



The Business of War: The Rise of the Private Mercenary Industry in Colombia

Colombia's highly skilled soldiers are the byproduct of more than a half-century of civil war. This article explains why so many of these former soldiers have turned to the private security sector.

Early in the morning of July 7, 2021, men disguised as agents of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration entered the private residence of Haiti's president in Port-au-Prince. Encountering minimal resistance, they quickly made their way to the president's room. Around 1 a.m., shots rang out. President Jovenel Moïse was dead. The first lady, Martine Moïse, was also shot but survived. Their daughter was in the house but managed to hide.

Of the 28 men that entered the President's home, two were Haitian American. The other 26 were Colombian mercenaries.

In the weeks that followed, news began to circulate. Interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph declared a state of siege, placing the army in charge of security and limiting freedom of information. Joseph took charge of the government but stepped aside later in July in favor of Ariel Henry, whom Moïse had appointed as prime minister the day before his assassination. A Haitian American doctor was suspected of ordering the attack as part of a plot to take over the presidency. In the months leading up to the assassination, President Moïse had become deeply

unpopular, and Haiti had dealt with an economic crisis and criminal gangs. Violent protests erupted over allegations of government corruption as well as the president's refusal to step down in a dispute over when his term should end.

After processing the cold-blooded assassination of a national leader, the world turned to the next obvious question: What were 26 Colombian ex-soldiers doing in Haiti?

A Long War

The answer to this question ties back to Colombia's more than 52-year civil conflict, which dominated the country during the second half of the 20th century and produced the most professional and highly skilled military in Latin America. This military became home to a group of highly trained soldiers who, upon retiring, have transitioned in increasingly greater numbers to the private security industry. Colombia went from an importer of private security throughout the 1980s and 1990s to an exporter, sending highly trained soldiers around the world at a fraction of previous costs.

Since the 1948 assassination of populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitan, Colombia has been embroiled in a violent internal conflict that has killed over 200,000 and injured and displaced countless more. The war, which has been financed largely by narcotics trafficking, has seen whole sections of the country cordoned off by Marxist guerillas, weakening nearly to breaking point the power and legitimacy of the government. For more than half a century, the Colombian armed forces have waged war and sustained large casualties, forging by fire the third-largest and one of the strongest and well-equipped professional armies of the region, standing 300,000 strong. Today, after the 2016 peace treaty with the oldest Marxist guerilla group in the world, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), Colombia has become “a net-exporter of security,” as U.S. Navy Adm. Kurt W. Tidd told a Congressional hearing in 2018.

Professionalization of the Army and the Cost of War

The modernization of the armed forces can be traced to a change in national perception of security after a failed attempt at peace. According to an article by Elvira Maria Restrepo, associate professor of international studies at George Washington University and former special counsel to Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos (2016-2017), in the aftermath of the failed peace agreement at Caguán by President Andres Pastrana, one of the four separate attempts at peace processes since 1982, military aid aimed at ramping up a war on drugs turned the tide of the conflict in Colombia and helped form the armed forces of today. The failure of the peace agreement led to a change in the national psyche towards a preference for the hard-nosed national security doctrine that would characterize Alvaro Uribe’s presidency. Uribe’s election in 2002, under the slogan “mano firme, corazon grande” (“firm hand, big heart”), propelled the country into an age of militarization that transformed the army and allowed for the government to regain control of the country. Fueled by a U.S. aid package originally negotiated by Pastrana, named Plan Colombia, the Colombian armed forces cemented a deep relationship with the United States and brought large swaths of territory once again under the control of the central government. The military victories achieved under Uribe’s presidency would set the stage for the successful negotiation of peace with the FARC by President Santos between 2012 and 2017.

U.S. military training and aid proved vital in the professionalization of the armed forces of Colombia. Gen. Alberto Mejia, ex-commander of the Colombian armed forces between 2017 and 2018, said in an interview that soldiers trained by the U.S. were the “tip of the spear in fighting terrorism and narcotraffic in Colombia.” However, the resourcefulness and adaptability that make Colombian soldiers such skilled fighters are uniquely Colombian. These are men capable of surviving in the jungle, the desert, and high altitudes, who can, in Mejia’s words, “set up a system of communication in a matter of minutes” and pilot Black Hawk helicopters through difficult terrain. The combined \$7 billion in U.S. aid has accounted for only 4% of the defense budget; the rest has been funded by Colombians through tax revenue

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However, as Restrepo said in an interview, the price of war has been costly in Colombia. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, military expenditure in Colombia represented on average 11.2% of government spending between 2002 and 2021, which is the highest amount in the region as a percentage of GDP (3.4%). Additionally, its partnership with the United States led to demands that crossed sovereign boundaries. For example, Colombia was the only country in the world to allow a foreign power to conduct aerial fumigation of crops within its national territory. Glyphosate fumigation by the United States aimed at destroying coca crops between 1994 and 2015 has severely damaged the Colombian ecosystem and led to health problems for farmers whose crops were purposefully or accidentally fumigated, all without effectively reducing coca cultivation.

Further, the incentive structure that allowed the military to become a highly effective fighting force also led to human rights abuses that inflated the body count (as was the case for the U.S. in Vietnam). In what is known as the “false positive scandal,” military officers executed civilian men who were falsely accused of being enemy combatants. The silver lining in all this national pain is that today the Colombian army plays a role in training and peace keeping

internationally, by exporting security and training Central American armies alongside the United States.

Currently, the Colombian armed forces are the only Latin American army to be a partner to NATO and have served as a proxy for U.S. troops in more than 40 countries, training local military forces. In a U.S. House of Representatives 2014 subcommittee hearing, Gen. John F. Kelly of the U.S. Southern Command praised the training efforts of the Colombian military in Central America, saying that Colombian soldiers “are such good partners with us (that) when we ask them to go somewhere else and train the Mexicans, the Hondurans, the Guatemalans, the Panamanians, they will do it almost without asking, and they will do it on their own.” While the war with the FARC has ended, the role of the army in Colombian life nationally has not changed. Military spending has not significantly decreased since the signing of the peace treaty in 2016, with military spending still accounting for 3.4% of the GDP in 2020, or \$9.2 million. Colombian men and women continue to be caught up in the business of war.

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The Human Factor

While the end of war has been long awaited, it has also resulted in an increasingly large number of private soldiers. According to the General Command of the Military Forces, there has been a reduction of approximately 30,000 officers during 2013-17, with the biggest annual drops observed since 2008.

But decades of war are not easily dismissed by those who devoted their lives to it. Layoffs and comparable low pay could create an incentive for former soldiers to put their skills to use elsewhere. According to Restrepo, “The peace agreement hadn’t foreseen a private security sector reform, or anything that would reincorporate professionals from the army and police that would no longer be necessary with the end of the war and give them a dignified way out the same way that it was given to the former guerrilleros.”

With the newly established peace, there was significant positive speculation on Colombia’s economy. The National Planning Department (DNP) forecasted a permanent increase of 1.1% to 1.9% to the GDP. According to the World Bank, Colombia sustained unprecedented levels of foreign direct investment, a signal of confidence in the country’s stability. “Many of the professionals that were leaving the army and police had the possibility of joining a regular work life and having a more or less normal life,” Restrepo said about the positive outlook. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought economic instability to Colombia. In 2020, according to the World Bank, Colombia experienced its first recession since 1999, observing a 6.8% reduction in GDP. Unemployment rose over five percentage points to 15% of the workforce. In this new climate, retiring soldiers are encountering inhospitable employment prospects and are more likely to turn to the private security sector and the attractive salary that it brings.

The Plan for Reintegration

When Colombian soldiers retire after 18 to 20 years of service, they receive different standard pensions based on their rank. For public officials and military officers, the standard pension is the basic monthly salary, currently established at 908,526 pesos (approximately \$240), with different premiums based on seniority, activity, family, disability, etc. For professional soldiers, the standard pension is 70% of their monthly salary (currently established at a 40% increase of the basic salary), 38.5% of their seniority premium, and potential additional premiums similar to that of public officials and military officers.

The financial compensation of the Colombian armed forces has remained relatively stable since the peace accords. However, a 2016 veteran’s law aiming at honoring the work done by the Veterans of the Public Force provided new social benefits and welfare through state programs. These benefits range from access to digital media platforms to access to basic and higher education. As mentioned by Gen. Mejia, “For those who reach the term of 20 years, of which there are thousands, the military does something extraordinary. In their last year, when they have completed 19 years of service, they are sent to study for a year at SENA (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje); they can choose where and what to study. The government gives them this year as a tool so they can find a dignified

job at the time of retirement.” This program aims to help soldiers reintegrate into society and find a civilian job.

Although the new veteran’s law establishes a positive trend towards the reintegration of Colombian soldiers in society, it does not fully address the issue. Neither did the peace accord. While the agreement prioritized establishing peace, Restrepo noted, it failed to address what would happen to these highly skilled and technical soldiers now that their primary purpose had been accomplished. Furthermore, the armed forces purposely refrained from including army personnel decisions in the accord to avoid being treated at an equal level to the FARC fighters.

The challenge that stems from the current situation is twofold. Firstly, the current reintegration plan only applies to those soldiers who remain in the army for over 20 years. However, there are thousands of soldiers who leave the armed forces before that. Mejia confirmed that the military completely loses touch with them once they do. Secondly, the transition to civilian life can prove difficult, both financially and emotionally, even with training. These factors, when combined with high unemployment, the flood of Venezuelan refugees into Colombia, and a global pandemic, significantly limit the options for retired soldiers. By entering the private security industry, these retired soldiers can often earn more than five times their regular income, significantly enhancing their economic prospects.

A Global Problem

As in any market, supply and demand are the norm, and Colombia is not unique in having thousands of experienced special forces looking for employment in higher paying markets. The pull that the private security industry has on retiring soldiers is a phenomenon faced by countries around the globe. Private security companies such as the Russian-based Wagner Group, London-based Aegis Defense Services, and U.S.-based Triple Canopy Inc. all recruit former special operations forces from the U.S., British, and Russian military forces, among other nationalities. This industry is not new. In the 1980s, Israeli soldiers for hire were discovered to be training “murder teams” for narco-traffickers in Colombia.

Moïse’s assassination putting the spotlight on Colombia’s growing pool of former soldiers for hire, but Mejia points out that these few men cannot be associated with the

immense majority of professional soldiers and retired military personnel who are working appropriately, professionally, and ethically in Colombia or elsewhere. These soldiers take these fully legal jobs to support their families and should not be scapegoated because of the incident in Haiti. For example, Colombian ex-soldiers were hired by Erik Prince, the founder of private military company Blackwater (now known as Academi), to work in the United Arab Emirates. The force was intended to conduct special operations missions inside and outside the country, defend oil pipelines and skyscrapers from terrorist attacks, and put down interval revolts, according to a 2011 *New York Times* article. However, the newspaper also reported that the UAE secretly dispatched hundreds of Colombian and other Latin American private soldiers to Yemen to intervene in its civil war and fight Houthi rebels, increasing the complexity of a proxy war involving the U.S. and Iran. In recent years, Colombian private soldiers have been in conflicts in several other countries in the Middle East, including Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, according to reporting by *The New Arab*.

It could be argued that with or without Colombian private soldiers, the UAE would have found a way to intervene in the conflict in Yemen. But, as Gen. Mejia points out, these soldiers were treated as full members of the UAE army, and their generous compensation gave them a stronger economic base when they returned home. Monetary incentives are and will remain an attractive alternative for professional soldiers who have suddenly found their advanced skill set without use domestically but in high demand in so-called “conflict markets,” and Colombia is not unique in this regard.

What Comes Next?

Three of the Colombian mercenaries were killed by police in Haiti the morning after the assassination. Another 18 were taken into custody and currently await trial. There are still many unanswered questions. How much did the soldiers know about what they were paid to do? How much were they paid? Due to Haiti’s political climate and continued instability, there is a chance that we will never get the answers to these questions.

In the meantime, Colombia will continue to grapple with its role as one of the leading military forces in Latin America.

While this presents opportunities for peacebuilding across the region, it comes with a set of challenges familiar to any military power tasked with reintegrating soldiers into civilian society. Private security will always be there as a legal option for retired soldiers. The real question is how to prevent highly trained soldiers from being lured into illegal missions in search of economic incentives. This question

is not new, and the answer has eluded many countries before, but it is one that Colombia should try to solve if it hopes to maintain its position of influence in the region.

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THE LAUDER GLOBAL BUSINESS INSIGHT REPORT | 2022

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