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Colombia: Update On Peace Negotiations, March 24 - April 20

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[For several months, the Colombian government has been involved in peace negotiations with rebel organizations under the Simon Bolivar National Guerrilla Coordinator (CNGSB). The Coordinator is an umbrella group for the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and a "dissident" faction of the demobilized Popular Liberation Army (EPL). See NotiSur 03/25/92 for recent coverage of peace talks and related events.] March 24: Interior Minister Humberto de la Calle announced that CNGSB rebel groups would be required to sign a cease-fire agreement as a pre-condition to continuing the negotiations. The last round of talks in Tlaxcala, Mexico, was suspended on March 21, following the death of former cabinet minister Argelino Duran Quintero. Duran was abducted by EPL rebels in late January. Anibal Pineda, spokesperson for demobilized EPL rebels, said the government should demand the removal of the dissident EPL faction from the CNGSB. In Tlaxcala, Coordinator spokesperson Alfonso Cano called for resumption of the peace talks. He said, "The dialogue can not be subject to interference by the daily tragedies of our country." Cano asserted that the CNGSB would not accept any conditions for continuing the talks. March 25: President Cesar Gaviria warned the rebel negotiating team that no peace agreement is possible as long as political violence continues. March 26: Presidential peace adviser Horacio Serpa Uribe told reporters that "changes" in the peace negotiations process are necessary if talks are to be resumed. He said that while the rebels have demonstrated interest in the peace process, their commitment to eventual demobilization has not been evident. According to Serpa Uribe, the rebels must recognize that the general public is more interested in a concrete cease-fire than continued discussions on general issues such as political "openings" and privatization. Next, the official said the CNGSB must publicly repudiate the abduction and death of Duran Quintero, and should reconsider Coordinator membership of EPL dissidents. In a nationwide TV and radio broadcast, Gaviria said peace negotiations would continue, but insisted on a clear indication of the rebels' will to reach a peace agreement. Gaviria said he would request priority discussions on a cease-fire and an end to abductions. The president did not specify such agreements are pre-conditions to continue the peace talks. A timetable for resuming the talks was not mentioned. Gaviria said that independently of the outcome of negotiations with the Coordinator, the government would continue to strengthen the nation's public security forces. He mentioned a 55 billion peso (US\$91 million) military budget supplement, and the addition of 12,000 new police and soldier recruits in 1991. March 28: In a communique, the CNGSB proposed the immediate resumption of peace talks in Tlaxcala. March 31: Government officials responded to the Coordinator's demand by asserting that talks will be resumed only when the rebels accept changes in the agenda to focus on priority topics, e.g., cease-fire, suspension of abductions and sabotage of the nation's oil and electricity infrastructure. According to government sources, rebel sabotage is responsible for at least 20% of current power rationing. April 3: Cano confirmed the Coordinator's request that presidential peace adviser Horacio Serpa Uribe return to Mexico to discuss changes in the agenda for the next round of peace talks. At a press conference, Gaviria said the government is prepared to deal with the rebels via military action should negotiations fail to bring about a "political solution." April 5:

According to Bogota daily newspaper El Tiempo, a special House-Senate commission will approve resumption of peace talks before April 10. April 7: Nel Beltran, Catholic Church mediator in the peace negotiations, said he was confident that the CNGSB would agree to prioritizing a cease-fire and an end to abductions in order for the talks to resume the following week. Beltran was appointed by the Colombian Conference of Bishops to mediate an agreement between the two sides on changing the agenda, and to avoid future suspension of the talks. Church mediation was requested by the government, and supported by the CNGSB. Military sources quoted by daily newspaper El Tiempo said the armed forces are developing a prolonged conflict strategy to be implemented if peace talks fail. April 12: CNGSB spokesperson Guillermo Zuloaga said proposals to modify the peace talk agenda presented by the government and Beltran were similar. Both call for negotiators to begin the talks with discussion of a cease-fire agreement, ending abductions, and immediate release of all kidnapping victims currently held by the rebels. According to Zuloaga, the two sides had originally agreed to begin the talks with discussions of economic and social welfare policies. He added that the Coordinator had already rejected the government's proposed first agenda items before Beltran suggested the same. April 16: Presidential peace adviser Serpa Uribe announced that peace talks with the Coordinator in Tlaxcala, Mexico, would be formally resumed on April 21. Both sides, he added, had agreed to consider modifying the agenda during the negotiations. April 20: Msgr. Pedro Rubiano Saenz, president of the Colombian Conference of Bishops, said the Church will not be represented in the next round of peace talks. He added that any further participation would go beyond the Church's role as mediator. [Sources: El Tiempo (Bogota), 03/26/92, 04/07/92; Spanish news service EFE, 03/31/92, 04/06/92, 04/07/92; Agence France-Presse, 03/24-26/92, 03/28/92, 03/31/92, 04/03/92, 04/05-09/92, 04/12/92, 04/16/92, 04/18/92; Chinese news service Xinhua, 04/03/92, 04/20/92; Notimex, 03/26/92, 03/31/92, 04/01/92, 04/07-09/92, 04/14/92, 04/20/92]

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