

# Colombia

## De-mining in Micoahumado: from civil resistance to local negotiation with the ELN

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On 2 February 2005, the inhabitants of Micoahumado village organised a traditional *cabalgata* celebration – a march with horses. It was attended by community and state representatives, as well as members of the media, the Catholic Church, regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the international NGO Geneva Call. The event celebrated the completion of “the process of social and community de-mining” of the main road, the secondary roads and access routes leading to Micoahumado, by the National Liberation Army (ELN). The village is an administrative subdivision (*corregimiento*) of Morales municipality in the department of Bolívar, north-central Colombia [see map]. It is also part of the geographic region of Magdalena Medio, which stretches across a number of departments, and encompasses the Magdalena River, the biggest in Colombia.

The process – also known as humanitarian de-mining – began after a request by the community to the ELN to de-mine the area, and nearly two years of negotiations. It involved multiple interactions between the community, national and international NGOs, armed actors, and the government. With the support of external actors, the community organised to confront and negotiate with different armed actors, including paramilitary and guerrilla groups.

This article is based on research carried out by the authors as part of CINEP's efforts to document the Micoahumado experience. The research, conducted between 2010 and 2015, included several interviews, two workshops and various peace events involving community leaders and members of supporting organisations.

### The ELN and Micoahumado

Contemporary armed conflict in Colombia began in the 1960s with the emergence of two major guerrilla groups – the ELN and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). The other main conflict parties include the Colombian Army and police forces, and paramilitary groups under the umbrella of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). After two decades of low intensity conflict, the violence escalated in the 1980s and reached its peak in the late 1990s.

As a Marxist pro-Cuban group, the ELN was inspired by tactics used by guerrillas led by Fidel Castro in the 1950s in the Sierra Maestra mountain range of Cuba. It had ideological ties with Cuba, as well as Christian roots inspired by liberation theology and notions of social justice. The group has included several priests and religious actors, such as General Commander Manuel Pérez (also known as *El Cura Pérez* – “Pérez the Priest”), and Camilo Torres, who participated in socialist movements before joining the ELN in 1965. The ELN had an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 members at the height of the movement in the 1990s; in 2015 it is estimated to have 1,500 to 2,000 members.

The greatest escalation of violence in Colombia coincided with negotiations between the government and the FARC from 1999–2002. While peace talks developed in a demilitarised zone in El Caguán in the south of the country, armed conflict intensified in the north. During this time the paramilitary AUC concentrated its efforts on attacking areas controlled by the ELN in the Magdalena Medio region, including villages like Micoahumado, located in the Serranía de San Lucas mountain range.

Given its central location and wealth of natural resources, the Serranía de San Lucas became one of the country's most disputed regions, more so after the improvement of the Magdalena Medio Highway during the 1980s, which connected northern and central parts of the country.

The state has historically been absent from the region, with little institutional provision of water, education or health care. The ELN, in many cases with support from the population, maintained social and military control of various municipalities and subdivisions of Serranía de San Lucas and Magdalena Medio. Communities and armed groups developed strong relationships, and individual guerrillas had personal links to inhabitants as family, friends and neighbours. Direct communication between the community and the ELN was therefore normally possible, although the community would look to the Church to help resolve disputes.

The region also has particular political, military and historic significance for the ELN as one of the main areas where the group rebuilt itself in the 1980s after it was militarily devastated in the 1970s. The group then expanded its use of anti-personnel mines as a way of defending territory.

"The elenos [ELN] have played a central role in everyday life in the region. They helped to build the paths and the roads, as well as the soccer field, the health centre and schools, with their own machinery. They also defended the local population from the paramilitary onslaught, which would have been worse without their protection"  
*Interview with a community leader, 2010*

#### Escalation of violence in Micoahumado

There were two cycles of heightened armed conflict in Micoahumado. From 1985–95 the army conducted sporadic counter-insurgency operations in the village. The population was stigmatised as supporters of the guerrillas and experienced a variety of repressive measures. Then, between 1998 and 2003, there was a territorial dispute between the paramilitary AUC's Central Bolivar Block (BCB) and the ELN's José Solano Sepúlveda Front. As part of their broad strategy to gain territorial control in southern Bolivar, the paramilitaries launched a series of raids to establish operational bases in a number of the region's municipalities and towns.

Between 1998 and 2002, Micoahumado was subject to a series of attacks by paramilitaries in an attempt to take control of the zone from the ELN. At the peak of the fighting in 2001–02, the local community started to organise in response to the brutality of paramilitary violence. The BCB attacked the civilian population in order to reach the guerrillas, often with the tacit consent of the army. Many families and most community leaders had to abandon their homes for fear of being charged as accomplices of the guerrillas.

On 2 December 2002, the BCB launched its most severe attack. The population was caught in the crossfire between the paramilitaries and the ELN. Roadblocks limited access to food, medical aid and drinking water as both sides sought to entrench themselves in the village. Paramilitaries established themselves in the school, the sports arenas, and other public places, as well as people's homes. The ELN mined water

supply routes to force the population to leave so they could confront the paramilitaries directly.

#### The community dialogue commission

Adversity and violence in Micoahumado ultimately led to community organisation. The community faced an apparent dilemma: either to join one or other of the groups, inviting direct involvement in the confrontation; or to oppose both, almost certainly provoking their own displacement. Instead, they opted for a third alternative: to declare their "civil disobedience" – refusing to support any of the armed actors, assuming a nonviolent stance, and defending a proposal for peace, coexistence and security.

On 14 December 2002, the inhabitants of Micoahumado and representatives of the local Catholic Church held a meeting on the village soccer field. The new priest of the Diocese of Magangué, Fr. Joaquin Mayorga, and the Director of the Peace and Development Programme of Magdalena Medio (PDPMM), Fr. Francisco De Roux, who had begun to provide support to Micoahumado, also attended.

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The participants voted to remain in the village rather than abandon it, as had happened previously. The assembly elected a dialogue commission made up of eight to ten people, with equal representation of men and women. Their mission was to talk to the paramilitaries and guerrillas to resolve issues such as drug trafficking and de-mining. Because many previous community leaders had been accused of collaboration with the ELN and forced to leave, it was vital that the new commission remain anonymous. At the same time each commissioner also had to be an active member of the community – an evangelical pastor or teacher, for example.

The first round of negotiations began in the middle of armed confrontation. The commission initiated contact with the ELN through the *milicianos* (militias) present in the village and convened a meeting with guerrilla commanders positioned in the mountains.

The paramilitaries moved away from the centre of the village to the neighbouring hills. However, according to a community leader, this was "when the worst fighting started".

Intense violence continued through Christmas 2002 and the New Year, "which kept us boarded up in our houses from 24 to 31 December. We couldn't even poke our heads out." After this, the commission negotiated with the paramilitaries to withdraw from Micoahumado and continued dialogue



An ELN guerrilla de-mining in Micoahumado in January 2005 // © Peace and Development Program in Magdalena Medio

with the ELN to protect the population from crossfire. “On 17 January [2003], the paramilitaries left with just 150 men, after they had arrived with 600 [...] After that, they never came back” (*interview with community leader, 2010*). The ELN then returned to Micoahumado in order to maintain control of the area.

Community leaders’ accounts reveal the risks involved in engaging with all sides in the middle of armed confrontation. They had to be direct and clear with each party and emphasise the unity and resolve of the community. Although both the ELN and the paramilitaries broadly accepted the community’s proposal to avoid involving the population in the confrontation, adherence to this was not constant, and was dependent on the armed actors’ strategic interests vis-à-vis their adversary a particular moments.

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With the withdrawal of the paramilitaries, however, the army intensified aggression against the population. The community insisted the guerrillas abide by previous agreements and not involve the community in the confrontation. The ELN accepted this and decreased their presence. Encouraged by this progress, on 14 March 2003, the community created the Popular Constituent Assembly of Micoahumado as a humanitarian space for “life and peace”. The Assembly was representative of the whole territory – in the preceding weeks 100 delegates drawn from every village in the administrative subdivision had been selected to sit on it.

The Assembly became the community’s main organisational structure, responsible for all major decisions. It ratified the dialogue commission and created further commissions to deal with other community issues. The Assembly met to prepare for the dialogues with the armed groups, defining the main topics to be addressed by the commission and to establish criteria for the commission to take decisions autonomously during the talks. After each round, the results of the dialogues were discussed and ratified by the Assembly.

The Assembly worked collectively, and no one person exercised more power than another. A religious dimension was always present: meetings started with a Bible reading and ecumenical prayer. Both the Assembly and the commission were driven by the slogan: “In defence of a territory for life, without coca, without military operations, without camps, without mines, with autonomy and freedom”. The issue of de-mining was central to their dialogues with the ELN.

## De-mining begins

A second round of negotiations between the communities and the *elenos* focused on de-mining and took place throughout 2003–04, at specific times and under specific conditions. A guerrilla envoy would announce when the dialogue commission could go up the mountain to talk, and the community would immediately tell Frs. de Roux and Mayorga, who would accompany the commission.

Community leaders attest that the guerrillas at first maintained their position on landmines: “they are what protects us, so we cannot remove them”. The community leaders insisted that they had learned from the ELN how to make demands from the state, and now they had to make demands of the ELN.

On 28 December 2004, after two years of protracted efforts and negotiations with the dialogue commission, the Central Committee of the ELN announced through the Luis Solano Sepúlveda Front its decision to unilaterally de-mine some key roads: from the urban centre of the Municipality of Morales to the administrative subdivision of Micoahumado, and from there to the villages of La Caoba and La Guácima, as well as some secondary roads and paths. The ELN also agreed:

1. not to enter the village in uniform and with weapons
2. to return goods taken from the community as punishment: land, cattle and working tools
3. to cease kidnappings and retentions
4. not to re-mine the territory.

By 20 January 2005, the territory was held to be safe for transit. This event was a historical milestone for Micoahumado. A large part of the community was involved in verifying the de-mining process, given that there was no technical verification either by the government or by national or international NGOs.

The Micoahumado community’s commitment to impartiality vis-à-vis the different armed actors and its refusal to collaborate with any of the groups was key to the ELN’s willingness to accept and comply with the de-mining request. The ELN recognised that its own security was in large part due to the population’s decision to neither denounce the group nor support other armed actors.

## National and international support

Since the escalation of conflict in 1998, dialogue with specific armed groups, including the ELN and FARC, without the authorisation of the state has been illegal under Colombian law. However, the state accepted “pastoral dialogues” whereby members of the Catholic Church (bishops and priests) reached out to guerrilla and paramilitary groups to ensure minimal security for communities or to mediate the release of kidnap victims. The pastoral dialogues, which were developed by the Church across the country, offered a back channel for engagement and were influential with all groups.

When members of the Micoahumado dialogue commission initiated talks with the ELN, they would ask a priest to accompany them so they could be “covered” by the pastoral dialogue provision. The presence of religious leaders during moments of fierce confrontation between the ELN and AUC also provided immediate security to commission members

from the armed actors. Fr. de Roux and the Dioceses played a critical and coordinated mediation role in the advancement of dialogue with the ELN and helped to present the community’s demands clearly to the guerrillas. They also coordinated peace missions to Micoahumado in February 2003 to train and strengthen the assembly and dialogue commissions, and were supported by REDEPAZ (the National Network for Peace).

National organisations were also important in supporting and drawing attention to the dialogue initiative. These included national church networks; human rights and humanitarian groups such as the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), the Colombian Campaign against Mines, and the Popular Women’s Organisation (OFP); as well regional state bodies such as the Ombudsman Office in Magdalena Medio, the local administration of Morales and the regional administration of Bolívar.

International organisations provided similar support by highlighting the issue and endorsing the initiative, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN Refugee Agency. Geneva Call, which is committed to engaging non-state armed actors to improve civilian protection in armed conflicts, played a secondary but important role, offering technical advice and encouraging the government to allow the process. It proposed joint de-mining by the guerrillas and the armed forces, which the latter rejected.

“After a two-day journey we met with the guerrillas on 17 December of 2002, unbeknownst to the paramilitaries. In La Guásima they said to us: we will clear the water supply of mines, we’ll let food come in, but with the condition that the “paras” [paramilitaries] leave the centre of the village. Then the same commission decided to talk to the paras. The paras decided to accept”

*Interview with a community leader, 2010*

## The lack of state recognition

One of the most difficult aspects of the de-mining process was the relationship between the leaders of Micoahumado and the Colombian State. Towards the end of 2003, the dialogue commission travelled to Bogotá to inform the Vice-President and Peace Commissioner, Luis Carlos Restrepo, of the harassment they faced from the army. The government refused the community’s request for official support because, as the Peace Commissioner pointed out, the ELN continued to plant landmines in other areas of the country.

“ **Faced with high levels of violence and insecurity, the [de-mining] process in Micoahumado was not only empowering for the population but also showed a way to build peace from below with wider social participation”**





The army also questioned the ELN's commitment to de-mining and raised doubts about the community's impartiality. It continued to harass the population. Nevertheless, specific units of the army in the area allowed ELN de-mining activities as long as they did not undermine military operations.

The director of the national landmine observatory acknowledged the importance of the process and the need to provide technical support for verification, but could not act against government decisions. The state's solution was to provide unofficial support without granting administrative

certification for de-mining activities; this made the process more complex and difficult, although paradoxically more autonomous and sustainable in the long term.

The government's reaction suggests that, at the national level, the logic of armed conflict determined institutional decisions and undermined the ability of local actors to promote security and peace within their communities. The potential role of the state was also limited by the ELN's mistrust of official participation in the process. The group insisted on carrying out

the de-mining process itself and would not allow the armed forces access to the zone.

Faced with these tensions, the local population insisted on describing their interactions with the ELN as “social and pastoral dialogues”, highlighting that their actions were independent of any armed group and supported by the Church. In order to avoid official and international language, the community called the process “social and community de-mining” instead of “humanitarian de-mining”. Their objective was to emphasise a bottom-up process that had been carried out after the refusal of official support.

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#### **Sustained impact of the Micoahumado model**

In the face of high levels of violence and insecurity, the process in Micoahumado was empowering for the population and demonstrated a bottom-up approach to building peace with broad social participation. The community’s social organisation (the Popular Constituent Assembly) developed as an effective conflict resolution mechanism. Some peace activists have called the Micoahumado experience a de-mining process for “life and development”. It allowed, for example, communication and transportation between different parts of the municipality, and the resumption of economic activity including cultivation

of agriculture and its export out of the region. Since 2005 there have not been any armed confrontations in the village.

The Micoahumado experience held symbolic meaning for other peace initiatives. For example, members of the Micoahumado community shared experiences with counterparts in Samaniego (in the department of Nariño), and subsequently, representatives of Samaniego travelled to Havana, Cuba, during exploratory talks between the ELN and the Colombian government to discuss the de-mining of their territories.

Key factors in the development and sustenance of the initiative included the ability to maintain momentum in the midst of continuing armed conflict and a refusal to compromise with armed actors. The community also learned the importance of external support as government policy prioritised national strategic objectives over local needs. The community required the backing of regional, national and international organisations to strengthen its ability to negotiate with both government and “illegal” armed groups. Above all, it was essential for the community to be consistent in its interactions with different actors in order to maintain trust and legitimacy in their dialogues.

De-mining is a key issue in formal negotiation discussions in the country. It has been made one of the main topics in talks in Havana between the FARC and Colombian government as a way to de-escalate the armed confrontation. It is likely to feature prominently in any talks between the ELN and the government. Colombian civil society has been vocal in ensuring the issue is on the table and has been pushing to be involved in any de-mining process that takes place. While de-mining can act as a confidence-building measure between conflict parties, de-mining as a process also recognises the effects of violence on the population and its role in overcoming conflict. The participation of local communities will be crucial to ensure a peace agreement has broad societal support and can be implemented in practice, as well as to ensure that any post-conflict peacebuilding strategy is feasible.