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Peace Talks Remain Stalled in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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Former Colombian president Alfonso Lopez Michelsen's recommendation that the government of President Andres Pastrana recognize the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) as a belligerent force has set off a political controversy. Meanwhile, despite pronouncements from all sides, the peace process is making little headway. Lopez's proposal set off a huge debate in Colombia between those who consider it "inappropriate" and those who warn about the national and international political risks.

On Oct. 12, both Defense Minister Luis Fernando Ramirez and peace commissioner Victor G. Ricardo said the government would not consider belligerent status for the FARC. "The Colombian guerrillas do not fulfill the requirements to obtain belligerent status," said Ramirez, adding that the FARC "does not control any territory," one requisite for such a status. He said the government "unilaterally conceded those kilometers in the demilitarized zone, but it can retake them whenever it deems it convenient."

The peace commissioner said in an 11-point communique that "no interruption or suspension of the power of the state exists in any part of the national territory." The document also said that the government has taken the necessary steps to dialogue with the insurgency, including granting "political recognition" to the FARC and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN). For the government, "the recognition of belligerent status, today more than ever, is an obsolete concept, for historic, practical, and legal reasons."

FARC says it wants control of the country

The FARC began conversations with the government last January, and in May agreed on an agenda for the next phase in negotiations, which has been postponed twice (see NotiSur, 1999-05-14). Talks have been suspended since July 18 because of differences between the government and the FARC regarding the interpretation of an earlier agreement to an "international commission of accompaniment" that would verify and resolve problems that arise during the conversations.

For the government, the purpose of the commission is to control the abuses of the guerrillas in the 42,000-sq km demilitarized area where 90,000 people live. For the FARC, the commission has no purpose until the talks lead to some agreements that need verifying. Meanwhile, FARC leaders have accused the US of carrying out "direct, permanent intervention in our internal affairs," and they accuse Pastrana of "being alongside the US carrying out its orders."

"Representatives of the Pentagon, the CIA, and the US anti-drug department come to Colombia regularly to offer ever-increasing amounts of aid in money, in planes, and when they don't come here to make these offers then the Minister of Defense and other representatives of the military and the government go there, to the US, to ask for aid," said Raul Reyes, FARC spokesperson and one of the group's seven top leaders, in a radio interview.

Reyes also said the FARC "wants power" to govern the country and provide a more egalitarian social model. "The objective is to create a socialism, but not like those that have failed or exist with much difficulty," he said. Reyes said the FARC is ready to become a political force if, in the peace talks, "truly democratic spaces are opened." If not, he said, "there is the armed way."

Another sticking point is an exchange of prisoners. On Oct. 7, the FARC said that the civilians it is holding should not be included in any exchange of police and military hostages. FARC leader Ivan Rios said a recently introduced bill does not coincide with the FARC's original proposal. "What we proposed concretely is an exchange of prisoners of war, an exchange of combatants between the two sides."

In September 1998, supreme FARC commander Manuel Tirofijo Marulanda Velez proposed drawing up a law to permit the exchange of more than 350 members of the security forces held by the rebels for 480 imprisoned guerrillas. Recently four deputies introduced a bill in Congress calling for a "humanitarian exchange," which would include civilians kidnapped by the guerrillas. It would give Pastrana special authority to grant conditional or provisional freedom to jailed rebels.

The release would be reserved for insurgents with political recognition who are involved in a peace process with the government, such as the FARC. The military considers any exchange "unconstitutional." Military leaders recently gave Ricardo a report outlining alleged abuses by the FARC in the demilitarized zone. It says residents in the zone or near it have complained about assassinations, kidnappings, cattle stealing, and "tolls" charged by the rebels to move around the area.

Reyes said on Oct. 11 that the FARC would continue kidnapping soldiers and police until a law is passed permitting an exchange. And he said the group still expects Pastrana to recognize it as a belligerent force.

ELN frees some of its hostages

ELN leader Pablo Beltran says peace is possible in Colombia, but he also says the rebels could take power through armed struggle. Beltran says that the rejection by the majority of Colombians of a military escalation could deter efforts for a US or multilateral intervention. "When we see US aid that is topping US\$2 million a day, it makes the peace process difficult," said Beltran.

Beltran said Venezuela could provide the site for a "national convention" between the ELN and civil society if the Colombian government does not authorize a demilitarized area in the country for a convention, which the ELN considers essential to continue the peace process. The ELN has been pushing for a demilitarized area in northeastern Colombia similar to the one controlled by the FARC. So far, the government has refused. ELN rebels on Oct. 2 released a US hostage, one of 41 passengers and crew seized in the mid-April hijacking of a domestic flight. The group still holds 15 passengers and crew including a Colombian congressman and is demanding a ransom.

The ELN holds another 60 civilians who were seized in raids on a Catholic church and a sports-fishing excursion. Although official contacts with the ELN were broken when the group admitted it

was demanding ransom, Pastrana recently said negotiations could start as soon as the ELN frees the remaining hostages.

Paramilitaries make offer

On Oct. 10, in a communique sent to the departmental government, the paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) proposed that the guerrillas halt their extortions, kidnapping, and roadblocks in exchange for the AUC's disbanding in the northeast department of Antioquia.

"With a serious pledge by the FARC and the ELN to the country and the international community to definitively abandon these cruel practices of a dirty war, the AUC will promise to disband," read the communique.

Even as communiqués are released, however, killing by the AUC, the guerrillas, and the military continues to terrorize the country.

Civilians feel increased pressure to leave

Death threats in recent weeks have spread fear and sent peace advocates, journalists, academics, and others into exile. One of the latest to leave is Sen. Piedad Cordoba, head of the Senate's human rights commission and a leader of the opposition Partido Liberal. "There comes a point at which your ability to resist and put up with all this begins to wear down," said Cordoba, who was held for two weeks earlier this year by assailants working for a paramilitary leader.

Both the left and right appear to be using death threats more frequently to silence opponents. Last month, two prominent columnists for Bogota newspaper El Espectador, Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Antonio Morales, fled to Europe after receiving death threats. Both had written extensively about peace prospects.

Earlier, another columnist, Alfredo Molano, went to Spain after he was publicly labeled a "paraguerrilla" by AUC leader Carlos Castano. On Sept. 15, Jesus Antonio Bejarano, a former peace envoy and respected professor at the National University, was murdered on campus. Experts say opponents of peace talks include prominent members of society and the political and military establishment. [Sources: Associated Press, 10/03/99; The Miami Herald, 10/04/99; Inter Press Service, 10/05/99; Notimex, 10/10/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 10/11/99; Spanish news service EFE, 10/07-12/99; Reuters, 10/12/99]

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