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Peace Talk Proposals, Counterproposals in Colombia

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Colombians periodically get their hopes up about an end to the nearly five-decade internal war that has cost thousands of lives and displaced millions of campesinos (NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2011). The sequence of events follows a pattern.

First, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) challenges the current administration to initiate peace talks. Then the guerrillas give a second signal, announcing the unilateral release of some of the prisoners they hold in their jungle jails. The government, in turn, rejects the proposal and President Juan Manuel Santos, since taking office in 2010, repeats a phrase whose meaning is not very well understood: "The doors to dialogue are not locked, and the key is not at the bottom of the sea." The third act stars a progressive political leader or humanitarian organization. This time it is Colombianas y Colombianos por la Paz (CCP), whose hopes were raised by the FARC proposal and the government's confusing response and suggested to both sides an immediate cease-fire to initiate the oft-frustrated dialogue.

Finally, hours or days later come the government pressures. "What we want is to see a real willingness to arrive at a peace accord, and one way of expressing that willingness is to unconditionally and without fanfare release those who were kidnapped. If [the guerrillas] want to release them, let them release them. Release them this morning, today, tell us where they are and we will go get them," said Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón on Jan. 25. His "defiant" words—as the opposition described them—ended the game that Santos had begun a week earlier, when he said, "No one is telling them that they have to submit to a humiliating surrender, because that is not realistic."

In this latest round of "wishful thinking," it was the president who on Feb. 3 definitively put a padlock on the possibility of dialogue. That Friday, Santos called the FARC "hypocrites" and said that three bomb attacks in recent days that authorities attributed to the FARC and which resulted in 18 deaths were "cowardly" and "demented" and removed any possibility of peace. Meanwhile, the international humanitarian organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) condemned the attacks but expressed some doubts about who the perpetrators were and demanded that the government carry out "a prompt, thorough, and impartial investigation."

**FARC hostage release ends in tragedy**

In recent months, uncertainty has reigned in Colombia. On Nov. 26, the FARC had planned to release four people. Somehow, the release was botched, and the four hostages died. There are two contradictory versions, the government's and the guerrillas', of what happened in the confusing incident.

On Jan. 3, from Madrid, where she had gone for a series of conferences, former senator Piedad Córdoba questioned both versions and asked for "international support" for an investigation that would get at the truth about the four deaths. "Was there or was there not a failed rescue by the armed forces? Was there a confrontation? Was there crossfire? Were there executions outlawed by the laws of war?" asked the former legislator.
Córdoba has never gotten along with the governments in Bogotá, and in 2010 the attorney general removed her from office and banned her from holding any public office for 18 years on charges that she "promoted and collaborated with the FARC."

Speaking from the Spanish capital, the former senator was careful to lay out her position without giving her detractors ammunition. Referring to the FARC and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)—the other guerrilla group fighting in the Colombian war—Córdoba said, "They have their own voice, there is an internal war, there are political actors. These actors are responsible for crimes that ethics condemns, but it is necessary that they be heard."

**Government-sponsored march falls flat**

The government opted to respond with actions. On Jan. 6, it organized a national demonstration calling for the release of the FARC hostages, some 11 military and police and about 300 civilians. It did not go well, despite the invaluable support of newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations. In 2008, hundred of thousands had participated in a similar march. On this first Friday of 2012, fewer than 30,000 participated. People's feelings and their reasons to march or not reflected the national polarization on the issue. It should have been a strong wake-up call for the government, but it was not.

"Citizens resisted marching because demonstrations like these fuel hatred among Colombians, and they also make the other actors of the armed conflict invisible—the paramilitaries, drug traffickers, and the government itself, with its armed forces, police, and special commandos," said Jenny Giraldo, an academic who backed not attending the demonstration on her Twitter account. "The march minimizes the magnitude of the internal war as it promotes a rejection of only the guerrillas, and, while the guerrillas deserve rejection, many armed groups are responsible for the situation we're in, but this march takes us back to the most hawkish moments of Álvaro Uribe." She was referring to former President Uribe (2002-2010), Santos' predecessor. Santos was Uribe's interior minister and later his defense minister.

The following day, addressing the organization Mujeres del Mundo por la Paz in Colombia, the FARC sped up the decision to release six detainees, all military or police, and again lamented the fate of the four persons who died in the Nov. 26 incident. "We deeply regret that four prisoners of war whom we were going to unilaterally release...died in an irrational rescue attempt by the government's Army, when we were on our way to the place where we were planning to turn them over."

The message, posted on the FARC Web page (www.farc-ep.co), was in response to a request from the women. Members of the women's organization include Córdoba, Guatemalan 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchu, Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, Uruguayan Sen. Lucía Topolanski (wife of President José Mujica), Salvadoran Nidia Díaz (signer of the 1992 peace accords), Mexican Margarita Zapata (niece of the legendary Emiliano Zapata), and Xiomara Castro (wife of democratically elected former Honduran President Manuel Zelaya who was ousted in a 2009 coup).

**CCP calls for peace talks, respect for human rights**

On Jan. 9, the FARC launched its latest proposal for dialogue. Days later, on Jan. 17, the CCP addressed the government and the guerrilla groups (FARC and ELN), asking that they accept a bilateral truce or a 90-day renewable cease-fire as a prologue to peace talks and humanitarian
agreements that would lead to the end of the internal war. The CCP published three letters addressed to President Santos, Comandante Timochenko of the FARC, and Gabino, his counterpart in the ELN.

In the letter to the FARC, the CCP praised a new announcement on the unilateral release of six soldiers and police and expressed its "willingness to contribute to developing the humanitarian operation that facilitates and guarantees the releases." To Gabino, it repeated its request that "all hostages be released." The organization demanded that the two guerrilla groups "take imperative measures within your ranks to see that international humanitarian law is applied in all situations and investigate any violations of the law."

Although the organization did not refer to the guerrilla groups as "belligerent parties" as defined by the 1969 Vienna Convention (NotiSur, Feb. 8, 2008)—a status that would imply the Santos administration's admission of the existence of an internal war, which it has not admitted—the CCP addressed the president in the exact same terms, asking that he adopt adequate measures with "the armed forces to see that international humanitarian law is applied in all situations and investigate any violations of the law."

The letters were made public a week after the FARC leader asked Santos to agree to resume the inconclusive peace talks (NotiSur, July 17, 1998, May 14, 1999, Nov. 17, 2000, and March 1, 2002) carried out during the administration of former President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002). Santos dismissed that possibility and instead asked that the guerrillas, "before attempting a dialogue, turn in their weapons and demobilize," obviously a veritable impossibility.

In its Jan. 14 online edition, the influential magazine Semana commented on the latest developments and called the guerrilla proposal "a step forward from the silence of recent rebel commanders." The magazine continued, "At the same time, it is disheartening because it again reveals the enormous breach between the political position of the guerrillas—who aim to talk about a cease-fire, liquidation of the ultraright paramilitary organizations, a strategy of respect for human rights, and a distributive agrarian policy, among other reforms—and the militaristic government position." The FARC, the magazine concluded, "proposes discussing the country's major issues while still armed. Santos is not going to move a finger if the guerrillas do not first release all those kidnapped, turn over their arms, and stop fighting."

Two years ago, when Uribe was in office, polls showed that Colombians had a similar rejection of both sides but that, like their president, they wanted the guerrillas annihilated, with everything that implied. Today things have changed. A Semana poll indicated that only 4% of respondents are uninterested in dialogue. The remaining 96% are divided equally between those in favor of negotiating peace and those favoring a military option.