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LADB Staff

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Death of ELN Leader Could Affect Peace Effort in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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Colombia's second-largest guerrilla group, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), confirmed the death of its leader, Manuel Perez Martinez, also known as Cura Perez or Poliarco. The 54-year-old Perez, a Spanish former priest, died of chronic hepatitis in the northern department of Santander on February 14, but the death was not made public until April 25. Perez was ordained a priest in his native Spain in 1966. He came to Colombia and began working in the poor barrios of Cartagena de Indias. He joined the ELN in 1969, and said he took up the armed struggle to put his Christian-Marxist ideals into practice.

"For us peace and love are the basic values by which a society should live," Perez said in one of his last press interviews. "But events have forced us to take part in a war of liberation." Perez was buried April 6 in the mountainous region of Catatumbo near the Venezuelan border, an area controlled by the ELN. Perez's death raises questions about the moves toward peace talks that had taken place between the ELN and the government.

A "preagreement" was signed in Madrid Feb. 9, but the ELN pulled out of the process saying it had become politicized. Some analysts say the pullout was most likely related to the death of Perez. President Ernesto Samper praised Perez for supporting the Madrid accord. "His ultimate desire for peace was reflected in the spirit of the accord," Samper said. The government "hopes his memory will open new paths that will lead to peace and reconciliation for all Colombians."

The ELN was founded in 1964 by brothers Manuel and Fabio Vasquez Castano. One of the group's early heroes was another priest, Camilo Torres, who joined shortly after its formation and died in combat in 1966. The Vasquez Castano brothers were killed in a confrontation with the Colombian military in 1973. Following their death, Perez assumed leadership of the group. The ELN has focused on destroying infrastructure, especially oil pipelines, claiming that foreign companies are unfairly exploiting Colombia's natural resources. It has been responsible for most of the 600 dynamite attacks during the past 10 years against the 780-km Cano Limon-Covenas pipeline, the longest in the country.

The attacks have caused hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue. Successor called hard-liner Succeeding Perez as the head of the ELN is the group's military commander, Nicolas Rodriguez Bautista, known as Gabino. Rodriguez has strongly opposed dialogue with the Samper government, which he considers corrupt and illegitimate. Rodriguez, the oldest of 17 children, joined the ELN in 1964 at the age of 13 and has spent all his adult life in the rebel ranks. "He's a hard-liner and definitely favors the military line," said a member of the military intelligence services who requested anonymity.

Former ELN rebel Fernando Hernandez, head of the political group Renovacion Socialista, at one time a part of the ELN, rejected the army claims that Rodriguez is an irrevocable hard-liner,

and he said Rodriguez had learned "political flexibility" from Perez. Hernandez said Rodriguez's immediate challenge would be to maintain the unity of the 5,000-strong guerrilla force. "The death of Manuel Perez has left the ELN without a man with the moral authority to unify the different tendencies within the movement," Hernandez told Reuters. "That could lead to a greater fragmentation or even splits."

The creation of splinter groups could bring more sabotage, kidnapping, and attacks on oil installations, but it would also reduce the ELN's military capability, Hernandez said. Rodriguez says he wants peace, but will continue fighting Rodriguez has said the only hope for peace is if "the owners of power" the armed forces and the powerful economic groups accept profound changes to eradicate the misery of the Colombian people.

"As long as the oligarchy of this country continues acting as it has until now, we will not stop," said Rodriguez. "When the multinationals quit making scandalous profits, when Ardila Lulle, Julio Mario Santodomingo, and the Sindicato Antioqueno [the three major business groups in Colombia] think about social development instead of amassing more and more, the insurgency will be left without a cause."

At the same time, Rodriguez emphasized his hope for peace. "I believe it has always been the time for peace. I believe that it is never the time for war," he said. "The guerrillas continue to be the answer to social misery." [Sources: CNN, Reuter, 04/06/98, 04/07/98; Associated Press, Inter Press Service, 04/07/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 04/08/98; Notimex, 04/06/98, 04/10/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/25/98, 04/06/98, 04/07/98, 04/12/98]

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