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E.O. 13526, SECTION 5.3(b)(3)

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*PHUM*  
*PHS - paramilitary*  
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~~SECRET~~ SECTION 01 OF 02 [redacted]

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SERIAL: (U) [redacted]

COUNTRY: (U) COLOMBIA (CO).

SUBJ: [redacted] UPDATE ON COLOMBIAN ARMY  
RELATIONS WITH PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATIONS (U)

WARNING: (U) THIS IS AN INFORMATION REPORT, NOT  
FINALLY EVALUATED INTELLIGENCE. REPORT CLASSIFIED  
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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

DOI: (U) 961008.

[redacted]

**E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)(d)**

SUMMARY: ~~(S)~~ REPORT REVIEWS THE CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECT  
OF ARMY RELATIONS WITH PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATIONS. THERE  
IS NO KNOWN NATIONAL-LEVEL CONNECTION BETWEEN THE ARMY  
AND THESE GROUPS. LOCAL COMMANDERS OFTEN FIND IT  
FOOLHARDY NOT TO MAINTAIN A DIALOGUE WITH THESE GROUPS.

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TEXT: 1. ~~(S)~~ THERE IS NO KNOWN OFFICIAL CONNECTION  
BETWEEN THE COLOMBIAN ARMY (COLAR) AND THE VARIOUS  
PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATIONS WHICH OPERATE THROUGHOUT PARTS  
OF COLOMBIA. NEVERTHELESS, AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, COLAR  
COMMANDERS OFTEN ENTER INTO DISCREET MARRIAGES OF  
CONVENIENCE WITH THESE GROUPS IN ORDER TO OBTAIN  
IMPORTANT INFORMATION REGARDING ONGOING GUERRILLA  
ACTIVITY OCCURRING IN THEIR AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY.  
LOCAL COMMANDERS GENERALLY FIND IT FOOLHARDY NOT TO  
MAINTAIN A DIALOGUE WITH THESE GROUPS.

2. ~~(S)~~ DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS  
(CONSIDERED "GOOD"—USUALLY CONTROLLED BY WEALTHY LAND-  
OWNERS) AND PARAMILITARY GROUPS (CONSIDERED "BAD"—  
USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH NARCOTRAFFICKING OR OTHER ILLEGAL  
ACTIVITY) IS OFTEN BLURRED. ALTHOUGH BOTH GROUPS ARE  
ILLEGAL, THEY OFTEN OPERATE QUIETLY AND EFFECTIVELY TO  
"ELIMINATE" GUERRILLA ACTIVITY IN THEIR AREAS.

[redacted] BEING FROM  
THE LOCAL AREA, MEMBERS OF SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS KNOW WHO

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THE "SUSPICIOUS OUTSIDERS" ARE, AND TARGET THEM ACCORDINGLY. THESE GROUPS ARE OFTEN MORE EFFECTIVE IN ELIMINATING GUERRILLA ACTIVITY THAN THE COLAR BECAUSE OF THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF WHO THE "BAD GUYS" ARE.)

3. (S) LOCAL COLAR COMMANDERS USUALLY MEET DISCREETLY WITH MEMBERS OF THESE GROUPS. BECAUSE OF THESE DISCREET, LOCAL MEETINGS, THERE IS LITTLE FEAR BY EITHER SIDE OF THE ASSOCIATION BECOMING KNOWN PUBLICLY KNOWN ("MAKING THE NEWSPAPER"): BOTH PARTIES CAN CLAIM IGNORANCE OF ANY OFFICIAL ASSOCIATION. ALL PARTIES INVOLVED ARE AWARE THAT DUE TO THE ILLEGAL NATURE OF THESE GROUPS THE MILITARY CANNOT OPENLY ASSOCIATE WITH THEM.

4. (S) MEANWHILE, THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE'S (MOD) "CONVIVIR" PROGRAM, WHICH ORGANIZES AND REGISTERS "SECURITY COOPERATIVES," CONTINUES TO BE LESS SUCCESSFUL IN ITS COUNTERGUERRILLA EFFORTS THAN NON-MOD-AFFILIATED SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS. THE STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH CONVIVIR'S DIRECT ASSOCIATION WITH THE MOD DETRACTS FROM ITS EFFECTIVENESS IN COMBATTING GUERRILLAS. THIS STIGMA ARISES FROM BEING OPENLY AFFILIATED WITH THE MOD. BECAUSE OF THIS AFFILIATION, CONVIVIR GROUPS ARE UNDER GREATER PUBLIC SCRUTINY/RESTRAINT THAN NON-MOD-AFFILIATED SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS.

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2. (U) THIS SOURCE IS AVAILABLE FOR FURTHER CONTACT.

[REDACTED]

4. (S)

[REDACTED] ALTHOUGH ALL OFFICERS ARE AWARE IT IS ILLEGAL TO ASSOCIATE WITH THEM, MOST WOULD RATHER QUIETLY COOPERATE WITH THESE GROUPS, WHICH USUALLY SHARE THE OBJECTIVE OF ELIMINATING GUERRILLA ACTIVITY, THAN IGNORE THEM. MOST COLAR OFFICERS ACKNOWLEDGE THAT INTERACTING WITH A PARAMILITARY GROUP CAN BE A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD. SOME PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATIONS ARE

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DOMINATED BY INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN NARCOTRAFFICKING AND OTHER ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES. MOST COLAR OFFICERS CLAIM THEY WOULD NEVER ASSOCIATE WITH GROUPS INVOLVED IN THESE TYPES OF ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES.

5. (S) EMBASSY COMMENT. THIS IS AN INFORMED AND HONEST ASSESSMENT OF AN AMORPHOUS ISSUE WHICH IS EQUALLY DISTURBING AND HARD TO NAIL DOWN. PROFESSIONAL MILITARY DOCTRINE MAY BE TO KEEP THE PARAMILITARIES AT ARMS LENGTH, BUT THE REALITY IS OVERWHELMINGLY OTHERWISE — AND EVERYBODY INCLUDING THE TOP BRASS KNOWS IT. THE CLAIMED DENIABILITY ATTAINED BY THIS HOLLOW CHARADE IS NOT WORTH A TIN NICKEL, AND WE SHOULD GIVE IT SCANT CREDENCE. OFTEN THE PARAMILITARIES ARE EITHER PART-TIME NARCOTRAFFICKERS THEMSELVES, LIKE THE INFAMOUS CASTANO BROTHERS RUNNING THE AUTO DEFENSAS DE URABA Y CORDOBA, OR BANKROLLED BY RICH LANDOWNERS WHO INCLUDE NARCOTRAFFICKERS. WHILE AN UNSAVORY LOT, BY MOST ACCOUNTS THE PARAMILITARIES ARE ETCHING OUT A GROWING NICHE IN THE FOOD CHAIN OF VIOLENCE FOR ONE REASON — FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THOSE WHO FINANCE THEM AND MANY

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OF THOSE WHO LIVE WHERE THEY OPERATE, PARAMILITARIES FILL A VICIOUS VACUUM. THEY WORK. THEY HAVE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS; THEY CAN SPOT (LIKELY) GUERRILLA SUPPORTERS AND TAKE RUTHLESS ACTION (TO THE DESPAIR OF THE INNOCENT ALONG WITH THE GUILTY) INSTEAD OF HUNKERING DOWN TO SERVE OUT THEIR TOURS AND GO HOME; THEY ARE TOO WELL PAID AND TOO LOCALLY INVESTED TO CUT AND RUN WHEN THINGS GET HOT. ONE CANNOT CONDONE THE PARAMILITARIES FOR A SECOND, AND WE DO NOT. BUT OVER HALF OF THE COUNTRY'S 1,025 MUNICIPALITIES ARE ALREADY SUBJECT TO PERMANENT GUERRILLA PRESSURE TO ONE DEGREE OR ANOTHER, AND THE SITUATION IS DETERIORATING. WHOEVER NEEDS AND CAN AFFORD A PRIVATE ARMY WILL BUY ONE, ARM IT, AND GIVE IT THE "FLEXIBILITY" TO BE PROFITABLE. UNTIL THE URBAN-BASED POLITICAL CLASS MARSHALS THE WILL TO INVEST IN COMMUNITY-ROOTED — BUT NATIONALLY ACCOUNTABLE — LOCAL SECURITY FORCES, THIS WILL NOT CHANGE. IN THE MEANTIME, THE GUERRILLA PROBLEM OF FOUR DECADES STANDING WILL NOT GO AWAY.

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