

Foreword by

Sir Keith Morris, former British Ambassador to Colombia

David Hutchinson was one of the last people we saw on a return visit to Colombia in 2002. A few days later we heard of his kidnapping. After our immediate reaction of horror we consoled ourselves with the thought that among our friends he was the one best equipped to stand up to the experience. David was not only a very fit 59 year- old but had an immense zest for life and was fascinated by Colombia and its people. We were right. Hutchinson came through his ordeal as unscathed as anyone could. With his songs, jokes, and anecdotes and his passionate interest in the country he maintained his own morale and that of his companions. His captors even asked for his marching songs. The qualities that ensured his survival also made him the best possible observer of the FARC guerrillas and their habitat. As he got to know them and shared their lives he was able gradually to piece together their personal stories. The result is a vivid account of Hutchinson's journeys, his jailers and fellow prisoners and the astonishing landscapes they traversed from 4,000 metres up in the Sumapaz to under 300 metres in the rain forest. It provides, I believe, an exceptional insight into the FARC because Hutchinson, as a foreigner and a particularly robust one, was also able to view his situation, despite his natural anger, as dispassionately as anyone could. In his words we come as close to the reality of the FARC and its kidnapping business as possible.

This is important both inside and outside Colombia. The FARC are the world's largest and richest insurgent group. They are a classic case of a movement that has survived and flourished after the ending of the Cold War -the FARC was originally backed by the Soviet Union- because it found a highly profitable commodity to exploit- cocaine. This the FARC increasingly supplemented with kidnapping and extortion on threat of kidnapping. As with similar illegal armed groups its popular support, never great, has declined as its wealth and military strength has grown. The modest means of Hutchinson's fellow victims make a mockery of the FARC's claims to champion social justice, sincerely though many in the FARC may still believe in them. When Hutchinson was kidnapped the FARC were by far the largest drug-financed insurgency in the world. Now they are rivalled by the Taliban. Then Colombia was the kidnapping capital of the world and the FARC were the world's leading kidnapers by far. Now Colombia comes below Mexico, Venezuela and Nigeria in the league table and among politically motivated kidnapers the Taliban and Iraqi insurgent groups are catching up on the FARC.

The lessons of Colombia therefore have a wide relevance. Hutchinson describes how Colombians elected an outsider in Alvaro Uribe, committed to tackle the country's endemic insecurity, when long-drawn out negotiations with the FARC failed in 2002. Uribe's democratic security policy has been very successful in almost halving the homicide rate and in reducing kidnapping to below 10% of the 2002 rate. The spectacular fall in kidnapping was due largely to the Army's success in driving the FARC out of areas near the big cities like the Sumapaz where Hutchinson spent his first four months and, for the first time, replacing them with a permanent military presence. . The overall improvement in security has led to sharply increased growth, investment and employment with corresponding reductions in poverty.

The FARC, although reduced in numbers by perhaps a third and largely driven back to their jungle strongholds, are still a threat. Sadly they show no sign as yet of giving up their ambition to

overthrow the Colombian state by force nor any interest in negotiating seriously for peace. For the time being they have the resources to continue the struggle. Despite intensified spraying the coca crop is still large enough to support high levels of cocaine exports and, while the FARC's kidnapping revenues are down, their drug earnings are still large. To reduce these significantly will require extending the military presence to all the lightly populated areas where coca is grown. It will be a long and very expensive process but there is no substitute for boots on the ground with the other state services quick to follow. Since the international community has set the rules that make cocaine so profitable and the great majority of cocaine is consumed in the industrialised countries, it seems incumbent on the international community to see how it could find ways of helping Colombia more imaginatively and generously. This is a country which is paying such a high price to ensure that others do not have to endure the ordeal suffered by Hutchinson and his family.