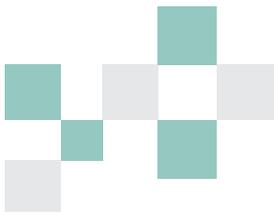


The Paraguayan People's Army: A new rebel group or simple bandits?

Jeremy McDermott

- Latin America's youngest rebel group, the Paraguayan People's Army (Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo-EPP), established in 1992, has around 30 members.
- Kidnappings seem to be a significant share of its income, complemented with extortion and robbery.
- Its ideology states to abolish the "bourgeois liberal parliamentary system", and replace it with "a regime of popular congresses".
- So far, the Police has been ineffective against the group, and the military, involved in the fight since a few months ago, hasn't had much success either.
- Still, it is a mistake to think of the EPP as nothing more than bandits. This underestimates the threat they present and the resonance that their political discourse has.



Contents

Development of the EPP.....	3
Financing the revolution	3
Ideology.....	7
International links.....	7
Leadership, Structure And Capability.....	9
The Security Forces	10
The EPP Splits	11
A prisoner exchange.....	11
The Future of the EPP	11





Latin America's youngest rebel group, the Paraguayan People's Army (Ejército Paraguayo del Pueblo -EPP), counts on around 30 fighters. Yet it dominates Paraguay's headlines on an almost daily basis, and reveals the weakness of all too many of the country's institutions. Its actions are concentrated in a small part of this landlocked country and it is unlikely they can spread to other areas. While they profess a Marxist Leninist ideology, are they any more than a gang of bandits engaged in kidnapping and extortion? The government refuses to recognise the EPP an insurgency, describing it simply as a criminal group. Is it underestimating the threat?

Development of the EPP

While the EPP was officially formed on March 1, 2008, the roots of the group go back to the opening days of democracy, when the military dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner (1953 – 1989) was overthrown and political expression and activism was again permitted.

In 1990, after the collapse of the dictatorship, Alcides Oviedo Brítez, from a poor family born in the province, or department, of Itapúa, along the border with Argentina, went to study theology in the Catholic University of Asunción. Once in Asunción, he got caught up in the explosion of left-wing political activity detonated by the fall of the dictatorship. In 1992 he met a left-wing firebrand, Juan Arrom Suhurt, who in 1992, was one of the founders of the left-wing political party the Free Country Movement (Movimiento Patria Libre - MPL). By 1992, Oviedo had been expelled from the theology program, abandoned notions of the priesthood and become more interested in an armed revolutionary struggle to bring about change. He had also fallen in love with another radical activist from the northern department of Concepción. Oviedo was to marry Carmen Villalba, and along with Arrom they were to form the core of a radical left-wing cell that was to evolve into the EPP.

A former secretary general of Patria Libre, Dionisio Cristóbal Olazar, who later became a key witness against the EPP, stated that as early as 1992 the conformation of an armed group had begun, with Oviedo at its heart.¹

Financing the revolution

Kidnapping

Kidnapping was not the first choice for raising money for the revolutionary cause. In 1997, Oviedo and Carmen Villalba gathered a small group and planned to rob a bank in the city of Choré in the northern department of San Pedro. They manage to tunnel almost 80m towards the bank vault before being detected by the police and arrested. All six would-be bank robbers were sentenced to 3 years in prison. Prison records show that Carmen Villalba was visited on at least 15 occasions by Juan Arrom.²

Once released from prison in early 2000, the group was back to work, recruiting more members and planning a new revenue raising tactic. Kidnapping was not only a way to raise money, but to send a clear message, as victims were to be high profile members of Paraguay's ruling class. While there are up to 27 abductions linked to the EPP, there have been five high profile kidnappings, each bringing in significant earnings and enabling the development of the armed group.

María Edith Bórdon was snatched from a park outside Asunción, on November 16, 2001. She was to spend 64 days in captivity. María Edith Bórdon de Debernardi was the daughter-in-law of Enzo Debernardi, a functionary of the military dictatorship, who

1 ABC Color, "Cristóbal Olazar confirma la formación de grupo paramilitar," March 18, 2008 <http://www.abc.com.py/edicion-impresa/policiales/cristobal-olazar-confirma-la-formacion-de-grupo-paramilitar-1052194.html>

2 Andrés Colman, "Primera Misión Armada," Chapter 2 of 2011 Última Hora book "EPP - La Verdadera Historia".



had been involved in the construction of the hydro-electric Itaipu Dam, by far Paraguay's most important infrastructure project. Debernardi had also been the Minister of Finance in the first post-dictatorship administration.

Bordón later identified the head of her kidnapping team as Juan Arrom, and the woman who fed and looked after her as Carmen Villalba. An initial ransom of \$12 million was demanded which, after prolonged negotiation was lowered to \$1 million. During the kidnapping, police received intelligence on the involvement of members of the Patria Libre political party and detained Juan Arrom and another party leader, Anuncio Martí. They were tortured for information on the whereabouts of Bordón. Despite a great deal of evidence against Arrom, including \$350,000 of the first instalment of the ransom money, the two Patria Libre leaders were released on bail. They immediately fled to Brazil, where they were granted political asylum on the basis of the torture they received at the hands of police. Arrest warrants were also issued for Oviedo and Carmen Villalba.

With the exile of Arrom, the group lost its most active political leader. Oviedo and Carmen Villalba decided to concentrate now on building up their military capacity. Carmen Villalba had already recruited her younger siblings, Osvaldo and Liliana, who were soon to become the key players in the formation of the EPP.

The revolutionaries disappeared. There was no sign of their activity, but they were busy, recruiting, training and arming. Evidence of their activity became abundantly clear on July 16, 2003, when police came to check out a farm in San Pedro where neighbours had reported strange activities. The police were greeted with gunfire. After a shootout police found just one woman inside: Carmen Villalba. It seems she had held off the police long enough for her companions to escape. Inside the house was an arsenal, including rocket launchers, machine guns, automatic rifles, grenades, explosives and 5000 bullets. As well as the weapons were uniforms, radios, bullet-proof

vests, satellite telephones and cell phones. Police concluded that the farm had been used as a military training camp. An armed cell of radicals had been formed and now had military training and armament. On a computer also seized at the farm was evidence that the kidnapping of María Edith Bórdon was not a one-off. There were lists of other potential kidnapping targets.

Carmen Villalba was not to remain long as a guest of the state. On June 24, 2004, she escaped from the women's prison of Buen Pastor in Asunción and was quickly reunited with her husband, Oviedo. The reunion was not to last long, as another chance encounter was to expose them. On 2 July, 2004, in Ñemby, on the outskirts of Asunción, police sought to pull over a truck for a routine check. Again the police were greeted with bullets, and responded in kind. One of the gunmen, who turned out to be Oviedo, was wounded in the leg. The other gunman, who was only subdued by police after she ran out of ammunition, was none other than Carmen Villalba.

Police later found the house in the city of San Lorenzo, on the outskirts of Asunción, in which Oviedo and Carmen Villalba had been staying. Here another treasure trove of intelligence was uncovered, including operating manuals and a video which showed various people practising a kidnapping operation. There were some new faces in this video, among them Aldo Meza and his sister Magna. It was not until later that the importance of these two figures was to become known, although the target for whom they were rehearsing a kidnapping soon became apparent.

The exile of Arrom and the incarceration of Oviedo and Carmen Villalba did not halt the activities of the revolutionaries. The place of Arrom was taken by another Patria Libre leader, Osmar Martínez, the secretary general of the party. Oviedo's place as military leader of the group, was taken by Carmen Villalba's younger brother, Osvaldo, ably assisted by another recruit, Manuel Cristaldo Mieres. This new genera-



tion of leaders was about to pull off the group's most spectacular coup.

On September 21, 2004, Cecilia Cubas, aged 31, the daughter of former president Raul Cubas, was returning home in Asunción, in her Nissan Patrol. As she approached her house, a VW Santana screeched to a halt in front of her, and a Ford Escort pulled up behind, closing her in. Five people rolled out of the vehicles, and fired 26 shots, mainly with 9 mm pistols. They pulled the ex-president's daughter from the vehicle and escaped in the VW. The snatch, clearly well rehearsed and impeccably executed, was over in just over a minute.

The kidnapping was front page news not only in Paraguay, but internationally. On November 14, 2004, the one and only ransom payment was made, \$800,000 according to the family, or \$300,000 according to rebel sources. The drop was made at a rural location more than 100 km from the Paraguayan capital.

After the payment of the ransom, the Cubas family heard nothing from the kidnapers. Nothing until February 16, 2005, when the corpse of their daughter was found buried under a house in Ñemby.

The house was found after witnesses put Mieres and Magna Meza at the property. Initially the authorities were looking for the house where the kidnap training video was filmed. And they had found it. On searching the property, they found a concrete floor that had obviously been recently laid. Thinking that it might be a weapons hide, they broke through the floor and were greeted with the smell of the decomposing body.

It was another four years before the next high-profile kidnapping, and this was simply a crime of opportunity. On July 31, 2008, Luis Alberto Lindstron arrived at his farm in the zone of Kuruzú de Hierro, in the south of Concepción. Among the five armed men waiting for him were Oscar Villalba and Mieres. They were there to extort money rather than kidnap.

The EPP were asking for 18 million Guarani's (around \$18,000). The police had been tipped off, and two of them were wounded in the ensuing shootout as rebels escaped with Lindstron as their captive. The EPP called the Lindstron family lawyer and asked for a million-dollar ransom. That was later lowered \$130,000. He was kept on the move during the 43 days of his captivity, but within a confined geographical area, in the EPP strongholds of Arroyito and Horqueta. Negotiations were carried out by Mieres, who collected the ransom in person. Lindstron was released on September 12, 2008, but later killed in May 2013 by suspected guerrillas.

Less than a year later, on October 15, 2009, rancher Fidel Zavala was tying up business at his ranch some 80 km north of the city of Concepción when ten heavily armed men arrived. The leader of the group, later identified by witnesses as Osvaldo Villalba, told Zavala to take a couple of good books with him as he would be spending a long time in the mountain. The rebels rigged Zavala's pickup truck with explosives and two police were wounded when the booby-trapped was detonated.

Initially the EPP asked for a \$5 million ransom. Negotiations were long and often acrimonious, until in early January 2010 the rebels agreed to a \$550,000 payment and the condition that the Zavala family deliver 30 head of cattle to poor communities in the area. After his release, Zavala stated that he had never really move that far from where he'd been snatched, and spent time in 13 different camps. Zavala was able to identify Osvaldo Villalba, Mieres and Magna Meza. He said the group was very well prepared, having hide scattered all over their area, with food and supplies.

The last major kidnapping carried out by the EPP was that of Arlan Fick, who turned 17 in captivity. The son of a Mennonite farmer of San Pedro, Fick was abducted on April 10, 2014. His father, Alcido Fick, who the author met, paid a \$500,000 ransom without asking for a proof of life video. He also had to deliver \$50,000 worth of supplies to communities



in Arroyito and Kurusu de Hierro, in the department of Concepción. In October a proof of life video delivered, showing Fick with another hostage, a police officer Edelio Morínigo, taken in June (see more of this in the section below “Prisoner Exchange”).

Asked why the EPP had kept Fick after the payment of a ransom, Interior Minister Francisco de Vargas explained this by saying “it keeps them in the media spotlight without having to do anything. It undermines the government as they say the government cannot do anything with us and the government is doing nothing to free him. It sends the message that they are winning.”

Extortion and robbery

Sources on the ground in both Concepción and San Pedro told the author that the EPP extort money from farmers and ranchers in their zone of influence. These are called “revolutionary taxes”. The rebels also routinely steal cattle, usually for food, and have been known to rob businesses and travelling salesman. This likely provides the day-to-day money needed to keep the group fed and supplied, with the ransoms from kidnapping allowing the group to acquire ammunition and explosives, and recruit more fighters.

Links to the drug trade?

Other rebels groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have long had links to the drug trade, and today income from coca and cocaine makes up at least half of the Colombian rebels’ revenue. The same is the case with the remnants of the Shining Path in Peru. Paraguay is the principal producer of marijuana in South America. Has the EPP got involved in Paraguay’s drug trade?

Sources in the Ministry of the Interior, the attorney general’s office and the anti-drug agency, the SENAD (Servicio Nacional Antidrogas), stated that there are

no open cases linking the EPP to drugs. However all agree that it is very likely is that the EPP extort money from marijuana growers in their area of influence, the presence of which was confirmed by Colonel Ramón Benítez, the head of the Joint Task Force who is hunting the rebels.

Luis Rojas of Paraguay’s anti-drug agency, the SENAD believes that the EPP have gone beyond just extorting money from marijuana growers. In August 2013, 1.8 tons of cocaine was seized in Puentesíño, in Concepción. Alongside the runway, where drug flights were arriving and departing, EPP material was found, including badges and uniforms, suggesting the rebels were offering protection to traffickers. There have also been suggestions that the EPP has some international narco connections that are facilitating the flow of arms and munitions.³ However it is worth noting that no arms have been taken from the EPP or seen on rebel videos that could not have been taken from the Paraguay security forces, which suggests that the group does not have yet an international arms smuggling pipeline.

However there is a potential international contact for one of the EPP factions. Ruben Dario Lopez Fernandez (31), who has taken the alias “Raul Reyes,” escaped from prison in Concepcion, along with six other inmates, in November 2013. The man who led the prison break was Osmar de Souza Junior, the head of the First Catarinense Group (Primeiro Grupo Catarinense - PGC), a Brazilian transnational organized crime group, with presence in both Paraguay and Peru. It is believed that Lopez and de Souza were friends in prison, and may have stayed in contact, potentially providing the rebels with a valuable international criminal connection.

Rojas believes that the EPP have now moved into production, not only extorting marijuana growers

3 ABC Color, “ Sospechan que narcos proveen armas al EPP”, August 26, 2013. <http://www.abc.com.py/edicion-impresa/politica/sospechan-que-narcos-proveen-armas-al-epp-610765.html>



and protecting narcos, but sowing their own drug crops. To support this he cited the fact that the EPP has camps near marijuana production centres, has photos of EPP guerrillas in marijuana plantations, and a video in which the group is shown preparing an area for planting in a wooded area.⁴

Due to their limited numbers and their current commitments with guarding kidnap victims, it seems unlikely that the rebels have the resources for extensive involvement in the drug business. In the aftermath of the accusations, the EPP released a communiqué denying links to drug trafficking, stating that the government's claims were an attempt to stain the group's reputation.

Ideology

The ideology of the EPP was set out by Oviedo in 150-page book that he wrote in prison. The author obtained a copy of this book, which was presented on July 19, 2011. In it, Oviedo lays out what he calls "Francist 21st Century Revolution" using as inspiration the dictator José Rodríguez de Francia, who governed Paraguay between 1814 and 1840. It seems Oviedo was trying to do the same with de Francia as Chavez did in Venezuela using independence hero Simón Bolívar.

"Francismo of the 21st Century is not committed to the democracy of the rich. On the contrary, it wishes to destroy it, and in its place build a democracy of the people, revolutionary, serious and combative," wrote Oviedo in "Political Programme of the Paraguayan People's Army".

The prologue was written by Oviedo's wife, Carmen Villalba. It stated that the EPP plan to abolish the "bourgeois liberal parliamentary system", and replace it with "a regime of popular congresses".

4 Ultima Hora, "EPP pasa del "impuesto al narco" a producir su propia droga, según la Senad", October 2, 2014. <http://www.ultimahora.com/epp-pasa-del-impuesto-al-narco-producir-su-propia-droga-segun-la-senad-n835092.html>

International links

While EPP arrived some 30 years later than most of Latin America's left-wing rebel groups, it did not develop in isolation, but forged close links with at least two other guerrilla groups.

The first was Chile's Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, a left-wing urban guerrilla movement, formed during the Pinochet dictatorship. At its height, the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez had over 1000 members, and carried out, in 1986, an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Chilean dictator, killing five of his bodyguards and wounding another 11, although General Augusto Pinochet himself escaped unscathed.

According to sources in Paraguay's anti-kidnapping units, Oviedo and Carmen Villalba made a series of trips to Chile between 1995 and 1996, where were believed to have received basic military training, including weapons handling, explosives, guerrilla tactics and kidnapping.

The second relationship, and faraway the more important, was that developed with the FARC. The earliest evidence of this relationship came from files seized from the camp of Luis Edgar Devia Silva, alias 'Raul Reyes', who was killed in an aerial bombardment in Ecuador, in March 2008.⁵

One of the messages found in the FARC files was dated July 3, 2003 and spoke of three to five "Paraguayans from Patria Libre, with whom we have done some financial jobs in their country," who were due to arrive on July 20 for a training course. Sources in the anti-kidnapping police in Paraguay told the author that they had obtained information of Mieres in

5 International Institute for Strategic Studies, "The Farc Files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the Secret Archive of 'Raúl Reyes'", May 10, 2011 will stop <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic%20dossiers/issues/the-farc-files-venezuela--ecuador-and-the-secret-archive-of---39-ra-250-l-reyes--39-8716>



Ecuador near the date, from where he was believed to have crossed into Colombia.⁶

It is also clear that the FARC were involved in the planning of the kidnapping of Cecilia Cubas, with another message stating: "The economic objective is ready. They have the intelligence, weapons, cars, houses, and the group to carry out the operation. They're looking to get 5 million of the greenbacks, and are capable of guarding the bull for six months. The cooperation they are asking for is that Hermes go and inspect the locations and provide recommendations to the operational group about the best way to negotiate and collect...".

Hermes is alias 'Hermes Aguilar', whose real name is as Osley Jurado Palomino. In Paraguay he used the alias "Mauricio Valverde". Investigations made by the author in Colombia revealed that Jurado Palomino is currently one of the rebel negotiators in Havana, Cuba, where peace talks between the FARC and the Colombian government are ongoing.

Former Patria Libre secretary general, Olazar said that Jurado Palomino spent months in Paraguay training, and was a guest in his house.⁷ Jurado Palomino might also have been one of two guerrillas who conducted a training course for Paraguayan rebels in early 2005. Details of this course were delivered by Rubén Darío Bernal, dubbed by the Paraguayan media the "repentant guerrilla", who deserted from the EPP in the department of Concepción on April 30, 2006. During 13 hours of testimony, recorded on May 3, he spoke of how he had been recruited by Patria Libre and attended a course in a rural area of Sidepar, on the border between the departments of Caaguazú and Canindeyú. He stated that 20 Para-

guayans, among them three women, received training at the hands of two members of the FARC.⁸ He identified Osvaldo Villalba, Manuel Cristaldo Mieres and Magna Meza among those who received training. It is known that the column was in the area on August 27, 2005, when two policemen went to investigate reports of an armed group in Yasy Cañy, Canindeyú. One of the policemen died in a shootout with the rebels.

After the course ended the guerrilla column then marched north for several months, until it arrived at the department of Concepción. The column was heavily armed with AK47, FAL, M16, AR15, Uzi, 9 mm pistols, bazookas and grenade launchers. The EPP has been in Concepción ever since.

The FARC unit with which EPP members trained was allegedly the Mobile Column Jacobo Arenas, one of the more belligerent fronts, active in the Colombian department of Cauca.

Osmar Martínez, former secretary general of Patria Libre and one of the leaders in the Cecilia Cubas kidnapping was also believed to have developed international links, initially in Venezuela, and then in 2000, travelling to Rome, Libya and Ireland.⁹ Martínez, now serving a 35 year sentence for the Cecilia Cubas kidnapping, was arrested in possession of a CD of the Continental Bolivarian Movement (MCB), a left-wing organisation, based in Venezuela, which is accused of supporting the FARC, if not actually being a FARC mouthpiece.

There has been no hard evidence of further connections with the FARC since 2005, but in August 2014 anti-kidnapping prosecutor Sandra Quiñonez, who perhaps knows more about the EPP than any other

6 Author's interview with Comisario Principal Francisco Resquín Chamorro of the anti-kidnapping police, August 22, 2014, in Asunción.

7 Ultima Hora, "Vi formarse al EPP y también recibí entrenamiento guerrillero", October 22, 2009. <http://www.ultimahora.com/vi-formarse-al-epp-y-tambien-recibi-entrenamiento-guerrillero-n266707.html>

8 Andrés Colman, "EPP - La Verdadera Historia," Fascículo 8: Guerrillero Arrepentido, 2011.

9 Author's interview with official source specialised in the EPP, but who prefers to remain anonymous, August 20, 2014, Asunción



official, said that Paraguay must put measures in place to prevent the FARC operating in the country.

Leadership, Structure And Capability

If you take out the ideology, the EPP is really little more than a criminal clan. Most of those in the group are related, or grew up together in Concepción. An investigation by the Paraguayan newspaper *Ultima Hora* stated that all but four of those identified as EPP members come from just eight different families.¹⁰

Oviedo although imprisoned, remains the “centre of gravity for the EPP”, said General Oscar Pavón, the head of the army’s fourth division, based in Concepción.¹¹ He and his wife Carmen Villalba are able to stay in touch with the rebels in the field via their 18-year old daughter, who moves constantly between their prisons in Asunción and Concepción.

The leader in the field is Osvaldo Villalba, something confirmed by the kidnap victim Fidel Zavala. After his release he gave authorities detailed breakdown of the group. After Oscar Villalba, the second-in-command is Mieres, “as cold and calculating as can be”, with the third-in-command being Magna Meza. He also mentioned a former leader of the Northern Peasant Organization (OCN), a rural peasant association in Concepción with close ties to the rebels, Alejandro Ramos. Zavala described Ramos as the “thinker of the group, with a certain level of knowledge, who indoctrinates the group”.¹²

10 *Ultima Hora*, “El EPP está estructurado por clanes familiares, parejas y compueblanos”, June 13, 2014. <http://www.ultimahora.com/el-epp-esta-estructurado-clanes-familiares-parejas-y-compueblanos-n802986.html>

11 Author’s interview with General Pavón in Concepción, August 25, 2014.

12 *ABC Color*, “El testimonio clave del caso”, June 23, 2014. <http://www.abc.com.py/edicion-impresa/suplementos/judicial/el-testimonio-clave-del-caso-1258043.html>

EPP has engaged in more than 100 armed actions, the vast majority in the south of Concepción, and the section of the north of San Pedro department. These actions have included the kidnappings, attacks on property, attacks on isolated police and military posts, bombs placed in media outlets and a branch of the attorney general’s office, two attacks on electricity pylons (October 2012 and July 2014) and a handful of ambushes. There have been more than 50 people killed in these attacks, both security forces and civilians.

Military and police officials consulted by the author have voiced respect for the EPP’s field discipline and tactical ability. This is not only the result of FARC training, but the fact that several EPP members have done their military service in Paraguay, and therefore learned basic military tactics and weapons handling.

Thanks perhaps to their training by the FARC, the EPP do have a sophisticated knowledge of the use of explosives, something confirmed by Paraguay’s Directorate of War Material (*Dirección de Material Bélico - Dimabel*), which studied the EPP manual and the guerrillas use of explosives to date.¹³

However the real secret to the survival of the EPP is the support it receives from the local population in the region it has presence. This, added to the fact that most of the EPP members and their support network are related, makes the gathering of intelligence on the group by security forces very difficult.

The group has four different elements: the military core of full-time combatants, perhaps 30 strong; part time combatants and militia, who provide the immediate security and intelligence for the core group, perhaps 50 strong; the logistics network, which supplies the core group with food and a steady stream

13 *ABC Color*, “Impresionante manejo de explosivos del EPP, según informe de Dimabel”, November 18, 2010. <http://www.abc.com.py/edicion-impresa/politica/impresionante-manejo-de-explosivos-del-epp-segun-informe--de-dimabel-185974.html>



of intelligence, which might number 200, and then local sympathisers, who play no active part in the rebel movement, but who will not report on rebel movements and activity, but would report on those of the security forces.

The Security Forces

While sources have talked about the high level of professionalism in rebel ranks, almost every source in Paraguay has said that the police suffer from rampant corruption. This was confirmed by the current Interior Minister, Francisco José De Vargas,¹⁴ who is responsible for the police force, and the former interior Minister, Rafael Filizzola.

Before the arrival of President Horacio Cartes, the fight against the EPP was handled by the police. The anti-kidnapping police, who have tracked the group since the first kidnapping of Bordón in 2001, provided the intelligence, while the US and Colombian trained Forces for Specialised Police Operations (Fuerzas de Operaciones de la Policía Especializada - FOPE) were the operational arm.

The lack of results by the police and accusations of corruption might have been the reasons that, in August 2013 President Cartes got a decree through congress allowing for the military to be deployed against the EPP. Law 5036/13, modified the National Defence and Domestic Security Law and allows for the military to be used for internal security. He then established a Joint Task Force, under the command of an army officer, answerable directly to the presidency.

“The president does not trust the police, and has put the fight against the EPP, in the hands of the military, which answers directly to him. This is a huge error. There is no budget, while the army have no experi-

ence of working with the attorney general's office. There is immense rivalry between the police and the army, going back to the days of the dictatorship. The whole affair is simply a giant improvisation, said former Interior Minister Filizzola.”¹⁵

In an interview with Colonel Ramón Benítez, the commander of the task force, he admitted that the security forces main weakness was its lack of intelligence on the EPP, and a lack of resources.

“We need more technology. We have only two helicopters available, one belonging to the police, and the other from the army. We need to be able to build another base in the heart of EPP territory,” Colonel Benítez said.¹⁶

Yet the army have not had any more success than the police had before them in destroying the EPP. And there have been constant accusations of human rights abuses by the military and heavy-handed actions.

It is hard to understand why more than 1000 police and soldiers are unable to at least contain, if not destroy, the EPP, as they act in a small geographical area. And Concepción is not Colombia's southern deep, impenetrable jungles, home to many of the FARC units. For the most part this is open rolling farmland, with the occasional patches of forest. It is clear however that the security forces have very little intelligence, either signals or human. They are essentially patrolling the area, hoping to stumble across a guerrilla camp or catch the rebels in action. Interior Minister de Vargas described the Joint Task Force as “literally working blindfolded” in intelligence terms.

The police have tried a system of payments for information. This is something that has worked with great effect in Colombia. However former Interior

¹⁴ Author's interview with de Vargas, in Asunción, August 18, 2014.

¹⁵ Author's interview with former Interior Minister Rafael Filizzola, August 19, 2014 in Asunción

¹⁶ Author's interview with Joint Task Force commander, Colonel Ramón Benítez on August 25 in Concepción.



Minister Rafael Filizzola said that corrupt elements in the police “manipulated the system of rewards for personal gain. They would deliver only a percentage of the promised reward, and keep the rest for themselves. So the credibility of the programme was destroyed.”

The EPP Splits

While in the field in Concepción in August 2014, rumours abounded that one of the columns of the EPP, of which there were up to four, was unhappy with the central leadership and vice versa. By September evidence had emerged that indeed there had been a split and that the dissident column had formed a new rebel group: one of the EPP groups, led by two brothers, Albino and Alfredo Jara Larrea (22 and 23 years old respectively), have formed a splinter group, calling themselves Armed Peasant Association (Asociación Campesina Armada - ACA). The ACA was initially believed to number 13 fighters.

During September there were a series of clashes between the FTC and the ACA.¹⁷ Up to five guerrillas may have been killed. This suggests that not only is the level of professionalism of the ACA less than the EPP, but that the dissident group does not enjoy the same support from the civilian population that has kept the EPP one step ahead of the security forces to date.

A prisoner exchange

On July 5, 2014, the EPP engaged in its first kidnapping that did not have economic motivation. Edelio Morínigo, a 25-year-old police officer, was snatched in Horqueta, Concepción, in the heart of the EPP's area of influence.

On September 30, a letter arrived at the house of the parents of the police officer, requesting the release of incarcerated EPP members in exchange for Morínigo's freedom. This is not the first time that a prisoner exchange has been mentioned. In May this year, Oviedo wrote a letter from prison saying that the then 16-year-old kidnap victim Arlan Fick would not be liberated until EPP prisoners were freed.¹⁸

The idea of a prisoner exchange is not a new one. The FARC over a number of years “collected” political prisoners and members of the security forces hoping to force the Colombian government to free imprisoned rebels. The strategy failed after the Colombian army managed to free the FARC's highest profile hostages, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, in July 2008. Discussions of the strategy of a prisoner exchange was also found in the seized EPP manual of which the author has a copy.

It seems unlikely that the Paraguayan government will give in to rebel demands. “It is out of the question,” said Interior Minister De Vargas, and called the guerrilla tactic “a perverse game”.

The Future of the EPP

Perhaps the key question is whether the EPP could replicate the system they have in the relatively small geographic area in the south of Concepción and the north of San Pedro departments in other parts of the country. Or are they simply just an ideologically motivated criminal clan which has the support of the local population in this area, unable to replicate these conditions elsewhere? With the loss of the Patria Libre political activists and imprisonment of Alcides

¹⁷ Kyra Gurney, “Paraguay Security Forces Deal Major Blow to Dissident Guerrilla Group”, September 22, 2014. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/paraguay-security-forces-deal-major-blow-to-dissident-guerrilla-group>

¹⁸ Kyra Gurney, “Paraguay Guerrillas Demand Prisoner Swap, Threaten to Kill Hostage,” InSight Crime, October 1, 2014. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/paraguay-rebels-demand-prisoner-exchange-threaten-hostage?highlight=WyJlcHAiLChAncyJd>



Oviedo, the political wing of the group is severely weakened. Are they any more than bandits?

Politically their area of operation has long been an opposition heartland. During the dictatorship the area was abandoned as a Liberal hotbed. However the poverty, abandonment of the state and poverty that characterise this area can be seen in many other parts of the country. The government and ruling elite have long been Asunción-centric.

Apart from Concepción/San Pedro, the EPP did have temporary presence in 2005 on the border of Caaguazu and Candideyu, where the training course with the FARC was held. However since then there has been no news of EPP activity.

In July 2010 EPP member Severiano Martinez was killed by the police in the extreme north of the country in the department of Alto Paraguay. He had apparently tried to carry out a kidnapping with several others and authorities had feared he was trying to set up another EPP cell. But the EPP never recognised his death or proclaimed him a martyr, as has happened with other fallen rebels, which might suggest he had left the group and was acting independently.

A source in the anti-kidnapping world said that intelligence sources had revealed that this year there was an EPP meeting to discuss the future of the group. The military head, Osvaldo Villalba proposed simply continuing the armed struggle in their area

of operations and keeping up pressure on the security forces through military actions, while recruiting local young people to build up the ranks. He was apparently challenged by Alejandro Ramos, the former peasant association leader, who said that the group must step up its political activity and work on creating conditions for expansion in other parts of the country. Villalba, described by sources as not the most intelligent man, carried the day.

One assumes that sooner or later the security forces will get a lucky break and find the main EPP encampment or stumble across the principal column on the move. While the EPP can call upon over 100 collaborators, its core is made up on perhaps 30 fighters, most related. Should the core leaders be killed: Osvaldo Villalba or his sister Liliana, Manuel Cristaldo Mieres or Magna Meza, the group would likely fade away, unless Oviedo was able to leave prison and rebuild again from scratch.

However until that day, the EPP seems set to continue dominating the Paraguayan headlines and embarrassing the government. It seems unable however to provide the spark for a wider insurgency, although an alliance with the drug trade could provide the rebels with enough funds to recruit more members and better arm themselves. It is however wrong to think of the EPP as nothing more than bandits. This underestimates the threat they present and the resonance that their political discourse has.



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