

# State, Illegality, and Territorial Control

## Colombian Armed Groups in Ecuador under the Correa Government

by

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*The inevitable incursion of Colombian armed groups into Ecuador remained at low levels for decades, but in the late 1990s the United States increased its level of engagement in the conflict and the Colombian government permitted the expansion of paramilitaries into the South of the country. While Rafael Correa's Plan Ecuador privileged economic development in the border region as a way of promoting peace there, the massacre by the Colombian military in Angostura (Sucumbíos) in March 2008 led to an increase in military spending and increasing violations of the human rights of the region's people. Socioeconomic conditions remain favorable to the expansion of the paramilitary organizations, linked to drug trafficking, gasoline smuggling, and other illegal activities. Without the resurrection of Plan Ecuador, their presence will continue to threaten the sovereignty of the state and the consolidation of its progressive national project.*

*La incursión inevitable de los grupos armados colombianos en Ecuador se mantuvo en niveles bajos durante décadas, pero a finales de los 90s los Estados Unidos aumentaron su nivel de participación en el conflicto y el gobierno colombiano permitió la expansión de los paramilitares en el sur del país. Si bien el Plan Ecuador de Rafael Correa privilegió el desarrollo económico en la región fronteriza como una forma de promover la paz allí, la masacre por el ejército colombiano en Angostura (Sucumbíos) en marzo de 2008 generó un incremento en el gasto militar y el aumento de violaciones de los derechos humanos de la gente de la región. Las condiciones socioeconómicas siguen siendo favorables a la expansión de las organizaciones paramilitares, vinculadas al tráfico de drogas, contrabando de gasolina, y otras actividades ilegales. Sin la resurrección del Plan Ecuador, su presencia seguirá amenazando la soberanía del Estado y la consolidación de su proyecto nacional progresista.*

**Keywords:** Ecuador, FARC, Paramilitaries, Plan Colombia, Plan Ecuador

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The internal armed conflict that Colombia has suffered since the 1960s is perhaps the second-most-significant security issue in South America after the presence of illegal organizations in the so-called triple frontier of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay (Vargas, 2009). The dynamics associated with it generate

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both direct and indirect impacts ranging from the expansion of irregular groups into neighboring countries to the displacement of civilian populations and an increase in military spending, coupled with a reduction in integration efforts throughout the region. This article describes the expansionary logic of Colombian armed groups in Ecuadorean territory and its links to the international political context, which was transformed with the election of Rafael Correa in 2007. It emphasizes two processes closely tied to this dynamic: violations of human rights because of increasing Ecuadorean military presence and the expansion of Colombian paramilitaries into the Ecuadorean province of Esmeraldas. While these two phenomena are not the direct result of the Correa government's policies, they are symptomatic of the ease with which illegal armed groups can expand in areas dominated by informal and illegal economic activities; they also demonstrate the impact and limitations of a counterinsurgency-based military response of the sort imposed by Ecuador after the Colombian bombardment of a guerrilla camp in the Angostura region in March 2008.

### THE COLOMBIAN ARMED CONFLICT AND THE U.S. ROLE IN THE ANDEAN REGION

The two most important Colombian guerrilla groups, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army—ELN) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC), both date to 1964 and have a Marxist orientation and a largely rural composition. Of the two, the FARC has the larger presence, having achieved in the late 1990s significant territorial control in the South of the country, including much of the border with Ecuador. That border is around 600 kilometers long and is shared by two Colombian states (Nariño and Putumayo) and three Ecuadorean provinces (Esmeraldas, Carchi, and Sucumbíos).

Starting in the late 1970s, under the tutelage of the United States, the Colombian military developed a counterinsurgency strategy based upon the creation of small groups of armed civilians willing to confront the guerrillas and to work with the military. These groups developed into “paramilitary armies” with a high degree of autonomy with respect to the state's armed forces—with which they frequently coordinated and collaborated—and combined direct confrontation with the guerrillas with the offer (for a fee) of “security services” to national and multinational actors, the killing of community and left-wing activists, the systematic expulsion of small and medium-sized landholders, and the exploitation of lucrative drug trafficking opportunities (Forero, 2012). Starting in 1996, most of these groups came together as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia—AUC).

Given the territorial, cultural, and demographic continuity between Colombia and Ecuador, the incursion of Colombian armed groups into Ecuador was inevitable, although it remained at low levels for decades and was not seen as a significant issue by the Ecuadorean government, which maintained a policy of neutrality and noninterference (Bonilla and Moreano, 2009: 141). This

dynamic changed in the late 1990s, when the United States increased its level of engagement in the conflict and Colombia became the third-largest recipient of military aid, after Israel and Egypt (Vargas, 2009: 202). Three factors were behind this increased engagement. First, the level of foreign investment in Colombia was on the upswing, from US\$2.6 billion in 1994 to US\$5.9 billion in 2001, US\$10.1 billion in 2005, and US\$10.4 billion in 2008 (Banco de la República, 2009). Second, the FARC was starting to win the territorial war against the Colombian military, especially along the southern border; by the mid-1990s, up to 40 percent of Colombian territory had some level of guerrilla control (Hylton, 2003: 74). Lastly, Washington became increasingly concerned with the rise of regimes critical of United States political and economic influence, especially in countries with significant energy and other natural resources (Vargas, 2009: 208). These factors converged in the notion of the “radical triangle” composed, as Washington would have it, of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, an increasingly powerful FARC in Colombia, and an anti-neoliberal resistance movement led by indigenous organizations in Ecuador (Petras, 2001).

It is in this context that the Colombian government of Andrés Pastrana began peace talks with the FARC in 1998. At the same time, Pastrana signed a new military cooperation agreement with the United States known as Plan Colombia, and he permitted the expansion of the paramilitary AUC into the South of the country. Plan Colombia was designed to eradicate illegal narcotics plantings in areas of guerrilla presence in order to undermine their source of financing; at the same time, the AUC (supported by the military) carried out massacres to undermine civilian support for the guerrillas and to eliminate the leadership of rural and indigenous organizations.

With the coming to power of Álvaro Uribe in 2002, the Colombian government adopted a close alignment with the Bush administration, and Plan Colombia was widened to include counterinsurgency; at the same time its budget was significantly increased under the post-9/11 mantle of counterterrorism. The resulting “Plan Patriota” operation involved more than 14,000 soldiers (Vargas, 2009: 200) and was aimed at recovering territory where the guerrillas had consolidated their presence in order to corner their fighters and pressure their leadership toward political negotiations on the government’s terms. These operations, as noted above, were accompanied by paramilitary expansion, and by 2009 the AUC’s campaign in Putumayo had produced 2,500 civilian deaths (*Verdad Abierta*, November 9, 2010).

The overall strategy called for a “hammer and anvil” collaboration with the Peruvian and Ecuadorean militaries to prevent Colombian guerrillas from taking refuge in their territory, but Ecuador’s position since mid-century, based upon an analysis radically different from that of the Colombian and U.S. governments, had been one of neutrality. For Ecuador, the Colombian conflict was essentially political and social in its origins and required a negotiated solution (Bonilla and Moreano, 2009: 141). Despite this, Washington and Bogotá won agreement from the Jamil Mahuad government (1998–2000) to base U.S. troops in Manta, ostensibly for antinarcotics operations. The designation of the Manta base as a “forward operating location” in 2000 meant that by U.S. law it could be used not only for its original purpose but “to project the power of the U.S. in South America when security imperatives required it” (Cadena, 2010: 48). The

Manta base became a logistical support center for Plan Colombia, something acknowledged at the time by the U.S. Southern Command (Comisión de Transparencia y Verdad Angostura, 2009: 17).

A key factor in Washington's increasing interest in the Colombian conflict was, as noted above, the parallel rise of leftist governments in the region, starting with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1999. By 2006 the Chávez regime was characterized by the U.S. National Security Strategy document as a threat to democracy and as a poor partner in the "war on terror" (Cadena, 2010: 44). With the coming to power of Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2006 and Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2007, there was a clear difference between Colombia, which largely agreed with Washington on free trade and the war on terror, and an emerging block that backed a multipolar world and regional integration as a counterweight to traditional U.S. hegemony (Puyana, 2009: 58). At the Fourth Summit of the Americas in 2005 this coalition was decisive in the defeat of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) initiative pushed for over a decade by the United States—the block's first success against a Washington-backed project. The rise of these three regimes, in each case accompanied by nationalization of strategic resources, represented a sharp reverse for the objectives on the continent of the Bush administration, which privileged free trade and the encouragement of private investment, especially in the energy sector (Áviles, 2005: 46).

### ECUADOR'S "CITIZENS' REVOLUTION" AND THE COLOMBIAN ARMED CONFLICT

Rafael Correa came to power in Ecuador in 2007 after almost a decade of political agitation and struggle against the neoliberal project. In 2007 he called a constituent assembly, which produced one of the most progressive constitutions in Latin America, a document that was approved the following year by a wide referendum majority. Correa's time in power has paralleled one of the biggest upticks in the Colombian armed conflict, and his government has proved to be an obstacle to the militarist solution proposed by Colombia and the United States in at least three ways. First, the new constitution's explicit prohibition of foreign military bases on Ecuadorean territory required the dismantling of the U.S. base in Manta the following year. Second, the Correa regime waged an intense campaign against the use of glyphosate to eradicate illegal narcotics crops along the border, which was an essential part of Plan Colombia. Even before Correa came to power, the Ecuadorean government had filed 10 protest notes about unauthorized incursions into its territory by Colombian fumigation planes. Correa brought the matter to the International Court of Justice in 2008 in search of a definitive decision on the issue (Cadena, 2010: 54). A third factor was his decisive support for the Venezuelan government in its efforts to bring about a "humanitarian exchange" of prisoners between the FARC and the Colombian government, including three U.S. mercenaries and the former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. By early 2008 the contradiction between the leftist governments of the region and the Bogotá-Washington axis on these issues was at a critical point,

especially since growing pressure from the international community for the prisoner exchange challenged Uribe's long-standing opposition.

Chávez's mediation bore fruit in January 2008 when, despite the obstacles thrown up by the Colombian government, the FARC unilaterally freed two prisoners who were taken along with Betancourt in 2001, Clara Rojas and Consuelo Gonzales. Chávez took advantage of the moment to propose international recognition of the FARC as a belligerent, a proposal backed by Venezuela's legislature. While Correa's government refrained from supporting the idea, it also declined Colombia's request to designate FARC as a "terrorist" (as opposed to the more neutral "irregular") group. This was all part of a wider debate in the region about the military presence of the United States, which for the three leftist regimes represented a latent threat.

Amidst this debate Correa proposed the "Plan Ecuador" to deal with the impact of the Colombian conflict on Ecuadorean territory by strengthening "peace and cooperation between states, rejection of external aggression, nonintervention in the internal affairs of other states, and sovereign equality between neighboring states." The plan recognized poverty as the structural cause of border insecurity and privileged economic development and employment, infrastructure improvement, and sustainable use of natural resources as part of an overall thrust of strengthening institutions for peace and development. Plan Ecuador proposed to spend US\$135 million toward these goals, whose fulfillment would be an essential part of "the fight against all types of illegal activities that impact the security of our citizens" (Presidencia de la República, 2007: 1). The plan sought to address what many considered the direct and determining causes of the armed confrontation; specifically, it assumed that the state's de facto abandonment of border territories, economic precariousness, social exclusion, and above all the informal-to-illegal nature of the regional economy were key factors in explaining the logic of Colombian armed groups' expansion into Ecuadorean territory. The best way to counter that logic, therefore, was to bring the state's resources to bear on the social and economic development of the border region.

### THE EXPANSION OF COLOMBIAN ARMED GROUPS INTO ECUADOREAN TERRITORY

To understand the hidden logic of the occupation of Ecuadorean territory by Colombian armed groups it is useful to adopt the proposal of Nazih Richani (2002), who (drawing on the theoretical insights of Charles Tilly) calls such groups "systems of violence." The fundamental characteristic of these systems is that they develop functions similar to those of states during their initial processes of formation. The significance of this perspective resides in its ability to highlight the relation between the economy and territorial control through violence, a relation that in large part determines the actions of Colombian armed groups.

From this perspective, territorial control via organized coercion can only occur through *extraction*, that is, the obtaining of economic resources that can in turn be employed toward greater coercive capacity; this de facto taxation



implies a commitment of the coercive group to provide a security service to at least some sectors of the population. With the passage of time, any system of violence turns toward the regulation of ever-wider and unexpected dimensions of social life, from the administration of justice to the resolution of disputes big and small. This logic has led to an increasing linkage between Colombian armed groups and illegal but lucrative activities, particularly drug trafficking. For instance, the processing and export of cocaine have been by far the paramilitaries' most important source of funding, and this has led to their expansion into territories considered essential for that activity (Forero, 2012). In the case of the FARC, their impressive military expansion in the 1990s is largely explained by their imposition of *gramaje*, a tax on all cocaine-related activity in areas under their control (Richani, 2002). The presence of the FARC on Ecuadorean territory is largely a factor of the coca-driven colonization of Putumayo. The FARC, which long had a presence in Putumayo thanks to the minimal presence of the Colombian state, saw the coca/cocaine economy as a way to obtain resources via taxation (Hylton, 2003: 75). The funds thus raised became coercive capital, to be used in expelling government forces from other parts of southern Colombia.

Putumayo is on what González (2008) calls a "geographic continuum" with Sucumbíos, in which the frontier dissolves because of cultural, economic, geographical, ethnic, and family ties. It was therefore no surprise that rural Ecuadoreans found employment as *raspachines* (coca leaf harvesters) in Putumayo (Molano, 2009), while the FARC found in Sucumbíos an area for rest and relaxation and a supply hub free of pressures from the Colombian military (Bonilla and Moreano, 2009: 146). This did not represent a danger for the local population, since in the absence of Ecuadorean state presence the FARC's organized coercion was seen more as a guarantee of security for local inhabitants, who were accustomed to the FARC's presence and to its role in social regulation. Laura González found in her travels in the region that "the presence of the state has been minimal in terms of access to justice, a role that the FARC has taken over" (2008: 64).

Seeking to undermine local support for the guerrillas and to gain a foothold in a zone of coca production, in 1999 the AUC began its occupation of Putumayo with a massacre in the municipality of El Placer, followed up by similar actions in El Tigre and La Dorada. As noted above, these massacres were accompanied by military operations within the framework of Plan Colombia and Plan Patriota. This dual counterinsurgency offensive had important repercussions in Ecuador. The FARC presence in Ecuador became stronger, and the logic of confrontation moved into Ecuadorean territory. In this new situation, an indigenous Shuar noted in 2008 that local people "have a certain trust level [*confianza*] about [the guerrillas] because they protect them from the paramilitaries; the FARC watches the border so they don't cross over" (quoted in González, 2008: 67). There were, in fact, reports of paramilitary presence on the Ecuadorean side starting in mid-2004, when the AUC threatened to attack several villages and announced "an agreement between the paramilitaries and the Ecuadorean military that the military would not intervene" (Misión Internacional a la Frontera Ecuatoriana con Colombia, 2005: 18). In November of that year, a local schoolteacher and his wife were kidnapped by paramilitaries on the San Miguel River, taken into Colombian territory, and carved up with chainsaws.

The Colombia-Ecuador border is a zone of multiple illegal activities including arms and fuel smuggling and of course drug trafficking, including all of the requirements for cocaine production. It is estimated that at least 26 arms-smuggling routes make it the principal source of resupply for both guerrillas and paramilitaries (CODHES, 2009). It is also the FARC's principal supply route for explosives (Naciones Unidas, 2006). Fuel smuggling is an important activity for these organizations, both for resale and for its importance in cocaine processing (ICG, 2007). These activities find a favorable environment on the border, where the poverty index as measured officially by "unmet basic needs" ranged in 2010 from 57.2 percent in Carchi to 78.3 percent in Esmeraldas and 87 percent in Sucumbíos (Ministerio Coordinador de Desarrollo Social, 2011). The first report from Plan Ecuador noted that 35.5 percent of the population in the border region survived on less than a dollar per day, while 65 percent were underemployed (Presidencia de la República, 2007: 17). The recognition of the preponderant role of poor socioeconomic conditions in the cross-border expansion of Colombian armed groups is fundamental to Plan Ecuador's strategy to combat the phenomenon, and it implicitly rejects the primacy of military or police solutions.

The Plan Ecuador approach was weakened by the events of March 1, 2008, in the parish of Angostura (Sucumbíos). The Colombian military launched an early-morning bombardment followed by a cross-border operation that targeted a FARC encampment. The FARC's second in command, Raúl Reyes, known as "the chancellor" for his international contacts, was killed in the attack along with 20 others, of whom 1 was Ecuadorean and 4 were students from the Universidad Autónoma de Mexico. Several of them showed signs of having been killed after the initial attack, a version confirmed by two survivors. This set off a sharp diplomatic confrontation between Colombia on one side and Ecuador and Venezuela on the other. Colombia responded to Ecuador's protest by justifying the attack as "preventative"—along the lines of the Bush administration's rationale for attacking Iraq in 2003—and as legitimate self-defense (Cadena, 2010: 60). Ecuador responded by sending troops to the northern border and convening its National Security Council. The Permanent Council of the Organization of American States released a declaration recognizing Colombia's violation of Ecuador's sovereignty, but the United States refused to sign, supporting Colombia's claims. Venezuela expelled the Colombian ambassador, called its ambassador to Bogotá back for consultations, and moved 10 tank battalions to the border warning that a similar Colombian attack on Venezuelan soil would lead to full-scale war (Cadena, 2010: 60).

Faced with a diplomatic outcry, the Uribe government chose to wage a media battle by publishing the alleged contents of laptop computers seized during the military operation, including correspondence that linked the Ecuadorean and Venezuelan governments to the FARC (*El Mundo* [Madrid], May 22, 2011). While the information lacked legal standing because of the suspect chain of custody, it was an effective part of Colombia's media campaign to defend the attack. The heightened diplomatic confrontation was resolved only in mid-2010 with Juan Manuel Santos's election in Colombia and the departure of Uribe (*El Universal* [Quito], April 9, 2011). The attack led to an increase in Ecuador's military spending and procurement (including unmanned aircraft, radars, and

night-vision goggles), the restructuring of its military leadership, and a significant increase in troop strength all along the border. By March 2009 the figure had reached 11,000, while Colombia had only 7,000 soldiers on its side (Bonilla and Moreano, 2009: 147).<sup>1</sup> In 2010 Ecuador spent US\$200 million on its military along the border, while the Plan Ecuador received less than US\$5 million (*El Universo* [Quito], December 12, 2010).

What were the results of this increased Ecuadorean military presence along the border? Information gathered in 2008–2009, after the Angostura attack, shows the effects and limitations of the military response to Colombian incursions, both official and irregular, into Ecuadorean territory.

### THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN SUCUMBÍOS

Sucumbíos was the province that saw the greatest increase in military presence after Angostura; during 2008 Ecuadorean operations quadrupled, while military spending in the zone increased by US\$600 million (*El Universo* [Quito], February 25, 2009). The frequent complaints of mistreatment by Ecuadorean military personnel starting around this time point to an increasing involvement of civilians in the conflict and the stigmatization of people along the border as collaborators with the FARC. For instance, Ecuadorean soldiers entered the Kichwa indigenous community of Yana Amarún, where they illegally searched properties, stole belongings, and destroyed the identity documents of the children.<sup>2</sup>

Something similar occurred in a military incursion into the Fuerzas Unidas community in Lago Agrio canton. Some of the complaints gathered by the provincial human rights committee described an operation that included “a group of 30 soldiers and a prosecutor, on foot and in a helicopter that landed around 100 meters from the house”; the residents described severe mistreatment, torture, and a violation of due process. A 15-year-old girl was beaten, tortured, and threatened with sexual abuse by soldiers who asked her where “guns and drugs” were kept (Comité de Derechos Humanos de la Provincia de Sucumbíos, 2009). Other inhabitants of the community suffered similar mistreatment. According to testimony from people throughout the border region, these were not isolated events: “The military harass us, they take our gasoline, cooking gas, and food, they persecute us, they accuse us of being guerrillas when we are just simple farmers. . . . They steal from our houses and scare our children. We live in a situation of uncontrollable panic, and the provincial authorities know this but they have done nothing to investigate our complaints” (González, 2008: 278).

The Ecuadorean military was not the only armed actor in the area in 2008. A few months after Angostura, on May 28, 2008, there was an incursion in the San Martín area in which heavily armed unidentified men kidnapped three Colombian refugees and killed them on the other side of the border. The Ecuadorean authorities blamed the attack on “Colombian irregular groups,” but local accounts suggest that the 30 to 40 attackers may have been from the Colombian military, supported by helicopters. The inhabitants noted that they were constantly accused by the Colombian military of being members of or collaborators with the guerrillas (González, 2008: 46). Similar accounts came



from Santa Rosa, Barranca Bermeja, and Villa Hermosa (Fundación Amazónica, 2009) and often included details about the role of the Ecuadorean military: “When the Colombian army comes in, the Ecuadorean army does nothing. There is a great friendship between the two” (Sucumbíos public defender, interview, Lago Agrio, December 18, 2009). There has also been an increase in paramilitary incursions into Ecuadorean territory: “What we have seen is incursions by paramilitary groups that take people over the border to kill them. I think it was in October or November when they killed Miguel Lapo. They killed him along with another leader of Barranca Bermeja.” These accounts suggest that the increased military presence has actually produced a deterioration in the civil rights of local inhabitants without achieving a consolidation of national sovereignty. It is plausible that the Ecuadorean military, faced with Colombian guerrillas who have decades of combat experience and superior capacity, would see Colombia’s military and paramilitaries as natural allies—sacrificing, in other words, national sovereignty for tolerance of incursions that can be justified as counterinsurgency.

### PARAMILITARY EXPANSION IN ESMERALDAS

The flawed demobilization of the AUC, which ended in 2006, produced a proliferation of new paramilitary groups, often made up of members of “demobilized” structures. Almost all of them were devoted to counterinsurgency and political repression, and in several regions of southern Colombia their relationship with the Colombian military has been evident (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Most of these “criminal bands,” as the Colombian government now calls them (*bacrim*, a contraction of *bandas criminales*), are tightly linked to drug trafficking and gasoline smuggling, activities that draw them to Colombia’s borders with Ecuador and Venezuela (ICG, 2007: 8). Nariño and Putumayo have been the most affected by the *bacrim*. In 2010, 46 percent of Putumayo’s municipalities and 34 percent of Nariño’s had some level of *bacrim* presence (Indepaz, 2010: 5). These two departments have a significant share of Colombia’s coca leaf production, and the displacement of coca cultivation from Putumayo to Nariño, thanks to aerial fumigations outlined in Plan Colombia and Plan Patriota, moved Nariño into first place among Colombian departments for hectares under coca cultivation by 2007 (Prensa Rural, 2009).

This phenomenon explains the strategic character of the coastal municipality of Tumaco—not only is it a substantial area of coca cultivation but also it has a Pacific port serving a smuggling route that has taken on greater importance since the 1990s (Bagley, 2001). Tumaco is only a few hours away from San Lorenzo, the northernmost canton of the Ecuadorean province of Esmeraldas. Both towns are largely populated by people of African descent, and there are substantial cross-border cultural, economic, and family ties (González, 2008). This has facilitated the expansion of Colombian paramilitary groups across the border; as the public defender in Esmeraldas notes,

The paramilitaries are now present throughout the province, and they control territory in San Lorenzo, Eloy Alfaro, and Borbón, and as far as I know they are even in Rocafuerte. And of course here in the city of Esmeraldas their presence

is felt. The irregulars come into the province without uniforms, so it's not so obvious. This has increased in the past four years.

This territorial expansion has come with the offer of "protective services," which legitimate and bring in funds for the paramilitaries. They typically inaugurate their presence with "cleansing" (*limpieza*), in other words, threats and killings that target "undesirable" social groups; in Esmeraldas this included sex workers, car thieves, street vendors, and drug addicts (Spanish aid worker, interview, Esmeraldas, December 2, 2009). Local accounts suggest that this may have started as early as 2007: "About two years ago the pamphlets started to appear imposing a 10:00 p.m. curfew. This had a lot of influence from La Concordia to Santo Domingo and even as far as Manabí. The problem is that the police go along with it. They say that, well, maybe it will help reduce crime" (Plan Ecuador official, interview, Esmeraldas, December 2, 2009). The police were not the only ones inclined to go along with the paramilitaries' curfew as a solution to ordinary crime: "Their case was convincing. And with all of the insecurity people said, 'Well, if one or two innocents fall, then they fall'" (Spanish aid worker, interview, Esmeraldas, December 2, 2009). Important sectors of the local economy made use of paramilitaries to solve their crime problems: "The people from the port hired paramilitaries to do some cleansing. For about two months we saw dead bodies with pamphlets. After that things calmed down and there was no more crime [*piratería*]" (Plan Ecuador official, interview, Esmeraldas, December 2, 2009).

Besides laying the groundwork for legitimacy, the paramilitaries' cleansing campaigns gave them a monopoly over criminal activities (Duncan, 2005: 33). Through the exercise of violence, they derived significant revenues from protection, from the criminal activities themselves, and even from legal activities where there were low levels of government regulation. Drug trafficking was probably the most significant of their activities, especially given the growing importance of Pacific smuggling routes (Bagley, 2001). "In Santo Domingo we have seen an increase in drug trafficking, especially in terms of processing. There are laboratories [*crystalizadores*] in houses, and this kind of small-scale production is hard to control. Sometimes the authorities discover a laboratory, but it makes no difference—they just start a new one elsewhere" (Plan Ecuador official, interview, Esmeraldas, December 3, 2009). Drug trafficking provides paramilitaries with the resources that ensure their territorial control, which in turn makes other illegal activities possible through economies of scale, such as gasoline smuggling, which is profitable in itself but also guarantees access to an important ingredient in cocaine processing. "In La Tola gasoline smuggling is controlled by the paramilitaries, the Aguilas Negras [*bacrim* group], and the North Valle cartel. The police look the other way while these groups threaten the population. The people of Palma Real are also threatened, but they know they can't lodge a complaint."

Another revenue-generating activity embraced by paramilitaries is small-scale loan-sharking involving "daily" or "drop-by-drop" loans. In a region where most people have a very precarious living, the paramilitaries and their front men offer loans door-to-door, with the condition that they be paid back a bit each day. Those who fall behind face the enforcers (*chulqueros*), who are not reluctant to use paramilitary methods including murder. The provincial

authorities have also noted an increase in illegal mining but have been unable to control it because the sites are controlled by paramilitary “security services” that keep out visitors and threaten local communities. According to the Plan Ecuador official, “The illegal mining operations pay off local public officials, and they use the inhabitants as human shields in case the government wants to intervene. It is a complex phenomenon because there are miners, local people, and gunmen [*sicarios*], all hired by the companies to silence community leaders.” This coincides with the version of the province’s public defender: “It is very hard for my office to come in and address this problem, because we have no coercive power. In these places there is a ‘private guard’ that comes from Colombia and makes our work very difficult.”

Paramilitaries are present not only in illegal settings but in significant legal ones as well. African palm cultivation is a clear example of this; as González (2008) has noted, palm cultivation and paramilitarism have developed in parallel. There are two reasons for this. First, paramilitaries have been able to invest substantial capital in this sector; at least nine of the largest Colombian palm companies have been investigated for paramilitary links, and several executives have been charged (Indepaz, 2010). Second, paramilitaries have engaged in “accumulation through dispossession,” to borrow a phrase category from David Harvey (2005). Through systematic violence, they have displaced thousands of Afro-Colombians up and down the Colombian Pacific coast, despite the 1991 Constitution’s guarantees that community land cannot be sold or seized (Forero, 2012). The lack of government regulation on the Ecuadorean side has made cross-border expansion an attractive option for palm cultivators. By 2008 Ecuador’s public defender’s offices had received numerous complaints from small farmers about irregularities in land purchases by palm companies (public defender, interview, Esmeraldas, December 2, 2009). In some cases outright violence was used by companies to accumulate land: “The companies’ use of gunmen to threaten and expel inhabitants has been confirmed by an intelligence agent” (González, 2008: 342). Similar situations have been reported in another “legal” sector, shrimp farming, where companies “have contracted with paramilitaries to throw longstanding inhabitants off of their land through systematic armed expulsions, and later to provide security.”

These situations could perhaps be explained by the lack of coercive capacity of the Ecuadorean state in Esmeraldas, but the evidence suggests that the state’s significant military presence actively permits these activities. Most people interviewed noted that corruption and infiltration of the military were rampant and that those who filed complaints about contraband or paramilitary presence were often killed. “If someone files a complaint and they’re killed a little later, that is no coincidence. When the light goes out right at that moment, it’s no coincidence. It looks like a lot of coincidences, but I don’t believe in coincidence. The most serious problem in this province is corruption” (Catholic priest, interview, Esmeraldas, December 3, 2009). For instance, the police post in La Tola is alleged to have had agreements with armed groups to permit large-scale gasoline smuggling: “They put in a police post, to control fuel smuggling, or so they said. But as soon as they arrived, they made a deal with the smugglers. Everything happens at 3 in the morning—you hear the motors, but nobody says anything” (civic leader, interview, in San Lorenzo canton,

December 5, 2009). Something similar happened with the police in the provincial capital of Esmeraldas, where it was alleged that agents at mobile police posts (*unidades móviles de atención ciudadana*—UMAC) received monthly payments to permit loan-sharking in their areas: “For example, the UMAC police, have you seen them? They go around in pickup trucks, they park on the street. They’re paid a monthly salary by the loan sharks, so when they go out to collect, the police aren’t there. And I’m telling you this because an agent told me personally” (Spanish aid worker, interview, Esmeraldas, December 2, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

The government of Rafael Correa has sought to develop an alternative approach to combating the presence of Colombian armed groups, privileging development and inclusion in order to counter the economic and social precariousness that has facilitated the expansion of these groups. This proposal, characteristic of the progressive regimes that have recently arisen in the region, constitutes a response to the militarist model applied by Colombia with the economic and military support of the United States. However, the events of Angostura, which represented a direct threat to Ecuador’s national security, led the Correa government to increase its military spending along the border. This produced a significant strengthening of the state’s military presence, and while this has brought about the detection and dismantling of several Colombian guerrilla camps in Ecuadorean territory, it has also produced a growing number of human rights violations against local people. Militarization has not even been effective as a strategy to restore effective sovereignty in the border region, given the multiple accounts of the Ecuadorean military’s acceptance of Colombian military and paramilitary incursions across the border. Likewise, there is ample evidence that military and police presence has done little to counter the expansion of Colombian armed groups who have the economic and coercive resources to secure the cooperation of Ecuadorean officials both civilian and military. The fact that paramilitaries lack an insurgent project and thus represent no explicit threat to the Ecuadorean state or military lends them an invisibility that they have used successfully.

The expansionary logic of Colombian paramilitary organizations into Ecuador seems to confirm the hypothesis that they are organizations that seek territorial control through organized violence and economic benefits through the regulation or outright monopoly over illegal, informal, and selected legal activities (such as African palm). The socioeconomic conditions of the border region remain favorable to their presence and expansion, and this suggests the need to resurrect Plan Ecuador with its emphasis on the development of duly regulated economic activities and the socioeconomic inclusion of the population. Without this, the paramilitary presence will continue to threaten the sovereignty of the state and, more important, the consolidation of Ecuador’s progressive national project.

## NOTES

1. The Colombian figure includes forces on the border itself rather than those in the interior of Nariño and Putumayo.

2. Complaint drafted by the community on November 23, 2008, and sent to Lt. Col. Ciro Burbano, commander of the 55th Battalion.

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