expenditures.26

Small towns and rural areas are, for the most part, highly vulnerable to guerrilla infiltration. According to official figures, there is no police presence in one fourth of the country’s *municipios* or *corregimientos.*27 Small and isolated police and military posts simply become targets of opportunity for guerrilla attacks: In the first half of 2000, the guerrillas carried out 176 attacks on police posts.28 In these attacks, as noted above, the guerrillas typically use homemade propane cylinders filled with explosives, napalm, or tear gas launched from improvised mortars fashioned from 55-gallon drums or larger canisters. These are highly inaccurate devices that often result in casualties among the civilian population and severe damage to the town that is being attacked.

The experience of the town of Alpujarra, in southern Tolima, illustrates the vulnerability of exposed towns in contested areas. On November 6, 1998, a 300-strong FARC force overwhelmed the town’s small police garrison; Colombian army reinforcements did not arrive in time. On December 12, 1999, the town was again attacked in a FARC general offensive in Tolima. On March 20, 2000, guerrillas attacked a nearby communications tower that relayed signals to and from the departments of Tolima, Huila, Caquetá, Vaupez, and Putumayo. The guerrillas also attacked the police station, but were driven off by the Colombian air force. On May 3, the guerrillas dynamited the communications tower, leaving the town without communications. On July 12, there was another violent guerrilla attack—within a two-hour period, the guerrillas blanketed the town with 35 home-

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26 Presentation by Gilberto Toro, Executive Secretary, *Federación Colombiana de Municipios,* at Georgetown University and National Endowment for Democracy, Conference on “Local Government Amidst the Armed Conflict: The Experience of Colombian Mayors”; see also Rangel, pp. 34–36.

27 There is no police presence in 254 *municipios or corregimientos.* Colombian armed forces briefing, March 2000.

made propane cylinder bombs. As a result, many of the inhabitants fled to the provincial capital, Ibagué, which, like other Colombian cities, has been overrun by large numbers of displaced persons.

Local officials and political and civic leaders are very much at the mercy of the armed groups. Prior to the October 1997 regional elections, which the guerrillas attempted to block, 110 candidates and political activists were murdered, 244 were kidnapped, 359 mayoral candidates were forced to withdraw, and 22 municipios were left without candidates. Two hundred mayors were declared “military targets”—candidates for assassination by guerrillas or paramilitaries. Lack of basic security is at the root of the dysfunctional nature of Colombian governmental and judicial institutions.
