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Breakthrough Reported in Peace Talks Between Colombian Government, Rebels

by LADB Staff
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Talks between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) resumed in mid-January, even as fighting picked up after a three-week holiday truce. The two sides agreed to speed up the slow-moving peace talks, despite warnings from the top guerrilla leader that increased US military aid would intensify the country's long-running war.

The other major rebel force, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), is also closer to being given a demilitarized zone as a step toward peace. The five government negotiators, headed by Peace Commissioner Victor Ricardo, traveled to San Vicente de Caguan in the department of Caqueta, 700 km south of Bogota Jan. 12. San Vicente de Caguan is the major town in the 42,000 sq km "distension zone" set up by President Andres Pastrana in November 1998 to promote the dialogue with the FARC.

Talks resumed Jan. 13, centering on which topic would be addressed first from an agenda that includes sweeping reforms to combat poverty, political corruption, and drug trafficking. "I'm optimistic because this process is now into its substantive phase, which means negotiations and discussions on the issues," said government delegate Fabio Valencia.

FARC top commander Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda Velez participated in the talks on Jan. 14. "It's very important that Marulanda is here because it ratifies the FARC's political will to keep seeking, through dialogue and negotiation, a solution to the conflict," said Valencia.

Marulanda denied that the FARC reaps huge profits from the drug trade. He called the charges "a slanderous pretext" to deepen US involvement in Colombia and said the proposed US$1.6 billion US aid package would send Colombia down a path toward more war rather than peace. "What we have here is hunger, misery and exploitation, and that's not going to end with rifles, machine guns, and bombs," said Marulanda.

Economic and social model will lead agenda
Finance Minister Juan Camilo Restrepo and Mauricio Cardenas, director of the National Planning Department, both went to San Vicente to speak with negotiators regarding the state of the nation's economy.

In what could be a major breakthrough, negotiators chose "social and economic structures" as the first block of issues to analyze during peace negotiations, and they estimated it would take them six months to carry out these discussions.
The 12-point agenda agreed upon in May 1999 has been restructured and divided into three blocks: issues related to social and economic structures; human rights, international humanitarian law, and international relations; and democracy and the political structure of the state. "The parties agree to search for a model that suits the needs of Colombians, within the context of a globalized world, and leaving aside radical models," said the communique read by Ricardo and FARC spokesperson Raul Reyes.

The two sides also agreed on a method of negotiation that ensures that the process not become paralyzed if agreement is not reached on one point by contemplating partial agreements and advancements in the discussions. If they stick to their schedule, a negotiated settlement of the four-decade war could come within a year and a half, although some analysts believe it could take decades.

The obstacles to an agreement are formidable. A 10-point list the FARC calls a "minimum agenda for halting the war" includes a huge increase in social spending, nationalization of key industries, and a 10-year moratorium on foreign-debt payment. Such proposals are diametrically opposed to conditions set in December by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a US$2.7 billion loan.

Under the deal, Pastrana agreed to slash public spending, privatize state industries, and maintain interest payments on the US$36 billion debt, equivalent to 40% of GDP. "You won't need economic experts but true magicians to reconcile the conditions set by the IMF with the demands of the FARC," said the daily newspaper El Tiempo.

Another touchy issue will be land reform, inextricably linked to the social conflict. The rebels insist that idle land be expropriated and distributed to those who work it. They also call for a limit on the size of rural estates, in a country where land is concentrated in the hands of the 5% of the population that comprise the elite landowning class. As progress in the talks raised cautious optimism, on Feb. 2 the Foreign Relations Ministry said government and FARC negotiators had traveled to Norway and Sweden to study their models of economic development that balance competition with social justice.

**ELN pushes for territory**

Meanwhile, on Jan. 18, the ELN carried out more attacks on infrastructure, blowing up dozens of transmission towers, causing major power blackouts in some areas, and forcing the government to ration electricity and close some schools in Medellin. The ELN opposes foreign exploitation of Colombia's natural resources, and has backed consumer complaints about energy rates. It opposes government plans to privatize public utilities. On Jan. 20, the rebels said they would keep blowing up transmission towers until the government meets their demands, particularly their own distension zone.

The Colombian government will consider a proposal from a mediation committee to set up a neutral area to unblock the peace process that has been on hold for more than a year, said congressional representative Benjamin Higuita. After months of opposition, the administration has agreed to offer the ELN a demilitarized zone similar to that of the FARC, but the location of the zone is still being debated. The ELN insisted on the zone before it would move forward with an agreement it made in July 1998 in the German city of Mainz with representatives of civil society. The agreement calls
for a "national convention," followed by a constituent assembly, and finally the opening of formal talks with the state. [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 01/14/00, 01/16/00; Notimex, 01/21/00; CNN, 01/20/00, 01/29/00; Reuters, 01/29/00; Inter Press Service, 01/19/00, 02/01/00; Associated Press, 01/13/00, 01/14/00, 01/18/00, 01/19/00, 01/21/00, 02/02/00; Spanish news service EFE, 01/14/00, 01/17/00, 01/20/00, 01/30-02/03/00]

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