

Colombia's War Goes Downtown

As Rightist Militias Challenge Rebels, Blood Stains the Streets

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BARRANCABERMEJA, Colombia—It was about 1 p.m. on a typically sweltering day in this city when two men entered the Rosita superstore to shoot two relatives of the store's owner. The men walked past the multicolored fabrics lining the walls, up the winding marble staircase, then through the men's clothing section, where they found their targets. After they emptied several rounds into their victims, the men calmly walked out of the store, got on their motorcycle and sped off.

This type of mafia-style hit in Barrancabermeja is becoming commonplace throughout the country as Colombia's 40-year civil war spills from the rural areas into the biggest cities. From Medellin to Cali, leftist rebels and members of right-wing paramilitary groups are waging urban war upon one another in public places.

Rosita is in the heart of Barrancabermeja's commercial district, along a main thoroughfare lined with street vendors and filled with a constant flow of motorcycles, buses and taxis. At any one time, 15 people are selling towels, sheets and clothes in the store; countless others stroll along the street window-shopping.

Yet the police say no one will testify about the murder of the two men. "Everyone knows who it was," a Rosita employee said. "But no one dares be a witness."

The businessmen slain at Rosita were only two of the more than 400 murder victims this year that made Barrancabermeja Colombia's most dangerous city.

Although it has been a guerrilla stronghold for years, paramilitary forces have begun to challenge the supremacy of the rebels. In addition, the two groups are fighting over the lucrative illicit drug and gasoline trade that thrives here.

The political and economic incentives in this war often make it difficult to fully clarify the killers' motives; determining their sympathies is not so difficult. Authorities acknowledge it was the paramilitary forces that killed the

two men at Rosita.

Alleged paramilitary gunmen killed another man 200 feet down the road from Rosita in front of the city's main telephone office. A suspected paramilitary member riding on a bicycle shot yet another man as he walked past him near the city center.

The guerrillas are not far behind, killing suspected paramilitary collaborators at an equally startling rate in the areas they control, and planting bombs in heavily traveled commercial districts.

Earlier this month, suspected urban militias from the country's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), set off a car bomb in front of a bank just across the street from the telephone company office, killing two people and injuring several others. The police have deactivated 20 other explosive devices this year, including a bicycle bomb and a canoe bomb.

Barrancabermeja's war is part of a larger territorial dispute in this region, known as the Middle Magdalena Valley. The city is home to the country's largest refinery and the region has several important oil fields. Just west of Barrancabermeja, there are large gold and mineral deposits as well as vast fields of coca, the raw material for cocaine.

Both guerrillas and paramilitary groups finance much of their war by taxing coca growers and traffickers and in some cases trafficking the drugs themselves.

Earlier this year, as many as 1,000 right-wing militiamen moved into the area with sophisticated weaponry, killing hundreds of suspected rebel collaborators and ripping into the traditional support base of the country's second-largest rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN).

The paramilitary offensive coincided with the government's preliminary agreement with the ELN to remove the armed forces from three districts in the area in preparation for peace talks.

The government is holding a similar process with the FARC in a 16,000 square-mile area in the south of the country that the guerrillas formally control. But

the paramilitary forces' offensive has put the viability of the ELN's "demilitarized zone" in doubt.

The battle between the armed factions in the countryside has seeped onto the streets of Barrancabermeja. Locals say that many guerrillas have switched sides to the paramilitaries and now single out their former colleagues in the city for execution.

Police and military personnel routinely set up checkpoints on the streets to search for guns and explosives. They also round up masses of men between 15 and 35, looking for urban guerrillas in Barrancabermeja's infamous northwest neighborhoods, which are the guerrillas' home base in the city. Murals of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine-born revolutionary icon, line the streets. The former neighborhood police station lies in rubble covered with rebel graffiti. The police abandoned it several years ago after repeated guerrilla attacks.

Police have scoured the northwest for suspects, but local authorities are troubled by the seemingly inadequate response to the paramilitary activities in the city center.

"They [the police] say they're investigating, but the results are few and far between," said the Rev. Jose Figueroa from Barrancabermeja's archdiocese.

The military arrested five suspected paramilitary leaders in July, but the men are being held only for carrying weapons illegally. In Colombia, an estimated 97 percent of all crimes go unpunished.

The police say said the murder rate has dropped substantially since the July arrests and a series of raids in the northwest neighborhoods. Still, victims fill the morgues at alarming rates, particularly on weekends.

In separate incidents on a Friday in mid-October, for example, two unidentified men were killed, as was Claudia Bernal, 16. Bernal was shot in the head as she drove on her moped from her older sister Angelica's house in Provienda in the northwest.

At the morgue, with her sister's blood still on her shirt, Angelica writhed in pain, then screamed, "Why her? She didn't do anything!"