

The Popular Liberation Army (EPL)

AT A GLANCE

Overview

Organization

Strategy

Major Attacks

Interactions

Maps

HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: April 1967¹

Disbanded: 1991

First Attack: December 17, 1967: The EPL led peasant uprisings in Alto Sinu, the San Jorge region and Cauca.²

Last Attack: October 13, 2014: Colombian officials suspected the EPL was responsible for an attack on the town of Playa de Belen in Norte de Santander that left two police officers dead. (2 killed, 1 wounded).³

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OVERVIEW

The Popular Liberation Army (EPL) was a Marxist guerrilla group that formed in 1967 as the armed wing of the Communist Party of Colombia (Marxist-Leninist), a splinter party of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC). The EPL openly used the drug trade to finance its operations in an attempt to achieve its goal of protecting the proletariat from government influence. In 1991, less than half of the group demobilized and transformed itself into a political party while the majority of members continued militant activities as a dissident group under the leadership of Megateo, originally the leader of one of EPL's factions, the Libardo Mora Toro Front.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Popular Liberation Army (EPL) was a Marxist guerrilla group founded in 1967 to oppose to the Colombian government. Unlike other Colombian guerrilla groups, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), the EPL was formed as the militant wing of the Communist Party of Colombia (Marxist-Leninist), a branch of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC), and self-titled itself the official armed wing of the party.⁴ Together, the EPL and the PCC attempted to end government influence over labor unions and local corporations.⁵

In the 1960s, the EPL operated exclusively in rural areas attempting to fight for the interests of the proletariat, particularly in Northwest Antioquia, but was almost eliminated after a series of attacks from paramilitaries and the Colombian government. It was not until the 1980s, when the EPL started expanding into urban areas, that the group rebuilt and strengthened. In the 1980s, the EPL focused on agro-industrial development and openly used drug trafficking to finance its operations.⁶

In 1984, the EPL participated in peace talks with the Betancur Administration, but the peace was punctuated by breaches of the ceasefire committed by both sides. In 1991, the EPL signed a truce with the Colombian government and officially disbanded. However, the majority of EPL members united under one of the EPL's original factions, the Libardo Mora Toro Front led by Megateo, and chose to continue fighting despite the truce.⁷ The dissident group kept the EPL name and throughout the 1990s, maintained the EPL's ranking as the third largest guerrilla group in Colombia. Though the majority of EPL members continued fighting, the Colombian government considers the EPL disbanded and reports refer to the EPL's continued militant activity as attacks carried out by a dissident faction of the officially disbanded group.⁸

Throughout the 1990s, the dissident members allied with the FARC to attack demobilized EPL members because both guerrilla groups believed that those who demobilized had 'betrayed the revolution.'⁹ Between 1999 and 2000, most of the EPL's remaining leaders were either captured or killed by paramilitary groups or the Colombian army. Following loss of leadership, many remaining members dispersed or joined the FARC or ELN.¹⁰ However, in 2001, 500 EPL members were still active and the group was responsible for kidnapping 20 people. In 2002, the group kidnapped 33 people and planted land mines.¹¹ By 2005, paramilitary groups, security agencies, and, most notably, the FARC and dissident EPL group killed a total of 321 demilitarized EPL members.¹² Since 2005, very little information exists on the EPL but in 2014, the group, under leader Megateo, wanted to join the peace talks with the Colombian government, the FARC, and the ELN. EPL leader Megateo believed a National Constituent Assembly would be necessary to get the EPL involved in the peace talks.¹³

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Oscar William Calvo (1967-1985): Calvo was an EPL representative in the 1984 peace negotiations with President Belisario Betancur and a member of President Belisario Betancur's Peace Commission in 1984. In November 1985, Calvo was murdered.¹⁴

Francisco Caraballo (1991 to 2008): Caraballo led the armed wing of the Communist Party of Colombia and the group's transition to the EPL. Caraballo then became the political and military leader of the EPL. He also led the dissident members that refused to adhere to the 1991 peace agreement. He was arrested in 1993, but continued to influence the EPL from his jail cell. He was released from jail in 2008, at which time he renounced violence.¹⁵

El Viejo Rafa, legal name Antonio Martínez Pastrana (1980-Present): El Viejo Rafa has been a member of the EPL since the 1970s as a messenger but became a leader, known for his kidnapping skills, in the 1980s. Despite the Colombian police's knowledge of his whereabouts, Colombian police allegedly refused to enter areas under his control.¹⁶

Megateo, legal name Victor Ramon Navarro-Cerrano (unknown-Present): Megateo is the current leader and chief financial officer of the Libardo Mora Tora front, the last operating EPL faction. Megateo has also been connected to the FARC and the ELN. There is a \$5 million bounty on his head.¹⁷ On August 16, 2015, Megateo was allegedly killed by Colombian Special Forces and the Colombian Army in North Santander; however, reports are unconfirmed.¹⁸

B. NAME CHANGES

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 1975: 3000 (Jane's Intelligence Review)¹⁹
- 1985: 450²⁰
- 1990: 2000 (El País)²¹
- 1991: 700 (Jane's Intelligence Review)²²
- 1999: A few hundred (LA Times)²³
- Early 2000s: <1,000 (World Terrorism)²⁴
- 2003: 500 (UNHCR)²⁵
- 2001: 500²⁶
- 2011: 200 (Jane's Intelligence Review)²⁷
- 2013: 70-100 (Commander Megateo)²⁸

D. RESOURCES

The EPL frequently publicized its endorsement of the drug trade and reliance on the drug trade for profit. The EPL paid for weapons, ammunition, and other supplies through a taxation process, in which the EPL would 'tax' cocaine producers in its territory and collect fees for having protected drug shipments.²⁹

In addition to the drug trade, the EPL relied on extortion of wealthy landowners, cattle stealing, and money laundering to earn revenue.³⁰

E. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

The EPL was originally based in Northwest Antioquia and rural areas. In the 1980s, the EPL expanded and included urban regions. In addition to Antioquia, the EPL has reportedly had strong presence in Caldas, La Guajira, and North Santander.³¹

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

The EPL was a Marxist group, inspired by Maoist ideology that aimed to topple the Colombian government and establish a communist state.³² It originally operated in rural Colombia in an effort to fight a "people's war." However, in 1976 the EPL began to include urban regions and the working class. Throughout its existence, the EPL was motivated by its main goal of protecting the proletariat.³³

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

The EPL was founded as the armed wing of the Communist Party of Colombia (Marxist-Leninist), an offshoot of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC).

Many members of the EPL accepted a truce offered by the Betancur government in 1984. Others demobilized in 1991 and entered the political arena as the Partido Esperanza, Paz y Libertad (Hope, Peace and Liberty Party) in the Uraba region of the northern province of Antioquia.³⁴ However, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), another guerrilla group, opposed this political move, and many EPL members were not convinced that involving the group in politics would be as

effective as guerrilla warfare. The party was severely weakened by decreasing membership in addition to targeted assassinations of members by the FARC and the dissident EPL faction led by Megateo.³⁵

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The EPL traditionally engaged in kidnapping, extortion, cattle stealing, money laundering, planting land mines and directly attacking communities.³⁶ Before 1991, the EPL targeted Colombian government assets and staged attacks on the military, police and government personnel.³⁷

The current EPL is only a fraction as strong as the EPL of the 1980s. It has devolved into little more than an organized crime network that carries out intimidation tactics, kidnappings, and murders of high-profile landowners, foreign visitors and workers.³⁸

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing, but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

December 17, 1967: The EPL led peasant uprisings in Alto Sinu, the San Jorge region and Cauca. (unknown killed, unknown wounded)³⁹

October 4, 1999: Fifteen EPL members kidnapped 12 civilians from the town of Ocana at a roadblock. In a rescue mission, the Colombian military rescued all 12 hostages, killed one EPL member, and injured two of the hostages. (1 killed, 2 wounded).⁴⁰

April 2000: At a roadblock south of Bogotá, the EPL kidnapped between 10 and 14 persons. (unknown killed, unknown wounded)⁴¹

Unknown 2006: In 2006, the EPL received assistance from the FARC and killed 10 DAS detectives in addition to seven soldiers. (17 killed, unknown wounded)⁴²

February 2012: EPL militants shot at a surveillance helicopter in Norte de Santander. (0 killed, 2 wounded).⁴³

May 2014: The EPL kidnapped and shot a police officer in Norte de Santander. (1 killed, 0 wounded).⁴⁴

October 13, 2014: Colombian officials suspected the EPL was responsible for an attack on the town of Playa de Belen in Norte de Santander that left two police officers dead. (2 killed, 1 wounded).⁴⁵

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

The EPL has never been listed as a terrorist organization by the United States government or other governments.⁴⁶

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

In 1987, the EPL joined the Simon Bolivar Guerrilla Coordinating Board (CGSB), a guerrilla alliance formed by the National Liberation (ELN) following its failed 1984 peace negotiations with the

government. Other members of the CGSB included the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the April 19 Movement (M-19).⁴⁷ Together, these guerrilla groups operated throughout Colombia and attacked Colombia's major oil facilities. In 1991, the EPL left the CGSB when the group officially demobilized.⁴⁸

When the EPL officially disbanded in 1991, many members continued to fight under the EPL name despite their agreement with the government. These EPL members allied with FARC guerrillas and attacked demobilized EPL members for betraying the revolutionary cause. Attacks on demobilized EPL members continued into the 2000s.⁴⁹ In 1999, when the EPL's remaining leaders were either captured or killed, many EPL guerrillas joined the FARC and the ELN.⁵⁰

In 2002, the EPL and the ELN committed a joint attack on the town of Hacari.⁵¹ In 2014, the EPL sought to enter the latest round of peace talks among the FARC and ELN and the Colombian government. In July 2014 the EPL proposed to the FARC and the ELN a National Constituent Assembly to persuade the Colombian government to allow the EPL to join the peace talks.⁵²

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

MAPS

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