



BRIEFINGS

LEARNING FROM SHORTCOMINGS: THE DEMOBILISATION OF PARAMILITARIES IN COLOMBIA

ENZO NUSSIO

Introduction

Between 2003 and 2006, 30,671 members of the United Self-defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) participated in collective demobilisation ceremonies. The stated objective of demobilising these paramilitaries amidst the conflict between Colombian government forces and guerrillas was to 're-establish the monopoly of force in the hands of the state', as agreed in Santa Fe de Ralito. The locally based paramilitary groups had been a significant party to the armed conflict in Colombia since the 1980s, often financed through drug trafficking (Romero 2003). The AUC federation was created in 1997 and had assembled most of the regional factions by the time of demobilisation.

After demobilisation, commanders and mid-ranking soldiers responsible for crimes against humanity accessed a reduced prison sentence under the 'Justice and Peace Law', a controversial piece of transitional justice legislation (Pizarro Leongómez & Valencia 2009). The rank-and-file combatants entered a reintegration programme. Until today the Office of the High Counsellor for Reintegration (Alta Consejería para la Reintegración – ACR) has been in charge of the reintegration policy, which consists of education, vocational training, grants for micro-businesses, psychosocial support and a monthly stipend.

Perceptions of DDR

Despite the institutional efforts, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) in Colombia has been accompanied by harsh criticisms and controversies among scholars, practitioners and civil society (Restrepo & Bagley 2011). In the following analysis, some of these frequently expressed perceptions are discussed with reference to existing literature and fieldwork experience.¹

'That was no peace process'

There is a common perception in Colombia that the process with the AUC was not a peace process, but rather a fake negotiation between allies. For Chernick (2008) there is 'no peace process' as it presupposes negotiations between opposing groups, and the paramilitaries had not attacked government forces. What is this process really about? The special constellation of negotiating partners may have distanced civil society from the beginning and generated speculation about the 'real' intentions of the government and the paramilitary leaders. The involvement of local politicians in the paramilitary project on the one hand – known as 'parapolítica' scandal – and the inclusion of pure drug traffickers within the AUC on the other hand undermined the legitimacy of negotiations (Cubides 2004).

'Many demobilised persons were never paramilitaries'

Critics claim that many of the demobilised people were not really members of the AUC. Before the demobilisation process began AUC commanders spoke of about 15,000 people to demobilise (CNRR 2010). By the end the number had jumped to more than 30,000. The example of one of the largest demobilisations – the Bloque Mineros that demobilised 2,789 persons in 2006 – might clarify this contradiction. One

former member of this paramilitary faction said that 2,000 combatants and '1,700 civilians' had demobilised. He stated that civilians entered the process because they wanted to take advantage of the promised benefits. Another member of the same bloc, who had lived in Tarazá, the main municipality of activity of the Bloque Mineros, does not believe that the numbers of demobilisation were inflated. He explains that the supposed demobilised civilians worked as hidden informants or prostitutes in the service of the armed group. According to his information, they were members of the AUC.²

The international standards of the United Nations state that not only combatants, but also associated members such as cooks, war wives or logistics personnel should be eligible for DDR benefits (UN 2006). There is sufficient evidence that non-AUC members filled the ranks shortly before demobilisation (CNRR 2010), but it is unclear how large this number is. Lax eligibility criteria surely contributed to the low legitimacy of demobilisation and to speculation about large numbers of non-members accessing reintegration benefits.

'Many paramilitaries never demobilised'

As the UN integrated DDR standards state, it should not be assumed that combatants obey their commanders' orders to demobilise (UN 2006). So was the case in Colombia. In addition to some dissident paramilitary factions, such as the Autodefensas Campesinas del Casanare and the Frente Cacique Pipintá, dissident persons have not entered the process (CNRR 2007). A former member of the Bloque Córdoba, who demobilised in 2005, claimed in an interview that 45 of his companions 'remained' in the group. He stated that all of them were later 'killed by the army'.³ Despite the evidence about cases of non-demobilised AUC members, estimates of their overall number are mere speculation.

'They just handed in the old guns'

Many observers claim that the different blocs of the AUC handed in obsolete weapons and hid the rest of the armaments for later use. The AUC handed in a total of 18,051 weapons in the collective demobilisations – creating a rate of 0.59 surrendered arms per demobilised person. Compared to other cases of DDR, this is a relatively high rate. However, it should be kept in mind that the AUC has become one of the best-equipped armed groups in the world during its rise between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. According to Caramés and Sanz (2009), there is no single DDR process with total disarmament. The AUC is no exception. Considering the fragile trust between negotiating parties, it is no surprise that armed groups retain some of their armaments and thus some of their power.

'The paramilitaries are still active; they just changed their names'

There is growing concern within Colombian society about newly armed groups and their relationship to paramilitarism. The debate on this topic is highly controversial (Granada *et al* 2009). The naming of the phenomenon reflects underlying views. Two important research institutes (Conflict Analysis Resource Centre and Nuevo Arco Iris) call these groups 'neo-paramilitaries', referring to their close relationship to former paramilitary groups, evidenced by their geographical presence that coincides with the earlier presence of paramilitaries. The Toledo Centre for Peace calls them 'armed post-demobilisation structures', alluding to their emergence after the AUC demobilisation (Massé *et al* 2010). Government institutions speak of 'criminal gangs' (*bandas criminales*), downplaying their relationship with former paramilitary groups and emphasising their involvement in drug trafficking. 'Urabeños', 'Paisas', 'Rastrojos', 'Black Eagles' and 'Popular Revolutionary Anti-subversive Army of Colombia' (ERPAC) are some of the names of these gangs or neo-paramilitary groups.

Recent estimates of the total number of members in newly armed groups range from 3,900 to 10,200 (CNRR 2010). The ERPAC formerly commanded by 'Cuchillo' ('Knife') – who recently died in a military intervention – in the Llanos-region alone is estimated to have up to 1,200 armed members (Massé *et al* 2010). The local communities often call members of these newly armed groups 'paramilitaries', and see no difference in the new groups' *modus operandi*. In their perception the members of these groups are mainly demobilised people.

A demobilised person from the Bloque Bananero said in an interview that more than half of the former members of his bloc were involved in successor organisations in the Urabá region, where the Bloque Bananero had been active.⁴ Another interviewee, a demobilised person from the Bloque Central Bolívar, said that he and 600 of his fellow ex-combatants had returned to the organisation only a few days after demobilising. Their commanders had ordered them to take care of the 'drug routes'.⁵

Some of the visible leaders of the new groups are former mid-level commanders of the AUC. Even Frank Pearl, the former High Counsellor for Reintegration, admits that the DDR process was not attractive enough for many of them (Semana.com 2008). Although demobilised people may occupy important positions within the new structures, only 12% of the members are demobilised combatants, according to police estimates (*ibid.*). In addition, ex-combatants are among the main victims of their threats, especially when resisting incorporation into the new groups (MAPP-OEA 2009b; Munévar & Nussio 2009).

'The demobilised people live half in legality, half in illegality'

There is evidence that some of the demobilised people who actively participate in the reintegration programme of the ACR are at the same time involved in illegal activities (Munévar & Nussio 2009). The Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP-OEA 2009a) claims that

more than half of the arrested demobilised persons were actively participating in the programme at the moment of arrest. Most of the interviewed ex-combatants claimed to know about other demobilised people who were living a 'double life'. The National Commission of Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR 2010) calculated that 15.5% of the total demobilised population (including individually demobilised former guerrilla members) have been involved in some illegal activity – ranging from petty crime to engagement in armed groups – since their demobilisation.

'DDR has led to insecurity in the cities'

A generalised perception within the urban population is that insecurity has moved from rural regions to urban areas following the AUC demobilisation (Massé *et al* 2011). According to the Foundation Ideas for Peace, the demobilised population had become urbanised in comparison to where they had lived before recruitment into the illegal armed groups (Palou & Méndez forthcoming). Major cities in the country have been exposed to violence related to newly armed groups that are often identified with former members of the AUC. After an initial decline in violence various cities show increasing crime rates in the years after demobilisation.

However, rising levels of insecurity may be due to a structural transformation rather than to the actual presence of demobilised combatants. The formerly active paramilitary groups have monopolised the violence in many, especially marginal, neighbourhoods. A variety of criminal actors compete for control of these neighbourhoods and their persistent potential for illicit activities. Moreover, the costs of petty crime may have decreased since the former parallel authority, which exercised harsh and arbitrary social control, no longer functions. It has been replaced by often overstrained and – compared to the former parallel authority – 'soft' state institutions.

Other criticisms of the DDR process are, for example, the exclusive targeting of former combatants without taking into account the

receiving communities, bad planning in the beginning of the DDR process and the lack of involvement of local governments.

Conclusion

However, not everything about the Colombian process has been negative. Two studies conclude that the overall security situation has improved since the AUC demobilisation (Restrepo & Muggah 2009; Bello Montes 2009), though with a diminishing effect (Procuraduría 2011). The ACR and other DDR-related institutions went through an important learning process during the past years. Also, compared to most other processes, DDR in Colombia has been almost completely a nationally owned process.

Furthermore, when criticising the efforts of the involved institutions, it has to be taken into account that the process of reintegration depends not only on the activities of state institutions, but also on a variety of exogenous factors. Usually DDR begins at the end of an internal conflict and is embedded in a broader peacebuilding context. In Colombia the main conflict between government forces and guerrilla groups persists. Moreover, Colombia continues to be the most important cocaine production hub in the world, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. The return to participation in the conflict or other illegal activities remains open for ex-combatants (Nussio 2009). Considering this situation, radical critics might entirely reject the idea of a DDR process with the AUC, and instead ask: why even conduct DDR in the midst of conflict?

Although mistakes have been made and many issues are still unresolved, thousands of combatants have left illegality and found relief in the activities offered by the ACR. Yet it is important to address today's shortcomings in future demobilisation activities. There are still two guerrilla groups to demobilise and a huge number of regular soldiers to reintegrate in civil society. The Colombian government cannot

afford to commit the same errors again, errors such as: engaging in a fragmented peace process with highly illegitimate negotiations; establishing selection criteria that are too lax; providing communication that generates confusion among both demobilised people and civil society; improvising DDR planning in spite of valuable earlier experiences; and not preparing the security forces sufficiently for the aftermath of demobilisation. Colombian institutions must think about procedures that provide greater legitimacy to future processes. DDR cannot be an isolated peacebuilding policy, but must be integrated into a wider peacebuilding framework. Otherwise the security problems will persist even after an eventual end to the armed conflict, as they persist now, after the demobilisation of the paramilitary groups.

ENZO NUSSIO is a lecturer at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, a researcher at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, and a consultant for security-related issues in Colombia. He recently received a PhD in international affairs and governance from the University of St. Gallen.

Endnotes

¹ The author spent two years in Colombia doing fieldwork in different settings and regions with demobilised people and involved national institutions, international observers and receiving communities.

² Interviews in Bogotá, 3 September 2009 and 28 October 2009.

³ Interview in Tierralta, 30 April 2009.

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