6-25-2004

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Negotiations with ELN Restart

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2004-06-25

As peace talks between the Colombian government and paramilitary groups sputtered, representatives of the government and the country's second-largest guerilla group announced a possible cease-fire in early June. But in the following days, a massacre by the country's largest rebel organization killed 34 raspachines, or coca-leaf pickers, making international headlines and potentially undermining right-wing President Alvaro Uribe's already tenuous motivation for making peace with the leftist guerrilla forces.

Paramilitary negotiations delayed

Paramilitary leaders from the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) put off dialogues that had been scheduled near the town of Santa Fe de Ralito, complaining that logistics and lack of security prevented top AUC commanders from attending safely. Commanders threatened not to attend at all, saying their leaders were being persecuted. The talks were set to take place in the "location zone" where paramilitary groups will be concentrated and disarmed if talks succeed (see NotiSur, 2004-06-04).

Marta Martinez, a spokeswoman for the government's Peace Commission, said on June 14 that both sides had agreed to a postponement to give them more time to iron out security concerns and set rules for the negotiations. Mexico "guarantees" peace talks with ELN In early June, prospects for peacemaking between the Colombian government and the country's second-largest rebel organization appeared strong.

On June 4, Francisco Galan, one of the leaders of the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), announced a peace proposal from the Senate floor, which was broadcast on a public television station. The proposal included the possible release of former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and an agreement to curb the use of land mines, with which the guerrillas kill hundreds of soldiers and civilians every year. Reports at the time said that the offer could form part of eventual peace talks between the government and the rebel group.

The peace proposal that the ELN, which has an estimated membership of 3,500-5,000, presented to the government of President Uribe included a humanitarian agreement to limit the use of land mines as well as an exchange of imprisoned rebels for hostages held by the guerrillas, which would take place during a temporary bilateral cease-fire.

Mines, the cheapest of which cost US$2, are one of the most cost-effective ways for insurgents to wage war against the US-backed Colombian military, according to members of the armed forces. This makes Colombia the fourth highest in the world for numbers of mine-blast victims, behind
Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Cambodia. Land-mine victims in Colombia are up 345% from just a year and a half ago, UN officials say.

The Mexican government offered to monitor possible future peace talks between the ELN and the Colombian government. Galan said that he met with Mexican Ambassador Mario Chacon and that they agreed to explore the possibility of peace talks with the Uribe administration, monitored by Mexico.

"Mexico has offered us its house," and, according to the agreement with Chacon, "the doors are open for developing an agenda" for peace talks, said the insurgent, released temporarily from imprisonment to pursue peace efforts. From his Medellin jail cell where he is serving a life sentence, Galan had been allowed to use a radio to keep in contact with the ELN high command.

The Mexican Foreign Ministry reported that Mexico, which served as a guarantor of the talks that led to peace deals in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996), is setting up a commission to help support possible negotiations. Andres Valencia, Mexico's ambassador to Israel who was diplomatic representative to Colombia from 1997-2000, was designated as the facilitator for talks. He is trying to set up the format and time for initial meetings as well as put together a dialogue-facilitation team.

The Mexican government said it would "guarantee" a peace-negotiation process, something Mexican and Colombian officials discussed during Uribe's state visit to Mexico City on May 30.

Uribe said that he would be disposed to dialogue with the ELN if there were a cessation of hostilities and an international guarantor. Mexico's President Vicente Fox said Mexico would be willing to be that guarantor provided that the parties involved accepted it. Days later, the ELN announced its readiness to begin dialogue and accepted Mexico as a facilitator.

Observers say that a truce between the government and the ELN would free some Colombian forces, allowing the Army to shore up its large-scale offensive against the country's main rebel group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

A political agreement reached last August by the leaders of the FARC and the ELN described Uribe as an "enemy of peace" and a "warmonger," and said that peace talks were impossible as long as the president continued to apply his "hard-hand" approach to the civil war. At the same time, the two groups agreed to work together to push for "an exchange of prisoners of war and political detainees held by both sides" a reference to between 300 and 500 imprisoned guerrillas and 21 high-profile hostages like Betancourt and 37 military and police officers held by the insurgents.

If the Uribe administration accepts Galan's peace proposal and the powerful 30,000-member FARC ratifies the political agreement signed in August with the ELN leadership, Betancourt whose FARC captors are holding her as a hostage to be exchanged for imprisoned rebels in a possible swap could be freed. Betancourt has dual French and Colombian citizenship.

French President Jacques Chirac recently told Uribe that he would support a humanitarian swap, though the Uribe administration has frequently rejected such proposals.
FARC massacre leaves 34 coca pickers dead

A massacre committed by FARC fighters at a coca farm in the days immediately following the announcements of ELN-government compromise dominated world headlines. In the rural zone near the town of La Gabarra, near the Venezuelan border, about 50 FARC soldiers burst through the doors of a building where ranch workers were sleeping in hammocks in the pre-dawn hours of June 15.

Reports said that the rebels tied up the workers with their hammocks and shot them with machine guns, killing 34. Seven people survived with injuries and were taken by boat to a hospital in the nearby town of Cucuta. The killers also allowed two women to escape.

"They tied us up and threw us on the floor like dogs and shot us," said one of the campesinos, who was shot once and pretended to be dead. Another survivor told reporters he also played dead, and he recalled how the wounded and dying called out for help after the killers left. "They asked why they had been gunned down so miserably," he said.

None of the survivors wanted to be identified for security reasons. One survivor said the killers were young FARC members who accused the field hands, known as raspachines, of being paramilitary members. He denied that the victims, who worked harvesting coca the main ingredient of cocaine were militia members. "All we care about is [finding] work, not who the boss is," he said. Landless campesinos often pick coca leaves and sell them to both left-wing guerrillas and their right-wing opponents, which can leave the farmers targets of reprisals.

Gen. Carlos Alberto Ospina, Colombia's armed forces chief, said the killings were provoked by a dispute between rebels and paramilitary fighters regarding control of coca production and the profits it brings when it is converted in clandestine labs to cocaine.

A FARC statement two days later said the farmers supported right-wing paramilitaries and accused the government of shedding "crocodile tears over the deaths." The latest attack was a blow to President Uribe, who has proudly boasted of across-the-board declines in war crimes and terrorism.

In the first 10 months of 2003, the government said, massacres were down 38% from 103 cases to 64. The number of victims fell from 624 to 373. The massacre at La Gabarra, however, marked the largest since Uribe came to office in 2002. Government authorities said anti-narcotics forces would fumigate drug fields in the region in an attempt to curb an escalating turf war involving the lucrative cocaine trade.

The UN human rights office in Bogota described the killing "as a war crime, since the culprits carried out a premeditated murder of totally defenseless civilians." It remains unclear what impact the massacre will have on the proposed cease-fire with the ELN, but it was another low in the historically bad relationship between President Uribe and the human rights group Amnesty International (AI).
Uribe lashed out at the group for not denouncing the killings. "You know what makes me sad?" Uribe said June 16 during a military ceremony. "That so far I haven't heard anything from Amnesty International... Amnesty International stays silent, the same group that abuses its good name to go and accuse Colombian government forces [of committing abuses]." The human rights group said it has not denounced the killings because it does not know all the facts, but it will condemn the massacres if the government reports prove true.

"We don't rely too much on the government because often times they don't have all the information or manipulate it," Eric Olson, Americas director for Amnesty International USA, told the Associated Press from Washington. "We like to do our own verification." In the past, Uribe has criticized human rights groups for assisting "terrorists" and being sympathetic to the rebels, while the groups have attacked his hard-line approach to the country's civil war.

Some political analysts condemned Uribe's criticism of AI on Colombian radio. Colombia's four-decade war has displaced an estimated 3 million people and leaves about 3,500 dead annually.

Army Commander Gen. Martin Orlando Carreno said recently that 1,054 people have been killed in the January-May period and that the majority of them belonged to guerrilla and paramilitary groups. He said 4,334 have been captured. Some analysts characterize the military offensive Uribe is currently carrying out as the largest in Colombian history.

Alfonso Cano named as new FARC leader

Differing reports from journalists and intelligence agencies have said that Manuel Marandula, the FARC's head since the 1960s, is suffering from prostate cancer and has either died, left Colombia for treatment, or stepped down from his leadership position. Reports that Marandula, known as Tirofijo or Sureshot, has been suffering from cancer emerged in February and led to speculation about a change of guard in the top ranks of the guerrilla organization.

Speculation regarding the insurgent group's leadership ended, however, when Sen. Jaime Dussan of the left-wing Polo Democratico Independiente (PDI) said FARC commanders had contacted the party and informed them that the new leader was Alfonso Cano. Cano's real name is Guillermo Leon Saenz and he has been the ideological head of the guerrilla army for more than a decade. Cano is known as a committed communist and the movement's ideology is unlikely to change.

What may change, said BBC correspondent Jeremy McDermott, is that the group may move away from indiscriminate bombings and killings that have earned the FARC the label "terrorist organization" both in the US and Europe. McDermott's report, however, came out three days before the massacre in La Gabarra.

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