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FARC Cease-Fire Brings Welcome Respite to Conflict in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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A unilateral cease-fire by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) has brought Colombians hope for a relatively peaceful holiday, despite serious economic difficulties for much of the population. The announcement follows a major offensive during November and December that took the lives of more than 200 security forces and guerrillas. FARC spokesperson Raul Reyes said the Dec. 21-Jan. 10 cease-fire, the first in 14 years, demonstrates the group's desire for peace.

Reyes made the announcement in San Vicente de Caguan in the "distension zone" in southeast Colombia where peace talks with the government are taking place in an effort to end the decades-long armed conflict (see NotiSur, 1999-10- 29). Reyes said, however, that the FARC "reserves the right to respond militarily to any aggression by the state or parastate security forces during the cease-fire."

Previously, the FARC had conditioned a holiday cease-fire on the government's reducing taxes, freezing basic food prices, increasing the minimum monthly salary (US\$130), and implementing a subsidy, beginning in January, for the unemployed. That government rejected the proposal.

Reyes said the FARC wants Colombia to have a "definitive and lasting peace, with social justice," one without hunger, layoffs or "state terrorism, but with employment, education, health services, housing, and immediate solutions for the agricultural sector," based on independence and sovereignty, and "not on the neoliberal model."

Reyes called on Colombian President Andres Pastrana and the army to reciprocate, saying, "The least the Colombian people could ask for is that the government not only cease military operations but also cease the atrocities caused by neoliberal economic policies."

Government response

President Pastrana applauded the cease-fire and called on the other armed groups to do the same. Pastrana said the cease-fire "is a gesture that the government and Colombians have repeatedly requested." The president said this could be "the beginning of a change in attitude that humanizes the conflict and facilitates the road to dialogue." But head of the armed forces Gen. Fernando Tapias was less optimistic, saying FARC's word cannot be trusted. "Seeing is believing," said Tapias.

Meanwhile, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the major right-wing paramilitary group, said it would heed Pastrana's call for a cease-fire if the guerrillas did so. The Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), the second- strongest guerrilla group in Colombia, may also declare a cease-fire. However, on Dec. 21 the ELN called an armed general strike, paralyzing navigation on the Rio Magdalena, the principal waterway between Barrancabermeja and Barranquilla in northern

Colombia. Bloodshed his heavy leading up to cease-fire November and December have been among the bloodiest months in the war. On Nov. 17, in the first nationwide guerrilla offensive in four months, about 1,000 FARC rebels attacked a detachment of 100 police and 500 marines, trained by the US Special Forces and equipped with US high-speed, armored gunboats. The attack took place in Puerto Inirida, a jungle town of 5,000 inhabitants in eastern Guainia province, which borders Brazil.

On Dec. 11, hundreds of rebels attacked a marine base at Jurado on Colombia's border with Panama, killing at least 65 marines, witnesses said. The clash was one of the heaviest this year and among the worst defeats suffered by a navy unit.

Negotiations on hold until January

The FARC formally initiated peace negotiations with the government Oct. 24, after a year of preparatory conversations. In early December, the peace talks were opened to the public with the first in a series of televised phone-ins.

The two sides invited citizens to present their proposals for ending the civil war. FARC rebels met face-to-face with government officials inside a small church in the Amazon for the live television broadcast. "Now is the moment to add the people to the peace process," said government peace commissioner Victor Ricardo during the broadcast. "The majority of Colombians are victims of inequality," said rebel commander Ivan Rios. "For that reason the peace process needs the participation of everyone."

Justice Minister Nestor Martinez said the hearings would gather opinions strictly related to the 12 points on the agenda for negotiations. He said the goal is to create a space so that the public "may influence negotiators with solid arguments." In early December, Colombian Foreign Minister Guillermo Fernandez de Soto said, "This is the closest we have ever been to peace but you have to take into account it will be complex and will take time," de Soto said during a visit to Sweden. "We really believe we are close to peace because for the first time in Colombia the FARC and the government have started negotiations and agreed on a common agenda for the negotiations."

The FARC and the government will resume negotiations Jan. 13. The 12-point agenda includes political, social, and economic issues. Meanwhile, on Dec. 3, the government extended for the third time the distention zone where negotiations are taking place. The extension runs until June 7, 2000.

ELN also wants distention zone

After three meetings with the government in Havana and four conferences with civil-society representatives in Caracas, ELN commander Pablo Beltran said he expects to reach an agreement before year-end on another distention zone. Beltran has told government negotiators that the ELN wants a 4,000 to 5,000 sq km demilitarized zone in which to hold a "national convention." The convention would last nine months and the ELN expects at least 500 people to take part in its opening sessions. Issues to be taken up include human and humanitarian rights, economic and development models including drug-trade issues, the state and political participation, natural resources and sovereignty, and armed forces and national security.

On Dec. 2, Attorney General Jaime Bernal Cuellar said any distention zone for the ELN would have to have clear and rigid norms to avoid the errors he said the government committed with the FARC distention zone. He said the agreements would have to include the permanent presence of civil authorities and the existence of a verification commission.

Economic issues tied to negotiations

In its hesitant moves toward peace, the FARC has demanded an end to free-market economic policies, an increase in social spending, and a 10-year moratorium on foreign debt payments by Colombia, which suffers widespread poverty, Latin America's highest unemployment rate, and uncontrollable violence.

The economic crisis, the worst in the past 20 years, and unemployment, which now exceeds 20% of the Economically Active Population (EAP), will dampen holiday festivities despite the cease-fire's reduction of violence. The cease-fire announcement came just ahead of an announcement by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that it was granting a three-year US\$2.7 billion loan to Colombia. But the IMF has insisted that the government continue free-market reforms, implement harsh austerity measures, and slash public spending in 2000.

Under the IMF deal, Pastrana agreed to sell off state industries and maintain interest payments on the US\$36 billion foreign debt, equivalent to about 40% of GDP. "The two sides are on course for a heavy collision," said Ricardo Bonilla, head of development studies at Bogota's National University. "The agreement with the IMF puts a barrier on the growth of the state while the guerrillas are calling for a larger state."

Critics say the IMF demands restrictive economic policies in developing countries at the expense of spending on essential social programs such as education and health. The administration's tight 2000 budget calls for cuts in social spending by almost 30% in real terms, while the cost of debt servicing increases by almost 25% in real terms to almost US\$8 billion.

The Partido Comunista, a political ally of the FARC, said the IMF "will now have total freedom to decide what will become of the lives of the Colombian people,". A "peace clause" in the IMF agreement could allow some leeway on certain fiscal targets if Pastrana signs a peace treaty with the guerrillas.

But at best the peace talks will take years to finalize and could be doomed quickly if discussions on economic policy boil down to a fight between "savage" capitalism and some form of socialism. "The government aims and the reforms that the Fund puts forward are clearly at odds with most of the things that the guerrillas have demanded," said Michael Henry, Colombian specialist at ING Barings in New York. [Sources: Associated Press, 12/13/99; Inter Press Service, 12/07/99, 12/09/99, 12/20/99; Reuters, 11/17/99, 12/03/99, 12/05/99, 12/11/99, 12/14/99, 12/16/99, 12/20/99, 12/21/99; Spanish news service EFE, 11/17/99, 11/26/99, 12/13/99, 12/21/99; Notimex, 11/30/99, 12/02/99, 12/21/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 12/03/99, 12/21/99; CNN, 12/04/99, 12/06/99, 12/21/99; Clarin (Argentina), The Financial Times (London), 12/14/99, 12/21/99]

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