

# Border Tensions

**Colombia's killing of a FARC leader has triggered a regional crisis. Could it lead to war?**

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Raúl Reyes liked to wear a Rolex and wave an AK-47. The Colombian guerrilla leader—barely over five feet tall—also liked to be surrounded by attractive women, some of whom were as young as 13 and who, by all accounts, were routinely sexually exploited by some men of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Whenever Reyes—a *nom de guerre* meaning *kings*—visited FARC camps, he was treated just like the literal translation of his assumed name.

Now Reyes is dead at 59, killed along with 16 other FARC members by Colombian forces at a jungle camp in Ecuador last Saturday. His demise has triggered one of the worst regional crises in decades, prompting Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to withdraw his ambassador from Bogotá and deploy tanks, fighter jets and 10 army battalions to his country's 1,300-mile border with Colombia. Reyes's elimination has also raised questions about the future of FARC and how it will affect the fate of several hundred hostages held by Latin America's largest insurgent group.

I met Reyes in January 1999, when, as editor of investigations at Colombia's largest newsmagazine, I spent a month in FARC camps in a zone demilitarized by the Colombian government as part of a bid to advance the peace process. My visit culminated in an interview with "Mono Jojoy" (Jorge Briceño), the mysterious military leader of FARC. Reyes (real name: Luis Edgar Devia Silva), who called himself FARC'S minister of foreign relations, was outraged that I hadn't worked through him to arrange the interview and tried to order me to set up all future meetings through him. Although he called himself the diplomat of FARC, that brash, authoritarian style remained his hallmark in the years that followed.

Will his death precipitate a real war? At this stage, Chávez's war talk may not amount to much more than saber rattling. The Venezuelan government has long had close ties with FARC, and it is certainly in Chávez's interest to distract critics from inflation and food shortage problems at home. Nonetheless, the killing of Reyes has united several Latin American leaders in their condemnation of the action. Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa expelled Colombia's ambassador, withdrew his own top diplomat from Bogotá and sent troops to the Colombian border. Chilean President Michelle Bachelet echoed Correa's criticism of Colombia's violation of Ecuadorean sovereignty, and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega referred to the operation in which Reyes died as an "assassination" and called Reyes a "brother."

Unsurprisingly, some of these condemnations are fueled by self-interest. Aside from Chávez's domestic woes, Nicaragua is involved in a sovereignty dispute with Colombia over three Caribbean islands. Colombia, for its part, says it is planning to complain to the Organization of American States (OAS) that the support provided by Ecuador and Venezuela to FARC violates international legislation forbidding support for terrorists. (Correa denied this, telling a cabinet meeting in Quito that it was "completely false" to suggest that Ecuador "had a pact with terrorists.")

The Bogotá government is optimistic that Reyes's death will also be a death blow to the four-decade-old movement. Colombian forces have systematically been killing or capturing lower-level commanders in recent months, raising hopes that intelligence gathered during these operations will weaken the movement. As a corollary to that, Colombian officials hope that FARC guerrillas will be sufficiently demoralized by the removal of their leaders to continue taking up a government offer of stipends, education and protection if they leave the movement. Indeed, Colombia's main daily paper, *El Tiempo*, was quick to publish an editorial suggesting that the Reyes killing was the beginning of the end of FARC.

That, however, is unlikely. FARC is flush with drug money and still controls coca production in the south of Colombia—a nation that produces 90 percent of the world's cocaine supply. According

to the United Nations, FARC produces about 500 tons of cocaine a year.

A further complication is the uncertain fate now facing FARC's hostages. Colombian President Alvaro Uribe says that FARC is holding more than 700 hostages, including three U.S. military contractors and former French-Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, whom the group is trying to swap for imprisoned rebels. Reyes was the public face of FARC in the hostage negotiations; his death, according to French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, "is not good news."

All of this might feel remote to U.S. voters focused on Tuesday's presidential primary showdown. But this is not an issue that can be ignored by the American candidates. Not only does the turmoil in Latin America have the potential to have a negative effect on the continent's security, the failed war on drugs can certainly hurt the futures of young Americans and Europeans who are already using or are being tempted to use illegal drugs. If the next president of the United States has no viable plan to revise its drug and Latin American policies, drug-financed groups like FARC could potentially expand their operations and strengthen the vicious cycle of violence, corruption and destructive addiction.

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