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EXPLAINING LOCAL FORCES: EVERYONE EXCEPT NEPAL HAS THEM

Local forces are an absolute requirement in restoration of legitimate government writ. This is true, as explained decades ago by T.E. Lawrence (he “of Arabia”), from the insurgent standpoint, in Chapter XXXIII of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. It all boiled down to numbers, time and space.

Put in simplest terms: The insurgents can choose the time and place to strike. The state can never field adequate numbers of full-time personnel to provide adequate security for the population. This can only be done by involving the population in their own defense.

All states involved in situations such as now afflict Nepal have been forced to use temporary, variously armed and equipped, local forces. They are nothing more than what in many Western countries is called “neighborhood watch.” (My neighborhood has one!)

It is significant that international critics of local defense as a concept, human rights groups in particular, have gone to extreme lengths to portray it as vigilante or death squad activity. To this end, reports issued routinely distort historical reality in an effort to mobilize donor and government opposition to victims’ efforts to defend themselves.

This new colonialism necessarily preys upon the weak, since it is non-Western states lacking capacity that find themselves facing the sort of challenge where local defense is necessary. Part and parcel of the human rights campaign is a systematic effort to portray the security forces as the abusers, the insurgents or terrorists as a necessary consequence, a legitimate consequence even, of state brutality and insensitivity.

Colombian Example

No state has suffered more abuse in this regard than Colombia. Yet it has, under its present democratic government, the administration of President Alvaro Uribe (2002-06),

made significant strides. Through its “Democratic Security” strategy, it has been able to return to Colombians a measure of personal and institutional security. Local forces have been an important part of the campaign.

Colombian Army (COLAR) units (as well as the far fewer Marine units) are deployed throughout the country in a national grid, supported by the air force (FAC) and navy (ARC). The country is covered by seven COLAR divisions comprised of 18 maneuver brigades of varying numbers of battalions of all arms (an eighth, division-sized force is the national reaction force, FUDRA; a further division-sized Joint Task Force is deployed in operations southeast of Bogota). These units conduct continuous operations within their assigned sectors.

Immediate reaction capabilities are organic to every division and brigade, because each has assigned to it one or more counter-guerrilla battalions (BCG, effectively light infantry brigades). Additionally, divisions have organic Mobile Brigades (BRIM) comprised of 4 x BCG each. BCG are approximately 40% the strength of a normal battalion and are organized and equipped to be self-sustaining.

Other formations complement the actions of the divisions and brigades. Each division, for example, has assigned to it urban commando units, as well as elite urban reaction strike teams. Likewise, a task-organized “Plan Meteor” is in reality an armored brigade specifically responsible for clearing the transportation network nationwide; though a CG COLAR asset, its units are OPCON (i.e., under operational control) to the divisions.

Also OPCON are special units (PEEV) to safeguard critical infrastructure (they are identical to regular COLAR units, in the fashion of units of India’s Central Industrial Security Force, CISF, but unlike CISF are actual army units with a specialized mission).

Until recently, the key missing component was local defense. This shortcoming has been rectified during the past two years by use of a 1940s law that allows draftees, who comprise approximately two-thirds of COLAR, to be assigned to local defense units permanently assigned in towns and villages. The units themselves -- more than 600 platoons (~40 men each) have been fielded, with more being stood up -- are part of the regular forces, either COLAR or Marines (police are not at present involved).

Key personnel are regulars, and each platoon is a part of the structure of a COLAR/Marine battalion. Platoons are armed, equipped, and run as a battalion asset.

Two names are presently in use for these formations, the most widespread being “Peasant Platoons,” the other “Home Guards” (or, literally translated, “soldiers of the village”). They were stood up very rapidly, with localities required to furnish temporary housing while the particulars were sorted out.

Members, being a part of the security forces, receive the same training and weapons/equipment, and are under the same regulations. Their primary duty is to be back-up for the local police and to conduct local security operations, especially of point

targets and the transportation network. They live in barracks but remain in their local area. Plans are afoot to augment them with regional forces; i.e., platoons that serve within an entire county (*municipio*) or larger area.

Allowing for the usual problems inherent to any such effort, the program has been very successful. Aside from the mundane (e.g. obtaining adequate barracks), the most pressing concern has not been the expected – i.e., developing principles for employment – rather finding sufficient numbers from the regular forces to fill the numerous leadership positions. Since abbreviated Officer Candidate School (OCS) programs have historically not worked well in Colombia (in contrast to the experience of the American armed forces), the immediate solution has been to shorten time spent at the military academy, with cadets graduated early to become platoon leaders.

Teething issues aside, the result has been to give the security forces local presence within a disciplined framework. All platoons are fielded as components of regular forces, so they are integrated into normal planning considerations (e.g. of reinforcement). To date, none have been overrun or even severely tested.

Neither have there been any serious problems of discipline or adherence to human rights standards. What they have done is to boost local security and become important generators of intelligence.

Comparisons With Selected Foreign Experiences

- *United Kingdom – Northern Ireland (Ulster)*

In its particulars, the Colombian use of local forces is closest to that of the United Kingdom as practiced in Northern Ireland (i.e. Ulster). There, the British position was built upon local capacity in a manner that was ill-understood by observers in general and the media.

In the 1990s (e.g. 1991), there were just 10 regular army battalions deployed to Ulster in three brigades: 39 Brigade, with responsibility for the Greater Belfast area; 8 Brigade, in the north and southwest near Londonderry; and 3 Brigade, in the southeast in Armagh. Their TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility) embraced 20-25% of Ulster. The remainder, three-quarters of the whole, was charged to the Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR), later (in a name change), the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR). At nine battalions, it was the largest regiment in the British army and, in reality, local forces.

Created to deal with the security situation in Ulster, the UDR's units performed virtually all the roles that were expected of regular battalions. Each battalion was built around a cadre of some 120 regular army officers and soldiers. All battalion commanders, for instance, were initially posted to their assignments from regular units (with the assignment much sought after, because it counted as an operational command).

Aside from this small cadre, though, UDR personnel were recruited locally and worked as part-timers. They received standard army training, equipment, and pay and allowances. Their service was such that there was roughly a 50-50 mix of full-time and part-time personnel present in any particular battalion.

All UDR members lived at home – there were no UDR barracks – which made them vulnerable but was one of the program’s attractions. Of the 191 UDR soldiers who had been killed during “the Troubles” as of mid-1991, 82% had been assassinated while off-duty (the regular army had suffered an additional 428 killed, the police, 277).

In effect, the UDR provided the local forces indispensable to a successful counterinsurgency campaign. Many, particularly among the full-timers, were former army personnel. Knowing well their home turf, they made a formidable addition to the British ranks.

Further refinement came when the single “Irish” battalion in the regular force structure was combined with the UDR to make the “Royal Irish Regiment.” It offered enhanced options for all personnel, to include the majority “local manpower,” through further inclusion in opportunities afforded regular units: e.g. career broadening tours (i.e. outside Ulster) and greater access to career enhancement (i.e. enhanced opportunities to command).

Being a part of the regular force structure, RIR could use the mechanisms of the regimental system to field as many battalions as were called for by the security situation – or to demobilize them. As a practical matter, the RIR, as local forces, allowed the British to withdraw regular units needed elsewhere yet maintain the security force “grid” intact.

Relations between locally recruited army forces and the police, also overwhelmingly locally recruited, were close throughout the campaign. Though accusations surfaced upon occasion of local forces personnel abusing their positions to pass information to Protestant paramilitary forces, these cases were few, involved few individuals, and were handled through the normal mechanisms criminal very limited regularly there were

- *India – Jammu & Kashmir (J&K)*

A hybrid of these two examples, in a sense, is presented by the Village Defence Committees (VDC) fielded by India in its troubled Muslim-majority state, Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). There, the local forces are also incorporated into the regular structure and are officered by “regulars.” It is the police, however, who run the units in most instances; the army only when absolutely necessary according to the situation.

Police officers (PO) are augmented in time of emergency by Special Police Officers (SPO), who receive lower pay as per contract (30% of a PO’s base salary) and shorter-but-equivalent training. SPOs are normally deployed in the areas where they are recruited (i.e., where they live) and may be sent as small units on area domination

operations within police jurisdictions. But they also are assigned as the principal element of command and control (C2) – and heavy weapons -- for the VDC, which are comprised of local people.

VDC members are part-time but paid (a minimal amount but significant enough to be attractive; approximately 8% of a PO's base salary). The result is that any VDC is a mix of full-time and part-time personnel, with the full-timers themselves mainly “temporary hires” (though in some cases POs may be deployed with a VDC). They share being normally from the local area in which they operate.

This combination of local officers and local home guards produces a local defense capacity limited only by factors of legitimacy (i.e., whether citizens will join) and resources (i.e., funding, availability of arms and ammunition). In a single district of the Jammu region (of J&K), Doda, in mid-2003, the normal police complement of 686 POs, upon finding itself faced with virtually an equal number of “militants” using terror as their principal approach, had mobilized 7,400 SPOs and 9,545 VDC members. So great was the desire to join the VDC that it had outstripped available funding and weapons (for the VDCs, the *Lee Enfield* as issued to Nepali police).

Inherent to the notion of building into the system a “surge” capacity is the expectation that one day what has been built will be dismantled. Manpower (SPOs, VDC members) is under no illusions that employment is anything but temporary.

As matters have worked out, though, participation has normally been an appropriate step. SPOs, for instance, are granted a preference chit (similar to “points” given to veterans who apply for U.S. government jobs) when applying for vacancies in the regular police force. VDC members earn extra income that otherwise would be unavailable.

Both SPOs and VDC members, particularly the former, have been known to find permanent employment in the hundreds of battalions of paramilitary forces that are kept in being on the order of a national “internal warfare” reaction force (the Central Reserve Police Force, or CRPF, for example, had 137 battalions in existence at mid-2003 and plans in the works to expand to 200 battalions; the Border Security Force, or BSF, was even larger, with 157 battalions and 176,000 personnel).

In aggregate, sources have put the manpower employed in paramilitary forces at a million men. There is also an extensive private network of security personnel that readily absorbs trained, motivated manpower.

- *Philippines*

Likewise, in the Philippines, the Central Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGU) functioned very much like the Colombian local forces template. Philippine battalions entered contested areas, chased away major insurgent units of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP, the Philippine Maoists), and then stood up CAFGU units led, in the first instance, by NCOs and officers of the battalion, later by a mix of regulars and local

people. In effect, each battalion of the Philippine Army, used popular support to clone itself (in some cases, several times over).

For example, in the so-called “banner of the revolution,” Negros island (3 million population living in an area the size of Ulster), the Maoist insurgents found themselves, in 1988-89, facing, besides the regular 6 x battalions of the army, 22 x battalions of local forces, all integrated into the military scheme of maneuver but performing local security tasks.

Ultimately, regional CAFGU also entered the order-of-battle, with highly motivated local people serving beyond their own villages and drawing augmented pay.

Important elements of the CAFGU program’s success were: leadership positions filled by regulars while local people were trained (in the same or shortened versions of the military’s courses); ultimate authority kept in the hands of regulars; issuing of identifiable garb to be worn while on duty; payment for duty time; and all CAFGU members subject to military justice while actually on duty (and thus legally fielded as military forces).

Following “victory” in the second round of communist insurgency – by 1992, the CPP’s New People’s Army (NPA) was fielding as few as 4,000 combatants – Manila disbanded a proportion of its CAFGU units, but it transitioned many of them to a local defense structure that was designed to augment regular defenses, very much in the manner of “people’s war” as advanced by Mao, once in power, as defense in depth of the homeland.

When a third CPP uprising became a reality in the years after 1998, the CAFGU structure and body of law/regulations remained intact and was used to again mobilize local forces.

- *Thailand*

In Thailand, the equivalent of CAFGU was the “Rangers” (*Tahan Pran*). They were so successful that a large proportion of the apparatus, following the complete collapse of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT; the Thai Maoists) insurgency by 1983, was integrated into the force structure, as a permanent territorial national guard.

The Thai case was noteworthy in that much of the heaviest fighting was carried out not only by the “Rangers” but also by contract units stood up to guard infrastructure development projects. These contained a large number of men who had served as contract soldiers in special light infantry and artillery battalions (approximately 22 *in toto*) that had been stood up for the Thai clandestine campaign in Laos against the Lao insurgents and their North Vietnamese patrons. Officers and NCOs were regulars, who returned to the force structure when the units were stood down, but the manpower, on short-term contracts, largely returned to civilian life.

Most *Tahan Pran* units were not paid anything more than operational funds. Serious strategic and operational mistakes by the CPT inspired ever increasing numbers of Thai to join local forces units, creating a mushroom effect, whereby the movement soon found

itself quite overwhelmed by the sheer numbers. *Tahan Pran* had older weapons, but the road crews were armed and equipped much as was the RTA (Royal Thai Army), which provided training teams and C2 personnel.

- *Peru*

Peru is a unique case (at least as compared to those above) in that Maoist insurgent conduct had become so egregious that villagers were demanding a self-defense capacity even as Alberto Fujimori took office as president in 1990. The military had not been able to convince all its officers to back arming the populace -- out of concern lest weapons be lost or indiscipline exacerbate already difficult local circumstances -- so a Fujimori order was necessary.

Military objections were overridden, and in 1991, 10,000 Winchester Model 1300 shotguns were distributed. Officials conducted ceremonies where priests blessed the arms, and a 1992 change in law recognized the people's right to self-defense. In summer 1993, a massive parade of local forces -- *rondas campesinas* -- was held in Lima. Units came from throughout the country.

Critics charged that it was all a smokescreen for abuse, but in the event, fears proved misplaced, abuses were minimal, and an aroused and mobilized population swept Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) from its historic hill bastions.

In Ayacucho alone, the half-million population department that gave birth to the insurgency, the 2,500 army regulars were augmented by more than 250,000 *ronderos*, the members of the *rondas campesinas*. Command and control was vested in the first instance in the hands of elected local authorities, with the military exercising oversight.

Ironically, it was the organizational capacity engendered that made the greatest difference, not provision of weapons *per se*. Indeed, the number of weapons distributed were relatively low, as was their lethality (shotguns remained the most substantial firearm provided). The low numbers were sufficient, because the local forces worked in shifts.

For instance, Sarhua district, 3,1113 people living southeast of Ayacucho in late 1998, had 16 groups of 10-20 men each, but just 15 weapons that were passed from shift to shift. It was the ability of all the groups to rush to the support of the armed main force, using agricultural implements principally, that gave the mobilized area its self-defense capacity as opposed to the weapons alone.

As *Sendero Luminoso* was swept from the hills in the 1990s, *rondas campesinas* gradually transitioned to more traditional forms as, effectively, neighborhood watch. Others became advocacy, public service, and single issue groups. Significantly, their presence, in whatever form, enhanced voting levels and the practice of local democracy.

Efforts by the security forces to collect weapons met with such a level of obfuscation (as opposed to outright resistance) that the authorities finally conceded it was best to allow

the arms to remain for neighborhood watch functions (traditionally, “nightwatch” had been practiced in Peruvian rural communities, especially in the north, for protection against robbery and stock rustling. Since the *rondas campesinas* were overwhelmingly run by the leadership of the traditional Indian communities where they were based, command and control remained quite good, abuses minimal (research offers little support the current human rights effort to paint a negative picture of the Peruvian local defense campaign).

Conclusions and Post-Conflict Incorporation

It may be seen that the Colombian experience with local forces contains elements of the cases above. It has the added advantage of neutralizing the inevitable human rights/activist attacks that are characteristic of the present world-environment.

Ironically, all local defense, in whatever form, appears to be opposed by human rights groups. The line of attack cites the possibility of abuse, more than the event, though it must be noted that “possibilities” are inherent to any situation of combat.

Indeed, indiscipline will gut any self-defense program, but proper command and control worked in the cases above. The very fact that the programs were so successful against the insurgents has led to a variety of efforts by human rights groups today to tar both the concept of local defense and the manner in which it worked. Peru has been a particular target, but scholars who have done research on the *rondas campesinas* do not agree with the claims of widespread abuses.

Issuing of arms is another thorny issue, for obvious reasons. Yet the historic results have been heartening, particularly when local defense units have been stood up in areas where the people are already seeking to resist insurgent depredations.

The authorities have found local defense, whatever the country, to be truly effective only where the will to resist is seeking the means. There are cases on record, such as Guatemala, where the authorities finally forced all in affected areas to choose one side or the other, and then systematically eliminated the insurgents using a combination of regulars and local defense units.

This is significant, because the alternative to mobilizing the state (even if in an imperfectly controlled fashion), hence to meet the challenge of the insurgent counter-state, has normally been “ugly.” This was seen in the two episodes of Maoist insurgency in Sri Lanka (the 1971 and 1987-90 JVP episodes), where local forces played a minimal role, because the security forces simply eliminated the problem physically, producing serious casualties.

In terms of mechanics of armament, types and numbers of weapons distributed is been driven by local circumstances. In Vietnam (not discussed, as it was such a special case) and the Philippines (and to a lesser extent, Thailand), for instance, there was little difference between the weapons possessed by the regulars and those issued to the local

forces. Though the emphasis was upon high-powered firearms (HPF), machineguns and grenade launchers, were also routinely provided.

In J&K, the VDC have the vintage .303 Lee Enfield, while in Peru nothing heavier than a Remington shotgun was given out (together with many pistols). Colombia arms and equips its local forces identically to its maneuver units but with fewer support weapons.

Colombia's mode of deployment lends itself to post-conflict demobilization, particularly since draftees may simply be assigned elsewhere (or not drafted at all). Indeed, since COLAR is presently mid-steam in a program to convert a good proportion of its manpower to volunteer status (presently one-third), it is more likely that local units will simply be disbanded when the need for them ends.

More desirable, of course, would be to incorporate them into mixed regular/popular forces units modeled upon the UK Royal Irish Regiment. This has the advantage of maintaining in place local security painstakingly constructed, providing a mechanism for pumping funds into cash-starved regions, and gainfully employing, even if on a part-time basis, large numbers of young people who otherwise would have to seek out options.

Thailand, as mentioned, incorporated its "Rangers" into the force structure, as did the Philippines (though eliminating many units after the 1992 collapse of "Round II" of the communist insurgency). The temporary nature of all augmentation manpower in J&K emphasizes the plan to demobilize as appropriate by simple non-renewal of contracts – though SPOs may receive at present, for superior service, an advantage in the competition for constable vacancies in the regular police force. Provision is made, though, to assist this trained and motivated manpower in moving into logical "next steps" that facilitate local defense.

In Peru, as already mentioned, many *rondas* have stayed intact as unarmed civic groups, even as their self-defense function has atrophied; but most of the manpower was not armed in the first instance, weapons being issued only as sufficient to arm "night watch" shifts.

Peru serves to illustrate another of the most unexpected consequences of local defense: the growth of democratic capacity. As the insurgency deliberately targeted the most unincorporated areas of the country, the population had long been marginalized. Defending its own space served to heighten political consciousness – the insurgents' goal turned on its head, particularly when local folk began to use the organizational skills learned to facilitate accountability from elected officials.

This was a logical outgrowth, too, of the marriage of local defense with government civic action and micro-development projects. The same phenomenon has occurred elsewhere, such as in the Philippines.

The aforementioned highlights the point raised any number of times above: the necessity of any local defense scheme to be integrated into a larger counterinsurgency campaign.

The “technique” of home guards is not intended as a stand-alone exercise but as one element among many in a coherent response to insurgency.

People defend what is theirs, what they see as worth fighting *for*. It is quite difficult merely to advance what they should fight *against*. The greatest success in counterinsurgency or counter-terrorism, then, has come in defense of democracy. There is no greater trust a state can place in its population than to incorporate citizens in its defense.