



Our Journeys

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Building Trust in Colombia's Hub of Coca and Conflict

Two years ago, Crisis Group found that major threats to Colombia's peace process with former guerrillas all intersect in the Pacific coastal district of Tumaco. Our Colombia analyst Kyle Johnson made it his mission to find out more.

TUMACO – I'd travelled to many places in Colombia before I joined International Crisis Group, but never Tumaco. My first impression was that it's a town that shares many qualities with others on the Pacific coast. It's made up of two built-up islands and some mainland barrios, tucked into a maze of estuaries along Colombia's south-western border with Ecuador. Just one road runs in and out. Around 115,000 people live in the town itself, with another 89,000 in the surrounding countryside. The great majority of residents are Afro-Colombian.

The more time I spent there, however, the more I came to see Tumaco as embodying Colombia's political and economic dilemmas in microcosm. Despite a peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in 2016 (FARC), rebel dissidents, criminal gangs and other armed groups proliferate throughout. It is a cocaine production hub with easy access to seaborne smuggling routes and a higher proportion of land used to grow coca leaves

than anywhere else in Colombia. Its politics are so corrupt that several former mayors are in jail. Tumaco also suffers the country's highest rates of unemployment, with many of its people working in the informal economy, and others in the drug trade.

There are people and institutions working unevenly to improve the situation. The Catholic Church is a positive and influential force for change, helping to organise communities, denouncing human rights violations and promoting peace initiatives. Meanwhile, as in many rural parts of the country, a mix of honest, well-intentioned and also occasionally corrupt soldiers and police are frustrated by their inability to expand state control. In many cases, they are just trying to survive their deployment.

Demobilisation in Real Time

I fly in from Bogotá for the first time in March 2017 in an effort to find out more about the town and its troubled transition toward peace. The journey is just over one hour by air, though it would have taken over 24 hours by road. We approach the town over the green coastal jungle and drop down toward the most alluring part of Tumaco: an island on the edge of the Pacific Ocean with a one-runway airstrip, a military base, a sandy beach and some hotels for mainly Colombian tourists.

My aims are modest in these first few days. I want to make contacts with residents and government officials, begin our research and build up Crisis Group's name in the city. Things are tense, with homicide rates spiking because

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General views of Tumaco in Southern Colombia, near the border with Ecuador, 9 April 2019. CRISISGROUP/ Zaida Marquez

of fighting between FARC rebels and a breakaway guerrilla faction. Soon after chatting to a community leader by phone, I am surprised when he calls back to invite me to a school in a neighbourhood I'd never heard of. He promises a breakthrough in my quest to meet the FARC breakaway faction.

I follow his instructions and take a motorcycle taxi to the school. As I go down the main "road" in the neighbourhood – about six feet wide, paved with cement and built on stilts over water – a young man stops me. He tells the driver to leave the neighbourhood. "Are you coming to the meeting?" he asks me. I say yes, and he escorts me to the school.

Inside the school, I'm astonished to see a negotiation underway between the dominant FARC dissident leader and three Ministry of Defence officials. An audience of some twenty people is arrayed behind too-small schoolroom desks, including a Catholic priest, someone from the UN human rights office and several

community leaders. All eyes follow the arrival of an unknown foreigner. Nobody asks me anything as I find a chair and sit.

The negotiators have already been at it for some time. I am surprised at how directly and practically they discuss complex issues I want to learn about: disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, for example. In less than two hours, they settle the disarmament process for all 330 members of the FARC dissident group. As a show of goodwill, the rebels introduce to the government officials one of Tumaco's most wanted men. The commander goes by Chicken, an incongruous nickname given the fearsome reputation of his violent, ill-disciplined militia. They promise that he, too, will disarm. The officials are astounded to have him in front of them, and to discover he was sitting at the back of the classroom all along.

The last item officials, dissidents and attendees discuss is that there should be "no more statements to the press" – something

that could complicate my goal of interviewing participants. As the gathering disperses, I stay behind. The community leader introduces me without ceremony to Chicken as “the guy who came to speak to you”. It does not go smoothly. Everyone assumes that I am with the media. It is hard to convince them that I’m not looking for news stories. I explain that Crisis Group tries to talk to all sides in a conflict and explores practical ways to prevent or end violence. One mid-level dissident officer concludes I am writing a book.

Chicken relents. He sends some men out to make sure the building is secure, then asks me to read out my whole list of questions, one by one. Some FARC commanders can be quite closed – in fact they are trained to be like that – and I worry the meeting will have little value. But after a while he warms up, even seems to enjoy getting his thoughts and feelings off his chest. We spend about 90 minutes together. We pause when an unknown motorbike enters the neighbourhood and look out a second-storey window to follow its progress. He radios his fighters to follow it and get it out of the area. Things relax again, and as I take my leave, he even says it’s fine to cite him by name.

A Colombian Crossroads

Tumaco is unlike the wide-open spaces or jungles elsewhere in Colombia. In order to meet conflict-hit communities and rebels in the countryside I usually have to fly, then travel for hours by boat, motorbike, truck or on foot. Here everything seems around the corner. When the phone call comes that so-and-so is ready to meet, I can usually walk there, moving quickly to the densely populated, poor, violent barrios dominated by dissident groups.

With each new contact, I feel my way forward, taking any advantage to deepen my

understanding of relationships and events here. On my eighth trip to Tumaco, I meet another group of FARC dissidents. The group’s commander has just been killed by the narcotics police, and the group wants to tell his story. They say they’re looking for a journalist to tell their story to. I explain I work for Crisis Group. They decide that they’re willing to chat either way. A go-between manages to arrange it in just a few hours.

A mid-level FARC dissident, a low-level fighter and the go-between take me by boat to a village about two hours north of Tumaco, consisting of roughly 50 houses several kilometres inland. Members of the breakaway group are there, though they try to be inconspicuous. A large speedboat shows up in the afternoon with about fifteen armed fighters on board. During the day there, we listen to the townspeople about the now-dead commander, known as David, describing him as a saint who the police killed in cold blood, a version of events officials deny. Their story weaves seamlessly between things I know to be true and statements that I suspect cannot be accurate. A few days later I interview the same mid-level officer who brought me to the meeting and he says that David’s ideology was the “well-being of the people.”

I notice similar dynamics and motivations in my interactions with three of the five non-state groups operating in Tumaco that I’ve spoken to. Some realise their image is terrible and want to change it. They believe telling their story will help.

But things don’t always work out as planned. We advance toward an interview with a prominent local commander known as Guacho, but pull out when his group claims responsibility for killing two Ecuadorian journalists and their driver in April 2018. Another time, a journalist

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and I take a small boat to a village called La Caleta to meet a commander. We make it there, but in the end he does not. He's on the offensive after another armed group attacked him and his group the night before. Back in the city, fighters from his group tell me that four kids from their neighbourhood sent to the rural battlefield died in this counterattack.

Interviewing armed group leaders can be dangerous so I take precautions. I know that it's not wise to get too close to any leader, as the other armed groups in the city can think you are collaborating with their enemies. I am careful when I first sit down with them. The first meetings are usually so they can warm to their narrative. I ask few, if any, difficult questions. Later, I can probe more boldly. When one FARC dissident fighter claims no one in his neighbourhood is involved in the fighting – despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary – I ask him about evidence made public by the state. “What about the intercepted phone calls?”

“What about the killing on Father's Day?” “How do you explain the shootouts with police?” Or “Why is your commander in prison?” The police have captured some of the group's fighters, charging them with various killings. Despite a difficult interview, with vigorous questions and answers, the tone stays professional and we meet regularly when I am in the town.

Amid the crime and violence, the low-level people, the foot soldiers, often have sad and harrowing stories. Talking to them, I hear of how they join as adolescents, some as young as twelve, and face hardship, stress and trauma. One who joined at the age of twelve tells how his best friend was killed and he became a fighter to get revenge. Others say they joined after being abused and abandoned as children. Once in the group, these fighters do not strike it rich. I interview a fighter who spent two days looking for a way to wash, as his neighbourhood – and much of the city at the time – did not have running water. On only one occasion,



Kyle Johnson interviewing dissident members of the FARC in Tumaco in Southern Colombia, near the border with Ecuador, 8 April 2019. CRISISGROUP/Zaida Marquez

speaking to a high-level drug trafficker, do I meet someone involved in the violence who has had a full high-school education.

As I spend more time in the area, I also talk to community leaders, NGO members and churchgoers. With them I can talk about our day-to-day lives, grab a beer, have lunch. One or two even visit me in Bogotá. It creates a bridge of trust. I test out our findings and recommendations informally, better understand how the city works, and hear them express the fears the people have. They also share with me their ideas for solutions to Tumaco's many problems.

State Security

It turns out that it is more difficult for me to develop contacts with the army and police than the armed groups. In Tumaco, the interaction between the security forces and the gangs is a curious duet. Some 500 members of non-state armed groups operate in the city, and 11,000 thousand police and soldiers cater to the whole of Tumaco and other towns in the region. Their strategy for bringing peace, stability, and protection to the area is to kill or capture gang and cartel leaders. But while this strategy may look good to politicians in Bogotá, it is not changing much here on the ground.

For example, targeting armed group leaders has not helped the authorities gain control of the barrios, where non-state groups can easily retain the upper hand even when the police make some effort to be present. Part of the problem is the fleeting nature of this presence. During the day, the police hang out in places which aren't typically violent, for instance along the main roads, sending sporadic patrols into the barrios. They go in and leave, providing little by way of sustained protection. The groups watch their every move, and resume normal activity after they depart. At one point, while I'm with FARC dissidents in the city, three heavily armed policemen walk through the streets of the neighbourhood and leave. Nothing happens and in future visits, it is clear that nothing changes.

I manage on occasion to talk to someone from the Colombian navy force that patrols the

coast off Tumaco, the head of the armed forces in the region and other senior figures. They meet me mainly for public relations purposes, and usually want to give me the message that "the strategy is working". Sometimes I sense they know that they are only putting a plaster on a gaping wound. But it's their job to do what they can.

Police, army and navy personnel are mostly posted from other parts of Colombia. Among them are those who are genuinely motivated by patriotism and committed to the fight against drugs and violence. Others are more cynical about the assignment. They simply want to survive it and then move on from remote Tumaco. Still others are in league with armed groups and profiting from corruption alongside them.

On my eleventh trip to Tumaco I meet some of the counter-narcotics police. They open up quickly, anxious to tell their story. They are tired of looking to locals like the bad guys, fighting a futile war. They even take me up in one of their helicopters to show the scale of the problems they face. From up there, it's easy to see why they think the country is being ravaged by an unstoppable force.

We fly along the Mira River – the region's main waterway – and over improvised pools of stolen oil, set ablaze to refine it into the gasoline used to process coca leaves into coca paste. A massive illegal gold mine operates just across the river from the neighbouring district of Barbacoas, and it is unclear if the town or the mine is bigger. In some parts, fields of coca stretch as far as the eye can see. The police are under heavy pressure from the central state to eradicate as much coca as possible.

But these agents on the frontline of the drug war say they can only do so much. For instance, the law says state security can't touch crops in areas populated by indigenous people, though coca fields are abundant there. Even when security forces manage to cut down coca bushes, it spoils just one harvest and the fields are replanted soon afterward. If the police burn down the coca labs, they face backlash from ordinary people whose principal source of income has just been destroyed. Security forces



Kyle Johnson in Tumaco in Southern Colombia, near the border with Ecuador, 8 April 2019. CRISISGROUP/ Zaida Marquez

may be hitting the drug trade but, locally at least, it is fostering hostility to the state.

The officers in the helicopter appear genuinely angry at the burning pools of stolen oil, but at ground level we get a different perspective on the police. While travelling in a taxi not far from those pools, three young men stop our car. They tell us to wait because two “filled” vehicles are coming up the road. We observe the passage of pickups stacked with barrels of illegally produced gasoline. When the young men allow us to proceed, we see the contraband pass unhindered through a police roadblock no more than five metres away.

Coca Territory

Tumaco’s overlapping worlds of state and non-state, legal and illegal, are most highly visible in towns along the main road or small settlements scattered throughout the rural jungle and hills of Tumaco. Wherever I go, the economy is often entirely reliant on the coca trade. Most

fighting in the region is for control of drug-producing territory, the engine of violence since the early 2000s.

Along the road to Tumaco sits the town of Llorente. It has huge supermarkets, casinos and brothels clearly profiting from booming economic activity. Llorente lives almost completely off the drug trade: it is home to countless transactions where coca paste and cocaine are bought and sold, coca farmers buy whatever they need and coca leaf pickers come here to spend their cash. Most of those in this area are not Afro-Colombian, as in coastal towns like Tumaco. In fact, many came from the neighbouring inland province of Putumayo some fifteen years ago, so locals have dubbed it Putumayito, or little Putumayo.

Given that the state isn’t fully present, armed groups often step in to create their version of law and order. In Llorente, the notorious commander Guacho set up traffic rules and introduced photo ticketing to end traffic

jams along the main road. Cars and trucks very quickly began behaving themselves. Guacho's group has now lost control of that stretch of road, and the traffic is terrible again. But his civic gesture underlines an enduring problem for the police: how do you establish rule of law where almost everything is based on or controlled by illegal forces?

Poverty, inequality and a lack of jobs also fuel the drug trade. Many young men and boys in Tumaco — and indeed up and down Colombia's Pacific coast — are ready to take the risk of earning \$20-30,000 working on a ship taking drugs up to Central America, for example.

When I take a walk with some locals down to the edge of the sea through one of the barrios, where the houses rise on wooden stilts above the sea, I stumble onto a sight of young men and a speedboat, which they are filling with tuna. It is immediately suspicious. The vessel bears no resemblance to a fishing boat, and there is no reason for it to be filled with tuna. Cocaine deliveries to the international market often start on vessels disguised as fishing boats, which take shipments out for transfer to fast

ocean-going boats on the high seas. No one here wants to be in a photo. I act as if I don't know what is going on and quickly leave. Being a witness to drug operations, even unintentionally, can get someone in serious trouble with armed groups and traffickers.

An Important Lady

Family is important to the functioning of the area's armed groups. One commander I meet has seventeen children, several of whom fight for the armed group he leads. In September 2018, I renew contact with another group that also looks like a family business. It once belonged to the FARC but never demobilised under the 2016 peace deal. The FARC murdered its first commander, known as Don Ye, in November 2016, who then was replaced by his brother, David, killed by state security forces weeks before I visited his family home in September 2018. The authorities say his sister was also the financial brains behind the group and their drug trafficking operations. I go to visit their mother, who many say runs part of the group.



Coca fields in Tumaco in Southern Colombia, near the border with Ecuador, 9 April 2019. CRISISGROUP/
Zaida Marquez

We're in a poor neighbourhood of Tumaco but the mother's house is huge, three storeys high and opulent. It has elaborate and expensive-looking decorations and furnishings, typical for people in the drug business. I gradually realise the mother is the one giving orders, sorting issues out as they arise right in front of me. But she denies leading the armed group or that her kids were criminals. I know the latter is simply not true.

Still, this important mother is flattered by the outside attention that I represent. I feel a bit surprised myself to be sitting with her. As far as I know, the only other outsider who has met her is a Colombian journalist. I see that she wants to tell her side of the story, to defend her children, to argue the armed group has been good for the region. She gives me a CD of songs in homage to Don Ye and pamphlets in which the armed group says they "provide order". She later sends me a video of David's funeral. Two weeks later, another armed group in the city attacks her house, leading to a massive shootout between fighters from David's group and this rival outfit.

A Deal Unravels

As time goes by, it's clear that the demobilisation deal I witnessed on my first visit is not working out. When the big day for the dissident groups to disarm comes in March 2017, only 128 of the 330 people on the list show up to hand in their weapons. Soon afterward, the 200 who didn't disarm start attacking those who did. By October 2017, most of those who demobilised are back to fighting. The violence between these now-divided groups quickly becomes worse than ever before. Too much of what I see in Tumaco as I continue to return follows a similar rhythm – progress toward tamping down on criminal networks and violence is often illusory and impermanent.

Leaving the airstrip after my most recent trip in June, my head is still filled with questions. I came to Tumaco initially to focus on whether the FARC dissidents maintained something of their guerrilla ideology, but instead I found that many people in the region are occupied with something more basic: struggling to make enough money to buy food. I wonder how even the most patriotic members of the security services can face their jobs when the scale of the problems is so enormous. Coca eradication and burning drug labs seem like sound plans in air-conditioned meeting rooms and faraway capitals, but how can they be defended when they cannot accomplish their objectives on the ground? And what does a war on drugs mean in a region where right now the only economy that counts is the drug economy? A simplistic approach to eradicating the drug trade seems doomed to fail in Tumaco. Bogotá and the donors that support it need to create a licit economy that presents an alternative—no easy task either.

The questions will keep multiplying. But thanks to the unique access the people of Tumaco are granting me, I am now being given ever more ways to argue that the causes of Colombia's still rumbling conflicts are not just guerrillas, crime and the international cocaine trade. These challenges are all very real, but they are also linked to problems that run even deeper — a precarious licit economy, the very limited presence of a state unable to respond to local needs, and people's search for survival in a harsh, unpredictable environment.