

## **In chaotic Venezuela, guerrillas from Colombia find new territory to grow**

BY JIM WYSS

Miami Herald, January 16, 2018 8:00 AM

With dark curly hair and a wiry frame, the 29-year-old gold miner said she had grown used to the violence, lawlessness and the rule of strongmen in southeastern Venezuela.

For years, the muddy patch of land that she worked with her family had been trapped in a turf war between rival gangs that left dozens dead.

But life changed about a year ago when a new gang arrived: Colombia's National Liberation Army, or ELN.

The miner said more than 100 well-armed ELN soldiers — hauled in by truck and wearing unmarked fatigues — descended on her isolated mining village along the border with Guyana and almost 500 miles away from the Colombian border.

“People were saying ‘the guerrillas are coming, the guerrillas are coming from Colombia,’” recalled the woman, who asked to remain anonymous out of fear her family could face retaliation. “And then from one day to the next, they were there.”

The guerrilla group has been present along the Venezuelan-Colombian border for decades, but there are indications that the Marxist-inspired rebels are growing stronger and more brazen as they capitalize on the general chaos and security breakdown in Venezuela.

On Thursday, Javier Tarazona, with the Venezuelan human rights group REDES, asked Venezuela's attorney general to investigate a spate of homicides and kidnappings along the border that he attributes to the ELN and other Colombian gangs.

The guerrillas “are shamelessly advancing in Venezuelan territory to completely control all of the border crossings and all of the areas along the border,” Tarazona said. “And what surprises us is the complacent attitude of the Venezuelan authorities. What surprises us is that no one is trying to stop these actions.”

Earlier this year, REDES reported that the ELN was helping deliver boxes of government-subsidized food in Venezuela and slapping its own propaganda on the products. In addition, Tarazona has accused the ELN of distributing leaflets, notebooks and coloring books at primary schools in at least eight states as part of an “indoctrination program.”

The reports emerge as Venezuela is in economic free-fall. Hyperinflation, international sanctions, collapsing oil prices and widespread corruption have created a breeding ground for organized crime.

In January, Republican Sen. Marco Rubio, from Florida, and Sen. Bob Menendez, a Democrat from New Jersey, [warned the White House](#) about the hemispheric risk.

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, “in an effort to cling to power and promote a failed political ideology, has dismantled democratic institutions, repressed political opponents, and starved the Venezuelan people through economic mismanagement,” they wrote. “This lawless environment threatens the stability and security of the region, including the United States, by providing fertile ground for drug cartels and U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations, such as the FARC and the ELN, to operate.”

While it's clear that the ELN is operating in Venezuela, some doubt the group has punched so deep into the country.

Jeremy McDermott, the executive director of Insight Crime, a non-governmental organization that studies criminality in the Americas, said the ELN has traditionally stayed closer to the Colombian-Venezuelan border.

“Venezuela is an enormously important strategic rearguard for the ELN,” McDermott said, noting that key ELN leaders are thought to live in the country. “It’s an extremely important place for them to sit and plan without the risk of getting bombed.”

While the account of the gold miner in southeastern Venezuela couldn’t be independently confirmed, Américo de Grazia, an opposition congressman from Bolivar state, said the ELN now controls at least seven mining areas in his district — including the region around Tumaremo, where the gold miner was working.

De Grazia said the Maduro administration, desperate for foreign investment, essentially invited the ELN to subdue warring gangs, or *pranes*, who have traditionally controlled gold, diamond and coltan — metallic ore used in cellphones — mines in southern Venezuela.

“Big multinationals have been demanding more security in the area in order to invest,” de Grazia said. “And the state is trying to guarantee that security by using the ELN, which they believe are more reliable than the *pranes*.”

“It’s an all-out war with the ELN liquidating the *pranes* — and it allows the armed forces to keep their hands clean,” he added.

When the guerrillas first moved into the area last year, they sometimes identified themselves as the Bolivarian Liberation Front, de Grazia said. But as they’ve consolidated power, they’ve dropped the subterfuge. And while they don’t wear the distinctive ELN armband, it’s clear who they are, he said.

Calls to Venezuela’s Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Communications seeking comment went unanswered.

The female gold miner said the ELN was unlike some of the other gangs she had worked under. In exchange for 10 percent of the gold that miners extracted, the guerrilla brought a degree of order to the chaotic village. Crime decreased and people were punished for domestic violence or stealing from neighbors. The ELN even helped guarantee that government-subsidized food, called CLAPs, were distributed in the town, she said.

While the core of the guerrilla army was made up of Colombians, there were also Venezuelans, Ecuadoreans, Bolivians and Guyanese, she said. And the ELN were constantly recruiting.

The woman, a former paratrooper who deserted the Venezuelan army in 2008, said her parents were afraid she might be forced to work for the ELN, so she and her sister fled to Colombia three months ago.

Fears of the ELN's international expansion come as Colombia is trying to hammer out a peace deal with the group in Cuba — similar to the 2016 pact that led the majority of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to lay down its weapons.

But the ELN, which was founded in 1964 and is thought to have about 1,500 fighters, has been [far more cagey and reluctant](#) to embrace a deal. Part of the reason is the group's decentralized command structure, but its growth in Venezuela is also relevant.

“Venezuela offers the last safe haven for the ELN and it's the principal base from which this guerrilla army is planning its expansion,” Insight Crime wrote in a recent report called [‘Venezuela: A Mafia State?’](#) “The ELN's safe haven in Venezuela, in large part, explains their lack of interest in committing themselves to negotiations.”

Those peace talks are hanging in the balance as Colombia is heading toward a June 17 presidential election runoff between two diametrically opposed candidates. Iván Duque, with the right-wing Centro Democrático party, has been a harsh critic of the FARC peace process and is unlikely to pursue a similar deal with the ELN. His rival, Gustavo Petro, a [former guerrilla himself](#), has said that negotiations are key to ending Colombia's half-century conflict.

The gold miner said the ELN has every reason to feel safe in Venezuela — the military turns a blind eye to all of the illegality in the gold-mining area. When the region was under the control of murderous gang leader known as “*El Topo*” — The Mole — she said soldiers would snap to attention when he passed. And the ELN are also treated with deference.

Now the woman works at a toy store in Colombia's capital. She's thankful for the job, but longs for the days in the dark, hot mine where the lure of striking it rich made the hard work worthwhile.

“Gold mining is an adventure but also a huge risk,” she said. Some weeks she would make nothing at all, but one week, she found 25 grams of gold — enough to buy a house.

“It’s another world,” she said of the mining town. “As soon as things get better over there, I’m going back.”

*A previous version of this story gave an incorrect political affiliation for Sen. Bob Menendez.*