

Stubborn rebels fight on in Colombia

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LA JULIA, Colombia --

Colombia's defense minister helicoptered into this leftist rebel stronghold with a clutch of U.S. Embassy officials and heavily armed American soldiers to assert emphatically that Latin America's most enduring guerrilla army is on the run.

"The state has arrived to stay, and never again will the guerrillas control this territory," Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos proclaimed in October while inaugurating the first police post ever in this former hub of the cocaine trade.

But just weeks later, an Associated Press news team had to talk its way past testy rebels just to reach the dirt-street town, from which hundreds of people have fled since police and soldiers moved in.

"It's silly to say the government has finished off the guerrillas," said Gustavo Valencia, a 52-year-old vegetable merchant, as helmeted soldiers shuffled by and an army radio station blared from loudspeakers.

With more than \$4 billion in U.S. military aid, this Andean nation's armed forces have been trying hard to crush the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as the FARC. To try to measure the campaign's success, the AP visited this longtime rebel bastion 120 miles south of the capital, Bogota.

In La Julia, Santos' victory declaration seemed premature, especially judging from the distrust, even hostility, that townspeople displayed toward police and soldiers nervously clutching assault rifles.

Since the 1960s, the peasant-based FARC has served as the only authority in many long-neglected corners of Colombia. Less than a decade ago, it was mounting big attacks on army bases and even briefly held a provincial capital, seizing scores of police and military hostages.

But since President Alvaro Uribe won office in 2002, the government has reasserted control over highways where guerrilla roadblocks once harvested kidnap victims. It also cleared rebels completely from the province around Bogota.

The FARC's international profile was raised by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's recent efforts to broker a prisoner swap to free rebel hostages including three U.S. military contractors.

Uribe canceled the initiative last month, saying Chavez overstepped his authority. But he said Friday that his government is willing to meet with the FARC in an unspecified rural area as long as neither side is armed and international observers are present. There was no immediate response from the FARC.

Under the government's anti-FARC offensive, the number of professional soldiers has doubled to almost 80,000 in seven years, with 12 mobile brigades and six high mountain battalions added. Plans call for an all-volunteer army once a goal of 100,000 professional soldiers is reached.

Washington's contribution under "Plan Colombia," begun by President Clinton, shifted from anti-narcotics to emphasize counterinsurgency after the 9/11 attacks.

U.S. Special Forces teams train elite troops and American military advisers are attached to Colombian divisions. The aid also includes encrypted radios and 60 helicopters.

Most important is the real-time intelligence provided by the U.S. from satellite imaging and communications intercepts, Colombian military commander Gen. Freddy Padilla told the AP in an interview.

"Colombia's armed forces are today able to go anywhere in the country with surprise, precision and overwhelming force," Padilla said. "We have at the moment access to or the support of all technology the United States employs for its defense."

No longer can the FARC move hundreds of fighters without detection, said Alfredo Rangel, Colombia's top military analyst. And the army got a morale boost when it killed two senior rebel leaders in separate operations - including the boss of the unit that held Colombia's current foreign minister, Fernando Araujo, for six years until his Jan. 1 escape.

But such gains hardly guarantee victory over a roughly 14,000-strong rebel army rooted in a history of peasant grievances. Unlike most of its neighbors, Colombia has never adopted reforms to more equitably distribute farmland.

The FARC could easily survive Uribe's frontal assault unless he can decapitate it by capturing some of its top leaders. One senior U.S. military analyst told the AP that the FARC is on the "strategic defensive" - with its leadership intact and its ranks easily replenished despite record desertions. It is trying to outlast Uribe and may succeed, said the analyst, who insisted on anonymity for his safety because he frequently travels in Colombia.

Cocaine has long fueled Colombia's conflict, and the FARC's durability owes much to revenues from the coca crops that once made La Julia a thriving drug market.

The town was home to three generations of FARC loyalists and a stronghold largely because of its inaccessibility. The rebels regularly engage the military in this rugged region where Andean foothills meet jungle-laced plains.

Only a few weeks after Santos flew in Oct. 5, an AP team was stopped by the FARC on a bone-jolting dirt road after rebel sentries spotted the journalists headed to La Julia.

"We just want to make it clear that we're the boss around here," said one uniformed guerrilla, an AK-47 over his shoulder. "We don't want the media going to La Julia and serving the state's propaganda."

Neither he nor his commander would be photographed or identified by name.

The AP team found La Julia a half-deserted town awash in fear. Commerce was depressed. Heavily armed police and soldiers were everywhere.

Since counterinsurgency troops arrived in June 2006, half the people are said to have fled. The size of La Julia's population is uncertain, but the town priest, the Rev. Henry Arias, noted school enrollment has dropped from 350 to 180 since troops came. All incoming and outgoing vehicles are searched, and the cocaine trade has gone underground.

Residents grumble that the government - much like the rebels in the past - has done little to improve people's lives.

It has failed to deliver on promises of electricity, running water and a ferry to cross the Duda River. Farmers depend on motorized dugout canoes to get their corn, bananas and yucca across its rushing waters and to market.

"We don't have power. We don't have (running) water. We don't have anything," said Father Arias.

The command post "inaugurated" in October also has yet to be built, so police make do with sandbagged fortifications and ditches dug into the moist ochre soil.

Jose Cabezas, president of the town's trucking cooperative, said it lost most of its members last year when security forces hauled away 24 people accused of rebel ties. He acknowledged some were indeed FARC but said most were not. To date, none has been tried.

No one in La Julia would admit to a reporter that they back the rebels, and only a few people - all newcomers - dared to praise the army.

The town's police commander, Capt. Rafael Montoya, acknowledges he's in hostile territory, with nearby jungles dotted with FARC camps.

The militants probe his defenses nearly nightly, he said. Men in black throw rocks to measure the distance to potential grenade targets, then melt away into the darkness.

"I'm up every night until about 3 a.m. Those are the hours we're on high alert," he said.

Meanwhile, townspeople strive to stay neutral.

Valencia, the vegetable merchant, says he won't invite officers into his business for coffee. Even Father Arias is cautiously neutral, refusing to celebrate special Masses for the soldiers.

"They've got their own chaplain," he said.