

## Colombia Brought to Its Knees

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On December 16, 2025, Buenos Aires, Cauca, endured a devastating seven-hour assault by FARC dissidents under the command of alias *Mordisco*. Police stations, municipal offices, and a bank were attacked with gunfire and explosives, leaving two officers dead, others wounded, and civilians trapped in hiding. National forces regained control only ten hours later marking the first time in 24 years that an illegal armed group has outright destroyed a Colombian town.

At the same time, coordinated attacks by the ELN and allied groups swept across 13 of Colombia's 26 departments, targeting civilians, security forces, and critical infrastructure. On December 19, at least six soldiers were killed and 28 wounded in a drone and explosives attack on a military base in rural Aguachica, Cesar, near the Venezuelan border. Authorities attributed the assault to the ELN. These operations have spread fear nationwide and exposed the state's declining capacity to protect its citizens.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights warns that regions such as the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta have become a "tragedy of human rights," with Indigenous and local communities living under constant threat. In 2025 alone, OHCHR documented multiple massacres and targeted killings of human rights defenders, underscoring the urgent need for effective state intervention and accountability.

Many of these armed actors are linked to Petro's *Total Peace* initiative, framing their violence as *resistance* to alleged possible foreign intervention in Venezuela.

Since 2022, military operations against armed groups have largely halted, and coca eradication programs have been suspended in favor of negotiations. As a result, Colombia has become the world's leading coca producer, armed groups have expanded territorial control, and peace talks have largely stalled.

Weak security is key for Petro's government. Colombia's security forces are now at their weakest point since the era of Plan Colombia. Over

the past three years, the Petro administration has retired or dismissed 40 percent of army generals and more than half of police generals, replacing experienced commanders with politically aligned but less seasoned officers.

This has disrupted command structures, eroded institutional expertise, and weakened counterdrug and counterterrorism capabilities. The National Police Intelligence Directorate (DIPOL) has lost senior officers with critical experience working alongside U.S. partners, creating a significant intelligence gap.

Ending U.S. assistance—something Petro has publicly advocated—would further worsen the crisis. More than \$60 million in U.S. funding and intelligence support in 2024 alone has been essential to confronting the ELN, Clan del Golfo, and FARC dissidents. Without it, violence, extortion, and displacement among Colombia's more than seven million internally displaced people will likely intensify.

Two elements illustrate the moral distortion of the current security approach. *First*, the government has equated illegal armed groups with legitimate political actors by referring to them as "*brothers and sisters*." *Second*, when dangerous criminals are arrested or neutralized, official narratives often portray them as victims – "*poor people, poor young people*", legitimizing armed actors while undermining justice and deepening social polarization.

Violence by non-state armed groups and criminal organizations continues to devastate Colombian communities – particularly Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, rural farmers, and urban residents.

In 2024 alone, 252 people were killed in 72 massacres, 89 human rights defenders were murdered, and 216 children were recruited by armed groups. The UN Human Rights Chief has urged the government to protect civilians, prevent child recruitment, and uphold the Escazú Agreement.

Today, armed groups and organized crime exert control over an estimated 75 percent of Colombian territory, placing vast regions beyond effective

state authority. In the past 18 months alone, they have carried out 393 explosive drone attacks against military forces and civilians nationwide.

Towns are under siege. The rule of law is eroding. Political opportunism is displacing the fundamental duty of protecting citizens. Colombia has reached a moment of reckoning.

#### UN and Democrats

The UN Secretary-General and U.S. Democrats are misdirecting their policy approach toward Colombia and Venezuela. Both countries face severe state capture by organized criminal networks operating with coordination and protection from the Maduro and Petro regimes and their political allies.

By refraining from firm condemnation and targeted accountability measures, the UN Secretary-General has contributed to the normalization of a dictatorship and a usurper whose electoral legitimacy is widely contested. This posture weakens international standards on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Venezuelans and Colombians are entitled to security, democratic governance, and the full protection of their fundamental rights—outcomes that current policies have failed to deliver under both regimes.

Allowing the continued deterioration of these countries should not become a byproduct of U.S. domestic partisan debates. Using Colombia and Venezuela as a counterpoint to oppose Donald Trump's policies risks entrenching the very regimes that deny their citizens democracy.

These nations cannot be reduced to a political battleground that ultimately benefits Maduro and Petro, who openly present themselves as ideological allies. It is urgent that both the United Nations and U.S. Democrats reassess and recalibrate their approach toward Colombia and Venezuela current situation.

These decisions carry significant implications for millions of people currently living under the control of illegal armed groups and transnational criminal networks. Such groups derive power and revenue from cocaine trafficking, human trafficking, contraband, kidnappings, sexual violence, and other organized criminal activities.

Several potential legislative and presidential candidates aligned with President Gustavo Petro appear to rely on the same illegal armed actors and organized crime networks incorporated into the “Total Peace” initiative operating in Colombia and Venezuela, many of which maintain close ties to the Maduro regime.

These criminal structures have demonstrated a consistent pattern of attempting to influence electoral processes across the region. To date, there is limited evidence that these networks can be effectively constrained while benefiting from political tolerance or protection under the Petro and Maduro administrations.

The public and confrontational responses from both leaders to recent presidential elections in Ecuador, Argentina, and Chile further indicate an intent to exert regional political influence. In this context, the 2026 legislative and presidential elections in Peru, Colombia, and Brazil face an elevated risk of interference linked to Petro-Maduro-aligned criminal networks.

The risk of electoral interference by illegal armed groups and transnational criminal networks is escalating across the Andean and Southern Cone region ahead of the 2025-2026 electoral cycle.

Warning signs include the political integration of armed groups without disarmament, illicit campaign financing, voter coercion, judicial erosion, coordinated disinformation, and state tolerance of criminal actors under the Maduro-Petro axis, evidenced by delayed disarmament, threats to electoral stakeholders, and coordinated regional activity.

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