

## 450 Colombian Paramilitaries Disarm

Some 450 right-wing paramilitary fighters left Colombia's crowded battlefields, turning in their weapons and asking society to let them back into its fold.

Wearing camouflage uniforms and rubber boots, the members of the "Banana Bloc" of the outlawed United Self-Defense Forces, or AUC, sang the national anthem Thursday, then laid down hundreds of rifles, grenade-launchers and mortars on a long table.

"We have been given hope again," government Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo told the disarmament ceremony at a soccer stadium in Turbo, 310 miles northwest of the capital, Bogota.

The ceremony completes the disbandment of the Banana Bloc, which for more than a decade held sway over much of Colombia's main banana-growing region in Antioquia state.

AUC leader Salvatore Mancuso said in a speech at that the paramilitaries were ready to "forgive our enemies and ask society to receive us in its bosom and believe in our decision to liberate ourselves from the war."

The fighters will now head to a nearby country estate where authorities will review their individual legal status, health, education and job prospects. Once deemed fit to return to civil society, they will be allowed to leave as free men.

Critics of the process, however, warn there is nothing to prevent them from regrouping under a different name and continuing to commit crimes and traffic drugs. The United States considers the AUC a "terrorist organization" and is seeking the extradition of several of its leaders, including Mancuso, on drug-related charges.

Villagers have also expressed concern that Marxist rebels driven away by the paramilitaries could return to fill the void left by the demobilization. The army says it has sent 500 additional troops to secure the region.

Peace talks between the government and the AUC began in July in a safe haven in northwest Colombia and aim to demobilize the AUC's 15,000 right-wing fighters by 2006. Hundreds have already demobilized, though the fate of commanders and fighters accused of gross human rights abuses has yet to be decided.

Colombia's paramilitary groups were created two decades ago to combat leftist guerrillas. The paramilitaries, like their rebel foes, finance themselves through drug trafficking and extortion.

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