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Americas

Colombia: Paramilitaries Seeking Higher Profile

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Colombia:

Analytic Perspective

Paramilitaries Seeking Higher Profile [REDACTED]

In recent months, Colombia's paramilitary groups—armed civilians paid to protect the interests of wealthy sponsors, including business owners, cattle ranchers, and even narcotics traffickers—have launched a series of high-profile operational and political activities, establishing themselves as a force to be reckoned with in any effort to bring peace to the country. The paramilitaries in May staged a daring attack on the river port of Barrancabermeja, leaving dozens dead or wounded.

— Also in May, 200 paramilitaries entered the village of Puerto Alvira and executed more than 20 villagers they accused of being guerrilla supporters. [REDACTED]

As part of an apparent two-tiered strategy to raise their profile, the paramilitaries are moving on the political front. In late July, the groups signed a widely publicized agreement with civil leaders—including business and church officials—in which they pledged to support President Pastrana's peace efforts and to adopt rules of military engagement in line with international humanitarian law. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the paramilitaries are seeking to ensure they are on an equal footing with the guerrillas in the event of peace negotiations with the new administration. Local press reports suggest some paramilitary leaders view their recent military strikes as a signal to the public that they are independent from—and more effective than—the military, which has suffered a series of defeats to the guerrillas in recent years. [REDACTED]

The growing public perception that the military is losing the war with the guerrillas and the recent wave of guerrilla violence are likely to enhance support for the paramilitaries, particularly among Colombians victimized by local insurgent groups. The growth of the paramilitaries and the possibility of increasingly violent clashes with the guerrillas risk undercutting the twin US goals of improving Colombia's human rights record—already among the worst in the Americas—and advancing the peace process. One of the main insurgent groups recently canceled a meeting with civic leaders to discuss the peace process because of concern that the paramilitaries would be afforded equal status. [REDACTED]