The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas

Latin America Report N°105 | 19 March 2024

Headquarters
International Crisis Group
Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • brussels@crisisgroup.org

Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

Table of Contents

Principal Findings

What's new? With its "total peace" policy, the Colombian government aims to engage all the country's armed groups in talks, but it has no dialogue under way with the largest armed criminal outfit, the Gaitanista Self-Defence Force. This gap is significant, given the Gaitanistas' deep pockets and their drive to expand.

Why does it matter? From their Atlantic coast stronghold, where they run some of the country's main drug trafficking routes as well as migrant smuggling rackets, the Gaitanistas exercise coercive control of numerous communities. If they remain outside peace talks, they could undermine negotiations with other groups or capitalise on their demobilisation.

What should be done? Bogotá should start down a path of progressively more substantive discussions with the Gaitanistas aiming, first, to reduce violence against civilians and, secondly, to discuss legal conditions for laying down arms. In parallel, the police and military should continue operations to protect civilians and press the group toward talks.

Executive Summary

While Colombian President Gustavo Petro has made talks with armed groups an overarching goal of his government, the powerful Gaitanista Self-Defence Force remains largely outside his *paz total*, or "total peace", initiative. The consequences are far-reaching. Originally comprising fighters previously aligned with Colombian paramilitary and guerrilla groups, the Gaitanistas (also known as the Gulf Clan, a name they reject) now have an estimated 9,000 members and are Colombia's richest criminal outfit. They hold much of the northern countryside, manage the lion's share of the drug trade and oversee extensive migrant smuggling. Petro had hoped talks with the Gaitanistas could rein them in, but his administration has struggled to get negotiations going. Legal obstacles, mistrust and crime bosses' inflated expectations have scuppered progress. Authorities should craft a strategy to coax the Gaitanistas into talks aimed at immediately reducing violence against civilians and ultimately disarming as much of the group as possible, all the while putting pressure on the group through continuing military and police operations.

The Gaitanistas worry Colombian authorities not just because their ranks are growing, but also because they pose a threat to Petro's "total peace" agenda. The group is a menace to all the negotiations now under way, including Bogotá's dialogues with the leftist insurgency the National Liberation Army and with two dissident factions of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), known to the government as the Central Command and the Segunda Marquetalia. The Gaitanistas are battling with the first two of these groups for turf along the Pacific coast, near the border with Venezuela, around major ports and in the country's rich agricultural heartland. No other armed group is likely to contemplate laying down its arms for the duration while the Gaitanistas are poised to grab their former lands and businesses.

The Gaitanistas' newfound status as a potential spoiler of "total peace" follows close to two decades of evolution into a complex, hierarchical organisation that governs and imposes social control. Founded in 2007, they amalgamated former right-wing paramilitary commanders with veterans of leftist guerrilla movements. Today, dozens of former FARC members have joined the Gaitanistas, as have hundreds of ex-soldiers. The result is an organisation that harbours a will to expand in the style of former paramilitaries while applying the local discipline typical of a guerrilla movement. But the group also operates with the precision of a multinational company. It is structured like a conventional army but also hires civilians to perform roles such as bookkeeping and political organising.

In the areas they govern, the Gaitanistas are the arbiters of daily life, making an estimated $4.4 billion each year from links to drugs and arms trafficking, illegal mining and migrant smuggling. Yet rather than relying exclusively on any one illicit business, the Gaitanistas have honed the ability to monetise territorial control – above all near the Atlantic coast, a key transit point in the cocaine trade. They tax drug traffickers but also multinational mining firms. They charge large landowners for "protection" while extorting part of what farmers produce.

Just as they regulate economic activity to their benefit, the Gaitanistas have increasingly sought to recast communities and local government in their image. Many rural residents report that they see the group, which recruits heavily, as an employer of first and last resort in areas devoid of other opportunities. As part of their bid to co-opt the population, the Gaitanistas keep staple food prices down and distribute presents to children. But their techniques are also coercive. They build extensive civilian intelligence networks, meting out punishment, at times violent, for words or actions that displease them. Meanwhile, elected town councils must consult the Gaitanistas on decisions, in part because they rely on the group to fund projects like paving roads or fixing schools.

The Gaitanistas' prominence in Colombian crime and conflict both makes their participation essential for the success of "total peace" and confounds efforts to include them. The government has struggled to get talks with them off the ground amid protests from Congress and the Attorney General's Office about negotiating with criminals. While the government has all the authority it needs to start conversations, Congress has not given it leave to negotiate the demobilisation of a criminal group or offer it incentives to cooperate. The legislative reforms that would be required for that endeavour have proven difficult to enact, leaving the government heavily reliant on the military to contain the Gaitanistas.

But a purely military strategy stands little chance against a group with the resources and know-how that the Gaitanistas command. Moreover, the group has, if anything, grown more formidable and audacious of late. Claiming that it has transformed into a political organisation that represents farmers and others in rural areas where state presence is low and services non-existent, its demands are more extensive than they were seven years ago, when the government of President Juan Manuel Santos explored the possibility of negotiating with it.

Against this backdrop, the government's challenge will be to find a way to include the Gaitanistas – or as many of them as it can – under the umbrella of "total peace", while working to protect the vulnerable communities under their control. As a first step, the Petro administration could establish a channel for dialogue with the group in the hope of achieving confidence-building measures, such as ending the Gaitanistas' threats against local community leaders. If this step succeeds, the two sides could pilot regionally focused violence reduction initiatives. Once sufficient trust is created between the sides, the goal should be to open talks aimed at demobilising as many Gaitanistas as possible. In the meantime, continued military pressure will be vital for safeguarding civilians and persuading the group to embrace dialogue in good faith.

Entrenched in its rural and coastal strongholds, the Gaitanistas are likely to play a central role in crime and conflict in Colombia for years to come. Though its leverage has clear limits, the government may be able to coax elements of the group to leave and help protect the communities that bear the brunt of the Gaitanistas' coercive power. Even modest success cannot be guaranteed, but if "total peace" is the objective, then there is no choice but to try.

Bogotá/New York/Washington/Brussels, 19 March 2024

International Crisis Group
Latin America Report N°105 **19 March 2024**

The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas

I. Introduction

The product of three decades of war, the Gaitanista Self-Defence Force is composed of combatants from at least four now defunct armed groups, as well as numerous ex-soldiers.[1] With members originating from both Colombia's former Marxist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary forces, as well as the army, the group is active in about one third of the country's municipalities. It is involved in various types of crime, most prominently drug trafficking and extortion. In terms of membership and territorial presence, the Gaitanistas today constitute the biggest non-state armed operation in the country.[2] They are also almost certainly the criminal group best equipped to expand into an empire, with the stated ambition of holding sway all along the Atlantic and Pacific coastlines, as well as in all the most agriculturally productive parts of rural Colombia.[3] By one estimate, their ranks are growing by roughly 20 per cent every six months.[4]

The Gaitanistas, also referred to colloquially as the Gulf Clan (a term they do not embrace), have become one of the state's main security headaches.[5] For years, under successive administrations, the Colombian military and police conducted offensives aimed at capturing or killing Gaitanista leaders, which failed to curb the organisation's growth. By 2016, former President Juan Manuel Santos had classified the Gaitanistas as an organised armed group in Colombia's internal conflict.[6] The next year, after the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) had signed a peace agreement with Bogotá, the Gaitanistas approached the Santos administration in pursuit of talks about demobilisation.[7] Dialogue between the group's representatives and state officials eventually collapsed, and the Gaitanistas seized the moment to occupy territory the FARC had vacated, launching a further period of rapid expansion.[8]

[1] María Teresa Ronderos, *Guerras Recicladas* (Bogotá, 2014).
[2] Military estimates seen by Crisis Group, April 2023.
[3] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023.
[4] Crisis Group interview, security source, Bogotá, February 2024.
[5] Colombians have long debated the most appropriate name for the group. Crisis Group has chosen to call it the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, the name it most often uses itself. (In February, the group said it would start referring to itself as the Gaitanista Army, though the earlier appellation is still more common.) People under the group's control also use this name or refer to them by their Spanish acronym, AGC (for Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia). Critics argue that using the Gaitanista name is disrespectful to Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a presidential candidate who was assassinated in 1948, and that it bestows on the group a political character that it does not in reality possess. They prefer to use the title Gulf Clan.
[6] "Permanent Directive 15", Colombian Defence Ministry, 22 April 2016. This classification meant that any military action against the Gaitanistas would have to proceed under international humanitarian law. Former President Santos is now a Trustee of the International Crisis Group.
[7] Crisis Group interview, former senior official, Bogotá, September 2023.
[8] The Gaitanistas rejected the terms of a demobilisation law including prison terms of between six to ten years. "Ley 1908 del 2018", 9 July 2018.

Since 2017, the Gaitanistas have become larger, stronger and richer. Today, they are the single biggest group linked to drug trafficking in Colombia, exporting an estimated twenty tonnes of cocaine per month in 2021.[9] Arguably, they are the victors in the national contest to take over criminal businesses abandoned by the FARC, with power over numerous territories once held by the rebels. In the areas under their thumb, the Gaitanistas use a mix of violence and co-optation to silence and discipline civilians. At the same time, their rhetoric has taken on an increasingly pronounced political tone. By way of example, a former senior leader of the group told Crisis Group that the Gaitanistas "are very clear on one thing: so long as there is no one else who can control these areas, and the state is incapable of doing so, we have to stay, and we have to control".[10]

With their grip on territory and readiness to use violence, the Gaitanistas have also become one of the main obstacles to Colombian President Gustavo Petro's efforts at achieving "total peace".[11] Petro's election in August 2022 marked the first time a left-wing politician had assumed the presidency in the country. Upon taking office, Petro and senior officials argued that bringing decades of conflict to a close depended upon negotiating not only with leftist insurgencies but also with all other armed and criminal groups. The government has also promised to work toward remedying the causes – from rural poverty to massive inequality – driving cycles of violence.[12]

Despite apparent interest from both sides, however, setting up a dialogue with the Gaitanistas is easier said than done. The Gaitanistas have repeatedly expressed enthusiasm about discussions with authorities. The Petro government, which is negotiating with the rebel National Liberation Army (ELN), a faction of the former FARC known as the Central Command (EMC) – with plans to open talks with a second FARC dissident faction known as Segunda Marquetalia – and several urban gangs, has demonstrated that it is keen on talks with the Gaitanistas as well. Officials held exploratory meetings with the group, yet the effort has stalled due to legal obstacles, hostile public opinion and specific Gaitanista leader demands. As a result, the Gaitanistas are now the only major, nationwide armed group that has no clear line of communication with the government – and thus no horizon for negotiations. That means they lack the incentive other groups have to reduce violence against civilians, as well as limit their criminal activities. Thus, the Gaitanistas continue to hold communities under their sway, put pressure on rival groups, and sabotage peace talks between these groups and the government.

This report endeavours to contribute to a better understanding of the Gaitanistas, an armed organisation that could determine much of the course of crime and violence in Colombia in the years ahead. It also explores reasons for including them in the

[9] "El Clan del Golfo mueve el 60 % de las drogas que exportan los grupos ilegales desde Colombia", Infobae, 8 May 2022.

[10] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023.

[11] For previous analysis of this initiative, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°98, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, 24 February 2023. See also Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: Is 'Total Peace' Back on Track?", 4 October 2023; and Elizabeth Dickinson, "Colombia's Last Guerrillas Make First Step toward 'Total Peace'", Crisis Group Commentary, 23 November 2022.

[12] See, for example, Germán Darío Valencia Agudelo, "La Paz Total como política pública", *Estudios Políticos*, 2022; and "22 grupos buscan sumarse a la paz total", Indepaz, 16 September 2022.

"total peace" effort, a possible structure for building confidence and engaging in talks and steps the government should take to protect civilians under Gaitanista control, whether talks proceed or not. The report builds on years of Crisis Group work on ending armed conflict in Latin America, as well as on Colombia and the "total peace" initiative in particular.[13] It is based on 175 interviews, roughly one third of them with women, including with current and former Gaitanista leaders, community leaders, residents and local authorities, military officers and government officials, among others, in Antioquia, Atlántico, Bolívar, Cesar, Chocó, Córdoba and Sucre, as well as Bogotá and Medellín.

[13] See, eg, Crisis Group Report, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: Is 'Total Peace' Back on Track?", op. cit.; and Dickinson, "Colombia's Last Guerrillas Make First Step toward 'Total Peace'", op. cit.

II. Origins and Recent History

The Gaitanistas emerged in the wake of the demobilisation of right-wing paramilitary forces in the early 2000s, seizing the money-making opportunities presented by various criminal rackets, forging ties with public officials and exploiting the blind spots in Colombian law enforcement. Today, the Gaitanistas are part criminal enterprise, part armed group and part cross-border commercial conglomerate. The organisation has absorbed decades of lessons from Colombia's armed conflicts on how to make control of territory and communities serve business interests.

A. *Counter-insurgents and Drug Traffickers*

The Gaitanistas' origins can be traced to a dissident movement of the former leftist insurgency the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), which declined to join a demobilisation program in 1991, in Córdoba, a department in northern Colombia.[14] Citing fears for their personal safety, these guerrillas remained under arms until 1996, when they reached an agreement with a nascent local "self-defence force" as a means of protecting themselves.[15] The dissenting EPL members made a public show of handing over their weapons, but in reality they ended up joining the ranks of a paramilitary force being built under the auspices of a wealthy landholding family, the Castaños. The brothers Carlos and Vicente Castaño – together with other self-appointed leaders – emerged as the heads of this paramilitary group in the 1990s, which later became known as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia.[16] This marriage of left- and right-leaning combatants would create a core of commanders who would years later form the Gaitanistas.[17]

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, the paramilitaries used scorched-earth tactics to "clear" vast regions of Colombia of FARC guerrillas. Working directly with state security forces in some instances, they perpetrated a rash of human rights abuses and war crimes.[18] While expelling the FARC, they consolidated their own business interests, including through land grabs, embezzlement in contracts with state authorities and protection rackets that tested the patience even of their supporters.[19]

[14] In Colombia, states or provinces are known as departments.
[15] "Lo que le iba a contar Vicente Castaño a la justicia", *Razón Pública*, 15 May 2012.
[16] "Informe analítico sobre el paramilitarismo en el Urabá Antioqueño, el sur de Córdoba, el Bajo Atrato y Darién", National Centre for Historical Memory, 16 June 2022.
[17] These figures included the Castaño brothers and the subsequent leaders of the Gaitanistas, Jesús and Dairo Antonio Úsuga (alias Giovanni and alias Otoniel), as well as Daniel and Fredy Rendón Herrera (alias Don Mario and alias El Alemán), among others. Crisis Group interviews, former senior Gaitanista leader, June and July 2023. See also Ronderos, *Guerras Recicladas*, op. cit.
[18] "BASTA YA! Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity", Historical Memory Group of the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation, June 2016; and "Hallazgos y recomendaciones de la Comisión de la Verdad de Colombia", Final Report of the Colombian Truth Commission, vol. 2, 2022. The Truth Commission found that the paramilitaries were responsible for the largest share of conflict-related homicides (45 per cent) and more than half of all forced disappearances, as well as thousands of cases of sexual and gender-based violence.
[19] See, for example, "'Paras' relatan cómo capturaron contratos en el Caribe", Verdad Abierta, 29 September 2013; and Javier Duque, "Gobernanza criminal: Cogobiernos entre políticos y paramilitares en Colombia", *Revista mexicana de ciencias políticas y sociales*, 2021.

Nominally a counter-insurgent movement, the paramilitaries were from the beginning allied with drug trafficking networks as a way to generate revenue and extend their territorial reach.[20] The Castaño family's wealth derived in large part from their alliance in the 1980s with drug lord Pablo Escobar. With the aim of protecting their economic interests, the family later switched sides and aided the security forces, providing information that helped lead to Escobar's killing in 1993.[21] One of the paramilitaries' commanders was Diego Murillo Bejarano, alias Don Berna, who had his eye on becoming the dominant crime boss in the city of Medellín.[22] Years later, in 2017, when the Gaitanistas and the Colombian government were exploring the prospect of talks, intermediaries close to Don Berna served as spokespeople for the group.[23]

Even so, drug trafficking was not the sole source of income for the paramilitaries – nor has it been for the Gaitanistas. Throughout their various iterations, these organisations were supported and bankrolled by certain large landowners and cattle ranchers who were eager for protection from guerrilla attacks, particularly land seizures and kidnappings.[24] These alliances between parts of the landed elite and the Gaitanistas persist today in parts of Colombia. As a former senior member of the group explained, "Business owners want to ensure that the self-defence forces never leave, because they are the ones who guarantee that other groups do not take over".[25]

B. *Demobilisation and Re-armament*

By the mid-1990s, successive Colombian governments had supported a legal framework enabling the creation of paramilitary self-defence groups as a way to fend off the guerrillas, fostering collaboration among them, state officials and security forces.[26] But as public outcry grew over these groups' crimes, and a 1997 Constitutional Court ruling put limits on state arms transfers to them, the paramilitaries began to fall out of favour with authorities in Bogotá.[27] Self-defence forces were outlawed under conservative President Andrés Pastrana, who took office in 1998 and began to target the paramilitaries in 2000.[28]

It was President Álvaro Uribe, whose government began a major U.S.-backed offensive against the guerrillas in 2002, who led the way in negotiating demobilisation

[20] Gustavo Duncan, *Más que plata o plomo* (Bogotá, 2015).
[21] This group of conspirators, made up of former allies of Escobar, was known as Los PePes, short for Los Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar, which loosely translates as "those pursued by Pablo Escobar". See Óscar Naranjo, *El derrumbe de Pablo Escobar* (Bogotá, 2023).
[22] "Quien es quien: Diego Fernando Murillo Bejarano", *La Silla Vacía*, 12 February 2021.
[23] Crisis Group interview, senior former security official, Bogotá, September 2023.
[24] Miriam Álvaro Rodríguez, "De las armas a la desmovilización: El poder paramilitar en Colombia", *Revista Internacional De Sociología*, vol. 67, no. 1 (2009).
[25] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023. See also Teo Ballvé, "Everyday State Formation: Territory, Decentralization and the Narco Landgrab in Colombia", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2012).
[26] "Ley 61 de 1993", Colombian Congress, 12 August 1993; "Así se gestó un engranaje de soporte bélico llamado 'Convivir'", Verdad Abierta, 14 May 2023.
[27] "Sentencia C-572/97", Colombian Constitutional Court, November 1997.
[28] "Versión de Andrés Pastrana sobre paramilitarismo en su gobierno deja muchas dudas", Verdad Abierta, 3 September 2023.

of the largest paramilitary units.[29] By this time, the paramilitaries had permeated the political elite, controlling an estimated 35 per cent of Congress, as well as regional elected offices.[30] With the paramilitaries trusting that support in the legislature would assure favourable judicial treatment, major paramilitary blocs entered negotiations to discuss a cessation of hostilities and steps toward disarmament before there was a legal framework in place.[31] Under what became known as the Santa Fe de Ralito process, individual blocs began laying down their arms.[32] Meanwhile, the Justice and Peace Law, passed by Congress in 2005, reduced prison sentences in exchange for truthful testimony from paramilitary members regarding past atrocities.[33]

Over 30,000 paramilitary members handed themselves over to the state, assuming they would receive the benefits outlined in the new law. But the process was less than smooth. The Constitutional Court annulled several key articles of the law, insisting that paramilitary networks be dismantled as a pre-condition for any reduction in jail sentences. Congress amended the law, however, and demobilisation continued.[34] Most paramilitary leaders remained free until August 2006, when fourteen were simultaneously but separately captured for allegedly resuming criminal activity. The government then extradited the most important of these leaders to the U.S., in a move that surprised both the public and jailed commanders.[35]

[29] The $12 billion Plan Colombia was conceived as a counter-narcotics program but evolved to support Colombia's military in its counter-insurgency campaigns. See, for example, "Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations", Congressional Research Service, December 2021.

[30] Roughly 200 senators and congressional representatives were investigated for ties to the paramilitaries, and just under a quarter of them were later convicted. "El informe que indica que la parapolítica no es cosa del pasado", *Semana*, 17 April 2016. A number of other prominent national figures – up to and including officials in the presidency – were subsequently accused of having ties to paramilitary groups. See, for example, Miriam Álvaro, "La Parapolítica: la infiltración paramilitar en la clase política colombiana", *Nuevo Mundo: Mundos Nuevos*, 15 May 2007.

[31] "Acuerdo Santa Fe de Ralito", 15 July 2003.

[32] Initial talks took place before there was a legal framework for demobilisation, and each regional faction secured slightly different conditions. In a bid to assure their own safety, but also to help long-time allies, the paramilitaries opened their ranks to drug traffickers who saw demobilisation as a chance to attain legal status after years of illicit activity. Crisis Group interview, senior former official, Bogotá, October 2023. See "Desmovilización y Reintegración Paramilitar: Panorama posacuerdos con las AUC", National Centre for Historical Memory, 2015.

[33] "Ley de Justicia y Paz, Compilación Normativa y Jurisprudencia", Attorney General's Office, February 2010. Critics of the paramilitary demobilisation argue the process handed down light sentences and provided only limited information on past crimes, while failing to dismantle illicit businesses. "Informe sobre la implementación de la ley de justicia y paz: etapas iniciales del proceso de desmovilización de las AUC y primeras diligencias judiciales", Inter-American Human Rights Commission, 2007.

[34] The court decided that the paramilitaries were not involved in "sedition", a crime that according to Colombian law can be committed only by armed groups with a political agenda and would render them eligible for transitional justice. The court also ruled that the Justice and Peace Law, as passed by Congress, did not make enough demands of the paramilitary in return for the benefits on offer. See Rodrigo Uprimny, Luz María Sánchez and Nelson Sánchez, "Justicia para la Paz. Crímenes Atroces, Derecho a la Justicia y Paz Negociada", DeJusticia, 2014.

[35] "Uribe ordenó captura de máximos jefes paramilitares colombianos", *El Universo*, 16 August 2006; "Colombia extradita a la cúpula paramilitar a EEUU", Reuters, 13 May 2008.

Mid-level commanders, including the future Gaitanista leadership, together with the rank and file, were left to make do with a limited economic and social reintegration program. Several future Gaitanistas returned to civilian life and supported themselves through initiatives such as fish farming and lime cultivation.[36] Other demobilised fighters turned to what they knew best – forming private security firms – to earn a living. But, as the Constitutional Court suggested could happen, paramilitary networks were never fully disbanded. In the city of Barrancabermeja, a military officer explained, "the paramilitaries demobilised but they never really left. .... The demobilisation happened on paper, but their control persisted".[37]

Gaitanista members said they eventually returned to crime because of insecurity.[38] Over 2,000 former paramilitary combatants have been killed since demobilising, many in reprisals by rival groups or because they resisted efforts to force them back into lives of crime.[39] Several senior paramilitary commanders were also killed during the early phases of talks with the government, including Carlos Castaño in 2004.[40] In some cases, the dangers faced by former paramilitary fighters stemmed from their connections with Colombian security forces. "When the military or the intelligence service or police undertook operations", one recalled, "they called me because I knew the region. They would ask for recommendations about the operation, which started to win me enemies again very quickly".[41]

Amid these frustrations at the difficulties of resuming peaceful civilian life, as well as fears of extradition to the U.S., Vicente Castaño, the former paramilitary leader, "called us back to arms" in 2007, a former Gaitanista member recounted.[42] Castaño stressed the importance of re-establishing "order and control" in the paramilitary heartland of Urabá and Córdoba, in the north of Colombia.[43] Just days after reaching

[36] Crisis Group interviews, senior former Gaitanistas, June-August 2023.

[37] Crisis Group interview, May 2023. Terrified locals called these former paramilitaries the Black Eagles (Águilas Negras). Crisis Group interviews, senior former Gaitanistas and military officers, May-June 2023. Today, many threats against social leaders are signed by "the Águilas Negras", a blanket name used by a variety of criminal interests.

[38] Crisis Group interviews, senior former Gaitanistas, June-August 2023.

[39] As of 2019, 2,202 former paramilitary members had been killed. Over 400 former FARC combatants have been murdered since the 2016 peace accord. "El 99% de los desmovilizados de las Autodefensas que culminó el proceso de reintegración permanece en la legalidad", National Reincorporation Agency, 25 July 2019. See Germán Darío Valencia Agudelo, "El asesinato de excombatientes en Colombia", *Estudios Políticos*, 2021.

[40] While there are conflicting accounts, Carlos Castaño is believed to have been killed on orders from his brother Vicente, who was reluctant to demobilise and sought to retain his illicit business interests. "Lo último que pidió Carlos Castaño antes de ser asesinado", *Razón Pública*, 10 April 2010.

[41] Crisis Group interviews, former senior Gaitanista, June and July 2023.

[42] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023. See also "Vicente Castaño (deceased)", U.S. Department of State Narcotics Rewards Program.

[43] Ibid. See also Aura Windy, Carolina Hernández Cetina, Alejandra Ripoll and Juan Carlos García Perilla, "'El Clan del golfo': ¿el nuevo paramilitarismo o delincuencia organizada?", *El Ágora USB*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June 2018).

out to former comrades, Castaño disappeared; he is presumed dead, although his body has never been found.[44]

Despite this loss, and possibly even galvanised by it, the Gaitanistas began to form under the leadership of Daniel Rendón Herrera, or Don Mario, a long-time friend of Vicente Castaño who had run the finances of a branch of the paramilitaries in southern Colombia.[45] A group of former paramilitary leaders set out to reconstruct their forces. According to Rendón Herrera, they recalled 26 mid-level paramilitary commanders, who were instructed in turn to summon their former sub-lieutenants.[46] Commanders also undertook a census in former paramilitary strongholds such as Chocó, Antioquia, Córdoba and Bolívar departments, in which a reported 12,000 individuals between the ages of eighteen to 25 expressed interest in returning to arms.[47]

The new armed outfit called itself the Gaitanista Self-Defence Force, a name that both asserted the members' identity as former paramilitaries and evoked Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a Liberal Party presidential candidate whose killing in 1948 sparked a civil war with the Conservative Party.[48] The Gaitanistas adopted the former statutes of the paramilitary forces but say they amended two elements. First, citing their disappointment in the paramilitary demobilisation and their distrust of the Colombian state, they claim to have decided to refrain from signing contracts with the public sector – even though these had been a major revenue source for the paramilitaries prior to demobilisation. Secondly, they say they promised to end the common paramilitary practice of assuming that all civilian residents of areas controlled by the FARC or other insurgencies were enemy sympathisers, thereby "justifying" indiscriminate violence.[49]

With the support of friendly landowners and big local merchants, who advanced the cash to pay salaries until the Gaitanistas could re-establish their illicit business-

[44] Colombian authorities and international partners largely agree that Castaño was killed, perhaps by his own men. See "El enigma del exjefe paramilitar Vicente Castaño: asesinado o vivo?", *El Tiempo*, 5 December 2023.

[45] Don Mario, whose full name is Daniel Rendón Herrera, had been part of the paramilitaries' Centauro Bloc. "Quién es Daniel Rendón, alias Don Mario, el fundador de la banda criminal más poderosa de Colombia que acaba de ser extraditado a Estados Unidos", BBC Mundo, 23 April 2018; and "Condenan a 'Don Mario' a 36 años de cárcel por actos violentos y de barbarie en Meta", RCN Noticias, 12 July 2023.

[46] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023.

[47] Ibid. In the years following the demobilisation, a number of similar groups recruiting former paramilitary fighters also emerged, most notably Los Rastrojos, founded by leaders associated with the late Cali Cartel. While this group (also called Los Costeños) retains some power, particularly around Barranquilla, fractures within its leadership have weakened it. See "El nuevo mapa de las criminalidades híbridas en Colombia", Special Jurisdiction for Peace, November 2023.

[48] While founding members told Crisis Group the name Gaitanistas emerged in 2007, in the organisation's early years it was popularly known as the Urabeños, the Clan de Úsuga or the Gulf Clan, each moniker referring either to its senior leadership or to areas under its control. Darío Fajardo, "Estudio sobre los orígenes del conflicto social armado, razones de su persistencia y sus efectos más profundos en la sociedad colombiana", *Espacio Crítico*, 2015.

[49] The Gaitanistas sent an envoy to the FARC leadership based in a region called Nudo de Paramillo to communicate this change. They claim that the guerrillas agreed in a similar fashion to refrain from community stigmatisation. Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023.

es, the group began to recruit and rearm.[50] In the areas they started to reoccupy, first in Urabá and Córdoba, local Gaitanista commanders would oblige a member of each family to attend a training session on "what to do if another armed group tries to enter and take over".[51] By the time Don Mario was captured in San Pedro de Urabá, Antioquia, in 2009, the group claimed to have 6,000 members.[52]

In the aftermath of Don Mario's arrest, Dairo Úsuga, alias Otoniel, became the new leader and presided over more than a decade of continuous expansion. First recruited into the EPL as a child, Otoniel brought several other former guerrillas with him into the Gaitanista leadership core. During this time, the Gaitanistas grew in part by allying with criminal groups up and down the Atlantic coast, which operated with some autonomy but answered to (and almost certainly shared profits with) the Gaitanista leadership.[53] This model had its perils for group cohesion, the most notable of which was the emergence of a breakaway faction known as the Caparrapos. Beginning in 2016, the Gaitanistas clashed with this faction in the Bajo Cauca region, defeating it only five years later.[54]

Under Otoniel, the Gaitanistas also sought to craft a more political identity, revising internal statutes governing the group's structure and goals, as well as designing a Gaitanista flag, composing a hymn and a prayer, and drafting a set of political ideals.[55] The group described itself as a self-defence force "for the lower and middle classes, but that does not hurt the rich".[56]

C. *Initial Attempt at Talks*

Much of what is known about the Gaitanistas' potential negotiating positions comes from this moment in the group's history and a previous attempt at dialogue in 2017 and 2018, under former President Santos, which collapsed because the Gaitanistas baulked at the judicial terms on offer and the government was unable to convince Congress and the Attorney General's Office to allow more favourable conditions.[57] At

[50] Crisis Group interviews, June-August 2023.

[51] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023. The Gaitanistas also resurrected practices developed by Freddy Rendón as a paramilitary commander in Urabá in the early 2000s, where he created a core of civilian "social development promoters" to expand rural services. See Ballvé, "Everyday State Formation: Territory, Decentralization and the Narco Landgrab in Colombia", op. cit.

[52] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023. "'Don Mario' offers to hand over 6,000 paras", *Colombia Reports*, 8 February 2010.

[53] Although it is not clear how the Gaitanistas share revenues, it is likely they follow a pattern similar to that developed by the Castaño family, in which half of all profits from regional allied branches were returned to the central coffers.

[54] The Caparrapos were also known as Bloque Virgilio Peralta Arena. See, for example, "Alerta Temprana 045-2020", Colombia Ombudsman's office, 31 August 2020.

[55] "Estatutos de Constitución y Régimen Disciplinario" and "Proyecto Político", Gaitanista Self-Defence Force of Colombia, on file with Crisis Group. See also R. Badillo Sarmiento and L.F. Trejos Rosero, "Las Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia como grupo armado politizado: un nuevo paradigma del crimen Organizado", *Revista Científica General José María Córdova*, vol. 21 (2023).

[56] Crisis Group interviews, senior former Gaitanista, June-July 2023.

[57] "¿Fiscalía frenó desmovilización del Clan del Golfo? Néstor Humberto Martínez le responde a alias Otoniel", *Semana*, 26 December 2021.

the time, the Gaitanista leadership was under heavy military pressure as a result of the security forces' Agamenón campaign, which had started in 2015, and conversations began with the understanding that they would only discuss conditions for demobilisation, which would then be drafted into law. Over the course of 28 meetings, the sides addressed the issues of senior Gaitanistas' confessions regarding atrocities and involvement in illicit markets in exchange for reduced jail terms.[58] The Santos administration also sought assurances that the group could honour its promises to demobilise rank-and-file members as well as provide information about collaborators in the government, the military and elsewhere.[59]

Citing high rates of killings of ex-combatants from two predecessor groups, the EPL and paramilitaries, the Gaitanistas insisted that the security of their members after demobilisation was their top priority.[60] Likewise, they argued that many of their members had taken up arms again because of economic hardship in civilian life. In response, the Santos government proposed a regional demobilisation process, starting in the group's strongholds and gradually shifting to other areas.[61] Despite progress, by this point the Santos government had lost part of its support base in Congress, and the final law on submission to the judicial system passed in 2018 added longer sentences and fewer concessions than anticipated. This offer failed to meet Gaitanista expectations, and the process collapsed.[62]

After these incomplete negotiations, the administration of President Iván Duque continued the military and police offensive initiated by his predecessor, leading to Otoniel's arrest in 2021 and extradition to the U.S. just weeks later. Since then, most of the former commander's trusted circle have also been either killed or captured. Yet the group has also grown more cohesive and hierarchical, with a clear chain of command under the leadership of Jobanis Ávila Villadiego, alias Javier or Chiquito Malo.[63]

[58] Crisis Group interview, former senior government official, Bogotá, September 2023.
[59] Crisis Group interviews, former senior official involved in talks, Bogotá, September-October 2023.
[60] Crisis Group interview, former senior Gaitanista, July 2023.
[61] Crisis Group interview, former senior official in talks, Bogotá, September-October 2023.
[62] "Investigación y judicialización de organizaciones criminales, se adoptan medidas para su sujeción a la justicia Ley 1908 de 2018", Colombian Congress, 9 July 2018.
[63] Military intelligence documents seen by Crisis Group. Javier is the alias used by the Gaitanistas themselves, while Chiquito Malo is the one appearing most often in the media.

III. "Total Peace"

President Petro's election in a runoff with Rodolfo Hernández in June 2022 brought a dramatic change in Colombia's approach to conflict. Petro drew enormous support from rural, conflict-affected areas in part through a promise to open talks with the armed and criminal groups that govern and terrorise pockets of the country. His pledge contrasted sharply with policy under his predecessor, President Iván Duque, who had campaigned for office railing against the 2016 peace deal with the FARC that was inked two years before he assumed the presidency. Once in office, Duque largely opposed speaking with armed groups.[64]

After Petro had secured his win at the polls, armed organisations reacted almost immediately to the prospect of dialogue dangled before them. Violence spiked in the two months between Petro's triumph in the runoff and his inauguration, as groups fought to strengthen their negotiating positions, claim territory and purge alleged enemy collaborators from the civilian population.[65]

The Gaitanistas had high hopes for Petro, a former fighter from the demobilised M-19 urban guerrilla movement. In some areas, Gaitanista members had apparently advised residents to vote for him out of a mix of aspiration and cynicism – looking to him to make negotiations happen, but also because, a local analyst explained, "he is a former guerrilla, and so [if he were elected] the large landowners would be more willing to support the Gaitanistas" to safeguard their interests.[66]

According to some reports, the Gaitanistas believed the Petro administration was prepared to offer them substantial incentives to lay down their arms. Persons close to the Petro campaign (though not officially part of it) had entered Colombian prisons on several occasions and spoken with inmates close to the group. In these conversations, participants discussed the possibility of the Gaitanistas seeking reduced sentences via the transitional justice system under a new Petro government.[67] The Gaitanista leadership was attracted by several turns of phrase uttered during these private meetings and publicly on the campaign trail that they felt were directed at them. These included the idea of "social pardon", in which criminals could be reintegrated into civilian life in exchange for truthful testimony about their crimes and limited jail time.[68] The Gaitanista leadership took these initial conversations as

[64] "Elecciones 2022: así votaron a la Presidencia las zonas afectadas por el conflicto", *El Espectador*, 20 June 2022. Duque had come to power less than two years after the signing of the 2016 peace accord, propelled by a campaign of opposition to that agreement. See "Colombia: Peace Withers amid the Pandemic", Crisis Group Commentary, 30 September 2020; and Crisis Group Latin America Report N°67, *Risky Business: The Duque Government's Approach to Peace in Colombia*, 21 June 2018.
[65] Elizabeth Dickinson, "Arauca: la guerra y la paz total", *Razón Pública*, 20 November 2022.
[66] Crisis Group interview, local analyst with Gaitanista contacts, Valledupar, September 2023.
[67] Crisis Group interview, person who entered prisons, Bogotá, June 2023. See "Roy Barreras dejó en evidencia la estrategia del Pacto Histórico para reaccionar al escándalo de La Picota", *El Colombiano*, 9 June 2022; "Las sospechas de la Paz Total que la han puesto bajo la lupa de la Fiscalía", *El País Cali*, 3 March 2023. The 2016 peace agreement with the former FARC created a transitional justice system that provides for "alternative sentences" to jail time, as determined by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace.
[68] "El 'Perdón Social': aterriza en el congreso con la ayuda del hermano de Petro", *La Silla Vacía*, 15 September 2022.

firm commitments, and they would later complain about having been "tricked" by the government.[69]

The Gaitanistas responded to the initial request from Danilo Rueda, who was at the time Petro government's high peace commissioner, that all armed groups refrain from killings, torture and forcible disappearances as a good-will gesture.[70] Individuals close to the Gaitanistas explained to Crisis Group that while it was unrealistic to expect demobilisation, reducing violence was possible.[71] As Petro took office on 7 August 2022, the Gaitanistas announced a unilateral cessation of offensive actions against the military that they say remains in place to this day.[72] The government held a small number of meetings with Gaitanistas in late 2022.[73] Soon thereafter, the group named a lawyer and two other civilian facilitators to represent them in conversations with Petro administration officials.[74]

These initial gestures sparked optimism among civilians residing in Gaitanista strongholds, and to this day, public support for talks in these areas appears high. As a farming leader in a coca-producing area put it, "if we negotiate, we lose nothing. It must be done. It is possible, and it is urgent. Negotiating the exit of the FARC was a blessing for the region, but the exit of this group – even more so".[75] Simultaneously, however, residents report more domineering Gaitanista behaviour that dates to the beginning of the "total peace" initiative, with the group seeking to demonstrate the extent of its territorial and social control.[76] An Afro-Colombian leader in Montes de María, close to the Atlantic coast, explained:

> From the moment Petro spoke about "total peace", there was a change in the region. The group was always here but never like after that day. … The conflict changed. There is more pressure on social leaders, more recruitment, more politics, more presence, more financial pressure [extortion].[77]

Communications between the government and the Gaitanistas advanced slowly in the first months of Petro's government, until Congress passed legislation setting up a framework for formal talks, known as the "total peace law".[78] Rueda had argued that the state should be prepared to negotiate with all armed and criminal groups, since

[69] Crisis Group interview, person with contact with senior Gaitanista leadership, June 2023.
[70] "Danilo Rueda, el alto comisionado para la paz a los grupos armados: 'El tiempo está corriendo'", *El País*, 12 November 2022.
[71] Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, March 2023.
[72] "Comunicado", Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, 7 August 2022. The Gaitanistas reiterated their commitment to ceasing operations against the state in February. "Comunicado a la Opinión Pública", video, TikTok, @Gaitanistas1948, 25 February 2024. While direct attacks on police in rural areas by the group appear to have diminished, there have been several casualties among security forces in recent combat between the state and the Gaitanistas. See, for example, "Combates entre Ejercito y AGC dejan cuatro militares muertos en Segovia, Antioquia", Caracol Radio, 16 February 2024.
[73] In areas under their control, the Gaitanistas told residents they were seeking talks with the government. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Puerto Libertador, June 2023.
[74] Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, November 2023.
[75] Crisis Group interview, Puerto Libertador, June 2023.
[76] Crisis Group Report, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, op. cit.
[77] Crisis Group interview, Carmen del Bolívar, March 2023.
[78] "Ley 2272 de 2022", 4 November 2022.

all had emerged from the same history of violent conflict. But the government encountered strong opposition in Congress to the idea of talking with criminal outfits that are not traditional insurgencies with defined ideologies.[79] In an attempt to enable such dialogue to take place, the new law authorises the government to discuss a narrow range of social and legal issues with "organised armed structures of high-impact crime" – a new legal category that groups together a range of organisations from the Gaitanistas to urban gangs. The government promised to support further legislation to enable the mass demobilisation of organised criminal groups, known colloquially as the "law of submission".[80]

In introducing "high-impact crime" as a new legal classification, the Petro administration entrenched Colombia's longstanding differentiation between political and criminal organisations under the law. Since 2012, the country's constitution has distinguished between groups fighting for political causes in contrast to others pursuing personal enrichment, with only the former eligible for negotiations on matters of political and social reform (see Appendix B). This distinction is separate from the issue of whether a group meets the international legal standards for a party to internal armed conflict – which turns on organisational cohesion and the extent to which it is engaged in protracted fighting – and hence could lawfully be made subject to status-based targeting with lethal force. The Gaitanistas, the Petro administration argues, are party to an armed conflict yet cannot be considered political.

On 31 December 2022, Petro decreed the government would observe ceasefires with five groups, including the Gaitanistas, as a trust-building gesture ahead of future dialogue.[81] Given the differentiation between insurgencies and high-impact crime groups in the "total peace law", however, the Attorney General's Office protested, saying decrees for the latter would be illegal, and declined to lift arrest warrants for potential Gaitanista negotiators, which it was doing for other armed group representatives.[82] The military, for its part, received conflicting instructions. The presidency told it to stand down vis-à-vis the Gaitanistas, but the Inspector General's Office told it not to cease hostilities with criminal groups on penalty of facing disciplinary hearings for dereliction of duty.[83] The mixed signals essentially froze operations against the Gaitanistas and other criminal groups except when they were caught committing crimes in flagrante.[84]

In March 2023, the ministers of Justice and Interior presented a draft "law of submission" that set down rules governing mass demobilisation of criminal groups. The law would have imposed jail terms of six to eight years for members of criminal

[79] "Cinco Conclusiones del Debate Constitucional sobre la paz total", *La Silla Vacía*, 23 August 2023. For more on the debate over which groups in Colombia should be considered political, see Luis Fernando Trejos Rosero and Reynell Badillo Sarmiento, "¿Políticos o criminales? una discusión que no se actualiza", *La Silla Vacía*, 26 Sept 2023.

[80] "Proyecto de Ley por la cual se establecen mecanismos de sujeción a la justicia ordinaria, garantías de no repetición y desmantelamiento de estructuras armadas organizadas de crimen de alto impacto y se dictan otras disposiciones", draft seen by Crisis Group, February 2023.

[81] "Decree 2658 of 2022", Colombian Presidency, 31 December 2022.

[82] Crisis Group Report, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, op. cit.

[83] "'La paz no puede estar por encima de la Constitución': Margarita Cabello", W Radio, 17 January 2023.

[84] Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, Bogotá, January-March 2023.

groups who complied with the process terms and engaged in restorative justice exercises such as community service. The draft law also allowed for a small percentage of ill-gotten wealth to be amnestied and rendered legal.[85] Individuals close to the Gaitanistas, however, say the law was a non-starter and failed to provide enough incentives for the group – or any other criminal operation – to lay down arms.[86] Legislators also found plenty to criticise in the draft law, shelving it in June. Chances that it will be revived are slim.[87]

Even before the law ran aground in Congress, relations with the Gaitanistas had deteriorated notably. The government complained that the Gaitanistas' facilitators had not maintained confidentiality in talks.[88] For their part, the Gaitanistas alleged that their state interlocutors were more sympathetic to guerrilla movements than to them. Tensions erupted on 19 March when Petro cancelled the above-referenced ceasefire with the Gaitanistas, saying the group was behind the sabotage of public infrastructure, including an attack on an aqueduct and several trucks, as part of a protest by informal miners in the country's central region.[89] The Gaitanistas disputed this claim, arguing that the ELN – also active in the region – had been responsible. Shortly thereafter, the military relaunched a series of campaigns targeting Gaitanista leaders.[90] These are still under way. Speaking in February, Petro declared that "if they are not capable of dismantling themselves as we have asked, they will simply be destroyed by the state".[91]

Contact between the government and the group stopped in the days after the ceasefire's cancellation. The Petro administration also retracted legal resolutions that had accredited the Gaitanistas' civilian facilitators to speak with the government.[92] At the end of 2023, officials said they were seeking a more direct channel to the group that would allow them to assess its position on possible talks about issues including land rights, mass graves, migration through the Darién Gap and the environment.[93]

Several congressional representatives close to the government have contemplated legal pathways to mass demobilisation for the Gaitanistas following the draft law of submission's 2023 demise. One proposal would amend the 2005 Justice and Peace

[85] "Gobierno radicó proyecto de ley de sometimiento a la justicia para bandas criminales", Colombian Senate, 15 March 2023.
[86] Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, March 2023.
[87] The draft law was withdrawn on 20 June 2023. For more on criticism of the draft law, see "David Luna radica ponencia negativa para archivar ley de sometimiento del Gobierno", *El Tiempo*, 26 May 2023.
[88] Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, November 2023.
[89] "Presidente Petro anuncia suspensión de cese al fuego con el Clan del Golfo", press release, Colombian Presidency, 19 March 2023.
[90] Known as Hefesto (in English, Hephaestus, the ancient Greek god of fire), the operations in the Gaitanistas' Urabá stronghold aim to capture senior commanders with the help of roughly 1,000 newly deployed troops and additional air and other capacities. Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Medellín, August 2023.
[91] "Petro al Clan del Golfo: 'si no son capaces de desmantelarse, serán destruidos por el Estado'", Blu Radio, 17 February 2024.
[92] The Gaitanistas claim that these resolutions were cancelled without notification and that they did not receive copies of the relevant documents from the government. Crisis Group interview, person close to the Gaitanistas, June and July 2023.
[93] Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, November 2023.

Law, which as noted offered reduced jail sentences (of five to eight years) to former combatants. Despite the limits on sentences, the Justice and Peace Law provides for the attorney general to continue investigating crimes indefinitely. Former combatants under this law's jurisdiction complain this clause represents a persistent handicap – eg, because individuals under investigation are often barred from employment. The draft reform of the law would aim to limit judicial investigations' length to ten years, so that ex-combatants have a horizon for legal proceedings to be completed and social and economic integration to proceed.[94]

The proposed amendment would also allow the law's benefits (including amnesty for rank-and-file fighters in exchange for testimony) to be applied to "third parties" involved in illicit business, even if they are not combatants and assuming they were not engaged in gross human rights abuses, so as to help unravel those networks. Doing so could help ensure that the investors and businesses involved in trafficking do not remain active, simply looking for new sources of armed protection once the Gaitanistas are no more.

A law, however, is not an essential precondition for preliminary conversations to take place. Previous Colombian governments started talks with the Gaitanistas and their predecessors without the legislation that is required to proceed with demobilisation. In January, Colombia's new high commissioner for peace, Otty Patiño, reiterated a willingness to engage in limited talks with the goal of unwinding the group's illegal business, so long as the group agreed not to kill him.[95] In a communiqué, the Gaitanistas replied that the high commissioner was "off to a bad start" with his statements.[96] As of March, said a senior Colombian official, there is "absolutely no negotiation" between the two sides.[97]

These awkward steps forward and back with the Gaitanistas stand in contrast to the Petro administration's push to make progress in talks with the two groups that the total peace law countenances, the guerrilla ELN and the EMC, a dissident faction of the former FARC.[98] The government has bilateral ceasefires in place with both these groups. In early February, the high commissioner for peace announced a plan to open talks with a second faction of the dissidents, known as the Segunda Marquetalia.[99]

The very real obstacles to getting into dialogue with the Gaitanistas have major ramifications for the government. As long as they stand firmly outside total peace talks, the Gaitanistas risk spoiling the prospect of agreements with other armed groups. Fear that the Gaitanistas will take over territory or attack other groups' fighters permeates these other negotiations – and would likely be enough to prevent other

[94] "Ampliar Justicia y Paz 10 años: así sería la cirugía para someter a narcobandas", *El Espectador*, 11 October 2023. Another similar legislative project to amend the Justice and Peace law was presented to Congress in December, see "La polémica por proyecto que abriría la puerta de Justicia y Paz a grupos criminales", *El Tiempo*, 26 February 2024. At the time of publication, neither proposal had advanced further.

[95] "El alto comisionado para la Paz, dispuesto a hablar con el 'clan del Golfo'", *El Tiempo*, 21 January 2024.

[96] "Comunicado", Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, 21 January 2024.

[97] Crisis Group interview, senior official, Colombian presidency, March 2024.

[98] Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: Is 'Total Peace' Back on Track?", op. cit.

[99] "Declaración Conjunta del Gobierno Nacional y la organización armada rebelde Segunda Marquetalia", communiqué, 9 February 2024.

organisations from disarming.[100] In fact, in every round of talks between the government and the ELN, the insurgency has beseeched the Petro administration to confront the Gaitanistas, including in Bolívar, Antioquia, Chocó, Catatumbo and Cesar departments.[101] Colombian authorities have deployed forces to these areas, yet the military has taken care to calibrate its response: unable to combat the ELN due to a bilateral ceasefire, it is reluctant to attack the Gaitanistas alone, potentially enabling the guerrillas to consolidate their positions.[102] Civilians pay the price, as armed groups are essentially left to battle it out.

Meanwhile, the Gaitanistas are dominant along the country's northern coastline, where many residents express exasperation at the group's apparent exclusion from the total peace process.[103] Violence stems not only from the Gaitanistas' actions but also from moves by rival outfits. ELN fronts have conducted various "armed strikes", in which they confine people to their homes for days at a time to prevent Gaitanista incursions.[104] These actions have humanitarian consequences – limiting supplies of food, cutting off access to health care and often shuttering schools. As a Petro administration official acknowledged, "it is a big problem for total peace to have this armed actor [the Gaitanistas] still active".[105]

[100] The Gaitanistas are pressing the ELN militarily in Chocó, Antioquia, Bolívar and La Guajira, and the FARC-EMC in Bolívar, Córdoba, Antioquia and around the port city of Buenaventura.
[101] Crisis Group interviews, international officials present at talks, January-February 2024.
[102] Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, January 2024.
[103] See, for example, "Bandas criminales, otro gran desafío para echar a andar la 'paz total' en el Caribe", *El Tiempo*, 12 February 2024.
[104] "Comunicado Público", Frente de Guerra Occidental Omar Gómez ELN, 8 February 2024.
[105] Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, November 2023.

IV. The Gaitanistas Today

In considering how and whether to try to bring the Gaitanistas under the total peace umbrella, it is important to have a clear-eyed view of what the group does and how it operates. In its own rhetoric, the Gaitanista Self-Defence Force is a "political organisation of civil armed resistance" that seeks "territorial, social, economic and military control" as the "only means of changing" structural inequalities, corruption and injustice.[106] The group's elaborate statutes and political platform promise that it will fight all other armed groups that "generate violence" (including, by the terms of these materials, the military), represent forgotten populations, control civic spaces, defend the environment, monitor the behaviour of public officials, eradicate sexual violence and improve education, housing and sport, among other things.[107]

Yet residents report that life under the Gaitanistas' control bears little comparison to what their platform promises – and, by many accounts, has grown more difficult since the total peace effort got under way.

A. *Internal Organisation*

The Gaitanista Self-Defence Force openly recruits for three types of roles: foot soldiers, administrators and politicians.[108] All these positions are paid, usually starting at and above minimum wage, between $185 and $275 per month for an entry-level role, even if salaries sometimes arrive late or are incomplete.[109] In the words of a former commander, "people see the organisation as a generator of employment that allows them to support their families".[110]

The Gaitanistas recruit extensively but are also selective about whom they integrate into their ranks. As a rule, they prefer to recruit "new men" – young and unexperienced – who can easily assimilate into their cultural and political program.[111] But two other constituencies are also major sources of recruits. Individuals close to the Gaitanistas say hundreds of former FARC members have joined since the 2016 peace agreement, many of them with knowledge of trafficking routes, skills with weapons and explosives, or other useful experience.[112]

[106] "Political Project", Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, undated document on file with Crisis Group. See also Reynill Badillo Sarmiento and Luis Fernando Trejos Rosero, "Entender al Clan del Golfo para entender la violencia pos AUC en Colombia: reflexiones sobre la transformación del crimen organizado y sus efectos sobre la paz", in Alexander Ugalde Zubiri and Iratxe Perea Ozerin (eds.), *Balances y perspectivas del cumplimiento del Acuerdo de Paz en Colombia (2016-2022)* (2022).
[107] In the medium term, the group also says it intends to form a political party. "Political Project", op. cit.
[108] Crisis Group interviews, June-July 2023.
[109] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders and residents from Montes de María, southern Córdoba, Bolívar, Chocó and Cesar, January and October 2022; March, May and June 2023.
[110] Crisis Group interview, senior former Gaitanista, July 2023.
[111] Ibid. Security forces say they have found several training camps for new recruits. See, for example, "La escuela de adoctrinamiento que montó el Clan del Golfo en Atlántico", *El Heraldo,* 9 January 2022.
[112] Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, May 2023. This claim aligns with accounts that Crisis Group has heard regarding particular regions, including Chocó, Montes de María and southern Córdoba.

The Gaitanistas also approach young people who have completed their obligatory military service or who have served as enlisted soldiers.[113] Roughly 30 per cent of the captures from Gaitanista ranks in Chocó in 2021, for example, had previous careers in the military.[114] According to the Gaitanistas' internal statutes, all would-be recruits should be above eighteen years of age and, in the case of Indigenous people, have permission from their traditional authorities.[115]

The organisation also contracts other individuals who carry out day-to-day jobs and in so doing come into the fold of Gaitanista influence. Women and motorcycle taxi drivers are often paid to carry out surveillance.[116] A trusted group of lookouts, or *puntos*, keep tabs on locals' movements and act as go-betweens with the civilian population.[117] Meanwhile, politicians compensated for their work with the group need charisma and a history of being able to organise the civilian population.[118]

While the Gaitanistas actively recruit for these roles, residents of areas they control say young people – lured by hopes of acquiring motorcycles, mobile phones, girlfriends or boyfriends, and easy cash – also proactively approach the group. According to a local analyst, in some areas the Gaitanistas are commonly described as "the only company with its doors always open".[119] The Gaitanistas often promise not only salaries but also paid vacation, support for the member's family and protection.[120] Another social leader explained, "they offer these kids service, rank, responsibility, authority. Once the kids are in, they discover a different reality. And once they are in, they cannot get out".[121] (Social leader is a broad term that in Colombia connotes a range of civil society roles.)

The heart of the organisation is the Estado Mayor (Command), currently led by alias Javier or Chiquito Malo.[122] The Estado Mayor includes the organisation's regional military and political leadership. Although its meetings are not often reported, the Estado Mayor has held at least three conferences involving all its members over the last decade. Members often communicate with one another electronically. The Estado Mayor creates policies for the group, designates priorities and establishes tribunals to mete out disciplinary measures to fellow commanders.[123] Regional lead-

[113] Crisis Group interview, Afro-Colombian community leader, Carmen del Bolívar, March 2023.
[114] Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, Quibdó and Medellín, January 2022 and August 2023.
[115] Crisis Group interview, June 2023. "Estatutos de Constitución y Régimen Disciplinario", Autodefensa Gaitanista de Colombia, on file with Crisis Group.
[116] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Montería and Maríalabaja, October 2022 and March 2023.
[117] Crisis Group interview, former local action council president, Montería, October 2022. "In each area, they have a lookout, who has his family there, and he is the one to approach if you have a question for the group or need to request their help. He is also the person who gives orders to the local authorities".
[118] Crisis Group interviews, June-July 2023.
[119] Crisis Group interview, local analyst, Montería, February 2022.
[120] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023.
[121] Crisis Group interview, campesino leader, Montería, October 2022.
[122] The U.S. has classified the group as a Transnational Criminal Organisation since 2018, and on 26 September 2023, the Gaitanista commander was placed under U.S. sanctions for his alleged role in drug trafficking to the U.S. "United States Sanctions Sinaloa Cartel Fentanyl Traffickers and Colombian Clan del Golfo Leader", U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, 26 September 2023.
[123] The military structure of the Gaitanistas mirrors that of a conventional force. The smallest unit is a squadron, with roughly ten members including a commander and sub-commander. Former

ers appear to have extensive leeway to manage their operations, so long as their actions are guided by the Estado Mayor's directives.

Since Otoniel's arrest in 2021, numerous sources have attested to the efforts of the central leadership to tighten its grip on the breadth of the organisation. According to one report, the Estado Mayor sent one or more envoys to its various battle fronts to ensure alignment with the new leadership.[124] Residents say they have seen the group's new leadership gradually stake out control since Otoniel's capture. Immediately after the former chief was extradited, Montería, a town near the Caribbean coast, underwent a wave of homicides that appeared to be related to violent competition among different fronts of the organisation.[125] More recently, military sources reported the murder, apparently by fellow Gaitanistas, of senior commander alias Siopas, a former FARC combatant who had participated in conversations between the Gaitanistas and the Petro government in 2022.[126] While there are conflicting reports about his death, fellow Gaitanista members had accused Siopas of trying to launch a breakaway faction.[127] He was killed in March 2023, his mutilated body left on a highway.[128]

Following Siopas's death, residents report seeing even greater efforts to establish centralised control over the rank and file. In Cesar, the Gaitanistas forcibly replaced several regional commanders with individuals from Urabá as part of a "strategy to strengthen and secure the structure of its forces, and men in arms".[129] Meanwhile, individuals with knowledge of government outreach to the group say the Estado Mayor has recently been restructured.[130]

B. *Economic Interests*

In the locales where they operate, the Gaitanistas serve as regulators and arbiters of daily economic life. They establish rules, collect taxes, and determine which businesses can operate and where. Leaders of the group say they tax formal companies including public-sector contractors, large landowners and multinationals, while the group's illicit business activities range from the narcotics trade to mining and migrant and

members of the group say the idea behind these small groups is that they can have direct, personal contact with the community where they are stationed. Sections include twenty members, and groups comprise four squadrons, while companies have two groups. Fronts are made up of at least two groups, and blocks must have at least two fronts. Commanders of these latter two – fronts and blocks – are included in the Estado Mayor. Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023. See also "Estatutos de Constitución y Régimen Disciplinario", op. cit.

[124] Crisis Group interview, person with knowledge of criminal networks, Barranquilla, July 2023.

[125] Crisis Group interview, local analyst, Montería, February 2022.

[126] "La vida criminal de alias 'Siopas', segundo al mando del 'clan del Golfo'", *El Tiempo*, 1 March 2023. Crisis Group interviews, participants in initial outreach, Bogotá, March 2023.

[127] Another version of the story suggests that Siopas may have wanted to turn himself in to cooperate with authorities. Crisis Group interviews, military officers, August 2023 and January 2024. Individuals close to the group suggest that mercenaries are responsible for some killings of Gaitanista commanders blamed on the group.

[128] Two other deaths apparently related to consolidation of the group's leadership were reported around the same time in Sucre. See "Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia y la Paz Total", Indepaz, January 2024.

[129] Crisis Group telephone interview, local analyst, September 2023.

[130] Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, September 2023.

arms smuggling.[131] The organisation's control and regulation of the local economy is so comprehensive that in some regions, residents refer to the Gaitanistas' network of influence as *la empresa* ("the firm").[132] U.S. security sources estimate the Gaitanistas' annual income at $4.4 billion.[133] This sum is roughly equivalent to a month's worth of Colombian exports.[134]

1. Businesses, landholders and protection tax

The Gaitanistas' relationship with rural landowners was fundamental at its inception and remains an important source of the group's vitality. In exchange for protecting private property and keeping other threatening forces at bay – whether left-wing insurgents or urban criminals – parts of the landowner and regional business elite in certain areas have repeatedly backed the group. They have also sought its assistance. "There is a symbiosis with the regional business elite", a person close to the organisation explained.[135] These powerful figures consider the Gaitanistas better equipped than the state to control petty crime, regulate extortion, and prevent kidnapping and land seizures by guerrilla forces.[136]

Today, the alliance with landed elites takes several forms. One is the provision of "services" to businesses that hire the Gaitanistas to protect, for example, large plots of oil-producing palms or cattle ranches.[137] Landowners in certain settings have encouraged the Gaitanista presence and pay their protection tax to counter other armed outfits. In Cesar, cattle ranchers and merchants complained that the ELN's extortion and kidnapping has reached such heights that "some of them got in touch with the Gaitanistas in the area to guarantee their security".[138]

Of course, not everyone is happy to pay Gaitanista protection fees. One farm owner in Antioquia explained, "Extortion is a burden for the people. In March, we paid our annual quota, but then in August they asked for money again. In November again. And of course, in March, they came back again".[139] The Gaitanistas' protection rates are based on the numbers of cattle on ranches or hectares under cultivation. Along migrant trafficking routes in the Darién Gap, the Gaitanistas have established rules and taxes for those involved in moving people northward.[140] They may also benefit through full or partial ownership of trafficking operations.[141]

[131] Crisis Group interview, senior Gaitanista leader, April 2023.
[132] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Sincelejo, March 2023.
[133] Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, August 2023.
[134] "Exportaciones", Department of National Statistics.
[135] Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, May 2023.
[136] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023. The military agrees with this analysis. "It is not so much that they like the Gaitanistas, but that they see them as the lesser evil". Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, January 2024.
[137] Crisis Group interview, Ombudsman's Office representative, September 2023. "Large companies are the historical allies of the Gaitanistas, and the Gaitanistas are the armed branch of these businesses". Crisis Group interview, social leader, Sincelejo, March 2023.
[138] Crisis Group interview, social leader from rural Cesar, Valledupar, September 2023.
[139] Crisis Group interview, Cantagallo, May 2023.
[140] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°102, *Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap*, 3 November 2023.
[141] Crisis Group interview, security source, Bogotá, February 2024.

In many cases, it is not only the rich but small-hold farmers and small business owners who are asked to pay extortion fees. Rural leaders in Cesar explained that the Gaitanistas ask dairy farmers to pay a fee for each container of milk they produce, leaving very little profit to survive on.[142] In La Guajira, a northern region with high levels of malnutrition among its mostly Indigenous population, the group has compelled farmers to provide it with food, including crops and cattle.[143] Contractors are often required to put down money in order to proceed with building roads, aqueducts or other projects, the Gaitanistas admit, leaving fewer funds available to complete these works to the right standard.[144]

On occasion, the Gaitanistas' complicity with firms involved in large building projects goes even further. Communities report being threatened or even forcibly displaced by individuals linked to the Gaitanistas in order either to enable large investments to move ahead or profit from increases in land prices as they do. In the case of one major infrastructure project, families in poor communities around the area in question say they have been pushed out of their homes. Said one resident:

> One day when we came home, there were seven armed men [Gaitanistas] who entered our plot of land, and we had to attend to them, serve them meals. We finally left and we will not go back. This is a way to displace us from the land.[145]

The Gaitanistas say one of their primary sources of income is the tax they charge multinational companies, particularly in the mining sector.[146] They extract this money, they say, to compensate for environmental damage from major construction projects that the government would otherwise turn a blind eye to, though there is little evidence that they work to mitigate the impact.[147] Moreover, their involvement sends a message to communities that the enterprise has met the Gaitanistas' conditions to operate – and should be left alone under threat of violent reprisal.[148]

The Gaitanistas' military operations indicate they are seeking to expand their involvement in mining, both legal and illegal.[149] In southern Bolívar, where the Gaitanistas control large strips of land along the Magdalena River, they have been pushing to enter ELN- and EMC-controlled areas in the Serranía de San Lucas, which is rich in gold deposits.[150] Clashes between the ELN and the Gaitanistas also erupted in

[142] Crisis Group interview, Valledupar, September 2023. Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian official, August 2023.
[143] Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian worker, September 2023.
[144] Crisis Group interviews, senior Gaitanista leader, April 2023; official in the governor's office, Montería, November 2022.
[145] Crisis Group interview, resident of rural Canal del Dique, Pasacaballos, March 2023. Crisis Group heard numerous similar testimonies across the region.
[146] Crisis Group interview, senior Gaitanista leader, April 2023. Colombian military sources corroborate this claim. Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, March 2023.
[147] Crisis Group interview, senior Gaitanista leader, April 2023.
[148] In one area of Córdoba, communities reported that the Gaitanistas had made themselves the intermediaries between an international mining operation and residents. Crisis Group interview, woman anti-mining activist, Puerto Libertador, August 2021.
[149] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, March 2023.
[150] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Barrancabermeja, May 2023.

2023 along the coal-rich corridor of Cesar department and in Segovia – a town in an important mining region in the Antioquia department.[151]

2. Coca and cocaine

The Gaitanistas are often referred to as Colombia's largest drug trafficking organisation, a description that if anything both oversimplifies their role and fails to convey their importance in shaping the global cocaine trade. With operations along the country's Atlantic coast, and in all its major ports, the Gaitanistas are the most powerful players in an industry that could not exist without their services. Gaitanista leaders insist the organisation does not itself traffic cocaine, instead taxing the many businesses that do.[152] Its role, however, is more far-reaching, encompassing several critical functions. The organisation sets the rules of the trade, guarantees the delivery of product to international traffickers and curbs others' participation in the drug business; it holds a majority market share in facilitating Colombia's cocaine exports.

Since the former FARC exited the narcotics market, Colombia's armed and criminal groups have largely preferred that third-party traffickers assume the risks of buying and transporting drugs while they act as local authorities, regulating the business and providing security for producers. The FARC guerrilla in its time pioneered this model, becoming the largest organisation able to guarantee the supply of drugs to international buyers.[153] Security officials now concur that the Gaitanistas have adopted this same approach.[154] A resident along a drug route explained: "The *narco* is someone else. The Gaitanistas provide security, send the product, assure the delivery of the commodity and answer for the money".[155]

Gaitanista regulation begins with coca cultivation.[156] The organisation dispenses guidelines to farmers about how much coca they should grow and where.[157] At least in some areas, the group controls inputs for the crop, including fertiliser (for growing) and ammonia (for refining).[158] Once the crop is harvested, many farmers undertake the first step in processing the leaf into coca paste, which has a fixed price also established by the group. While the Gaitanista do not buy coca paste, according to most

[151] People in the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia who were forced to leave their homes in December 2023 say the purpose was to make way for new mining projects. Crisis Group interviews, local displaced leaders, Rio Negro, January 2024. See also "Antioquia: nuevos enfrentamientos entre ELN, autodefensas y disidencias generan el desplazamiento de 150 personas en Segovia", *Semana*, 2 July 2023; and "Qué hay detrás de la guerra de Clan del Golfo y ELN que pone en riesgo a Antioquia", *El Espectador*, 10 July 2023.

[152] Crisis Group interview, senior Gaitanista official, April 2023.

[153] The FARC's methods varied: in some areas, they maintained control of the supply chain while in others they taxed external traffickers. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°87, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, 26 February 2021.

[154] Crisis Group interviews, residents and security officers, Sincelejo, Medellin, Cartagena, March, April and September 2023.

[155] Crisis Group interview, Cartagena, May 2023.

[156] For more on the group's involvement along the coca supply chain, see "Global Report on Cocaine 2023", UN Office on Drugs and Crime, March 2023, p. 142.

[157] Crisis Group interviews, former coca growers, Puerto Libertador, June 2023; retired security officer, Bogotá, September 2023.

[158] Crisis Group interview, former coca laboratory manager, Montería, October 2022.

accounts, they control which buyers are permitted to do so.[159] The Gaitanistas charge a fee, calculated by gram, on the sale of paste.[160] Laboratories that transform the paste into cocaine also enjoy Gaitanista protection.[161]

At this point, the product enters a trafficking system that is safeguarded and guaranteed by the Gaitanistas. In a crowded market, it is the group's ability to guarantee the transport of the product from inland Colombia to the high seas that sets it apart from other suppliers, according to a former commander:

> What is the costliest part – both in price and in risks – for the *narcos*? Transport. So, if they can get the product out safely, and close the export point, they prefer to do so even if they must pay more.[162]

The Gaitanistas are the "owners of the routes" along the Atlantic coast, including rivers, major highways and sea lanes.[163] This region enjoys vastly better infrastructure than Colombia's Pacific coast and Amazon, lowering export costs substantially. In recent years, the Gaitanistas have also gained access to Pacific shipping routes from the north-western department of Chocó. In these areas, Gaitanista control is largely uncontested, which lowers risks for third-party buyers. (Circumstances are different in other territories, particularly along the southern Pacific coast.)

Gaitanista forces provide specialised protection services on each step of the way. According to a resident near the Gulf of Morosquillo, a key exit route to the sea, the group is "divided into two branches, the military branch – those 'out of water', as they are known", who exercise control of territory and the local population, "and the branch that protects the *narcos* [at the point of sale], known as 'those in water'".[164] From permeable coastlines like this one, the Gaitanistas deliver the product to buyers on the high seas, where transnational crime groups take over the trafficking, above all to North America and Europe. Mexican cartels are the main buyers for the U.S. route, while Albanian and other European crime groups handle shipping to Europe.[165] In major ports, the Gaitanistas also have members on hand to ensure that cargo is loaded onto container ships to reach buyers abroad.[166]

Security forces say the Gaitanistas also wield influence in drug dealing in Colombia's urban areas.[167] In most cases, the Gaitanistas appear to contract out dealing to local criminal groups, but they ensure safe delivery of the product and take a cut from

[159] Crisis Group interview, retired security official, Bogotá, September 2023.
[160] Crisis Group interview, senior Gaitanista official, April 2023.
[161] Crisis Group interview, international security official, August 2023. See also "Global Report on Cocaine 2023", op. cit., p. 142.
[162] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023.
[163] Crisis Group interview, retired security official, Bogotá, September 2023.
[164] Crisis Group interview, resident in Golfo de Morosquillo, Cartagena, May 2023.
[165] The Sinaloa Cartel appears to dominate purchases on the Atlantic route from Gaitanista areas, according to residents and analysts. Crisis Group interviews, Cartagena, April-May 2023; international security officials, Oslo, February 2024. Recent captures of wanted Albanians along the Atlantic coast suggest that they have a role in the trade to Europe. See, for example, "Capturan en Colombia a narcotraficante albanés requerido en varios países de Europa", Associated Press, 26 August 2023.
[166] Crisis Group interview, retired security official, Bogotá, September 2023.
[167] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, March 2023.

the sales.[168] All told, the Gaitanistas are estimated to earn some $3.3 billion annually from their role in the drug business.[169]

Corruption in the Colombian security forces is vital to the Gaitanistas' ability to ensure the safe transit of coca and cocaine – a fact that military and police officers openly admit.[170] The military is "highly permeable", as a senior officer put it.[171] Police leaders acknowledge similar challenges and often rotate personnel more rapidly in areas under the Gaitanistas' sway.[172] While there is no evidence that the Gaitanistas have system-wide influence in these security institutions, the group does reportedly strike ad hoc agreements with individual regional military and police officers, for example with those overseeing highways and other trafficking routes.[173] A former senior Gaitanista member claimed, "I always had more members of the security forces on my payroll than fighters of my own. … I am sure it is the same to this day".[174] Indeed, large numbers of security officers are allegedly paid regularly by the Gaitanistas.[175] Another former Gaitanista member explained:

> The [security forces] charge to allow gasoline to enter these areas. The refining labs must pay them. They charge for the right of passage on all main roads. The *narcos* must pay the police when they arrive at the port. They [the police] charge the *narcos* whenever they have an intelligence report [that names them] – they charge them in order not to investigate. Those who are least interested in ending drug trafficking are the security forces.[176]

In addition to this sort of corruption, the Gaitanistas have built other defences against security operations that target their business. The group's civilian intelligence networks serve as an early warning system, with shop owners, taxi drivers and residents primed to alert the group to military patrols.[177] The group's illicit businesses are also strategically disaggregated, so that the capture of any one individual in the drug supply chain will provide limited insight into the trafficking operation as a whole.[178]

[168] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Ombudsman's Office representatives, August-September 2023. See, for example, Luis Fernando Trejos and Reynell Badillo Sarmiento, "Las Jerarquías criminales de Barranquilla: ¿Quiénes delinquen en la ciudad?", *La Silla Vacía*, 6 Oct 2023.
[169] Crisis Group interview, international security official, Bogotá, October 2023.
[170] Crisis Group interview, senior military and police officers, Quibdó, Medellín, Sincelejo and Bogotá, January 2021; August and October 2023; February 2024.
[171] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Medellín, September 2023.
[172] Crisis Group interview, senior police commander in a Gaitanista-dominated region, October 2023.
[173] Crisis Group interview, analyst, Barranquilla, July 2023.
[174] Crisis Group interview, August 2023.
[175] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023. A regional police commander confirmed this view, explaining that in Gaitanista areas, the security forces have to regularly transfer officers to limit co-optation. Crisis Group interview, October 2023.
[176] Crisis Group interview, July 2023. In the last decade, a number of senior military and police officers have been accused of corruption related to drug trafficking. See, for example, "General Martínez nuevamente salpicado", *El Espectador*, 8 October 2014; and "Investigan al general John Jairo Rojas por corrupción, acoso sexual y nexos criminales", *El Espectador*, 26 September 2023.
[177] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Medellín, August 2023.
[178] As one military officer put it, despite high-level captures the group remains "a living organism". Crisis Group interview, Montería, February 2022.

The ability to guarantee transport and cargo has cemented the relationship between the Gaitanistas and the "narco-investors" who provide the capital and credit to ensure a constant drug supply.[179] These businesspeople – residing in Colombia or abroad – contract the third-party traffickers who buy and move cocaine through Colombian territory and beyond, with Gaitanista protection. They also decide when and where to stimulate coca cultivation, for example providing loans or paying in advance for the first harvest.[180] Former Gaitanista members speak of these individuals as wielding enormous influence, and in some cases, express trepidation about discussing the topic in detail.[181]

Current dynamics in the coca market offer a glimpse into just how dominant the Gaitanistas have become. Beginning in the second half of 2022 and into 2023, coca prices in much of Colombia – except in Gaitanista areas – collapsed, falling to just 30 per cent of previous levels.[182] One explanation is oversupply: there is simply too much coca for global demand. But it was different in areas under the Gaitanistas' thumb. In those areas, the price paid to coca farmers has remained stable, and seizures indicate large quantities of the product are leaving Colombian shores.[183] This price stability likely reflects the strong preferences of international buyers. While other armed groups struggle to find buyers for the product of territories they control, the Gaitanistas have become the most reliable guarantors of cocaine for international clients, due to their elaborate regulatory systems and security, as well as the control of routes that they wield.

C. *Violence and Control*

While purporting to represent the interests of the poor communities they control, the Gaitanistas' methods are inherently coercive. Drawing on years of experience among their members as paramilitaries and guerrillas, the Gaitanistas have a sophisticated repertoire of ways to embed themselves in communities and then use violence and fear to ensure compliance with their directives. The exact mix of coercion and co-optation varies depending on the group's level of control.

[179] Crisis Group interviews, June-August 2023.

[180] After the 2016 peace accord, when buyers scrambled to find reliable sellers after the FARC's departure, these investors reportedly sank large sums in expanding coca cultivation across the country, likely as a safeguard against market shocks. Farmers speak of outsiders offering free credit, pre-paid inputs and guaranteed crop purchases. Crisis Group interviews, farmers, Santander de Quilichao, Orito, Tierralta and Alto Mira y Frontera, 2021 and 2023.

[181] Crisis Group interviews, June-August 2023. During negotiations with the Santos administration, Gaitanista members told officials that naming investors, some of whom are politicians, would be a death sentence. Crisis Group interview, former official, Bogotá, September 2023.

[182] "El negocio de la coca colapsa y asfixia a la Colombia rural", *El País*, 23 July 2023.

[183] A kilogram of coca paste is sold at between 2,800,000 and 3,200,000 Colombian pesos ($685-$780) in Gaitanista areas, whereas it would fetch only 1,000,000 ($245) in many areas controlled by FARC dissidents. Crisis Group interviews, 2020-2023. The fall in coca prices was first reported in Catatumbo just after Otoniel's arrest. Although controlled by ELN and FARC dissident forces, traffickers in that area had sold their product to the Gaitanistas. An early theory held that the buyer-seller relationship had collapsed without Otoniel.

1. Moving in

The Gaitanistas say they seek to control the Atlantic and Pacific coastlines as well as the economic heartland of Colombia – and they appear to be working toward that goal.[184] The group "is in constant expansion", a military officer noted. "It is filling spaces".[185] Between 2019 and 2023, the organisation's reach grew from 213 municipalities to 392.[186] Beyond these areas, the Gaitanistas are able to traffic and carry out specific operations in many major cities, including in districts controlled by rival outfits.[187] They are pushing into new territory in Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Chocó, Bolívar, Cesar, La Guajira, Catatumbo, Meta, Casanare and Vichada. As a senior elected official said, "what we see today of the Gaitanistas is just a preview of what the group could become, on its current trajectory".[188]

On these front lines, residents and military sources report that the Gaitanistas send their most experienced fighters to combat rivals.[189] Gaitanista troops in these places are competent and extremely well-armed, often wielding the latest-issue U.S.-made weapons.[190] The initial incursions into populated areas often result in forced displacement or confinement as civilians attempt to avoid being caught up in clashes or purges of residents suspected of allying with enemy groups.[191]

Simultaneous to this assault, the Gaitanistas often take steps to win over the communities they are seeking to control. In sharp contrast to predecessor paramilitaries, who often entered an area by convening the residents to threaten them, the Gaitanistas promise to support public works, provide paid jobs, give presents to children and deliver food baskets to the needy.[192] "They don't arrive like assassins, but instead they are offering to help, to fix, to give. To the point that the people say, 'the state does not have a presence here, but the groups do, doing everything that a state should be doing'", explained a social leader.[193] Other promises might include ending petty crime and delinquency. "To some, it seems like a paradise when the Gaitanistas arrive", a clergyman in Chocó said, "because they say to the community: 'We will not extort. There will be no more robberies'".[194]

[184] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023.
[185] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Medellín, August 2023.
[186] "Alerta temprana N°030-23 Elecciones Regionales 2023", Colombia Ombudsman's Office, 23 August 2023; "La expansión y consolidación de los grupos armados ilegales son la principal amenaza para el país", press release, Colombia Ombudsman's Office, 23 January 2024.
[187] Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers and retired officers, Bogotá, March and September 2023.
[188] Crisis Group interview, governor of a department with a Gaitanista presence, September 2023.
[189] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Barrancabermeja, May 2023.
[190] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Medellín, August 2023. "They arrived well equipped and with ample arms, in military clothing". Crisis Group interview, displaced social leaders from Briceño, Antioquia and Río Negro, January 2024.
[191] "Confinados en Chocó: donde el ELN y el Clan del Golfo son los 'dueños del mundo'", *La Silla Vacía*, 4 December 2022; and "Defensoría alerta situación en el Chocó por presencia del Clan del Golfo y el Eln", *El Espectador*, 30 December 2022.
[192] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders from Chocó, Sucre, Bolívar and Cesar, January 2022; March and May 2023.
[193] Crisis Group interview, social leader, Valledupar, September 2023.
[194] Crisis Group interview, clergyman, Quibdó, January 2022.

But those impressions often belie a grimmer reality that emerges over time. Residents say as the Gaitanistas consolidate their control, they kill or terrorise people whom they consider undesirable: often, drug users, thieves, LGBT people and social leaders who are vocally opposed to the group. In southern Cesar, several corpses have been found with notes signed by the Gaitanistas offering reasons such as "killed for being a robber".[195]

Civilians accused of collaboration with enemy groups face the direct threat of violence. During a December 2023 incursion into Briceño, Antioquia, Gaitanista fighters told residents they had not come to attack the civilian population, but added that they would target anyone accused of collaborating with members of a FARC dissident group; much of the town's small population, which has lived under dissident control since 2017, subsequently fled, fearing they would be stigmatised as enemies.[196] In southern Bolívar, a shop owner described a situation in which fighters from one group bought a soft drink and members of the Gaitanistas then held the merchant responsible for collaboration.[197] In La Guajira, a north-eastern department where the Gaitanistas are seeking to challenge ELN control, homicide victims have recently been found dismembered and exhibited in public. According to one observer, "if the group can demonstrate its ability to cause terror, the community will be terrorised, and with more terror comes more control".[198]

2. Sinking roots, establishing dependency

Once the Gaitanistas establish military control of an area, the bulk of their activity shifts toward overseeing the civilian population. As they have already demonstrated their ability to purge those whom they wish, little additional force is required. People in Montes de María, for example, explain that the Gaitanistas need only patrol occasionally to exercise their writ.[199] Instead, the group often begins to build an intelligence network. Women and young people (including children) are among those recruited – and are even preferred for their ability to move seamlessly through community life and report back.[200] Residents understand that they could be reported to local commanders for breaking any one of numerous rules that might be established – gossiping, speaking badly of the group or breaking curfew. "Now we are not under threat of machete, but we all know that if we make a mistake, we will be sent to see the group", as one social leader put it.[201]

Residents and international observers describe the Gaitanista strategy as oriented toward destroying existing authorities and loyalties within the community so as to rebuild them in ways that serve the group's interests.[202] The Gaitanistas often try

[195] Photographs seen by Crisis Group, shared by social leaders from rural Cesar, September 2023.
[196] Crisis Group interviews, displaced social leaders from Briceño, Río Negro, January 2024.
[197] Crisis Group interview, San Pablo, May 2023.
[198] Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian official, August 2023.
[199] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders from six municipalities, Sincelejo, March 2023.
[200] Crisis Group interview, Daniel Rendón Herrera, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2023.
[201] Crisis Group interview, leader from rural area, Sincelejo, March 2023.
[202] Crisis Group interview, international observer, Valledupar, September 2023. The Gaitanistas deny putting pressure on social leaders and in their statutes pronounce a commitment not to coerce or act against local social, religious or political authorities.

first to cultivate allies among two groups: the local action councils, which are elected civic bodies responsible for neighbourhood governance, and recognised social leaders. They try to co-opt such individuals, at times with the promise of funds or shared projects, and at other times with threats of displacement or violence should they not comply.[203]

Simply to survive, many residents resign themselves to collaboration with the Gaitanistas. In rural Cesar and Magdalena departments, a local activist explained:

> When the group enters, some in the community [come onto their side]. This is their tendency from the first moments, because of fear … and then the group puts them to work. It asks them to open the way for their presence, to give them provisions and food, to drive their cars, or to transport their people.[204]

Even as they sow fear, the Gaitanistas use recruitment – and the promise of remuneration – to bring local families onto their side. For example, residents in Chocó, where the Gaitanistas have been expanding continuously since 2020, say the group sometimes pays monthly wages in the town square in full public view.[205] Some residents have expressed appreciation for the Gaitanistas' strict military culture, including asking recruits to march at dawn; they also require their members to avoid drug use and non-heterosexual sexual behaviour.[206] Recruitment is not limited to men. Young women are also drawn into the group and its circles, either directly as new members or as "girlfriends" of combatants. The line between voluntary relationships and coercion is often blurred. Young women in the southern part of Córdoba recalled Gaitanista members frequently passing through their localities and taking two or three girls with them, "as if it was their right".[207] In another area of Córdoba, women recounted numerous female neighbours leaving the city centre for sex work in rural areas where the Gaitanistas have a camp, as a way to earn enough to sustain their children.[208]

At the same time, the Gaitanistas sometimes make improvements to communities. On occasion, they have paved stretches of road, set up solar grids or provided basic health services.[209] In southern Córdoba, the group recently started putting caps on the prices for staple goods to ensure that food remains affordable despite inflation.[210] In sum, whether by using sticks or carrots, and sometimes by using both, the Gaitanistas establish their dominance in the life of the community.[211]

[203] Crisis Group telephone interview, Ombudsman's Office representative, September 2023.
[204] Crisis Group interview, Valledupar, September 2023.
[205] Crisis Group interviews, local clergy, Quibdó, January 2022.
[206] Crisis Group interview, resident of Gaitanista area, Tierralta, June 2023.
[207] Crisis Group interviews, Puerto Libertador, June 2023.
[208] Crisis Group interviews, Montelíbano, August 2021.
[209] A former member described local squadrons carrying with them rapid tests for tropical diseases such as dengue fever, which is endemic along the Atlantic coast. Crisis Group interview, June 2023.
[210] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, November 2023.
[211] "They started slowly, and little by little, they have taken up [civic] space such that now there is none left". Crisis Group interview, Afro-Colombian woman leader, Sincelejo, March 2023.

3. Consolidating control

As the Gaitanistas assert themselves in nearly every aspect of daily life, two specific types of power play stand out. First, Gaitanistas in effect become the judicial authorities. Anyone can approach the neighbourhood *punto*, who will communicate that person's concern or dispute to local Gaitanista commanders. These local commanders then decide how to settle the issue. Domestic violence, for example, carries a fine of roughly $125 in southern Córdoba, while a fight in a public place costs about $250.[212] Sometimes, fines are paired with community labour. Residents can also approach the group to recover unpaid loans, on the understanding that the Gaitanistas will take 40 per cent of the sum repaid.[213] Local action councils, elected politicians and ethnic authorities all say they are obliged to coordinate with the Gaitanistas in settling disputes.[214] Indigenous populations, who have a constitutional right to administer their own justice, have reported that they retain the liberty to do so, as long as the Gaitanistas are kept informed.[215]

The second type of influence is even more striking: the Gaitanistas seek to infiltrate, take over or, failing that, replace civil society organisations. Civic leaders in Montes de María, for example, say they must always alert Gaitanista authorities before convening a meeting or risk being accused of working against the group.[216] The Gaitanistas send observers to these meetings when they take place.[217] Community leaders who are considered disloyal to the group face fines, scrutiny of their mobile phone use or direct threats of violence.[218] In Córdoba, the leaders of several farmers' organisations who refused to collaborate with the Gaitanistas have been threatened by name in pamphlets, with at least two social leaders facing assassination attempts over the last year.[219]

Beyond the issue of infiltration is that of competition: longstanding social organisations say they are losing ground to groups that enjoy Gaitanista support.[220] To start with, the latter have more funding to, in the words of one social leader, "solve people's problems".[221] For example, an aid group whose leaders praise the Gaitanista presence in Urabá delivers food baskets – donated by local supermarkets at the Gaitanistas' request – to remote Indigenous villages.[222] According to a civic organiser in Montes de María, "the Gaitanistas patronise all cultural events now. … They send

[212] Crisis Group interviews, local analyst and coca farmer, Montería, February and October 2022.
[213] Crisis Group interview, social leader from Montes de María, Cartagena, May 2023.
[214] Crisis Group interviews, ethnic officials, Quibdó and Puerto Libertador, January 2022 and June 2023.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Sincelejo, March 2023.
[217] "Silence is what scares them most", said a local farmers' organisation leader, referring to the Gaitanistas' penchant for staying informed. Crisis Group interview, Valledupar, September 2023.
[218] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Sincelejo and Puerto Libertador, March and June 2023.
[219] "Amenazan al líder social Andrés Chica y a otros miembros de Cordoberxia", Caracol Radio, 21 February 2023; "Defensores de derechos humanos y líderes sociales siguen recibiendo amenazas", Caracol Radio, 24 August 2023.
[220] One such group is the Gaitanista Youth, which emerged roughly around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Crisis Group interviews, former senior Gaitanista, June-July 2023.
[221] Crisis Group interviews, farmers' organisation leaders, Montería, October 2022.
[222] Crisis Group interview, aid coordinator in Urabá, Tierralta, May 2023.

gifts to all the children through the local action councils. They give out food baskets, or they slaughter a cow and divide the meat. We [independent civil society] have lost this capacity and permission to organise".[223] The Gaitanistas have even begun summoning officials from rural development agencies to meetings as a condition for them to operate in the Bajo Cauca region. Officials have declined to attend these meetings but sometimes have been forced to pause projects by Gaitanista pressure.[224]

[223] Crisis Group interview, leader from rural area, Sincelejo, March 2023.
[224] Crisis Group interview, regional manager in government rural development agency, Medellín, January 2024.

V. Strategies for Dealing with the Gaitanistas

Even as Petro's government has sought to reduce levels of conflict, since it took office the Gaitanistas have expanded and consolidated their control in the country's north and beyond. In doing so, they have not only tightened their coercive hold on communities, but they have also exerted pressure on other armed organisations that are in talks with the government, posing obstacles to a negotiated end to conflict with those groups.

A strategy for countering the Gaitanistas' power and influence is urgently needed, but devising it will not be straightforward. In seeking to curb the Gaitanistas, and to realise its ambitions for "total peace", the government bumps up against the hard reality that the Colombian state has a limited amount it can offer to entice the group's members to give up their lucrative illicit revenue streams. The state also has a responsibility to protect vulnerable communities under the group's sway.

One way to navigate these challenges in any possible dialogue with the group is to devise a staggered approach, rooted in building a modicum of trust between the sides that can be channelled into confidence-building measures, while at the same time making concrete improvements to communities' safety. Officials should start by working with the group to reduce levels of conflict and humanitarian harm in affected communities in exchange for curbs on offensive operations. They should then gradually aim for a fuller demobilisation. Military and police pressure on the group will remain indispensable, helping ensure the Gaitanistas feel a need to compromise, even as security forces do more to guarantee that their operations protect civilians caught in the crossfire.

A. *Options for Dialogue to Reduce Violence*

The case for working toward talks with the Gaitanistas rests primarily on need: without a deal, or series of deals, it is hard to see how Bogotá can durably address the humanitarian needs of communities under the group's control or defuse the challenge the group poses to "total peace" efforts. This logic is in turn based on the assessment that, should the parties come to the table, these talks could in fact produce substantive change. Because the group has a disciplined chain of command, and because it uses intimidation in a modulated and intentional fashion, any agreement reached with its leadership to loosen the Gaitanistas' coercive grip – something for which people from the most-affected regions are clamouring – has a chance of sticking.

Still, reaching such agreements will be a challenge. In seeking to coax concessions from the group, the choreography around discussions will be important. Bogotá should adopt a sequential approach to talks, with advances grounded in measurable reductions in violence. The first step should be to establish a reliable channel of communication. The Gaitanistas could be asked to designate "spokespersons" to represent them in exploratory talks. These would be trusted individuals close to the group and with the confidence of the Gaitanista leadership but who do not have outstanding

arrest warrants.[225] The government should use these conversations to better understand the Gaitanistas' expectations and priorities for dialogue. While the group's overriding desire is likely a ceasefire that would shield their operations from military pressure, these preliminary "talks about talks" would be a chance for the government to explain that it would only be able to offer steps in this direction toward the end of a trust-building process.

Secondly, if there seems to be room for progress after gauging the group's expectations, the government might ask the Gaitanistas to give evidence of their good faith through gestures that provide a measurable improvement in security conditions for civilians living in areas they control. The Gaitanistas could be asked to take steps such as: ensuring unimpeded access for independent humanitarian bodies and state institutions to these places; refraining from intimidating or coercing social leaders; revealing the locations of mass graves and disappeared persons; and ending forced disappearances. It would be up to the government to judge whether the group has satisfied the agreed-upon criteria, presumably based on its assessment of the improvements in human security in the areas in question. In exchange for measures along these lines, the government could make reciprocal gestures, for example by toning down its public rhetoric against the group – a repeated demand from the Gaitanistas to build trust.[226]

Thirdly, and only once these first steps prove fruitful, the two sides should begin working toward regional pilot projects for comprehensive violence reduction.[227] Beginning in the areas where the group's authority is uncontested by other illegal groups and it therefore feels most secure, the Gaitanistas should wind down their means of coercive social control. The group should, for example: eliminate curfews and movement restrictions, cease punishing residents with violence and pull back combatants from populated areas.[228] In exchange, the government could pause aerial bombardments in these areas, while reserving a further ratcheting-back of military operations for the fourth stage.

Fourthly, and only so long as both sides consistently display good faith, the authorities and the Gaitanistas could agree to tailored, regionally based ceasefires, which is likely what the Gaitanistas see as the greatest prize short of a demobilisation package in any such talks. The terms for these arrangements should be distinct from what the government has agreed to with the ELN and EMC. In those cases, ceasefires offer relief from offensive military operations nationwide, while allowing security forces the leeway to continue arresting group members on the basis of their involvement

[225] Spokespersons are in a different legal category from facilitators. The former speak directly on behalf of the organisation, while the latter act as intermediaries. The previous attempt at negotiations with the Gaitanistas involved spokespersons.

[226] This commitment would be similar to those that the government has explicitly made to the ELN to use "respectful language" when speaking about the group. See "Resolución 194 de 2023", Colombian Presidency, 8 July 2023.

[227] There are precedents for a regional focus. Talks between the government and paramilitaries under former President Uribe took place largely with different armed blocs in specific regions, while the Santos administration also proposed to demobilise Gaitanista forces in increments from one part of Colombia to the next.

[228] Crisis Group Report, *Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap*, op. cit.

in criminal activity.[229] These ceasefires have reduced clashes between insurgent groups and the military, but it is less clear whether their civilian protection measures – mainly, a mutual commitment to respect international humanitarian law – have reduced violence against the civilian population.[230]

By contrast, in the case of the Gaitanistas, the central purpose of these ceasefires should be to guarantee civilian protection. The terms will need to spell out exactly what protection means, rather than trusting to general international norms, which allow too much room for differing interpretations. Actions that should be expressly prohibited include the recruitment of minors, extortion, kidnapping, threats or violence against social leaders, the use of explosives or landmines and forced confinement of the civilian population.[231] By way of inducement, the government could go beyond the curtailment of aerial strikes by limiting certain other types of offensive operations, such as attacks on camps or groups of fighters. It should, however, retain the freedom to target illicit economic rackets with robust criminal investigations and carry out arrests on judicial charges (see more below in Section V.C) and to protect civilians, including through regular patrols and physical presence in Gaitanista areas.

As part of any eventual regional ceasefires, the government could also try to pacify the front lines between the Gaitanistas and other armed groups with which Bogotá is negotiating. Some of the worst violence affecting civilians today derives from territorial disputes between the Gaitanistas and ELN in Chocó, sur de Bolívar and Antioquia, as well as the group's clashes with the EMC in Antioquia. Working in parallel through its separate dialogues with armed groups, the government could seek to produce truces, ensure humanitarian access and freeze battle lines.[232] Even more ambitiously, the government could work to establish demilitarised zones between armed groups in conflict with each other.[233]

[229] Offensive military operations, including aerial bombardments, attacks on patrols or groups of fighters and the destruction of facilities, are suspended during the current ceasefires. Operations against illegal economies continue but generally make up a small part of military activity in the conflict. Captures on judicial charges depend on painstaking investigative work and collaboration with prosecutors to obtain arrest warrants – or on good fortune, namely catching an individual criminal in flagrante. Moreover, military officers say many locally based troops are not fully aware of the details of the two active ceasefires and the exceptions they contain. Hence, fearing they could face judicial or disciplinary repercussions for acting against the armed group, the military has tended toward caution when undertaking operations. Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, January-February 2024.

[230] Instances of combat between the military and these groups fell by 39 per cent between January and October 2023. See "Informe evaluación del impacto del cese al fuego", Unidad de Investigación y Acusación de la Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, November 2023.

[231] See Crisis Group Report, Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace", op. cit.

[232] Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: Is "Total Peace" Back on Track?", op. cit.

[233] International humanitarian law's Article 3 governing non-international internal conflict encourages partial agreements to work toward the full protection of civilians, including such incomplete truces and agreements for access.

B. *Toward an End to Conflict: Talks Leading to Demobilisation*

Even as it works toward talks seeking violence reduction and regional ceasefires, the government should continue to push Congress to approve legislation that would create a legal route for large-scale criminal disarmament and demobilisation. Initial conversations with the Gaitanistas to explore their interests in peace will need to shape these efforts by drawing out what the group would require to consider demobilising. At least some of the group's rank and file may seek to return to their families, while senior commanders facing serious judicial repercussions could well be interested in laying down arms in exchange for reduced sentences. The government would need to find a combination of incentives – including some form of judicial leniency – attractive enough to peel off a significant number of fighters while still securing truthful testimony, reparations from the group and court sentences acceptable to victims, the public and Congress.

In order to see enabling legislation enacted, the government will almost certainly have to rally a broad coalition in Congress, which must include conservative forces closely tied to landowning elites who have in the past given support (tacit or otherwise) to paramilitary forces, some of whose members later helped found the Gaitanistas.[234]

The government will need to hold firm to certain minimum standards for demobilisation, learning from the Colombian state's extensive experience in this domain. On one hand, a pillar of any demobilisation framework will almost surely be a requirement that Gaitanista members provide truthful accounts of their crimes to qualify for reduced sentences, as was the case for paramilitary members who laid down arms under the 2005 Justice and Peace Law.[235] On the other hand, that process failed to fully dismantle these forces' criminal infrastructure, in terms of their connections to formal businesses, trafficking routes and money laundering facilities, enabling successor groups to resume illegal operations.

While a full dismantling of Gaitanista-affiliated criminal networks is surely a remote prospect, it is a useful aspiration, and the government should be thinking about how it can make as much progress as possible in this direction. As in the past, the demobilisation process would encourage Gaitanista commanders to share information about their commercial partners as part of a deal over reduced jail sentences; in the same vein, members would share information about routes, buyers and international connections, as well as politicians, businesspeople, officials and members of the security forces involved in the trade. Of course, there would be security issues: members who disclose this information may need government assistance keeping a low profile as well as physical protection given the very real risk of retaliation by these same third-party interests.

The government would also need authority to deal with the businesses and individuals who operate and are ultimately the beneficiaries of drug trafficking. The above-referenced draft proposal to amend the 2005 Justice and Peace Law would offer businesspeople linked to crime their own chance at reduced jail time in return

[234] As the government has done in the case of negotiations with the ELN and EMC, the Petro administration would likely need to seek buy-in from former President Uribe.
[235] "Ley 975 de 2005", Colombian Congress, 25 July 2005.

for information.[236] Should these private-sector accomplices resist, the state should seek to gather the evidence needed to prosecute them for their role in facilitating illegal markets and violence. Confiscated criminal wealth could be put toward victims' reparations and community development to help towns and villages that have suffered from the armed conflict.

Aligning these demands with Gaitanista expectations will not be easy. Although the group's leaders put a major emphasis on assuring the security of demobilised fighters, their full list of demands is far longer. In contrast to 2017, during a previous attempt at dialogue, today the group scoffs at being treated as a criminal outfit, pointing to its professed political goals, and seeks negotiations around political and social issues, well beyond what current legislation allows for.[237] The group is adamant that "there will be no 'submission'" to the regular judicial system.[238] Instead, the Gaitanistas say they seek "transitional justice", defined roughly as a broad amnesty for fighters who have not committed gross human rights abuses, combined with reduced and alternative sentences for commanders that would keep them out of prison.[239]

The Gaitanistas' maximalist view of what talks might yield goes further, envisaging the organisation maintaining its structure and illicit business activities. A. person close to the group explained, "The government has to understand that these economies are not going to go away, but what we need is a mutation to make them less violent".[240] According to the group, some of its operations – though not drug trafficking – could be brought into the light and rendered legal. For example, mines controlled or regulated by the Gaitanistas could be restructured as community-owned, registered cooperatives. The Petro administration's early outreach to the Gaitanistas nodded in this direction, though there are clearly limits to how far it could or would be willing to go.[241]

Even if there is progress in framing rules for Gaitanista demobilisation, Bogotá would also need to remain clear-eyed about what a negotiation could not achieve. A large-scale demobilisation may be able to include numerous Gaitanistas, but fighters, businesspersons and/or state officials who do not wish to forsake illicit livelihoods might simply continue their activities, join other criminal outfits or start their own. The possibility of recidivism, moreover, is high. Any demobilisation would need to be accompanied by prosecution of those returning to arms, as well as law enforcement efforts to continue combating illegal activity and military operations in response to any armed threats.

[236] "Ampliar Justicia y paz 10 Años", op. cit.
[237] Crisis Group interviews, current and former Gaitanista members, April, July and August 2023.
[238] Crisis Group interview, person close to the Gaitanistas, Bogotá, March 2023.
[239] The transitional justice court created under the 2016 peace agreement, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, provides for "alternative sentences" that would restrict the liberty of convicted persons for five to eight years but not include prison. The Jurisdiction has yet to lay down a sentence, so the exact types of sanctions are not yet clear. See "What is the Special Jurisdiction for Peace?", press release, Special Jurisdiction for Peace, 2020.
[240] Crisis Group interview, person close to the Gaitanistas, Bogotá, March 2023.
[241] Crisis Group interviews, senior government official, Bogotá, September 2022; government official, Bogotá, November 2023. The government could draw on international best practice for formalising small-scale businesses, particularly in mining. See for example "Formalizing Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining for Inclusive Sustainable Development", Intergovernmental Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development, 29 November 2018.

C. *Refining the Military Approach*

While dialogue can make important headway toward reducing violence, security operations remain essential to safeguard communities, push the Gaitanistas toward compromise, address illegal economic activity and fight the corruption that fosters it.

Protecting vulnerable populations in areas that are today firmly under Gaitanista influence should be the priority. In this respect, the police and military can establish operational goals that place the emphasis squarely on public safety and well-being. Communities in Gaitanista-controlled areas are often isolated from state institutions and find themselves drawn into some form of dependence on the armed group. Security forces should seek to end this isolation; their goals should include creating space for civilian institutions to establish a foothold in Gaitanista areas and ensuring that the population has a source of protection from the state, along the lines described below, that "takes away from the Gaitanistas' social base", in the words of one official.[242]

Creating the conditions for greater civilian protection, however, requires a shift in the types of operations that the military undertakes. Since the government rescinded its ceasefire with the group in March 2023, military activity against the Gaitanistas has risen sharply, and is likely to continue expanding under a new Joint Military Command that is buttressed by 30,000 active troops, aerial capabilities, and international intelligence and planning support.[243] The command appears intent on striking the group not just along its fronts of expansion but inside its heartlands in the coming months.[244] There is no doubt these operations could play an important role in nudging the Gaitanistas toward talks with the government. But care should be taken in conducting short-lived operations such as targeted captures, which can leave civilians vulnerable to accusations of having passed critical information to the military. The group may violently retaliate against those it suspects after the soldiers depart. As Crisis Group has suggested in the past, such surgical offensive operations should be used sparingly.[245]

Instead, the military and police should look to carry out longer-term deployments in critical areas. In addition to shielding the population from harm, such deployments would also allow state services to be provided more safely. The defence ministry, for its part, could open more channels for endangered communities to report crime anonymously, thereby helping manage the risk of armed group retaliation.[246] Over the medium and long term, Colombia should consider expanding rural policing to ensure a stable law enforcement presence in these areas. Planning such long-term security

[242] Crisis Group interview, senior official, Colombian Presidency, March 2024.
[243] In October 2023, the Defence Ministry created a new Joint Command with the primary goal of targeting the Gaitanistas and other smaller groups in the same regions. See "Activación del Comando Conjunto No. 5 con 30.000 efectivos de las Fuerzas Militares", Defence Ministry, 22 October 2023. Prior to setting up the new command, the military and police captured at least sixteen commanders and Gaitanista officials between July and September 2023. Crisis Group interviews, international security officials, Bogotá, September-October 2023. The Gaitanistas report feeling stronger military pressure. Crisis Group correspondence, individual close to the Gaitanistas, August-September 2023.
[244] Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, January 2024.
[245] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°95, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, 27 September 2022.
[246] Ibid.

arrangements will become even more crucial if the government advances in talks toward demobilisation with the Gaitanistas and other armed organisations.

Alongside civilian protection, security forces should continue to enhance their operations targeting the group's core illicit interests. Military leadership has given clear indications that tackling criminal economies will remain a government priority.[247] The Petro administration is wisely focusing on countering the higher levels of the illicit value chain where the greatest profits are made, including by capturing leaders (particularly those involved in finances), seizing weapons, drugs and cash, and dismantling cocaine processing labs.[248] Colombia can strengthen these operations by drawing on past lessons of what has worked against the Gaitanistas. For example, the Agamenón campaign, which was critical in persuading the Gaitanistas to explore demobilisation during the Santos administration, relied exclusively on internationally vetted units and partner country forces.[249]

Whether or not that model can be entirely transposed into the present, heightened attention to the risks posed by infiltration and corruption within the police and military is essential. Such efforts would enhance prospects for mission success while also serving to create durable bonds of trust between the state and communities, who need to know that security forces are squarely on their side.[250] In the same vein, deploying more resources to counter-intelligence work and to prosecute corrupt individuals in the security sector would be a useful investment.[251]

D. *Individual Demobilisation*

Military pressure may inspire some individual Gaitanista fighters to want to lay down arms. Even as Congress drafts legislation to administer a large-scale process, the government can still improve and expand existing individual demobilisation programs of the sort that have seen thousands of former fighters quit a coterie of groups and lay down their arms.[252] Combatants in this process give themselves up to authorities in a personal capacity, in effect by deserting the group rather than as part of an agreement with its leaders. Until a legal framework for large-scale criminal disarmament is in place, these individual programs could be tweaked to make them more suitable for those who are ready to avail themselves.[253]

Demobilisation packages need to be diverse, with a wide range of routes to civilian life. Individuals who served in political or administrative roles in the Gaitanistas should be eligible for amnesty if they have not committed gross human rights abuses,

[247] In late January, the commander of the armed forces urged a renewed push to rein in illicit economic activity. "Hemos observado fallas y errores: carta del comandante de FF.MM. a generales y almirantes", W Radio, 29 January 2024.
[248] Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, Bogotá and Medellín, March and August 2023.
[249] Crisis Group interview, retired senior police officer, Bogotá, October 2023.
[250] When residents see members of the security forces apparently collaborating with the Gaitanistas, it "leaves a bad taste". Crisis Group interview, local leader, Marialabaja, March 2022.
[251] Military officers say they are working to this end, with a focus on vetting troops (for example through recurrent polygraphs) as well as attempts to build morale in the ranks so as to prevent corruption. Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, January 2024.
[252] "Decreto 601 de 2020", Colombian Presidency, 28 April 2020.
[253] "Desmovilizaciones colectivas e individuales", Datos Abiertos Colombia, 18 July 2023.

with demobilisation packages including legal employment assistance or education opportunities tailored to their experience.[254] Whether they are former administrators or fighters, not all members of the group based in rural areas will want to stay in the countryside or become farmers, a typical career path offered via reincorporation programs.[255] Colombia's agency in charge of reintegrating former fighters needs the resources and flexibility to design a wider array of programs. It could also draw on the experience of demobilised members from the paramilitaries to build a program that is oriented to Gaitanista fighters.

Physical security, meanwhile, remains an enormous challenge for former fighters from all groups.[256] The perpetrators of ex-combatant deaths are often, though not always, the same armed and criminal outfits that they left or a rival group in the same region. The government should seek commitments regarding the safety of ex-combatants in all present and future talks with armed groups while also setting aside resources for those instances where government assistance in providing protection is needed.

E. *State Presence*

The Gaitanistas emerged after the paramilitary demobilisation and have expanded through armed coercion. But much of the reason for their persistence is that they supply services binding them to communities – from what is in effect policing to justice to economic and social regulation – that the state does not offer in parts of Colombia.

As the government proceeds with various peace processes, it should seize the opportunities to expand the presence of state institutions, particularly in rural areas. A vital first step would be to reinvigorate implementation of the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC. The agreement includes pledges to extend public services, reform the rural economy, and shrink the gap between urban and rural Colombia. While the Petro administration has said it fully supports this process, a multi-partisan panel found that the pace appears to have slowed in its first year, largely due to management challenges.[257] Fulfilling the provisions of the previous peace agreement is vital to address inequality and give credibility to new accords.

[254] The idea of broad amnesties including civilian roles involved in war could draw on international humanitarian law practices. See "Customary IHL: Rules 156-159", International Committee of the Red Cross.

[255] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°92, *A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC*, 30 November 2021.

[256] "Boletín operativo – UEI Segundo Trimestre 2023", Attorney General's Office, 30 May 2023.

[257] "Informe: ¿Hacia dónde va la implementación del Acuerdo de Paz?", Del Capitolio al Territorio, 27 September 2023.

VI. Conclusion

From their dominant perch in Colombia's criminal underworld, the Gaitanistas represent a sophisticated threat. They are organised, heavily armed and entrenched, drawing upon the expertise of myriad ex-combatants. They exert asphyxiating control over community life in places where they are strong, extracting rents from legal and illegal businesses. President Petro has invested much of his political capital in trying to rekindle negotiations with all of Colombia's armed groups. Deemed a criminal group rather than a political insurgency, the Gaitanistas have remained outside talks. But if "total peace" is to succeed, they will need to be brought in.

Nothing about this process will be easy, but moving in steps may help make the challenge less forbidding. That means initial moves to build confidence, leading to broader efforts to negotiate regional ceasefires that eventually allow for broaching the thorny issue of demobilisation. The government cannot seek to take the last step – dismantling the Gaitanistas and their networks – without new legislation. If and when the law permits, the state may still struggle to offer incentives that would lure members permanently away from criminal rackets while delivering justice to victims and not offending public sentiment. Coordinating these dialogue initiatives with continuing military, police and judicial pressure will likely be fundamental to ensuring that the group feels it is worth its while to talk, and essential to ensuring stronger protection of civilians who live under the group's violent yoke.

Despite the magnitude of the challenges ahead, the arguments for persisting in efforts to demobilise the group remain strong. Colombia's armed organisations have proven remarkably resilient in the face of military attempts to destroy them. Rural communities in areas with a strong Gaitanista presence support talks overwhelmingly. Moreover, the outcome of peace negotiations with other armed outfits rests on the perception that, should they abandon the fight, the Gaitanistas would not be the prime beneficiaries. The fate of "total peace" may well now hinge on the prospect of a breakthrough with the one major group it has so far overlooked.

Bogotá/New York/Washington/Brussels, 19 March 2024

Appendix A: Map of Colombia

Appendix B: Legal Framework for Negotiation with Criminal Groups

Decisions about whether armed organisations are party to one of Colombia's internal armed conflicts are legally distinct from questions about whether a group is inherently political or criminal, and therefore can benefit from some of the peace-making incentives that Colombia has used to quell past insurgencies. This distinction is important when considering engagement with the Gaitanistas. The group has been classified as a party to internal conflict since 2017, yet no government has recognised them as working toward political objectives.[258] The government can thus fight the group within the legal framework reserved for waging war, but short of new legislation, it has a more limited set of tools for making peace than it would if the group were a political rather than a criminal organisation.

By way of background, Article 22 of Colombia's constitution establishes peace as a fundamental right and therefore allows and obliges the executive to work toward that end. Law 418 of 1997, known colloquially as the Law of Public Order, was the first to include negotiations among the instruments available to seek peace with political insurgents under the 1991 charter. Crimes such as sedition were deemed eligible for amnesty under some conditions in the greater search for peace. A 2012 amendment to the constitution (Transitory Articles 66 and 67) later codified a distinction between "political crimes" (those committed in the course of attempted rebellion against the institutional order) and common crimes (committed solely for profit). The constitution restricts transitional justice, defined as being outside the ordinary justice system, to groups that have committed political (versus common) crimes, independent of whether an armed organisation is party to internal conflict.

During the paramilitary demobilisation promoted by former President Álvaro Uribe, Congress passed Law 975 in 2005 (the Justice and Peace Law). This law said the government could enter negotiations with any group that acts outside the law – defined as either a guerrilla group such as the FARC or a paramilitary group such as United Self-Defence Forces (AUC), or any part thereof – to work toward demobilisation through reduced prison sentences, in return for turning in their weapons and confessing to past crimes. The Constitutional Court, however, affirmed a challenge to the law arguing that the paramilitaries' actions do not qualify as sedition and thus must be treated as common crimes. The court also declared sections of the law unconstitutional because it gave members of the paramilitary group benefits that should not be available to perpetrators of serious violations of human rights and breaches of international humanitarian law. The rationale behind the decision was that, while guerrilla groups were fighting the state, the paramilitaries were cooperating with it, and thus their violence could not be considered political rebellion.

[258] For details of the legislation and judicial rulings mentioned in this appendix, see the following: "Constitución Política de Colombia: Actualizada con los Actos Legislativos a 2015", Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2015; "Ley 418 de 1997", Congress of Colombia, 26 December 1997; "Ley 975 de 2005", Congress of Colombia, 25 July 2005;"Sentencia C-370/06", Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2006; "Directiva permanente 015 de 2016", Ministry of Defence of Colombia, 22 April 2016;"Ley 1908 de 2018", Congress of Colombia, 9 July 2018;"Ley 2272 de 2022", Congress of Colombia, 4 November 2022; and "Comunicado 50", Constitutional Court of Colombia, 29 November 2023.

Although as a practical matter, Colombia had been engaged for years in internal conflict, its domestic authorities did not expressly recognise this until 2016, when the Santos administration's Security Council did so for the first time. This leant greater legal coherence to decisions relating to the use of force. Under international law, it followed that if the government determined an organised armed group to be party to an internal conflict, then the use of force against that group would be governed by international humanitarian law, which creates greater latitude for certain kinds of targeting than human rights law. (In practice, the military had applied international humanitarian law to conflict actors long before the official declaration of an internal armed conflict.) Until 2022, the country's National Security Council made periodic decisions regarding which armed organisations were party to a recognised conflict, and therefore considered eligible for the application of international humanitarian law.

Within this framework, in 2017 the National Security Council deemed the Gaitanistas an organised armed group that was party to a conflict. The Defence Ministry also published Permanent Directive 015 to clarify that this designation alone did not endow political status. To facilitate talks toward demobilisation with the Gaitanistas, the Santos administration passed Law 1908 of 2018, laying out the terms for dialogue on specific topics with limited timelines.

The Petro administration changed the framework further. It supported the Total Peace Law (2272 of 2022), which gave the authority of determining which organised armed groups were parties to armed conflict to a "high-level body" that included the High Commissioner for Peace, Ministry of Defence and National Direction for Intelligence. That law was also the first to establish the legal category of "organised armed structures of high-impact crime" – a category that includes groups that the state argues are not political but are a threat to peace and therefore warrant dialogue. Some of these organisations, such as the Gaitanistas, are classified as parties to conflict, while the majority are not.

In a decision on 29 November 2023, the Constitutional Court sided with the executive in affirming that the Total Peace Law afforded it the legal right to approach and engage in conversations with high-impact criminal groups because the lines between criminal and political groups have become blurred. But it asserted that the High Commissioner for Peace cannot be the sole decision-maker in this respect, mandating that Congress define the terms for any eventual discussion of the demobilisation of high-impact criminal organisations.

Crucially, because the Gaitanistas are classified as a high-impact crime group, the court has recognised that the presidency retains the power to open a channel of communication and discuss confidence-building measures with such groups. But the administration will need to abide by the court's decision to pass new legislation (or amend existing laws) governing the terms of any eventual demobilisation.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Austria (Austrian Development Agency), Canada (Global Affairs Canada), Complex Risk Analytics Fund (CRAF'd), Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, DG INTPA), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), France (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency), Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs), Japan (Japan International Cooperation Agency and Japan External Trade Organization), Principality of Liechtenstein (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Luxembourg (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), The Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), New Zealand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Norway (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Qatar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Slovenia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), United Kingdom (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office) and the World Bank.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations and organisations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Global Challenges Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Pivotal Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Stand Together Trust, Stiftung Mercator, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

March 2024

Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2021

Special Reports and Briefings

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023.

The Exile Effect: Venezuela's Overseas Opposition and Social Media, Latin America Report N°86, 24 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia, Latin America Report N°87, 26 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Risks of a Rigged Election in Nicaragua, Latin America Report N°88, 20 May 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land, Latin America Report N°89, 2 June 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests, Latin America Report N°90, 2 July 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°44, 30 September 2021 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia, Latin America Report N°91, 4 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll, Latin America Briefing N°45, 23 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC, Latin America Report N°92, 30 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia, Latin America Report N°95, 27 September 2022 (also available in Spanish).

A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever, Latin America Report N°96, 5 October 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°97, 1 December 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, 14 December 2022 (also available in Spanish and French).

Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace", Latin America Report N°98, 24 February 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime, Latin America Report N°99, 23 June 2023 (also available in Spanish).

New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras' Security Dilemmas, Latin America Report N°100, 10 July 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Navigating Venezuela's Political Deadlock: The Road to Elections, Latin America Report N°101, 16 August 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap, Latin America Report N°102, 3 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Partners in Crime: The Rise of Women in Mexico's Illegal Groups, Latin America Report N°103, 28 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti's Gangs: Can a Foreign Mission Break Their Stranglehold?, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°49, 5 January 2024 (also available in French and Spanish).

Fear, Lies and Lucre: How Criminal Groups Weaponise Social Media in Mexico, Latin America Briefing N°50, 31 January 2024 (also available in Spanish).

Unrest on Repeat: Plotting a Route to Stability in Peru, Latin America Report N°104, 8 February 2024 (also available in Spanish).

Appendix E: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees

GLOBAL CORPORATE COUNCIL

A distinguished circle of Crisis Group supporters drawn from senior executives and private sector firms.

Global Leaders

Aris Mining

Shearman & Sterling LLP

White & Case LLP

Global Partners

(2) Anonymous

APCO Worldwide Inc.

BP

Chevron

Eni

Equinor

GardaWorld

Sempra Energy

TotalEnergies

CRISIS GROUP EMERITI

Mort Abramowitz – Founder and Trustee Emeritus

George Mitchell – Chairman Emeritus

Gareth Evans – President Emeritus

Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown – Founder and Chairman Emeritus

Thomas R. Pickering – Chairman Emeritus