

# The Colombian Army, News and Perspective

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*Soldiers from the Special Brigade against Drug Trafficking. This unit provides supports in eliminating illegal crops in different regions of the country. In some places drug traffickers present armed resistance, therefore, it is necessary for troops to arrive before this happens and guarantee the safety of the eradicators. This brigade operates completely by air and its troops are equipped with the most modern equipment and weapons.*

**F**or 50 years the Military and Police forces, representing the national government and democratic institutions, had to confront the FARC's subversive threat. This conflict left 200 thousand dead and more than six million internally displaced persons. After a complex process of negotiations, the President of the Republic, Juan Manuel Santos, an economist, was able to accomplish a peace agreement with the FARC which led to its demobilization, disarmament and reintegration to society. To date, the FARC has formed as a political party, which will participate in the upcoming elections.

All those years of countersubversive war conditioned the doctrine and the acquisitions of the Military and Police forces. To control those large territories, priority was given to personnel instead of heavy equipment, which is logical, since the hypothesis of the conflict of conventional

war was seen as somewhat distant, while the threat that the rebels represented, who little by little turned into drug traffickers and terrorists, was something real that was causing deaths and wounded on a daily basis.

Because of the above, the Colombian Army's units are above all light and with little deterrent capabilities for a conventional war. However, its troops have a lot of experience in the type of war they had to fight for decades, which is very important. Due to all that, the present situation is as follows:

1. The Colombian Military Forces want to retain the capabilities they have acquired during the internal conflict. Among the strategies to accomplish this, we have:
  - a. No reduction of the number of troops currently in service.
  - b. Become a training supplier for other nations.
  - c. Strengthen the country's military industries so the Military Forces and the Police become self-sufficient and resource generators through the sale of products and specialized services.
2. Acquire new capabilities for a conventional war to increase the deterrence when faced with external threats. This can be achieved through the following three strategies:
  - a. Participate in multinational operations for peacekeeping and world security (such as mutual humanitarian aid that takes place according to the agreements reached at the Conference of the Chiefs of the American Air Forces—CONJEFAMER), which includes constant training and participation in exercises with other nations in the world.
  - b. Acquire new and modern weapons, equipment, and technology.
  - c. Engage in alliances with military powers, such as the European Union, the System of Cooperation among the American Air Forces—SICOFAA, or NATO.
3. Create a change in mentality among the troops, from a doctrine focused on the anti-subversive war to a "multi mission" focus, that will not dismiss the anti-subversive war but that will also include focusing on other types of engagements. For this, the strategies are as follows:
  - a. Restructure Military and Police, adapting their organizational chart to the present reality and new threats.
  - b. Redefine the doctrine at every level to adapt it to the new strategic approach. In the Colombian Army this new doctrine is called "Damasco".
  - c. Improve and maintain the image of the Military Forces and the Police among the civilian population, nationally as well as internationally.

## Organizational Structure of the Colombian Armed Forces

In Colombia, the set of institutions that serve the State are known as Armed Forces or Public Force. These include the Military Forces (Army, Navy and Air Force) and the National Police. The four institutions fall under the Ministry of Defense. Below is the basic organizational chart.

We would need dozens of books to try to explain in detail the history of the Colombian Military Forces. In this brief article, we will touch upon some basic elements to give the reader an idea of how the Colombian Army is organized, how it is armed and equipped, what are the acquired capabilities and what are its future needs. In other articles we will examine other directions.

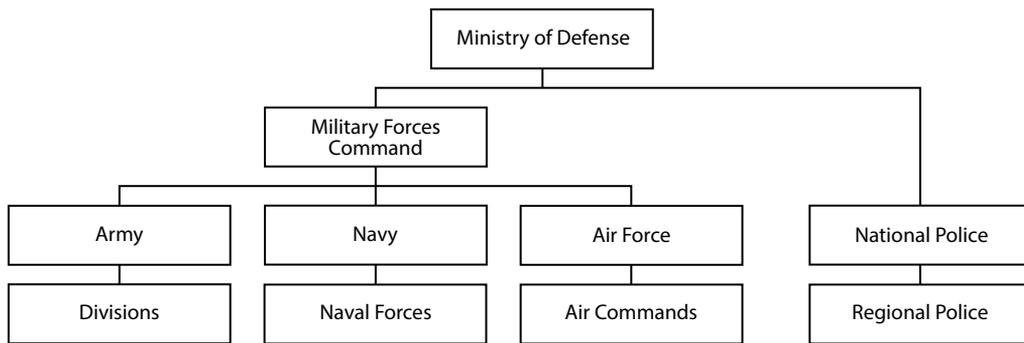


Figure. Colombian Ministry of Defense

## The Colombian Army

Has eight Divisions with jurisdiction over all the national territory, with the exception of coastal municipalities and islands, for which the Marines are responsible. There is also an Aviation Division which includes all the aircraft and helicopters used by the Army, and a Division made up of a group of Battalions of military specialties such as Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery, etc.



Mechanized Infantry Unit of the Colombian Army made up of five 8x8 LAV-III y one HMMWV. The LAV-III is equipped with an automatic turret, Rafael, of Israeli manufacture, "Remote Controlled Weapon Station" (RCWS) Samson Mini, with a .50 caliber (12,7 mm) weapon.

The standard assault rifle is the Galil AR, 5.56 mm., which is being replaced by the Galil ACE with the same caliber, both are of domestic manufacture, under license by IWI. The most common pistol is the Beretta 92, but the Cordova, which is of domestic manufacture and a 9mm parabellum, is ready to become operational, will replace the Beretta. The cluster hand grenades are of domestic manufacture, model M26.

Accompanying weapons are made up of light machine guns, 5.56 y 7.62 mm.; multiple grenade launchers, 40 mm.; command-type mortars (no tripod or base plate), 60 mm.; precision rifles, 7,62 mm. and light antitank rocket launchers. The Ministry of Defense, through its Social and Business Group (GSED), interested in boosting the capabilities of the military industry, chose some weapons and negotiated their manufacture in Colombia. INDUMIL, a Colombian company, is manufacturing the Negev machine gun of Israeli origin, the grenade launcher MGL, from Milkor a South African company, a nationally manufactured mortar, and versions of the Galil precision rifles from the Israeli IWI. INDUMIL is in the process of investigating and developing rocket systems, which will eventually allow, among other things, the manufacture of anti-tank rockets.



*The M-3 Stuart, US manufacture, is the only tank (light) that the Colombian Army has owned in all its history. The 12 units purchased at the end of WWII, were assigned to the Colombian Cavalry for various decades. Today, they have been retired and assigned as "Gate Guards" in some units. Soon, they Colombian Army hopes to acquire a modern war tank (MBT).*



*This model is an M8 Greyhound equipped with a Maxon anti-aircraft turret with capacity for four 12.7 mm (.50) M2HB. The Colombian Army kept them in service until recently, as anti-aircraft support for mechanized units. They have already been retired from the service, but some are in reserve. The Colombian Military Forces lack good anti-aircraft systems. This is one of its most pressing needs for the future.*

The support weapons of the Colombian Army's units include heavy machine guns (7,62 mm.), model M-2HB/QCB, 40 mm. machine guns Mk-19, 60 mm. mortars of various brands and models (there is one of national design and manufacture), 81 mm. mortars of various brands and models. The Army still owns a lot of anti-tank recoilless canons, 106 mm. M40A1 for anti-tank firing, there are also modern weapons such as the ATGW/TOW, from the US, and the Spike from Israel. Finally, the heavy precision rifle, Barrett model, in different versions.

The above is all common in the Colombian Army. Following, I describe in detail some peculiarities inherent to each military specialty.

### *Infantry*

The mechanized infantry is equipped with tracked armored vehicles M-113A2+, and wheeled vehicles 8x8 LAV-III. They are supported by TOW anti-tank missile launchers mounted on armored HMMWV. The Army owns various versions of M-35 tactical trucks, however, the greatest amount of trucks used are of civilian origin of various brands and models. In addition, they are painted in bright colors, to confuse rebels and terrorists who would not know the trucks were transporting troops until it was too late. It is foreseeable that now that the Army wishes to increase deterrence capabilities, the ratio between civilian trucks and tactical trucks might be inverted.



*The EE-9 Cascavel, is the main combat vehicle of the Colombian Army. It is generally kept in good condition and has the support of the Brazilian Army for instruction and training. In the photograph, there is a non-commissioned officer from the Brazilian Army who worked as instructor at the Colombian Army's Cavalry School (ESCAB).*

### *Cavalry*

The “heavy” cavalry squadrons are equipped with the Engesa EE-9 Cascavel and the E-11 Urutu, of Brazilian manufacture and the ASV M-1117 from the United States. The “light” cavalry squadrons are equipped with different versions of the US HMMWV and with M-462 from Israel.

Support for the cavalry is provided by Spike anti-tank missile launchers mounted on armored HMMWVs. To operate in the plains, the Colombian Army has squadrons on horse. In these areas we fight against the stealing of cattle and contraband.

Light vehicles known as Cobra have been manufactured nationally. The basic model, because of its characteristics, would equip units of motorized reconnaissance. A dozen of different versions of the Cobra have already been manufactured.

The maintenance battalion (BAMAN) is assembling Bufalo armored vehicles, based on the HMMWV, in which an armored capsule is installed to protect the crew. These vehicles transport support weapons in a pedestal located on the top part.



*The modern and the traditional. In the picture a Cavalry officer on horseback facing the modern Colombian Cavalry's ASV M-1117. This picture was taken at the Cavalry School (ESCAB) in Bogota. Next to it is the Army's Equestrian School, where they take pride in maintaining the traditions.*

### *Artillery*

The Colombian Army has 120 mm, Brant AM-50 mortars of French manufacture and HY-12 of Turkish manufacture (the latter with bored barrels). They also own 105 mm. Howitzers, models M-101A1/A2, manufactured by the US, and the French LG-1 Mk3. The most powerful tubular artillery is the 155 mm. howitzer, APU-SBT, manufactured by Spain. A prototype of self-propelled

artillery has been developed, through the integration of a heavy truck, an LG-1MK3 howitzer and its navigation and firing systems. This prototype is called "Joya" and there are plans to manufacture six to equip a self-propelled artillery battery.

Colombia owns some laser guided, Nimrod missile launch units from Israel and with a range of 28 kilometers, capable of receiving highly explosive warheads or anti-tanks. They can be guided to the target by a ground laser or by an aircraft. The Nimrods are assigned to the Artillery.

One of the versions of the Cobra vehicle, mentioned above, is equipped with ground-ground 70 mm. rocket launchers. It has been successfully tested and the Colombian Army is contemplating ordering some units.



*Aerial picture that shows three platoons of the Colombian Cavalry, the first one is made up of Brazilian vehicles, Cascavel and Urutú, the second one by US ASV M-1117, and the third platoon is a mounted Cavalry.*

### ***Military Engineers***

Military engineers in Colombia are dedicated to three strategic activities: On the one hand they are contributing to the development of the country via building roads and bridges. On the other hand, they are training and equipping for natural disasters, and they are also working in the humanitarian demining. For these three functions they have been conveniently equipped with heavy machinery for construction, equipment for emergencies and disaster and with manual and mechanical demining materiel.

### *Military Communications*

The Communications Brigade has an assembly plant of Tadiran military radios. Tadiran is an Israeli company with whom Colombia has negotiated the possibility of manufacturing this equipment in Colombia. There is also a plant for manufacturing disposable batteries for military radios. This specialty also includes the topic of electronic warfare. Colombia has sophisticated ground and airborne equipment for goniometry (detection and localization of emissions).

### *Military Intelligence*

This specialty is very advanced in Colombia, not only because of its doctrine, but also because of its capabilities and the ownership of sophisticated equipment for surveillance, interception, and control. They usually work closely with personnel from Communications and Army Aviation, while others gather SIGINT and IMINT. Military Intelligence integrates and interprets the data, complementing it with the HUMINT information it has been able to gather. The greatest recent operational successes are due to this specialty.



*National prototype of the ASV M-1117 with a special armored turret, with a 20 mm. cannon and a FLIR device. The Cavalry would like to increase the firepower of the M-1117.*

### *Army Aviation*

Equipped with sophisticated equipment, the Aviation of the Colombian Army owns drones, RQ-11 Raven, and even assault helicopters UG-60i that have the most modern electronics. They also have UH-60L, Mil Mi-17 and Huey II helicopters as well as transport aircraft of different capabilities, the most important the Antonov An-32. There is also the capability to offer basic training to fixed wing crews, however, rotary aircraft crews are trained at the Helicopter School for the

Armed Forces, which relies on the Colombian Air Force. The Army Aviation has various bases all over the country, the main one is Fort Tolémaida, in the center of the country.

### *Special Forces*

While the Colombian Army's Special Forces have been in existence for various decades, it was not until 2017 that they were assigned as an independent specialty, in which someone can make a career. This legal aspect was also accompanied by a restructuring of the units, which made possible the Special Forces Division.



*M-113A2+ of the Colombian Army. From the image you can see they are in perfect condition. These vehicles are with the Mechanized Infantry in the northern part of the country. The modernizations made them lose their amphibious capability. The only armored amphibious vehicles that the Colombian Army now owns are the EE-11 Urutú.*

## Main Capabilities of the Colombian Army

- Highly capable for air and air assault operations.
- Highly capable to operate in the jungle with little logistical support.
- Fully capable for night operations.
- Large force of professional soldiers (with long-term contracts).
- Experienced personnel in irregular war.

- Capable of moving on short notice a rapid deployment force anywhere in the country.
- Capable of providing support to the National Police's anti-drug operations.
- Capable of providing security in the national highways through armored vehicles, under the "Plan Meteoro".
- Commanders can carry out Joint Operations (with other military Forces), coordinated (with the participation of the National Police) and interagency (including other state organizations, such as the Public Prosecutor).
- Use of simulators for different scenarios and weapons. We are developing the capability to manufacture even more complex simulators in the country.
- The use of the Cessna Grand Caravan C-208 has been standardized throughout the institutions that depend on the Ministry of Defense as it is considered a very adaptable aircraft. A simulator was developed in Colombia.
- The use of the Sikorsky UH-60/S-70 helicopters has been standardized throughout the different institutions that depend on the Ministry of Defense. It is possible that the Navy will also acquire them in the future in an on-board version. A system of logistics, maintenance, and training has been developed for these helicopters.
- Capability to provide support for the nation's development through security, the work of engineers and integrated action.



*LG-1 105 mm. howitzer, being towed by M-462 Abir vehicles. The Artillery Batteries with these weapons have modern systems of firing control, data links and target acquisition. However, they are considered extremely light and the crew is unprotected when facing counter fire, therefore Colombia needs self-propelled artillery weapons.*

## Short and Medium-Term Needs

- Maintain the current number of troops, we need to provide for them the materials required to clothe, equip and feed them.
- There is an interest in acquiring tanks (MBT) and all the necessary logistics.
- There is an interest in acquiring armored vehicles that complement the MBTs.
- There is an interest in acquiring a system of self-propelled artillery.
- We need to acquire on a regular basis various supplies and spare parts to maintain the fleet of ground vehicles (armored, tactical, and administrative) that the Army uses. These include: tires, batteries, tents, and spare parts, which are renewed according to a pre-established cycle.
- We expect that the trucks of civilian manufacture that the Army uses, which are the majority, will be replaced by tactical military trucks.
- We need to acquire spares and services to provide maintenance to the fleet of aircraft used by the Army, which includes helicopters and aircraft. We must remember that the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters are used by the Army, Air Force, and the Police. The country has more than 100 of these helicopters in service.
- The end of the shelf life of the RPG-22 light anti-tank rocket launchers compels us to replace them.
- There is an interest to acquire the capability of manufacturing rockets, to manufacture air-ground, ground-ground, anti-tank rockets, and eventually missiles.
- We are interested in developing the Drone industry.
- There is an urgent need to acquire air defense systems, but until now there has not been a political interest to pursue this acquisition.
- The Colombian Army has been constantly acquiring Bailey-type (Acrow) bridges, to replace the bridges destroyed by rebels or by natural disasters.
- The Colombian Army has been creating and strengthening units for natural disasters for which they constantly require better, special, and more modern equipment.



*Cobra is a vehicle designed and manufactured nationally, this a multiple rocket launcher 70 mm. version. This version has been widely tested and has given excellent results. We hope the Colombian Army purchases them to equip artillery units.*

## Final Comments

The Colombian Army is in the process of transformation and modernization. This makes it necessary to acquire new technologies to bring it to international standards, especially if we plan to participate in multinational operations abroad and for which interoperability is important.

In this sense, Colombia is an important market for companies in the defense sector worldwide, since there are opportunities to sell products and services that support the modernization process of the Colombian Military Forces.

On the other hand, the Colombian Ministry of Defense is trying to strengthen the nation's military Industry and is open to negotiations which include the incorporation of new technologies, establishing commercial alliances, strategic associations and, in general, any agreement that prompts national companies in the defense sector and allows them to become important actors in the international arena. □



*The most modern aircraft in Colombia's Army Aviation is the S-70i. It has the most advanced electronics for navigation and self-testing. Aircraft like these allow the Colombia Army to develop its capabilities for air assault.*

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