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Colombia: Update On Peace Negotiations & Related Developments, April 21 - May 23

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April 23: Peace negotiations between the Simon Bolivar National Guerrilla Coordinator (CNGSB) and the government resumed in Tlaxcala, Mexico. The talks focused on the rules, procedures and agenda for continuing the negotiations. The government unilaterally suspended the peace talks on March 20 following the death of former minister Argelino Duran Quintero. The CNGSB is an umbrella organization for the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and a faction of the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). The CNGSB proposed prohibiting any future interruptions in the talks, and the presence of an "international supervisor" to monitor the talks and compliance with agreements. Presidential peace adviser Horacio Serpa Uribe rejected the proposal, "because there are no agreements to verify." He added that the government was determined to prioritize an end to abductions, and reaching a cease-fire agreement. Next, Serpa Uribe questioned the participation of EPL representatives Diego Ruiz and Asdrubal Jimenez at the talks. He called on the EPL to immediately release former House of Representatives president (speaker) Norberto Morales, who was abducted over six weeks ago. May 2: In Bogota, the office of the presidency released a statement indicating that the government and the rebels had agreed to indefinitely suspend peace negotiations to give both sides an opportunity to reflect on "the situation." The statement called on the rebels to avoid terrorist acts against politicians and civilians, and economic sabotage targeting the nation's electricity grid and the oil industry in order to maintain a climate "conducive to the resumption of talks." CNGSB representatives said the recess would not continue for over six months, and emphasized that the suspension does not mean the negotiations have failed. May 6: In Bogota, Serpa Uribe told reporters that prospects for reaching a peace agreement are very remote. He said the talks will be resumed by Oct. 31 at the latest. According to Serpa Uribe, the recess was a blow to the rebels' image. May 7: The Colombian Federation of Municipalities reiterated a request to Bogota for authorization to hold local and regional peace negotiations. According to Omar Florez, Federation president and mayor of Medellin, the petition is supported by broad sectors of society, including businesspeople, politicians, church leaders and journalists. May 8: According to a statement released by the Presidency Secretariat, the government will participate in negotiations with the Socialist Renovation faction of the ELN. The statement was signed by Serpa Uribe and Jacinto Ruiz, Socialist Renovation spokesperson. The ELN-RS appeared in mid-1991, and is considered the most moderate ELN faction. Faction members have expressed opposition to the abduction of civilians, and sabotage of the electricity grid and oil industry infrastructure. The ELN-RS claims to represent about 30% of ELN combatants. May 14: Senate president (speaker) Carlos Espinosa received authorization from President Cesar Gaviria to accept an invitation by the CNGSB to meet with rebel leaders in Tlaxcala, Mexico, to "discuss peace matters." May 15: Gaviria told reporters that the potential for achieving a political solution to the conflict is continually deteriorating. The president said the government plans a "massive rearmament" effort in order to contain the insurgency. In order to finance the anti-guerrilla campaign, said Gaviria, the government is forced to "sacrifice" resources earmarked for social welfare programs. Next, a large portion of US$900 million in revenue...
expected from a tax reform package recently submitted to the congress will be earmarked for the counterinsurgency campaign. Gaviria said the rebels have stepped up terrorist activities since the talks were suspended. In a communiqué, the CNGSB said rebels will insist on participating in local and regional peace talks throughout the country, "in order to ease tensions and prepare the country for a resumption of top level negotiations." May 17: In a statement broadcast on the Caracol radio network, the government condemned the recent escalation in rebel violence, and the May 16 hijacking by rebels of a commercial airliner. Presidential peace adviser Serpa Uribe called the rebels' "total war" on the government a serious "political error" that makes the potential for a negotiated peace even more limited. The government claimed to have intercepted orders from FARC commander Manuel Marulanda Velez, known as "Tiro Fijo," calling on combatants to launch a terrorist offensive aimed at pressuring the government into accepting regional peace talks. May 18: The CNGSB denied a statement by Administrative Security Department (DAS-secret police) director Fernando Brito that the rebels used the peace negotiations in Mexico as an opportunity for weapons acquisition in Central America. May 20: An unidentified judge issued arrest warrants for leaders of the former April 19 Movement (M-19) on charges of ordering the November 1985 occupation of the Palace of Justice. Over 100 people died during the rebel takeover. The judge also sent copies of the charges to the Supreme Court in order to determine whether then-president Belisario Betancur and his defense minister Miguel Vega Uribe should be investigated for involvement in the case. When M-19 demobilized in 1989, the government issued an amnesty for former rebel leaders. The former guerrillas established the M-19 Democratic Alliance party (AD-M19). The warrants claim that the 1989 amnesty does not apply to "atrocities." AD-M19 leaders requested assistance from the government and the national congress to resolve the legal dispute. In a letter to Attorney General Carlos Arrieta, President Gaviria said that rebel leaders covered by the 1989 amnesty cannot be prosecuted for crimes which took place prior to the amnesty decree. Presidential peace adviser Serpa Uribe said former M-19 rebels complied with peace agreement terms, and have been successfully reintegrated into civilian life, and the political system. He added that the charges endanger the country's fragile peace process. May 21: In Mexico City, Alejandro Botero, business attache at the Colombian Embassy, told reporters that his government will not return to the negotiating table as long as the rebels refuse to discuss a cease-fire and an end to kidnappings. Botero dismissed the possibility of incorporating regional and local government leaders, businesspeople, and others in the negotiations. He asserted that when the peace talks commenced, federal government and CNGSB representatives signed an agreement stating that the negotiations would involve the two parties only. The AD-M19 submitted a bill to the national congress proposing to drop all charges regarding political and politically-related crimes against individuals who have received official amnesty. AD-M19 leaders said, "The legislation would be a guarantee for past and future peace agreements." May 22: Rebels released kidnapping victim Norberto Morales following receipt of 300 million pesos (about US$455,000) in ransom. Morales was abducted March 3 by EPL rebels. The AD-M19 announced plans to act as an opposition party. The government was urged to renew peace negotiations with the CNGSB, and to comply with existing accords. Health Minister Camilo Gonzalez, a member of the AD-M19, said he will resign unless charges against M-19 leaders are dropped. Former EPL rebels said they are prepared to take up weapons and return to the mountains in self-defense. A dissident faction of the EPL which rejected demobilization is accused of the "continual massacre" of former comrades in arms who opted for disarmament. May 23: Senate president Carlos Espinosa arrived in Mexico City to meet with CNGSB leaders. [Sources: Prensa Latina (Cuba), 04/22/92, 05/07/92; Chinese news service Xinhua, 04/23/92, 05/14/92, 05/15/92; Spanish news service EFE, 05/03/92, 05/07/92, 05/08/92, 05/18/92,
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