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## Colombian Defense Minister Quits in Dispute Regarding Concessions to Guerrillas

by LADB Staff

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Colombian Defense Minister Rodrigo Lloreda resigned May 26, citing differences with the administration of President Andres Pastrana regarding the peace process. As the political crisis was unfolding, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) kidnapped 150 people who were attending mass at a parish in Cali.

The crisis set off by Lloreda's resignation forced Pastrana to cancel some activities at the presidential summit of the Comunidad Andina de Naciones (CAN), which was underway in Cartagena de Indias. He also canceled his trip to Mexico where he planned to participate in the Grupo de Rio summit. Lloreda, the 1990 Partido Conservador presidential candidate and a former senator, ambassador to Washington, and newspaper publisher, was the backbone of the Cabinet, and Pastrana's quick acceptance of his resignation stunned many Colombians. The vice minister, Alvaro Jose Cabo, resigned the same day in support of Lloreda.

Lloreda had publicly disagreed with Victor G. Ricardo, Pastrana's peace envoy, regarding talks with the 15,000-member Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). "My perception of the threats confronting the country and of the current management of the peace process differ fundamentally from those of the government," Lloreda said in a resignation letter he read to reporters. "Many people in this country think there have been too many concessions on the part of the state and not enough gestures of peace from some insurgent groups."

Lloreda said Pastrana has been too conciliatory toward the guerrillas. He said the government erred in announcing an indefinite extension of an army pullout begun last November from a Switzerland-sized area in southern Colombia. Lloreda said the extension would encourage the rebels to drag out peace talks and could lead to a permanent partitioning of the country into government and rebel-held areas. He also said he doubted the FARC's willingness to end the decades-old conflict. Pastrana ordered all troops out of the 42,000-sq km area in November in what was described as a temporary measure to induce the FARC into preliminary peace talks. But peace commissioner Ricardo announced May 27 that the region would remain a FARC sanctuary as long as peace talks with the group remain on track.

### *Experts disagree on concessions*

Right-wing US legislators and State Department officials in Washington backed Lloreda's position that the demilitarization should not be prolonged indefinitely. State Department officials said the indefinite withdrawal of army troops from the area strengthens subversion and favors drug trafficking. But former Colombian foreign minister Augusto Ramirez, a member of the nongovernmental Comision Nacional de Conciliacion (CNC), agreed with Ricardo that a geographical space where guarantees exist is needed so that negotiations can move forward.

Ramirez added, however, that Lloreda was also right in saying concessions should be conditioned on results. For wealthy conservatives and army leaders, Lloreda was their guarantee that Pastrana would not sell out their interests in any peace talks with the guerrillas. "The departure of Lloreda saps the confidence and security of an important segment of the political elite," said political analyst Rafael Nieto. Lloreda had begun a program to strengthen the 146,000- member armed forces, which won the loyalty of top officers. His resignation shocked the military. Press reports said as many as 20 generals tendered their resignations following Lloreda's announcement, setting off talk of a possible coup.

Pastrana dispelled coup rumors after holding an emergency meeting with military leaders, and he said he had rejected the officers' resignations. He read a statement saying that the crisis was over and that "the government and the armed forces are deeply united and identified with the national aim of seeking peace." After the meeting with Pastrana, armed forces commander Gen. Fernando Tapias assured the nation that all 58 military commanders "reiterated their loyalty to the president, their absolute respect for the Constitution, and their support for the peace process."

On May 29, Pastrana named Luis Fernando Ramirez as the new defense minister. Ramirez is a close associate of the president and was Pastrana's running mate when he lost the election to Ernesto Samper in 1994. Critics demand peace commissioner's ouster Most analysts agree that Lloreda's resignation was the most serious political crisis that Pastrana has faced since he took office in August 1998. The daily *El Tiempo* newspaper wrote that "the seriousness of what happened cannot be minimized." It added that things "should never have been allowed to reach this point."

The opposition Partido Liberal demanded the immediate resignation of Ricardo because he is causing "dangerous cracks" in the military forces. "This entire crisis was started by the peace commissioner who brought up the indefinite extension of the demilitarized zone without consulting military officials," said Sen. Mario Uribe, one of the hawks of the Partido Liberal. "That's why it would be good for the country if Ricardo presented his resignation immediately, otherwise the crisis could get worse."

### *ELN kidnaps churchgoers*

Meanwhile, on May 30, about 30 uniformed members of the ELN entered a Catholic church in an exclusive suburb of Cali and took nearly 150 parishioners hostage, including women, children, and elderly people. They later released 84 people. The ELN had hijacked a plane with 41 passengers and crew on board on April 12, and the rebels still hold 25 hostages from that incident.

The guerrillas convinced the churchgoers to board trucks by telling them they were soldiers and had received information that a bomb had been placed in the church, said Ana Elisa Pardo, one of the released hostages. Pastrana was en route to Canada, and Finance Minister Juan Camilo Restrepo, in charge in Pastrana's absence, convened the security council and said the ELN had further damaged peace prospects. "This is an act of war and not of peace," he said. The latest mass kidnapping brought international condemnation from governments and nongovernmental organizations. The Catholic Church excommunicated the rebels responsible for the kidnapping.

Pastrana cut short his visit to Canada and returned to Colombia. "The government I head will not negotiate under pressure," the president said in Cali. He said the government will have no contact with the ELN until it releases all the hostages from both the church and the airplane. "We are talking about a terrorist group," the president said after convening ministers and top defense officials. "A policy of peace loses all meaning if, in the absence of agreements, that policy is met with barbarous acts such as kidnapping airline passengers or churchgoers."

The ELN is demanding a demilitarized territory similar to that given the FARC, and actions such as the massive kidnappings are meant to pressure Pastrana to take it more seriously in peace talks. The president has given a higher priority to negotiations with the FARC. Paramilitary violence also continues. Right-wing paramilitary groups have also taken more extreme measures in recent weeks, adding to the national insecurity.

On May 21, a squad of paramilitary assailants seized prominent Partido Liberal Sen. Piedad Cordoba as she walked out of a Medellin health clinic. An outspoken human rights advocate and the most prominent national politician of African descent, Cordoba is still being held by paramilitary leader Carlos Castano. Paramilitaries also killed 11 people in the port city of Barrancabermeja on June 2. The victims were rounded up in several working-class neighborhoods by the assailants, who apparently had a list of people they were looking for, claiming they were guerrilla sympathizers.

The latest incidents have revived calls for the death penalty for kidnapping. Gen. Rosso Jose Serrano, head of the national police, said Colombia has the highest kidnapping rate in the world, with more than 1,000 victims per year. "While Colombians continue demanding the release of the people kidnapped by the ELN and other groups, the proposal to legalize the death penalty should not be discarded," said Serrano. [Sources: BBC, Inter Press Service, 05/27/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 05/26/99, 05/27/99, 05/30/99; Notimex, 05/26/99, 05/30-06/01/99; The Miami Herald, 05/27/99, 05/28/99, 05/31/99, 06/01/99; Reuters, 05/26-28/99, 06/02/99; Spanish news service EFE, 05/26/99, 05/27/99, 05/31-06/02/99; Clarin (Argentina), 06/02/99; CNN, 05/26/99, 05/29/99, 05/31/99, 06/03/99; Associated Press, 05/27/99, 05/31/99, 06/02/99, 06/03/99; El Tiempo (Colombia), 06/03/99]

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