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Colombia Ends FARC Negotiations After Bombing

by LADB Staff

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Colombian President Alvaro Uribe broke off hostage-exchange negotiations with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) after a bombing injured 23 people in Bogota. Uribe had previously expressed an openness to negotiations, an unprecedented stance during his time as president, but the Oct. 19 bombing reversed his willingness to enter into talks. Opposition figures questioned Uribe's claims that the FARC was responsible and conjectured that the timing of the attack might have had something to do with the visit of high-level officials from the US and the renewal of funding for the US's Plan Colombia military-aid program.

Prisoner swap talks over before they begin

At the end of September, Uribe had been preparing to remove troops from a southwestern portion of Colombia about the size of New York City to begin "humanitarian-exchange" talks. The municipalities of Florida and Pradera were designated as "meeting zones" for talks that would have covered the release of captives the FARC has held for years in exchange for the release of hundreds of imprisoned rebels. The guerrilla force holds many prominent Colombians including 59 politicians, soldiers, and police, along with former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three US contractors.

The rebels kidnapped French-Colombian citizen Betancourt during her 2002 presidential campaign and US military contractors Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, and Keith Stansell during a 2003 mission to locate crops used to make cocaine. Uribe had vehemently rejected any possibility of an exchange and peace negotiations in the first four years of his presidency, despite calls from family members of those being held, European nations, and human rights groups that he do so.

Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said that the Uribe government would not repeat the mistakes of the 1999 failed negotiations with the FARC when President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002) set up the region of San Vicente del Caguan as the scene for talks (see NotiSur, 1999-10-29 and 2002-03-01). The defense minister explained the change in Uribe's position on negotiations as the result of a new "demonstration to the country and to the guerrillas of the willingness to seek a humanitarian agreement." The government ordered troops to pull out of an 850-sq km area around Florida and Pradera in advance of negotiations.

Official FARC spokesperson Raul Reyes said that an exchange was near on Oct. 1. "We are ready," he said in a press interview. A French group calling for Betancourt's release said they were optimistic that she would be freed. Herve Marro, a spokesperson for the Ingrid Betancourt Support Committee, said, "For the first time in four and a half years, the FARC and Uribe seem to be on the same wavelength." But Uribe was angered by an Oct. 19 bombing in the parking lot of Bogota's Nueva Granada Military University. The bomb exploded yards from the country's top Army general. He was not hurt, but 23 other people were injured.

Authorities said some 60 kg of explosives were hidden in a Ford Explorer that would have had to pass through two security checkpoints to enter the school's parking lot. The complex, which contains a military school and the headquarters of an Army brigade, is one of the most protected installations in the country. "This looks like an unforgivable security lapse," Defense Minister Santos said.

Uribe blamed the attack on leftist rebels, broke off efforts to organize the prisoner swap, and ordered the military to rescue hostages by force. "We cannot continue the farce of a humanitarian exchange [of prisoners] with the FARC," he said. "We are going to capture the FARC militias that have infiltrated the urban centers of Pradera and Florida, and we are going to remove any trace of the FARC from the rural areas," Uribe said in an impassioned speech Oct. 20.

The FARC issued a statement on its Web site speculating that the bomb was planted by the US in an attempt to kill the possibility of ending Colombia's four-decade-old guerrilla war, in which thousands are killed every year. Colombia strengthened its police presence in rebel territory in the days after ruling out talks and threatening force to free hostages held by the insurgents.

Police Capt. Guillermo Solorzano said on Oct. 22 that some 150 police officers were sent to Florida and Pradera, where the number of rebels has risen in recent months. Families of hostages oppose Uribe's "military rescue" plan. The news came as a bitter blow to the families of those held by the guerrillas, some of whom have spent more than seven years in captivity, said a BBC correspondent in Colombia.

"The only path that remains is a military rescue," a visibly angry Uribe told reporters, saying the government had intercepted a communication from a rebel leader proving the FARC planted the bomb. Uribe's hardened stance drew swift condemnation from Betancourt's mother, who said it condemns the hostages to death. Mariana Howes, wife of contractor Howes, called Uribe's idea of a military rescue "crazy." She told Reuters, "He's going to get my husband killed." The rebels executed a group of 10 hostages, including a former defense minister, during a botched military rescue in 2003.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy issued a statement calling for renewed dialogue, saying his country was against "any use of force to rescue the hostages." His statement continued, "At a time when everyone was optimistic because of the recent statements by the Colombian president and the FARC, I remain convinced that only a peaceful solution is possible."

Government talks with the country's second-largest rebel group, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), are still underway and are reportedly nearing an agreement. The two sides started a fourth round of exploratory talks on Oct. 19. They hoped to draw up an agenda for negotiations after a year of confidence-building meetings hosted by Cuba, which inspired the formation of the ELN rebellion in 1964. Nonetheless, the FARC remains the country's strongest and most intractable rebel force.

Controversy regarding who perpetrated bombing

There were contradictory government conclusions as to who planted the bomb at Nueva Granada. Attorney General Mario Iguaran said that there was not sufficient evidence to implicate the FARC

in the attack, contrary to Uribe's claims. "The prosecutor's office cannot proceed to make an imputation or go before judges without being able to speak about probable cause," said Iguaran, arguing that he could not make the same allegations that Uribe was making at the time. The Colombian Senate was planning to set up a Commission for Peace and Humanitarian Accord, which, according to South American news network TeleSur, appeared to be without an agenda after Uribe called off talks.

Sen. Gloria Ines Ramirez, a commission member, would not rule out the possibility that official forces perpetrated the Oct. 19 attack. There have been past allegations of the military setting up bombings and then stopping them to gain good publicity or financial rewards, including a bombing in July before Uribe took office for his second term as president (see NotiSur, 2006-09-29).

"We are tired of the lies, of all this dissembling that has been done, corroborating and certifying the false military contrivances, and soon we will know that here there might have been another contrivance to maintain the resources of Plan Colombia, which is today being debated for the first time as to whether there should be cuts," said Sen. Ramirez, a member of the opposition party Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA). Another Polo figure, party spokesperson Gustavo Petro, echoed doubts about the FARC's role. "During 50 years the FARC have had neither the possibility nor the capacity to enter a military establishment in any city," he said in a radio interview.

Political analyst Vicente Torrijos said the political environment of Colombia did not allow anyone to rule out any hypothesis about the attack. "In a moment like this one in Colombia it is impossible to determine with exactitude, and quickly even less, who could be the perpetrator of an attack," he said.

New, "temporary" four-year tax to finance war

Funding the war has become an important issue in recent months, with Uribe asking Congress to set up a "temporary" four-year inheritance tax to collect US\$3.6 billion for military spending. Uribe, with an Orwellian flair that is a trademark of his administration, calls the tax plan a "policy to conquer the peace," arguing that it is a key financial plank in his "Democratic Security" program to fight rebel and paramilitary groups. The 1.2% tax, as currently proposed, would fall on recipients of inheritances greater than US\$640,000 to fund the country's armed forces and modernize its equipment.

Local press sources say Uribe seeks to have Colombia "free of guerrilla violence and narco-trafficking" by 2010 with the new measure. "And after that, then there may be a state policy based in peace." Guillermo Botero, head of the business association Federacion Nacional de Comerciantes de Colombia (Fenalco), said, "We view the measure with some worry because it opens a new taxation front in the country where the taxes are in reality very high."

James J. Brittain, a sociology lecturer at the University of New Brunswick, wrote in an Oct. 25 article in the political newsletter Counterpunch that policies "over the past four years [have resulted] in a systemic reduction in the amount of accessible revenue able to be utilized by the state coffers to confront the guerrilla." Brittain points to previous instances in which Uribe sought to impose taxes

on the country's wealthy elite, having lost revenue from years of neoliberal policies reducing taxes on resource extraction, corporations, and other sectors. He argues that Uribe's plans to tax the rich further and to stop swap efforts that will affect members of the upper class "will do nothing more than accelerate the already existing opposition toward the state, most notably among the traditional elite."

Uribe may, however, be counting on his extreme political strength, after he won re-election by a massive margin and the majority of Congressional seats went to his allies (see NotiSur, 2006-03-31, 2006-06-09, and 2006-09-01). Additionally, the upper classes have seen greater security under the Uribe administration, with reductions in violent crime and kidnapping, particularly in urban areas. The proposal for a new tax coincided with a high-level delegation from the US visiting Colombia, leading some analysts to suggest that Uribe was trying to demonstrate to Washington that Colombia is pulling its financial weight in the war and that the US should do the same.

US President George W. Bush plans to ask Congress to maintain current aid levels to Colombia running at more US\$600 million yearly to support the nation's ongoing war, undersecretary of state Nicholas Burns said Oct. 24. Burns was leading the US delegation to Colombia and said the mostly military aid would remain unchanged through at least 2008. "For the past few years we've extended about US\$600 million per year to the Colombian people for all these programs, and our administration in Washington will ask Congress to maintain that level in 2007 and 2008," Burns said. The call for continued funding is a major boost to Uribe, Washington's staunchest ally in Latin America, and comes despite the failure of efforts to reduce the country's cocaine trade. "In any counterterrorism or counternarcotics campaign you sometimes have to adjust strategy to be effective as conditions change," Burns said. "We'll be open to any suggestions the Colombian government makes."

US officials have said recently that aid for the drug-eradication strategy that is part of Plan Colombia, which has cost US taxpayers more than US\$4 billion since 2000, should be gradually reduced as Colombian authorities take over more duties. Legislators in both countries have questioned the effectiveness of a relentless aerial-spraying campaign of coca plantations that is the cornerstone of the strategy. The most recent US government survey indicates that coca production surged 26% in 2005 to 144,000 hectares. Burns said the Bush administration would also ask Congress to extend unilateral trade privileges for all four coca-producing Andean nations Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, something Andean nations have been calling for as trade preferences are set to expire within months (see NotiSur, 2006-04-07 and 2006-06-23).

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