

7-17-1998

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Talks With Rebels Renew Hopes for Peace in Colombia." (1998). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12524>

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Talks With Rebels Renew Hopes for Peace in Colombia

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 1998-07-17

Following quickly on the heels of presidential elections, several recent events have raised the hopes of Colombians that peace may become a reality after more than 30 years of war. President-elect Andres Pastrana surprised the nation on July 9 with a visit to the jungle where he met with Manuel Marulanda "Tirofijo," leader of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). Three days later, through the auspices of the German Catholic bishops, talks began in Mainz, Germany, between the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) and various civic and nongovernmental organizations.

Although the turn of events offers the greatest chance for peace since talks held in Mexico between the guerrillas and the government broke off in 1992, both sides caution that peace will not be achieved quickly or easily. Both the FARC and the ELN had refused to negotiate with President Ernesto Samper's government, which they called "illegitimate" after charges that drug money financed the 1994 election campaign. Both groups have now agreed to separately pursue peace negotiations with the incoming Pastrana government and have said they will later seek a unified peace project.

Pastrana holds jungle meeting with FARC leaders

In Pastrana's surprise meeting with FARC leaders, arranged through the International Red Cross, the president-elect promised to begin talks within 90 days after taking office on Aug. 7, and he agreed to rebel demands to demilitarize more than 40,000 sq km of territory as a precondition for the start of negotiations. A film clip aired on Colombian TV showed Pastrana greeting FARC leaders Marulanda and Manuel Briceno.

The narration by one of the guerrillas describes the meeting as "vital and historic" and "of far-reaching significance in the search for a political solution to the social and armed conflict." No other Colombian president or president-elect has met with guerrilla leaders on territory controlled by insurgents. ELN meets civic representatives in Germany Pastrana's dramatic meeting with the FARC came just three days before Colombia's second-strongest guerrilla group, the ELN, began four days of talks in Mainz, Germany, with business, labor, and church leaders. The agenda included rebel calls for agrarian reform, a reduction in the role of foreign multinationals in Colombia's oil industry, greater social spending, and a halt to the "dirty war" tactics of the armed forces and right-wing death squads.

ELN leader Juan Vasquez said that, should the new administration in Colombia be willing to negotiate with the insurgents, the dialogue must take place in Colombia and with the backing of the international community. But Vasquez said only those countries that have shown "their impartiality, neutrality, and discretion" will be welcome in the process. Although the US is not welcome, Vasquez said, Washington will be present through Pastrana "who received technical assistance and financial support from the US during his campaign."

On July 15, at the conclusion of the talks in Mainz, the ELN announced that it would no longer take children, the elderly, or pregnant women as hostages. The rebels also gave conditional agreement to halt attacks on oil pipelines, which, in the past 12 years, have resulted in the loss of 1.65 million barrels of oil. "In the last few days we have reached a breakthrough, but the end of this war is not the end of the conflict," said Hans Langendoerfer, general secretary of the German Bishops Conference. "For this, political reforms are needed." Langendoerfer said the ELN had agreed not to use anti-personnel mines in conflict zones and to back concrete measures for the protection of human rights, including protecting schools, hospitals, and water supplies. The parties agreed to hold a national convention before Oct. 12 to discuss economic and social reforms that may open the door to a permanent cease-fire.

The ELN's Pablo Beltran said they support meetings with the incoming Colombian government, "but we will not dialogue with other military groups under any circumstances." Paramilitaries make their own offer. A major obstacle toward peace will be the paramilitary groups, which have killed hundreds of civilians suspected of guerrilla sympathies (see NotiSur, 12/19/97). The paramilitary leaders refuse to disarm before the guerrillas, and they want a seat at the peace table. Just before the talks began in Germany, the paramilitaries requested to participate, but the ELN flatly refused.

On July 15, in a 12-point communique to Pastrana, the paramilitary alliance Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) called for an area in northern Colombia to be demilitarized to make way for negotiations. The letter was signed by the AUC leader Carlos Castano and 15 of his collaborators. "We reiterate that the solution to the present armed conflict should be exclusively political....We reconfirm our willingness to make way for a peace process," said the communique. "We require the demilitarization of a municipality in the north of Colombia and full guarantees for our negotiators. We will not demilitarize before the guerrillas because we consider it disadvantageous for the peace process."

The nongovernmental Centro de Investigaciones y Estudio Politicos (CINEP) blames the paramilitaries for 84% of the killings of civilians this year in Colombia. Another 14% of the murders had been carried out by the guerrillas and the remaining 6% were attributed to the army. CINEP said the paramilitary groups justify their massacres saying it is "very difficult" to determine "who is a guerrilla and who isn't." Killing suspects is thus "an effective warning" to the population not to support the rebels in any way.

Colombian government and US also out of talks

Not included in the Mainz talks were official government representatives, since the ELN said the talks were "not with the government, but with civil society." The ELN also said the US State Department had asked that a representative be allowed to sit in on the talks, but the request was turned down. "We received a proposal to include Americans in the negotiations," said Vasquez. He said ending the civil war was Colombia's business alone, and he blamed US imperialism for many of the country's social ills. "The US is part of the conflict and has no moral authority to mediate," said Vasquez. "The paramilitaries who operate in Colombia are the product of the School of the Americas, created in the 1970s by the US whose government is responsible for 70% of the political, social, and economic problems in Colombia."

Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan also offered to mediate an end Latin America's longest-running insurgency. "I have sent a message of congratulations to the president-elect and...indicated the UN would be very happy to do whatever we can do in a useful way to assist Colombia," Annan told a news conference. Road to peace will still be arduous Although peace may be on the horizon, securing it will test the nation's resolve. "It will require enormous discipline on the part of Colombian society...to speak with caution, to work with reserve and discretion, and to accept that negotiations will be lengthy and include moments of crisis and fragility," said Javeriana University political analyst Ernesto Borda. The latest peace efforts have some "exceptional characteristics" if compared with past attempts, said Horacio Duque, director of the nongovernmental Fundacion Participacion Civil.

The meeting in Mainz and Pastrana's meeting with the top FARC commanders could be the starting point for "a broad concerted effort by all sectors of society toward a solution to Colombia's problem of violence." "Peace is not just around the corner," cautioned political analyst Alfredo Rangel, an expert on the guerrillas who expects both sides to intensify fighting even as they talk of reconciliation. He believes the FARC may be using negotiations to gain political legitimacy, while still harboring hopes of taking power by force.

Nevertheless, reactions to the meetings were almost universally positive. National Police commander Gen. Rosso Jose Serrano praised the meeting as a possible prelude to a legitimate peace process. "We're finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel," Serrano said. "This is a great opportunity." [Sources: Inter Press Service, 07/08/98, 07/10/98; Notimex, 07/10/98; Associated Press, 07/12/98; Clarin (Argentina), 07/13/98; Reuters, 07/10/98, 07/14/98, 07/15/98; The Miami Herald, 07/11/98, 07/12/98, 07/16/98; Spanish news service EFE, 07/12/98, 07/15/98, 07/16/98]

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