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Talks Resume Between Colombian Government, Rebels

by LADB Staff

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An unexpected overture by Colombian President Andres Pastrana has once again raised the hope that the half-century civil war might see a negotiated peace. Talks between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), stalled since January, are now set to resume.

On May 2, Pastrana met with FARC commander Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda to finalize an agenda and push forward the stalled talks. It was their second meeting in a year, and the first between a sitting president and a rebel commander. The first meeting took place July 9, 1998, after Pastrana was elected but a month before he took office. The two were supposed to meet again at the opening ceremonies of the peace process in January, but Marulanda did not show up (see NotiSur, 1999-01-22).

The latest meeting took place in Caquetania, a hamlet in the Caqueta department in the rebel-controlled area of southeastern Colombia. It resolved months of disagreements between lower-ranking negotiators regarding the agenda for formal talks. Both Pastrana and Marulanda faced opposition in their own camps regarding the face-to-face encounter. Government delegates who accompanied Pastrana were Senate president Fabio Valencia, former foreign relations minister Maria Emma Mejia, Atlantico department Gov. Rodolfo Espinosa, and industrialist Nicanor Restrepo Santamaria.

At Caquetania, Pastrana said one delegate at the formal talks would be a "high-ranking retired military" person. No more than ten negotiators would participate, said Peace Commissioner Victor Ricardo. The agenda agreed upon by Pastrana and Marulanda includes human rights, agrarian reform, free-market economic policies, reform of the armed forces, and a crop-substitution project for campesinos growing coca and opium poppies for use in manufacturing illegal drugs.

In an important agreement, Pastrana and Marulanda approved "an international commission" to take part in the talks "to overcome any problems that may arise." The presence of foreigners will make it difficult for either side to pull out of talks without losing credibility. "This is extraordinary news for Colombia," said Valencia. Although the document signed by Pastrana and Marulanda set May 6 as the start date for negotiations, more snags occurred, and Mejia predicted a delay of up to three weeks.

The declaration cited both sides' "unwavering political commitment to find a political solution to the conflict," and said negotiators had reviewed efforts and found "concrete and significant advances." "This is a definitive moment in the history of Colombia and at last we can start...negotiations," said Mejia. Although not stated explicitly, the agreement effectively extends the controversial withdrawal of all government forces from the region where Pastrana met with Marulanda. The troop

withdrawal, effected last November, was set to expire May 7, and Pastrana had said he would not extend it unless progress was made in the discussions to define an agenda for the talks.

Pastrana faces growing criticism

Pastrana's unexpected meeting with Marulanda may breathe new life into the so-far unsuccessful efforts to end the war. Should the talks begin to show progress, they may weaken charges that Pastrana has given up too much to the rebels for too little in return. The criticism is accompanied by widespread speculation that the rebels have no real desire for peace but are stalling for time and concessions that will enhance prospects of a military victory. The rebels broke off talks in January, demanding that Pastrana crack down on the right-wing paramilitary groups that have killed thousands of suspected guerrilla sympathizers. In April, Pastrana retired two army generals accused of having paramilitary ties (see NotiSur, 1999-04-16).

Foreign governments and human rights groups praised the action as a significant step toward creating a climate for negotiations. Some critics in Colombia, however, called it a humiliating capitulation to pressures by the rebels and the US Embassy. "To fire the generals at the request of the guerrillas is to hand over to the insurgents a presidential prerogative," said Alvaro Uribe, former governor of the department of Antioquia and a prominent opposition leader, during a ceremony in support of the generals. "It is counterproductive to make concessions to the insurgency without a single act of reciprocity in favor of the people."

The proposed agenda presented to the FARC by government negotiators was also strongly criticized as giving the guerrillas an opportunity to shape policy regarding most aspects of Colombia's economic and political life, including overhauling the state and restructuring the armed forces. Until recently, much criticism of Pastrana's peace overtures has come from hard-core rightists like former Gen. Harold Bedoya who say the president's actions will lead to a permanent FARC liberated zone or "independent republic" in Colombia.

But centrists and even some leftists have begun to question Pastrana's negotiating tactics, especially the government's proposed agenda. "For arguments sake, let's say that the FARC still represents a sector of the peasantry," political commentator Eduardo Pizarro Leongomez wrote in Bogota's *El Espectador* newspaper. "Is that enough to give it the chance, served up on a silver platter, to make decisions for all Colombians?" "This type of offer sends a deeply harmful message in Colombia violence continues to be profitable," wrote Pizarro. "While the majority of Colombians work quietly and peacefully for a better country, the future is negotiated with those who demand what's theirs with the barrel of a gun."

Such skepticism is exacerbated by provocative guerrilla statements. A week after meeting with Pastrana, the press quoted a FARC leader saying the group would not negotiate its key aim of setting up a socialist regime. "We have nothing to negotiate," said Raul Reyes, lead negotiator for the FARC. "The government must negotiate to hand back part of what it has taken away from the people. We have proposals to solve the problems." The comments were similar to statements by Reyes in January that the FARC's ultimate aim was to take power by peaceful or violent means and set up a socialist "government of workers, campesinos, and Indians."

ELN hostage crisis continues

Meanwhile, a month after the second-strongest guerrilla group, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), hijacked a plane with 41 passengers and crew aboard, 16 have been released. Seven were released May 7, adding to the nine released earlier. After repeatedly insisting that the ELN would not be given a demilitarized zone similar to the FARC-controlled area, on May 4, Defense Minister Rodrigo Lloreda said the government will withdraw troops from the zone where the hijacking took place if the rebels release their captives. [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), Inter Press Service, 05/03/99; The New York Times, 05/03/99, 05/04/99; The Miami Herald, 05/04/99; Notimex, 05/03/99, 05/05/99; Associated Press, 05/03/99, 05/05/99, 05/06/99; Spanish news service EFE, 05/01/99, 05/02/99, 05/04/99, 05/05/99, 05/07/99; Reuters, 05/03/99, 05/06/99, 05/10/99]

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