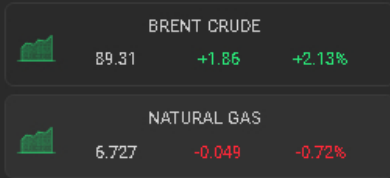
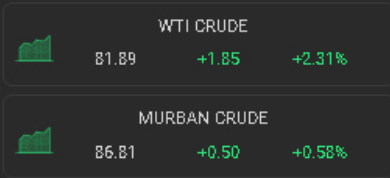




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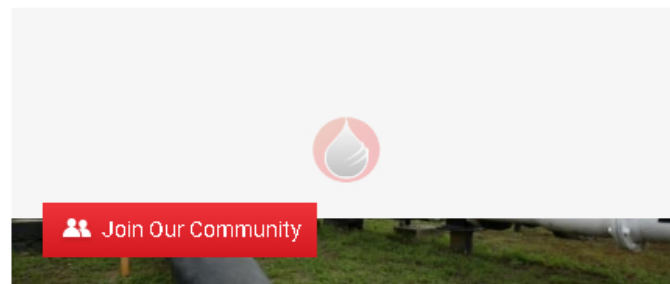
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In New Round Of OPEC+ Cuts

Can Colombia Secure Peace With The Last Leftwing Guerrilla Group?

By [Matthew Smith](#) - Nov 22, 2022, 9:00 AM CST

- ▶ In recent years the ELN has emerged as a major non-state actor in Venezuela.
- ▶ An increasingly lucrative source of income for the ELN is petroleum theft with the Cano Limon oil pipeline a key target.
- ▶ Leftist guerillas are responsible for most of the oil theft occurring in Colombia
- ▶ Peace negotiations between Petro's administration and the ELN commence on Monday, 21 November 2022.



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Colombia is [locked in a never-ending cycle](#) of grinding poverty, conflict and violence that has existed for nearly a century. The Latin American country's decades-long low-level multiparty asymmetric conflict continues to plague the resource-rich nation of 51 million. This is occurring despite the 2016 peace deal negotiated by President Juan Manuel Santos, with the most significant illegal armed group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC – Spanish initials). Colombia's first leftwing president Gustavo Petro, who recently reached the milestone of 100 days in office and is himself a former leftwing guerilla with the 19th of April Movement (M19 – Spanish initials), has promised [to bring total peace](#) (Spanish) to the strife-torn country. For this to occur, Petro must negotiate with a diverse array of illegal armed groups, including the leftist National Liberation Army (ELN – Spanish initials), a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist group, the most important because of its size and power. In an important development, the ELN has agreed to restart peace negotiations with Bogota which if successful, will represent a tremendous step toward ending the conflict in Colombia. Colombia's [low-intensity civil conflict](#) is rooted in a decade of extreme violence, known as *La Violencia*, that swept the country in the wake of the April 1948 assassination of popular leftist politician Jorge Gaitan. This was a period of savagery where the two major political parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, used armed groups to vie for control of Colombia viciously. La Violencia was responsible for sowing the seeds of Colombia's decades-long multiparty civil war, which exploded in violence and intensity when the massive profits generated by cocaine trafficking flooded the crisis-riven country during the 1980s. While violence has decreased significantly since the 1990s, with the dismantling of drug cartels and demobilization of various illegal armed groups, conflict, notably in remote rural regions where the state has a weak presence, remains a persistent problem. Colombia's current civil conflict is driven by rising cocaine production, which [during 2021 hit a new record](#), with illegal armed groups, notably the ELN and FARC dissidents who did not accept the 2016 peace accord, vying for control of lucrative coca-growing regions and smuggling routes.

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Despite a sharp increase in homicides and massacres since 2019, there have been several promising developments since Petro took office. The most important was the resumption of peace negotiations with the ELN, which were suspended by Petro's predecessor, Ivan Duque, after the [leftist guerilla's car-bombed](#) a Bogota police academy in January 2019, killing 22. This is crucial to achieving peace because the ELN is one of the two largest illegal armed groups, the other being the neo-paramilitary Gulf Clan, which is responsible for much of the violence occurring in Colombia's conflict zones. If Petro can

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secure peace with the ELN and the guerilla group demobilizes it will be a major milestone on the path to achieving total peace in Colombia.

The ELN emerged in 1964 from Colombia's northeastern department of Santander, where it was formed by a small group of Marxist students who had trained in Cuba at the invitation of Fidel Castro. A few charismatic leftist Catholic priests joined the group broadening its support base and popularity, but by the early 1970s, it became apparent that the ELN would not topple Colombia's government, and its military strength was waning. During the 1980s and early 1990s, a series of world-class oil discoveries in eastern Colombia saw an oil boom emerge, giving the leftist guerillas an economic lifeline by providing a lucrative target for extortion, and cashed up foreign energy companies. That success was followed by a further series of military setbacks, which along with substantial pressure from the paramilitary United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC – Spanish initials) and National Army, severely diminished the ELN and the territory under its control.

Analysts believe [the ELN has up to](#) 2,500 armed combatants and potentially double that number of civilian supporters. The illegal armed group funds its operations predominantly from cocaine production, petroleum theft, extortion and illegal gold mining. After the 2017 demobilization of the FARC, which left a power vacuum in many rural regions in Colombia, the ELN fought for control of the territory left by what had been the largest non-state armed group in Colombia's 70-year low-intensity asymmetric conflict. That saw the ELN come into conflict with FARC dissidents who refused to recognize the 2016 peace accord, and the Gulf Clan, a neo-paramilitary group that is [Colombia's largest illegal armed group](#). The ELN's main presence is now in Colombia's oil-rich eastern departments of Arauca and Norte de Santander which lie on the border with Venezuela. Norte de Santander contains the Catatumbo region, a major oil-producing area through which the Cano Limon pipeline passes, a violent conflict zone mired in violence and a known hotspot for coca cultivation, cocaine production and oil theft. In Catatumbo, the ELN has long clashed with a renegade faction of the defunct Popular Liberation Army (EPL – Spanish initials), FARC dissidents and the Gulf Clan for control of lucrative coca cropping areas and smuggling routes.

In recent years the ELN, [which was backed](#) by former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and current president Nicolas Maduro, has emerged as a major non-state actor in Venezuela. Elements within the Colombian military believe the leftist guerillas formed an alliance with Venezuela's autocratic government. The ELN moved quickly to exploit the power vacuum left by a crumbling Venezuelan state which fell upon hard times because of harsh U.S. sanctions severely diminishing its finances. The ELN is concentrated in the Venezuelan states of Zulia, Táchira, Apure, Amazonas and

Bolívar, with a significant presence in many municipalities on the border with Colombia, where it has displaced vicious criminal bands. The leftist guerillas even provide essential public services, such as law and order, in some communities where the Venezuelan state has no presence. The ELN finances its activities from illegal mining, having established a substantial presence in Venezuela's Orinoco mining arc, a key oil-producing region, cocaine trafficking, extortion and people smuggling. The leftist guerillas are an [important supplier of cocaine](#) and other illicit products to U.S. designated terrorists Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

An increasingly lucrative source of income for the ELN is petroleum theft with the Cano Limon oil pipeline a key target. The leftist guerillas are responsible for most of the [oil theft in occurring in Colombia](#) where it operates clandestine jungle refineries that process the stolen petroleum into a basic form of gasoline known as "pategrillo" or cricket foot because of its off-green color. Artisanal fuel is a vital precursor chemical used in the manufacture of cocaine. Gasoline is required to separate the alkaloid from coca leaves, which is then processed into a paste in clandestine jungle laboratories, eventually becoming cocaine hydrochloride. The manufacture of cocaine uses tremendous amounts of gasoline, with cost-effective fuel supplies becoming increasingly constrained because of chronic fuel shortages in Venezuela, a crackdown by Bogota on illicit sources of gasoline and the global energy crisis. Those events and rising cocaine production in Colombia, are responsible for soaring petroleum theft in the Andean nation.

Peace negotiations between Petro's administration and the ELN [commence](#) on Monday, 21 November 2022, in Caracas, with Bogota having resumed diplomatic relations with its neighbor. Petro has made goodwill gestures, including suspending arrest warrants for the 17 ELN members at the negotiating table. The latest events sparked genuine hopes of a peace agreement finally being reached. Such an outcome will significantly boost security within Colombia, which will assist the Andean county's beaten-down [oil industry](#) and bolster the economy at a crucial time. There are, however, still hurdles ahead. The ELN is more radical and decentralized than the FARC, with many local commanders in Colombia disagreeing with the direction being taken by the group's leadership based in Havana Cuba. This is evident from recent attacks by the ELN on security forces and the oil industry in Colombia despite the resumption of negotiations. Earlier this month, Colombia's Defense Ministry [confirmed the leftist guerillas](#) (Spanish) had kidnapped two soldiers in Arauca, who were recently released. Then last week, a hooded man in Barrancabermeja painted the letters ELN on a wall and [then threw an explosive device](#) (Spanish) at the headquarters of oil services company Ismocol, a contractor to Colombia's national oil company [Ecopetrol](#).

By Matthew Smith for Oilprice.com

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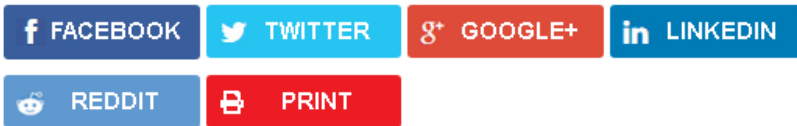
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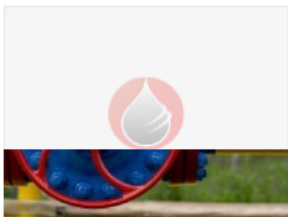
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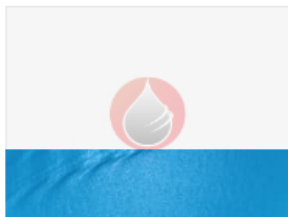
Matthew Smith is Oilprice.com's Latin-America correspondent. Matthew is a veteran investor and investment management professional. He obtained a Master of Law degree and is currently located...

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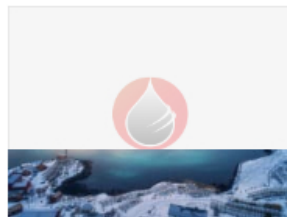
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