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From issue: **Cuba and Colombia** (Fall 2014)

■ AQ FEATURE

The ELN's War

BY [Ramón Campos Iriarte](#)

Life on Colombia's western warfront.

The recent 50th anniversary of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army—ELN) led journalist Ramón Campos Iriarte to the jungles of Colombia's western Chocó province, where open war between guerrillas, government forces and paramilitary groups has been escalating. The ELN—self-defined as a Marxist-Leninist organization influenced by liberation theology—was created on July 4, 1964, in the mountains of central Colombia by a group of students and clerics inspired by the Cuban Revolution.

The ELN's *frente Ernesto Che Guevara* (Ernesto Che Guevara Front), which controls a good part of Chocó, reached these remote jungles in 2010.

Today, Chocó is ravaged by war, illegal mining and logging, and political corruption. Countless attacks against foreign companies—especially in the oil and mining sector—and against government infrastructure and the armed forces have earned the ELN a place on the lists of terrorist organizations compiled by the U.S., Canada, Peru, and the European Union. Other countries—such as Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, and Nicaragua—consider the ELN a politically motivated insurgent group. Although the Colombian government has declared that there are only about 1,500 to 3,000 ELN fighters left, they have shown a considerable capacity to hit military targets across the country during their recent—and very violent—anniversary celebration.

Life on the River



An ELN combatant on a night stakeout in one of the villages along the Atrato riverbanks in Colombia's Choco province. Photo: Ramón Campos Iriarte.

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There aren't any roads for hundreds of kilometers in the southern part of Chocó,

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so life revolves around the San Juan and Atrato Rivers.

Communities settle on the riverbanks, and small boats called *pangas* are the only means of transportation. Geography also shapes the way conflict unfolds: the state's armed forces use

armored speedboats—nicknamed *pirañas*.

Guerrilla units use *pangas* to patrol and to transport troops and weapons, yet they also camp and move around the jungle on foot.

In August 2014, the Che Guevara Front called a meeting with the community council leaders of more than 25 villages in the region so that they could air their grievances to guerrilla leaders. Also invited to the meeting was the regional command of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC), which has operated alongside the ELN since July 2013. The steady hum of the *pangas*' 20-horse-power motors could be heard on the river from the early morning on, as dozens of boats approached the chosen host village.

View slideshow of ELN fighters in Chocó.



The guerillas use motorboats to move around the region. This man's t-shirt commemorates the 50th anniversary of the ELN. Photo: Ramón Campos Iriarte.



Town Hall Meetings in the Jungle

The guerrillas' authority has little competition in deeply impoverished Chocó, the poorest of Colombia's 32 departments, with 48.7 percent of the population living in extreme poverty and 80 percent lacking access to water and sewage services. With the Colombian government largely absent

here, citizens air their grievances at meetings organized by the guerrillas.

For one such meeting, ELN units delivered communiqués in every village along the river to publicize the event. The villages sent representatives in *pangas* to a specially designated village, where they handed over their cellphones and followed the guerrillas on motorboats to a location in the jungle.

Once at the meeting site, empty lined-up plastic chairs, ELN flags and banners—and dozens of *guerrilleros*, including Adrian,* an ELN commander, and Jaime,* the commander of the FARC's *Bloque Móvil Arturo Ruiz*, which operates alongside the ELN—awaited the congregation.

Community council leaders began by raising concerns about the interaction between the guerrillas and the civilian population in the region. One leader asked about an unsolved attack on a community member that took place in his village. Adrian and Jaime assured the man that their troops had nothing to do with the incident, but that they would investigate. Community leaders also asked the guerrillas to come up with a verdict for an accused rapist from the community. The ELN commanders decided to follow the pre-established code of conduct: the village's community council would decide the verdict and sentence, and the guerrillas would execute the punishment.

Someone also asked the guerrillas about their compliance with international humanitarian law, which requires, among other things, that guerrillas do not recruit child combatants under age 15. A commander named Camilo* answered, "International treaties ask us to leave the civilian population out of the conflict. But I ask you: who is suffering the consequences of their war? [...] Their peace means hunger, and there are two sides to this war: the rich and the poor. So not every war is bad, comrades; defensive wars are necessary."

After a few other complaints, the meeting came to an end, and everyone ate chicken stew.

Life During Wartime

Yeison* is a young guerrilla who joined the ELN many years ago. He only completed third grade, but learned to read and write in the guerrilla camps. He operates the radio station, writes dispatches and contributes to the ELN website in his time off.

During combat with a paramilitary unit, three high-caliber rounds tore Yeison's leg apart. He spent three months in the hospital and couldn't walk for a year.

As a result of bombings, guerrillas now move and sleep in small units of fewer than 30 fighters.

The Coca Economy

Peasants in areas like Chocó have no way of surviving on the unstable income that corn or plantain crops generate—there are no subsidies, and the infrastructure to market agricultural goods is nonexistent. So, many turn to illegal crops, such as coca.

In the 1980s, many guerrillas viewed the narco-economy as a damaging, corrupt and "imperialist" enterprise. The ELN initially implemented an illicit-crop eradication policy in some areas, but eventually, it had to accept the fact that millions of peasants depend on the coca trade.

Today, the ELN says that its role is to “protect the peasantry” by fixing the price of coca paste and taxing the *narcos* who buy it from the peasants. The current tax is around 200,000 pesos (\$100) per kilo in southern Chocó, according to ELN sources there.

A veteran FARC commander named Jaime* said that the rebels “have concrete policy plans to manage the cocaine issue in case we reach an agreement in Cuba.” Yet he added: “We’re no one’s DEA here: coca is a problem that needs to be addressed at the state level.”

Peace and the ELN

Shortly before his June 2014 re-election, President Juan Manuel Santos revealed that preliminary peace talks had begun between the ELN and the Colombian government. Yet the progress of the negotiations is unclear, since both parties have decided to keep the talks secret, and accusations of bad faith and unwillingness to compromise go both ways.

For commander Adrian* of the ELN’s Western Bloc, there are no guarantees that the guerrillas will give up their arms, even if the two parties reached a deal today. “Peace is not about guerrillas ceasing to exist. If we turned in our weapons right now, would anything change for these communities that live in absolute poverty and abandonment?” he asks.

**Not the guerrillas' real names.*

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