



COLOMBIA'S PARAMILITARY DDR: QUIET AND TENTATIVE SUCCESS¹

Colombian paramilitary DDR has saved the lives of an estimated 1400 to 2800 people nationally. However, there is considerable regional variation in outcomes with, for example, DDR leading to increased homicides in Nariño. The final impact of DDR has not yet been determined. Colombia's Justice and Peace Law, as amended recently by the Constitutional Court, strikes a reasonable balance between peace and justice. The DDR process deserves strong backing from the international community.

By

Michael Spagat

Department of Economics
Royal Holloway, University of London

and

CERAC

¹ This article surveys a broad research program on Colombian violence ongoing at [CERAC](#) in Colombia. I draw heavily on [Desmovilización de las AUC: ¿mayor seguridad humana?](#) by Andrea González Peña and Jorge Alberto Restrepo. Oscar Becerra of CERAC is also deeply involved in this work. We acknowledge support from the Canadian and Swiss governments through the [Small Arms Survey](#) in Geneva. A Spanish version of this article will be published in: [Hechos del Callejón](#) by UNDP-Colombia.

Illegal right-wing paramilitary groups are central to the question of civilian safety in Colombia. They have been responsible for most civilian conflict deaths. Compared to the guerrillas and government forces the paramilitaries have an exceptionally high ratio of killings to injuries in conflict events in which they have participated, indicating a strong intentionality in their killing. In other words, they have executed numerous people with shots at point blank range, mainly in massacres, leaving few people injured amidst the carnage. These killings were part of an explicit terror strategy of killing civilians whom the paramilitaries suspected of helping the guerrillas. Since the end of 2002, as most groups have officially gone on ceasefire and then demobilized, the paramilitaries have significantly reduced, but not eliminated, their killing.

The paramilitaries remain a major threat to human security, despite their Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) process. During their major growth phase of 1998 to 2002 the paramilitaries became one of the best-stocked and largest non-state armed group in the world, awash in US-made AR-15 assault rifles and M60 machine guns, Galil rifles, and an array of rifle and pistol silencers. The paramilitaries also accumulated abundant ammunition and have displayed correspondingly weak firing discipline in the field. They have drawn down their arsenal substantially over the last year, handing in almost 17,000 high-quality (often factory fresh) weapons through the DDR process, but almost certainly retain a significant stockpile. For the foreseeable future we must assume that many demobilized paramilitaries are, or can become on short notice, well armed and dangerous.

In light of the key role that paramilitary groups have played in Colombia's exceptionally violent past, it is clear that the success of their DDR is vital to the country's future. If the great majority of paramilitaries transition to a peaceful civilian existence then Colombia may achieve a substantial and long-lasting reduction in violence. If, on the other hand, many paramilitaries remain criminals and drug dealers and/or continue fighting the guerrillas and their presumed supporters then Colombian will remain a very violent place for many years.

Figures 1 and 2 span the range of possible Colombian futures. Figure 1 covers a coherent zone of paramilitary operation which CERAC researchers designate "Antioquia and Medellín", because it covers the Valle de Aburrá where the

city is located plus a larger area of paramilitary influence that surrounds this valley but remains within Antioquia.² The solid line gives the homicide rate in the zone at monthly, annualized intervals. The curve with long dashes, included for comparison, gives the monthly, annualized homicide rates for a set of municipalities nationwide that CERAC considers to have been without paramilitary activity in recent years. The curve with short dashes, scaled to the right-hand-side axis, gives the ratio of the first two curves. Finally, vertical lines mark key dates, including the demobilizations of the three paramilitary groups that operated in the zone. The homicide rate in the Antioquia and Medellín zone drops dramatically from a peak coinciding almost exactly with the beginning of the first Uribe government. The Antioquia and Medellín curve starts well above the non-paramilitary zone one and then dips below it in 2005, right after the demobilization of the Frente Suroeste Antioqueño. The ratio of the two curves plummets immediately after the demobilization of the Cacique Nutibara group at the end of 2003. To summarize, the homicide rate decreases particularly fast in the Antioquia and Medellín zone compared to the non-paramilitary zone and the timing of the drop suggests that paramilitary DDR is one of the causal factors in the improvement.³

Figure 2, constructed like figure 1 but covering the CERAC-designated Nariño zone, tells a much more pessimistic story. Nariño has not followed the homicide trends of the national level and the non-paramilitary zone. To the contrary, Nariño's homicide rate jumped immediately after the demobilization of the front "Libertadores del Sur". Recent reports of a New Generation paramilitary group emerging in Nariño feed a suspicion that DDR has gone awry in this area.

Fortunately, most paramilitary zones have followed more closely the pattern of figure 1 than figure 2. CERAC researchers have analyzed the impact of paramilitary DDR using statistical techniques that exploit the fact that different groups, operating in different areas, demobilize at different times. This is nothing more than a sophisticated before-and-after comparison, checking for changes in homicide rates in the operational areas each group right after it demobilizes. The DDR process takes on much of the character of a controlled experiment due to great variation in the times and places of demobilizations. One key result of this work is that the average demobilization, of which there have been 37 so far, lowers the homicide rate by (a statistically

² [Desmovilización de las AUC: ¿mayor seguridad humana?](#) gives a map of CERAC's classification of paramilitary zones.

³ Other factors likely to have contributed to the decrease in Colombia's homicide rate include increased justice, military and police presence and a variety of disarmament initiatives.

significant) 13% in the area of operation of the demobilized group. A further calculation indicates that between 1400 and 2800 homicides have been averted so far due to the cumulative effect of all completed demobilizations. Thus, paramilitary DDR has paid dividends for Colombia.

Two significant caveats should temper our enthusiasm for the early success of DDR. First, results vary considerably by region. Nariño is the only zone where CERAC finds a statistically significant increase in homicides due to DDR. However, the results are still inconclusive in a number of areas. Figure 3 summarizes this regional heterogeneity and suggests that the DDR outcome is delicately poised in many zones.⁴ The second major caveat is that the DDR process is still very new and evolving rapidly.

The international reception to Colombian DDR has progressed over time from frosty to, at best, tepid. There is much misperception underlying this reaction but, to a large extent, the government has fostered this aloofness. It is, indeed, tricky to establish a workable DDR framework: essentially a compromise between justice for past crimes and a more peaceful future. First, one cannot know how far justice can be pushed without destroying potential deals with armed groups that have not been defeated in the field. Second, DDR generates powerful emotions and strong opposition from a vocal minority can be very costly, making a broad consensus much preferable to a 60-40 majority. The Uribe government, apparently seduced by its popular and Congressional support, seems to have underestimated these considerations. For example, on multiple occasions, President Uribe has lashed out wildly against critics, sometimes construing constructive suggestions as support for the guerrillas. This has cost Colombia dearly in international circles and embittered the domestic opposition even though it does not seem to have affected Uribe's domestic approval ratings.

The Uribe government's most serious tactical error was over negotiations on the Peace and Justice Law, (P JL), governing paramilitary DDR. Colombia has a long history of DDRs for left-wing guerrilla groups that gave total impunity, collected few weapons and yielded no reparations for victims, consistent with the international practices of the times. The P JL, especially as amended in May of 2006 by the Constitutional Court, makes paramilitary DDR far more justice-

⁴ CERAC research also finds that DDR has a statistically significant effect reducing robberies and assaults at the national level but, again, there is much regional variation and statistically significant increases in some zones.

oriented than these domestic and international precedents. Nevertheless, justice concerns made the P JL into an international liability for Colombia. The government's first demobilization plan was dismissed almost universally as far too weak on the paramilitaries. Uribe introduced some changes but then later snubbed an initiative, lead by Senator Rafael Pardo and two representatives⁵, for further amendments. This plan had remarkably broad support across the Colombian political spectrum and the engagement of Human Rights Watch (HRW). Instead, the government pushed through its own plan without such a broad consensus and forfeited much international support along the way. The Constitutional Court has now forced the P JL back toward the Pardo plan, an unsurprising move given the Court's activist history. But much of the international damage surrounding the JPL is already irreversible. If the Uribe government had more carefully judged the political winds in advance it might have claimed credit for a strong, consensus JPL while basking in international support.

Despite these problems and caveats, we must recognize that much criticism of the DDR has been highly misleading. A particularly spurious critique is the presumed low ratio of guns handed in to people demobilized. For one thing, this ratio is actually high for paramilitary DDR compared to previous DDRs, both within Colombia and internationally.⁶ Moreover, the high quality of weapons collected in this process is unprecedented on an international scale. We should worry about what might have been held back, as these decommissioned weapons could be just the tip of an iceberg, but we can rest assured that the weapons transfers have certainly been serious. Second, the ratio of guns to people is not a good direct DDR success indicator in its own right. Figure 4 reveals this ratio as, at best, weakly connected with the movements in homicide rates displayed in figure 3. For example, the Nariño and Antioquia and Medellín zones both have particularly high ratios of guns handed in to people demobilized despite their dramatically different homicide dynamics.

⁵ Rafael Pardo was a strong Uribe backer in the Senate who is now in opposition, largely a result of the struggle over the Peace and Justice Law.

⁶ [Desmovilización de las AUC: ¿mayor seguridad humana?](#) gives details.

Colombian DDR is off to a good start and now has a legal basis that deserves widespread international support. The battle for a successful paramilitary DDR is just beginning and it is far too early to declare victory. It is vital to monitor developments on a zone-by-zone basis and respond quickly to worrying trends. But the time has come for the international community to engage seriously with this hopeful process.

Figure 1

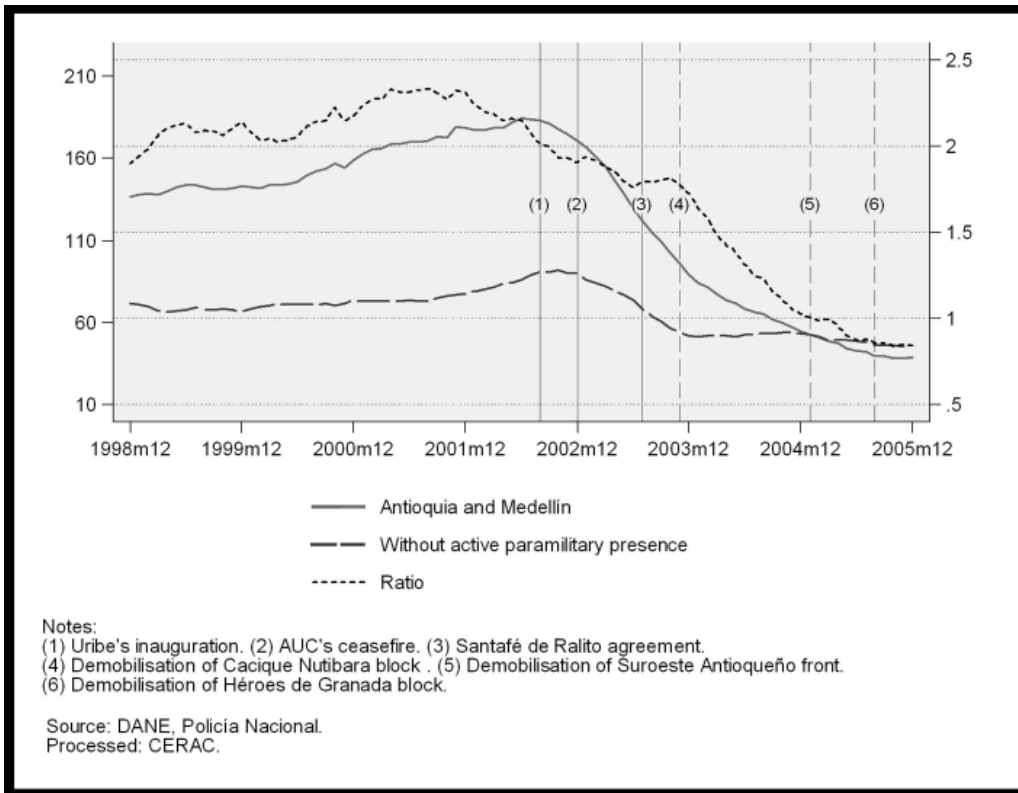


Figure 2

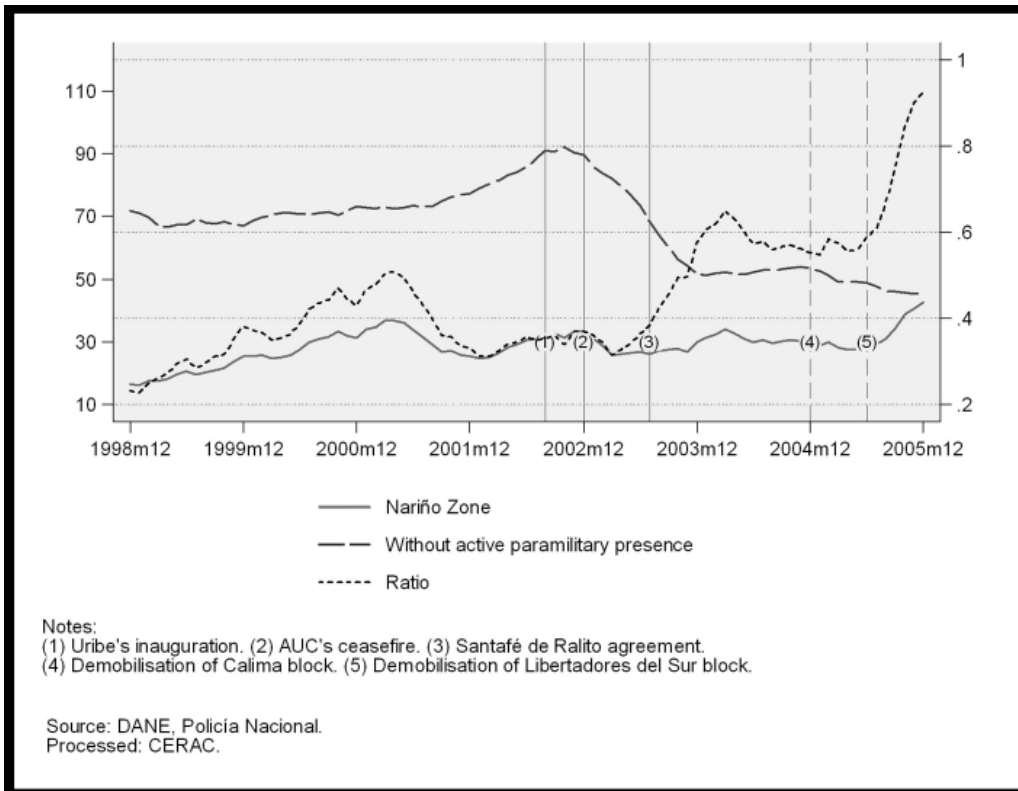


Figure 3

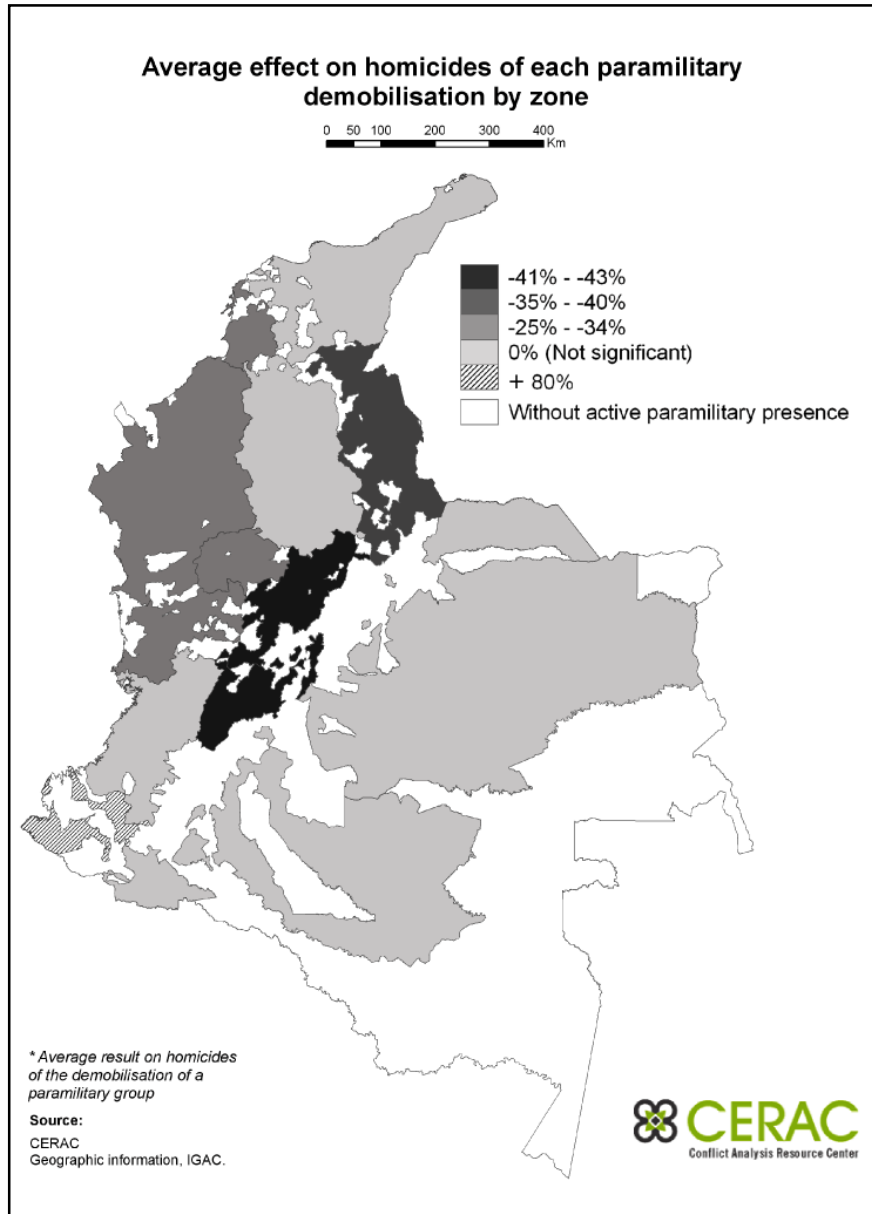


Figure 4

