

Blue Helmets to Maroon Berets:

Batallón Colombia in the Suez and Sinai, 1956–1958, 1982–2006

by Charles H. Briscoe



SINCE World War II, Colombia has supported international collective security through the United Nations and regionally with the Organization of American States (OAS). Colombia provided a naval frigate and an infantry battalion to serve in Korea with the UN Command for four years. In 1956, President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla sent *Batallón Colombia* to serve as part of the UN Emergency Force (UNEF) to defuse the Suez Crisis. Colombia, as an original signatory of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance [commonly known as the Río Treaty (1948)], mobilized its armed forces in support of the OAS naval quarantine of Cuba during the Missile Crisis in 1962. Hemispheric defense was the basis of the Río Treaty; aggression against one is considered to be an attack against all member states.¹ Since 1982, Colombia has supported the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai with an infantry battalion (*Batallón Colombia*) and selected officers, the UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (UNOSAL), and the UN Protection Force in the former Yugoslavia (UNPROFOR).²



United Nations symbol



Multinational Force and Observers logo

The purpose of this article is to briefly explain the Colombian military missions with the UNEF during the Suez Crisis of 1956 and with the MFO in the Sinai since 1982. Colombia has supported the principle of collective security since the end of World War II. Its Army and Navy forces fought with the UN Command in Korea to halt Communist aggression. Since the Korean War, the Colombian Army has been providing international peacekeeping forces and observers. These highly sought after overseas assignments have been career enhancing and an opportunity to escape the domestic violence endemic to Colombia since *La Violencia* began in 1948.

In the first months after overthrowing the regime of

President Laureano Gómez, General Rojas Pinilla dramatically reduced the domestic violence. However, by early 1954, the country was again deep in guerrilla war, more localized in rural areas, but equally bloody. The National Police were taken out of the fight and the Army thrown in shortly before the return of *Batallón Colombia* from Korea. As Colonel Alberto Ruíz Novoa (second commander of the Colombian battalion and then Minister of War) and the other veterans of Korea rose rapidly to positions of responsibility, these leaders soon lost confidence in their



President Laureano Gómez, 1950–1953

La Violencia

WHEN an assassin killed populist Liberal Party leader and presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in central Bogotá on 9 April 1948, the citizens spontaneously



Populist Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán

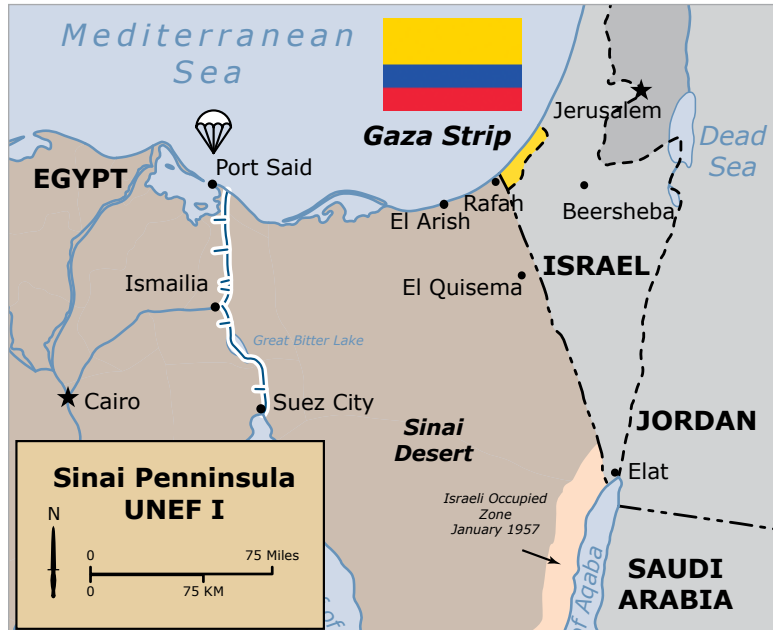
flooded into the streets to demonstrate their outrage. Uncontrolled violence for two days in the capital city left more than 1,400 people dead before order was restored. The *Bogotazo* (as those forty-eight hours are called) was the catalyst for the social turmoil that subsequently spread into the countryside. The traditional political antagonisms between Liberals and Conservatives, coupled with social and economic inequities,

prompted waves of rampant violence in rural areas. The uncontrolled killing that resembled familial blood feuds grew to epic proportions as law and order broke down in the countryside. *La Violencia* went through three distinct phases in its first life span: 1948–1953; 1953–1957; and 1958–1966.³



President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, El Jefe Supremo de Colombia, 1953–1957

Batallón Colombia insignia (which is identical to that worn in Korea)



United Nations Emergency Force I in the Sinai

former chief, who had evolved into a self-aggrandizing, despotic dictator ruling on whim. His days as president were numbered when, in a last ditch effort to regain military support, he committed the *Batallón Colombia* by executive decree to the UN for the Suez Crisis in 1956.⁴ The Army leadership, unwillingly involved in the domestic conflict, welcomed the UN mission. The crisis over the Suez Canal was an opportunity to divert the soldiers' attention from the violent war in the countryside.

The Suez Crisis of 1956 erupted after Anglo-French air forces bombarded Egyptian military targets before parachute assaults were made into Port Said and Port Faud. British and French paratroopers seized control of the Suez Canal on 31 October 1956. Two days before Israel had invaded the Sinai Peninsula. The rationale given for these acts of aggression were President Gamal Abdul Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, Egyptian and United Arab Republic (UAR) encouragement of Algerian nationalism, Egypt

allowing Arab guerrilla training bases in the Gaza Strip, and Nasser's threat to deny universal passage through the Suez Canal.⁵

During a 3–4 November 1956 all-night meeting of the UN General Assembly, the delegations from Canada, Colombia, and Norway drafted a joint resolution calling for a UN military task force to supervise a "cessation of hostilities" in the Suez. Colombian delegate Francisco Urrutía recommended that a "safety cordon" be established around the Gaza Strip by stationing UN troops along the frontier. The decision to provide a military unit to the UN raised little public interest in Colombia. The military regime did not need popular support to send its forces abroad. And, the Suez Crisis was not related to the country's domestic disorder.⁶

Military support to a UN mission, as it was during



UNEF symbol



President Abdul Gamal Nasser



Sunken vessels blocking the Suez Canal.



United Nations stamps commemorate UNEF mission to the Suez.



UN Emergency Force Medal

WHEN the *Batallón Colombia* returned from the Suez, it again became the elite force in the Colombian Army. But, this time the battalion would serve under a military-civilian junta government until a presidential election could be conducted.¹ It would be twenty-four years before Colombia accepted another peacekeeping mission. Again, it was in the Middle East, but this time the international peacekeepers would wear maroon berets instead of blue UN helmets.



UNEF medal

1 Russell W. Ramsey, "The Colombian Battalion in Korea and Suez," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* IX (October 1967), 555.

the Korean War, was one of the few issues on which most Colombian politicians were in agreement in 1956.

Offers of troops were made by twenty-four countries. Only ten were accepted. By 11 November 1956, forces from Canada, Colombia, Norway, and Denmark were assembled at Capodichino, near Naples, Italy. Within days, the contingents were flown by Swissair into Ismailia, Egypt, to form the UN Emergency Force (UNEF), commanded by Canadian Major General E.L.M. "Tommy" Burns, the former Chief of Staff of the UN Truce Supervision Organization.⁷ It was UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld who called the "Blue Helmets" the "first truly international force" because it eventually contained Communist, non-Communist, and neutral forces.

After the Anglo-French invasion force was pressured to



UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld

withdraw in late December 1956, the greatest potential spot for trouble was the Israeli-Egyptian border. The Brazilian, Indian, and Colombian battalions and a Swedish company were spread along the armistice demarcation line, called the Gaza Strip. The Colombian patrol sector until late October 1958 was the Khan Yunia zone.⁸

The UNEF mission was basic peacekeeping. The combined UN force monitored the French and British withdrawals and phased Israeli pull-back across the Sinai. UNEF assumed relief operations and administrative responsibility for the Gaza Strip. The forces of UNEF established observation posts and conducted patrols along the Gaza demarcation line and the international frontier in the Sinai between Israeli and Egyptian military forces. The *Batallón Colombia* of 490 officers and men sailed for Colombia on 28 October 1958, after nearly two years of peacekeeping duty.⁹ It would be twenty-four years before Colombia accepted another peacekeeping mission.

Colombia has provided an infantry battalion and officers to the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) mission since 1982. The MFO is an independent, international peacekeeping organization funded equally by Egypt, Israel, and the United States. It does not act as a buffer between Egyptian and Israeli forces nor as an instrument of interim or truce arrangements, but rather works closely with the two nations to support a permanent peace.¹⁰ Colombian Army soldiers and civilians (31 officers, 58 non-commissioned officers, 265 soldiers, and 3 civilians) are assigned to the Sinai mission for eight-month tours; half of the element rotates every four months.

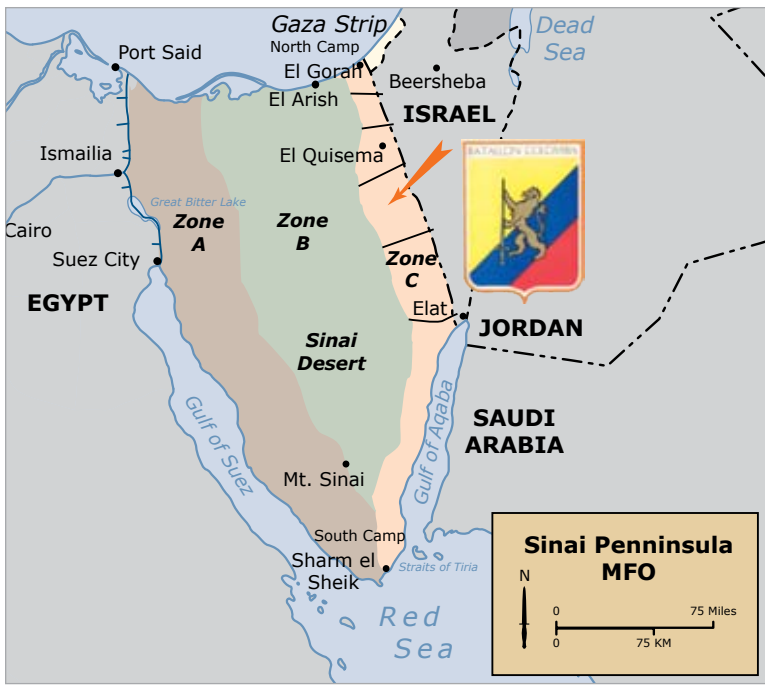
The mission of the *Batallón Colombia* is to observe and report any activities in the Central Sector of Zone C, according to the Sinai Treaty and Protocols, and to guard



President Jimmy Carter, architect of the Israel-Egypt Peace Accords of March 1979 and the MFO in August 1981.



Batallón Colombia with the MFO in the Sinai.



MFO Sinai map with Central Sector of Zone C highlighted



A Colombian soldier being awarded the MFO medal.



Multinational Force and Observers Medal

the North Camp, El Gorah, located on the northeast side of the Sinai border. The battalion also provides medical and dental officers, a force liaison officer, a force security officer, and fourteen soldiers to augment the Multinational Force staff. The *Batallón Colombia* accomplishes its peacekeeping observation mission by stationing elements of two infantry companies at seven remote sites throughout the Central Sector of Zone C, on the eastern border of the Sinai. Since the remote sites always have to be permanently manned, temporary observation posts and motorized patrols ensure wide coverage and continuous observation. Colombia is justifiably proud of its MFO mission in the Sinai that promotes peace and stability in the Middle East.¹¹

These two international peacekeeping missions reflect the continuous commitment of Colombia to world peace through international collective security. *Batallón Colombia* first became an instrument of Colombian foreign policy during the Korea War. Today, *Batallón Colombia* is still charged with that responsibility in the Sinai with the MFO. 📌

Endnotes

- 1 John Child, *Unequal Alliance: The Inter-American Military System, 1938–1978* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980), 164–65; Edwin Lieuwen, *U.S. Policy in Latin America: A Short History* (NY: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 99; “The Río Treaty,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interamerican_Treaty_of_Reciprocal_Assistance.
- 2 Major Antonio L. Pala, “The Increased Role of Latin American Armed Forces in UN Peacekeeping: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Airpower Journal* (special edition 1995), 2, 3. <http://www.airpower.Maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/api/pala.html>.
- 3 Dennis M. Rempe, *The Past as Prologue? A History of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in Colombia, 1958–1966* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2002), 2–3. Interestingly, Fidel Castro, representing the University of Havana law students, and Rafael del Piño, members of *Unión Insurreccional Revolucionaria (URI)*, arrived in Bogotá on 29 March 1948, to inaugurate a new inter-American student congress. They asked Jorgé Eliecier Gaitan to be the keynote speaker at a session of the congress. He was to address the students later in the afternoon on the day he was killed. Castro did become slightly involved as an armed observer in the *Bogotazo* riots, but sought sanctuary in the Cuban Embassy on 13 April 1948, and left the country shortly afterward. “Fidel Castro Reveals Role in 9 April 1948 Colombian Uprising,” *El Siglo* (Bogotá) 11 April 1982, 6–7, were excerpts of an undated interview with Cuban President Fidel Castro by journalist and writer Arturo Alape, broadcast over Colombia *Radio Cadena Caracol* on 9 April 1982, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro/1982/19820411>; Carlos Reyes Posada, *El Espectador* (Bogotá) 10 December 1961, from Hugh Thomas, *The Cuban Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1961), 28, in Geoff Simóns, *Colombia: A Brutal History* (London: SAQI Books, 2004), 45–46; David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 203.
- 4 Russell W. Ramsey, “The Colombian Battalion in Korea and Suez,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies* IX (October 1967), 555; Bradley L. Coleman, “The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950–1954,” *The Journal of Military History* 69 (January 2005) 1177; Szulc, *Twilight of the Tyrants*, 239. **The State of Emergency enacted in 1949 had not been lifted.**
- 5 Gabriella Rosner, *The United Nations Emergency Force* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1963), 6, 12, 17.
- 6 Ramsey, “The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez,” 549.
- 7 Rosner, *The United Nations Emergency Force*, 117, 119, 124.
- 8 Ramsey, “The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez,” 549, 550; **UNEF required a distinguishing uniform mark. American-style helmets were sprayed light blue in color with “UN” stenciled in white paint on the sides and issued to all troops.** Rosner, *The United Nations Emergency Force*, 123, 125, 127.
- 9 Ramsey, “The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez,” 549, 550.
- 10 “Multinational Force & Observers History,” <http://www.mfo.org/1/4/22base.asp>.
- 11 <http://www.mfo.org/1/9/38/base.asp>; http://www.Ejército.mil.co/English/?id_categoria