

7-18-2003

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### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Colombia Begins Negotiation with AUC." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13169>

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## Colombia Begins Negotiation with AUC

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 2003-07-18

The Colombian government and the nation's largest paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) agreed on July 15 to peace talks, and the AUC promised to start demobilizing its 13,000 fighters by the end of the year and to lay down its weapons by 2005. The official peace negotiations come after a December cease-fire and six months of exploratory talks. Human rights groups caution, however, that the paramilitary fighters should not be absolved of responsibility for their atrocities and abuses.

"I believe that this can contribute to the country laying the foundation for peace," Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez said from the city of Arauca, where he had moved the capital for three days. Although Uribe's government agreed to create special areas to facilitate the demobilization, the president emphasized that there would be no safe haven. "The armed forces and state institutions will not leave these areas," Uribe said, "so there will be no demilitarized zones."

Peace commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo said he hoped the peace talks with the AUC would prompt leftist guerrillas to put down their arms. "Taking away armed actors like the paramilitary fighters opens the way to an effective peace process" with the rebels, Restrepo said.

AUC leaders said they wanted to help build the "authentic peace that Colombia waits for and deserves."

In June, a six-person Colombian peace commission had recommended the government undertake formal peace talks with the paramilitaries, but also said the president should appoint international observers to strengthen negotiations. It said the government should continue the peace process "under the condition that there is a total and verifiable cease-fire, with the main goal being demobilizing and reincorporating the paramilitaries into society." The latest agreement capped a two-day preliminary meeting between AUC leaders and Restrepo that began July 14. Leaders from two smaller paramilitary groups also attended.

The AUC, led by Carlos Castano Gil and Salvatore Mancuso, represents about 70% of the paramilitary forces operating in Colombia. The group has been classified a terrorist and drug-trafficking organization by the administration of US President George W. Bush. The AUC split last year into at least five groups after an internal dispute regarding its increasing role in the drug trade (see NotiSur, 2002-07-26).

### *US will provide aid to paramilitaries*

In the signed agreement, the paramilitary group agreed to maintain the cease-fire it declared last December (see NotiSur, 2002-12-06) and to stop trafficking in drugs. The government promised to help the demobilized fighters return to regular society. The US will help with that process.

Although the US has helped fund programs for former combatants following other civil wars, this is reportedly the first time it would do so for a group it considers a terrorist organization.

The US refused to participate in peace negotiations with the FARC, also on the US list of terrorist organizations, conducted by then President Andres Pastrana (see NotiSur, 2001-08-17, 2002-03-01).

Officials said the US government would spend up to US\$5 million for a program to offer training, education, land, and other incentives to paramilitary fighters who agree to lay down their arms. "I don't think it matters" that this is a terrorist organization, one US official said. "The idea here is to take pieces off the playing board. I think we have to look at it in those terms."

Other nations are also being asked to help fund the demobilization. "We are confident that the international community will give us a hand and support us in this process of reinsertion of the paramilitaries into society," Restrepo said in a radio interview. The governmental Reinsertion Program calculates that the demobilization of 1,000 AUC members would cost US\$7.1 million a year. Restrepo said more than US\$92 million would be needed to disband the 13,000 paramilitaries covered by the agreement.

The statement signed by the AUC and the Colombian government did not address the legal actions pending against top AUC leaders, both in Colombia and in the US.

A Colombian government source said legal measures were being sought that would allow Castano and his fighters to lay down their arms, despite pending prison sentences. In June, Castano was sentenced in absentia to 40 years in prison for the massacre by his fighters of 30 peasants in the village of Mapiripan in 1997 (see NotiSur, 1997-07-25). Most victims were decapitated with machetes and their bodies burned.

Attorney General Luis Camilo Osorio said on July 14 his office had fired state prosecutor Ruben Munoz after allegations that he was paid by the paramilitaries to help draft a legal argument for a pardon. The prosecutor allegedly met with other lawyers in Costa Rica during his vacation. "He has been separated from his post," Osorio said. US officials say they support attempts to negotiate an end to the conflict in Colombia but refuse to drop the extradition demands for Castano and Mancuso who have been indicted in the US on drug-trafficking charges.

Camilo Guiza, lawyer for Castano, said that, since his client and Mancuso are negotiators in the peace process with the government, the US should automatically suspend the extradition request hanging over their heads.

## *Question of motives*

The Uribe government has called on the UN to support peace efforts, and it has done so in the past. However, in May UN envoy to Colombia James LeMoyne downplayed participating in peace talks between the government and the AUC.

In an interview in El Espectador newspaper, he said the two sides do not need his help. "Our help is extended to parties that have communication problems," LeMoyne said. "The government doesn't seem to have a big problem talking with the paramilitaries." LeMoyne warned that the UN would condemn attempts to give immunity to paramilitary members accused of serious human rights abuses. "We support the objective of the government to remove an armed actor from the conflict, but it has to do it carefully," he said.

Absent from the talks were several paramilitary leaders, including commander Rodrigo Franco of the Bloque Metro, who refused to sit down with Castano and Mancuso, saying they have become totally involved in the cocaine business and have accepted important drug traffickers into the AUC on the assumption that they will be pardoned at the end of the peace process.

The Washington Post on June 26 quoted a confidential report prepared for Uribe on whether peace talks should begin with the AUC. The findings raise questions about Uribe's decision to begin a formal peace process. The report concluded that the group, which has close links to the Colombian military, is a drug-trafficking organization. It said that "it is impossible to differentiate between the self-defense groups and narco-trafficking organizations," and said that paramilitary leaders seek to exploit peace talks to protect their drug-trafficking profits.

The Post said the analysis, by six civilian appointees, for the first time officially laid out the extent of drug trafficking by paramilitary forces. It said that, through a handful of drug kingpins posing as paramilitary commanders, they control about 40% of Colombia's drug trafficking. The AUC "sells its franchise" to regional drug traffickers, who rely on the group for security in exchange for a cut of profits. It estimated that as much as 80% of the AUC's funding comes from drug trafficking.

The report also revealed a deep split between Colombia's civilian government and the military leadership regarding demobilizing the AUC. "The armed forces are the principal enemy to a peace process with the self-defense groups," the analysis concludes. "Opposition exists at the highest ranks to permit demobilization." The most recent issue of *Semana* magazine again raised the issue of ties between security forces and the AUC.

Uribe's "policy of democratic security" has coincided with a "strong expansion" of the paramilitary groups, *Semana* reported on July 13. It said that, despite the cease-fire declared by the AUC late last year, the ultra-right groups have increased their presence in various regions of the country. The report cited various sources that pointed out that army and police operations coincided with an increase in the AUC forces. "It is a tendency that causes alarm because it puts at risk not only the entire security policy of President Uribe Velez but also the incredible advances obtained with so much effort by the public forces," warned *Semana*.

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