

# The COVID-19 Lockdown as a Window of Opportunity to Degrade Transnational Organized Crime Groups in Colombia

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The year 2020 presented unique opportunities for military forces globally, not only to assist and protect civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic but also to intensify the operational dynamics against the different hybrid security threats that are hidden inside each civilian society.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic and called on “all countries to continue efforts that have been effective in limiting the number of cases and slowing the spread of the virus.”<sup>1</sup> In response to this, for the first time in our recent world history, many countries around the world have implemented national lockdowns, imposing strict policies of domestic social distancing and social confinement including border closures in an effort to contain and eradicate the virus. Many governments have restricted freedom of mobility as well as the concentration of people to pray, deliberate, legislate, educate, and engage in many other activities that are normal human social behaviors. In the second quarter of 2020 around half of global population was under strict lockdown (approximately 3.9 billion people) due to the exponential growth of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

In Colombia, a national mandatory quarantine was decreed in July 2020. The Colombian army developed a comprehensive strategy that allowed an immediate and forceful offensive against COVID-19 without reducing

the operational dynamics against the *organizaciones criminales transnacionales*, or transnational criminal organizations (TCO), that degrade Colombian security. This strategy, called “Saint Roch,” consisted in four lines of effort: (1) preserve the force, (2) maintain operational capacity, (3) increase border controls, and (4) give total support to the civil authority. These lines of effort generated a window of opportunity to increase operational effectiveness against the TCOs during the quarantine.

It is important to understand that between February and March 2020, all political and military leaders in Colombia were primarily focused on the mitigation of COVID-19. However, this did not lead to a strategic myopia because the Colombian army planners understood that this situation would be used by the TCOs to mutate into more complex threats if the operational initiative was not increased.

## Preserve the Force

Preservation of force was the main line of effort for the Colombian army; if one soldier was infected with COVID-19, he or she could easily infect other soldiers due to the social coexistence and proximity prevalent in military barracks. Worse, it could infect those soldiers operationally deployed in the field. Furthermore, as the soldiers became active control agents, they were routinely close to the civilian population at checkpoints. For



Colombian soldiers patrol the streets 13 July 2020 after a strict quarantine was declared to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in Bogotá. Some 3.5 million people returned to strict confinement in Colombia in response to the alarming increase in infections of the coronavirus. (Photo by Raul Arboleda, Agence France-Presse)

these reasons, preventive measures were quickly established from the beginning of March 2020:

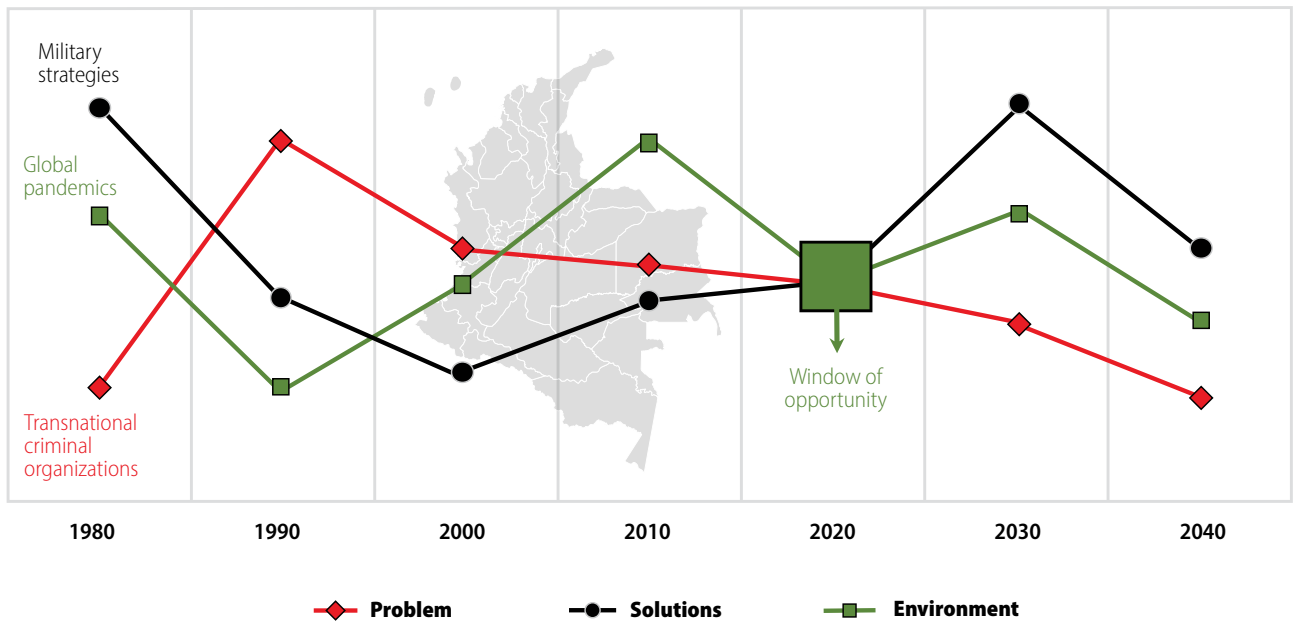
- Use of face masks and gloves and periodic hand-washing were mandatory.
- Combat courses and retraining were canceled until further notice. All academic courses were conducted virtually.
- Officer and noncommissioned officer staff members worked in shifts to reduce the number of people in the office.
- Holidays were canceled.
- Recruitment activities were postponed.
- All military ceremonies were canceled.
- Vehicles, planes, and helicopters were disinfected daily.
- Platoon commanders took the temperature of each soldier daily.
- All crew members of aeromedical evacuation aircraft wore chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear (CBRN) protective equipment.

- Resupply of deployed units was carried out with maximum biosecurity protocols, especially resupply food and water.

Due to the different environmental conditions that exist in Colombia such as snow-capped mountains, plains, deserts, rain forests, and long coastlines along the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, the Colombian army commander encouraged his more than two hundred battalion commanders to develop their own protocols and accentuate all the main protection measures. In case of doubt, there were health-care personnel and a team of combat paramedics that could rapidly deploy to assist if any soldier showed COVID-19 symptoms.

## Maintain Operational Capacity

The COVID-19 quarantine has led to never-before-seen control of the civilian population, and this has created atypical conditions for the development of offensive operations against TCOs in Colombia. During the



(Figure by author)

**Figure. COVID-19 Window of Opportunity**

last few years, counterinsurgency strategists and scholars have determined that population is the most important center of gravity for any counterinsurgency military campaign. According to David Galula, a notable French counterinsurgency theorist, one of the most important conditions of victory in counterinsurgency is “the permanent isolation of the insurgent from the population.”<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in March 2020, the different TCO entities that threaten to overwhelm Colombian society have lost part of their criminal initiative due to the national restriction of land and river movement, and under these circumstances, a window of opportunity was generated. According to John W. Kingdon, a window of opportunity appears when three separate variables converge at a certain moment to allow the emergence of a specific strategy, thus impacting the existence of a given threat.<sup>4</sup> In Colombia, the first variable, the problem, was the TCOs; the second variable, the solution, was the Saint Roch strategy; and the third variable, the operational environment, was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (see figure).

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the lack of a dispersed and mobile

society during the quarantine helped the Colombian government increase eradication efforts and thus restrict the normal profit flow of the illegal economies based on drug trafficking in Colombia.<sup>5</sup> It also led to the capture and neutralization of multiple TCO high-value targets (HVT) as well as the seizure of significant cocaine cargos. The vulnerability of the different hybrid threats and narco-terrorist groups was significantly increased since their criminal actions became more visible when isolating and containing the civilian population. The Colombian Joint Special Operations Command during the COVID-19 epidemic developed the mission to increase its operational effort to escalate the pressure against the nodal points of transnational criminal networks, especially when to neutralize HVTs. In other words, while almost eighty thousand members of the Colombian armed forces were committed to the containment of COVID-19, the special forces focused on detecting and neutralizing the middle echelons (underboss and caporegime) to weaken the organizational hierarchy of the main TCOs in Colombia.<sup>6</sup> The focus on the midlevel HVTs was because most of the senior leaders were protected: *Ejército de*



*Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army, or ELN) in Cuba, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC) dissidents in Venezuela, and paramilitary drug trafficking groups Gulf Clan and Caparros along the border with Panama.<sup>7</sup>

Most HVTs moved two to three times a day to avoid detection, but this technique of erratic location and dislocation became a vulnerability during times of confinement. Two key transnational criminals, Serbian drug trafficker Dejan Stanimirovic and Colombian drug trafficker José Rivera, allegedly killed each other after pressure from the Colombian special forces at the end of March, thus affecting the cartel of the Balkans, a criminal organization that trafficked Colombian cocaine for Europe, according to information provided by Europol.<sup>8</sup> Then, in August, Darío Úsuga Torres, known as “Pueblo,” was killed during a surgical precision attack operation; Torres was a key member of the Gulf Clan and cousin of its leader, Dairo Antonio Úsuga, known as “Otoniel.”<sup>9</sup>

The military pressure continued, achieving the capture of more than thirty key caporegimes, thus affecting the illegal finances of their criminal groups and taking them out of their comfort zone. On 25 October, a small special forces detachment infiltrated the western jungle of Colombia and killed ELN leader Andrés Felipe Vanegas, known as “Uriel.”<sup>10</sup>

On 3 November, Colombian President Iván Duque Márquez confirmed the death of Nelson Lerma Giraldo, known as “Mocho Leiber,” the leader

of the FARC dissidents in the south of the country.<sup>11</sup> And on 16 November, Emiliano Alcides Osorio, known as “Caín,” the top leader of the Caparros criminal structure and one of the most wanted in

Colombia, was killed, firmly establishing the success of this line of action.<sup>12</sup>

## Increase Border Controls

The third line of effort, increased border controls, was divided into land and maritime tasks. Land border control presented a great challenge for Colombian military forces because Colombia has 6,342 kilometers of land borders with five countries: Venezuela and Brazil to the east, Ecuador and Peru to the south, and Panama to the northwest. A predominance of rain forest compounds the problem, making it nearly impossible for Colombia to completely close its borders. On paper, Colombia may prohibit transit through its legal migratory passages, but in practice, illegal trails and remote locations create porous borders. The coronavirus pandemic has led each country to try to isolate itself from the outside, but for Colombia, its ambiguous and porous borders are a risk factor that has been exploited by different TCOs.

The president of Colombia restricted the entry and exit of both nationals and foreigners into Colombian territory from March to September 2020. However, the rate of COVID-19 infections in the region is high, and Colombia is surrounded by countries that have been central

to its spread in South America during this pandemic. On 26 February, Brazil became the first country in the region to report COVID-19 infection, and as



Andrés Felipe Vanegas Londoño, commander of the National Liberation Army, was killed by Colombian special forces 25 October 2020. (Photo courtesy of Twitter)



In August 2020, Darío Úsuga Torres, key member of the Gulf Clan and cousin of its leader, Dairo Antonio Úsuga, was killed during a surgical precision attack operation. (Photo courtesy of the National Police of Colombia)





of this article's publication, it was the country most affected by this pandemic in South America, challenged with controlling the spread of the virus in the Amazon region.

On the other hand, the Maduro regime in Venezuela has attempted to turn this pandemic into a tool to destabilize the region. This country claimed to be immune to COVID-19 since it only reports less than one thousand infected and few deaths.<sup>13</sup> The Maduro regime called on the nearly four million Venezuelan migrants and refugees to return to their country, guaranteeing them health and food services if they supported Maduro in the next elections. In their return, Colombia was an obligatory stop for many. The Colombian police, with the support of the Colombian army transports, have created a humanitarian corridor to move these Venezuelan citizens to the Venezuelan border, crossing Colombia in two days but with strict biosecurity protocols.

Traffic on the country's roads was restricted and controlled in an orderly fashion by cavalry battalions. This generated the seizure of more than forty tons of cocaine during the COVID-19 lockdown, the interruption of chemical inputs for its manufacture, and the visualization in real time of the different illegal corridors through which TCOs are smuggling.<sup>14</sup> This is undoubtedly affecting negatively their illegal economies.

The second task was maritime border control. Since 20 March, the Colombian navy has increased its presence in the Pacific Ocean and in the Caribbean Sea in order to deter illegal trafficking and strengthen maritime security, but the task is made complex by Colombia's wide maritime borders and its proximity to Nicaragua, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Panama, Venezuela, and Jamaica in the Caribbean Sea; and Ecuador, Panama, and Costa Rica in the Pacific Ocean. However, this effort was complemented by the Caribbean Corridor Strike Force (CCSF), a multinational campaign incorporating intelligence agencies, including the DEA, DHS, ICE, FBI, USCG, U.S. Marshals Service and armed forces from countries such as Argentina, Belize, Brazil, the Cayman Islands, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, France, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Spain, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Uruguay.<sup>15</sup> The deployment of U.S. Navy destroyers, combat ships, and surveillance aircraft was planned to support a multinational operation combating drug trafficking. On 1 April 2020, President Donald Trump said of this operation, "As governments and nations focus on the coronavirus there is a growing threat that cartels, criminals, terrorists and other malign actors will try to exploit the situation for their own gain."<sup>16</sup>

## Give Total Support to the Civil Authority

The Colombian armed forces are first responders in their country during times of crisis and natural disasters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the military has been key in maintaining order, preventing looting, and ensuring the population remains at home to prevent the spread of the virus. The first response to the virus by the Colombian armed forces occurred on 15 February 2020 when the Colombian president ordered an immediate humanitarian evacuation of fourteen university students

**Top left:** Colombian army and navy service members assemble and man a field hospital 26 March 2020 in preparation for potential COVID-19 patients outside the Military Central Hospital in Bogotá. (Photo courtesy of the Colombian Military Health Directorate) **Bottom left:** As part of Operation San Roque, aviators from the Colombian army's 1st Division deliver more than 840 humanitarian and medical relief packages to the indigenous Kogui 24 July 2020 in a region of Colombia that had been especially hard hit by COVID-19. (Photo courtesy of the Colombian army)

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Colombian army paratroopers assigned to the Special Forces Division board a plane for a high-altitude/high-opening parachute infiltration 21 August 2020 to facilitate special operations against high-value targets at Apiay Military Base, Colombia. (Photo by author)

isolated in the city of Wuhan, China. The Colombian air force, supported by medical personnel, planned and executed this operation using a Boeing 767 aircraft. The operation ended successfully on 28 February without any of the students or crew members and doctors presenting COVID-19 infection.

On 23 March, the president issued a decree ordering a national mandatory quarantine. The national police had the power to arrest those who failed to comply with this measure and to impose fines of approximately US\$300, and the highway police had the function of controlling mobility on the main roads. Additionally, the Colombian army deployed its regular units (including military police, infantry, cavalry, and artillery) of approximately 150,000 soldiers to support the police mission in small towns

and on secondary and tertiary roads. Military engineers, with their CBRN response groups and assisted by military doctors and combat paramedics, built campaign hospitals. In early April, CBRN teams started a nationwide campaign to disinfect bus stations, subways, airports, shopping centers, and hospitals. The key to this deployment was showing full respect for human rights and understanding the level of stress on the civilian population. This reduction of freedoms was very hard for a democratic society, but it was the only way to control the exponential growth of the COVID-19 virus.

## Conclusion

While it is clear that no one was prepared for this pandemic, most governments were making decisions to





Maj. Edwin Martin C. (*with pointer*), operations officer in the Colombian 3rd Special Forces Battalion at Larandia Military Fort, Colombia, briefs the scheme of maneuver 30 May 2020 for operations that were later carried out in southern Colombia during the most critical months of the pandemic. (Photo by Lt. Col. Danilo Fernandez, Colombian 3rd Special Forces Battalion)

contain COVID-19, and military forces were fundamental components to confront this biological threat. Restricting freedoms in times of globalization and international interconnection was daunting but necessary, and the only way to ensure compliance with those restrictions was through the soldiers and the police.

One can draw three conclusions from this situation. First, a global wave of protests occurred in 2019 in Iran, Hong Kong, France, Catalonia, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia, creating a fracture in trust between the civilian populations in those countries and their police and military forces. Today, however, soldiers and policemen around the world are applauded and supported since, along with doctors and nurses, they are on the front line of the fight against

COVID-19, and they risk their health daily to guarantee the well-being of their society. This credibility and support must be maintained, but this will only be achieved by avoiding the use of force to control the population as much as possible during this quarantine. Today, an overwhelming majority of citizens around the world understand the need for isolation.

Second, social isolation is creating unique conditions that separate citizens from the different hybrid threats that normally mingle with civil society to avoid justice. Consequently, the continuous control of and patrols in the cities, on the roads and highways, and along the borders is making key places and people within TCOs uncomfortable and visible to law enforcement and the military for neutralization.







Third, special forces commanders must understand that phenomena such as pandemics, natural disasters, and other emergency situations will always present windows of opportunity to uniquely degrade criminal organizations, and they must press for the

different intelligence agencies to intensify the search for high-value targets. Moreover, political leaders must authorize the neutralization of these targets before this window of opportunity closes. Now is the time to be proactive and not reactive against TCOs. ■

## Notes

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**Top left:** Coca growers raise their hands in protest against the eradication of illicit crops 3 September 2020 as soldiers carry out the sixth phase of the Artemisa Campaign to combat deforestation in the Amazonian departments of southeastern Colombia at the Natural National Park in La Macarena, Meta Department, Colombia. (Photo by Raul Arboleda, Agence France-Presse) **Bottom left:** A member of Colombia's investigation team inspects cocaine seized from a cartel's lab 19 December 2020 in the Pacific coast department of Nariño, Colombia. The lab reportedly produced \$696 million worth of cocaine a year, which was shipped on submarines and boats to Central America before making its way to the United States. (Photo courtesy of the Military Forces of Colombia)