

COLOMBIA - Latest News on FARC (by Constanza Vieira, IPS)

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[IPS](#) - In Colombia, which has been steeped in civil war for decades, every reporter has refrained from writing up hundreds of stories to avoid endangering people or communities merely by mentioning or revealing specific places like villages or roads, or repeating conversations.

But Colombian journalist Jorge Enrique Botero, who has reaped both prizes and criticism, has now provided another glimpse into the world of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Colombia's largest rebel group, which operates freely in up to 40 percent of the national territory.

Botero has access to the wary rural insurgent group, whose leaders have enormous rewards hanging over their heads. In fact, in recent years, anyone who turns them in can expect not only a cash payment but also a U.S. visa and a change of identity for their entire family.

"Latest News from the War", which came out this month, is Botero's second "non-fiction novel". His first, also published by Random House Mondadori, was "Espérame en el cielo, capitán" (Wait for Me in Heaven, Captain), and was released in 2004.

The armed conflict involves not only the FARC and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN) - both of which have been in arms since 1964 - but also the extreme-right United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), the paramilitary network involved in a controversial disarmament process that emerged from negotiations with the rightwing government of Álvaro Uribe.

Botero is the only writer who has had access to 90 percent of the hostages who are held by the FARC with the aim of eventually swapping them for imprisoned insurgents. Among the hostages with whom he has been unable to make contact are former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, her running-mate Clara Rojas, and several other politicians.

He is also one of the Colombian reporters who have been approached by U.S. officials offering, in exchange for revealing his sources, so much money that he would never again have to work.

In his new book, Botero uses the non-fiction novel genre, just as stories and plays on the guerrilla lifestyle were written in Colombia in the 1960s as a way to avoid censorship and stigmatisation.

The non-fiction novel is based on real events and characters, and reflects experiences gathered in many journalistic missions, shedding light on people's deepest motivations, and bringing to life forgotten stories from the past.

"Latest News from the War" caused a commotion by revealing that the 43-year-old Rojas has a two-year-old son, reportedly the fruit of a consensual relationship between the hostage and a guerrilla fighter.

Botero makes it clear that rape is punishable by death among the FARC. But "just how much freedom (Rojas) had in this, only she can say," Carlos Rodríguez, with the prominent human rights group Colombian Commission of Jurists, told IPS.

The publishing house points out that the book forms part of its Testimony collection, which falls under the Debate label.

The debate surrounding the book this month has focused on whether or not Botero violated the privacy of

Rojas, who is a single woman and a former professor of economic law, especially since he was never actually able to interview her himself.

Most local reporters have admitted that if the breaking news had fallen into their hands, they would have published it, each in their own manner. But Carlos Lozano, director of the communist weekly Voz, told IPS that he had heard a year and a half ago that Rojas had a child with one of her captors, but did not reveal the story "because we had no way of showing the context, given space constraints."

The hostage's mother, Clara de Rojas, was moved to hear that her daughter had a baby, and said that if she did not judge her daughter's behaviour, no one else had the right to do so.

One of Clara de Rojas's sons later said he was considering the possibility of suing Botero for slander, but the family eventually decided against taking legal action.

Prompt action by organisations like the Bogotá association of journalists aborted any attempt to ban the book.

With regard to Betancourt and Rojas, the author told IPS that he had evidence that they have been held together at least during certain periods of their four-year captivity. He also confirmed what a high-level insurgent source had told IPS earlier: that the former presidential candidate gives daily French lessons in the jungle, and spends her afternoons writing.

The book's most important military revelation is that the guerrillas have the resources for acquiring surface-to-air missiles, but that "the arms dealers say that the only thing the gringos prohibit on the black market is for them to sell us missiles," according to a FARC leader.

In an article published in the local press, Botero once described a guerrilla fighter teaching one of her fellow insurgents to read, using one of the works of Karl Marx.

In "Latest News from the War", a young rural woman in one of the vast rural regions abandoned by the state says: "We had never seen a gringo around here before, but (the guerrillas) said they are mainly to blame for our poverty."

Botero vividly evokes the paradoxes of guerrilla life, a subject that is cloaked in mystery in Colombia despite decades of civil strife. The rebels emerge as human beings, some of them troubled by doubts and weaknesses, some actually driven mad by the conflict.

Then there are others for whom combat is a thrill. "I love the shooting, the butterflies in the stomach when it starts, the sudden dryness in your throat," relates one female FARC member.

Numerous passages reflect the weariness of the combatants, the contempt some have come to feel for the war ("When it isn't cruel, it's ridiculous," says the same female guerrilla fighter), their doubts about a military victory, and their conviction that no matter how many more bullets are fired, sooner or later, the only solution to the Colombian conflict will be a negotiated peace agreement.

Some, especially the young, cling to the faith that the end of the war is near, as IPS has also seen in interviews with rebel fighters. Others are certain that the day will come when the FARC will reach Bogotá, "more precisely, Bolívar Square," the political heart of Colombia.

"But before the victory there will be a ceasefire. And then, without laying down our arms, we will be the most important political force in the country, until we win power, just like it's written in the Strategic Plan," says another FARC rebel.

Botero also explores some of the reasons that lead men and women to join the rebels' ranks, which have also been shared with IPS in several visits to the conflict zones.

Some joined up as a response to the massacre unleashed by paramilitary and government troops and

druglords against the Patriotic Union, the leftist political party that emerged from the peace negotiations between the FARC and the administration of Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) and was essentially wiped off the political map through the wholesale assassination of its leaders and membership.

Others, persecuted for their social or trade union activism, feel more secure with a rifle in their hands.

For some vulnerable sectors of the population, the guerrilla is seen as "an inevitable fate, virtually the only one." These include young people from the remote agricultural frontier, where coca farming is a mainstay, and many women turn to prostitution to survive.

In these places, the maceration of coca leaves to produce basic cocaine paste, the raw material for producing cocaine, generates "real financial returns, not like in the banks, or saving bonds, or stock markets," Botero writes.

Among young people growing up in this environment, where domestic violence is a fact of life, the guerrillas are admired for being "well fed" and for "being a part of something."

Some of these youngsters join the insurgents without their parents' consent, although none of them are forcibly recruited, since FARC membership is entirely voluntary.

The official minimum age for FARC recruits is 16, although many exceptions are made. "What you've got in front of you is a woman who's asking to be a guerrilla, but could end up becoming a whore," a 15-year-old daughter of a prostitute tells a local FARC commander to convince him to let her join up.

The book refers to the presence of foreigners among the ranks of the FARC, but as regular combatants, with no leadership role. It also confirms that during the time of the demilitarised safe haven zone created by the Andrés Pastrana administration (1998-2002) to engage in peace talks with the guerrillas, there were insurgent training courses held for urban dwellers.

Those were days when "the guerrilla moved around these parts dictating laws and organising people, like they were citizens of another country. Citizens of the New Colombia, they used to say."

For some people in sizeable areas of the country, and for many years, the FARC have been the authority that attends to "divorces and marriages, even the theft of a chicken, disputes between neighbours, the price of milk, and the health of the hookers." Local FARC leaders also control "schools, highways, health posts and toll booths."

The book describes guerrilla settlements in the jungle complete with classrooms, a dining hall, infirmary, dentist's office, operating room, x-ray facilities and a print shop with a photo lab. One is even home to one of the local FM radio stations run by the FARC.

For many Colombians, the book's cover photo will be their first introduction to the existence and massive size of the FARC's trenches, which are actually roads stretching for kilometres dug two metres deep into the damp ground.

Botero catalogues some of the military defeats suffered by the FARC, like their expulsion from the outskirts of Bogotá, the greatest feat achieved by the administration of President Uribe, who took office in 2002.

He also points out that rural villages and the civilians living there have been destroyed in indiscriminate bombing by the military of areas under guerrilla control - incidents that never make it into the news.

In addition, the author takes note of the human rights violations committed by the guerrilla, like the assassination of local government authorities and attacks on civilian transportation.

In the end, the guerrilla are like any other group of human beings, with "bootlickers kissing up to the chief, commanders settling into their routine, or girls looking for husbands."

There are also cases of superiors abusing their power, although the rank and file feel protected by the FARC rules and regulations and voice their concerns to their leaders - despite the fact that they are sometimes ignored.

At the same time, however, Botero also describes various scenes of camaraderie between high military leaders and common combatants, something unthinkable in the traditional armed forces.

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