

Total Peace: Criminal Control of Colombia's Borders

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Colombia's border regions have become epicenters of criminal governance. Across vast stretches of territory, the *absence—or deliberate withdrawal—of* effective state authority has allowed illegal armed groups and transnational criminal organizations to consolidate power, expand operations, and entrench illicit economies. *Drug trafficking, illegal mining, smuggling, human trafficking, and arms trafficking now dominate these regions, generating sustained violence, forced displacement, and systematic human rights violations, particularly against rural and Indigenous communities.*

Among the most powerful actors operating in these areas are FARC dissident groups—including the Central General Staff and the Second Marquetalia—the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gulf Clan, the Cartel of the Suns, and the Tren de Aragua. These groups operate alongside networks linked to Mexican cartels and other transnational organizations, including Hezbollah and Hamas. These criminal structures have benefited from *protection* by the Maduro and Petro administrations, which have publicly *denied* their existence or influence.

These actors exploit Colombia's strategic geography, using border corridors to access the Caribbean, the Pacific, Central America, Europe, Africa, and neighboring countries. These dynamics are particularly visible in Amazonas, Putumayo, and Nariño, as well as along the borders with Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil.

Ecuador-Peru: Under Criminal Dispute

Along the borders with Ecuador and Peru, especially in the Amazon and Putumayo regions, FARC dissident groups—including the Central General Staff and the Second Marquetalia—operate in coordination with hybrid criminal structures such as the Border Commands. At the same time, Mexican cartels and other transnational networks seek to consolidate drug trafficking and smuggling routes to Pacific ports and Central America.

These territories are key nodes for coca cultivation and cocaine processing and have become battlegrounds for territorial control. The resulting violence has directly affected local populations through displacement, intimidation, and targeted killings.

The 2023 assassination of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio is particularly relevant in this context. Its *modus operandi* closely resembles the assassination of Colombian senator and presidential

candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay in 2025. In both cases, organized crime and illegal armed groups sought to expand their territorial control and political influence. *Colombian armed groups are attempting to replicate in Ecuador—and beyond—the control they already exercise in Colombia.*

However, the Petro administration has been *unwilling to contain* their cross-border expansion. This reality is largely absent from Colombian media coverage, which instead criticizes the *security measures* adopted by Ecuador, such as tariffs imposed in response to the spillover of insecurity from Colombia.

Venezuela: Binational Criminal Governance

Along the border with Venezuela—particularly in Norte de Santander and Arauca—the ELN (“good people,” “my brothers,” according to Petro), FARC dissident groups, including Iván Márquez's Second Marquetalia, Hezbollah, Hamas, and state-backed Venezuelan criminal structures such as the Cartel of the Suns and the Tren de Aragua operate in a coordinated, binational manner.

These groups control smuggling routes, drug trafficking corridors, and other illicit economies, exploiting security vacuums fostered by both states while *enjoying protection* from the Venezuelan dictatorship and Petro's Total Peace policy. Competition over trafficking routes has intensified violence and insecurity, turning these regions into de facto zones of criminal sovereignty.

Brazil: Criminal Alliances in the Amazon

Along the border with Brazil, FARC dissident groups—including the Second Marquetalia and the Central General Staff—have established operational alliances with Brazil's most powerful criminal organizations, particularly the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and the Comando Vermelho. These alliances facilitate the trafficking of cocaine and gold through river systems, jungle corridors, and clandestine airstrips deep in the Amazon.

Criminal Control and Social Domination

Across Colombia's borders, these groups exercise territorial control through checkpoints, threats, extortion, and *social regulation, effectively replacing the state*. They dominate coca cultivation, processing laboratories, and trafficking routes, often in coordination with international cartels that exploit informal crossings to evade authorities.

To avoid military pressure, these organizations fragment into smaller, more mobile units¹, using dense jungle

¹ A tactic Petro has used with Indigenous communities to mobilize demonstrations in his support, both while in opposition and while in power.”

terrain and weak institutional presence to their advantage.

The human cost is severe. Territorial disputes have triggered mass displacement, forced confinement, and persistent threats against Indigenous and farming communities. Groups such as the Awá and numerous Amazonian peoples have been forced into self-confinement to survive amid constant crossfire and coercion.

This reality reflects a profound crisis of governance. The *Colombian state has failed—or refused—to* reestablish authority and protect the civilian population, while illegal armed groups and transnational criminal organizations consolidate their power as partners in the Petro government's so-called Total Peace policy.

“Total Peace”: Origins and Consequences

The Total Peace policy took shape during Gustavo Petro's presidential campaign, following a meeting at La Picota prison in Bogotá, attended by his brother and the person who would later become his first High Commissioner for Peace. At the time, the prison housed alias “El Viejo,” identified as the coordinator of the assassination of Senator and presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay, allegedly under orders from Iván Márquez, leader of the Second Marquetalia.

This meeting—later known as the La Picota Prison Agreement—reportedly offered illegal armed groups and organized crime networks three concessions in exchange for support: *continuity of their illicit activities, de facto territorial control, and legal or political immunity.*

That agreement laid the foundation for the current Total Peace policy, under which these groups are recognized as political interlocutors while the *state significantly reduces military confrontation. As a result, these organizations have expanded their manpower, increased their finances, and strengthened their territorial control not only in Colombia, but also in Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador.*

In Panama, they shifted their focus toward human trafficking and smuggling. The situation worsened after Petro introduced visa-free entry for several African countries, triggering an unprecedented expansion of human trafficking networks. Only the tightening of U.S. border policies significantly disrupted this flow, dealing a blow to Petro's Total Peace partners.

Petro's Promises: Fulfilled...

In practice, the only campaign promises Petro has effectively fulfilled are those negotiated at La Picota prison. This perception is widely held among

Colombians. Most other commitments function as political marketing, amplified internationally but disconnected from realities on the ground.

Since September 2025, when the United States increased its military presence in the Caribbean, the Maduro-Petro axis and their Total Peace partners have sought to divert attention by accelerating trafficking through Colombia's other borders.

According to investigations by Caracol TV, Petro has been sharing intelligence with Total Peace criminal groups, constituting evidence of direct cooperation. Although several military officers were arrested in late 2025—allegedly under U.S. pressure—for facilitating trafficking in the Pacific, no comparable actions were taken along the country's other borders.

Under mounting pressure, two major cocaine seizures in Spain were publicized in late 2025 and early 2026 as examples of Colombian Spanish cooperation. However, Colombians and Venezuelans—familiar with tactics from the *Pablo Escobar era*—recognize these seizures as symbolic gestures designed to relieve pressure, while much larger shipments continue entering Europe through other ports. *Nonetheless, these operations proved politically convenient for both Gustavo Petro and Pedro Sánchez.*

Elections 2026: Crime and Politics Converge

With legislative elections just two months away and presidential elections four months away, President Gustavo Petro, his potential presidential candidate Iván Cepeda, and their political movement, *Pacto Histórico*, remain clinging to the so-called “Total Peace” policy. In practice, this strategy has meant *relying* on illegal armed groups and organized crime networks that now control nearly 70 percent of Colombian territory, including large swaths of the country's border regions, thereby weakening state authority and calling national security into question.

In many regions, these groups openly instruct communities to vote for Petro's movement and candidates, leveraging their territorial control and the climate of intimidation repeatedly documented by electoral observers and civil society organizations. An increasing number of Colombians perceive a direct political and financial *alliance* between Petro, Iván Cepeda, their movement, and criminal organizations.

Meanwhile, much of the *international community* limits its engagement to NGOs, think tanks, and social movements aligned with Petro and his allies to document the situation in Colombia, ignoring the rest of civil society and the growing criminal capture of the Colombian state.

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