

# The Reinforcing Activities of the ELN(National Liberation Army) in Colombia and Venezuela

R. EVAN ELLIS, PHD\*

In the past five years, a confluence of events in Colombia and Venezuela have empowered the National Liberation Army (ELN) to become a far more dangerous and intractable threat to both countries, and the region. The reinforcing effects of the partial demobilization the rival Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC),<sup>1</sup> a dramatic expansion in coca production in Columbia,<sup>2</sup> a permissive environment for the ELN in neighboring Venezuela,<sup>3</sup> plus opportunities arising out of that nation's criminal economy and refugee crisis, have together allowed the organization to become larger, better funded, and more difficult to dislodge. In the process, the organization has begun to displace a range of key adversaries in both Colombia and Venezuela, increase its territorial control, play an expanded role in transnational criminal activities from drugs and gasoline smuggling to mining to extortion, impacting not only the security of Colombia, but the future of Venezuela, as well as facilitating ever greater flows of narcotics and refugees that impact Brazil, the Caribbean, Central America and beyond.

ELN activities in Colombia and Venezuela countries are complimentary, although its actual activities differ from its public posture in both. In Colombia, the group seeks the overthrow of the government through revolutionary action,<sup>4</sup> although its armed actions are limited relative to its fundraising through illicit activities. In Venezuela, the group does not openly seek the government's downfall, and collaborates with that nation's political leadership and local military commanders,<sup>5</sup> as the ELN it uses the country as a strategic safe zone and concentrates on the generation of revenue through illicit activities. Nonetheless, in the course of seeking revenue and expanding its operations, the ELN engages in violence with rivals and dominates territory in Venezuela in a form arguably more extensive than in Colombia.<sup>6</sup>

\*The author is Latin America Research Professor for the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The author would like to thank COL John Marulanda, COL Carlos Ardila Castro, Omar Cortes Reyes, Pedro Burelli, and Steve Salisbury, among others, for their contributions to this work.

This work examines the evolution of the ELN in recent years as a transnational criminal-terrorist organization straddling both Colombia and Venezuela, and its implications for the region.

## **Background**

The contemporary ELN has evolved significantly from the organization's origin in the Department of Santander in 1964, following Colombia's traumatic period of La Violencia. When the group launched its public military challenge against the Colombian government in 1965 by overrunning the town of Simacota,<sup>7</sup> it was a relatively close-knit, ideologically oriented organization, inspired in part by Marxism and social justice, shaped by iconic figures like leftist priest Camilo Torres, whose liberation theology and social activism animated its membership and its broader support base.<sup>8</sup> While the group's roots in Marxism and social justice may still be recognizable today in the rites of its senior leaders and the indoctrination given to some new recruits, it has evolved into a decentralized criminal-terrorist organization, increasingly large and well-funded, nurtured by the chaos and criminality in Venezuela, and with Coronavirus, in the region. From its early period, aided by its founding doctrine as a partially clandestine insurgent organization, the ELN was relatively disciplined and secretive, with a core of fighters supported by a broader grouping of students, unions, and political supporters. In 1973, the fledgling organization was almost destroyed by the Colombian government's military offensive against it in Operation Anori,<sup>9</sup> which forced the group out of Antioquia to Arauca adjoining Colombia (and elsewhere in the country), sowing the seeds for its subsequent spread across the Colombia-Venezuela border region, and into Venezuela, creating today's problem.

During this period, a critical development following the group's entry into this area, known as the Eastern Plains, was its entry into extortion of oil companies operating there, particularly in the 1990s,<sup>10</sup> providing a lucrative source of income. The group's decentralized structure allowed it to adopt a revenue model tailored to the criminal opportunities in each of the states in which it operated, including charging "war taxes" on the production of cocaine and marijuana.<sup>11</sup>

The group's location and character were also molded by its struggles and alliances with rivals operating in the area. In the 1990s, the group was threatened by attacks from paramilitary groups and the Colombian military, particularly in the Colombian department of Bolivar, forcing it into temporary, pragmatic collaborations with fellow leftist guerilla group the FARC, from sharing food to a non-aggression pact in Arauca. Although the group has both collaborated with the FARC and clashed over issues such as control over drug routes, recruiting, or who has the right to extort oil companies and other entities operating in the border

region,<sup>12</sup> During the most recent period following the peace accords, the relationship has moved toward more collaboration versus competition.<sup>13</sup>

### **The ELNs Move to the Border and Into Venezuela**

While the seeds of the ELN's presence in the Venezuela-Colombia border is the previously mentioned Operation Anori, and while the ELN has operated in Venezuela for at least 30 years,<sup>14</sup> the extensive presence it has there, and in Venezuela today, traces its origin to four mutually reinforcing phenomenon that came later.

First, the ELN came to find its presence in Colombia's lucrative Eastern Plains—the entry of oil companies in the area in the 1980s and 1990s created opportunities to expand illicit income through their extortion, among other activities. The German company Mannesmann, whose operations in the region included the construction and operation of the Caño-Limon-Covenas pipeline, played a particularly important role for the organization in this regard. Following the kidnapping of company executives, Mannesmann allegedly entered into an agreement with the ELN in which it paid the group a regular sum of money to not attack the pipeline or kidnap its executives.<sup>15</sup> As a compliment, the ELN's combination of newfound resources to bribe, the power to intimidate, and the skill to integrate into a community through political-ideological work, allowed it to coopt leaders of many of the municipalities in which it operated.<sup>16</sup>

Reflecting the lucrative criminal opportunities in the area, as the ELN strengthened its position in Arauca, it came into competition with the FARC for control over territory and the associated income from extortion and cross-border contraband activities. The ELN's "Domingo Lain" warfront, for example, engaged in a bitter, protracted struggle with the 10th front of the FARC for domination of the the eastern province of the Arauca Department, until finally coming to an agreement in 1996 to share control of it. With this arrangement, and with continuing opportunities for income from extortion and other activities,<sup>17</sup> by 1999 the group's strength reached a height of approximately 5,000, with a good portion of them in the border region.

Second, in the second ELN Congress in 1992, the group adopted a border policy that embraced contacts and operations on both sides of the border for benefits ranging from political support to income to sanctuary.<sup>18</sup> Even under pro-Western "Punto Fijo" governments in Venezuela prior to the election of Hugo Chavez, the ELN entered into Venezuelan territory<sup>19</sup> to protect itself against operations by the Colombian government, and to enrich itself through its involvement in the smuggling of gasoline and other contraband items.<sup>20</sup> In the

process, the ELN built up influence in the vicinity of El Nula, in the Venezuelan state of Apure, among other places.<sup>21</sup>

Third, the reorganization of the Colombian military which began at the end of the administration of Andres Pastrana, and the stepped up military campaign against both the FARC and the ELN under President Alvaro Uribe beginning in 2002, put military pressure on the ELN which increasingly forced them to seek refuge on the Venezuelan side of the border.

Fourth, the December 1998 election of populist leader Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 1998 and, and his increasing turn toward the left following his temporary ouster from power in 2002, led his Venezuelan government to adopt a more permissive posture toward the ELN as they increasingly sought refuge in that country,<sup>22</sup> complimented by a less cooperative attitude by Chavez toward the strongly pro-US Uribe administration in Colombia.<sup>23</sup> Chavez not only reportedly gave instructions to the local military commanders not to challenge the ELN, but allowed members of the organization to become involved in ideological activities in conjunction with the regime's "Bolivarian Circles" and other entities.<sup>24</sup> By 2010, there were an estimated 1,500 ELN operating permanently or temporarily on the Venezuelan side of the border.<sup>25</sup>

As the political and economic situation in Venezuela deteriorated over the next decade, the ELN significantly expanded its position within Venezuela, including not only using the country as a rear-guard area, but becoming increasingly involved in extorting and controlling the illegal mining of gold, coltan and diamonds, and other illicit businesses within the country. Such activities in Venezuela particularly began to take off from 2013<sup>26</sup> forward under Hugo Chavez' successor Nicholas Maduro.<sup>27</sup>

### **ELN Leadership and Organization**

The ELN is a relatively decentralized organization, officially divided into seven Colombia-oriented "fronts" (or eight if its front for Urban operations is considered). Establishing the number of ELN fighters is a complicated matter, since the distinction between ELN fighters and the broader circle of "supporters" of the organization is ambiguous; a subset of its supporters can be called upon to use weapons in certain circumstances. Indeed, the ELN leadership itself has suggested that it does not always know the precise size of its organization at any given time.<sup>28</sup> It is possible, however, to distinguish those who are "integrated" into the organization (whether or not carrying weapons) from those student, union leaders and other persons who may sympathize or occasionally help the ELN, but who are not formally part.

The ELN is officially led by a “National Congress” which meets every five years.<sup>29</sup> It is headed in its day to day operations by an executive committee, the Central Command (COCE), and under it, a “National Directorate” (DINAL) of 20 commanders from ELN regional military organizations.<sup>30</sup> The ELN military structure, centered on Colombia, includes six “war fronts,” subdivided into 22 “rural fronts” plus a national “urban front” which coordinates the “revolutionary struggle” in the cities.<sup>31</sup>

The current head of the ELN, “first among equals” on the COCE, prior to resigning in June 2021 as this article went to press, was Nicholas Rodriguez Bautista (“Gabino”). Its second in command is reportedly Eliécer Erlington Chamorro Acosta (“Antonio Garcia”), who officially has the portfolio for international operations and military strategy. Third in command is Israel Ramírez Pineda (“Pablo Beltran”), who headed the delegation in Cuba for peace talks, and has ties to Maduro and the Venezuela government through that process.<sup>32</sup> The next key COCE leader is Rafael Sierra Granados (“Ramiro Vargas”), whose title of “Financier” suggests a tie to the group’s illegal income in Venezuela and elsewhere. The newest member of the COCE, is Gustavo Anibal Giraldo (“Pablito”), commander of the Eastern war front with significant (but not exclusive) activities in Venezuela. Pablito reportedly gained his importance through his operations on the Colombia-Venezuela border, as well as illicit operations in the later which allowed him to generate significant money for the organization through drug operations<sup>33</sup> and illegal mining, and recruit and build a powerful military organization.<sup>34</sup>

### **Impact of the 2016 FARC Peace Accord**

The demobilization of the FARC per the group’s October 2016 peace accord with the Colombian government bolstered the expansion of the ELN in both Colombia and Venezuela in several ways. These included creating opportunities to both establish itself in new territory and recruit fighters, while also gaining new sources of criminal income from the territory it occupied.

On one hand, as the FARC demobilized, it allowed the ELN to move into areas that the former had previously dominated, including acquiring key routes for smuggling drugs and people along the Colombia-Venezuela border.<sup>35</sup> On the Colombian side of the border, the ELN extended its presence along the border south from Arauca toward Vichada.<sup>36</sup>

Although the Colombian government deployed some 80,000 military and police personnel under Plan Victoria to the areas from which the FARC was withdrawing to fill the power vacuum, it wasn’t enough.<sup>37</sup> Some analysts believe that the demobilizing FARC may have facilitated the entry of the ELN into this territory in some cases, preferring it to be dominated by a fellow leftist organization

rather than a rival right wing or other criminal militia.<sup>38</sup> Given the traditionally cautious posture of the ELN in moving into new territory, its agile movement into areas that the FARC was withdrawing from under the terms of the accords suggested an active collaboration, perhaps including the outright movement of FARC fighters into the ranks of the ELN. Prominent examples include the ELN's rapid establishment of a strong presence in Vichada, where it had not previously operated, as well as into Nariño and Cauca.<sup>39</sup>

The 2016 peace accords created multiple opportunities for demobilizing FARC and FARC militia members to join the ELN. During the period leading up to the agreement and during its implementation, some FARC members temporarily or permanently changed allegiances to the ELN, rather than participating in the demobilization process established by the accord. Others participated in the demobilization, then later became disillusioned, or couldn't find adequate opportunities in civil society, or became disillusioned for other reasons, and joined the ELN.

With the expansion of coca production in Colombia following the accords, the ELN, among other groups, benefitted from an expansion of income which allowed the organization not only to sustain those transitioning to the organization from the FARC, but also to recruit economically vulnerable Venezuelans and others. At the time of the 2016 Peace Accords, the ELN had an estimated 1,500 combatants, not counting supporters and affiliated groups,<sup>40</sup> and was operating in 96 municipalities.<sup>41</sup> By the end of 2020, the organization was estimated to have 5,400 "integral" members<sup>42</sup> (including approximately 2,500 armed combatants,<sup>43</sup> plus those operating in direct support), and many more when indirect affiliates and support networks are included.<sup>44</sup> Colombian intelligence estimates that the ELN is currently operating in 156 municipalities in the country.<sup>45</sup>

As of late 2020, ELN bi-national areas of focus include Catatumbo (in Norte de Santander), Arauca, Casanare and Vichada (on the border with Venezuela), Choco and Antioquia (on the border with Panama), and the Southwest of the country, including Nariño (on the border with Ecuador) and Cauca.<sup>46</sup> The area along the coast of Colombia has been particularly involved with the export of drugs, including the use of narcosubmarines to send shipments, although activities of the organization there have also been heavily targeted by Colombian security forces.<sup>47</sup>

Although for a time, the Colombian government's peace accord with the FARC, negotiated under center-left President Juan Manuel Santos seemed to open up an opportunity to negotiate a similar accord with the ELN, with the initiation of peace talks in Havana in 2015,<sup>48</sup> the organization's increasing power, criminal activities, a more conservative government in Colombia, Colombia and the region have combined to lead the ELN to a more aggressive posture. The cease-fire that the group agreed to in September 2017, and which lasted from

October 2017 through January 2018, was abandoned by the ELN with a series of bombings.<sup>49</sup> The inauguration of conservative President Ivan Duque in August 2018 hardened the Colombian government's posture toward the ELN in peace negotiations. The January 2019 ELN attack against the national police academy in Bogota, which killed 21 persons, led the Duque government to completely abandon peace talks,<sup>50</sup> setting the state for a more combative posture by the ELN in Colombia and elsewhere.

The new aggressive posture of the ELN in Colombia was highlighted 14-17 February 2020, when the organization declared an "armed strike" across Colombia, with a series of 27 operations and "show of force attacks,"<sup>51</sup> as the Covid-19 pandemic was in its early stages, although in October 2020, it was again calling for a cease-fire with the government.<sup>52</sup> Currently, the ELN is believed to be playing an active role in current social unrest in Colombia, with the intention of leveraging and expanding the protests to support its strategic goals of delegitimizing and destabilizing the Colombian government. Examples include a believed ELN role in the protests of 21 September 2020,<sup>53</sup> as well as the indigenous protests in Cali in October 2020 (a "minga")<sup>54</sup> and the group's associated march on Bogota in which the resumption of peace talks with the ELN was one of the indigenous demands.<sup>55</sup>

In Colombia's neighbor Ecuador, criminal operations by the ELN in that country, including the killing of three journalists in April 2018,<sup>56</sup> and the Ecuadoran government's subsequent appointment of a new Minister of Defense Oswaldo Jarrin (in part to bring the ELN threat on Ecuadoran territory under control) ultimately led the Moreno government to withdraw Ecuador's role as guarantor of the ELN-Colombia peace talks in Havana.<sup>57</sup>

Since the dynamics unleashed by the 2016 Peace Accords, and before, the ELN has not only been growing, but it has also been fighting with rival criminal groups in the areas where it operates, both in the border region with Venezuela and elsewhere in Colombia, leveraging not only its expanded numbers and wealth, but also its relative discipline and ability to infiltrate an area.<sup>58</sup> In a series of violent clashes in March 2020, the ELN has been trying to gain ground in the border region against three of Colombia's most powerful criminal rivals, the Urabeños<sup>59</sup> the Rastrojos,<sup>60</sup> and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL, a.k.a. Pelusos).<sup>61</sup>

The ELN's advance and competition with other groups goes far beyond the border region. In Colombia's Southwestern state of Nariño, 20 persons were reportedly killed in a week of fighting between the Urabeños, the ELN, and dissident factions from the FARC.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in Tambo, in the Department of Cauca, 53 people have been killed in the first nine months of 2020, triple the number for all of 2019, in fighting between the ELN fronts Carlos Patiño and José María

Becerra, FARC dissidents, and other criminal groups. The Colombian town of Argelia similarly saw violent clashes between elements of the ELN and FARC dissidents over control of drug routes in March 2020.<sup>63</sup> Both areas are strategically located for access to the Pacific from the Cauca valley.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Post-2016 ELN Expansion and Consolidation in Venezuela**

As noted previously, with the demobilization of the FARC following the 2016 peace accords with the Colombian government, the ELN took advantage of the withdraw of its leftist counterpart, to expand its position in Colombia, particularly on the border with Venezuela. At the same time, however, the ELN also expanded on the Venezuelan side. Along the border region during this period, the ELN expanded and consolidated its position in the Colombian states of Táchira and Apure, south toward Amazonas,<sup>65</sup> as well as moving into Zulia and Bolívar. In the process, it increased its control over drug smuggling routes from Colombia into Venezuela<sup>66</sup> by increasingly controlling the informal crossings known as *trochas*.<sup>67</sup> The ELN for example, reportedly established an informal border crossing (*trocha*) under its control connecting Colombia with Manapiare, in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, an important mining region.<sup>68</sup> As part of its expansion within Venezuela, the ELN also moved to control the river systems connecting the border to the interior of the country, including the Autana, Cuaio, Sipapo and Guayapo rivers.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond drugs and minerals, the ELN has also been involved in stealing and extorting cattle from ranchers on the Colombian side of the border and smuggling them into Venezuela,<sup>70</sup> particularly in the Department of Arauca, although illegal mining is generally considered more lucrative.<sup>71</sup>

As during the Colombian presidency of Alvaro Uribe in Colombia, the election of Ivan Duque in June 2018, and his more confrontational posture toward the ELN with his assumption of power in August of that year, put further pressure on the organization to increase its operations on the Venezuelan side of the border. This was particularly the case following the ELN bombing of a Bogota police training facility in January 2019, and President Duque's subsequent cessation of all peace talks with the group. Similarly, in July 2020, Duque rejected ELN offer of a cease-fire in conjunction with the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>72</sup>

Within Venezuela itself, as the nation's economic and political crisis deepened, the ELN extended its operations from those at the border, to become increasingly active in the illegal mining sector in the interior of the country. With the permission<sup>73</sup> and even invitation of the Maduro government, and the collaboration of local Venezuelan military commanders, the ELN fought and displaced the local



*sindicatos* (mafia organizations), *pranes* (prison gangs),<sup>74</sup> and *collectivos* that had previously dominated illegal activities in the region, but which had increasingly gotten out of control and become a liability of the Maduro government.<sup>75</sup> The Maduro regime also found working with the ELN useful insofar as the ELN served as a useful buffer against intervention from the US through Colombia, and possibly as a vehicle, in conjunction with Venezuela's police special forces (FAES), for Maduro to protect himself against any attempt by the Armed Forces or other factions to oust him.<sup>76</sup>

The entry of the ELN into the illicit economies of the subregions of Venezuela was accompanied by considerable violence as the organization displaced the aforementioned organizations which had previously exerted control.<sup>77</sup> As one analyst put it, "the ELN is generally brought in by the [Maduro regime] to solve problems in areas where there are problems."<sup>78</sup> The October 2018 massacre of miners in the town of El Tumaremo, in the Venezuelan state of Bolivar, believed tied to the arrival of 100 ELN soldiers, was for some, evidence of the ELN advance into even the easternmost parts of the country.<sup>79</sup>

By 2020, the ELN reportedly had a presence in 12 of Venezuela's 24 states.<sup>80</sup> It had influence over territory and involvement in illicit economic activities in at least five (mostly near the border with Colombia), representing a significant amount of Venezuela's national territory, and in particular, Zulia, Táchira, Apure, Amazonas, and Bolivar.<sup>81</sup> As of December 2020, the ELN was estimated to have close to 1,000 members on the Venezuelan side of the border,<sup>82</sup> in ten major groupings, principally representing three war fronts (the Eastern, the North, and the Northeast war fronts) and 43 columns,<sup>83</sup> making it Latin America's first truly bi-national guerilla group.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, of 24 key ELN leaders, at the end of 2020, three-quarters of them were believed to be in Venezuela.<sup>85</sup> Many of the ELN forces regularly move between the Colombian and Venezuelan sides of the border, although those involved in illicit activities in the Eastern parts of the country, more distant from Colombia, are believed to have a more permanent status.<sup>86</sup>

Of note, by the end of 2020, some analyses indicated that the number and geographic penetration of the ELN in Colombia had stabilized, with certain areas in which the ELN operated more broadly and freely than in others, suggesting a de facto cooperation with the Maduro regime regarding how and where the ELN would maintain its presence.<sup>87</sup> Analyses of operating patterns suggested a level of self-coordination between ELN and dissident elements of the FARC operating in these areas, with the facilitation of local Venezuelan military commanders and Cuban intelligence.<sup>88</sup> While there is uncertainty over the exact relationship between the ELN and Cuban agents operating in Venezuela, the participation of many senior ELN leaders in Cuban schools, and reference to Cuban doctrine

arguably facilitates a common language and respect of the ELN for the Cubans in the areas where they find themselves collocated.<sup>89</sup>

The expansion of Venezuelan oil production and US sanctions against the Maduro regime and the associated collapse of Venezuelan oil production has increased the regime's need for gold and other illicit income, and thus its need for, and the leverage of the ELN. In May 2020, the Maduro regime opened mining in the Bolivar state along the Caura, Cuchivero, Aro, Yuruari, Cuyuní and Caroní rivers, further setting the stage for an expanded ELN presence in those areas. Within the Maduro regime, Tareck El Aissami is believed to play a role in liaisons with the ELN,<sup>90</sup> although others believe that Diosdado Cabello<sup>91</sup> and Freddy Bernal, the head of the Venezuelan paramilitary police, the FAES, may play a role in the relationship.<sup>92</sup>

Currently, the ELN is believed to be expanding its presence in Venezuela, building bases in the Venezuelan states of Barinas, Guarico, Lara, Falcon, including airstrips which give their camps access to the Caribbean coast for drug smuggling and other operations.

The expanding ELN footprint in Venezuela has been felt by the peoples in the region, including the indigenous peoples operating in remote jungle areas. In July 2020, for example, a group of approximately 60 ELN moving into the mining area on the Caura river were believed responsible for multiple acts of violence against the local population.<sup>93</sup>

In regions the ELN occupies in Venezuela, it exerts a degree of de facto territorial political and social control, reflecting both its roots as a guerilla organization, and the weakness of the Venezuelan state.<sup>94</sup> Such activities include administering justice, imposing curfews in association with Covid-19,<sup>95</sup> maintaining roads, as well as recruiting new members. The ELN has have even been known to distribute food rations from the government, in the form of the famous local Committees of Supply and Production "CLAP boxes."<sup>96</sup> All three ELN warfronts in Venezuela have reportedly been involved in this activity (the Northeastern War Front oriented toward Norte de Santander, the Northern War Front oriented toward La Guajira and Cesar, and the Eastern war front focused on Arauca, Boyacá, and Casanare),<sup>97</sup> in collaboration with the Maduro regime and local authorities in the states of in the states of Táchira, Apure and Zulia. Through their role in this distribution, they support both their territorial control and the Maduro regime, effectively deciding who gets needed food and other supplies from the government.<sup>98</sup> In addition, in the state of Arauca, the ELN is involved in infiltration and political work, consistent with their Marxist roots.<sup>99</sup> The ELN also reportedly give "classes" in local schools, and operate a series of five to six mobile radio facilities

on the Venezuelan side of the border,<sup>100</sup> in collaboration with the government, producing socialist propaganda.<sup>101</sup>

With respect to the chain of command for ELN operations in Venezuela, the ELN Eastern, Northern, and Northeastern War Fronts are reportedly active in the country. There are not, as far as this investigation could identify, official separate, permanent ELN organizational structures for the management of its criminal and other operations in Venezuela.<sup>102</sup>

Despite the apparent presence of multiple ELN “War Fronts” in Venezuela, “Pablito” (commander of the ELN Eastern Warfront), is arguably the most important ELN figure with respect to operations in the country. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Eastern War Front, in Venezuelan states such as Lara, Merida, and parts of Barinas, the organization’s operations are believed to be more directly under control of the ELN Northeastern or Northern fronts, or the COCE directly, in coordination with Venezuela’s Maduro regime.<sup>103</sup>

As the ELN War Front commander with most significant presence in Venezuela, the wealth and associated military power that Pablito has achieved through such activities, including recruitment of new members in Venezuela, has made his front so important within the organization that his invitation to be part of the COCE in 2015 was believed to be an attempt by the other ELN leaders to accommodate him.

With respect to the revenues generated in Eastern Warfront related activities in Venezuela, Pablito reportedly passes a small portion of the proceeds to the rest of the organization through the COCE, although in general, ELN war fronts are expected to “self-finance,” with a significant portion of money generated in Venezuela going to personal enrichment and/or diverted to unknown destinations.<sup>104</sup> “Ramiro Vargas,” the COCE leadership figure whose previously noted designation as “Financier” is believed to play a key role in the management of those proceeds for the COCE.<sup>105</sup> Such contributions notwithstanding, Pablito reportedly has significant latitude to do what he wants with the money generated in Venezuela. Still the direct relationship between other COCE members such as Antonio Garcia, and the Maduro regime, are believed to limit that latitude to some degree.<sup>106</sup>

The relationship between the ELN and local Venezuelan politicians and military commanders, including the Bolivarian National Guard, is collaborative, and generally without overt conflict, reflecting both permission from the Maduro regime for the ELN to operate in Venezuela, and the way in which local Venezuelan political and military leaders (including Venezuela’s Integral Strategic Defense Regions REDI and Integral Defense Operations Zones ZODI commanders) permit and facilitate the ELN role in imposing order on criminal activities in their region, and in the process, share the proceeds.<sup>107</sup>

The ELN relationship with local Venezuelan political and military leaders is different in differing parts of Venezuela. In Amazonas, for example, the ELN reportedly pays a tax to the Venezuela's Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) to permit its operations. Venezuelan military units permit, and sometimes facilitate activities by the ELN<sup>108</sup> to drive out rival groups empowering it to consolidate its control over income coming from mining activities on Venezuelan territory, as well as narcotics and other activities.<sup>109</sup> The ELN is believed to be less directly involved in profiting from smuggling people and their food and medicine across the border.<sup>110</sup>

Despite the collaborative nature of the relationship, there have been incidents of conflict. One of the most prominent occurred in 2018, when Venezuelan officials captured the ELN local commander Luis Felipe Ortega Bernal ("Garganta"), allegedly over a criminal dispute, leading the ELN to ambush and kill four GNB personnel in reprisal. More recently, a May 2020 operation by the Venezuelan government against FARC dissident leader "Ferney," believed to have ties to the ELN,<sup>111</sup> left four GNB members dead, and may indicate involvement of the Venezuelan military in helping to tip the balance between ELN and FARC organizations whose criminal activities in Venezuela compete with each other.<sup>112</sup>

Aside from such incidents,<sup>113</sup> the ELN relationship with the FARC dissidents in Venezuela, where both use the country as a rear area and base for recruiting and generating revenues within Venezuela, is arguably even less conflictual<sup>114</sup> than in Colombia.<sup>115</sup> In the border region, one analysis cited the lack of conflict between the ELN and the FARC in the border region between Puerto Páez, Puerto Ayacucho, and San Fernando de Atapabo, where both had presence and interests as evidence of the principally cooperative relationship between the two groups.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, in October 2018, in Apure, Venezuela, the ELN and FARC in Venezuela reportedly signed a non-aggression pact, including collaboration over drug routes. The ELN and FARC simultaneously operate in specific mining areas, such as Yapacana nature preserve, in Amazonas state.<sup>117</sup>

The return of FARC commanders Ivan Marquez and Jesus Santrich to the FARC dissident movement in 2019,<sup>118</sup> and their operation from Venezuela reportedly generated some uncertainty in the relationship, but had no enduring negative effect,<sup>119</sup> and with time, has helped decrease violence associated with competition between the groups.<sup>120</sup>

Beyond the FARC, as noted previously, the ELN is also competing with other armed groups for control over smuggling routes between Venezuela and Colombia. These include an ongoing fight with the EPL<sup>121</sup> as well as with elements of the Gulf Clan<sup>122</sup> and the Rastrojos<sup>123</sup> over border crossings between Norte de Santander Colombia,<sup>124</sup> and the bordering Venezuelan states of Zulia and Táchira.

The ELN has gained ground in some of these struggles, although it is not clear who is prevailing.

### The Impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed the environment in Colombia and Venezuela in ways that facilitate the further expansion of the ELN, its criminal and terrorist activities, and the threat that it poses to prosperity and governance in the region and indirectly, to the United States.

In the short term, the economic hardship occasioned in Colombia by the closure of the economy to limit the spread of the virus arguably increased the susceptibility of some Colombians in need to recruitment and bribery by the ELN. Formal unemployment in Colombia more than doubled during the pandemic from 9.4% in June 2019, to 19.8% in June 2020.<sup>125</sup> The poverty rate in Colombia jumped from 26.9% to 38% during the same period.<sup>126</sup> During the lockdown in Colombia in April, the government documented 30 cases of ELN recruitment of minors from destitute families who could not afford to maintain their children.<sup>127</sup>

The ELN also benefitted from the distraction of the Colombian state and its security forces in responding to the pandemic,<sup>128</sup> as well as the debilitation of the de facto Maduro government in Venezuela.

In both Colombia and Venezuela, the pandemic allowed the ELN to exercise governance and consolidate control over areas in which they were operating. In May 2020, in the village of Teorama, in the Colombian Department of Norte de Santander, for example, the ELN engaged in the distribution of relief supplies to the local population, and gave talks about how to avoid contagion.<sup>129</sup> In April, in the Department of Choco, the ELN similarly distributed pamphlets with regulations in response to the pandemic, including demanding the closure of streets and the prohibition of public gatherings, subsequently killing persons who did not comply with the order.<sup>130</sup> In Bolivar State, the ELN also issued pamphlets, which reached towns along the Magdalena river including Simití, Cantagallo, San Pablo and Santa Rosa del Sur,<sup>131</sup> threatening to kill residents if they did not comply with its social isolation rules.<sup>132</sup>

The ELN's use of the pandemic to consolidate its social control, even as it struggles for new territory, can be seen in the offer it made to the Colombian government in May 2020,<sup>133</sup> and again in October 2020<sup>134</sup> (although rejected on both occasions), for a "humanitarian cease fire."<sup>135</sup>

Although in the short term, the Colombian government has not made significant reductions in programmed government spending,<sup>136</sup> in the longer term, the need for expanded spending on medical and emergency economic programs to combat COVID-19 leaves the Colombian state saddled with debts, and will likely

force budget cuts in areas from security to infrastructure and social development programs, limiting Colombia's ability to impose effective governance, and to combat and provide alternatives to the ELN in areas where it operates.

## **Conclusions**

The expanding position of the ELN in Colombia and Venezuela reflects a dangerous feedback cycle that could ultimately present grave consequences for both countries and the region. The efforts against the ELN by the Duque government in Colombia, and collaboration from the Maduro regime in Venezuela's have pushed the group far deeper into Venezuela. The group has been nourished by the proceeds of expanded coca production in Colombia, illegal mining in Venezuela, the extortion of flows of people, goods and money at the Venezuelan-Colombian border where they have a strong presence, and opportunities augmented by the Covid-19 pandemic to exploit and recruit desperate Venezuelans and Colombians in both countries. The political crisis in Venezuela, ideological differences and strong opposition between the Colombian government and those occupying power in Caracas make cooperation to control the ELN as an entrenched, well-financed bi-national threat, unrealistic under current conditions.

The Colombian government, with the help of the US and other allies, clearly needs to continue to prioritize and fund efforts against the ELN, among other armed organized groups, including clear strategic planning, international and interagency coordination, and the assertion of effective control over national territory, including the border region. Even with such efforts, however, an enduring solution to the ELN challenge requires the restoration of a legitimate democratic government in Caracas with which Colombia can effectively and reliably coordinate. Even if such a future democratic government in Venezuela is not ideologically aligned with its counterpart in Colombia, it must be willing, and at least marginally capable of asserting control over the web of criminal enterprises that the interior of the country has become, in order to deprive the ELN of both its sanctuary and revenue base.<sup>137</sup>

There are no easy solutions in the near term to the grave challenge posed by the ELN, but if not confronted, the threat and its adverse consequences for Colombia, Venezuela, and the region will only grow. □

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**R. Evan Ellis, PhD**

He is a research professor of Latin American Studies at the Institute of Strategic Studies of the US Army War College with a focus on the region's relations with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors. Dr. Ellis has published more than 90 works, including the 2009 book *China in Latin America: The Whats and Wherefores* (China in Latin America: the whys and whys), the 2013 book *The Strategic Dimension of Chinese Engagement with Latin America* (The strategic dimension of Chinese activities in Latin America) and the 2014 book, *China on the Ground in Latin America*. Dr. Ellis has presented his work in a wide range of commercial and government forums in 25 countries. He has testified about Chinese activities in Latin America before the US Congress, and has talked about his work in China and other external actors in Latin America in a wide range of radio and television programs, including CNN International, CNN En Español, The John Bachelor Show, Voice of America and Radio Martí. Dr. Ellis is usually quoted in the print media in both the US and Latin America for his work in this area, including the Washington Times, Bloomberg, America Economy, DEF and InfoBAE. Dr. Ellis has a doctorate in political science with a specialization in comparative politics. The opinions expressed in this article are strictly yours.