

Colombian rebels trade jungle for YouTube

HAVANA - Until recently, Milena Reyes spent her days slogging around the jungle, dressed in combat fatigues and carrying an assault rifle.

The Colombian guerrilla fighter never imagined she would end up in front of a TV camera wearing make-up and high heels to present the first-ever news programme by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on YouTube.

Reyes, 26, says she did not even know what her mission was when she and a small group of comrades were flown into Cuba, where the FARC and the Colombian government have been holding talks to end a five-decade armed conflict.

FARC commanders only told the youthful band of guerrillas once they arrived in Havana that they would be creating and producing the "Insurgent News," the Marxist rebel group's attempt to get its message out and revamp its image.

Reyes, who says she could not even watch television when she was in the jungle, said it was intimidating to suddenly become a TV presenter.



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"When you're in the mountains, you worry about staying alive. You get chills from the tension. Here the chills are different - I get nervous about people seeing me on TV," she said.

She has had to learn to wear heels, do her on-screen make-up in a matter of minutes and deal with the comments people make about her online.

Reyes, who only opened a Twitter account eight months ago, is now the head of social media for the news bulletin, a 15-minute weekly programme that blends traditional FARC propaganda -- revolutionary rhetoric and people power songs -- with segments on sports, culture and the Internet.

Some 50 editions have aired since the program debuted in October 2014.

Viviana Hernandez, a 49-year-old rebel who reviews books and movies for the news bulletin, said it was tricky transitioning from the jungle to cyberspace.

"It's been hard. We were trained for something else entirely. We shudder every time they point a camera at us," she said.

The FARC has been at war with the Colombian government since 1964, a conflict that has killed more than 220,000 people.

Human rights groups say atrocities have been committed on both sides.

But the FARC alleges its version of events gets only biased coverage in the "oligarchic" media.

To counter the weight of the mainstream press, the guerrillas' approach used to be to release statements datelined in "the mountains of Colombia" via clandestine short-range radio transmitters or European websites.

But the rebel group is now seeking to transform itself into a political party in anticipation of an eventual peace deal.

As part of that push, the fiercely "anti-imperialist" guerrillas have turned to firmly capitalist, American platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to tell their side of the story and improve their public relations.

"These are situations we could never have imagined a few years ago, but there's a new reality now," said FARC commander Carlos Lozada, a member of the rebel negotiating team.

Media analyst Omar Rincon, the director of the journalism program at the University of Los Andes in Colombia, praised the FARC's media savvy in using technology to convey its message in its own "esthetic-narrative code."

But he said the group needs to learn the news media are "not a recruiting tool."

"The FARC will continue losing the media war as long as it doesn't understand that you win with your message," he said.

Source: AFP