
Putumayo: Back door of drug trafficking in the Peruvian Northeast

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Summary

In Peru, the different governments of the day have applied centralist development policies that have left large areas of territory neglected, without an effective presence of the State. The Putumayo area, which delimits the border with Colombia through the river of the same name, is one of these places where drug trafficking and other related crimes are proliferating, and where criminal organizations not only affect national security and sovereignty, they also harm the development of the region. In this sense, it is essential that the Government establish clear policies of multisectoral action to increase the presence of the State in these regions; otherwise, you run the risk that when you want to intervene, it may already be too late. This article analyzes the existing situation in Putumayo, evidencing the urgent need for the Peruvian State to adopt immediate and forceful actions to avoid new fronts of struggle for the Armed Forces and the National Police of Peru, which would lead to the inevitable loss of human lives.

Key Words: FARC, Guerrilla, Putumayo, GAOR, drug trafficking.

Introduction

Peru ranks 19^o among the countries with the largest geographical extension on the planet and 3rd in South America, with a total area of 1,285,216 km² (without considering the extension of its territorial sea), with a strategic geographical location in the central and western part of the South American continent. Likewise, Peru is an Amazonian country that borders five other countries and that projects to the Pacific Ocean, presenting a great territorial and climatic variety, and one of the largest biodiversity in the world.¹ However, this great diversity also includes large areas of mountain ranges, deserts and forests that are very difficult to access.

The province of Putumayo, in the Loreto region, despite its wide biodiversity and potential tourist sites, has one of the highest levels of poverty in the country due to its geographic isolation, the lack of a State presence, and low economic development. Corruption and drug trafficking being factors that get this situation

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worse. In this regard, drug trafficking in the Putumayo area has been driven by foreign criminal organizations, mostly of Colombian origin, and dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) that operate on the Peruvian-Colombian border and have installed their Operational camps in Peruvian territory, supported by the Peruvian riverine communities that work in the cultivation of coca and marijuana leaves.

These criminal organizations have divided the domain and control of certain areas in Colombia, where they cultivate, produce and market different types of narcotics that generate large profits. Some of these organizations are known as Remnant Organized Armed Groups (GAOR) because their members are former members of the FARC. The presence of GAOR in Peruvian territory is a threat not only to national security, but also to regional stability; therefore, it must be controlled in the shortest term to avoid its proliferation and strengthening. Undoubtedly, the expansion of coca leaf crops in the Putumayo area, as well as the increase in related crimes related to Illicit Drug Trafficking (DID) are serious indications that should be analyzed and should attract the urgent attention of the authorities. Before facing these threats becomes a full-time job for the State, especially for the Armed Forces and the National Police of Peru. It is estimated that the highest number of violent deaths in the Putumayo region is due to open warfare between the GAORs operating in the area.² In this sense, what has been happening in the Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro River Valleys (VRAEM) shows the complexity of the problem, how laborious it is to contain it and how expensive it can be to eradicate it.

By making a comparison between how narco-terrorism starts and develops in the VRAEM, and the current beginnings of drug trafficking in Putumayo, a very valid hypothesis can be formulated: Putumayo could become the next VRAEM of Peru, if it no longer does so. This article analyzes the situation in the Putumayo region to draw the attention of society and the main authorities of the Peruvian State, adopting urgent measures to combat the existing threats in this region of the country, before it is too late.

Analysis

A clear example of the close relationship that exists between drug trafficking and terrorist organizations that see this illicit activity as a good form of financing is the FARC. By the end of 1975, this terrorist organization had five badly armed fronts, little organized and with poor logistics; however, everything would change in the eighties with the money coming from drug trafficking, multiplying its resources and

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modernizing its weapons, which accelerated the creation of a greater number of fighting fronts. In this sense, in 1982, the FARC already had 24 fighting fronts and before the end of that decade the number grew to 48.³

After unsuccessful attempts to seek dialogue with the FARC and peace in Colombia, President Andrés Pastrana (1998 - 2002) signed the "Plan Colombia", obtaining financing and military assistance from the United States in order to modernize the Colombian armed forces and combat the FARC more effectively. Thus, during the government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010 - 2018) forceful operations were carried out against this terrorist organization, laying the foundations and conditions for the beginning of a dialogue process aimed at seeking peace in Colombia, which materialized with the "Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace". However, in the first months of 2018, the presence of two GAOR was detected that operated in the contiguous towns along the Putumayo river, which - taking advantage of the scarce presence of the State and the geographical characteristics of the area- They have been entering Peruvian territory to carry out illicit activities related to drug trafficking, such as arms and ammunition trafficking, the collection of quotas, or forced recruitment, among other crimes, putting the safety of the Peruvian population in the area at risk.

In this regard, Adriana Chica, a Colombian journalist and political scientist, mentions that during the restructuring of the armed groups in Colombia after the demobilization of the FARC, the cells of former dissident militants of this organization quickly became one of the main actors of the new dynamics of crime. For them, they have been able to rebuild old alliances and build others, having been strengthened with the sole interest of the drug trafficking business.⁴ In this sense, the GAOR stationed in the Putumayo border area (Colombian side) focus their activities on the TID, showing interest in expanding their area of interference along the Putumayo River, which would allow them to ensure a mobility corridor to Brazil to control the cultivation of coca plantations and drug production along the entire border between Peru and Colombia, including the "High Putumayo", the "Low Putumayo" and the "Amazon Trapeze" area.

On the one hand, since the beginning of 2020, the "High Putumayo" area (Peru - Colombia border) has been constantly alert to the sporadic presence of GAOR members, mainly in the ports of both countries, where they intend to consolidate their presence to achieve a monopoly on activities related to TID. In this sense, the predominant GAOR in the "High Putumayo" area has approximately 200 armed

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members, distributed in nine commissions and a financial coordinator. This GAOR is also known as "Los Sinaloa" (due to its downcast leader Pedro Oberman Goyes "Sinaloa") and they call themselves "La Mafia", "Águilas del Sur" or "Commands de la Frontera", the latter being the one used in the towns of the municipality of Leguizamo Port (Putumayo Department - Colombia) and in its areas of influence on the border between Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Additionally, the "Border Commands" have chosen to capture informants in most towns and communities located on both banks of the Putumayo River, as part of their security measures for the displacement of their commissions and the transfer of their shipments (drugs and weapons) along this river, evidencing the recruitment of young people and children, in some cases armed. Likewise, they use Unmanned Aerial Vehicles with which they monitor the activities of the Military Bases, Control Posts of the Forces of Order and the fluvial units that transit the Putumayo

On the other hand, in the area that includes the "Lower Putumayo" (Peruvian side), an increase is observed in the number of members of the GAOR, dedicated to planting coca plantations, the construction of clandestine rustic laboratories for the processing of Basic Cocaine Paste, as well as the traffic and distribution of logistics supplies. For this reason, in 2020, the movements of the GAOR to the native communities increased to use them as rest areas and carry out food supply activities, coordination of actions related to TID (encourage the cultivation of coca plantations), and extorting the owners of boats that cross the Putumayo River. Likewise, they try to obtain information on the presence of other groups of drug traffickers that pass through the area that have not yet accepted its provisions, and on the Forces of Order present in the area; likewise, they pay the villagers to work for them as collaborators and informants.

The predominant GAOR in the "Low Putumayo" area calls itself the "Carolina Ramírez" Front. This GAOR generally concentrates its activities in Colombian territory, south of the department of Caquetá. However, on the border with Peru, they are present in the towns located on the banks of the Putumayo River, constituting a growing and worrying threat because their activities are linked to DID, arms trafficking, extortion, among others, seeking with it consolidating its dominance over the aforementioned activities in the sectors where the "Border Commands" predominate. This fact has created a scenario of continuous confrontation between these groups, disturbing the tranquility on both banks of the Putumayo River.

In this context, the presence of these criminal organizations in Peruvian territory is due to limited preventive actions by the State, as well as a weak culture of peace,

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scarce State-population dialogue, and the reduced operational capacity of the Governments Local and Regional to close critical gaps (such as the deficit of human resources, technological and logistical resources), the limitations of justice operators and the inadequate regulatory framework.

The Drug Control Information System (SISCOD) of the National Commission for Development and Life without Drugs (DEVIDA) reported that, as of December 31, 2017, the total area occupied by coca leaf crops in the Putumayo area increased by 13.7% compared to 2016. However, the largest areas of coca leaf cultivation are still concentrated in the VRAEM area, with 21,657 hectares, and in La Convencion and Lares, with 10,479 hectares. In this sense, the Putumayo area represents less than 10% of the existing coca leaf crops in Peru, which is why DEVIDA -who allocates the budgets to combat DID at the national level- dismisses the Putumayo area as an area of concern.

Conclusions

The military operations in support of the National Police of Peru necessary to cover the entire territory that encompasses the Putumayo region require a considerable budget, but it is absolutely necessary. Failure to act promptly, effectively and forcefully will allow these criminal groups to grow and - possibly - make the transition to narco-terrorism, becoming a serious threat to the Peruvian State and a problem equal to or greater than the one currently present in the world. VRAEM.

This is the time to make decisions with a vision of the future, thinking of the Peruvians who live in that remote area of the country, as well as to facilitate the development of border areas and to demonstrate the good international relations that exist with Colombia. Likewise, it is time to work in a coordinated manner between the sectors of the Government and the powers of the State, showing the population that the Peruvian State is present where it is needed.

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Endnotes:

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² Ricardo León, "Fuego cruzado en el Putumayo", <https://especiales.elcomercio.pe/?q=especiales/fuego-cruzado-en-la-frontera-del-putumayo-ecpm/index.html> (Cited July 9, 2021), 1.

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⁴ Adriana Chica García, "Quiénes son los disidentes de las FARC que tomaron el control del narcotráfico en Colombia", *Infobae*, (Bogotá – Colombia: September 8, 2021) <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2018/09/08/quienes-son-los-disidentes-de-las-farc-que-tomaron-el-control-del-narcotrafico-en-colombia/> (Cited July 7, 2021), 1.