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Struggle For Peace Hits Obstacles in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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With a new target date for peace talks, both the Colombian government and the rebels continue to proclaim their commitment to peace even as battles continue and the death toll mounts. Peace talks are scheduled to begin July 19, but as more time elapses without an obvious breakthrough, hope for progress fades.

On July 9, armed services commander Gen. Fernando Tapias said hundreds of guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) overran an army camp near the village of Gutierrez in the mountains 18 km south of Bogota. The attack began the strongest rebel offensive since the peace process was formally launched in January. As rebels waged fresh attacks in the nationwide offensive, the government imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew on one-third of Colombia, including the towns on the outskirts of Bogota.

Interior Minister Nestor Humberto Martinez said the emergency measures, which prohibit all road and river travel in ten of the country's 32 provinces and ten towns during hours of darkness, would remain in force indefinitely. "What we want is to prevent the insurgents from using free transit on the highways to escalate their terrorism," said Martinez.

Military claims victory

By July 11, the army claimed it had resisted "the biggest and most demented guerrilla offensive in the past 40 years." In helicopter trips to the battle zone, the army showed reporters 62 bodies. The FARC also inflicted both physical and psychological damage, with attacks on dozens of locations simultaneously. More than 60 police and soldiers died in the fighting and hundreds of hostages were taken in separate roadblocks on main highways in at least two provinces.

The large assault so close to Bogota, which has been largely untouched by the conflict, left residents of the capital uneasy. The FARC has urban units but in the past they have concentrated on bomb attacks, kidnappings, and intelligence gathering. But several FARC commanders say they are preparing to bring the war into the cities. "The guerrillas are building up in the countryside but our objective is the cities," said commander Jorge Briceno. "We will arrive soon if there's no [negotiated] solution to this conflict." The army press office said the six days of violence has left 350 dead. It said 287 members of the FARC died during the offensive, as well as 63 soldiers and police. The guerrillas captured another 27 police.

On July 14, the FARC called the army figures a lie, saying the rebels lost 40 combatants, while the government lost 76, 54 soldiers and 22 police. No independent confirmation was made of the death toll, and both sides routinely minimize their casualties for propaganda purposes.

Peace process hurt by offensive

The latest clashes have increased public skepticism about President Andres Pastrana's slow-moving peace process. Many observers feel the FARC continues to gain strength, even if it suffered

significant casualties in the latest fighting. "They've managed to show force, to intimidate the establishment, and without a doubt made it possible to push harder at the negotiating table," said former national security adviser Alfredo Rangel. He said the army was probably exaggerating the scope of the FARC offensive as well as rebel losses part of a "propaganda counteroffensive" designed to divert attention from the military's own shortcomings on the battlefield.

Just two weeks before this offensive began, FARC fighters killed 35 soldiers when the army, responding to reports of clashes between the rebels and right-wing paramilitary bands, dropped the soldiers from helicopters onto a riverbank crawling with guerrillas. The error put in doubt assertions by Colombian and US officials that the 120,000-member military was becoming more effective in its fight against the FARC. Peace talks to resume July 19 Peace talks were scheduled to resume July 7, but were postponed at the last minute for two weeks.

The last talks between the government and the FARC were broken off in January when the FARC accused the government of doing too little to curb paramilitary activities (see NotiSur, 1999-01-22). Representatives of both sides spent six months just agreeing on an agenda for the negotiations.

The agenda puts everything on the table except sovereignty, the democratic system, and national unity, said Fabio Valencia, president of Congress and a government negotiator. Meanwhile, the rebel offensive is a setback for Pastrana, who has pledged to end the conflict and who has dedicated the past year to pushing the peace process. In July 1998, before taking office, he met with FARC leader Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda to demonstrate his commitment to bring peace to Colombia (see NotiSur, 1998-07-17).

Pastrana has made a series of concessions to the rebels, including demilitarizing a Switzerland-size region that the FARC may have used to mount the recent attacks. Whenever talks begin, the priorities will not be those of primary concern to most Colombians stopping the fighting and the kidnapping. These will only be taken up when the negotiations are much further advanced. For the FARC, the priority is to negotiate the exchange of 450 jailed guerrillas for 400 soldiers and police they are holding.

On July 12 Interior Minister Martinez said the guerrillas have failed in their attempt to arrive at negotiations in a stronger position. "The plan backfired because the state and its army showed they are much stronger militarily to confront distinct forms of delinquency in Colombia," said Martinez.

Rebels again charge US involvement

The latest fighting came amid FARC claims that the US is preparing to intervene militarily in the civil conflict. On July 5, FARC leader Briceno warned against a broader US role in Colombia, saying it could get mired in a war that it would have no chance of winning. "The North Americans have been intervening here for more than 50 years, but now they want to do it more directly," Briceno said. "If they invade they'll have to take the consequences." He said a direct US role in Colombia's war could cause it to spill over into neighboring countries and ignite a regionwide conflict.

Political analysts have long accused Washington of involvement in anti-guerrilla operations in Colombia by deliberately blurring the lines between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency.

But the US denies rebel claims that it has military advisers in Colombia and insists it has no direct involvement in the country's internal conflict. On July 14, the State Department said the US is sharing intelligence with Colombian security forces but only to help them combat the drug trade. "We have explicit guarantees from the government of Colombia that shared information will be used only for the purposes for which it is intended and will not be shared with any outside groups," said State Department spokesperson James Rubin.

US authorities declined to comment on whether they warned Colombia about the impending rebel offensive or helped them pinpoint rebel columns. But one US military source said that would be an "educated supposition." Campesinos in Puerto Rico, where one of the battles took place, insisted that planes with the US insignia had flown over the area during the fighting. [Sources: BBC, 07/06/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 07/06/99, 07/12/99; CNN, 07/06/99, 07/10/99, 07/12/99; Inter Press Service, The New York Times, 07/12/99; Associated Press, 07/07/99, 07/09/99, 07/12/99, 07/13/99; Clarin (Argentina), Spanish news service EFE, 07/13/99; Reuters, 07/05-07/09/99, 07/11/99, 07/12/99, 07/14/99; Notimex, 07/07/99, 07/12/99, 07/14/99; The Miami Herald, 07/06/99, 07/09/99, 07/13/99, 07/15/99]

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