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Wider Drug War Threatens Colombian Indians

By [SIMON ROMERO](#)

NUNCIDO, [Colombia](#) — Up and down the rivers of western Colombia, a new breed of criminal armies is pressing deeper into this isolated jungle, fighting with guerrillas for control of the cocaine trade and forcing thousands of Indians to flee.

It is the kind of nightmarish ordeal that is an all-too-common feature of Colombia's long war: peasants being terrorized by gunmen seeking dominance in the backlands.

But as Colombia's war for control of the drug trade intensifies in frontiers like this one, with new combatants vying for smuggling routes and coca-growing areas where Indians eke out a meager existence, it is adding to the already grave toll on the nation's indigenous groups. At least 27 of the groups are at risk of being eliminated because of the country's four-decade conflict, according to the [United Nations](#), and human rights organizations worry that the new violence is pushing even deeper into the Indians' ancient lands.

Here in the Chocó region's jungle, gunmen arrived as Jhonny Caisamo was harvesting plantains. More than 100 strong, the men beat him with the flat part of their machetes, then threatened to drown him in the brown waters of the Cedro River.

"They wanted to know where the guerrillas were camped," said Mr. Caisamo, 18, one of many Embera Indians to recount recent beatings, rapes or threats by armed groups here. "They told me they would kill me if I did not collaborate."

The battles are unfolding far from largely pacified cities like the capital, Bogotá, where a newly confident government acclaims recent military advances against leftist rebels and the demobilization of thousands of paramilitary fighters. In another region, officials recently helped one indigenous group, the Arhuacos, reclaim land from paramilitary fighters.

But the seeming stability in some places belies the conflict in remote areas, where Indians like the Embera find themselves at the mercy of armed groups. Colombia has about three million [internal refugees](#) — second in number only to Sudan, the United Nations says — and its Indians bear a disproportionate share of the suffering.

“Our rulers in Bogotá prefer to ignore that an entire section of the country is surviving, just barely, as if we are in the 16th century, when plunder and killing were the norm,” said Víctor Copete, who runs Chocó Pacífico, a foundation addressing the violence here in Chocó, one of the nation’s poorest departments, or provinces.

The latest displacement of the Embera was set off by a collective panic after reports that the Rastrojos, a criminal army, raped two Embera girls in early March and killed an Embera man before burning his body in front of his family.

Witnesses said the gunmen then went from village to village, beating, torturing, abducting and temporarily detaining some Embera leaders to get information about the gunmen’s rivals, the Cimarrón faction of the National Liberation Army, or E.L.N., a small rebel group that has held sway in the area for years.

“There is safety in numbers, so we moved here,” said Dionel Isaramá, 38, in a one-room hut with 27 other people from his hamlet, hours away by foot. “We will not return as long as our fear of the armed men remains with us.”

Before the Embera Indians were displaced, the nation’s main rebel group, the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC, admitted killing eight Awá Indians in February in Nariño, another department, accusing them of informing for the Colombian Army.

Late last year, tensions also flared in Cauca, a nearby province, after the husband of a Nasa Indian leader was killed at a military checkpoint, and it was reported that at least eight Nasa Indians had been assassinated. Nasa leaders said those responsible included both the FARC and paramilitary groups working with large landowners who oppose land reform demands.

Here in Chocó, the Embera fleeing during the first three months of this year almost equaled the 2,400 displaced in all of 2008, said Luis Enrique Murillo, the peace commissioner here. Many of their villages lie in areas long under the control of rebel groups, but are now in the cross hairs of the criminal armies trying to dislodge the guerrillas.

Chocó may be an ideal theater for the latest phase of this ever changing, labyrinthine war. Fighters are lured by its geography, with outlets to the Pacific, the Caribbean and Panama, offering options for smuggling out cocaine and shipping in arms.

In the conflict’s latest incarnation, neo-paramilitary groups like the Rastrojos, which originated as a cocaine-trafficking syndicate around the city of Cali, have emerged from the ashes of demobilized groups. At times they use some of the same fighters from groups that formed years ago to combat the leftist guerrillas, but they also forcibly recruit new combatants in areas like Chocó, security analysts said.

Now these new armed groups, stripped of their old ideological bents, are forging alliances with rebels in some parts of the country, while going for their throats in others, like this

swath of Chocó, according to security analysts. Either way, their objective remains the same: dominance over coca-growing areas and routes to ship cocaine abroad, predominantly to the United States.

The conflict has found new life in areas like Chocó partly because of the government's successes elsewhere. As American-financed eradication projects have cut coca growing in some areas, Chocó's cultivation of the crop surged 32 percent in 2007, according to the United Nations.

Most of Chocó's 450,000 people lack drinkable water. Thousands live in wooden shacks on stilts. Grenade blasts like one in late March in the regional capital, Quibdó, which wounded 13 people, go largely unnoticed elsewhere in the country.

In isolated villages like Nuncido, where more than 100 of the Embera have recently fled, children with distended bellies and light-colored hair, a sign of malnutrition, asked for food.

The government has brought in some soldiers to help, but they said they would leave soon. Some of the fleeing Embera Indians, however, worry that the emergency will last for months, perhaps longer.

In Puerto Meluk, a river port with bars blaring vallenato music and stores selling chemicals used to process coca into cocaine, some Embera refugees cooked in a swamp reeking of raw sewage and recounted stories similar to those upriver: of beatings and threats in their villages, then displacement here.

At one house with 11 families crowded inside, Enrique Manyoma, a 42-year-old maize farmer, told of his escape from the village of Incirá.

"That is my daughter, Marta Cecilia," Mr. Manyoma said, pointing to an infant. "She was born here eight days ago.

"As long as the men with guns remain in the jungle," he said, "I do not think her home will be in Incirá."

Jenny Carolina González contributed reporting from Bogotá, Colombia.

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