5-4-2007

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LADB Staff

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ELN Guerrillas Agree to Provisional Cease-Fire with Colombian Government

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2007-05-04

The government of Colombia has negotiated an "experimental" cease-fire with the country's second-largest rebel guerrilla group, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN). The cease-fire is part of a "base agreement" that the ELN and the Colombian government reached after five rounds of peace talks, with both sides seeking to expand their agreements in the future.

'Experimental and transitory' cease-fire
The two sides announced the cease-fire on April 18, with the head of Colombia's Peace Commission, Luis Carlos Restrepo, saying, "The president [Alvaro Uribe] has asked me to say to the ELN that we accept its proposal that the cease-fire be experimental and transitory." The ELN announced the day before that it was ready to begin discussions to set up the cease-fire "immediately."

Negotiations have been underway for a long time (see NotiSur, 2004-06-25, 2005-06-17 and 2006-10-27), with the city of Havana, Cuba, playing host to several rounds of talks since 2005. Prior talks had not ended in any agreements. The sixth round of talks began on April 17, although it had been delayed as the ELN’s delegation chief Pablo Beltran had difficulties traveling from Venezuela to Cuba for several days. He arrived with other delegation members Francisco Galan and Juan Carlos Cuellar.

Beltran said that the rebel group was willing to lay down arms, "to create an atmosphere of peace and participation. We are going to experiment [to see] if a temporary cease-fire works. And if that is accomplished, the cease-fire may be prolonged, but if it does not work, it will not be prolonged." Beltran added, "We are not talking about the ELN disappearing, but rather an experiment." He put aside the idea that the armed group would be concentrated in a certain area as has been done with disarmed paramilitary organizations (see NotiSur, 2005-07-22).

The ELN says gathering its forces in a specific area would be "suicide." Beltran countered calls for concentration by saying that the ELN was not demanding that "the [Colombian] Army return to their forts." Beltran said it would be necessary to arrange for verification of the cease-fire with the military in areas where the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and paramilitary groups are in active combat with the government and each other. Restrepo said on April 19 that the agreement depended on each side "demonstrating the will to design national and international verification mechanisms" for the cease-fire. The FARC, Colombia's largest rebel organization, is not in formal negotiations with the Colombian government.

Base agreement seeks to solidify peace
The experimental cease-fire does not indicate the end of talks but rather a step in a continuing negotiation process. From mid-April to the end of the month, negotiators conducted the sixth round
of talks, keeping announcements to the press to a minimum. The Colombian Catholic Church had representatives in Havana monitoring discussions and seeking to re-establish confidence between the two parties.

Before the official announcement of the cease-fire, Beltran confirmed reports that his team and Restrepo had met in March with Nobel Prize-winning novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the provisional president of Cuba Raul Castro with the aim of moving talks forward.

According to Beltran, Castro reiterated Cuba's support for the dialogue and demonstrated the hope that Colombia's internal conflict be resolved as soon as possible. The Cuban government appears to have some persuasive influence on the leftist rebels. The Uribe government has been calling for a cease-fire for some time, while the ELN calls for an amnesty for jailed rebels, noncombatant activists, and union chiefs who sympathize with the movement.

The government seeks the liberation of individuals the ELN has kidnapped, an issue the Army has not discussed publicly. It is possible that reduced numbers in the ELN have also convinced it to accept the government's terms for a cease-fire. Its forces have reportedly dwindled to fewer than 2,000 fighters after a military offensive by Uribe in recent years. Beltran indicated that there are still differences between the ELN and the government. "It is not possible to put forward an issue as deep as amnesty or that the ELN cease to exist," said Beltran, laying out limits to what talks would be able to accomplish at this point.

The absence of ELN second-in-command Antonio Garcia, present in other rounds as head of the group's delegation, led to conjectures that no serious progress would occur during the sixth round of talks. The ELN said that Garcia would travel to Havana only when it was necessary to sign an agreement. Prior to the sixth round, the ELN's magazine Insurreccion wrote that the government sought a negotiation where it could "show quick results without any cost and harvest political benefits in its own favor in little time."

The ELN has been fighting the government since the 1960s. It originated in 1964 with radical students and Catholic priests inspired by the Cuban revolution. It has long been seen as Colombia's most ideologically driven rebel force, in part thanks to its traditional reluctance to get involved in Colombia's multibillion-dollar cocaine trade.

The government has accused the ELN of drug trafficking, which ELN representatives deny and say the accusation threatens talks. ELN says drug accusations put talks at risk Restrepo told Reuters on April 3 that cocaine smuggling had supplanted kidnapping as the left-wing group's main source of income.

"The commissioner has committed an offense against the peace process, putting the process at risk," Antonio Garcia told local radio. "We do not cultivate illicit crops, operate cocaine production laboratories, or traffic in drugs. This is ELN policy. What the commissioner said is not true." The ELN is known for bombing energy installations, kidnapping for ransom, and planting land mines that are often stepped on and detonated by poor farmers and their families.