



Will Colombia's Army be able to take control of its arsenals and curb its historic Corruption?

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In December 2023, somebody bombed a Colombian Army checkpoint. Investigators determined that the explosive used was a Colombian Army munition, supposedly stored at the Army arsenal in Tolemaida. The Minister of Defense, Iván Velásquez, immediately ordered an investigation of Army munition and weapons controls, storage, and records.

The preliminary examination was done quickly, and on April 30, 2024, the President called a hasty press conference. He had just received a chart prepared by the Army investigators. It showed the items on hand and items missing, and not only from the arsenal at Tolemaida.



After a cursory look at the chart, the President announced that a million pieces of weaponry, including nearly 23,000 grenades, 39 missiles, 550 rockets, and 800,000 munitions were missing from only two of the Army's arsenals. Presumably, the missing items had been given or sold to illegal armed groups, even in other countries. ("Presidente Petro denuncia pérdida de mas de un millón de municiones de Ejército", EL ESPECTADOR, April 30, 2024). Specifically, he said, "The only way to explain this list of missing weapons is that for a long time there have been networks made up of people from the Military Forces and civilians dedicated to a massive commerce in weapons, using legal weapons belonging to the Colombian government." He said he thinks that they have been going to the illegal armed groups. "Las municiones y explosivos de la Policía de Urabá que terminaron en manos del Clan del Golfo", by Señal Investigativa, una alianza entre Revista Raya and Señal Colombia, Revista Raya, June 23, 2024.

This created a media furor, as could be expected.

The Army promptly announced that the President had read from the wrong column on the chart, and a million weapons had not been stolen. The furor died down. Maybe this was not such a very big problem. Just another of President Petro's big announcements about nothing much.

But while it corrected the figures, EL TIEMPO reported on May 2 that, just from the arsenal at La Guajira, the missing items are 3,696 grenades of different types, 3,694 hand grenades, 2 Spike missiles and 37 antitank missiles, 17,456 antitank charges, 128,036 munitions of various calibers, and 550 RPG rockets. As of the date of its report, EL TIEMPO had not yet received the accurate report on weapons missing from the arsenal at Tolemaida. (“Las dudas por la cifra que reporta sobre robo de armas en Tolemaida y La Guajira”, May 2, 2024.)



The Minister of Defense pointed out that, obviously, the investigation would have to continue. Not only are there very significant amounts of weaponry and explosives missing, the arsenals appear to contain weapons that are not listed in Army records and do not belong to the Army. INFOBAE, May 7, 2024..

Thievery of weapons is a major ingredient in the Colombian Army’s long history of corruption.

Corruption in the Colombian Army has never been a secret. Over the past five years, military intelligence identified multiple alleged arms trafficking networks in army bases throughout Colombia. (COLOMBIA REPORTS, May 13, 2024). And there is a long history of weapons trafficking by security forces, not just in Colombia. InsightCrime reported in 2014 that Cali was a weapons trafficking hotspot. A scandal erupted in October of 2013 with the disappearance of weapons from Colombia’s 3d Brigade. News magazine SEMANA

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reported that an incomplete investigation suggested that half the 16,000 revolvers, pistols, sub-machine guns and rifles that were supposed to be at the Brigade might be missing.

At the end of December of 2013, the Attorney General's Office had arrested four suspects in the case, including two soldiers, a Sgt. 2d class, and the Corporal who was in charge of the munitions. ("El lío de las armas en Cali," SEMANA, January 3, 2014) and ("Half of Weapons Missing from Cali Armoury as Count gets Underway", Insight Crime, January 6, 2014).

Again in Cali, in late October of 2023, the Attorney General's Office and the Police searched the residence of an Army Major. They found a stash of barrel guns, 2-way radios, rifle grips, holsters for 9mm pistols, a double-barrel shotgun and 57 cartridges. The Major was arrested and became part of a criminal investigation.

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Minister Velásquez has had a distinguished career as a prosecutor. He is well aware that the Colombian Army has a long history of arms theft, connivance with illegal groups, and other kinds of corruption. After the latest case of missing weapons was announced, both the President and the Minister of Defense again stated forcefully that the elimination of corruption is one of their highest goals for the Colombian Army.

Under then-President Uribe's policy of "Democratic Security". Uribe's DAS (Administrative Department of Security) had illegally wiretapped the communications of current Defense Minister Iván Velásquez, who was then attached to the Supreme Court's Criminal Branch, assigned to investigate the relations between politicians and paramilitaries. Velásquez obtained the convictions of some 50 politicians, largely members or supporters of the Uribe administration. ("Iván Velásquez perseguido por el das es el nuevo ministro de defensa", CAMBIO, July 22, 2022).

During CSN's recent visit to Colombia, we interviewed Carlos

Velandia, a former guerrilla who had educated himself while serving time in prison. He told us that every president of Colombia has been afraid of the Army. He feared that the Army might never be able to absorb this President's message of inclusion.

Colombian media have often reported thefts of weapons by members of the military.

In March of 2023, ("Militares vendían armas a disidencias de las Farc; esto es lo que ha revelado la investigación de la Fiscalía", Infobae)

Also in March of 2023, ("Red de trafico de armas del Ejército habría dotado a civiles en el Paro Nacional", EL ESPECTADOR);

In April of 2023, ("A la cárcel dos sargentos del Ejército por presunto trafico de armas", EL ESPECTADOR);

In June of 2023, ("12 años de carcel para sargento del Ejército que vendía armas a narcotraficantes", LA TERCERA);

In October of 2023, (Envían a prisión a mayor del ejército por presunto trafico de armas, EL ESPECTADOR);

Also in October of 2023, (La radiografía del trafico ilegal de armas en Colombia", by Luisa Fernanda Moscoso Gutiérrez, EL ESPECTADOR);

In November of 2023, (Military intelligence sheds light on Colombia's illegal arms imports, colombiareports.com);

In February of 2022, ("El prontuario de Colonel (r) del Ejército Robinson González del Río", EL ESPECTADOR), {see also "The Rap Sheet of Colombian Army Retired Colonel Robinson González del Río", colombia support.net};

In October of 2022, ("Colombia: procesan a red que vendía armas del ejército", Associated Press);



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and on and on and on.

Members of the military who might choose to report missing weapons, may face immediate transfer, discipline, and even death threats.

Sgt. Carlos Mario Gómez Hincapie, a soldier with 20 years of satisfactory service received a dishonorable discharge when he reported sales of stolen weapons, but it could have been a lot worse. An experienced arsenal manager, he provided CAMBIO with an amazing account of the disorder he found at his new post at the Vélez Battalion in San Pedro de Urabá. Weapons were lying here and there, and records were not maintained; under these conditions it was easy to steal weapons. He expressed shock to see that even some US-funded weapons, for which precise records are required, were missing.

When he asked for an investigation, he was lucky to get home alive. He told CAMBIO that at first he was offered a bribe to keep quiet. He was told that a previous armorer had “made a lot of money, but then was killed”. When he refused the bribe, he was warned that he was “messing with some powerful and dangerous people”. CAMBIO reported that he was discharged, but barely escaped with his life when he learned of a plan to kill him. (“Militar fue echado del Ejército por reportar robo de fusiles que irían al Clan del Golfo”, by Alfredo Molano Jimeno, CAMBIO, April 16, 2023.

REVISTA RAYA was reporting on a recently uncovered “hidden file” detailing losses of weapons and munitions at the armory of the National Police in Urabá. It referred to what had happened to Sgt. Gómez and repeated his warning: “There’s a network here. There’s a criminal network, a mafia. There’s a mafia. And believe me, no noncommissioned officer, no soldier, no civilian, would be able to direct it and protect it. There are high levels in the institution that are really running this network, and who have really corrupted the institution. I think they’re serving as a center and are delivering this military equipment that belongs to the Defense Ministry to kill

our own men and even the civilian population. “Las municiones y explosivos de la Policia que terminaron en manos del Clan del Golfo”, REVISTA RAYA, June 23, 2024.”

Maybe things are starting to change?

More frequent reports of weapons theft may not mean there is more weapons theft. It could mean that the administration of the Colombian military and the new Attorney General may be working to change this long-standing habit.

On the very same day that EL TIEMPO reported on the corrected quantities of missing armaments, the Attorney General’s Office had just arrested some active duty and retired military and charged them with stealing weapons and munitions and selling them to

illegal armed groups in Caquetá, Huila, Putumayo, Tolima, Antioquia, Meta, and Chocó Departments. (Doesn’t this sound like the network that Sgt. Gómez was talking about?) They had regularly stolen weapons and munitions and were selling them to the Dissidents, to the ELN, and to the Clan del Golfo. They are now charged with breach of trust by omission, trafficking of weapons restricted to military use, and destruction, suppression, and hiding of material elements of evidence. (“Cayó red de trafico de armas integrada por miembros activos y retirados de las Fuerzas Militares”, by Sebastián Vargas Rueda, Infobae, May 2, 2024.

And there had already been another charge, just last April 10. A retired Army Major was

arrested by Police, and his speeding vehicle was found to contain 15 mortars, 32 fragmentation grenades, 2 pistols, 17,000 cartridges of different calibers, five holsters, bars of C4 explosive, a bulletproof jacket, and communications equipment. He was charged with

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fabrication, trafficking and carrying weapons, accessories, parts or munitions the use of which is restricted to the Armed Forces. (“Mayor retirado de Ejército fue capturado movilizand o morteros y otras armas”, EL ESPECTADOR, April 13, 2024).

And on May 13,2024, the Army’s Commanding General Luis Ospina told WRadio that, based on the Army’s investigation of missing weapons that the Minister of Defense had called for, any member of the Army suspected of weapons theft would be reported to the Attorney General’s Office, and that they had already reported 120 people.

The Defense Minister has stated that some members of the military will be discharged and he repeated that in response to a question from REVISTA RAYA for the above-cited article. Very recently, he also replaced the Commander of Colombia’s Military Forces.

We can only hope that the new Defense Minister, Iván Velásquez, and the new Attorney General, Luz Adriana Camargo, will take the actions necessary to curb corruption in the Colombian military, and especially, to end the current practice of sloppy storage and incomplete records in the Army’s arsenals, and to stop members of the military from stealing weapons to arm their own enemies and the enemies of the Colombian people.

General Ospina was relieved of his duties a week or so later.

“Estas son las razones de la salida del general Ospina de la comandância del Ejército”, WRadio, May 20, 2024

“Las razones de la salida del general Helder Giraldo de la comandância de las FFMM”, WRadio, July 4, 2024. This article mões no specific reference to weapons theft.