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CIA/APLA IR 98-41025

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Intelligence Report

Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis

27 March 1998

Colombia: Status of Drug- and Insurgent-Related Activity in Putumayo and Caqueta Departments

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Summary

[REDACTED]

- Similar protests in response to planned eradication efforts in these areas are likely, and the next Colombian president will have to weigh the potential political and security repercussions of these protests against progress on eradication. [REDACTED]

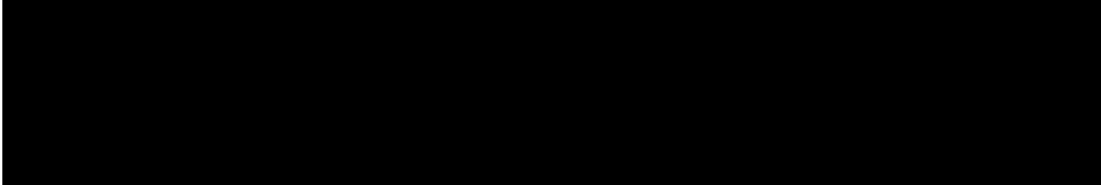
Most, if not all, of the fronts of the FARC's Southern Bloc probably participate to some degree in narcotics-related activities, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

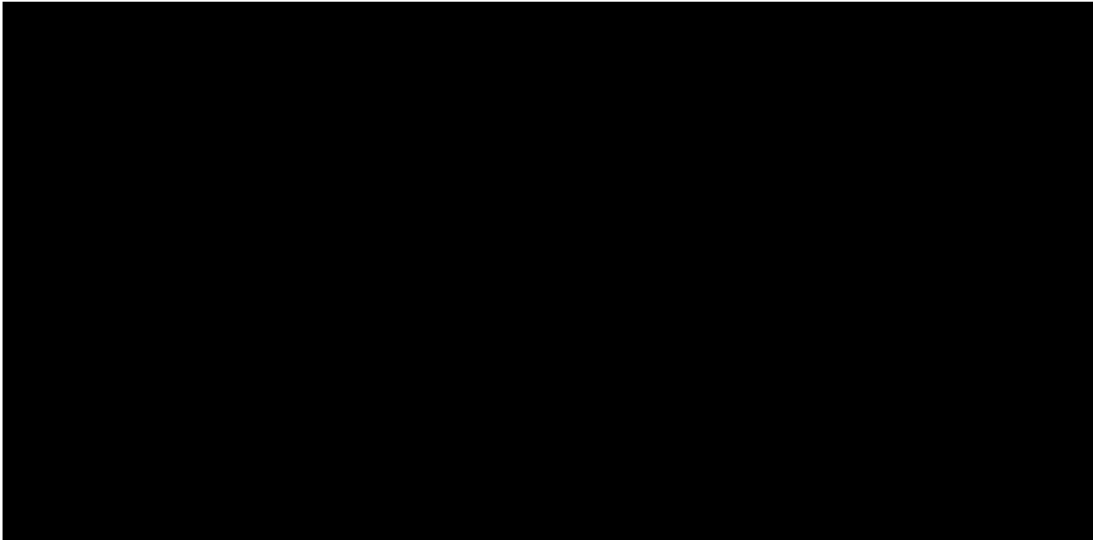
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[REDACTED]



Although the level of activity by illegal paramilitary groups is probably increasing in these departments somewhat as compared with the mid-1990s, paramilitary activity does not appear to be as prevalent or as strong as it is in northern Colombia.



Coca Cultivation and Transportation

What are the trends in coca cultivation in Putumayo and Caqueta Departments in recent years? What are the cultivation patterns? Who is growing the coca? What traffickers operate in these areas? [REDACTED]

Growing Areas.

[REDACTED] The dramatic increase in cultivation in these two departments offset significant strides made by the aerial eradication program in reducing [REDACTED] the amount of coca being grown in Guaviare Department and thrust Colombia into first place as the world's largest coca cultivator, surpassing Peru for the first time. [REDACTED]

The Caqueta coca growing area, which encompasses some [REDACTED] hectares, is located in the southwestern portion of Caqueta Department. An estimated [REDACTED] hectares of coca were under cultivation there in 1997. The area is drained by two major river systems, the Caqueta and Caguan, which provide the primary means of transportation in the area. The most centrally located town in the growing area is Tres Esquinas, connected to the departmental capital of Florencia only by river and 100 kilometers of dirt road. [REDACTED]

The eastern part of the Caqueta growing area is a remote and sparsely populated area of dense tropical rain forest with limited transportation and communication systems. Coca is the predominate crop. The coca fields in this area are generally larger—multi-hectare fields are not uncommon—than those seen in the western part of the growing area, [REDACTED] probably because of the area's remoteness and the availability of land for cultivation. Although there have been no corroborated reports of large plantation-style coca cultivation along the lines of that found near Miraflores, Guaviare—characterized by large coca fields cultivated and harvested by resident workers housed in communal barracks—the region would be conducive to this type of activity. [REDACTED]

The western part of the Caqueta growing area is more populous than the eastern part and enjoys better transportation and communication systems. While there is dense coca cultivation in the region, the area also exhibits a greater diversity of licit crops and contains large areas of cattle ranching. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a factor that significantly complicates the precise application of aerial herbicide. Soon after spraying started in this area last July, for example, some farmers filed legal claims citing damage to legitimate crops, prompting Bogota to allow only Colombian pilots to spray in this area to avoid any anti-US backlash if American pilots were thought to have destroyed the wrong crops, [REDACTED]

The Putumayo coca growing area is the smallest of Colombia's three primary growing areas. It [REDACTED] is located in the southwestern portion of Putumayo Department along the border with Ecuador. [REDACTED]

Agricultural patterns in this area differ significantly from those in most of Caqueta and Guaviare in that coca is not the dominant agricultural crop; subsistence crops of corn, beans, and grains are widely grown. Also unlike Guaviare, this area has an established peasant population and has not been subject to large numbers of transients who enter the area in pursuit of illicit wealth from coca cultivation. [REDACTED]

Overall, Caqueta and Putumayo are among Colombia's most sparsely populated departments, and together have less than 500,000 people, according to the last census taken in Colombia in 1993. Each department has less than 13 persons per square mile and features terrain ranging from tropical jungle to heavily forested mountains with peaks over 3,000 meters. Their economies are based mostly on agriculture, livestock, and some mining--and in Putumayo, on oil production and related activities--but the lack of infrastructure to transport goods results in inefficiencies in all sectors. [REDACTED]

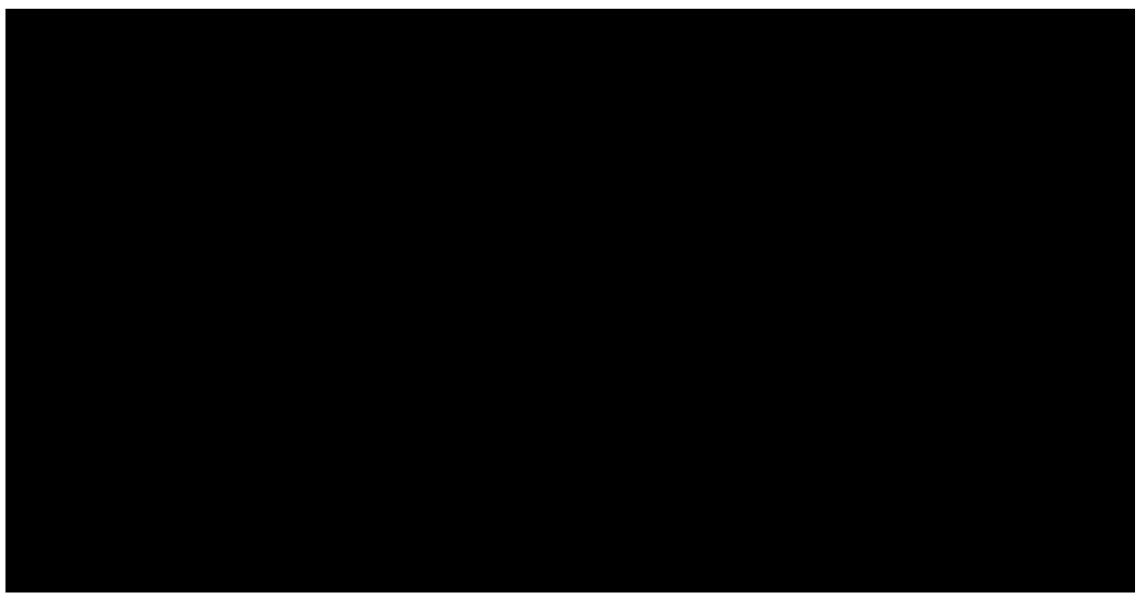
Coca Growers. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] estimates vary widely and range from 100,000 to 300,000 people. Over 75,000 people in Putumayo and Caqueta were estimated to have participated in a series of peasant protests over eradication--instigated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)--during the fall and summer of 1996, according to press reports, but it is doubtful that all the protesters were directly involved in coca cultivation. Several factors probably account for the large numbers of residents involved in coca cultivation, including a lack of alternative employment, depressed socioeconomic conditions, and coca's wage advantage; farmers and laborers can generally earn more money in the coca industry than in any other comparable agricultural endeavor. [REDACTED]

Alternative Development. [REDACTED] local campesinos are interested in growing alternative crops, and Bogota has reportedly increased funding for its alternative development program (PLANTE). Successful implementation of these programs, however, is a long way from being realized. Local peasant leaders stress that the shift away from coca requires a long-term government commitment and needs to be done gradually, because of the time needed for alternative crops to be productive,

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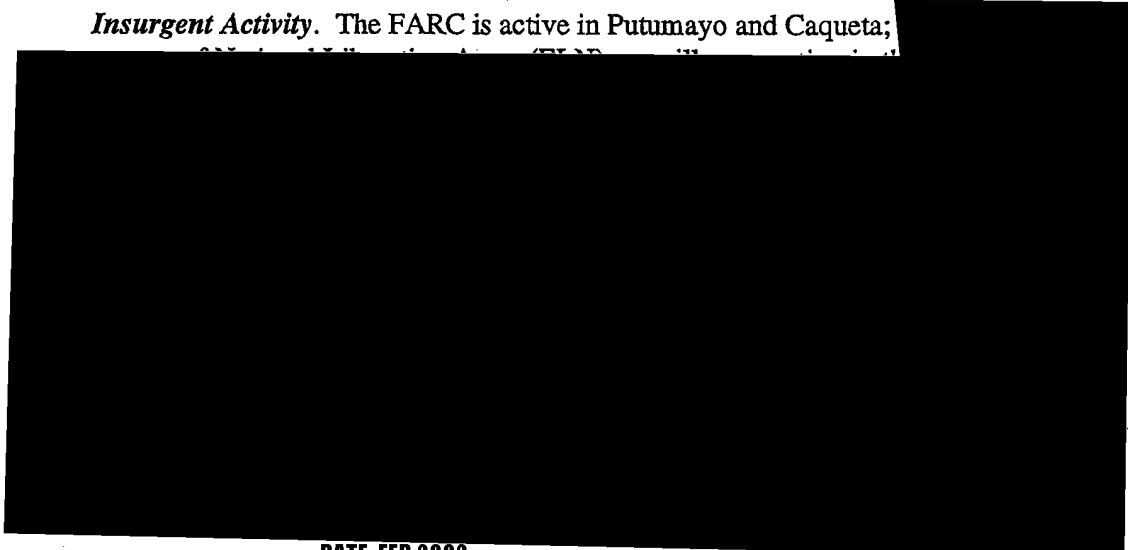
according to press reports. Moreover, peasants do not trust government pledges of alternative crop price supports or basic social and infrastructure improvement because many such promises have been broken in the past. [REDACTED]



Insurgency

What is the nature and scope of insurgent activity in these departments? To what degree are they involved in narcotics-related activities? How are illegal drugs moved within and from Putumayo and Caqueta? To what extent do they exert influence or control over the local inhabitants? [REDACTED]

Insurgent Activity. The FARC is active in Putumayo and Caqueta; [REDACTED]



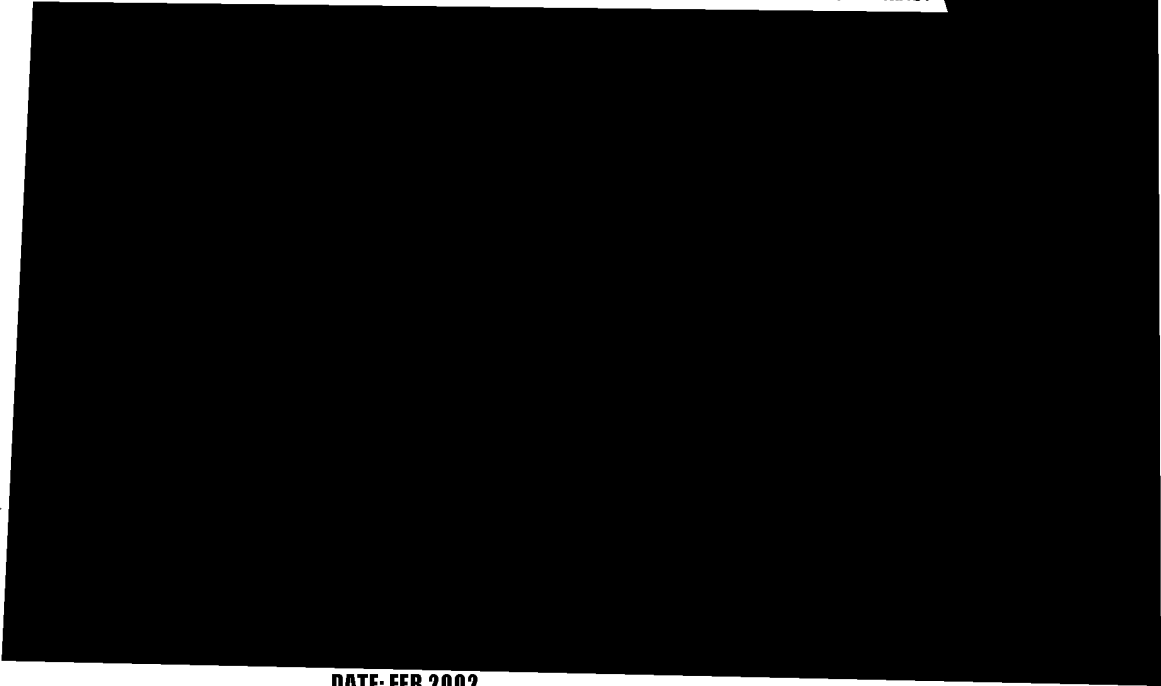
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Guerrillas in southern Colombia are well equipped in terms of basic military supplies. Standard arms include assault rifles, other small arms, grenades, and rocket launchers, according to Colombian military and police sources. The insurgents have home-made mortars of undetermined caliber, 60-mm mortars, and 81-mm mortars.



Narcotics-Related Activities. Most, if not all, of the fronts of the FARC's Southern Bloc probably participate to some degree in narcotics-related activities, but we do not have detailed, recent information on the activities of all of these units.



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The FARC and other groups use a variety of means to move drugs and money throughout Caqueta and Putumayo. [REDACTED]

Influence Over Civilians. The FARC is clearly in a position to coerce residents into providing intelligence on troop movements, inciting peasant protests, and forcing local officials to turn a blind eye to their illicit activities. Their power stems from the FARC's longstanding presence in this area, extensive links with thousands of peasants who depend on coca for their livelihood, and a track record of intimidating recalcitrant local officials and residents through the use of murder and kidnapping.

[REDACTED] note that the FARC's typical modus operandi for influencing residents includes developing and maintaining a detailed census of the civilian population and identifying their business activities and the location of relatives living outside of the area. Armed with this information, FARC agents are able to establish a climate of intimidation and psychological control over local residents and lead them to believe that the guerrillas are everywhere and know everything that is going on, according to a defense attache report. [REDACTED]

Paramilitary Activity

How extensive is paramilitary activity in this region? Are the groups operating in this area relatively autonomous or do they have strong links to forces outside the region? What is the relationship, if any, between paramilitary groups and the local military and police forces? [REDACTED]

Paramilitary Activity. The level of activity by illegal paramilitary groups—armed bands of men paid to protect the interests of various sponsors such as businessmen, landowners, and other wealthy patrons—including drug traffickers—appears to be increasing when compared with levels of activity in this region in the mid 1990s but to date does not appear to be as prevalent or as strong as it is in northern Colombia. Battles between trafficker-sponsored paramilitaries and their various foes—sometimes including guerrillas—probably constitute the bulk of paramilitary activity in these areas, but we do not have a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of paramilitarism in Putumayo and Caqueta [REDACTED]

Activity by Castano's Organization. Carlos Castano's Peasant Self-Defense Groups of Cordoba and Uraba is active in southern Colombia according to press reports, but the extent of their presence and influence in this area is not clear. In an interview last September, Castano claimed that his group was already in Putumayo, Guaviare, and

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**Does Colombia Have the Political Will To Step Up
Counternarcotics Efforts?** [REDACTED]

Continued commitment to increasing bilateral counternarcotics cooperation largely depends on the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections. Frontrunner *Horacio Serpa*—the former Interior Minister and Samper's heir apparent—has recently tried to beef up [REDACTED] record, [REDACTED] places priority on advancing key bilateral antidrug initiatives. If such initiatives begin to erode his approval rating or interfere with his goal of ending the insurgency, however, the populist Serpa is likely to backtrack. Moreover, unproven allegations of Serpa's involvement in narcotics-related corruption continue to raise questions about his credibility on this issue. Conservative candidate *Andres Pastrana* has pledged to work closely with the United States to end the drug war but, thus far, has been short on specifics when discussing extradition and eradication programs; he would probably have a weak stomach for continuing operations that led to more widely spread violence. Political independent *Harold Bedoya* is described by US officials as a solid counternarcotics ally; the authoritarian ex-military commander would probably stay the course even in the face of increased political opposition caused by heightened violence. *Noemi Sanin* has consistently voiced her support for increasing bilateral cooperation to combat the counternarcotics problem although her resolve would probably be tested if confronted with large-scale protests in southern Colombia.

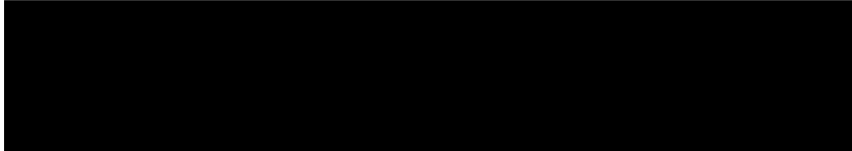


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
Security officials fighting on the front lines of Colombia's drug war have demonstrated solid commitment toward increasing bilateral counternarcotics cooperation and will probably continue to wage an aggressive fight regardless of the election outcome. The hard-charging Director of the Colombian National Police Rosso Jose Serrano is regarded by US diplomats as a key counternarcotics ally who has worked closely with several US agencies to dismantle major drug-trafficking organizations, eradicate coca crops, and root out money-laundering networks. Major General Serrano can probably be expected to continue to aggressively pursue counternarcotics operations although he repeatedly expresses a deep sense of personal responsibility to his men and could become demoralized if operations led to widespread losses among police. Military Forces Commander Manuel Bonett has also stated that he places priority on expanding the military's role in tactical counternarcotics operations in view of the nexus between insurgents and narcotraffickers; yet, he is still touchy about the military's controversial human rights record and alleged links to illegal paramilitary groups, and could backtrack in the event that such operations resulted in renewed criticism about human rights abuses.

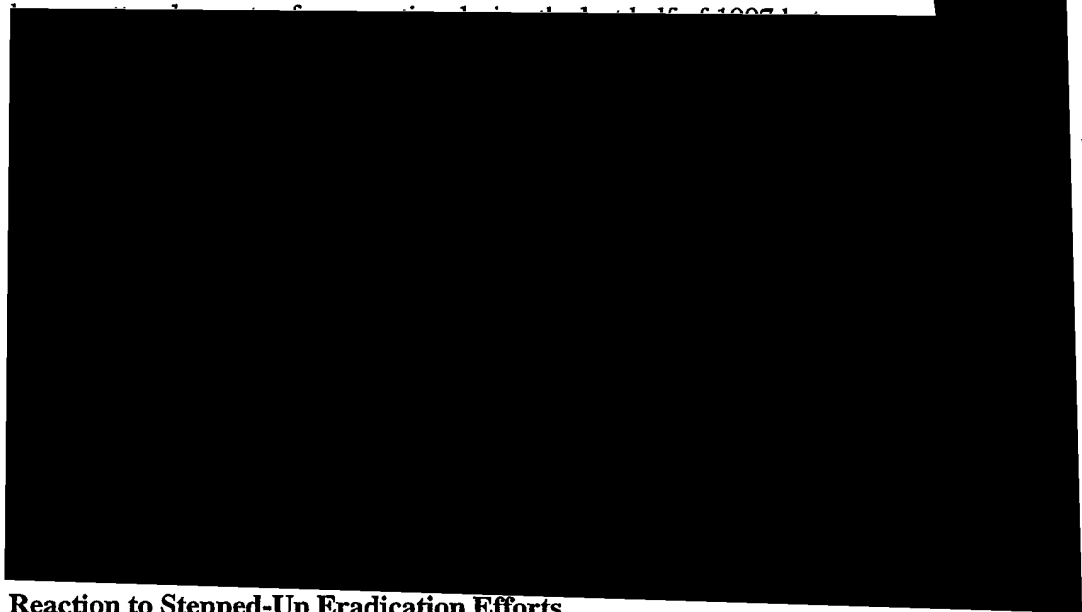
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Meta and was getting ready to enter Caqueta "very professionally." He added that his group, which was originally based in northern Colombia and is now loosely affiliated with other paramilitary groups in various parts of the country, travels to these areas, trains local recruits to form new fronts, and then returns home:

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- Castano, like the guerrillas, uses terror and heated rhetoric to foster fear and create the impression that his forces are able to strike anywhere. He publicly acknowledged that his group was involved in the massacre in Mapiripan, Meta, last July and boasted that there would be more "Mapiripans," 


Links to Security Forces. The links between paramilitaries operating in Putumayo and Caqueta and police or military units in the areas are difficult to ascertain. 



Reaction to Stepped-Up Eradication Efforts

How are local groups likely to react to increased eradication efforts? What difficulties are likely to be encountered by aerial eradication operations? 

Insurgent Reaction. FARC guerrillas of the Southern Bloc would probably go to great lengths—including attacking US personnel—to preserve the power they

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exercise in Putumayo and Caqueta and the substantial revenues they derive from narcotics-related activities:

- Fabian Ramirez, a key FARC commander in southern Colombia, told reporters in mid March that guerrillas would attack US advisers assisting Colombian security services.¹


Guerrillas routinely fire at eradication aircraft and are presumably unconcerned that Americans may be on board the aircraft and could be injured or killed by their fire. FARC members are likely to interpret Ramirez's statement as sanctioning attacks on US personnel who present targets of opportunity, and units will probably not hesitate to attack US personnel encountered during the course of their operations. Should the FARC perceive that increased US assistance to Bogota is having a substantial impact on guerrilla narcotics operations, they might attempt to retaliate with more direct terrorist attacks against US personnel and facilities. [REDACTED]

Peasant Response. Increased eradication efforts are also vulnerable to internal political pressures. The director of the Colombian National Police antinarcotics division, Col. Leonardo Gallego, told [REDACTED] in February that peasant protests in Putumayo are probably inevitable, despite the best efforts to address peasants concerns, and that any incoming administration would have to "stand up to the pressure" caused by these demonstrations. Such protests would probably have a particularly strong effect should a populist such as Horacio Serpa, who views peasants as a key part of his constituency, become president. In any event, the cycle of coca cultivation, government eradication, and peasant protests will most likely continue as long as the government is unable or unwilling to follow through on promises to improve the region's living conditions and provide farmers with financial incentives for abandoning illicit crops. [REDACTED]

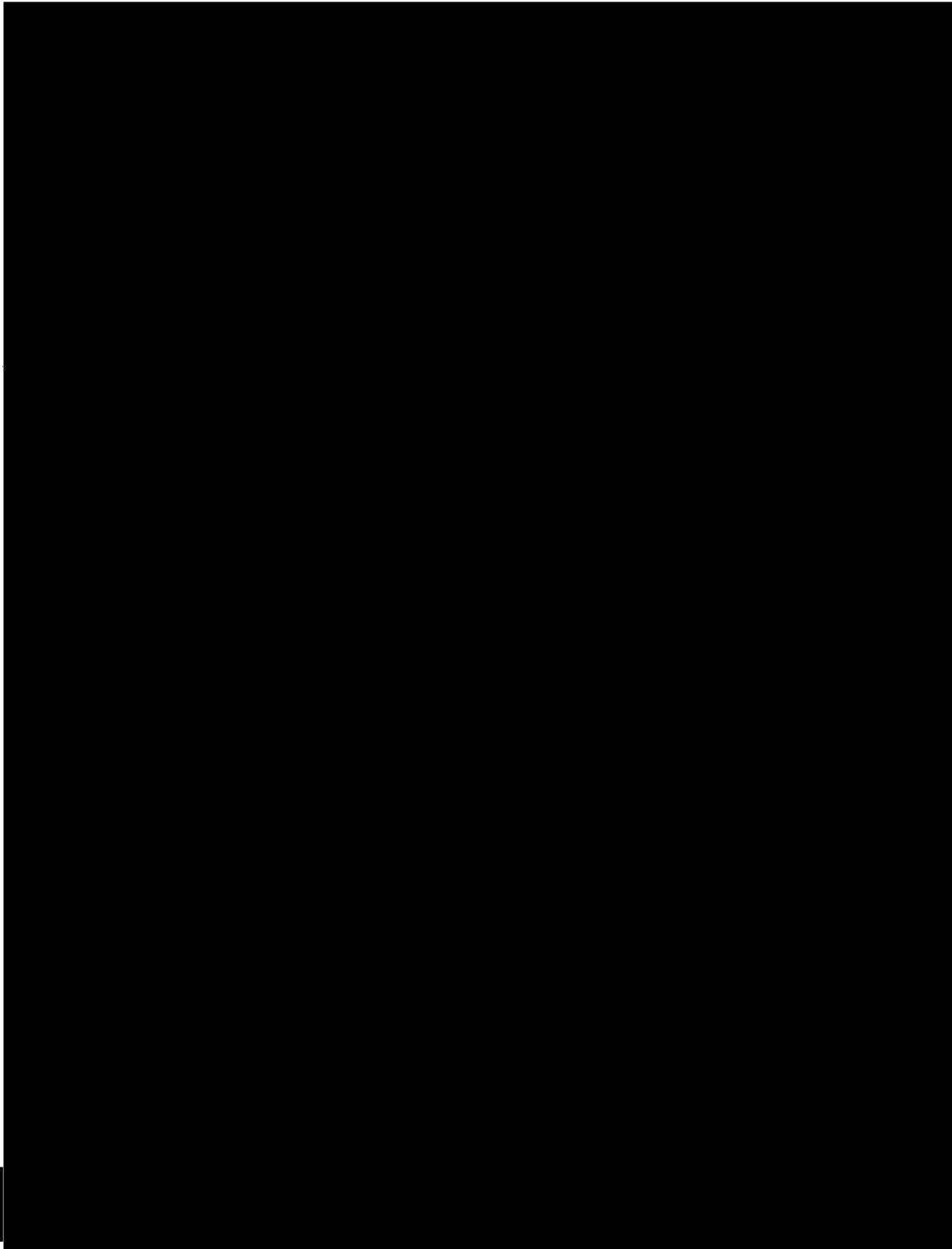
The Samper administration or the next administration may at times subordinate the eradication program to efforts to improve relations with the guerrillas, especially the

[REDACTED]

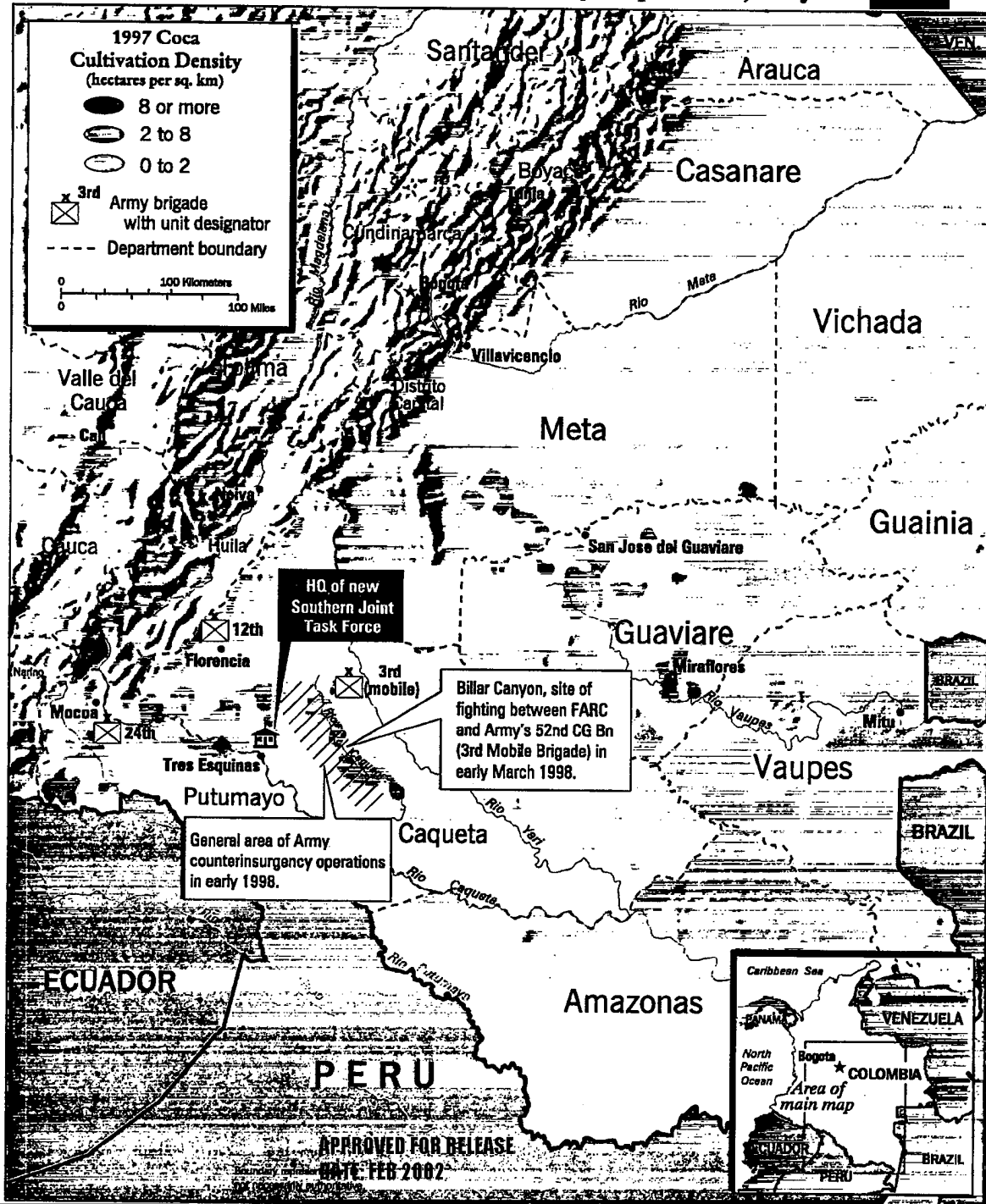
FARC. In 1997, Bogota halted spraying from its base in Larandia, Caqueta, for over a month when the FARC insisted that flights be suspended and a large part of Caqueta be demilitarized before they would release Army hostages captured at Las Delicias.



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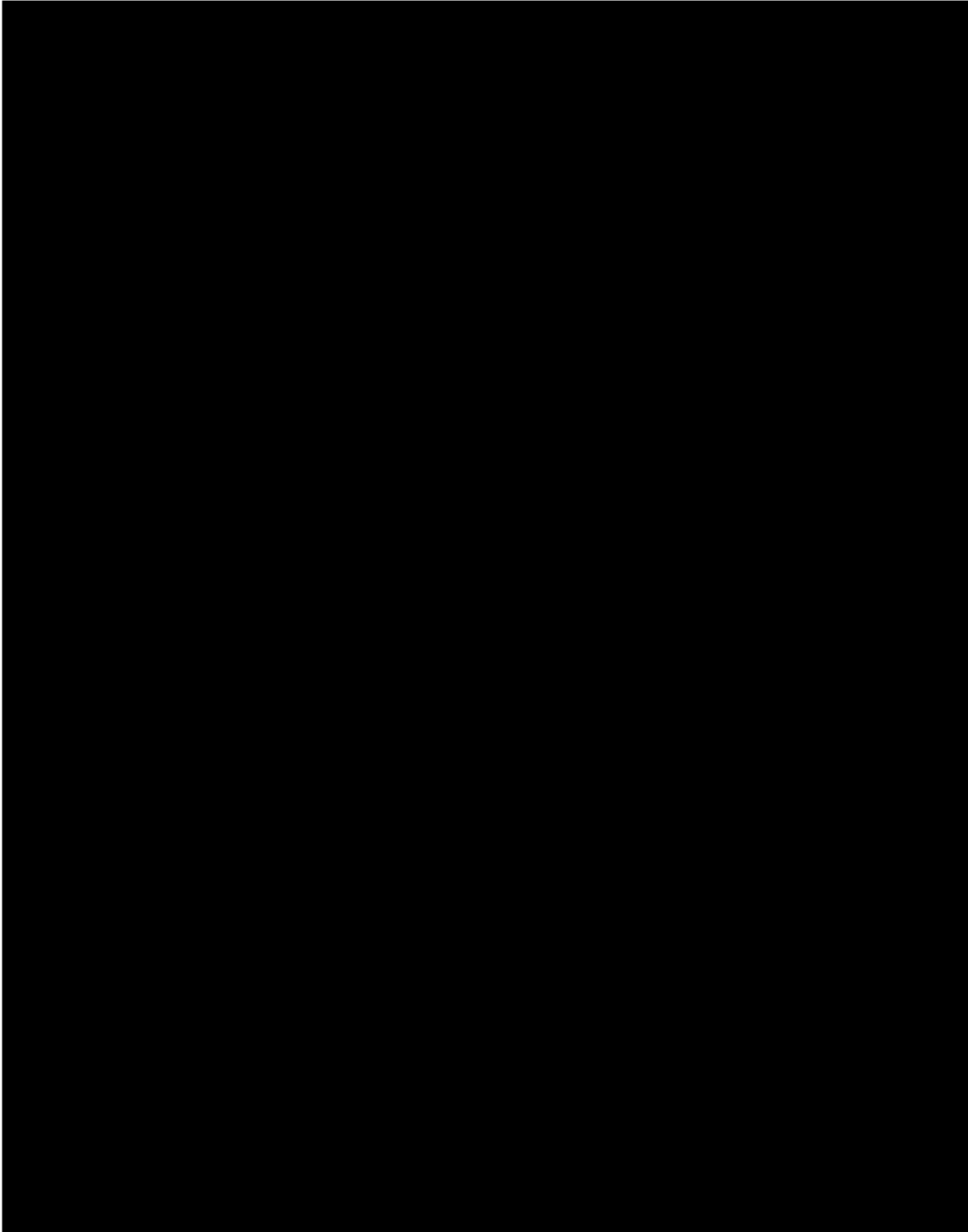
Colombia: Military Operations in Caqueta and Putumayo Departments, Early 1998



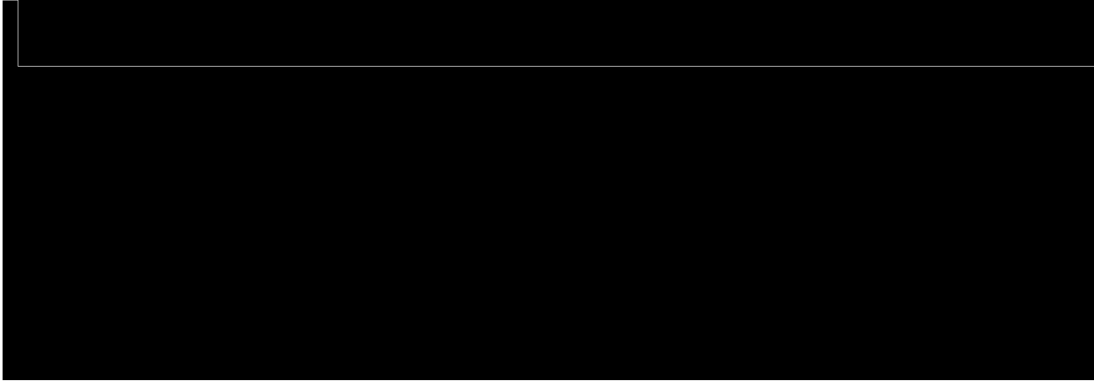
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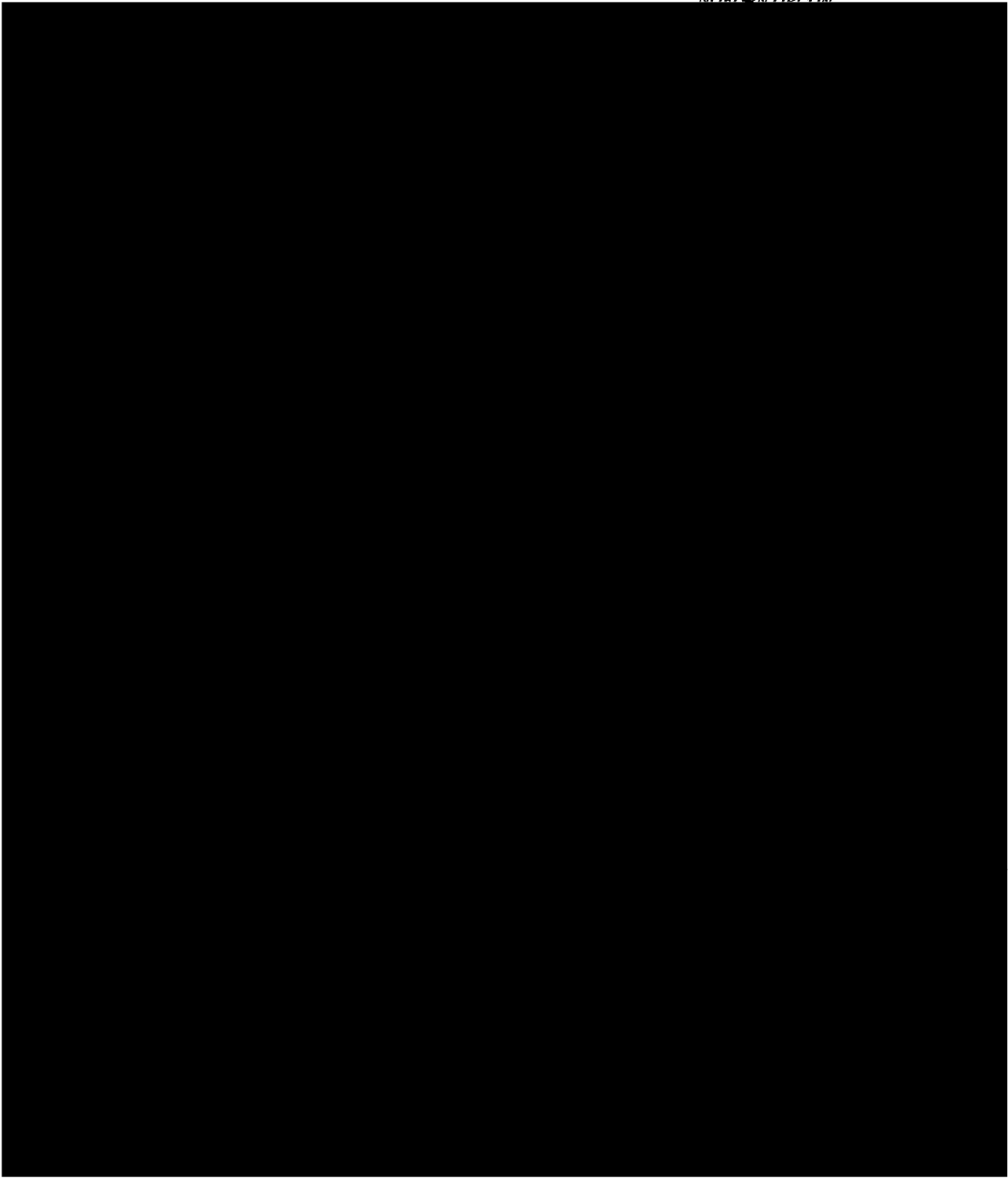


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