Colombians Hopes for Peace Raised Again

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Colombians Hopes for Peace Raised Again
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In the space of a few weeks, the peace proposal by a Colombian humanitarian group seems to have raised some hope for beginning on a path that could finally end the bloody internal war that began 48 years ago, when what is today the oldest guerrilla group in Latin America appeared in Colombia. Although not all analysts are equally hopeful, the Jan. 17 proposal by Colombianas y Colombianos por la Paz (CCP) that the two sides commit to a 90-day truce in which to lay the groundwork for peace talks has acted as a powerful catalyst for debate.

The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Colombia's two insurrectionist groups, responded positively to the proposal. The association of relatives of victims of rebel action asked the government to give "our loved ones a second opportunity for life," and, in urging the government to accept the path of dialogue to negotiate peace, it expressed its "radical opposition to military rescue attempts" of hostages held by the guerrillas in their jungle bastions. Thus, the insurgents and the Asociación de Familiares de Miembros de la Fuerza Pública Retenidos y Liberados por Grupos Guerrillos (ASFAMIPAZ) left President Juan Manuel Santos' administration to risk assuming a high political cost if it did not consider the CCP idea or come up with a better proposal.

President Santos still believes in military solution
No sooner had the CCP idea become known than Santos rejected it. He said the government "did not authorize and will not authorize Colombian or foreign mediators to look for rapprochement" with the FARC. (He did not mention the ELN, but the position is the same.) The president, who was defense minister from 2006 to 2009 and as such was in charge of military actions against rebel groups, repeated that he continues to believe in a military solution to Colombia's drama.

Santos denied that police and military forces are "demoralized"—an assertion by his predecessor, former President Álvaro Uribe (2001-2010)—and he pointed out that, in his 18 months in office, "8,300 guerrillas were captured and another 2,500 turned in their weapons." The president's statement was surprising because just days earlier the military high command had estimated that the FARC had only 8,000-9,000 combatants. The president's words set off a series of reactions that backed the government into a corner and, worse for its interests, isolated it from general public sentiment.

On Feb. 1, ASFAMIPAZ addressed a public letter to Santos, which the large national dailies refused to print and which became known only through alternative Web sites. The letter said, "Our loved ones, kidnapped more than 13 years ago, deserve a second opportunity for life, and you, Dr. Santos, hold the power to allow us to embrace them alive and free as soon as possible, since the guerrillas have indicated that they will unilaterally free six of them." (The FARC subsequently announced that all captives would be freed.)

The letter then mentioned the peace efforts by the CCP and other humanitarian organizations and thanked the International Red Cross for its work as well as the Brazil government, which had provided logistical assistance to facilitate the release of other FARC hostages (NotiSur, March 6,
Finally, ASFAMIPAZ criticized the government's militaristic policy, manifested its "radical opposition to military rescue attempts of our loved ones," and expressed the hope that "the road to a credible peace process be opened," that is, that a dialogue be begun. Until the contents of the letter were published, victims’ relatives had maintained positions close to those of the government.

Guerrillas push for talks

On Feb. 20, the ELN responded to the CCP proposal by accepting the establishment of a 90-day bilateral cease-fire, repudiating the "warmongering posture of Santos, who systematically rejects any contribution toward peace," and calling for "the truce to be considered and accepted as part of the dialogue and not as a prior condition."

On Feb. 26, it was the FARC's turn. In a communiqué from the group's Secretariado del Estado Mayor Central, it made two surprising announcements. First, that it would unilaterally release the 10 police and military held by them in the jungle. Second, that as of that date it would no longer engage in kidnappings, both of state agents whom it considers pawns to exchange for detained rebels as well as civilians used to extract ransoms to finance its activities.

"Every time we talk of peace, of political solutions to confrontation, of the need to converse to find a civilized exit to the serious social and political problems that began the armed conflict in Colombia, the embittered chorus of lovers of war rise up undermining our proposals for reconciliation," said the document. In a resolute invitation to dialogue, the FARC added, "We consider that there is no more room for delaying the beginning of conversations."

The FARC then laid out two points with a profound political content. First, it asked ASFAMIPAZ president Marleny Orujuela, a former government ally, to receive the hostages when they were released. Second, in ratifying the decision to abandon the practice of kidnapping, it referred to "what was established in Law 002 issued at the 2002 plenary of our military command, which is henceforth repealed...because now is the time to begin to clarify who kidnaps and why in Colombia."

In referring to "current legislation," the FARC was claiming to be a belligerent party (one clause of the Vienna Convention considers a belligerent party an actor in an internal conflict with territorial control and its own legal norms) and indirectly accused the state of using paramilitary groups to kidnap and kill opponents. A March 3 report from the regional office of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) said that in Colombia an average of 100 union leaders per year are murdered (2,800 since 1984).

New elements were added to the debate in the following days. On March 4, in a public letter addressed to ASFAMIPAZ, FARC top commander Rodrigo Londoño Echeverry repeated the group's decision to abandon kidnappings and said, "So that more soldiers and police do not continue dying, do not continue being wounded, are not taken prisoners, we believe it is worth the effort to try to break this vicious cycle and commit to reconciliation and peace." The FARC leader added, "Soldiers should not die, nor police, nor guerrillas; perhaps it would be better if none of them existed any longer."

That same day, in an interview with the Bogotá daily El Tiempo, former senator and CCP leader Piedad Córdoba repeated the call for a truce, saying, "No conflict has been resolved without a mechanism for gradually reducing the violence and without a cease-fire agreement, as we
have learned from processes such as those in Ireland, the Philippines, South Africa, and Central America."

Civil society weighs in
On March 8, more than 100 Colombian intellectuals called on Santos to establish "serious and clear conversations with the insurgency" and said that a conflict like Colombia's, "which has lasted for at least one-fourth of the republic's history, cannot be treated as if it were the exclusive purview of the armed institutions or the president."

On Feb. 27, Todd Howland of the Colombian Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said that the FARC's announcement that it was abandoning kidnappings was "a good sign aimed at peace or at a negotiation." That same day, in Washington, State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland called the FARC statements "an important step forward," although she added, "And we note that the FARC has promised to release all of its prisoners before, so obviously, we'll want to see these steps actually implemented."

Amid this barrage of new signals, on March 11, Spain's Jesús Eguiguren expressed his willingness to act as an advisor to President Santos, "if he were to ask me to, in the event of a dialogue with the guerrillas." The Associated Press (AP) quoted Eguiguren as saying he was encouraged that in Colombia making dialogue a priority was gaining ground rather than looking for an armed solution to an internal conflict that has been going on for nearly 50 years.

Eguiguren has relevant experience. He is well-known in Spain and throughout the world as a negotiator with the ETA separatists until October 2011 when the nationalist group announced the end of its terrorist actions. In Madrid, Eguiguren is still waiting for a response that, if positive, would give Colombians a hope that no one would have expected just a month ago.

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