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## War Continues in Colombia Despite Calls for Peace

by LADB Staff

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Colombia's peace process has been stalled since January. At informal meetings between congressional representatives and negotiators for the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in San Vicente de Caguan, both sides agreed to resume formal meetings April 20. But even as peace efforts limp along, guerrilla attacks and kidnappings continue, and the army prepares for a large-scale war.

Twenty members of the congressional peace commissions and human rights commissioner Victor G. Ricardo traveled in early April to San Vicente de Caguan, the demilitarized area in southern Colombia, to meet with FARC leaders. FARC commandante Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda Velez repeated the rebel demand for an exchange of FARC-held police and military for its members in Colombian prisons. The FARC offered to carry out coca-eradication in an area under its control to show its willingness and ability to "find a social solution to the scourge of drugs." Meanwhile, Colombia's Catholic Church and civic organizations used traditional Holy Week celebrations to call for an end to the country's decades of violence.

Catholic bishops called for an end to the war and to political corruption as well as for respect for human rights. "All of the participants in the war, absolutely all, must stop the operations that cause the suffering of so many innocent people, spill the blood of their brothers and sisters, and bring pain to so many widows and orphans," said Cardinal Dario Castrillon.

### *Plane is hijacked by guerrillas*

Despite the calls for peace, the violence continues. On April 11, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) shot down a US-made Huey UH-1H police helicopter as it flew over Bolivar province. Nine people were injured. The following day, the ELN hijacked a plane with 41 passengers and five crew members aboard. The abandoned plane was later found at a small air strip in Bucaramanga province. By April 15, ten captives had been released.

The International Red Cross has been in contact with the rebels trying to secure the release of the remaining hostages. Analysts say the ELN could be using the kidnapping to strengthen its bargaining position for upcoming talks with the government. The ELN is demanding that the government demilitarize an area in northern Colombia, similar to the FARC-controlled area, but the government has refused. Defense Minister Rodrigo Lloreda, meanwhile, is preparing for all-out war. Lloreda says he plans to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the ill-equipped and poorly motivated military so that it can defeat the guerrillas if the peace process fails. Since mid-1996, the army has suffered several major defeats at the hands of the FARC.

The Defense Ministry launched a program in March to create a more professional force "ready for peace or war." Lloreda plans to increase the number of combat troops to 90,000 in three years, cut the bureaucracy, and improve troop mobility with more helicopters and logistical support. "This

will help the peace process," said Lloreda. "I think that when the guerrillas see they are not going to take power through armed conflict, they will be more willing to arrive at a negotiated agreement." Lloreda says he wants to find peace, either through dialogue or militarily. "The guerrillas are still waging war, these are the rules of the game established not by the government, but by the guerrillas," said Lloreda. "They said they were going to dialogue in the midst of the conflict, and we are not going to sit waiting to see what happens."

### *Role of US in Colombia*

The upgrading and a new offensive against the rebels have the backing of the US. The US is giving Colombia a record US\$289 million in military-related aid in 1999, including weapons and aircraft, and is helping set up an elite 1,000-member anti-narcotics unit near rebel strongholds in the south (see NotiSur, 1998-12-04, 1999-01-22). Throughout the region, US military teams are training local armies. The Miami-based US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) said as of March it had 160 US military personnel in Ecuador, 136 in Venezuela, and 181 in Peru.

SOUTHCOM also persuaded Peru and Ecuador to move more troops to their northern borders to contain Colombian "narco-traffickers and their associated insurgents." Most political observers believe direct US intervention in Colombia's conflict is unlikely, but human rights groups are troubled by Washington's growing behind-the-scenes role. "US intervention is based on the deadly equation that they provide the military technology and the weapons and we provide the dead," said Alejandro Santos, a columnist in the news magazine *Semana*. Following the FARC's killing of three US citizens in Colombia in March, the US has linked its support for the peace process to the FARC handing over those responsible.

After the bodies of the US citizens who were helping the U'wa Indian community were discovered, FARC commanders blamed a little-known field commander (see NotiSur, 1999-03-12). But government officials insist top regional commander German Briceno, brother of the FARC's second-ranking leader and military strategist, ordered the killings. On March 26, Colombian authorities issued an arrest warrant for Briceno and for Gustavo Bokota, a member of the U'wa community. President cracks down on paramilitaries and their army backers

On March 24, President Andres Pastrana demanded that the paramilitary organizations cease their operations, and he said groups such as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) would not be given political status. "Since we drew up the policy of peace, we have made a commitment to combat the self-defense and private justice groups, being firmly convinced that they are a serious factor in the degradation of the conflict," said Pastrana. "They [the AUC] do not have political characteristics. Their only viable option is to cease their operations immediately and dismantle their military structures."

On March 31, Lt. Col. Lino Sanchez Prado was arrested for his alleged involvement in the massacre of about 30 people by an AUC in 1997. More than 100 paramilitaries attacked the town of Mapiripan in eastern Meta province in July 1997 (see NotiSur, 1997-07-25). The attackers beheaded some of their victims with machetes and tortured others. AUC leader Carlos Castano claimed responsibility for the attack and said the victims were all either Marxist rebels or their known sympathizers. Sanchez Prado was operations chief of the army's 12th brigade when the massacre occurred.

On April 9, Pastrana ordered the dismissal of two more senior army officers, Brig. Gens. Rito Alejo del Rio, the army's chief of operations, and Fernando Millan Perez, director of the Bogota-based Army War College, both of whom are under investigation for links to right-wing death squads. The military has long denied charges by human rights groups that it backs the paramilitary that have killed with impunity for more than a decade. When the FARC broke off talks with the government in January, it said the government had done nothing to halt paramilitary violence or military support for the far right. The recent crackdown may be part of a government bid to get the peace process back on track. [Sources: CNN, 03/17/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 03/25/99, 03/26/99, 04/02/99; Notimex, 03/24-26/99, 04/03/99; El Tiempo (Colombia), 04/09/99; Reuters, 03/16/99, 03/26/99, 03/31/99, 04/09/99, 04/11/99; Associated Press, 03/29/99, 04/14/99; The Miami Herald, 04/13/99, 04/14/99; The New York Times, 04/14/99; Spanish news service EFE, 03/25/99, 04/13-15/99]

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