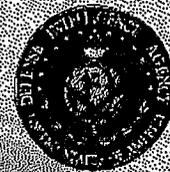


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October 2000
DI-1584-17-00

DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT



(U) Colombian *Autodefensas* History and Organization

Derived from Multiple Sources
Declassify on: X1, X5



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(U) Colombian *Autodefensas* History and Organization

Key Judgments

~~(S)~~ The rise of Colombian self-defense groups is a direct response to the explosive growth of insurgent forces. To protect themselves from insurgent extortion and kidnaping, legal businesses and drug traffickers helped launch the United Self-Defense Group of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, or AUC), an organization that has fundamentally changed Colombia's military and political landscape.

~~(S//NF)~~ The AUC and its predecessors have been involved in drug trafficking since the 1980s. AUC leader Carlos Castano admits to his association with drug traffickers, a connection that provides his organization with financial resources and weapons.

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Information Cutoff Date: 1 October 2000

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The *Autodefensas*' Rise to Prominence

Long a part of Colombia's violence, the *autodefensas*, which some commonly refer to as paramilitaries,¹ have seized national attention over the past 2 years. Emerging from a tradition of political violence and regional strongmen, the United Self-Defense Group of Colombia (AUC) has risen to prominence as a direct response to the explosive growth of insurgent forces. In attempting to protect themselves from insurgent extortion and kidnaping, legal businesses and drug traffickers have launched an organization that has fundamentally changed Colombia's military and political landscape.

This assessment, which examines the origins and organization of the *autodefensas*, is the first of a series assessing the impact the *autodefensas* have had on Colombia and neighboring states and the persistent allegations of ties between the military and *autodefensas* groups.

The Typical *Autodefensas* Member

The average *autodefensas* member differs little from his military or insurgent counterpart. Predominantly young and male, members probably have little education and few prospects in an economy with over 20-percent unemployment. AUC members are more likely to live as part of a community than are Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia members, and they earn about \$150 a month. Originally, the *autodefensas* were dominated by former drug cartel or legal self-defense group members. Since then, trained and experienced insurgent defectors and former military members have joined their ranks. As of June 1999, the AUC reportedly had a training base for new members operating in the Uraba region of Antioquia.

¹ (U) This assessment uses the term *autodefensas* (self-defense groups) to classify what are inaccurately referred to as paramilitaries.

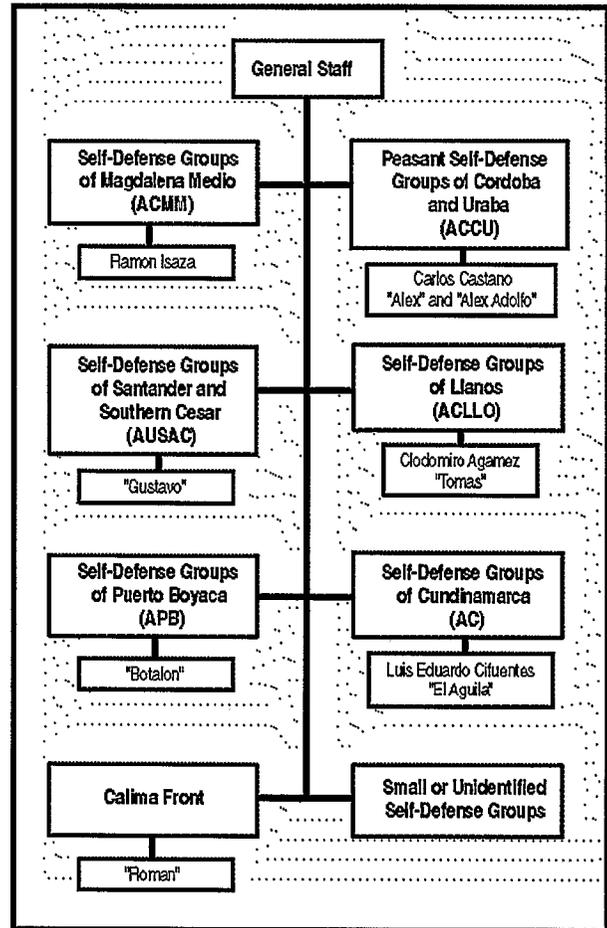


Figure 1. ~~SECRET//NOFORN//X1~~ *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*.

Defining *Autodefensas*

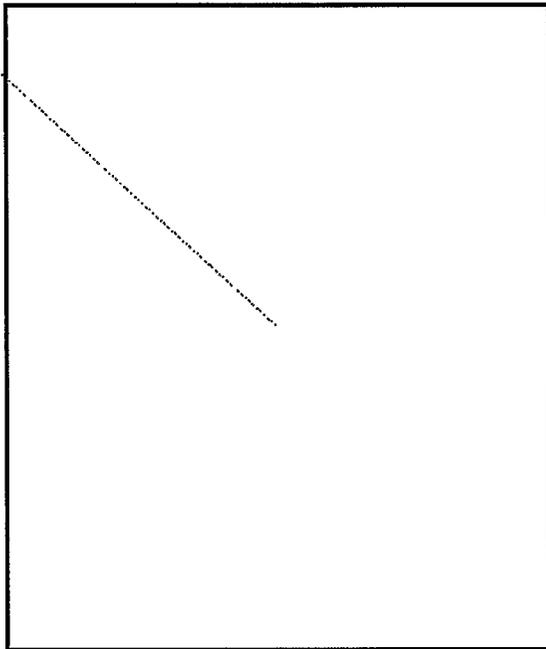
(U) The *autodefensas* and criminal groups make up Colombia's significant nongovernment/noninsurgent armed organizations. Although these groups interact and share many characteristics, they differ in their objectives.

(U) *Autodefensas*: Supported by economic elites, drug traffickers, and local communities in the absence of

effective government security, their primary objective is protecting their sponsors from the insurgents. The most prominent of these groups are politically motivated with the ultimate goal of defeating the insurgency. The *autodefensas* operate locally by protecting legal and illegal economic interests and nationally by conducting counterinsurgent offensives.

AUC Equipment

(b)(1),1.4
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(U) Criminal (private justice) groups: These armed organizations are hired to protect primarily drug traffickers. Gangs of kidnapers or assassins (*sicaros*) for hire are a subgroup of this category. In the interests of their employers, these groups join forces, fight each other, or aid the *autodefensas*.

Historical Foundations of the *Autodefensas*

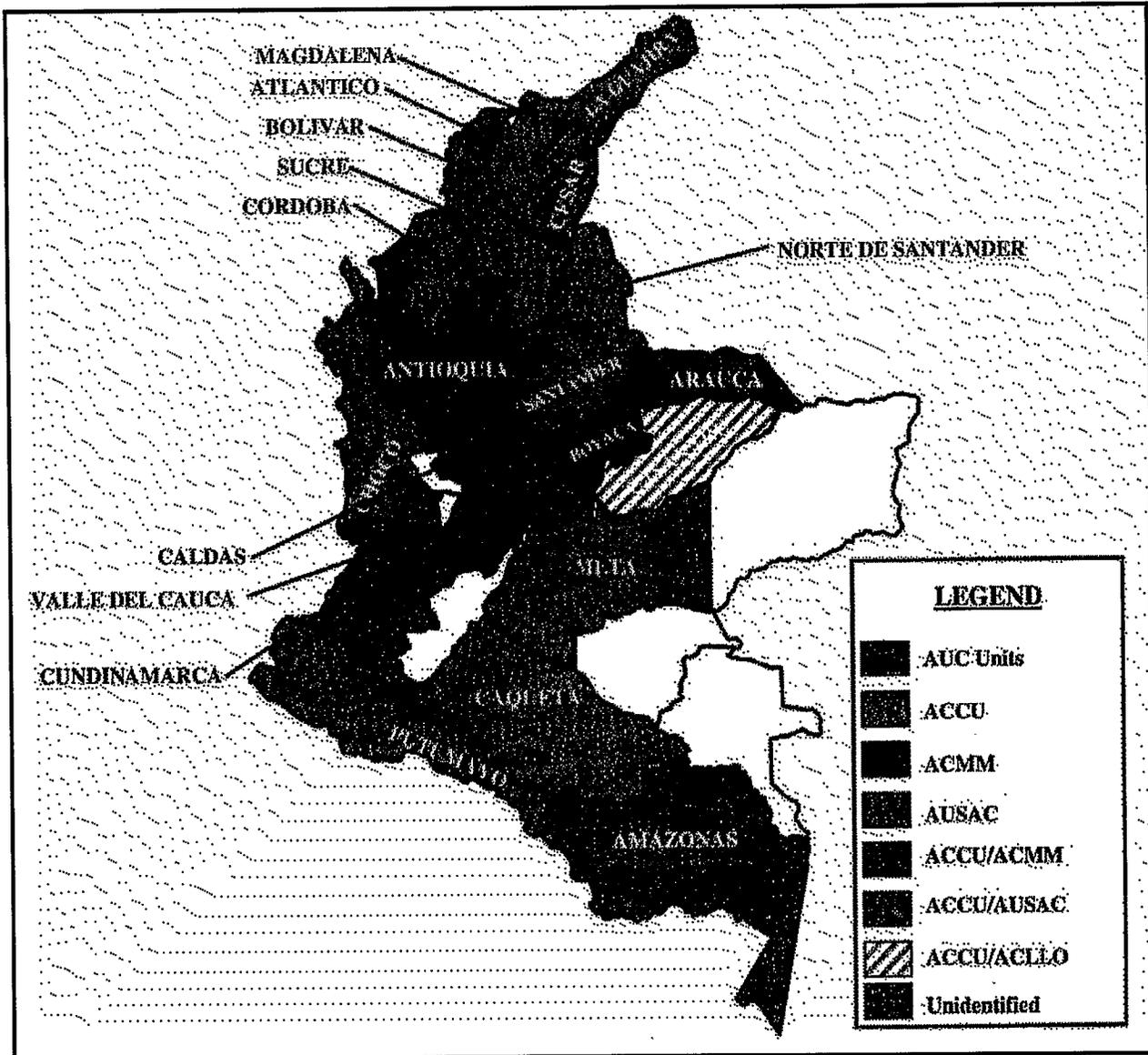
(U) Since they were established in 1964, the legal status of state-sponsored self-defense groups and their relationship with the military have undergone numerous changes. In accordance with standard counterinsurgency doctrine, civil defense forces were established to help isolate insurgents from their poten-

tial support base and aid the military with intelligence and logistic support.

(U) As insurgent control of rural areas increased in the 1980s, landowners and rural communities turned increasingly to the *autodefensas* for protection. In addition to legal *autodefensas*, private armies emerged for the drug cartels. These criminal organizations expanded their employer's enterprises, halted encroachment of competitors, and protected drug shipments and facilities. The US Embassy in Bogota made a noteworthy observation in the late 1980s that the boundary between sanctioned self-defense groups and violent armed groups would become blurred, particularly as evaluated by international human rights groups. In 1989, under domestic and international pressure, the Colombian Supreme Court ruled the *autodefensas* unconstitutional.

(U) Colombia revived the self-defense concept in 1994 with the institution of *convivirs* through a law establishing community associations for rural oversight. *Convivirs* provided state security forces with logistic and intelligence support. Many illegal armed groups were granted *convivir* licenses even as they continued operating outside the scope of *convivir* responsibilities. Although Colombian Army unit commanders could legally provide handguns to *convivir* members for personal defense, officers were accused of arming some with automatic rifles and including them in military operations.

(U) Stepping in again in 1997, the Constitutional Court ordered the *convivirs* to relinquish restricted weapons provided by military officers and to not participate in state security force operations. Finally, in 1998, the government ended the program and began dismantling licensed *convivirs*. By May 2000, fewer than 20 of 414 *convivirs* remained. However, as the security situation in Colombia deteriorated, the demand for the services of the *autodefensas* increased. Many of the former *convivirs* joined *autodefensas* sponsored by both legal and illegal businesses.



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Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia

(S//NF) Today's dominant self-defense organization, the AUC, was formed and grew largely in reaction to the explosive growth of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the 1990s. Prompted by growing instability and the financial backing of drug traffickers and legal businesses, leaders of

Colombia's three major *autodefensas* formed the AUC in April 1997. Carlos Castano-Gil, leader of the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Cordoba and Uraba (ACCU), the largest and most influential *autodefensas* organization, became the leader of the AUC. The AUC now accounts for 80 percent of the estimated 5,000 to 8,000 *autodefensas* in Colombia, which currently conduct significant activities in 26 of Colombia's 32 departments.

Carlos Castano

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Figure 3. (U) Carlos Castano, Head of the AUC. Castano believes he can effect change in Colombia.

~~(S//NF)~~ Following the murder of their father by the FARC in 1980, Carlos Castano-Gil and his brother Fidel organized the ACCU. After dropping out of school, Carlos dedicated himself to fighting the insurgency despite professed center-left sympathies. His dedication would cost the lives of at least three of his brothers and one sister at the hands of the FARC.

~~(S//NF)~~ The Castanos' connections to other *autodefensas* leaders and drug traffickers facilitated their rise to prominence. Carlos assumed control of the ACCU in 1995 when Fidel disappeared and was presumably killed. Castano is intimately involved in planning, coordinating, and implementing AUC strategy and operations. As a result, he claims to have been shot four times and hit with grenade shrapnel. He is charged with at least five crimes, including multiple murders. No evidence suggests that he has received foreign training.

~~(S//NF)~~ A self-described "progressive conservative," Castano espouses a populist ideology that includes issues such as land reform and improving social services. A widely watched national television interview in early 2000 presented Castano as an articulate political figure who believes he can bring needed change to Colombia. The AUC's growing strength has fueled his political ambition and gained him support among some Colombians. Originally opposed to US intervention in Colombia, Castano now claims to support limited involvement.

~~(S//NF)~~ The AUC defines itself as a national anti-insurgent political-military movement that is impatient with the state's inability to defeat the insurgents. Often described as an ultrarightwing organization, the AUC espouses a populist political agenda. It agrees with some of the insurgent's stated goals but only if enacted within the present political system. Castano and other leaders have repeatedly stated that no final peace agreement is possible without their participation.

~~(S//NF)~~ The organization developed its goals and procedures at the first annual *autodefensas* summit in April 1997. The AUC founded a National Counter-guerrilla Coordinating Board to act as a general staff. Each group has one representative member, except for the ACCU, which provides two. The summit also called for creation of AUC urban militia and intelligence and political action cells to support the overall counterinsurgent effort.

(U) Control is maintained by either granting financial bonuses to or withholding funds from an AUC front. Individual punishments include banishment from the AUC or, for the most serious offensives, execution.

Infractions include disobeying orders from the national leadership or kidnaping and extorting for personal gain.

Autodefensas Finances

(U) Considering their size and scope, the AUC's activities require substantial financing. One study estimated that the AUC earned as much as \$75 million in 1999. Expenses include a \$30-million estimated annual payroll in addition to the cost of operations, weapons, and other supplies. Principal *autodefensas* sponsors are drug traffickers, legitimate businesses, local communities, unions, and political groups.

~~(S//NF)~~ Legal businesses are an important source of income, particularly those operating in rural areas, such as ranches, farms, and transportation, manufacturing, and lumber companies. Although some businesses contribute voluntarily, others do so under threat. The AUC reportedly charges less for protection than the FARC does. Protecting their sponsors from insurgent harassment has built support for the AUC

among some sectors. One *autodefensas* sympathizer, a cattle rancher, points out that heads of cattle in Cordoba Department climbed from 1.6 million to 2.6 million since the late 1980s because of *autodefensas* protection. Unlike the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN), who rely on kidnaping to help finance their operations, the *autodefensas* selectively kidnap for political reasons and not for money.

Paramilitaries — Drug Trafficker Ties

~~(S//NF)~~ The AUC and its predecessors have been involved in drug trafficking since the 1980s. Castano freely admits his association with drug traffickers, a connection that provides the organization with financial resources and weapons. The AUC receives money from Medellin- and Bogota-based traffickers for protecting drug trafficking operations and for providing logistic support and security to traffickers in Valle del Cauca, Antioquia, and Atlántico Departments. In addition, Castano's forces guard coca fields and drug-processing laboratories.

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~~(S//NF)~~ The AUC has gained significant control over several coca-producing departments in the north and currently is fighting the FARC to seize control of coca cultivation areas in southern Colombia.

Outlook for Continued *Autodefensas* Growth

~~(S)~~ The AUC was the inevitable outgrowth of the Colombian government's inability to provide basic security and the drug traffickers' determination to regain control of their industry. Carlos Castano's personal political agenda remains a driving factor in AUC operations. This combination of protection and poli-

tics makes the AUC's services valuable to a cross section of Colombia's economic elite.

~~(C)~~ Despite improvements in the military's ability to thwart large-scale insurgent attacks, the overall security picture in Colombia continues to deteriorate. An ongoing and concerted guerrilla campaign against police forces continues to expose more areas of Colombia to insurgent domination. Under such conditions, the *autodefensas* will remain the fastest growing armed force in the country.

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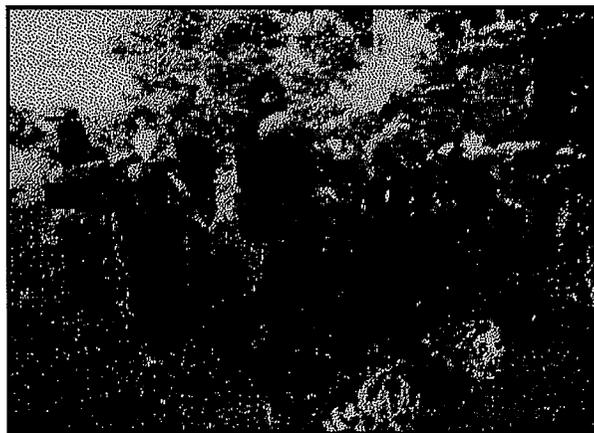


Figure 4. ~~(S//NF)~~ AUC Members in Formation. The increasing number of former military personnel in the *autodefensas* probably means a greater level of training and capability in the force.

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Figure 5. ~~(S)~~ AUC Members in Training. The AUC operates a school, moved periodically, for the *auto defensas* that trains 50 men every 2 months. Reportedly run by former military officers, the course includes political training, weapons, communications, and physical and first-aid training.

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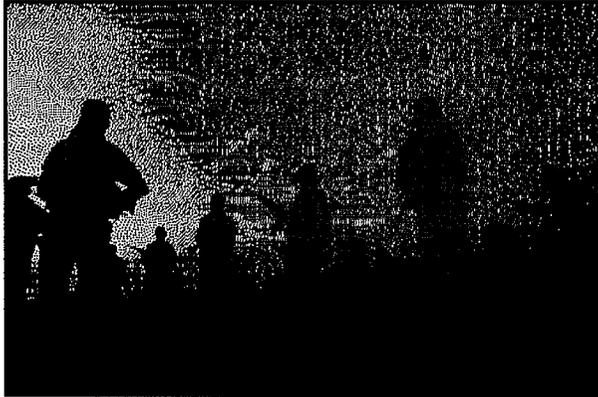


Figure 6. ~~(S)~~ *Autodefensas* Members on Patrol. Independent *autodefensas* forces have cast their shadow over Colombia's war, counterdrug efforts, and human rights situation.

~~(S)~~ The greatest limiting factor to the *autodefensas'* ability to grow is the government's capacity and willingness to target them. As measured by the total number of members killed or captured, the AUC ranks as a lower military priority than the FARC, ELN, or drug traffickers. Because of multiple threats facing the military and the indirect nature of the *autodefensas'* threat,

the *autodefensas* probably will not become a top military priority in the next 2 years. This may change only if the *autodefensas* change their policy of not targeting government security forces.

(U) Questions and comments may be addressed to ~~(b)(3):1~~ ~~(b)(3):10~~ South America Division, Office for Latin America Regional Assessments, Regional Military Assessments Group, Directorate for Analysis and Production (DISTS 981-2498, Commercial ~~(b)(3):10 USC 424~~ Analysis Division, Operations Intelligence Directorate, SOUTH-COM (Commercial ~~(b)(3):10 USC 424~~

(U) ~~(b)(3):10 USC 424~~ Office for Counterdrug Analysis, Transnational Warfare Group, Directorate for Intelligence Production, provided significant contributions to this publication.

(U) This report contains information as of 1 October 2000. It is published under the auspices of the Department of Defense Intelligence Production Program (DoDIPP). The Defense Intelligence Agency produced it as the designated DoDIPP producer for this subject.

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