From "Total Peace" to Iron Fist: Colombia's Risky Turn to Hard Security

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What's new? After outgoing President Gustavo Petro's flagship "total peace" policy failed to curtail the growth of violent criminal groups, Colombia's new leader Abelardo de la Espriella has vowed to launch a military-led crackdown and scrap the country's long-standing efforts to negotiate an end to its conflicts.

Why does it matter? Colombia urgently needs a more effective military strategy but embracing hardline methods alone could backfire as well as encourage abuses of residents by state forces. Talks with armed and criminal groups have been slow-moving and often frustrating, but they are the country's most promising route to dismantling these outfits.

What should be done? De la Espriella should learn from Colombia's vast experience of handling conflict, strengthening the selective use of armed force and intelligence gathering while avoiding heavy-handed military offensives. Rather than simply discard negotiations, Bogotá should be ready to use talks to reduce violence and demobilise armed groups.

I. Overview

Colombia's new president, Abelardo de la Espriella, rose to power after promising a hardline solution to the country's problems with public safety. Pledging an uncompromising riposte to violent groups and vowing to end negotiations with them, De la Espriella won election in what amounted to a comprehensive rejection of outgoing President Gustavo Petro's flagship policy. Dubbed "total peace", this approach embraced dialogue with armed and criminal groups in a bid to achieve lasting security nationwide. Organised crime expanded as these talks proceeded, however, with violence rising. Many Colombians thus welcome his promises of stronger law enforcement, but De la Espriella should take care not to repeat the errors of the past, when military deployments spurred cycles of bloodshed and undermined public trust

in state forces. Rejecting peace talks outright would be unwise, considering that they have on occasion reduced violence and unravelled insurgencies and criminal networks. Rather than consign "total peace" to oblivion, his government should learn from its successes as well as its failures.

Despite high expectations at the start of Petro's term, "total peace" proved a chimera. Petro's government was engaged in nine formal dialogues with roughly fourteen armed and criminal groups, but it proved unable to reverse a decade-long pattern of growth among such outfits: by the end of Petro's tenure, there were more irregular combatants in Colombia than at any moment since 2016, when the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), then the largest guerrilla, agreed to lay down its arms. Today's armed conflicts expose people across Colombia to a variety of harms, including lethal violence, extortion, oppressive curfews, forced displacement and child recruitment.

De la Espriella has laid out his promised response in stark terms. He is demanding a string of high-level captures, the restart of coca crop eradication, an enhanced wave of aerial bombardment, deeper cooperation with the U.S., including more extraditions, and the construction of huge new jails. During his campaign, he said these policies would break the stranglehold of criminal groups on places they control, get rid of rampant extortion and smash money laundering networks. Yet the severity of the crackdown he envisages brings with it inescapable risks. A heavy-handed approach could cause violence to spike, rather than reducing it. Decapitating armed and criminal groups tends to fragment them, leading to intense turf battles among those left behind. Bombing would very likely kill civilians, and mass arrests would ensnare innocent bystanders.

A better strategy is possible, combining some of the goals De la Espriella has identified with an approach to talks that draws upon the experience of "total peace". The state does virtually nothing in parts of rural Colombia, besides send in the army to combat armed and criminal groups, and it is long past time for it to do more. If it takes this advice from no one else, the new government should heed the army officers who say their job is far harder because the military is often the only state authority in the countryside. Residents need access to basic services, from decent roads to health care and justice. Not only are these the constitutional rights of all Colombians; they are also the sine qua non for an effective campaign to lessen the armed groups' sway.

Ramping up military deployments will also require careful stewardship of limited resources and improved use of intelligence. As a partner of the new government, the U.S. should help make sure that the armed forces have the equipment they need, for example helping repair the dilapidated helicopter fleet. Bogotá, for its part, should ensure that soldiers are adequately paid and have access to education and other benefits, so as to boost morale and ward off the temptation of

corruption. Critical to the success of a reinforced military-led campaign will be avoiding the mistakes of previous offensives, above all the human rights violations and attacks on civilians that came with them. Without the support of rural communities, the military will be unable to beat its non-state adversaries.

If the military does manage to deal armed and criminal groups a serious blow, then the new government should consider negotiations with these outfits, rather than excluding the possibility on principle. Colombia has never defeated an armed group by force alone. In some areas, insurgencies and criminal groups have penetrated social and economic life to such an extent that no reasonable level of pressure will be sufficient to uproot them. If they are weakened, however, these groups may listen to proposals for an exit.

It is then that the successes and failures of "total peace" talks could provide valuable indications as to how best to wind down conflict. A robust legal framework to guide negotiations, along with a prudent use of dialogue to reduce violence and protect civilians, are chief among the lessons to be derived from Petro's flawed endeavours. The new government would be well advised to study these options now, so that it can be prepared to act on them if the price of continual fighting in Colombia proves too high even for De la Espriella's iron will.

II. A Gathering Storm

Colombia's new administration inherits the most serious humanitarian crisis in over a decade, with forced displacement, child recruitment and the use of improvised explosives all rising sharply.[1] Armed and criminal groups have proliferated in number and grown in size: between 2022 and 2025, total estimated membership nearly doubled, from 15,132 to around 27,000.[2] According to police estimates, around half of new recruits are children and young people.[3] These groups have spread out across parts of rural Colombia and grown entrenched in communities, where they impose stringent controls. At the same time, the schisms within armed and criminal groups have led to more and fiercer clashes among the splinters (see Appendix B).

[1] "Report on the Humanitarian Situation in Colombia in 2025", International Committee of the Red Cross, May 2026.
[2] The figure includes both combatants and members of support networks. The number of armed members alone rose from 7,620 in 2022 to 13,794 in 2025. "27.000 combatientes y récord en disputas: el deterioro de la seguridad marca el inicio de 2026", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, January 2026; "Paz Total, disputas e inseguridad en el primer año del gobierno Petro", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, August 2023.
[3] For a detailed analysis of child recruitment, see Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°55, Kids on the Front Lines: Stopping Child Recruitment in Colombia, 12 February 2026.

These trends date back ten years, to the moment just after violence hit an historical low in Colombia following the peace agreement with the former FARC. A rural insurgency, the FARC had held vast expanses of land. When it laid down its arms, state institutions struggled to occupy all this territory and eradicate the illicit businesses the rebels had left behind.[4] Other armed and criminal groups, including the largest remaining guerrilla group the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC, also known as the Gulf Clan) and FARC dissidents, hastened to seize control of strategic corridors, drug trafficking routes and other assets.[5] In 2018, right-wing Iván Duque, the first president to take office after the peace accord was signed, turned to the military to stem these groups' spread. Despite record levels of illicit crop eradication, organised crime captures and military operations during his term, armed and criminal groups continued to expand.[6] By 2022, his last year in office, massacres and political killings were up dramatically from the immediate post-accord period.[7]

Petro's "total peace" policy was partly a reaction to his predecessor's legacy. In his inauguration speech, Petro vowed to end the country's conflicts "once and for all".[8] "Total peace" was a departure from past negotiation efforts in both substance and style. Recognising that other criminal groups benefited from the opportunities thrown up by the FARC's demobilisation, the Petro administration sought talks with all the remaining groups at the same time to stop spoilers from emerging.[9] The government opened two different dialogue channels: negotiations with organised armed groups that made political demands of the state, exercised territorial control and could sustain military operations; and talks with "high-impact criminal structures" focused on dismantling them through the ordinary justice system and addressing social concerns in areas under their influence.[10]

[4] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°98, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, 24 February 2023.
[5] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°63, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, 19 October 2017.
[6] "Plomo es lo que hay: violencia y seguridad en tiempos de Duque", Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (Pares), April 2022.
[7] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°95, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, 27 September 2022.
[8] Gustavo Petro, "Palabras del Presidente de la República, Gustavo Petro Urrego, al tomar posesión como Jefe de Estado", speech at inauguration, Bogotá, 7 August 2022.
[9] "We need an agile state, but what we have is a slow one". Crisis Group interview, senior official, Bogotá, 2023.
[10] This two-track approach was enabled by Law 2272 of 2022, signed by President Petro on 4 November 2022. The Petro government formally opened nine dialogues under its "total peace" policy: four political negotiation (with the ELN, Comuneros del Sur, the Estado Mayor Central or EMC and Segunda Marquetalia) and five sets of talks with high-impact criminal groups (the EGC, the Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada or ACSN, and urban criminal groups in Medellín, Buena-

The immediate goal of dialogue was not demobilising the armed outfits but rather reducing violence, with the government asking groups to show good-will by ending homicides, disappearances and torture.[11] In Buenaventura, a bustling Pacific port that had been Colombia's most violent city, one of the first "total peace" experiments produced a truce between rival gangs that halted murders completely for 90 days.[12] This result was a stark demonstration that these groups were behind the rash of killings and that negotiations with them could mitigate it. By the end of Petro's term, eight sets of talks remained active.[13] Some proceeded along bifurcated tracks after the original armed groups split; negotiations with the ELN were the only ones to break down entirely.

Even so, armed groups and criminal rackets continued to expand during the pivot to dialogue, partly due to government missteps. Early miscalculations included a lack of planning for how peace talks were to be developed as well as a slew of undeserved concessions from the state, which played into illegal organisations' hands.[14] The government's decision to declare unilateral ceasefires with five groups and desist from military offensives against them, beginning on 1 January 2023, was particularly damaging.[15] The armed and criminal groups involved made no reciprocal commitment. Instead, they sought to capitalise on talks by clamping down on local resistance, controlling

ventura and Quibdó). Following a split, the talks with Segunda Marquetalia continued with the Coordinadora Nacional Ejército Bolivariano. Similarly, after factions broke away from the EMC, negotiations went on with the Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frentes. These were treated as continuations of the original dialogues rather than as new, separate ones.

[11] "'Total peace' seeks to wind down all forms of violence, since all have an impact [on civilians]". Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bogotá, November 2023. "'Parar de atentar y matar, es un requisito para dialogar': comisionado de Paz a grupos ilegales", *El Colombiano*, 31 October 2022.

[12] At the Petro administration's urging, the Catholic Church helped broker a truce between two rival gangs whose turf wars had divided the city. In this and other urban peace processes, the state was an observer, rather than a counterpart, in talks. The administration sought to offer incentives such as social programs to improve the stability of truces between criminal organisations. "Shottas y Espartanos logran extender la tregua en Buenaventura por unos días más", Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (Pares), 4 August 2024.

[13] Eight sets of talks remained open when Petro handed over power in August: three political negotiations with the Comuneros del Sur, the Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frentes and the Coordinadora Nacional Ejército Bolivariano; and five sets of talks with high-impact criminal groups: the EGC, the ACSN and urban groups in Medellín, Buenaventura and Quibdó.

[14] As arguably the country's first left-wing government, the Petro administration initiated some dialogues assuming that its counterparts – particularly those armed groups tracing their origins to communist insurgencies – would act in good faith. This unwarranted assumption helps explain why the government failed to plan adequately for talks. Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: From 'Total Peace' to Local Peace", 30 January 2025.

[15] "'Es un alivio necesario': así reciben en las regiones el cese al fuego bilateral", *El Espectador*, 2 January 2023.

numerous aspects of community life, and claiming for themselves a political identity and social mission. A recent study observed that these ceasefire arrangements sometimes reduced violence against civilians, but not always, while aggravating other types of coercion.[16] Residents of Buenaventura, for example, summed up their experience as "less homicides, more extortion and recruitment".[17]

The question of how to involve the armed forces in "total peace" illustrated the government's trial-and-error approach. Petro had entered office sceptical of the military's prominent role in handling the conflict, and his initial treatment of the armed forces generated frustration among the rank and file.[18] Coordination with his peace initiatives ranged from weak to non-existent. In the first months of his term, military officers said they learned of policy decisions like ceasefires in the media.[19] Having failed to receive clear instructions from the presidency, for example, defence ministry officials told Crisis Group they drafted early operational plans based on Petro's public statements and Twitter feed.[20] Many military officers particularly distrusted the above-mentioned ceasefires, which they viewed as disregarding the state's obligation to guarantee public safety. "The military forces were worn down", a former defence official recounted. "They [would say], 'We had the groups right in front of us, but we couldn't do anything'".[21]

Midway through Petro's term, with the poor results of its security policies becoming increasingly visible, the government shifted tack. After Petro appointed a former air force general as defence minister, the military mobilised in earnest.[22] In 2025, it carried out almost twice the number of combat operations that had occurred under Duque.[23]

[16] Daniel Mejía, Andrés Rivera and Juan F. Vargas, "Paz Total? How Ceasefires Backfire", Documentos CEDE-CESED, June 2026.
[17] Crisis Group interviews, Buenaventura, 2023.
[18] "Los cuatro grandes desplantes del presidente Gustavo Petro a los militares", *El Espectador*, 29 May 2024.
[19] Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, late 2022 and early 2023.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Crisis Group telephone interview, former government official, April 2026.
[22] "Colombia's new defense minister vows to reclaim territory lost to rebel groups", AP, 11 March 2025.
[23] During the Duque administration, the number of clashes between state forces and armed groups peaked at 212 in 2021. Under Petro, this figure reached 392 in 2025, an increase of approximately 85 per cent from four years prior. The number of combat operations under Petro rose considerably from 2024, when 447 were recorded, to 563 in 2025. "Mapa interactivo sobre eventos del conflicto, afectación a civiles y acciones de entidades del Estado", Mecanismo unificado de monitoreo de riesgos del sistema integral para la paz, Unidad de Investigación y Acusación, Special Jurisdiction for Peace. "Fuerzas Militares resaltan aumento del 52 % en combates contra grupos armados ilegales y del 35 % en incautación de cocaína", press release, Colombian Presidency, 2 January 2025. "2025: Fuerzas Militares neutralizaron a 13.971 integrantes de estructuras criminales", press release, Colombian presidency, 28 December 2025.

The new approach, however, did not arrest the decline in public safety. Efforts to curb Colombia's violence with the armed forces come with two main complications. On one hand, the country's conflicts have become something quite different from the war that the military was trained to fight. Counter-insurgency approaches pushed the former FARC to a point of exhaustion, inducing them to negotiate.[24] Yet today's threats resemble organised crime more than political rebellion. Despite the displays of ideological piety offered by some groups, all the remaining armed organisations are motivated by an interest in illicit revenue, whether from drug trafficking, mining or environmental predation, which gives them the financial means to defend their turf.

On the other hand, Colombia's military, arguably one of the best equipped and most professional in Latin America, is struggling to keep troops under arms. While the official head count is not public, the military has registered a major decline in overall active membership since 2010, likely amounting to several tens of thousands of soldiers.[25] The drop in new recruits and rise in departures grew particularly acute under the Duque government. The erosion of fighting strength continued at pace under Petro, who also removed 40 generals from the military and police shortly after taking office for alleged corruption.[26] This shift forced less experienced officers to move into sensitive positions. De la Espriella's campaign suggested that he may reintegrate retired military officers into the force to help plug the gap. But should he do so, he would risk "sending the message that the current crop is not good enough", thus undermining morale, as a veteran officer put it.[27]

The military is also facing an acute crisis in its air force, intelligence equipment and other technological capabilities. Well over half the country's helicopters are grounded and in need of repair; of the 53 U.S.-made Black Hawks, considered Colombia's most versatile and reliable fleet, only thirteen are in working order.[28] Even though aircraft and helicopters are vital in Colombia's treacherous topography, just 4 per cent of defence spending is devoted to investing in air and other technological assets.[29] Secure communications equipment has also often gone unfixed, compelling troops to rely on more porous platforms like

[24] Jorge Battaglino and Germán Lodola, "Negotiations and Possible Spoilers in the Colombian Peace Process", NOREF, November 2013.
[25] Colombia's mandatory military service has grown far more flexible in recent years, allowing exemptions for education, health problems or alternative forms of service. "Informe revela grave debilitamiento de las Fuerzas Militares; tienen 65 mil hombres menos para enfrentar a grupos criminales", La FM, 18 December 2025.
[26] "Exclusivo: así está la planta de generales, coroneles y demás oficiales del Ejército tras las constantes 'barridas' de uniformados; ¿cuántos hay?", *El Tiempo*, 9 July 2026.
[27] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2026.
[28] "El Ejército de Colombia solo opera 13 de sus 53 helicópteros Black Hawk", Infodefensa, 17 June 2026.
[29] "A Renewed Security and Cooperation Agenda for Colombia's Next Government", Atlantic Council, 12 June 2026.

WhatsApp. For its plans to succeed, the new government will need to find more money for the armed forces, a requirement that will likely be at odds with De la Espriella's desire to make swingeing spending cuts.[30] While Washington may be able to help, U.S. officials caution that there is little appetite for a major reinvestment on the scale of Plan Colombia, which began in 1999 and ended up pouring roughly $10 billion into the country's forces over the next decade.[31]

There are also new threats for which the current military is almost totally unequipped. Alongside their longstanding use of landmines and improvised explosive devices, armed and criminal groups are increasingly deploying drones, to harass state forces, assail rival outfits and survey perimeters to avoid getting caught off guard by military raids. More than 400 attacks with explosive-equipped drones were recorded between 2024 and 2026, up from one in 2023.[32] Colombia has moved at a snail's pace to counter this danger, with plans for a national anti-drone shield mired in delays and technical revisions. Meanwhile, the system purchased by the army to protect the troubled region of Catatumbo, on the Venezuelan border, from explosive drones used by armed groups has yet to become operational.[33]

III. The Rise of De la Espriella

De la Espriella arrives in office as much of Latin America swings to the right, under the watchful eye of a U.S. administration that has gone to almost unprecedented lengths to demonise leftist movements as a "revolution against Western civilization".[34] Taking inspiration from the successes in protecting public safety scored so far by El Salvador's Nayib Bukele and the radical austerity measures of Argentina's Javier Milei, De la Espriella has appealed to those Colombians who believe in military solutions to conflict, resent the concessions made in the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC and other negotiations since then, and prefer to keep the state (apart from the security apparatus) lean so as to pay lower taxes.[35]

[30] De la Espriella's platform calls for cutting the size of the state by 40 per cent. "El rescate fiscal que propone Abelardo de La Espriella sin empobrecer a los colombianos", Defensores de la Patria, 7 February 2026.
[31] Crisis Group interviews, 2026.
[32] "En 22 meses de registraron 418 ataques con drones cargados con explosivos", *El Tiempo*, 25 January 2025. "Ahora las disidencias atacan a militares y policías con drones suicidas", *El Colombiano*, 8 April 2024.
[33] "El escudo antidrones: una 'papa caliente' que heredará el nuevo Gobierno", *El Colombiano*, 30 June 2026. "Lo que dice el Ejército sobre el sistema de drones para el Catatumbo que no está en funcionamiento", *El Tiempo*, 12 July 2026.
[34] "Cuba: The Capital of 21st Century Communism", U.S. Department of State, 20 July 2026.
[35] Media reports have suggested that De la Espriella developed links with figures from the criminal underworld during his career as a lawyer, notably through repre-

At the same time, De la Espriella has cast himself as an outsider, distancing himself even from former President Álvaro Uribe, who was until recently the undisputed leader of the Colombian right.[36] He has said his administration will foster a "miracle motherland" (*la patria milagro*), generating expectations that he will bring change fast. The new president has also struck a defiant note regarding Colombia's constitutional checks and balances, promising to use executive decrees to bypass a fragmented Congress, where he will have to rely on a loose coalition of right-leaning parties for support.[37]

When it comes to security, De la Espriella's campaign identified ten priorities, most of them unobjectionable: they included improving urban safety; recovering a state monopoly on arms and the provision of justice; reforming the prison system; and strengthening intelligence agencies.[38] Certain aspects of De la Espriella's platform are praiseworthy for addressing weaknesses in the current set-up. These include pledges to coordinate more with local authorities, who are the first responders in the most conflict-affected areas, as well as a plan to limit one-off military operations in favour of selecting priority areas for sustained attention from the armed forces, police and state ministries.[39] The new president identifies the trafficking of contraband goods as a major source of money laundering that needs to be tackled.

De la Espriella's plan to crack down on illegal mining, one of the most important assets in organised crime's portfolio, likewise seems sensible, with ideas such as investing in a traceability scheme to limit illegal gold from entering the supply chain.[40] He nods to giving formal jobs to artisanal miners, who are often stigmatised and at times embroiled in illegal extraction out of necessity or under coercion.[41]

senting Alex Saab, a Colombian businessman indicted in the U.S. on charges of laundering millions of dollars tied to Venezuelan government contracts. Reports also suggest that U.S. federal prosecutors scrutinised De la Espriella during their investigation into Saab's money laundering in relation to the movement of Saab-linked funds, yet the precise focus of that investigation remains unclear. "From defending Colombian drug traffickers to waging war on them", *The New York Times*, 25 July 2026.

[36] "La campaña de Abelardo de la Espriella: el penalista ultraconservador que rompió a la derecha", *El País*, 31 May 2026.

[37] "Abelardo pierde su primer pulso con un Congreso que le muestra los dientes", *La Silla Vacía*, 21 April 2026.

[38] "El Milagro de la Seguridad", Defensores de la Patria, 5 February 2026.

[39] "I will create joint operational commands in key regions and concentrate law enforcement, intelligence, the judicial police, the judiciary and institutional presence there. No more symbolic presence. No more operations that come and go. No more short-lived recovery followed by abandonment". Ibid.

[40] "Las estrategias de Iván Cepeda y Abelardo de la Espriella para combatir la minería ilegal", *El Espectador*, 20 June 2026.

[41] "De la Espriella promete 'firmeza absoluta' contra la minería legal y formalización para quienes quieran 'producir dentro de la ley'", *El Heraldo*, 7 June 2026.

Elsewhere, however, the new president has promised voters a blanket *mano dura* (iron fist) approach to crime, echoing the martial tone he adopted throughout much of his campaign. As regards the military, De la Espriella has promised to ratchet up the frequency of aerial bombardment of armed groups, pursue high-value targets and restart forced coca eradication.[42] The administration's defence sector appointments thus far include a large number of retired officers from a current within the military that opposed the 2016 peace agreement. This cohort would like to see a stronger mandate – and more legal tolerance – for the use of force.[43]

"Total peace", in the new president's view, equates to "total impunity".[44] In contrast to Petro's willingness to negotiate with armed and criminal groups, De la Espriella has promised to "defeat criminal power in order to liberate communities".[45] He has asserted that the state needs to wrest control of territory away from illegal groups, while tackling illicit businesses, particularly coca cultivation and illegal gold mining, head on.[46] The prison system, parts of which languish under criminal dominion, is another area that the new president has highlighted for root-and-branch reform.[47] De la Espriella has suggested building mega-prisons like Bukele's in El Salvador, where inmates will be held in spartan conditions.[48] In line with many of his supporters' concerns, De la Espriella has also been outspoken about rooting extortion and drug dealing out of cities.[49]

On several fronts, De la Espriella's proposals have raised acute concern as to their impact on Colombia's peace and security. The dangers that could be posed by over-reliance on military force are paramount (see Section IV below). But the new president's vitriol regarding the political opposition is also troubling. He has described the left as "scum" and promised to "disembowel" its activists.[50] Though De la Espriella

[42] "Propuestas de seguridad de Abelardo de la Espriella e Iván Cepeda en Colombia", Segurilatam, 2 June 2026; "De la Espriella: diez cabecillas fuera de combate en 90 días para que regrese el milagro de la seguridad", Defensores de la Patria, 5 February 2026.
[43] Crisis Group interviews, active-duty and retired military officers, June-July 2026.
[44] "'La paz total fue impunidad total, el país necesita conocer cuáles fueron los verdaderos compromisos': Abelardo De La Espriella", *Revista Semana*, 5 July 2026.
[45] "El Milagro de la Seguridad", op. cit.
[46] Ibid.
[47] "Testimonios de corrupción en las cárceles de Colombia", *El Tiempo*, 13 February 2019; "Imputan a cinco guardianes del Inpec por extorsión desde cárcel de máxima seguridad", *Vanguardia*, 19 July 2026.
[48] "Colombia prisons turn overcrowding into security's darkest national mirror", *Latin American Post*, 21 May 2026; "Abelardo de la Espriella, right-wing millionaire backed by Trump, declared winner of Colombia's presidential runoff election", CBS News, 24 June 2026.
[49] "El Milagro de la Seguridad", op. cit.
[50] "Abelardo de la Espriella explicó a que se refería con su afirmación de que va a 'destripar' a la izquierda radical: 'Yo sé usar el lenguaje'", *Infobae*, 11 February 2026.

has also pledged to govern for all Colombians, and Vice President José Manuel Restrepo has explicitly vowed to respect press freedom, among other rights, the virulence of the new president's rhetoric carries enormous weight in a country plagued by decades of political violence.[51] The opposition understandably fears that efforts to debate, resist or push back against the government's policies will be met with force.[52]

Beyond the effects on the health of democracy, such belligerence in high office could set back years of efforts to restore trust between deprived communities and the state. In conflict-affected areas, many rural voters already feel profoundly estranged from the state. These residents recall previous counter-insurgent offensives with dread, particularly those involving right-wing paramilitary groups from the 1980s to the early 2000s that threatened, killed and displaced leftist union, political and community leaders, at times with the complicity or even assistance of state officials.[53] In the eyes of his critics, De la Espriella's proposal to create a Defence Block for Urban Security is reminiscent of these campaigns.[54] These fears have been reinforced by new Defence Minister Jorge Mora's suggestion that such a block could include a role for retired military personnel.[55]

[51] "José Manuel Restrepo se refirió a controversias de Abelardo de la Espriella con periodistas: 'Compromiso de respeto por la prensa y con la mujer'", *El Tiempo*, 13 May 2026.

[52] "El regreso del Esmad confirma el plan de mano dura de De la Espriella frente a la protesta social", *El País*, 9 July 2026.

[53] Colombia's paramilitaries were right-wing armed groups that emerged ostensibly to protect landowners, businesses and rural communities from leftist guerrillas, but over time became powerful forces in the country's conflict and criminal economy. Often operating with the tolerance, cooperation or direct support of members of the armed forces, local politicians and economic elites, they fought guerrilla organisations while using massacres, forced displacement, assassinations and intimidation to establish territorial and political control. Paramilitary groups also financed themselves through drug trafficking, extortion and land seizures. Most eventually united under the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, which formally demobilised between 2003 and 2006. Many of their armed, economic and political networks stayed intact, however. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°105, *The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, 19 March 2024.

[54] "La propuesta de De la Espriella de crear bloques de seguridad urbana se estrella con el fantasma del paramilitarismo", *El País*, 7 July 2026.

[55] "Bloque de Defensa de Abelardo gusta a los alcaldes y asusta a la oposición", *La Silla Vacía*, 13 July 2026. Critics liken the new proposal to the Convivir (Coexist) project launched in 1994 to link neighbourhood watch groups directly with state forces. Intended to strengthen the counter-insurgency fight, the project paved the way for violent paramilitary organisations to emerge, despite a court ruling three years later that Convivir groups could not bear arms. As part of his proposal, Mora has said retired officers would be unarmed and would not have operational roles.

Mass arrests of suspected criminals, which De la Espriella has proposed along the lines of those carried out by Bukele in El Salvador, would also likely spark a backlash and could prove counterproductive.[56] Given the state of Colombian prisons, with inmates in certain jails extracting extortion payments from the families of prisoners without criminal connections in exchange for safety and a place to sleep, more captures are not a short-term solution.[57] A growing body of research from Latin America demonstrates that an emphasis on rehabilitation, rather than punitive conditions, offers a more promising route for inmates to return to society once they serve their sentences.[58]

The incoming government's stance toward Washington has also stirred misgivings among critics. A U.S. citizen and registered member of the Republican Party who professes conservative values, De la Espriella has promised to align closely with President Donald Trump's embrace of lethal force to fight crime. De la Espriella said Colombia will join the Shield of the Americas group of like-minded countries to work with Washington on combating drug trafficking and illegal migration.[59] While the ways in which this coalition will operate are still vague, the participating governments have endorsed a militarised response to narcotics trafficking, without much consideration of the limited results this approach has brought in the decades since the "war on drugs" started. Nor have they contemplated incentives to lessen drug consumption or enact harm reduction strategies.[60] The new president has stressed that he is ready to extradite any apprehended suspect requested by U.S. courts, a practice that on past occasions has clashed with efforts to bring truth and justice to victims of the conflict.[61]

IV. The Dangers of *Mano Dura*

The incoming president's plans identify many of the security challenges that Colombia faces. A heavy-handed approach alone, however, is unlikely to be successful in addressing them, due mainly to changes on the battlefield. Control of communities is now the asset that armed and

[56] "Colombian far-right candidate is latest Trumpian figure in Latin America to ride anti-incumbent wave", *The Guardian*, 6 June 2026.
[57] Crisis Group interviews, former prisoners and justice system officials, Bogotá and Lima, 2023 and 2025.
[58] See, for example, Marcelo Bergman and Gustavo Fondevila, *Prisons and Crime in Latin America* (Cambridge, 2021).
[59] De la Espriella announced in Medellín on 21 July that this city will host Colombia's main office for the Shield of the Americas. "Abelardo De La Espriella anunció que Medellín será la sede principal del Escudo de las Américas para luchar contra el narcotráfico en compañía de EE. UU.", NTN24, 21 July 2026.
[60] "The Shield of the Americas does not help Latin America", Latinoamérica 21, 25 March 2026.
[61] "El Milagro de la Seguridad", op. cit. "Extraditing the Truth: Transformations in the Public, Legal and Political Debate in Colombia", Elementa, 23 July 2024.

criminal groups most covet. When violent outfits succeed in coopting or coercing civilians into silence, they prosper. The state has proven unable to uproot these bands, largely because, thanks to the absence of formal institutions in remote areas, they are the only source of protection, livelihoods and justice available. Even if brutal and often arbitrary, these groups impart a semblance of order in the midst of conflict.[62] Moreover, unlike the former FARC, which regularly clashed with the military as it sought to topple Colombia's establishment, today's armed and criminal groups avoid confrontations with the state.[63] These groups instead direct their combat power at rival outfits.

With armed groups prizing their chokehold on local populations, the fallout from security operations can quickly undermine apparent successes. De la Espriella has said he wants the military to capture ten high-value targets in his first 90 days in office. But taking out criminal kingpins tends to heighten, rather than reduce, conflict. Once a commander is removed, armed and criminal groups frequently splinter or become embroiled in leadership contests. Competing factions may fight to consolidate their control of the criminal apparatus, fuelling turf wars.[64] A senior military officer along the Pacific Coast recounted the case of a dissident FARC leader whose death in combat with soldiers led to more than a dozen other deaths, as ambitious lieutenants elbowing to take over killed civilians alleged to have passed information to the armed forces.[65]

In any event, captures are not a particularly effective way to throttle the criminal economy. Army officers told Crisis Group that, unlike the former FARC, whose top leaders were consulted on both major and minor decisions, today's groups are largely free of oversight in their day-to-day business, with each part of the criminal network performing a discrete role in a long supply chain, whether for cocaine or illegally mined gold.[66] Removing armed leaders often has little effect on these groups' ability to function as cogs in a machine. Even up to the highest level, most roles are easily filled with new recruits. A senior military commander working along the Venezuela border put it bluntly: "Captures are not useful for us, because if today I capture twenty

[62] For more on criminal governance, see, eg, Andres Uribe, Benjamin Lessing, Noah Schouela and Elayne Stecher, "Criminal Governance in Latin America: Prevalence and Correlates", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2026).
[63] Crisis Group Report, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, op. cit.
[64] For more on the kingpin strategy's fallout in Mexico and Ecuador, see Crisis Group Visual Explainer, "Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's 'War on Drugs'", 2 September 2022; Crisis Group Video, "Living in Fear: How Gang Violence Is Reshaping Ecuador", 26 January 2026; and Crisis Group Latin America Report N°112, *Sinaloa's War of the Splinters: Fighting Crime in Mexico under U.S. Threat*, 7 July 2026.
[65] Crisis Group interview, military commander, 2022.
[66] Crisis Group interviews, 2023-2024.

members, tomorrow they have 30 more".[67] Indeed, recruitment into these organisations has ballooned in recent years, in part to make up for fighters who have been arrested or killed in combat, as well as to fuel the perpetual costly battles with rival organisations. As Crisis Group has documented, roughly half the new foot soldiers are believed to be minors.[68]

Aerial bombardment or other types of indiscriminate attack can also provide armed groups with exactly the sort of evidence they need to persuade communities that they are more trustworthy than the state. Experience shows that these strikes almost inevitably kill civilians.[69] Widespread recruitment of minors makes this tactic even more fraught. Mid- and senior-level commanders – who are often the "high-value" targets in question – have begun to use children as bodyguards in an attempt to deter aerial attack by the state.[70] According to the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences, at least 65 children were killed in military operations under the Petro administration.[71] The armed group leaders themselves, of course, are to blame for using children for protection, but the government will need to navigate these treacherous waters carefully.

Forces seeking to consolidate state control should also be wary of reinforcing armed groups' assertions that the state has no interest in the public's wellbeing. These risks are aggravated by the fact that armed

[67] Crisis Group interview, April 2025.
[68] Crisis Group Briefing, *Kids on the Front Lines: Stopping Child Recruitment in Colombia*, op. cit.
[69] Though the state does not keep statistics about collateral damage from bombing, media reports show that such cases are common. At least fifteen forcibly recruited minors died in the second half of 2025 after military bombardment of FARC dissident groups. The deadliest strike hit Guaviare on 10 November, killing nineteen people, including seven minors. More recently, on 11 May 2026, a man was killed and eight injured, including two children, when the army's Rapid Deployment Force blew up a house in rural El Tambo, Cauca, that the EMC was allegedly using to store and assemble explosives. The blast also damaged more than twenty nearby homes. On 1 July, the director of the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences stated that at least 65 minors had died since the resurgence of military bombardment in 2022. "Las duras críticas al gobierno de Petro por la muerte de al menos 15 menores en bombardeos de fuerzas militares en Colombia", BBC Mundo, 19 November 2025; "Tragedia en Cauca: estalló casa que terroristas usaban para guardar explosivos; hay un muerto y varios heridos", *El Colombiano*, 11 May 2026; "Al menos 65 menores muertos: el saldo que deja el regreso de los bombardeos en la estrategia militar de Petro", *Cambio*, 1 July 2026.
[70] Crisis Group Briefing, *Kids on the Front Lines: Stopping Child Recruitment in Colombia*, op. cit.
[71] The National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences reported that most of those killed were aged between fourteen and seventeen, with most deaths occurring in Arauca, Putumayo and Guaviare. The government has disputed the figure. "Durante el gobierno de Gustavo Petro fallecieron 65 menores en medio de bombardeos, aseguró Medicina Legal", *Infobae*, 1 July 2026. "Mindefensa cuestiona la cifra de 65 menores muertos en bombardeos durante el gobierno Petro", *El Espectador*, 3 July 2026.

and criminal groups rarely live in camps and only occasionally wear uniforms. Instead, they often reside in towns and villages, where they dress in plainclothes and are difficult to distinguish from innocent bystanders. More indiscriminate attacks such as bombardments run greater risks of hurting non-combatants – and thus pushing communities further into the hands of illegal organisations.

Perhaps the most visible demonstration of how armed and criminal groups have exploited civilians in recent years is the *asonadas*, in which masses of people either stand as human shields to stop the military from entering an area or surround soldiers as they seek to carry out an operation. Crisis Group first documented *asonadas* in 2020, amid a campaign of forced coca eradication during the Duque administration, with coca farmers blocking counter-narcotics police and military officers. Now, this use of civilians as human shields has become widespread: at least 92 incidents were recorded between 2022 and July 2026.[72]

While community representatives in these instances emphatically reject suggestions that they are acting under pressure from an armed group, in private conversations residents and military officers say whole rural neighbourhoods are often obliged to participate under threat of fines or expulsion.[73] These civilians are then caught between two lethal forces: armed and criminal groups, on one side, and soldiers on the other. Troops are correctly instructed not to fire upon civilians. If the military were to disperse *asonadas* with force, it would not only overstep legal bounds but also redouble popular resentment of the state and encourage residents to seek protection from the local armed outfit.

Despite the growing frequency of *asonadas*, the incoming government would be wrong to ignore the real dissatisfaction that underlies much popular mobilisation. In the countryside, even though residents are often threatened into protesting by armed groups, many have their own grievances with a neglectful state. In urban areas, protests are often organic expressions of social discontent. Even in cases when criminal interests may have taken advantage of such upheaval for their own ends, the state is required by law to treat unarmed demonstrators as civilians.

Though De la Espriella has promised to respect the right to peaceful protest, it is likely that his tolerance of unrest will be limited. In urban areas, crackdowns on dissent could prove dangerous, as Colombia

[72] "These new structures try not to confront the military. Instead, they organise the population to oblige us to leave, to kick out the military. They put out rules, for example, that every family must send two people to protest or there is a penalty. There are orders; there is intimidation", Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, 2021. "El duro balance del gobierno de la 'paz total': 1.110 ataques a la Fuerza Pública, 92 asonadas y 272 militares muertos", *El Colombiano*, 24 July 2026.
[73] Crisis Group interviews, residents, local authorities and field-based military officers, Guaviare and Cauca, 2025.

learned during a months-long national strike in 2021. At the height of that movement, which initially sought to vent frustration with economic and social inequalities following the COVID-19 pandemic, civilian casualties at the hands of riot police fuelled public anger, prompting acts of vandalism and road blockades by demonstrators.[74] De la Espriella's opponent in the presidential runoff, left-wing Senator Iván Cepeda, has called for civil disobedience after the new administration takes office, while Petro has disputed the election results.[75] If the left organises mass protests of Bogotá's initiatives, the government will need to remain extraordinarily disciplined in its response, as repression would likely prolong and deepen social turmoil.

Excessive reliance on force, either in conflict-hit areas or in big-city protests, could also damage the armed forces as an institution. The military has spent years grappling with the abuses it carried out, above all when soldiers looked the other way or collaborated directly with paramilitary groups that were disproportionately responsible for massacres and other killings during the 1990s and 2000s.[76] It also stokes fears of a return to the conditions of the early 2000s, when high-level political pressure for results against the former FARC gave rise to a grisly nationwide racket, in which soldiers killed civilians and counted them as combat deaths – a practice known as "false positives".[77] Over 5,000 former members of state forces have turned themselves in to the transitional justice court in connection with these crimes, while 204 have been identified as bearing the greatest responsibility. Many of them have acknowledged their guilt and asked victims for forgiveness.[78] Nonetheless, these incidents eroded public confidence and the institution's reputation overall.[79]

The incoming administration should be wary of undermining years of reform, even if small numbers of military officers, many of them retired, are eager to adopt greater use of force and pare back legal consequences for troops involved in abuses. In the most conflict-affected areas, military brigades have had to invest strenuous effort in rebuilding trust with residents. The institution has set up legal safeguards to prevent abuses from happening again; these are reinforced by U.S. legislation

[74] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°90, *The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests*, 2 July 2021.
[75] "Iván Cepeda explicó qué quiso decir con 'desobediencia civil' tras sus polémicas declaraciones contra el Gobierno De La Espriella", *Infobae*, 1 July 2026; "Colombia's Petro repeats vote fraud claims days before handing over power", Al Jazeera, 4 August 2026.
[76] For more on the paramilitaries, see "Hallazgos y recomendaciones de la Comisión de la Verdad de Colombia", Final Report of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, 2022.
[77] "How the Perverse Incentives behind 'False Positives' Worked", Human Rights Watch, 12 November 2018.
[78] "Caso 03. Asesinatos y desapariciones forzadas presentados como bajas en combate por agentes del Estado", Special Jurisdiction for Peace, undated.
[79] "Invamer poll medición #159", Invamer, February 2024.

prohibiting assistance to military units with a poor human rights record.[80] Training and compliance with rules of engagement is deeply entrenched in military protocol, and many officers would likely push back against tactics that overstep these norms. "We need a stronger security approach, but it also worries us when we hear there is pressure for 'results'", a senior military officer told Crisis Group.[81]

Residents of conflict-affected areas want to trust the state for protection and as an alternative to the grip of armed and criminal groups. An overzealous use of force, however, spurs them to see the state as one more party in a complex conflict that does tremendous harm to ordinary people. Exacerbating that perception would set back a decade of relationship building with locals, which is fundamental to long-term success on the battlefield.

V. The End of Peace Negotiations

Colombia has almost a half-century of experience with efforts to end its internal armed conflicts through negotiations. Since the 1980s, the Colombian state has embarked on numerous rounds of peace talks, including with the urban insurgency M-19, of which Petro was previously a member.[82] In 2016, the most ambitious and far-reaching agreement, concluded under former President Juan Manuel Santos, demobilised nearly 14,000 members of the FARC.[83]

To shape these negotiations, Colombia has historically made a legal distinction between groups that have a political ideology and those that take up arms to enrich themselves.[84] Negotiated settlements have

[80] What are called the Leahy laws prohibit the U.S. government from providing military or police assistance to foreign units where there is credible information that they have committed gross human rights violations. "Global Human Rights: Security Forces Vetting ('Leahy Laws')", Congressional Research Service, June 2025. Scholars such as Winifred Tate, however, have highlighted these laws' limitations when violators are seen as bad apples, rather than the product of systematic institutional failings. Winifred Tate, *Drugs, Thugs and Diplomats: U.S. Policymaking in Colombia* (Stanford, Cal., 2015).

[81] Crisis Group interview, June 2026.

[82] These included M-19, the Revolutionary Workers Party, the Ejército Popular de Liberación and the Quintín Lame armed movement. In addition, over 25,000 former members of guerrilla groups and other armed and criminal organisations have voluntarily and individually surrendered to the justice system between 2001 and 2026. "ARN en cifras – marzo 2026", Agency for Reintegration and Normalisation, 31 March 2026. "Seguimiento a indicadores de seguridad y resultados operacionales", Human Rights and National Defence Observatory of the Ministry of Defense.

[83] "Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera", Government of Colombia and FARC, 24 November 2016. Santos is now a member of Crisis Group's Board of Trustees.

[84] See Appendix B in Crisis Group Report, *The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, op. cit.

been reserved for the former, with amnesties available only for politically motivated crimes, not for offences committed merely for reasons like profit. This distinction has been sacrosanct but never clear-cut. In the early 2000s, then President Uribe opened negotiations with the right-wing paramilitary United Self Defence Forces of Colombia, leading to the demobilisation of over 30,000 combatants. Uribe's government treated the paramilitaries as parties to the conflict, branded their behaviour as sedition and offered members reduced sentences in exchange for full confessions of their misdeeds.[85] The Constitutional Court, however, rejected classifying the groups as political and ruled that paramilitaries had to answer for their crimes through the ordinary justice system. It did so after most paramilitaries had already given up their weapons, leaving many in legal limbo for years to follow.[86]

Peace negotiations, whether the paramilitary demobilisation or the 2016 agreement with the former FARC, have led to sharp reductions in murder, kidnapping, forced displacement and child recruitment in conflict zones.[87] For that reason, almost every Colombian president over the past five decades has conducted or contemplated initiating dialogues with armed groups.[88] De la Espriella, however, appears set on breaking that mould. As noted above (see Section III), he campaigned to end "total peace", which he has dubbed "fake peace".[89]

[85] "Ley 975 de 2005", 25 July 2005. Critics of the paramilitary demobilisation argue that it resulted in lenient sentences, revealed only limited information about past crimes, provided victims with little reparation and failed to dismantle illicit businesses. "El cascarón y la semilla. Lecciones de la negociación con las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia", International Center for Transitional Justice, September 2023.

[86] "Sentencia C-370/06", Constitutional Court, 18 May 2006.

[87] The number of direct victims of conflict-related homicide fell from 12,665 in 2012, when negotiations with the FARC started, to 1,386 in 2017, after the group disarmed. "5 años del acuerdo de paz – Balance en cifras de la violencia en los territorios", Indepaz, 24 November 2021.

[88] In addition to Uribe and Santos: Alfonso López Michelsen (1974-1978) held indirect talks with the ELN; Julio César Turbay (1978-1982) explored dialogue with the M-19; Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) led the first formal peace initiative and negotiated with a coalition of leftist groups including M-19, the Popular Liberation Army and the FARC, which led to the creation of the political party Patriotic Union. Virgilio Barco (1986-1990) brokered the final peace deal with M-19, and started negotiations with the EPL, Quintín Lame and the Revolutionary Workers Party, which came to fruition during the mandate of César Gaviria (1990-1994), who also explored talks with the Guerrilla Coordinator Simón Bolivar, a rebel umbrella organisation. Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) also made repeated attempts to engage the ELN in talks, with little success. Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) hosted failed negotiations with the FARC. See the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, hosted by the University of Edinburgh.

[89] "Abelardo de la Espriella anuncia el desmonte de la paz total y la reactivación de órdenes de captura desde el 7 de agosto", *Infobae*, 5 July 2026.

His disdain for Petro's flagship program is not surprising. In a poll conducted in May, 62 per cent of Colombians said the policy had failed.[90] The new president has raised apprehensions about "total peace" that echo common public concerns: that the negotiations granted impunity to armed groups, allowing them to expand and strengthen; that the talks were not transparent; and that the agreements reached could not be enforced.[91] In a speech after his victory in June, De la Espriella announced that all talks under way would be terminated, telling armed and criminal groups they would have 30 days from his taking office to "organise their demobilisation".[92]

De la Espriella went on to announce sweeping changes to the institutions that have traditionally taken charge of Colombia's internal peace efforts. In particular, he plans to abolish the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace and replace it with a High Commissioner for Security. This new office will manage the follow-up to the 2016 peace agreement, in place of the Unit for the Implementation of the Final Peace Agreement, created in 2022. He has also said he will close the Office for National Reconciliation and the Presidential Office for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law.[93]

Since so many political parties, with the obvious exception of Petro's Historic Pact, are critical of "total peace", its fate is probably sealed. But De la Espriella's opposition to the 2016 peace deal with the FARC is likely to face taller political and legal hurdles. His objections to the accord range from questions about the referendum organised by the Santos administration in October 2016 to issues with the chapters on rural reform and illicit crop substitution in the final text. The new president has shown particular aversion to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace court, which he claims has not done enough to punish the former

[90] "Colombia Opina", Invamer, May 2026. Opponents of "total peace" range from groups on the right, such as the Democratic Centre and Radical Change parties, to politicians in the centre, including Sergio Fajardo and Claudia López. "Centro Democrático busca derogar la Paz Total en el Congreso", *El Universal*, 19 February 2025; "Congresistas de oposición le plantaron cara a Petro: así fue la réplica a la gestión de su gobierno", *Infobae*, 20 July 2026.

[91] "'La paz total fue impunidad total, el país necesita conocer cuáles fueron los verdaderos compromisos': Abelardo De La Espriella", *Semana*, 5 July 2026.

[92] At the time of writing, only the criminal groups Los Pepes from port city of Barranquilla, in the north of the country, and the EGC have reacted to this ultimatum. In a letter to the incoming president on 29 June, the EGC expressed willingness to surrender in exchange for leniency but argued it lacked the legal guarantees to move forward. "'Disponen de un mes para organizar su sometimiento': De la Espriella a grupos armados", *El Espectador*, 25 June 2026. "Clan del Golfo responde ultimátum de De la Espriella y pide garantías para su sometimiento", *El Espectador*, 30 June 2026. "De la Espriella anuncia que los líderes de Los Pepes aceptan desmovilizarse y someterse a la Justicia", *Infobae*, 6 July 2026.

[93] "Abelardo De La Espriella eliminará consejerías de Presidencia y cambiará la figura del comisionado de Paz: anunció ahorro de $10.000 millones anuales", *El Tiempo*, 13 July 2026.

FARC and, he says, was designed to prosecute the "historical enemies of the subversives".[94] While at first he vowed to eliminate the court altogether, his team has recently suggested they are only looking to cut its costs.[95]

Ten years after its signing, national and international advocates have rallied to defend the peace agreement and encouraged De la Espriella to honour it swiftly and in full. Despite its shortcomings, they argue, the peace agreement has succeeded in its main objective, which was to demobilise thousands of fighters. Data collected in 2025 showed that over 11,000 former combatants (85 per cent of those who signed up to the agreement) remain in civilian life.[96] Officials worry that relitigating the peace process will endanger them.[97] The UN has said 493 former FARC members have been killed since 2016, a trend that could worsen if the programs created to protect their reintegration are weakened or shut down.[98] While there are legitimate criticisms of the transitional justice system's lack of celerity in handling cases, experts have noted that dismantling institutions such as the Special Jurisdiction for Peace would create profound legal and practical problems.[99]

Even the Trump administration, which has been vocal in its scepticism of the 2016 agreement, has voiced its support for the peace process. In the July UN Security Council session held to renew the mandate of the UN Verification Mission that monitors the accord's progress, it urged "the Government of Colombia to prioritise comprehensive and expeditious implementation of its commitments".[100] This statement

[94] Abelardo de la Espriella, "Con cabeza fría", *El Heraldo*, 28 August 2016.
[95] "Abelardo de la Espriella reafirmó que buscará eliminar la JEP cuando sea presidente: 'Tiene un altísimo costo para Colombia'", *Infobae*, 9 June 2026.
[96] "Así avanza la reincorporación: 11.130 excombatientes siguen cumpliendo el Acuerdo de Paz", *El Espectador*, 25 July 2025.
[97] Alejandra Miller, head of the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation, has warned of "a dangerous narrative that equates the signatories of the peace agreement with the FARC dissidents. This puts them at tremendous risk, because it falsely suggests that they have continued to commit crimes". The FARC dissident groups emerged through several distinct paths: some commanders rejected the agreement from the beginning; others abandoned the peace process later; and still other small factions formed when mid-ranking leaders split off to recruit new fighters. Their rapid expansion should not be interpreted as a mass return of ex-guerrillas to arms; most new recruits have no previous connection to the organisation. "De la Espriella inicia los recortes con las entidades de la paz", *El País*, 14 July 2026. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°92, *A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC*, 30 November 2021; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Kids on the Front Lines: Stopping Child Recruitment in Colombia*, op. cit.
[98] "Colombia: Quarterly Meeting", Security Council Report, 17 July 2026.
[99] There are thousands of open cases, involving both ex-guerrillas and officers from state forces, which would be left in limbo if the transitional justice apparatus were to suddenly close. "De la Espriella amenaza la implementación de la paz con una asfixia prespuestal", *El País*, 19 July 2025.
[100] "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Colombia", U.S. Mission to the UN, 15 July 2026.

came as a surprise after the previous mandate renewal session in October 2025, when the U.S. broke with the extant consensus around the UN mission, stripping it of certain duties and expressing doubts about the merits of the peace deal.[101]

Furthermore, the government is bound by law to respect parts of the peace agreement after a 2017 ruling by the Constitutional Court and several legislative decisions, which have turned sections of the accord into "transitory articles" of the constitution.[102] As a result, the clauses about the transitional justice system, the security of former combatants and their right to political participation, the creation of voting districts for the areas most affected by the conflict, and rural reform initiatives, among others, enjoy constitutional protection. The implementation plan, which lays out policies and the ways to measure their effectiveness, established a fifteen-year term for fulfilling all the agreement's provisions.[103] The legislature also decided that the accord's implementation would be constitutionally protected through three presidential terms, the last of which starts in 2026 and ends in 2030.[104] Rather than attempting to undo it, De la Espriella would do well to accelerate the accord's implementation, which would help change the conditions that have allowed violent groups to flourish.

VI. Making Colombia Safer

De la Espriella won the presidential election with a trenchant message in support of more effective law enforcement that will use a stronger hand to halt the advance of armed and criminal groups. But his administration should take care not to repeat the serious mistakes and human rights violations made under past military offensives. Early abuses or missteps could erode public confidence in the armed forces, sapping the Colombian state's support when it will be dependent on popular backing to loosen the grip of armed outfits. The new administration

[101] For almost a decade, the Colombian peace process was a matter of rare consensus in the Security Council: member states unanimously supported creating the UN Verification Mission, and almost all have backed it unequivocally since, in keeping with the view that the 2016 deal was the best framework for lasting peace. After U.S.-Colombia relations soured during Trump's second term, Washington demanded the removal of a few verification tasks from the mission's mandate, including those pertaining to ethnic minorities, rural reform and the transitional justice system. "Colombia: Vote on Verification Mission Mandate Renewal*", Security Council Report, 30 October 2025.

[102] Colombian legislation allows for inclusion of "transitory articles", or sections that have a time limit, in the constitution. Crisis Group interviews, international law experts, July 2026. See also "Abelardo no puede acabar con el Acuerdo, pero tiene cómo debilitarlo", *La Silla Vacía*, 16 July 2026.

[103] "El camino a una medición de cumplimiento del plan marco de implementación del acuerdo de paz a 2031", National Planning Department, 19 October 2023.

[104] "Acto Legislativo 02 de 2017 Congreso de la República", Congress of the Republic, 11 May 2017.

should also make consistent efforts to bring state institutions and better services to remote areas. Leaving the military to be the sole face of the state in these parts of the country has helped violent groups entrench themselves.

While De la Espriella has been adamant in his opposition to negotiations with illegal groups, it would be rash for him to exclude the possibility of talks, especially if he gains the upper hand with the military's aid. The evidence from recent Colombian history is overwhelming: when conditions are right, dialogue with armed organisations has been essential for reducing violence and protecting civilians in the line of fire. It has also provided a path toward permanent demobilisation of combatants. Force alone will not be enough and could well backfire; a carefully gauged combination of force and dialogue, on the other hand, could allow De la Espriella to make a lasting contribution to public safety.

A. *Improving the Security Apparatus*

The new administration takes office facing daunting challenges and equipped with fewer military resources than the state had a decade ago. Dozens of locally rooted adversaries, each with its own incentives and revenue streams, dot the country. Military officers often express exasperation at being spread thin across these battlefronts without a clear guide as to how to focus their energies.[105] The mismatch between the spread of threats and the capabilities available means that the government will need to pick its battles.

The new government should begin by listening to a frequent plea from the armed forces to use soldiers for offensive operations and deploy other state institutions to establish lasting territorial control. Time and again, governments "send only the military, alone, to the hardest areas", a retired senior officer explained.[106] Military officers often remind policymakers that the army is trained to be a lethal force; civilian bodies are better suited to the hard work of providing basic services such as policing, justice and road maintenance.[107]

In response, Bogotá should consider expanding and strengthening rural policing. The military rarely has the luxury of remaining in any given area long enough to clear it of non-state forces and establish effective law enforcement – a job that in any case should fall to the

[105] Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, 2023-2026.
[106] Crisis Group interview, June 2026.
[107] "What we are still missing is the entrance of the state", a general stationed along the Pacific coast said. "For me, the primordial issue is education, and the second is infrastructure, then agricultural development. With these three things, we would solve a great deal. For now … the solution of the political authorities is always simply to send the military to deal with any and every problem". Crisis Group interview, 2022.

police. For now, the police are largely unable to operate safely in rural districts with a sizeable armed group presence; often, officers who are nominally on patrol stay close to or even inside their stations, limiting interaction with civilians. Police, however, are the critical missing link after a military response.[108] While building rural policing capacity will take time and resources, intermediate actions can also help.[109] Establishing a base of local trust will yield operational benefits, increasing crime reporting and ensuring that civilians see an interest in having troops nearby, rather than yielding to armed group pressure to oust them or reveal their whereabouts. These steps would also ease the way for other state institutions to earn credibility.

The U.S. should support Bogotá in improving its military capabilities, including by helping repair broken-down helicopters and aircraft. But given the personnel and equipment limitations plaguing the armed forces (see Section II), it is unlikely that Washington will be willing to make the investment necessary to address all of them. The government will thus need to maximise the efficiency of everything it does. Given the diversity of threats across the country, past administrations have given in to the political temptation to deploy the military when crises are visible in the media, essentially using soldiers to fight fires. Instead, the defence ministry should work to determine regional or armed group priorities, as De la Espriella has suggested it should, and then set the benchmarks the military needs to meet before other state institutions can step in.[110]

[108] Crisis Group has long advocated for establishing a strong rural police force in Colombia. See Crisis Group Report, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Latin America Report N°76, *Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast*, 8 August 2019; and Crisis Group Report, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, op. cit.

[109] Colombia's rural policing is led by the Directorate of Carabineros and Environmental Protection (Dirección de Carabineros y Protección Ambiental, DICAR). The system includes units such as the Carabineros, who conduct preventive, community-oriented and patrol work in rural areas, parks, reserves, productive zones, border areas and other designated territories, as well as the Mobile Carabineer Squadrons (Escuadrones Móviles de Carabineros). The number of DICAR's personnel has fallen from 2,991 in 2013 to 2,172 in 2024, a decline of 27.38 per cent, reducing its capacity to ensure rural security. "Dirección de Talento Humano en cifras: Un Análisis desde la Estadística Descriptiva", Colombian National Police, 2024.

[110] Missions from civilian government institutions in rural areas depend on a comprehensive review of security conditions, which is often difficult to pass. Visits may be cancelled at the last minute, or limited to daylight hours, meaning that officials are flying in and out on the same day. Residents say this setup inevitably inhibits the officials' inquiries, which require discussion of sensitive issues and follow-up to make sure the national government is meeting its commitments. Crisis Group has witnessed such visits on several occasions, including along the border with Venezuela, in Catatumbo and Arauca, and in several areas along the Pacific coast. For an emblematic case, see "Así fue la visita del gobierno a El Plateado, el antiguo fortín de las disidencias", *La Silla Vacía*, 15 October 2024.

As for the military offensives themselves, it is vital that commanders, with the support of civilian prosecutors, identify the nerve centres within armed and criminal groups whose removal will in fact leave them weaker. These are often not kingpins, but bankers and members in charge of tasks that, if unmet, will disrupt the production chain. Operations that target the lowest tiers of illicit businesses, on the other hand, are resource-intensive and often have little lasting effect. A notable example is the Duque administration's efforts to combat deforestation, in which state personnel often arrested hired hands but rarely sought to identify the financiers and biggest beneficiaries of razing Amazon land.[111]

Coca eradication is another highly costly operation with mediocre results. Counter-narcotics police may rip out plants by hand or fumigate them at close range. But as the crops are often in remote areas without roads but under the sway of armed or criminal groups, manual eradication requires air support to drop in the troops, resupply them and be ready for medical evacuations. At a cost of at least 6 million pesos per hectare (roughly $1,825), it is effective only for a matter of months, as farmers can replant and usually have a new harvest within 180 days.[112] Fumigation with drones comes at a fraction of this price, but it does not stop regeneration of a crop that cultivators have bred to grow quickly.[113] It also entails heavy use of chemical agents that are hazardous to human and environmental health. With these facts in mind, Bogotá should resist Washington's pressure to use military force against the lower rungs of organised crime, focusing instead on the figures who play a much more important role.

Intelligence should be at the core of differentiating which operations and targets are worth the cost – and which deplete resources to little effect. Entering office, De la Espriella will find intelligence agencies that are highly capable but divided into competing factions, some preoccupied with narrow tactical questions and others bedevilled by political meddling. Undue levels of bureaucracy, hierarchy and distrust often prevent the most valuable information from reaching those who need it in time.[114] Ideally, the new government will maintain the inde-

[111] Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°52, *Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian Amazon*, 18 October 2024.
[112] Tatiana Martínez and Edgar Castro, "Is Forced Eradication of Coca Crops Effective?", CESED, May 2019.
[113] As Crisis Group has suggested in the past, the state should foster legal livelihoods that are a real alternative to coca growing, including by building roads and other infrastructure to support campesino economies, and build trust with the growers to help them escape criminal control. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°87, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, 26 February 2021.
[114] Intelligence services within the military, police and directorate of national intelligence each essentially work for different bosses and therefore respond to different political cues. Under the past two administrations, this setup has complicated cooperation between them, particularly between military and civilian services, with the

pendence of Colombia's various civilian and military intelligence agencies but ensure that each has direct channels to decision-makers to convey insights quickly. Counter-intelligence to identify and bring to trial soldiers who have been corrupted by criminal interests is also fundamental. Compromised personnel may leak operational details or other critical information that renders force ineffective and may even cause direct harm to soldiers.

Across the board, the government will get the best results if it continues to invest in the security forces, both as individuals and as an institution. It should stand by Petro's decision to pay at least the minimum wage to professional soldiers, raising it for mid-level officers who did not benefit from that increase and now only barely out-earn their subordinates, and perhaps adding benefits such as access to education and better health care.[115] Moves in this direction would also make the military more attractive to new recruits, helping redress its shortfalls in personnel.

B. *Leading Successful Talks*

Today's generation of illegal groups, deeply embedded in economic and social life in their strongholds, will likely resist a purely military offensive. But previous negotiations have succeeded in demobilising individuals and groups when they have found themselves on the back foot. Talks remain an essential part of any strategy for extending state control over the expanse of Colombian territory. If the De la Espriella administration is able to weaken criminal and armed groups – and particularly if the state's forces have built trust in conflict-affected communities that will allow its civilian institutions to take deeper root – the government should draw on what past peace processes have done to wind down illegal groups.

The most recent experiment in dialogue, "total peace", illustrates how (and how not) to approach Colombia's current generation of armed and criminal threats. A lesson that will be especially important for the new administration has to do with the right moment to enter dialogue. The Petro government struggled to coordinate its defence approach with peace talks, meaning that pressure was not calibrated to move decision-makers within armed outfits toward the possibility of demobilisation. A notable exception was the talks with the EGC. Not unlike the peace process led by former President Santos with the FARC, military operations continued throughout talks and were key to pushing

latter perceived as highly politicised. Crisis Group interviews, acting and former senior intelligence officials, 2025-2026.

[115] Active-duty fighters were previously paid significantly less than the minimum wage, with the justification that the state was providing food and housing. The result, however, was to render the military highly unattractive as an occupation. "Salario de soldados en Colombia: este es el monto que recibirán en 2026", *El País*, 28 January 2026.

negotiations forward.[116] Continued military pressure is likely necessary early in talks to ensure leverage over illegal groups.

Similarly, the government should enter any talks with a clear assessment of its adversary, including its leadership structure, economic interests, geographic spread and relationship with local communities. Negotiators should keenly watch for indications that the demobilising group is arranging to "hand off" its economic portfolio to another party.[117]

Should it decide to recommence negotiations, Bogotá should consider passing laws governing how to demobilise organisations that the state considers criminal rather than political. At the moment, only insurgencies are eligible for limited amnesties.[118] The prospect of surrendering to the regular justice system, however, is almost certain to deter large, sophisticated organisations like the EGC from laying down their weapons.[119] Several bills drafted under Petro, none of which prospered in Congress, raised points that could be incorporated in future legislation on this front. For a start, these proposals demanded accountability in the form of confessions and reparations.[120] They also allowed victims of organised crime to register for the same benefits as those who suffered at the hands of rebels. Measures to seize criminal groups' assets to support victims are also important. To nudge groups to demobilise, the Petro-era bills also envisaged allowing members who have not committed crimes against humanity, and who fully admit responsibility, to retain a small percentage of their ill-gotten wealth.[121]

[116] Renata Segura and Delphine Mechoulan, "Made in Havana", International Peace Institute, February 2017; "'No hay limitación': FF. MM. sobre bombardeo al Clan del Golfo en medio de negociaciones con el Gobierno", *Revista Semana*, 31 May 2026.

[117] For example, as talks advanced between the Petro administration and an ELN dissident group calling itself Comuneros del Sur, in the south-western Pacific department of Nariño, residents raised concerns that the armed group was quietly empowering a separate faction, the Autodefensas Unidas de Nariño, in order to safeguard its economic interests and physical safety after laying down arms. A spokesperson for the group denied the accusations. See, for example, "El oscuro grupo de autodefensa que opaca los diálogos de paz en Nariño", *Vorágine*, 24 November 2024; "Royer Garzón, vocero de Comuneros del Sur, habla sobre la entrega de armas y el abandono de las economías ilícitas", *El Tiempo*, 12 June 2025.

[118] Such legislation could build on Law 2272 of 2022, which created separate tracks for dialogue with political and criminal groups. The distinction has in any event lost much of its meaning, as armed or criminal groups in Colombia today are more interested in controlling drug routes, illegal mining, extortion and other illicit economies than in taking power in Bogotá.

[119] Crisis Group Report, *The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, op. cit.

[120] Draft legislation seen by Crisis Group, 2024-2025.

[121] The legislation, known as a draft "law of surrender", proposed preferential judicial terms for criminal organisations that agreed to demobilise. The first proposal included a maximum prison sentence of eight years and would have allowed groups

If talks eventually begin, the government should insist that its counterparts at the negotiating table take measurable steps to reduce civilian suffering, including ending direct violence and displacement, stopping extortion, and walking back community controls such as curfews. Crimes such as child recruitment, assassinations, and sexual and gender-based violence should be red lines for the state, disqualifying any group that commits them from participation in talks. In monitoring these gestures of good and bad faith, authorities should beware of violence simply changing forms to become less visible, whether homicides giving way to disappearances or individuals rather than entire communities being forcibly displaced. These measures are critical for building confidence between the parties, but also for the credibility of talks with the public.[122]

VII. Conclusion

A successful politician is adept at taking the pulse of a country's discontents. Abelardo de la Espriella understood the groundswell of frustration with "total peace" in Colombia, and – propelled in part by the winds blowing rightward throughout Latin America – decided to bet that his fellow citizens were ready to jump on the most radical *mano dura* wagon on offer. Even so, a fragmented Congress could easily turn against him. Strong left-wing opposition forces, freshly ousted from power, stand ready to take to the streets in protest if this far-right ally of President Trump follows through on his more illiberal campaign promises. Combined with the contradictions and flaws in De la Espriella's own policies, these conditions could make for a turbulent time in office.

to retain up to 6 per cent of their illicit assets. The justice and interior ministers introduced the bill in the Senate in March 2023, but it was shelved after facing resistance in Congress. In July 2025, the justice minister introduced a new bill aimed at creating a legal framework for the dismantling of criminal organisations. Under the proposal, those who agreed to surrender to justice would have been allowed to retain up to 12 per cent of their illicitly acquired assets and receive prison sentences of between five and eight years, in exchange for handing over weapons, providing information and paying reparations to victims. This bill also failed to pass and was withdrawn in June 2026. "Gobierno radicó proyecto de ley de sometimiento a la justicia para bandas criminales", press release, Senate of the Republic of Colombia, 15 March 2023. "Minjusticia radicó proyecto de ley para avanzar hacia la Paz Total", press release, Ministry of Justice and Law, 20 July 2025. "Estos son los pros y contras de la Ley de sometimiento 2.0", Universidad de La Sabana, 24 July 2025.

[122] A counterexample from the ELN's dramatic 2025 military offensive which displaced over 100,000 people in Catatumbo, along the border with Venezuela, makes this point clear. The violence shattered public trust, as the state ombudsperson explained. "The largest displacement in Colombian history took place in the middle of a peace process with an armed actor engaged in negotiations". Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, February 2026.

Much as it attracted voters, the new president's campaign rhetoric has stirred fears of a return to a dark era in Colombian history, marked by political intolerance and the blunt use of military force. Instead of pursuing policies ill-suited to the country's current conflict, his government should move to remedy the absence of state institutions in much of the country's periphery, which is the condition allowing illegal groups' expansion. It should also study the distribution, motives and behaviour of armed and criminal groups, stand ready to deploy intelligence-led operations against them, and be open to negotiations with these groups if there is a will on both sides to reduce violence and demobilise their rank and file. The era of "total peace" may be over, but it is crucial that the new government does not dismiss the enterprise of dialogue entirely.

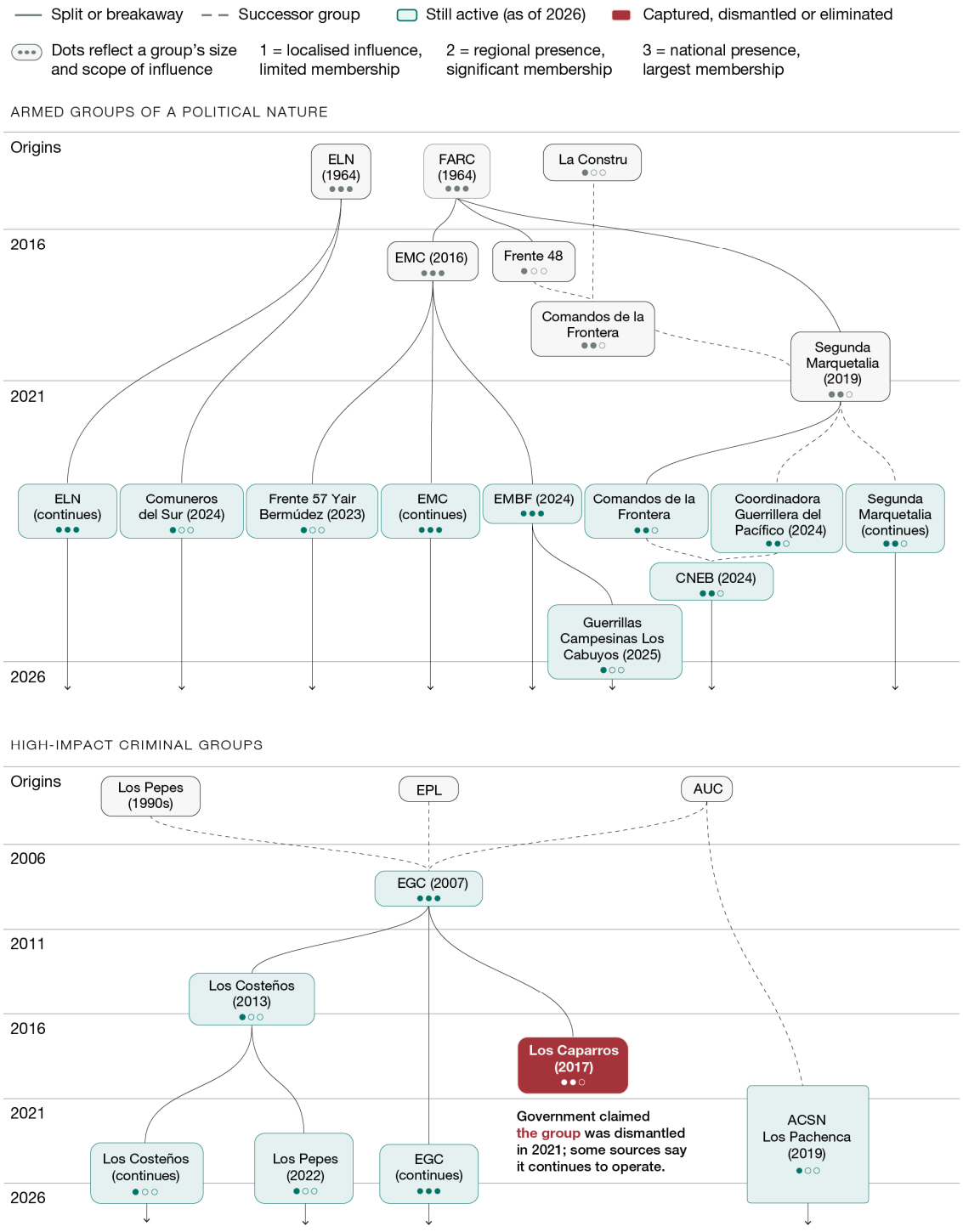
Bogotá/Brussels, 7 August 2026

Appendix A: Map of Colombia



Appendix B: Armed and Criminal Groups' Fragmentation in Colombia 2016-2026

Internal divisions within Colombia's main armed and criminal groups have led to more and fiercer clashes among the splinters.



Note: These graphics do not represent the totality of armed and criminal groups in Colombia, but rather those included in some manner in total peace. The distinction between "high-impact criminal groups" and "armed groups of a political nature" is based on how the groups were labelled under the "total peace" law.

Source: Crisis Group research as of August 2026 / CRISIS GROUP

Appendix C: Glossary of Armed and Criminal Groups

ELN	National Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
EMC	Central Armed Command
EMBF	Central Command of Blocks and Fronts
CNEB	National Coordinator of the Bolivarian Army
EPL	Popular Liberation Army
AUC	United Self-defence Forces of Colombia
EGC	Gaitanista Army of Colombia
ACSN	Self-defence forces of the Sierra Nevada



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