

# Borders vulnerable as peace stalls in Colombia

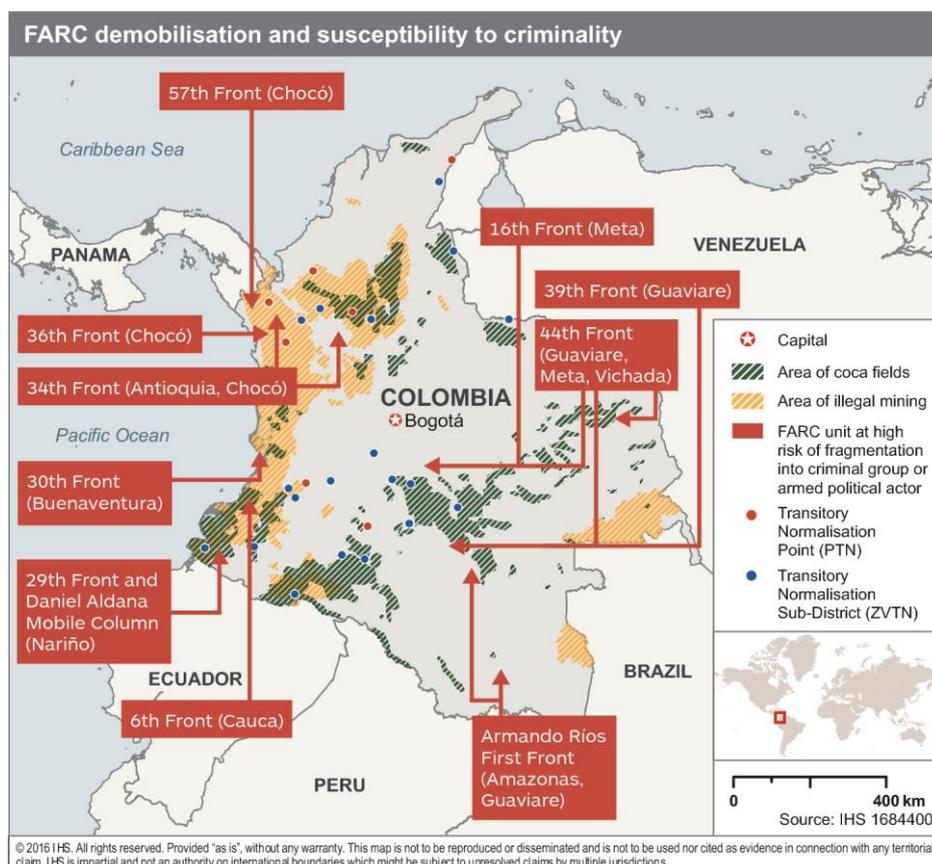
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**Colombian voters have narrowly rejected a peace deal with the insurgent group FARC. Annette Idler surveys the prospects for security in the country's border regions.**

On 26 September 2016, the Colombian government and the insurgent group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) signed a historic peace deal that could potentially end 52 years of armed conflict between the two parties. However, on 2 October the Colombian people narrowly voted in a plebiscite to reject the deal, creating uncertainty around its implementation.

In this changing security landscape, Colombia's borderlands are particularly vulnerable to an upsurge in violence and insecurity. Even if the peace deal is revived and approved and the FARC demobilises, new violent non-state groups are expanding their illicit governance and filling power voids in areas previously occupied by the FARC, particularly in border areas. This, in turn, results in two further challenges: first, the reconfiguration of participants in the transactional cocaine supply chain, which is making the civilian population vulnerable to abuse and violence; and the transnational character of these borderlands, used by non-state groups to accrue power.

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FARC demobilisation and susceptibility to criminality (©2016 IHS)

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## **Shifting power alliances**

Violent non-state groups collaborate with each other in Colombia's borderlands, especially along the borders with Ecuador and Venezuela. These groups include the two remaining leftist groups - the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and a small remaining faction of the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) - as well as right-wing groups that emerged after the 2006 demobilisation of the paramilitary umbrella group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), and criminal groups including the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel.

Amid an uncertain peace deal with the FARC, in regions such as Colombia's southern department of Putumayo new groups such as Mexican cartels have arrived to fill power vacuums, increasing the likelihood of power struggles and an upsurge of targeted killings and acts of retaliation. Several groups have moved their presence: elements of the ELN, for example, operating in the southern department of Nariño, have shifted westwards towards Tumaco on the Pacific coast.

As a result, the civilian population is vulnerable to extortion demands and intimidation from new groups. Furthermore, new alliances among those groups make it difficult to judge who will be able to provide protection and other illicit governance functions.

Communities living in territories controlled by the ELN are particularly exposed to violence and abuse. For example, in the Colombian department of Arauca bordering Venezuela, the FARC and ELN were at war with each other between 2006 and 2010. Since 2010, the ELN has increased its support base, which now reaches across the border to the Venezuelan state of Apure, where it has influence over local government authorities.

Arauca includes strategic trafficking routes for cocaine that is produced in Colombia and shipped abroad from Apure, where there are many landing strips for aircraft carrying drugs. At the same time, gasoline, food, and other goods are smuggled from Venezuela to Colombia, with many Venezuelans involved in contraband smuggling due to a lack of alternative livelihoods. Many have also collaborated with the ELN, or in previous years with the FARC, either voluntarily or under duress.

The population of Arauca is stigmatised as collaborators with the insurgents. One of the normalisation zones in which FARC combatants will gather to demobilise if a renegotiated peace deal is approved is located in Arauquita. This has increased tensions and accusations against locals who have collaborated with insurgents, making it possible that the ELN will recruit some of the demobilised FARC members and strengthen itself in Arauca.

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## **Outlook**

The plebiscite results throw into doubt the implementation of the peace deal agreed between the government and the FARC. The political opposition, led by former president Álvaro Uribe, will demand greater concessions from the FARC, including previously rejected negotiation points such as prison time and a ban on holding public office for certain FARC combatants accused of certain crimes, before agreeing to a deal. This may take at least several months and is by no means guaranteed to succeed.

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## TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS

Insurgents have historically operated in the Venezuelan and Ecuadorian border zones next to Colombia. According to the University of Oxford study, they crossed borders to obtain goods ranging from food, medicine, ammunition and weapons, to chemical precursors used in cocaine laboratories. When under pressure from Colombian security forces, some groups crossed the border to continue operations.

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