

Colombia Colombia

ELN

by *InSight Crime*

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Guerrilleros del ELN en marcha

The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) is Colombia’s last true insurgency and one of Latin America’s most powerful criminal organizations. Due to its expansion and strengthening in Venezuela in recent years, it has established itself as a binational guerrilla.

Initially, the ELN was a nationalist movement **influenced** by the Cuban revolution, focused on kidnapping, extortion, and attacking the oil infrastructure. Although it avoided any involvement in drug trafficking for decades, it has become deeply involved in the international drug trade in recent years.

The ELN is **made up** of more than 5,000 members, including networks of militants infiltrating the civilian population. That force is distributed between Colombia and Venezuela, but its objectives in each country are very different. While in Colombia, the ELN is dedicated to confronting the state in an armed revolution, but in Venezuela, it acts more like a paramilitary force in support of the government of Nicolás Maduro.

Despite these criminal interests on both sides of the border, the ELN’s top commanders continue to pursue a political agenda. In 2022, the group joined the **“Total Peace”** proposal of Colombian President Gustavo Petro, which saw the start of a new round of peace negotiations.

History

The ELN guerrilla movement **began** in the 1960s, a time when Colombia was recovering from a bloody period known as **La Violencia**, and when various social and intellectual movements in the country were influenced by the context of the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution.

The most radical segments of these movements became the heart of the guerrilla group from July 1964. That year, a small armed insurgency was formed and **began training** in San Vicente de Chucurí, a town in eastern Colombia less than 400 kilometers from the border with Venezuela.

Six months later, on January 7, 1965, the group carried out its first major attack: **the invasion** of Simacota, a small municipality in the department of Santander. There they officially announced their creation under the leadership of Fabio Vásquez Castaño.

From the beginning, the ELN was a **highly ideological** organization, combining Marxist-Leninist doctrine with liberation theology: a religious movement inspired by struggles against inequality in Latin America. Some of its initial members, such as Camilo Torres, a priest who died during an early clash in 1966, came directly from the Catholic Church.

It was in this context that Manuel Pérez, alias "**El Cura**," (The Priest) joined. He would become one of the ELN's main ELN, although he was almost executed during an internal purge led by Vásquez Castaño.

A few years after the attack on Simacota, the ELN was on the verge of annihilation. A military offensive in 1973, known as "**Operation Anorí**," wiped out much of the group's soldiers and weakened its command structure. This forced the guerrillas to withdraw to the border with Venezuela and rearm.

After Operation Anorí, El Cura, together with Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, alias "Gabino," took control of the ELN. **Both led** the expansion of the group after the military defeat in Anorí, reaching departments such as Casanare and Boyacá, near the border with Venezuela; and Nariño and Putumayo, in southern Colombia.

The guerrillas slowly recovered, largely due to their participation in kidnappings for extortion, which became their main source of income.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the ELN began to **use** Venezuela as a refuge from the operations of the Colombian authorities, which turned the border state of Apure into the favorite rear guard of the guerrillas.

The Venezuelan government was initially hostile to the ELN, something that worsened after the **Cararabo massacre** in 1995, when eight marines were killed by guerrillas in Apure state.

Meanwhile, in Colombia, the guerrillas carried out several of their most important military actions. One of them came in 1999 when the ELN **kidnapped** 190 people from a church in Cali, Valle del Cauca, in western Colombia.

This remains the largest kidnapping in the country's history. In April of that same year, the group **seized** a commercial plane from the Avianca company, forced it to land in a remote area in the south of Bolívar, and kidnapped its passengers.

These events put the ELN at the center of Colombia's security conflict and made them a target for other illegal armed groups. Increasing pressure from Colombian security forces, coupled with **attacks** by the paramilitary organization known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC), as well as its antagonistic relationship with the FARC forced the ELN to abandon some territories in Colombia and **increase** its presence in Venezuela.

When seeking refuge in Venezuela, the ELN found a willing host in then-President Hugo Chávez in 1999, who was **openly friendly** with the ELN and the **FARC**.

During this time, the ELN had less military importance and territorial influence than the FARC, who were the main guerrilla group in Colombia. At that time, the ELN **built up** bases of political and social support in the communities where they had a presence.

And while many of its troops had to withdraw from Colombia, the ELN's **Eastern War Front** in the department of Arauca resisted various military offensives against it. Proof of this came during a confrontation with the FARC, which ended in a peace treaty between the two and led to the ELN strengthening along the border with Venezuela.

Likewise, the ELN's commanders rethought their financial, military, and political strategies in various parts of Colombia. **This led** several ELN fronts to expand their criminal portfolios and venture into new sectors, such as drug trafficking and illegal mining, which would become crucial sources of income for the guerrilla group.

After the FARC demobilized in early 2017, the ELN began a process of expansion both nationally and internationally. In addition to filling the territorial vacuums left by the FARC, the ELN increased its involvement in the criminal economies in Colombia and in Venezuela. In the latter, the rise to power of President Nicolás Maduro in 2013 **further increased** the ELN's presence there.

While the ELN was also **expanding** across Colombia, its presence along the border was where it was strongest. It **dominated** border crossings between the two countries where it oversaw smuggling and drug trafficking, and through which it could move its combatants.

But the ELN's activities did not stop at the border. InSight Crime **investigations** have documented the incursion and dominance that the ELN exercises in the interior of Venezuela, including over mining areas located in Bolívar state.

In this context, Venezuela began to play an increasingly central role for the Colombian insurgency. Senior commanders like Gustavo Aníbal Giraldo, alias "Pablito," decided to move to the neighboring country and from there **lead** the organization's operational threads.

The ELN began to operate as a **binational guerrilla**. In Colombia, it remains focused on seizing territory, engaging law enforcement, and building political bases, all in the name of its traditional revolution. But in Venezuela, the ELN's ideological sympathies and strategic alliances with the Chavista government has led it to function as a paramilitary group, coordinating operations with security forces, interfering in electoral events, and helping the government control key areas.

The ELN has **participated** in several rounds of peace talks with the Colombian government, beginning in 1975, and followed by attempts at dialogue in 1994, 1998, and 2005.

In 2014, the ELN **resumed** peace negotiations in Colombia, this time with then-President Juan Manuel Santos, who was already leading advanced peace talks with the FARC. The peace approaches ended in 2019, when the guerrillas **attacked** a police training school in the capital, Bogotá, with a car bomb. The attack left 21 dead and nearly a hundred injured. Shortly after, President Iván Duque Márquez, officially **ended** the peace talks and began new military operations against the ELN.

In 2022, a **strengthened** ELN resumed peace talks in Caracas with the new Colombian president, Gustavo Petro, **hosted** by Caracas and with Venezuela acting as a **guarantor**. Due to these talks, the arrest warrants for 17 of the ELN's most important leaders were suspended.

Criminal Activities

In its beginnings, the ELN's economy was based on income received from kidnappings, extortions and attacks against the oil infrastructure. By the 1980s, the group **officially constituted** the Domingo Laín Front in Arauca, which extorted multinational companies drilling oil wells in the department.

However, oil and kidnappings fell short of the ELN's growing needs in Colombia.

Although the ELN initially **resisted** becoming directly involved with drug trafficking for several decades, the transformation of the Colombian armed conflict and the weakening of the guerrillas led various of its fronts to gradually become involved in coca growing.

Certain ELN structures simply collected taxes from peasants and drug traffickers, but others became involved in international drug production and trafficking, especially on the border between the Colombian department of Norte de Santander and the Venezuelan state of Zulia.

This expansion of their criminal portfolio also led them to enter **logging and gold mining** in departments such as Chocó and Antioquia, in western Colombia.

The ELN put this experience in illegal mining to good use in Venezuela's mining territories. According to field investigations carried out by InSight Crime, the ELN regulates and oversees mining activities in Bolívar and Amazonas states, with the blessing of military and political sectors loyal to Maduro.

Likewise, its extensive presence in the **clandestine crossings** on the border between Colombia and Venezuela, known as *trochas*, has allowed the ELN to receive profits from smuggling and from the payments that migrants who want to go through these illegal crossings must make. Today, control of the border is decisive to the ELN's finances.

Leadership

The ELN has a **confederate structure**, in which its war fronts maintain a certain operational and financial independence. The group's political decision-making rests with a body called the Central Command (Comando Central – COCE), made up of five commanders. Below them is the National Directorate (Dirección Nacional – DINAL), a body made up of 23 representatives elected by the eight war fronts, which, in turn, are led by a commander, a political leader, and a military leader.

Currently, Eliécer Erlinto Chamorro, alias “Antonio García”, is the **commander-in-chief** of the guerrilla, accompanied in the COCE by Israel Ramírez Pineda, alias “Pablo Beltrán,” the political commander and **chief negotiator**; Rafael Sierra, alias “Ramiro Vargas”, the **commander in charge** of international affairs; Jaime Galvis Rivera, alias “Ariel,” the **financial commander**, and Aníbal Giraldo, alias “Pablito,” who is in charge of relations between the COCE and the war fronts.

Pablito allegedly **orchestrated** the attack on the General Santander Police School, an action that put an end to the peace talks in 2019. In addition, he **has played** a central role in the ELN's transition to a binational guerrilla due to his historical presence along the border with Venezuela. This is why he remains one of the ELN's most influential leaders today.

The group's eight war fronts and their commanders also have strong influence in the areas they control.

The Manuel Pérez Martínez Northeastern War Front (**Frente de Guerra Nororiental Manuel Pérez Martínez** – FGNO) has influence in the department of Norte de Santander, Colombia, and in the state of Zulia, in Venezuela. It is currently led by Leonel Salazar Roa, alias “Gonzalo Satélite.”

The Northern War Front (**Frente de Guerra Norte** – FGN), with influence in the departments of La Guajira, Cesar, Magdalena and Atlántico in Colombia, and Zulia and Táchira in Venezuela, is currently led by alias “El Poeta.”

The Manuel Vásquez Castaño Eastern War Front (**Frente de Guerra Oriental Manuel Vásquez Castaño** – FGO) has influence in the Colombian departments of Arauca, Boyacá, Vichada and Casanare and in the Venezuelan states of Apure, Táchira, and Amazonas. Pablito was the **commander of the front** until 2016 and remains one of its most important representatives.

The Jesús Darío Ramírez Castro War Front (**Frente de Guerra Jesús Darío Ramírez Castro** – FGJDR) has influence in the department of Antioquia in Colombia and in the south of Bolívar, in Venezuela. The front was **commanded** by Gustavo Wilfredo Vásquez Castrillón, alias “Pirry,” until his death in early 2022.

The Omar Gómez Western War Front (**Frente de Guerra Occidental Omar Gómez** – FGO) has influence in Colombia's departments of Chocó and Risaralda. It was led by Ogli Ángel Padilla Romero, alias “Fabián,” until his **death** in 2021, and is currently **led** by Enilce Oviedo Sierra, alias “Martha” or “La Abuela.”

Some fronts do not have a clear commander, such as the **Carlos Alberto Troches Zuleta Southwestern War Front** (FGSO), with influence in the departments of Nariño and Cauca, and the **Central War Front** (FGC), with influence in the departments of Tolima, Risaralda and Antioquia.

For its part, the **Camilo Torres Restrepo National Urban War Front** (FGUN), consolidated a few years ago, could have cells in the main cities of Colombia, such as Medellín, Barranquilla, Bogotá and Cali. However, its actions have been less noteworthy than those of the other fronts. The alleged **commander** of the FGUN is Jaime Galvis Rivera, alias “Ariel” or “Lorenzo Alcantruz.”

Geography

According to independent reports and estimates by InSight Crime, the ELN operates in **at least 23** and in **eight** of Venezuela's 24 states.

In Colombia, their **main strongholds** are in the departments of Chocó, in the northwest of the country, Norte de Santander, in the northeast, and Arauca, in the east of the country, where they control part of drug trafficking, smuggling, and extortion.

To a lesser extent, but with strategic positions, the ELN **is also** in the departments of Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño, and Vichada. These departments are key for their coca crops, cocaine production, and cross-border corridors to Ecuador and Venezuela.

On the border with Venezuela, the **main** War Fronts are the Northeast and the East, which have used their strength in the region to increase their presence **within Venezuela** in recent years.

The Venezuelan states where the ELN has the greatest presence are Zulia, Táchira, Apure and Amazonas. In these areas, the guerrillas settled in border municipalities that allow them to control criminal economies and guarantee mobility between Colombia and Venezuela.

The ELN has also extended its presence to states in central and eastern Venezuela, such as Bolívar, Anzoátegui and Guárico.

Allies and Enemies

The ELN has faced a wide range of enemies, from paramilitary groups to insurgencies.

One of the main enemies of the ELN in Colombia have been the Gaitanistas, also known as the Urabeños, the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC) or the Gulf Clan. In Antioquia and Chocó, the two groups have been engaged a territorial dispute since 2019 for the control of drug trafficking and illegal mining areas.

Along the Colombia-Venezuela border, between Arauca and Apure, the ELN has faced off against the 10th Front of the ex-FARC mafia.

In 2019, it was reported that both groups had made **non-aggression agreements** in the departments of Arauca, Boyacá, and Casanare. However, in 2022, the 10th Front and the ELN's Domingo Laín Front **began** to clash in Arauca and Apure, in a conflict that involved the Venezuelan security forces and elements of another FARC dissident group: the Second Marquetalia.

Since 2018, the Second Marquetalia, under the command of Luciano Marín Arango, alias "Iván Márquez," **established agreements** with the ELN on Venezuelan soil with the aim of defining territorial control, non-aggression pacts, and division of criminal income.

In Norte de Santander and Cesar, two Colombian departments located east of the border with Venezuela, the ELN **displaced** the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) to become one of the most powerful groups in those areas. In that same region, it has maintained a non-aggression agreement with the 33rd Front of the ex-FARC mafia.

In Venezuela, the ELN's most important alliance has been with **authorities and security forces**, which have allowed it to act with a large degree of freedom and opportunity. This relationship is even more evident in the border states with Colombia, where the guerrillas often **act in consort** or with guidance from security forces or political figures.

Another of Venezuela's criminal actors, with whom the ELN has had an ambiguous relationship, is the Bolivarian Liberation Forces (FBL), also known as the Patriotic Forces of National Liberation (FPLN), or "Boliches." In Apure state, the ELN does not interfere in FBL business due to requests made from Caracas, according to sources consulted by InSight Crime.

Prospects

The ELN's expansion into Venezuela, beyond allowing it to rejuvenate itself, has furthered its status as one of the main threats to security in Latin America.

Currently, the guerrillas have **resumed** peace talks with the president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, in a new effort to resolve the conflict. However, these talks face several challenges, among them the ELN's federated structure of the guerrillas, which gives the commanders of each war front a certain independence from the COCE's orders.

In addition, the ELN is going through a historic moment: the guerrillas have a force of up to 5,000 members, including the militias; it controls a wide variety of criminal economies in both Colombia and Venezuela; and has leaders who, like Pablito, are cynical about the prospects for peace.

Added to this is its extensive presence in Venezuela, where it operates with some freedom thanks to relations with politicians and security forces.

Thus, even if the peace talks with the government of Gustavo Petro are fruitful, whether the ELN will show a real commitment to return to Colombia, lay down its arms, and demobilize remains to be seen. Even if the ELN does strike a peace deal and demobilize, much like with the FARC, a large quantity of its members may stay in both countries, refuse to hand over their weapons, and keep up their criminal ways.