

10-29-1999

Peace Talks Resume in Colombia Amid Massive Public Call for an End to Violence

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Peace Talks Resume in Colombia Amid Massive Public Call for an End to Violence." (1999).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12703>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Peace Talks Resume in Colombia Amid Massive Public Call for an End to Violence

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 1999-10-29

After months of delay, the Colombian government and leftist rebels of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) have resumed talks. This latest effort to bring peace to Colombia began Oct. 24 in Uribe, a town about 150 km southeast of Bogota in Meta province. At the same time, millions of Colombians across the country marched under the slogan "No Mas" (No More) to demand a cease-fire and an end to the decades of violence.

In comments at the ceremony restarting the negotiations, government peace commissioner Victor Ricardo warned this may be the last chance for peace. "Either we destroy ourselves or we rebuild. Colombia cannot continue with a war of attrition," said Ricardo. "Our historic responsibility is to refrain from getting up from the negotiating table until we have a peace treaty." Ricardo urged the guerrillas to consider a cease-fire, and warned Colombians that the process would be "long and difficult."

In his remarks, FARC spokesman Raul Reyes incorporated the "No More" slogan of the peace marchers. "No more gringo military assistance!" he said. "No more impositions from the IMF [International Monetary Fund]!...No more interference from the US in the internal affairs of Colombia!" Reyes called on the government to make "serious commitments" to carry out "far-reaching social investments" and implement economic measures "that resolve, in the short term, the problems of unemployment and high taxes, and the shortcomings in health, education, and housing."

FARC and government delegates met Oct. 25 with the Comité Temático Nacional, made up of 10 delegates named by the rebels and 10 designated by the government, which will be in charge of organizing public hearings to discuss issues on the "Agenda for Change toward a new Colombia," adopted last May. The 12-point agenda includes human rights, agrarian reform, exploitation of natural resources, the economic and social structure, the fight against corruption and drug trafficking, reforms to the judiciary, the political system, the state, and the military, international relations, and the formalization of agreements.

Following the meeting, Ricardo read a joint communique saying they would meet again Nov. 2 in San Vicente del Caguan, the site of the opening of talks last January (see NotiSur, 1999-01-22). The communique reiterated the "will and decision to work on the Agenda for Change." Talks promise to be lengthy. In a later meeting with foreign reporters, Ricardo said the talks would include sweeping political, economic, and social reforms. "Only three subjects are...not up for discussion," he said, "respect for private property, democracy as a system of government, and recognition of national boundaries. We can talk about and debate all other issues, and I think that we can reach agreements that allow for national reconciliation."

Analyst Alfredo Rangel pointed out that the agenda topics would need lengthy debate. He said that "issues as complex as developing a more effective policy to protect human rights and agrarian reform" would require lengthy negotiations, making an agreement before the end of President Andres Pastrana's term in 2002 "highly unlikely." Former foreign minister Augusto Ramirez, who headed the UN mission in El Salvador that organized that country's successful peace talks, concurred.

If the peace negotiations in Central America were long, it is hard to imagine that in Colombia which is even more complex, with the involvement of drug cartels and right-wing paramilitary groups along with the insurgents and the army it will take any less time, he said.

Pastrana's concessions bring criticism

The government had insisted that international observers monitor the peace process and travel freely within the demilitarized area. Pastrana, already under fire for granting significant concessions to the FARC with little in return, again conceded to the guerrillas and withdrew his demand for a verification committee. That brought a rare public criticism from armed forces chief Gen. Fernando Tapias, who had previously called on the military to support Pastrana. "The Colombian peace process is never going to work as long as we have armed groups that are rolling in money [from the drug trade]," Tapias said.

Critics accuse the FARC of using the demilitarized zone as a base from which to make fresh attacks across the country. "I don't have any faith in the future of the peace process," said Fernando Devis, head of the Sociedad de Agricultores de Colombia (SAC), the powerful organization of large landowners. "Pastrana is acting naively. He has been improvising. The guerrillas have not stopped killing or extorting, they have grown stronger. The FARC has been dictating the terms of the peace process."

The rebels had demanded that the government recognize them as a "belligerent force," which Pastrana has so far refused to do. The FARC has also refused to declare a cease-fire until substantial advances have been made in the negotiations (see NotiSur, 1999-10-15).

Ricardo, although optimistic that a cease-fire will eventually be achieved, agreed that it will only happen when advances have been made in the talks. In a Gallup opinion poll published in the political magazine *Cambio*, 80% of respondents disapproved of the way Pastrana was handling the talks.

And a separate poll in the newspaper *El Tiempo* showed that two-thirds of Colombia's business leaders favor using foreign troops to help crush the rebels. US lawmakers are considering proposals for a massive increase in military aid as much as US\$1.5 billion during the next three years (see NotiSur, 1999-10-01).

Talks with ELN also advance

Just before the government-FARC talks resumed, the government and the second-strongest guerrilla group, the *Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional* (ELN), met in Cuba to try to advance their peace talks. The meeting was announced by Foreign Minister Guillermo Fernandez de Soto. He said at the

Oct. 18-19 meetings that the government and the ELN discussed various topics including holding a national convention and the release of hostages.

Massive march for peace coincides with talks

At least 11 million people turned out in cities and towns across the country Oct. 24 in possibly the largest-ever protest against the political violence. Under the slogan "No Mas," protesters called for no more violence, no more kidnapping, and no more conflict. They called for a cease-fire, a rapid settlement of the conflict, and an end to violence against civilians, the war's principal victims.

The marches took place in 850 of Colombia's 1002 municipalities, as well as four US cities and in France, Canada, Switzerland, Russia, New Zealand, Venezuela, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. "We can't negotiate a new country if its foundations are bullets, the dead, the displaced, and the kidnapped," said organizer Francisco Santos, editor of El Tiempo.

Thirty prominent Colombians, including former Cabinet ministers Noemi Sanin and Rafael Pardo, sent UN Secretary General Kofi Annan a letter outlining how the international community could contribute to the peace process. It urged Annan to strengthen the UN human rights office in Bogota and to designate a special rapporteur to conduct an "independent assessment" of the situation. Annan is expected to agree to the request. [Sources: Clarin (Argentina), Notimex, 10/17/99; The Financial Times (London), 10/18/99; Reuters, 10/16/99, 10/20-22/99; Spanish news service EFE, 10/18/99, 10/21/99, 10/25/99; Associated Press, 10/18/99, 10/24/99, 10/25/99; CNN, 10/24/99, 10/25/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), Inter Press Service, The Miami Herald, The New York Times, 10/25/99]

-- End --