



A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups

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Principal Findings

What's new? Political turmoil, economic ruin and heightening tensions with neighbouring countries have furnished non-state armed groups, including guerillas from Colombia, criminal syndicates, paramilitaries and pro-government vigilantes known as *colectivos*, with the means to expand their influence and presence across Venezuela.

Why does it matter? Armed groups filling the vacuum left by a government determined to resist domestic opposition, international pressure and mounting sanctions pose a threat of escalating violence in the absence of negotiations, while also entailing major risks of sabotage in the wake of any eventual political settlement.

What should be done? These groups' threat to peace must be contained, and that imperative should feature prominently in future talks aimed at settling the crisis. Those negotiations should include Venezuela's military. Demobilising each armed group will require a tailored approach, but most should aim for deals securing acquiescence in a comprehensive political settlement.

Executive Summary

As Venezuela's turmoil deepens with no end in sight, power is seeping out of formal state institutions and pooling in the hands of various armed irregulars. Behind this phenomenon are diverse causes. The ceaseless struggle for supremacy between President Nicolás Maduro's government and opposition forces has turned state organs into partisan bodies that either solicit support from armed groups or overlook them. Economic ruin brought about by government mismanagement – now worsened by U.S. sanctions – has pushed numerous Venezuelans into illicit livelihoods and the orbit of organised crime. Meanwhile, the country's long, porous borders have allowed Colombian guerrillas to gain footholds deep inside the country. The armed groups are far from identical, but all are ready to use violence and territorial control to further their goals, and any might sabotage a settlement that Venezuela's competing political forces eventually agree to. Defanging them will require approaches tailored to each outfit, but the main goal should be to demobilise fighters and seek their buy-in to a deal that ends Venezuela's collective agony.

Guerrillas from Colombia, loyalist pro-government militias known as *colectivos*, paramilitaries and a catalogue of criminal gangs stand out as the main non-state armed groups now operating in Venezuela. Their methods, goals and affinities vary hugely. Some profess ideological motivations while others pursue naked criminal profit. Some work in alleged collusion with ruling elites, while others purportedly have ties to opposition elites. The opposition led by Juan Guaidó and its international allies, now numbering close to 60 countries, accuse all but the right-wing paramilitaries of complicity with state security forces, or even with the high military command and political elites within *chavismo*, the movement named after the late president, Hugo Chávez. But the exact nature of the ties between these armed groups and the state, and the mutual benefits that arise from them, are not always easy to identify. Skirmishes between state and non-state actors acting in supposed coordination have exposed the high levels of mistrust that divide them.

Formal talks between the government and opposition are moribund, but if and when they restart, they should urgently address the questions of how to reduce the armed irregulars' influence and how to stop them from scuttling agreements that the sparring Venezuelan sides may reach. As the types of armed groups present different problems, each will need its own remedy. Dealing with Colombian guerrillas will require intensive cooperation between Caracas and Bogotá, ideally as part of efforts in the latter capital to end the insurgencies through negotiations aimed at general demobilisation. Some *colectivos* may be persuaded to reassume their historical role as mediators between state and society. As for criminal elements, several of them may also accept deals whereby they avoid prosecution or face reduced sentences in exchange for giving up arms. Experience in other Latin American countries shows that such tactics, while not always easy to swallow, are more likely to help the Venezuelan state reassert its writ with a minimum of additional bloodshed.

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A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups

I. Introduction

President Nicolás Maduro's government is clinging to office in Venezuela, tightening its authoritarian grip on the country's politics and society even as opposition to it has grown more uncompromising and received the support of a rising number of countries. It is doing so in the name of preserving the power of *chavismo*, the movement embracing the left-wing populist ideology propagated by Maduro's predecessor Hugo Chávez, but at the cost of growing disarray in state institutions and national economic catastrophe.

The battle between the government and opposition intensified in January 2019, when the head of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, asserted his own claim to the presidency, saying Maduro's re-election the year before was invalid. As a result, for over a year Venezuela has had two leaders claiming to be legitimate president, as well as two legislatures and two Supreme Courts.¹ The government's move in early January 2020 to seize control over the National Assembly has served only to splinter the country's institutions further.² Meanwhile, the U.S. has imposed sweeping sanctions, including on oil sales, aggravating the Venezuelan economy's sharp contraction since

¹ On 21 July 2017, amid mass protests against the Maduro government, the opposition-controlled National Assembly swore in an alternative Supreme Court as a response to the perceived bias of the official one, which was packed with judges supportive of the government in the last days of the previously *chavista*-controlled National Assembly in 2015. The National Assembly declared those appointments void in 2017 and proceeded to swear in a new Supreme Court. Maduro's reaction was swift; he called the new judges criminals, ordering their arrest "one by one". Three judges were detained, and the rest fled abroad. Maduro's government has continuously used the Supreme Court to undermine parliament's authority through various rulings. Members of the new National Constituent Assembly, all of whom are government supporters, were elected in July 2017. Pedro Pablo Peñalosa, "3 magistrados detenidos y 30 en la clandestinidad: así va la cacería de Nicolás Maduro contra los jueces nombrados por el Parlamento", Univision, 25 July 2018; Jennifer McCoy, "Venezuela's controversial new Constituent Assembly, explained", *Washington Post*, 1 August 2017. See also Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°36, *Power without the People: Averting Venezuela's Breakdown*, 19 June 2017.

² On 5 January, Maduro's government and state security forces prevented Guaidó and other opposition legislators from entering the National Assembly precinct and participating in the vote on the Assembly's new one-year presidency. The *chavista* deputies, together with some former opposition deputies, took part in a sham vote that flouted established procedures and declared Luis Parra the new National Assembly president. Parra is a former opposition deputy who has been accused of corruption in relation to government food programs. Guaidó and the majority of the Assembly's deputies held a parallel vote later that same day, in which Guaidó was re-elected Assembly president. The Maduro government and some of its international allies (though not all) recognise Parra as Assembly leader. At the same time, 58 countries including the U.S. and most of South America continue to recognise Guaidó as both Assembly leader and Venezuela's interim president. Ana Vanessa Herrero and Julie Turkewitz, "Venezuela's National Assembly opens for business: scuffles, tear gas and doused lights", *The New York Times*, 7 January 2020. See also Crisis Group Statement, "Seizure of Parliament Plunges Venezuela into Deeper Turmoil", 7 January 2020.

2013 due to falling oil prices, government mismanagement and corruption. Despite recent efforts to scrap inefficient state controls and dollarise the economy, much of the population suffers regular interruptions to electricity and water supply, while hunger is rife and the public health system is in ruins.³ Certain public services still operate, including the main offices of state bureaucracy, urban transport and waste collection and police and fire emergency response, albeit with numerous problems and shortfalls.

The central state continues to oversee territorial control, law enforcement and maintenance of public order. It funds, supervises and appoints the heads of the armed forces and other security services, and takes the military's loyalty extremely seriously.⁴ But the ability of the government in Caracas to carry out these functions is also slipping. Security forces have failed to contain Venezuela's extremely high levels of criminal violence and have themselves been charged with numerous human rights violations.⁵ At the same time, the political and economic crisis has both weakened the security forces – which must get by with depleted resources while grappling with desertions and internal tensions – and empowered non-state armed groups, which have grown in size or scaled up their operations in the country thanks to the boom in illicit business coinciding with the formal economy's collapse.⁶

The result is a realignment in the country's internal security as irregular armed outfits have partly replaced the state security apparatus in the southern states of Bolívar and Amazonas, as well as in certain other rural and urban settings, particularly along borders. Venezuela's state forces are not obsolete or irrelevant. Their support for Maduro makes them the backbone of the status quo and will make them critical in any transition.⁷ But as their operational power and territorial presence fades, they are forming unstable alliances with, or tolerating the rise of, non-state

³ In March 2019, the country suffered a nationwide electrical blackout lasting 50 hours, which was followed by recurrent service cuts across the country. In various parts of the country, the government now applies an electricity rationing program that cuts off the supply for many hours. Phil Gunson, "The Darkest Hours: Power Outages Raise the Temperature in Venezuela", Crisis Group Commentary, 15 March 2019. Regarding the problems in the health service as well as food insecurity, see "UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on the Humanitarian Situation in Venezuela", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 6 November 2019. Regarding the recent bonfire of economic policies and their impact, see Ryan Dube, Juan Forero and Kejal Vyas, "Maduro gives economy a freer hand to keep his grip on Venezuela", Wall Street Journal, 30 January 2020.

⁴ Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°39, *Venezuela's Military Enigma*, 16 September 2019.

⁵ The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported in July last year that Venezuela's security apparatus is responsible for a series of political and other crimes. "Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of Human Rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela", OHCHR, July 2019.

⁶ An estimated 1,500 Venezuelan military officers deserted for Colombia and Brazil during and immediately after the efforts backed by Guaidó and international allies on 23 February 2019 to get humanitarian aid into the country. Recent reports suggest that the military high command is alarmed at the high ongoing rate of desertion. "Militares desertores en Colombia, entre el olvido y el engaño", France 24, 5 June 2019. "Antes la alarmante desertión, el ministro de Defensa de Venezuela ordenó convencer a los soldados de regresar 'como sea'", Infobae, 20 January 2020.

⁷ Crisis Group Briefing, *Venezuela's Military Enigma*, op. cit.

armed groups, which provide crude versions of state services and assure locals some form of livelihood.

This report examines the main non-state armed groups in Venezuela, assesses their relations with government officials and political elites, and explores how their activities and alliances could affect the outcome of Venezuela's turmoil.⁸ It also points to how negotiators from both sides in future talks could seek to manage the threat posed by these groups in any eventual transition. The report builds on Crisis Group's continuous coverage of Venezuela's socio-economic and political crises over the last five years.⁹

⁸ This report does not consider the case of Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militia whose alleged presence in Venezuela has become a leading concern of the U.S., Colombia and the Venezuelan opposition, as reflected in the January ministerial conference on terrorism in Bogotá. "Duque denunció presencia de células de Hezbolá en Venezuela", *El Tiempo*, 20 January 2020. Although evidence linking the group to Latin America's worst-ever terrorist attack, the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires in 1994, remains very strong, the supposed presence of Hizbollah in and around Venezuela appears to be based largely on sightings of individuals reportedly connected to the organisation. See "La evidencia que se llevó Pompeo de los nexos de Maduro y Hezbolá", *El Tiempo*, 26 January 2020. Crisis Group has until now encountered no evidence that the group has an organised, armed presence in Venezuela.

⁹ See, in addition to previously cited publications, Crisis Group Latin America Briefings N°33, *Venezuela: Unnatural Disaster*, 30 July 2015; N°35, *Venezuela: Edge of the Precipice*, 24 June 2016; and N°37, *Venezuela: Hunger by Default*, 23 November 2017; as well as Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°65, *Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela*, 21 March 2018; and N°73, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, 28 February 2019.

II. Armed Groups, Crime and the State

Irregular armed groups have a long history in Venezuela.¹⁰ But in recent years their presence has taken on a qualitatively different character. In theory, non-state armed groups, while not direct enemies of the state like insurgencies, nevertheless seek a degree of autonomy from state institutions and formal politics. Yet in Venezuela, as in other Latin American countries, the relationship between armed groups and the public sector is far from clear-cut. Many irregular outfits have direct relations and common interests with parts of the state, which support or influence them either secretly or openly.¹¹ For some state officials or politicians, these shadowy groups prove attractive because they can generate income via their illicit activities while also serving political ends, for example by intimidating people in order to secure votes. Growing evidence and eyewitness testimony indicate that such relations are becoming more commonplace in Venezuela, although the country's highly polarised political landscape has given rise to mutual accusations of complicity in criminal conduct that are not always grounded in reality.¹²

A. Guerrillas

The guerrillas in Venezuela today are largely transplants from neighbouring Colombia, although they do also recruit local members who in certain areas outnumber the Colombians.

The National Liberation Army (ELN) and the disbanded Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) maintained a limited presence in Venezuela well before

¹⁰ Guerrilla movements under the influence of Cuba operated in Venezuela throughout the 1960s, attempting to overthrow the country's democratically elected governments. For a favourable account of the guerrillas in Venezuela, see Pedro Pablo Linárez, "Lucha Armada en Venezuela", Bolivarian University of Venezuela, 2006. Venezuela's 2,200km border with Colombia is porous, enabling Colombian guerrillas to cross back and forth at least since the 1980s. Conflict between Colombian guerrillas and paramilitaries also spread into Venezuela starting in the 1990s. Socorro Ramírez, "Colombia y sus vecinos", *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 192, July-August 2004.

¹¹ Certain vigilante, militia and paramilitary groups, notably in Colombia, urban areas of Brazil and in the Northern Triangle of Central America, have been tied to the state. Ulrich Schneckener, "Fragile Statehood, Armed Non-State Actors and Security Governance", in Alan Bryden and Marina Caparini (eds.), *Private Actors and Security Governance* (Geneva, 2006). Some scholars argue that for some governments the existence of non-state armed groups is a "convenient scapegoat" that serves to distract the public from other problems and entrench the social status quo. Dennis Rodgers and Robert Muggah, "Gangs as Non-State Armed Groups: The Central American Case", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2019); pp. 301-317. Regarding definitions of non-state armed groups in Venezuela, see "Colectivo, Paramilitar", Parapolicial, PROVEA.

¹² Maduro's government has made unsubstantiated claims that Colombian paramilitaries funded by the Venezuelan opposition have planned to assassinate him dozens of times. See, for instance, "Venezuela arrests Colombians over Maduro assassination plot", BBC, 10 June 2013. Meanwhile, evidence presented to the UN by the Colombian government showing alleged Venezuelan support for Colombian guerrillas came into question when several photos were proved to have been taken outside Venezuela. "Gobierno enviará a ONU versión 'actualizada' del dossier contra Maduro", *El Tiempo*, 1 October 2019.

Chávez assumed the presidency in 1999.¹³ Chávez was generally tolerant of their activities, declaring as early as 1999 that his government would be neutral in relation to the armed conflict in Colombia. On occasion, he expressed active support for the guerrillas' hard left political stances.¹⁴ Ties between Chávez and the guerrillas deteriorated, however, during the last years of his presidency as relations with the Colombian government of former president Juan Manuel Santos improved. Venezuela played an active role in peace negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government that began in 2012. For at least its first four years, the Maduro administration continued the line espoused by Chávez, supporting the conclusion of peace negotiations and refraining from open support for the guerrillas.¹⁵

Since 2017, however, Venezuela's heightened political instability and deepening economic crisis, combined with the spread of new or expansionary armed groups in Colombia following the FARC insurgency's end, have boosted the guerrilla presence in Venezuela.¹⁶ Colombian guerrillas from the ELN and dissidents from the FARC who reject the peace process use Venezuela as a safe haven and a source of revenue through illicit activities. Their presence has extended far into the interior, with reports suggesting that they operate in at least thirteen of Venezuela's 24 states, although the heartlands of their activity remain the states of Bolívar and Amazonas in southern Venezuela and the regions of Apure and Táchira, adjacent to the Colombian border.¹⁷ In addition to these groups' traditional activities of drug trafficking, extortion and smuggling, they are now heavily involved in illegal mining of gold and other minerals, from which they are believed to obtain most of their revenue. According to sources close to these groups, both FARC dissidents and the ELN make more than half of their income from mining inside Venezuela and Colombia.¹⁸

The presence of these groups on Venezuelan soil, often operating with the connivance of corrupt authorities, has sparked escalating tensions between Venezuela and Colombia, replete with threats of military reprisal. Bogotá insists that Caracas and the guerrillas are acting in concert, a claim that has assumed far greater urgency

¹³ For instance, in 1995 eight Venezuelan soldiers died after a guerrilla attack on the border with Colombia. At this time, the Colombian guerrillas had bases inside Venezuela and were involved in kidnappings and other illegal activities on Venezuelan soil. Ludmila Vinogradoff, "Mueren ocho 'marines' venezolanos en un ataque de la guerrilla colombiana", *El País*, 27 February 1995.

¹⁴ Miguel Goncalves, "Conditional Convenience: Venezuelan Support for FARC since Hugo Chávez", *The Yale Review of International Studies*, January 2014. See also "The FARC Files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the Secret Archive of 'Raul Reyes'", International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011.

¹⁵ For an overview of the role of the Venezuelan government in the Colombian peace process, see David Smilde and Dimitris Pantoulas, "The Venezuelan Crisis, Regional Dynamics and the Colombian Peace Process", Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, 2016.

¹⁶ On these changing conditions in Venezuela and Colombia in 2017, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°63, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, 19 October 2017; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Power without the People: Averting Venezuela's Breakdown*, op. cit.

¹⁷ On Bolívar and Amazonas, see Crisis Group Report, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, op. cit. A recent report indicates that FARC dissidents control municipalities in Apure state and are assisting with health and school services there. Sebastiana Barráez, "Elorza, el pueblo venezolano controlado por las FARC: 'El comandante Lucas es el amo del lugar'", *Infobae*, 13 April 2019. See also "The Guerrillas Are the Police: Social Control and Abuses by Armed Groups in Colombia's Arauca Province and Venezuela's Apure State", Human Rights Watch, January 2020.

¹⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, op. cit., p. 6.

since a number of FARC commanders announced they were taking up arms again at the end of August 2019, from a location that senior Colombian officials claimed was in Venezuela.¹⁹ Colombian President Iván Duque told the UN General Assembly that he had “irrefutable and conclusive proof that corroborates the support of the dictatorship for criminal and narco-terrorist groups that operate in Venezuela”, although some of the photographs in the file he handed over were later found to have been taken in Colombia, not Venezuela.²⁰ Venezuelan opposition leaders have used similar language, calling the guerrilla groups terrorists who work hand in glove with the Maduro government.²¹ But no one has presented incontrovertible proof of close ties between senior officials in Caracas and the guerrillas.

The activities of guerrilla and dissident groups across Venezuela bring them into close contact with state officials and local residents, while also triggering violent clashes with other groups coveting illicit revenues. In their mining operations, guerrilla groups subcontract other armed outfits to control the miners and the impoverished local population, sometimes through coercion, but sometimes by offering them job opportunities and staple goods.²² To transport and export the gold, the guerrillas rely on cooperation with state security forces and trafficking networks, both of which take sizeable cuts of the revenues.²³ Evidence also suggests, however, that the relationship between Venezuela’s military and Colombian guerrillas can rapidly turn sour: Venezuelan troops reportedly killed two FARC dissidents on the border next to Zulia state in July 2019, while ELN guerrillas clashed with Venezuelan National Guard in Bolívar state in late November 2018, killing three guardsmen.²⁴

¹⁹ Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°40, *Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia’s New Guerrilla Schism*, 20 September 2019.

²⁰ “Colombia’s Duque tells U.N. that dossier proves Maduro supports terrorists”, Reuters, 25 September 2019. Following the declaration of the new FARC schism on 29 August and in response to perceived Venezuelan aggression, the Colombian government pushed hard for the activation on 23 September of the Rio Treaty, also known as the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, a mutual defence pact.

²¹ “Acuerdo en rechazo a la presencia y expansión de grupos narcoterroristas en el territorio nacional”, Venezuela National Assembly, 3 September 2019.

²² According to media reports, in some parts of the country the ELN is helping distribute government food parcels, known as CLAP. “Las evidencias de la alianza del Eln con Maduro”, *El Tiempo*, 20 May 2019.

²³ Crisis Group Report, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela’s Violent South*, op. cit.

²⁴ On the killing of the FARC dissidents, see Caleb Zuleta, “El Ejército de Maduro también mata a guerrilleros ex-FARC”, *Alnavío*, 31 July 2019. On the clashes between the ELN and the National Guard, see Bram Ebus, “A Rising Tide of Murder in Venezuela’s Mineral-Rich South”, Crisis Group Commentary, 12 November 2018. The ELN commander involved in those clashes was reportedly detained with numerous privileges in the Fuerte Tiuna barracks in Caracas. Sebastiana Barráez, “Oficiales venezolanos toman café y oyen vallenatos con un jefe de la ELN que mató a tres sargentos de la Guardia Nacional”, Infobae, 1 September 2019. Venezuelan security forces reportedly killed another ELN commander in Zulia state early in November. Sebastiana Barráez, “Muerte en una discoteca del Zulia: cómo cayó un comandante del ELN por el disparo de un policía venezolano”, Infobae, 6 November 2019.

B. *Colectivos*

So-called *colectivos* are civil associations that in some cases function as para-police groups and that have gained prominence as Venezuela's political conflict has intensified. Both *colectivos*' opponents and their defenders tend to attribute almost mythical dimensions to their importance, yet they have without doubt become *chavismo*'s backbone through coercive control over street protests and influence in low-income communities.²⁵ Their relationship with central government and state institutions, however, is far from harmonious.

In Venezuela, the term *colectivo* has traditionally referred to a local organisation with a left-wing ideology that seeks, in theory, to serve the common good of its members and the general public. In practice, opinions as to what these groups now represent differ markedly. Supporters of *chavismo* emphasise their community roots and commitment to locals' well-being as defining features. They argue that these bodies function as social auditors monitoring the progress of what Chávez called the Bolivarian revolution, supporting and helping execute government policies at the neighbourhood level.²⁶

From their opponents' viewpoint, on the other hand, *colectivos* constitute shadowy paramilitary units, linked to organised crime, which follow government orders and use guns and fear to exercise social control, mainly in the poorest neighbourhoods of Caracas and other big cities.²⁷ Members of the *colectivos* engaged in acts of political harassment under Chávez when they attacked TV stations, business organisations, diplomatic missions or figures opposed to the government.²⁸ Venezuela's extremely polarised politics have led many in the opposition camp to scorn any public expression of support for *chavismo* as the fruit of coercive *colectivos*, prompting violent reprisals against people with no links to these bodies.²⁹

Under the Maduro government the *colectivos* have taken a more active role in "the defence" of the revolution, and during opposition demonstrations of 2014 and 2017 engaged in violent and criminal acts against protesters.³⁰ *Colectivos*' reputation as brutal para-police enforcers has been reinforced over the past year following

²⁵ One writer says the *colectivos* are "revolutionary grassroots organizations [that] represent the backbone of the Bolivarian process" and are at the "forefront of the struggle for a new kind of state". George Ciccariello-Maher, "Collective Panic in Venezuela", *Jacobin*, June 2014. Conversely, others say the *colectivos* "have a green light to kill any person who is against Maduro's regime". Pachi Valencia, "Licencia para matar: Los colectivos armados en Venezuela siembran terror en el país", *La Gran Época*, 25 June 2019.

²⁶ For a description of the *colectivos*, see Daniel García Marco, "Qué son los colectivos y cómo operan para 'defender la revolución bolivariana' en Venezuela", BBC, 7 July 2017.

²⁷ Ludmila Vinogradoff, "'Brazo armado' Venezuela: así son y operan los 'colectivos' chavistas, la cara más oscura del régimen", *Clarín*, 5 April 2019. Thomas Dangel, "Colectivos en Venezuela: de civiles a delincuentes", *PanAm Post*, 17 May 2019. Ronny Rodríguez Rosas, "Represión y colectivos para aplacar protestas en Caracas y el interior del país", *Efecto Cocuyo*, 31 March 2019.

²⁸ Fabiola Sánchez, "Detienen a Lina Ron por ataque a Globovisión", *El Nuevo Herald*, 4 August, 2009. "Atacan misión del Vaticano en Venezuela", VOA, 4 February 2009.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, social scientist, 4 April 2019.

³⁰ Daniel Wallis, "Venezuela violence puts focus on militant 'colectivo' groups", Reuters, 13 February 2014. Patricia Torres and Nicholas Casey, "Los colectivos venezolanos, las bandas de civiles armados que atacan a los manifestantes y defienden a Maduro", *The New York Times*, 22 April 2017.

opposition attempts led by Guaidó to overthrow the Maduro government, which has responded by relying on the *colectivos*' power to intimidate opponents and mobilise supporters.³¹ Both on 23 February, when Maduro's opponents attempted to force humanitarian aid into Venezuela from neighbouring Colombia and Brazil, and during the opposition's failed civil-military uprising on 30 April, the *colectivos* played a leading role in street clashes. Witnesses to the February events on the Colombian border report that the *colectivos* were more effective in deterring the efforts of Guaidó's supporters than the security forces proper.³²

More recently, government supporters carrying firearms, rocks and sticks violently prevented opposition deputies from entering the National Assembly while also harassing journalists.³³ The press and the opposition called the mob *colectivos*, but bona fide members of these groups who were around the National Assembly at the time said they had nothing to do with the violence. Representatives of the *colectivos* nevertheless recognise that they carry out joint actions with state security forces to "preserve peace", and many *colectivo* members are also part of the official Venezuelan civilian militia, an adjunct of the armed forces said by the government to be 3.3 million strong.³⁴

A direct relationship connects some *colectivos* and the government. But not all are the same, and some have stayed relatively independent of central government and remain wary of falling under top-down political control. One group of *colectivos*, for example, has maintained a continuous presence in Venezuelan politics since the 1970s and 1980s, years before the emergence of Chávez. Members of this group, such as the Coordinadora Simón Bolívar in the working-class 23 de Enero neighbourhood of Caracas, display clear left-wing leanings and are committed to improving community life through better public policies, cultural activities and campaigning against police repression and abuse.³⁵ However, even these groups are increasingly aligned with Maduro's government, arguing that Venezuela is under attack from imperialist forces across the region.³⁶

Two other categories, which also are branded *colectivos*, display far less interest in grassroots mobilisation. One is made up of opportunists and criminals who use their supposed affiliation with *chavismo* to gain legitimacy and act with impunity. The Frente 5 de Marzo, for example, is a *colectivo* with professed links to security

³¹ As pressure mounted on Maduro at the start of the year, *colectivos* staged various public events where they swore to defend the Bolivarian revolution and Maduro. "Colectivos armados' llaman a defender revolución", ANSA, 7 January 2019.

³² Lucia Newman, "Venezuela: Who are the colectivos?", Al Jazeera, 9 May 2019.

³³ "Venezuela opposition says govt. loyalists fired at them", AFP, 15 January 2020. "Colectivo chavista negó haber agredido a periodistas cerca del Palacio Federal Legislativo", *El Nacional*, 13 January 2020.

³⁴ On the reported size of the state militia, which has not been independently verified, see "Maduro despliega milicias en las calles de Venezuela para 'garantizar la paz'", EFE, 13 November 2019. Also on state militia, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Venezuela's Military Enigma*, op. cit.

³⁵ Juan Contreras, "Nacimiento de la Coordinadora Cultural Simón Bolívar en la Parroquia 23 de Enero", *Rebelión*, 8 February 2008.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, *colectivo* member, Caracas, 18 August 2018.

forces and the *chavista* political elite.³⁷ Nonetheless, its leader, together with four other *colectivo* members, was killed in a skirmish with the police in 2014, an event that sent shock waves through the Maduro government and led to the dismissal of General Miguel Rodríguez Torres, then the interior minister.³⁸ Groups of this sort are mainly dedicated to illegal activities such as extortion, but also do some community work in the areas where they operate in order to win local support and a degree of public complicity.³⁹ On many occasions, these outfits are at loggerheads with the more politically oriented *colectivos*, although in moments of crisis they rally to defend the “revolution” and follow government dictates.

A last category consists of paramilitary or para-police outfits. These are directly related to the state, and are often the creations of politicians or senior government officials, which use them as private shock forces. State institutions or specific politicians fund them, and they spend their time working on behalf of their beneficiaries. *Chavista* strongman Diosdado Cabello, for example, had known ties with one *colectivo* leader, the late Lina Ron, while the links to the *colectivos* of the former mayor of Libertador Municipality in Caracas and current “protector” of the border state of Táchira, Freddy Bernal, are also overt.⁴⁰ These *colectivos* do not always have a territorial base and usually coexist with the other two types at state-organised events and initiatives. One *colectivo* that has direct links with public officials and has allegedly participated in police operations is Tres Raíces, which operates in the 23 de Enero neighbourhood. Its members took part in a joint operation with the special police unit FAES against the renegade police officer Óscar Pérez in 2018, as a result of which both Pérez and the leader of Tres Raíces died.⁴¹

Central state officials have attempted to co-opt community-based *colectivos* in recent years with some success, turning a number of them into increasingly mercenary paramilitary outfits.⁴² In a series of interviews between 2013 and 2018 with prominent *colectivo* members in Caracas, Crisis Group noticed that the relative autonomy enjoyed by some of the *colectivos* had waned over the years. In 2013 the main aim of these groups was to fight for the “communal state” that they regarded as Chávez’s main legacy, while in 2015 the members indicated that their overriding objective was to guarantee food and staples to their community in alliance with the state,

³⁷ Ronna Risquez, “Líder del Frente 5 de Marzo: ‘Los colectivos somos un mal necesario’”, *Runrunes*, 24 October 2014.

³⁸ Vanesa Moreno, “Lucha de poder causó la muerte de dos integrantes del Frente 5 de Marzo”, *Efecto Cocuyo*, 15 December 2015. For a political analysis of the event, see also David Smilde and Hugo Pérez Hernáiz, “Removal of minister reveals tenuous state monopoly on violence”, *Venezuelablog*, 27 October 2014.

³⁹ “Colectivos se fortalecen con la anuencia del Estado”, *PROVEA*, 2 April 2019.

⁴⁰ “Ud. lo vio – Lina Ron orgullosa de ser amiga de Diosdado Cabello”, *Globovisión* video excerpt, 6 September 2009. For an obituary of Lina Ron detailing her activities and the controversies around them, see “Muere Lina Ron: el chavismo llora a la más polémica de sus ‘revolucionarias’”, *BBC Mundo*, 5 March 2011. “Freddy Bernal confirma intervención de colectivos en operativo contra Oscar Pérez”, *El Impulso*, 15 January 2018. “Freddy Bernal se reunió con colectivos en el puente Simón Bolívar”, *El Nacional*, 14 April 2019.

⁴¹ Lorena Meléndez, “Colectivo Tres Raíces: ‘Ha muerto el león más feroz del 23 de Enero’”, *Runrunes*, 18 January 2018.

⁴² Taylor Luke, “Maduro turns to violent ‘mercenary’ colectivos to maintain order”, *PRI*, April 25, 2019.

and prevent any “private sector speculation”. In 2018, many were working as bodyguards for state officials, and instead of discussing community power spoke far more about “imperialism” and their hostility toward the opposition.⁴³

As a result, all three sorts of *colectivos* have developed common characteristics. All are to some extent armed and opposed previous disarmament policies promoted by the government to reduce gun crime.⁴⁴ In addition, they all derive local power by exhibiting connections with the state; they usually operate under strict vertical command systems; and they all defend the revolution and are willing to resort to violence to this end. Even so, it is not unusual for fights to occur between different *colectivos* operating in the same area. In one of the most recent incidents, five members died in a clash between two groups in the 23 de Enero neighbourhood.⁴⁵

That said, *colectivos* are not necessarily passive recipients of government orders. Different factions within the Venezuelan government control separate *colectivos*, and as a result the groups’ interests do not always coincide. On several occasions security forces have openly clashed with the *colectivos*, forcing the government into hard choices as to which side to favour. In 2014, as mentioned above, former interior minister Miguel Rodríguez Torres was sacked after police and members of the 5 de Marzo *colectivo* fought, with five group leaders killed after the authorities accused them of criminal activities.⁴⁶ Members of the group and other organisations demanded that Rodríguez Torres be dismissed, a request with which Maduro complied.⁴⁷

Four years later, frictions between the military high command and *colectivos* resurfaced when Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino López voiced indignation following the release of a video showing *colectivo* members with guns announcing their willingness to use violence in defence of the government. “The state and the Venezuelan people have the armed forces constitutionally fulfilling their tasks”, he stated, arguing that there was no need for armed groups to rally to the government’s side.⁴⁸ Spokespeople for the *colectivos* retaliated by accusing Padrino López of failing to understand the “civic-military” bond at the heart of *chavismo*, and insisting that

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, different *colectivo* leaders in Caracas, April and May 2013, November 2015 and September 2018.

⁴⁴ In 2013, the National Assembly, then controlled by *chavistas*, passed a gun control and disarmament law. The *colectivos* were loath to hand over their weapons to the state, however, arguing that as “the armed vigilantes behind the *chavista* revolution” they need the guns since the opposition could destabilise the government at any time. Crisis Group interviews, two *colectivo* leaders, 23 de Enero, Caracas, 15 August 2013. The law eventually proved a failure, and official disarmament efforts have since been discarded. James Bargent, “Disarmament Law in Venezuela Yields Near Zero Results”, InSight Crime, 18 August 2014.

⁴⁵ “Colectivos del 23 de Enero matan al hermano de Heyker Vásquez”, El Pitazo, 13 January 2020.

⁴⁶ One of those killed, José Odreman, offered declarations to the press before the clashes with the police in which he held Rodríguez Torres responsible for their possible fate. “Maduro reemplaza a controversial ministro del Interior y le da 15 días de ‘descanso’”, EFE, 24 October 2014.

⁴⁷ “Sale Rodríguez Torres y lo sustituye Carmen Meléndez”, EFE, 24 October 2014. The relation between Torres and Maduro deteriorated further, and in 2018 Torres was arrested on charges of espionage, conspiracy and instigating a military rebellion. He sits in prison to this day.

⁴⁸ “Padrino López: Rechazamos grupos armados ‘que se hacen llamar colectivos’”, Aporrea, 2 March 2018.

they had become part of the Venezuelan state and would continue defending the Bolivarian revolution.⁴⁹

The relation between Padrino López and the *colectivos* does not seem to have improved greatly since then, with the minister recently stating that the armed forces are obliged to combat all armed groups present in the country.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Maduro's explicit backing for *colectivos* and their central role in seeking to quash pro-Guaidó protests restrains the armed forces in any action against them.⁵¹

C. *Paramilitaries*

Right-wing paramilitaries, to use the Maduro government's terminology, are illegal combat units usually acting on behalf of foreign governments and in collaboration with the Venezuelan opposition. As with the guerrillas, the paramilitaries are supposedly imported from Colombia, where they were involved for years in both extreme counter-insurgent violence and organised crime, including drug trafficking. Under former president Álvaro Uribe, the government began negotiating their demobilisation in 2003, concluding an agreement in 2006. But some of the paramilitaries were only loosely committed to this peace process, giving rise to a second rash of criminality.⁵² Their activities in Venezuela allegedly include crimes such as harassment, extortion and kidnapping of peasants and landowners, as well as intimidation of *chavista* loyalists and leaders.⁵³ Although core members of these outfits are Colombian, recent reports indicate that they have tried to recruit new members from among Venezuelan migrants.⁵⁴

The Maduro government has placed great emphasis on the role played by right-wing Colombian paramilitary units in the country, saying there are five that participate in various illegal activities and are tolerated by Colombian armed forces along the border.⁵⁵ The Venezuelan military report, not always truthfully, that they have suffered casualties in paramilitary attacks on their posts near the border.⁵⁶ They

⁴⁹ "Colectivos: Padrino López no aguantó la presión de la derecha", *Noticiero Digital*, 3 March 2018.

⁵⁰ Sebastiana Barráez, "Padrino López pretende desligarse de los colectivos chavistas y pidió a la Fuerza Armada actuar contra cualquier grupo violento", *Infobae*, 6 April 2019.

⁵¹ Daniel Lozano, "Nicolás Maduro: 'El primer defensor de los colectivos soy yo'", *El Mundo*, 4 April 2019.

⁵² Regarding the paramilitaries in Colombia and their dismantling as a result of the 2003-2006 peace process under Uribe, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°8, *Demobilising the Paramilitaries in Colombia: An Achievable Goal?*, 5 August 2004; Douglas Porch and María José Rasmussen, "Demobilization of Paramilitaries in Colombia: Transformation or Transition?", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 31, no. 6 (2008), pp. 520-540.

⁵³ Eligio Rojas, "Denuncian asesinato de seis militantes chavistas", *Últimas Noticias*, 28 July 2019.

⁵⁴ Helen Murphy and Luis Jaime Acosta, "Exclusive: Colombian armed groups recruiting desperate Venezuelans, army says", *Reuters*, 20 June 2019.

⁵⁵ "En la frontera con Venezuela existen 5 grupos paramilitares: Bernal", *Panorama*, 13 August 2019.

⁵⁶ For example, the November 2018 attack attributed by the Venezuelan military to Colombian paramilitaries was in fact the work of the ELN. "Mueren 3 militares venezolanos tras ataque de grupo irregular", *Telesur*, 4 November 2018.

have repeatedly announced the arrest of paramilitary members allegedly seeking to destabilise Venezuela.⁵⁷

The Venezuelan opposition denies any connection with right-wing paramilitary groups, but these disclaimers are in doubt after the publication of compromising photographs showing Juan Guaidó with two Colombian paramilitaries. The photograph was taken as he travelled into Colombia via an illegal crossing, known as a *trocha*, in order to attend a humanitarian aid concert on 22 February and support efforts to get relief supplies into Venezuela the next day.⁵⁸ Guaidó claimed not to have known the paramilitaries' identity, saying many people had their picture taken with him that day.⁵⁹

D. Criminal Groups

Venezuela is one of the most dangerous countries in the world if judged by its homicide rate, one of Latin America's highest.⁶⁰ A range of criminal groups of varying size and structure engage in robbery, kidnapping, fraud, blackmail, contract killing or illegal trade, notably in weapons, drugs, children and women.⁶¹ Police report that a total of over 100 Venezuelan criminal groups operate across the country, with the three most important categories of illicit organisation being the *pranes* (criminal bosses in Venezuela's prison system), *megabandas* (mega-gangs) and *sindicatos*

⁵⁷ In 2015, the Maduro government closed the border with Colombia after gunmen wounded three Venezuelan military officers. Maduro said Colombian paramilitaries were behind the attack. David Smilde, "Venezuelan government blames Colombian paramilitaries for violence, contraband and protests", Venezuelablog, 24 August 2015. The Maduro government said it had captured 83 paramilitaries in 2019 alone in Táchira, a state bordering Colombia. "Gobierno venezolano asesta otro golpe a la banda paramilitar La Línea", VTV, 8 November 2019. See also "Venezuela: six farmers killed by Colombian paramilitary", Telesur, 30 July 2019.

⁵⁸ "Venezuela's Guaidó pictured with members of Colombian gang", *The Guardian*, 14 September 2019.

⁵⁹ "Guaidó niega que grupo criminal Los Rastrojos lo ayudara a cruzar la frontera con Colombia", CNN, 13 September 2019.

⁶⁰ Venezuela for many years had one of the highest murder rates in the world, with official data putting Venezuela constantly among the five most dangerous countries. Officially, in 2016 the murder rate was 56 per 100,000 inhabitants, and in 2015, 58. Extra-official data have reported significantly higher rates, with murder rates of over 80 per 100,000 inhabitants. Since 2017, however, murder rates have decreased, with 2019 being the least violent for years. Extra-officially, in 2019 the murder rate was 60 per 100,000 inhabitants, while the Maduro government claims it stood at 20 (the government does not include murders caused by state security forces). See Mayela Armas, "Venezuela murder rate dips, partly due to migration: monitoring group", Reuters, 27 December 2018. Ludmila Vinogradoff, "Informe 2019: con más de 16.000 asesinatos, Venezuela se mantiene como uno de los países más violentos del mundo", *Clarín*, 27 December 2019. "Venezuela reduce 36,3% tasa de criminalidad en ocho principales delitos durante 2019", Xinhua, 29 December 2019. For a global study showing Venezuela's exposure to high levels of homicidal violence, see "Global Study on Homicide", UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019.

⁶¹ For a comprehensive overview of criminal dynamics and activities in Venezuela, see Roberto Briceño-León and Alberto Camardiel (eds.), *Delito organizado, mercados ilegales y democracia en Venezuela* (Caracas, 2015).

(literally, the unions).⁶² Despite their criminal activities, in some areas these groups have replaced the state by providing rudimentary law and order.⁶³

The *pranes* are the heads of criminal groups usually dedicated to drug trafficking and extortion operating out of Venezuela's squalid and extremely violent prison system.⁶⁴ In many cases, the *pranes* control the prisons where they are held, and tend to feel safer behind bars.⁶⁵ Ill-advised prison policies made during the Chávez and Maduro governments, including toleration of overcrowding and informal arrangements as to who exercises control over inmates, strengthened the role of the *pranes* in prisons, giving them exceptional power inside these institutions.⁶⁶

Mega-bandas are hierarchical organisations that are a relatively new arrival to the Venezuelan underworld. They engage in drug trafficking, extortion and kidnapping throughout the country, and have great sway on their own turf. Many of these groups' leaders have spent time in jail, as a result of which it is not uncommon for them to work together with the prison-based *pranes*.⁶⁷

Criminal experts have detected the existence of between twelve and sixteen *mega-bandas*, some with over 300 members.⁶⁸ They are heavily armed and, as a result of the threat they pose through territorial control, the government has tried to combat them through fierce police crackdowns, most notoriously the Operation to Liberate and Protect the People between 2015 and 2017.⁶⁹ While these massive police raids failed to reduce the gangs' power, they perpetrated widespread human rights violations wherever carried out.⁷⁰ At the same time, the government has also selectively

⁶² The Venezuelan police in 2019 reported that 110 criminal groups operate in eighteen of the country's 24 states. Rosibel Cristina González, "110 bandas criminales tienen secuestrada a Venezuela", *El Nacional*, 7 September 2019.

⁶³ In a recent protest against police operations in a poor, densely populated suburb of Caracas, Petare, residents claimed that "the police are killing us, and the gangs are protecting us". Carlos d'Hoy, "Excesos del FAES provocan protesta en Petare", *El Universal*, 10 June 2019.

⁶⁴ In a recent incident in a western Venezuelan jail, 29 prisoners were killed and 19 police wounded in clashes. "Venezuelan prison clashes leave 29 inmates dead", BBC, 25 May 2019. Prisons in Venezuela are overpopulated; estimates say the country has 46,675 prisoners while jail capacity stands at 20,776. See Claudia Smolansky, "En 20 años de chavismo más de 7000 personas murieron en cárceles venezolanas", *Crónica Uno*, 2 April 2019. "Venezuela prisons 'beyond monstrous', UN warns, highlighting plight of Colombian detainees", UN News, 9 October 2018. Simon Romero, "Where prisoners can do anything, except leave", *The New York Times*, 3 June 2011.

⁶⁵ "¿Quién era el Conejo, el homenajado con disparos al aire en una cárcel en Venezuela?", BBC Mundo, 29 January 2016.

⁶⁶ Andrés Antillano, "Cuando los presos mandan: control informal dentro de la cárcel venezolana", *Espacio Abierto*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2015). "La delegación del poder estatal: Los 'pranes'", InSight Crime, 20 May 2018.

⁶⁷ Antonio María Delgado, "Grandes bandas delictivas siembran terror en Venezuela", *El Nuevo Herald*, 23 July 2015.

⁶⁸ "Megabandas en Venezuela", *El Nacional*, 13 May 2016.

⁶⁹ The name given to these police operations was later changed to Humanistic Operation to Liberate the People.

⁷⁰ According to a police officer questioned by researchers, prison overcrowding persuaded government officials that a crime policy based on killing suspected criminals was preferable to mass incarceration. "So we started to eliminate, eliminate, eliminate. So as to clean up the population, above all the poorer classes". Verónica Zubillaga and Rebecca Hanson, "Los operativos militarizados en la

favoured the creation of peace zones in Caracas, entailing informal non-aggression pacts between state security forces and criminal groups in an attempt to pacify and eventually demobilise the latter. Opposition critics have vilified these zones for allegedly offering impunity to criminal groups, despite evidence of security benefits of neighbourhood ceasefires among competing criminal groups, in certain cases brokered by local women.⁷¹

The *sindicatos*, meanwhile, are criminal groups operating primarily in southern Venezuela, and largely based in the Orinoco Mining Arc, a vast area in Bolívar state that is home to a government mining initiative created in 2016. Their origins lie in the construction industry, but since the economic crisis began they have focused on illegal mining and other illicit activities. They are able to deploy significant armed force, have alleged links to state officials, and compete with other non-state armed groups, notably the ELN guerrillas.⁷² The *sindicatos* have grown more autonomous from the state as they have become richer and better able to draw on their own support networks.⁷³ But to a greater extent than the guerrillas, their relations with locals are marked by disrespect, looting and atrocities, provoking indigenous communities to create, or consider creating, “security brigades” or self-defence groups.⁷⁴ The *sindicatos* and their conflict with other armed groups are visible in one of Venezuela’s most dangerous places, the south-eastern mining town of El Callao, where civil society groups calculate a murder rate of over 600 per 100,000 inhabitants – roughly a hundred times the rate in the U.S.⁷⁵

Judicial investigations, generally carried out by U.S. prosecutors, as well as media reports, suggest that a number of senior government officials have direct, profit-sharing links to organised crime.⁷⁶ At the same time, weak and poorly supervised state

era post-Chávez”, *Nueva Sociedad*, November-December 2018. See also “OLP: The mask of official terror in Venezuela”, Connectas.org, 6 October 2017.

⁷¹ On local peace movements in Caracas, see Verónica Zubillaga, Manuel Llorens and John Souto, “Micropolitics in a Caracas Barrio: The Political Survival Strategies of Mothers in a Context of Armed Violence”, *Latin America Research Review*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2019), pp. 429-443. For opposition criticism of “peace zones”, see “Parlamento venezolano investigará enfrentamientos en la Cota 905”, NT24, 31 July 2019.

⁷² Crisis Group Report, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela’s Violent South*, op. cit.

⁷³ Edgar López, “Una mafia disfrazada de sindicato está al mando del yacimiento de oro más grande de Venezuela”, Arcominerodelorinoco.com, 19 September 2017.

⁷⁴ The indigenous self-defence groups have arisen in response to efforts by various groups (including the military) to control gold mines in the south of the country. María Antonieta Segovia, “Indigenous self-defence groups rise in southern Venezuela”, Armando.info, 10 October 2015.

⁷⁵ Bladimir Martínez Ladera, “‘Sindicatos’ convirtieron en un ‘Pueblo Vaquero’ El Callao”, *Nueva Prensa*, 30 May 2019. In one of the most recent crimes in El Callao, political activist Rosalba “Mara” Valdez was shot dead after denouncing the relations between state and non-state armed groups in the area. “De varios disparos asesinaron a exconcejal Rosalba Valdez en El Callao”, *Tal Cual*, 22 December 2019.

⁷⁶ The most notorious case suggesting links between the high echelons of *chavismo* and organised crime is the case of the “narco-nephews”. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration arrested two nephews of Cilia Flores, President Maduro’s wife, on drug trafficking charges in Haiti. A U.S. court found them guilty and sentenced them to eighteen years in prison. Brendan Pierson, “Nephews of Venezuela’s first lady sentenced to 18 years in U.S. drug case”, Reuters, 14 December 2017. An InSight Crime investigation reports that 123 government officials are involved in criminal activity. “7 Reasons for Describing Venezuela as a ‘Mafia State’”, InSight Crime, 16 May 2019.

institutions, economic crisis and discretionary public policies have created a permissive environment for criminal activity to prosper by coexisting with and supplanting state institutions, without necessarily depending on full-scale collusion between the two.⁷⁷ Recent reports from Venezuela's rural areas indicate that local people have been reduced to living in "preindustrial conditions", providing armed groups with the opportunity to supplant an increasingly absent state. "These groups have often taken charge of enforcing business contracts, punishing common crimes and even settling divorces", witnesses report.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "El Estado y el delito organizado: exceso y vacío normativo", in Briceño-León and Camardiel, op. cit.; John Polga-Hecimovich, "Organized Crime and the State in Venezuela under Chavismo", in Bruce Bagley, Jorge Chabat and Jonathan Rosen (eds.), *The Criminalization of States: The Relationship between States and Organized Crime* (London, 2018).

⁷⁸ Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Rural Venezuela crumbles as president shores up the capital and his power", *The New York Times*, 13 January 2020.

III. Armed Groups in a Political Agreement

Armed groups operating in Venezuela have distinct objectives, *modus operandi*, political loyalties and relations with the state. As political conflict has intensified, they have increasingly preyed on the state's absence, fissures or weakness, providing them with the sort of power and economic stakes that they will not easily forsake and which directly threaten the country's long-term stability. At the same time, engaging with these groups as part of a political settlement or eventual government transition raises profound moral concerns and practical challenges.

Although there is at present no formal negotiation between the government and opposition, previous rounds of talks among the country's political forces have focused almost exclusively on political and institutional arrangements, with little or no discussion of how to deal with armed groups and criminal actors. Venezuela's competing forces may be avoiding mention of these groups due to the political cost of addressing the issue or because they do not consider it urgent. But even if these armed factions do not arouse the greatest concern, their growth in a climate of economic collapse and political deadlock, and the consequences for the country's future security, should help motivate both sides, and their respective allies, to resume the quest for a negotiated outcome. The threat posed by these groups also underlines the importance of ensuring that the top brass is involved in any forthcoming negotiations. Military participation in future talks is essential to ensuring that no faction of the armed forces sabotages an eventual political transition, as well as to designing and later enforcing a long-term policy toward non-state armed outfits.⁷⁹

The approach chosen will have to be tailored to each set of groups. Dealing with the Colombian guerrillas or rebel offshoots operating in Venezuela requires flexibility and regional cooperation. The Venezuelan state alone cannot bargain with these forces without risking entrenching them in the country and creating tensions with Colombia. Optimally, both countries' governments and armed forces would embark on fresh negotiations with the ELN aimed at its permanent demobilisation, while also working to persuade FARC dissidents to lay down their arms in exchange for judicial benefits and reintegration. Venezuela showed in the talks between Colombia and the FARC that it can help end decades of insurgency if it wishes. While such cooperation now seems improbable given the parlous state of bilateral relations, the countries' shared interest in reducing violence along lengthy borders could help sway both governments. For now, the two countries could build confidence by calling for an independent, multilateral border monitoring mechanism, possibly under UN auspices, so as to prevent and contain flare-ups.

As for *colectivos*, negotiations may also be an option. Not all the *colectivos* are the same, and a future political settlement aiming to pacify the country, respect the integrity of the *chavista* movement and prevent future political persecution could attract the support of these groups, especially if it includes provisions that emphasise their historical identity and mission as social movements auditing the effects of government policy at the local level. Such an approach might appeal to the more community-oriented and politically active *colectivos*. The ambitions of some *colectivo*

⁷⁹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Venezuela's Military Enigma*, op. cit.

leaders may also facilitate their incorporation into formal political life so long as the state and judicial system can provide guarantees that they will not be subject to criminal investigation or violent retaliation.

Dealing with purely criminal groups, including certain *colectivos* as well as major gangs and cartels, will require recognition of the state's limited resources as well a prudent use of sticks and carrots. Whereas civilian authorities should assume the responsibility of gauging the main security threats, it will be up to Venezuela's armed forces and police to combat and weaken these groups in a range of ways. Purely coercive law enforcement and "iron fist" policies targeted at the largest and most violent criminal outfits will in all likelihood not achieve this goal, and could in fact do the reverse, judging by previous experience in Venezuela and Latin America.⁸⁰ Mindful of norms against extending amnesties to perpetrators of certain serious crimes as well as possible domestic resistance to any such moves, civil and military authorities should explore the prospect of leniency for those willing to surrender their weapons, including reduced jail sentences for those who have committed serious crimes on condition that they give an honest account of their acts and do not return to crime.⁸¹ Profit-driven actors may be receptive to offers that allow them to retain some of their resources in exchange for a peaceful life and reduced sentences.⁸²

⁸⁰ See, for example, Crisis Group Latin America Report N°64, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 19 December 2017; Ivan Briscoe and David Kieseberg, "Only Connect: The Survival and Spread of Organized Crime in Latin America", *PRISM*, vol. 8, no. 1 (February 2019); Ulrich Schneckener, "Dealing with Armed Non-State Actors in Peace-and State-Building, Types and Strategies", in *Transnational Terrorism, Organized Crime and Peace-Building* (London, 2010).

⁸¹ A model for such transitional justice – albeit applied to an armed insurgency and not a purely criminal enterprise – can be found in the 2016 Colombian peace accord, which allowed for reduced (non-prison) sentences for serious crimes such as murder, extrajudicial executions and kidnapping so long as the former combatants undertook to tell the truth, make reparations to victims and do not return to crime. "Acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto & la construcción de una paz estable y duradera", 2016. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°67, *Risky Business: The Duque Government's Approach to Peace in Colombia*, 21 June 2018.

⁸² According to one peacebuilding scholar, "when exploring the potential of engaging armed groups through economic issues, it is essential to consider that those benefiting from economic opportunities in times of war may not want to lose these sources of revenue – and power – just for the sake of peace". Achim Wennmann, "Getting Armed Groups to the Table: Peace Processes, the Political Economy of Conflict and the Mediated State", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 6 (2009); Alex De Waal, "No money, no peace", *Foreign Policy*, 2 December 2015.

IV. Conclusion

Armed groups have extended their reach across Venezuela as the country's political convulsions and economic debacle have afforded them the complicity or tolerance of state officials and illicit profit-making opportunities. Colombian guerrillas and rebel offshoots have also taken advantage of these inviting conditions by crossing long, largely unmonitored borders in and out of the country. Although the two sparring sides in Venezuela's dispute focus on the fight for the commanding heights in Caracas, the spread of irregular armed units that are in effect ruling impoverished populations in urban, rural and border areas highlights the acute danger that a continuing political standoff will lead to the fragmentation of territory into numerous enclaves run by local warlords. Both sides in Venezuela and their international allies should acknowledge that such outcome is to the benefit of neither, and offers a powerful reason to return to the negotiating table.

That said, the challenges posed by these groups to the country's stability during and after any future political agreement will be considerable. Any effort to tame the threats posed by armed groups after a settlement is reached will most likely coincide with a period in which the state is fragile, violence is rife and reconciliation embryonic. Negotiations or deals with these groups could incur a high cost to the government, give armed actors legitimacy and political prominence, and need considerable effort, time and resources at a moment when all three will be in short supply. But treating these groups as little more than the criminal debris of the central political struggle – to be either ignored or relentlessly fought – could result in a stretch of violence that far outlasts the country's current turmoil.

Caracas/Bogotá/Brussels, 20 February 2020

Appendix A: Map of Venezuela



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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February 2020

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America since 2017

Special Reports and Briefings

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

In the Shadow of "No": Peace after Colombia's Plebiscite, Latin America Report N°60, 31 January 2017 (also available in Spanish).

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