Attack on Colombian President Shows the Insecurity Borne of Venezuela’s Criminal Sanctuary

By Ryan Berg, Alexandra Winkler, and Veronica Hoyer

Last Friday, the helicopter of Colombian president Iván Duque came under fire as it landed in the border city of Cúcuta after an event in a fragile area near the border with Venezuela. The president, accompanied by an entourage including Defense Minister Diego Molano and Interior Minister Daniel Palacios, was unharmed despite visible damage to the presidential aircraft. Colombian authorities suspect guerrillas from the dissident Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or FARC) or the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional or ELN), though the region is a hotbed of violence housing multiple guerrilla groups dueling for control of coca production, drug trafficking routes into Venezuela, and other illicit activities. This attack comes on the heels of a massive car bomb explosion, also attributed to these guerrilla groups, which ripped through a military base in the same city of Cúcuta, near the Colombia-Venezuela border, injuring 36 people, including U.S. military advisers and Colombian military personnel.

Despite the bloodshed and the clear potential for regional volatility, the irregular nature of the conflict between guerrilla groups has meant scant attention paid to the security crisis unfolding for months now on both sides of the Venezuela-Colombia border, even though other conflicts with similar numbers of victims and conflict dynamics have received greater focus.

For many years, Venezuela has barely concealed its sympathy for guerrilla groups that operate cross-border trafficking networks and wage war against the Colombian state. Former president Hugo Chávez even invited guerrilla leaders to the presidential palace, telling Venezuela’s National Assembly that the FARC guerrillas had a “political project” that ought to be “respected here”—even as the Marxist verbiage they employed was a thinly-veiled cover for trafficking in cocaine and other illicit goods. Guerrilla groups remain an integral part of what analysts have dubbed Venezuela’s mafia state — the use of transnational organized crime as an instrument of state power—but the difficulty of managing relationships between unruly factions operating on Venezuelan territory is generating significant violence, regional insecurity, and human suffering.

In March 2021, the regime of Nicolás Maduro initiated military exercises near the border region. After encountering resistance and, in some instances coming under fire, the Maduro regime upped the ante by launching “Operation Bolivar Shield,” which featured aerial bombardments, airborne deployment of Venezuelan troops, and frontal assaults on guerrilla positions in the southwestern state of Apure. It appears the conflict evolved from infighting between rival segments of FARC dissidents, the so-called Frente 10 Martin Villa and the Segunda Marquetalia, vying for control over the Colombian-Venezuelan border and its associated trafficking routes. The participation of the Venezuelan army is further proof of the state’s support and cooperation with preferred guerrilla groups and a breakdown in relations with the Frente 10 Martin Villa for upsetting the criminal equilibrium.

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