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PRIMER PLAN DE APOYO A MIEMBROS

## **Border Violence and Insecurity in the Venezuelan - Colombian Border: Apure - Arauca<sup>1</sup>**

*Guest post by Ana Marleny Bustamante<sup>2</sup> and Francisco Javier Sánchez Chacón<sup>3</sup>*

## INTRODUCCIÓN

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021 the media in Venezuela and Colombia announced clashes between the Venezuelan armed forces (FANB) and some Organized Residual Armed Groups (GAOR, in Spanish). According to the Colombian government and other sources, members of GAOR are the FARC-EP guerrilla dissidents, in the Venezuelan town of La Victoria and its surroundings in the Apure state. To those familiar with the context of the army being the legitimate provider of law and control of the Venezuelan territory, this confrontation was not news. However, further information showed a different reality, as civilians are victims from Venezuelan Army.

Since March 2021, news about this confrontation appeared almost daily, until the FANB withdrew from the region in May from La Victoria (which comprises about 1975 Km<sup>2</sup> of the 25.500 of the Alto Apure district in the Apure state of Venezuela) (see map), and the GAOR released in June eight military men that had been captured in conflict to the government, using Red Cross mediation.

The resolution and the decrease of media interest in the matter seem to indicate a soft conflict in the area, that included unforeseen casualties (a random search points to 20 deaths and nearly 100 injured). This post aims to analyze the Venezuelan governmental attack on one of the irregular groups in this border area, suggest reasons for the presence of GAOR on La Victoria, and the meaning and long-term implications for the relationship with Colombia, and peace in the region.

There are at least two FARC-EP dissident groups. The first one appeared in 2016 when Gentil Duarte, leader of Front 10 and redoubts of other fronts such as Acacio Medina and Teófilo Forero, refused to participate in the peace process at La Habana. The second appeared in 2019 when Ivan Márquez and Jesús Santrich decided to return to arms after complaints about governmental resistance to honor the peace agreements and opted for creating the FARC-Segunda Marquetalia (FARC-SM). The first group had traditionally moved to the Colombian Vichada and Guainía border regions with the Amazonas and Apure states in Venezuela, and since 2016 organized settlements in Apure to avoid clashes with the Colombian government. According to Francine Jácome, Apure has traditionally been occupied and shared by FARC-EP with the National Liberation Army (ELN) that wanders in the zone since the 1980s as part of the distribution of territories among them.

Duarte's Front was the FARC-EP group in this territory until the FARC-SM appeared and attempted to rebuild the structure of the guerrilla under their command. By 2020, Front 10 refused to join them and declared war on them, according to the Voice of America's publication. This event left the FARC-SM without or with a fragile presence in Apure. Photographs of Márquez and Santrich with official authorities of the Venezuelan government conveyed the idea that they had the favor of these authorities to rebuild the structure of the guerrilla movement and were not in Colombia. It also signaled they were avoiding orders for their capture in Colombia and the United States, as Mayorca pointed out in early 2021.

FANB's attack on the guerrilla turned out to be against Duarte's Front. This Front reacted aggressively, showed to be well equipped and organized, and left the Venezuelan Army in a weak and vulnerable position because of the loss of equipment, lives and territory, in addition to the seizure of the army officials that led to negotiations for their release. However, this FANB's attack indicates that the Venezuelan government was willing to combat Duarte's Front while it seemed to ignore the ELN or the FARC-SM, for instance. It had not attacked the ELN before or attacked them simultaneously this time, despite knowing of their existence.

This shows that, although commonalities regarding ideology and uses given to the territory (smuggling, narcotics, logistics, extortion, parallel law, and order, recruitment, among others) to remain and increase their domain, there is also conflict and Venezuela seems to be involved in it. At first sight, the attack does not necessarily indicate that Venezuela was promoting the settlement of the FARC-SM or the ELN but, Jesús Santrich's death in the aftermaths of the confrontation and before the liberation of the army officials casts doubts about the price paid to Duarte. In general terms, we can say that Front 10 has reassured its presence in Venezuela and Colombia; that the Venezuelan government knows of their presence in its territory and does not have the power to displace them. But, at the same time, it is also involved and taking sides in the disputes between these different groups.

This finding has short and long-term implications for peace in the region and the relationships with Colombia. The most important consequence would be the control of La Victoria by guerrilla rather than the government, and the proliferation of conflict and violence

locally and binationally, as long as governments do not cooperate. The spreading of sympathetic governments to the guerrilla's cause and call will difficult the reach of a regional agreement against them. Likewise, the triumph of these movements and their accession to power will incite the appearance of similar movements in countries where inequalities and discontent mount and do not lead to dismount pressures.

**Map: Colombia - Venezuela Border**



Source: *Diario La Opinión, Colombia.*

## NOTAS

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