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Andrés Gaudán

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Colombia Inches Toward Peace Talks
by Andrés Gaudín
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After a half century of internal war, and much more importantly—50 years that cover one-quarter of the country’s history since independence—Colombia seems finally on the road to ending a conflict that has cost three generations of Colombians thousands of lives and displaced millions more. Colombians have demanded a gesture of peace from the parties in conflict: the state, whose first independent government was installed in August 1819, and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas, who came onto the scene in June 1964 in the Andean jungle of Marquetalia.

To arrive at the dialogue that will be held alternately in Oslo, Norway, and Havana, Cuba—the two guarantor countries of the possible accords—it was necessary that a president who understood that the long war would never be resolved militarily head the Bogotá government. President Juan Manuel Santos had backed the military option throughout his life and, as defense minister from 2006 to 2009, in the pro-war administration of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), dealt the harshest blows to the rebel groups. He reconsidered his position, however, and faced up to reality.

On Aug. 28, Santos acknowledged that for the past six months his administration had engaged in "exploratory meetings" with the FARC. He also said that those "approaches" would lead to negotiations, which would include a six-point agenda based on three pillars: "to learn from the mistakes of the past so as to not repeat them, to end the conflict, and to maintain the military's presence throughout the country." When Santos spoke of past mistakes, he was alluding to the three failed dialogue processes begun by Presidents Belisario Betancur (1982-1986), César Gaviria (1990-1994), and Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) [NotiSur, June 28, 1988, Oct. 8, 1993, and March 2, 2001].

It would be a mistake to think that peace is at hand, that both Santos and the FARC have made 180-degree turns, and that they will sit down to negotiate—to "converse," as the rebels say, since they insist that there is nothing to negotiate—with much of the ground already covered and their former positions forgotten. No, that is not the case.

Cease-fire a point of contention
As do the most representative civil groups, the FARC poses the need to establish a cease-fire while the two sides are meeting. Santos, in addition to stressing the state's natural role in maintaining a military presence throughout the country, says that this presence must be active, carrying out ongoing operations against the rebels. That is what has been happening. No fewer than 50 guerrillas have died in military attacks since Aug. 28.

Santos does, however, support adding other "companions" to the dialogue, which would join the governments of Chile and Venezuela, and he mentioned the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS). The rebels agree on broadening the discussions but not with the UN and the OAS.

On Sept. 19, in an interview with the Bogotá weekly magazine Voz, Rodrigo "Timochenko" Londoño, the top guerrilla leader, said that "the people cannot be ignored; an agreement cannot
be attempted once again behind their backs, considering only what interests and suits the transnationals, bankers, business owners, and large landholders. The vast majority must be listened to and [their concerns] addressed."

Importantly, Santos made his final decision after he was bombarded, beginning Jan. 1, by the demands from relatives of victims of the conflict, guerrilla organizations, political parties, and groups of intellectuals for the initiation of peace talks (NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2011, Feb. 17, 2012, and March 30, 2012).

All Cabinet members and the military high command knew that the two sides had been conversing in Cuba since the end of February. One of the major newspapers, the conservative El Espectador, as well as the most representative humanitarian organization, Colombianos y Colombianas por la Paz (CCP), were also aware of what was happening. They all understood that this was a state undertaking and maintained strict silence on the matter.

Only Uribe broke this tacit agreement and spoke about the meetings. He did so on Aug. 19, saying that to dialogue was "treason." He tried to question Santos' leadership, but managed only to receive widespread negative reactions, including from political parties, union leaders, the Catholic Church, organizations of indigenous and campesinos, and the business chambers. Later, a Sept. 28 Datesco poll showed that 67.3% of Colombians were in favor of the conversations.

**Talks have broad public support**

The day after Uribe's "disloyalty," El Espectador wrote in its lead editorial that "the dialogue is a great step toward using intelligence and not just force in the conflict because the war that we are suffering, with its deaths, its displaced persons, and its disappeared, cannot be resolved any other way than through negotiations."

That same day, the other major Colombian newspaper Tiempo said that it did not understand Uribe's position, and it unmasked him, saying that "until the last minute of his second term, he looked for a rapprochement with the FARC and the ELN" (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, the second active guerrilla group in the country)—efforts that were frustrated by the "logical reservations" that his person and his past awakened.

The General Agreement to End the Conflict and Build a Lasting Peace, signed in Cuba, establishes that each side's delegation will be made up of 30 persons but only 10 at a time will be able to participate in the meetings. The six points that will be discussed are: 1) a comprehensive agrarian-development policy, which means discussing the land-tenancy regime; 2) the future participation of demobilized rebels in the political life of the country, which recalls the genocide perpetrated against the Unión Patriótica (UP), a party that arose from the guerrilla demobilization in 1985 (NotiSur, Oct. 13, 1987,Sept. 7, 1989, March 27, 1990); 3) the terms for the end of the conflict, which will have to include discussion on what will happen to high-ranking guerrilla leaders like Simón Trinidad, who was extradited to the US to be investigated for alleged drug trafficking and who received a 60-year prison sentence for the crime of kidnapping (NotiSur, June 29, 2007); 4) solving the illegal-drug problem, with both sides supporting legalization; 5) redress for victims of the internal conflict; and 6) the forms of implementation, verification, and endorsement of eventual accords that might be reached.
History provides cautionary tale

For students of the Colombian situation, the two most difficult aspects to resolve are points two and three. The first because of the ugly history of the violence against the UP. The second because this is where US interests come into play, involving US economic and military aid to Colombia to the tune of some US$5 billion a year and more than 500 "contractors" permanently in the country, making Colombia the fifth-largest recipient of US aid, after Israel, Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

In the 1980s, the demobilization that led to the founding of the UP was brutally resisted by the right and its paramilitaries. In less than four years, two presidential candidates (Jaime Pardo Leal and Bernardo Jaramillo), all UP senators elected in 1986, 13 or their 14 deputies, 70 of their 351 city councilors, and 11 of their 23 mayors were murdered. Various studies estimate that the Army, secret police, intelligence services, regular police, bands of drug traffickers, and paramilitary groups killed no fewer than 20,000 people in a genocide that also caused thousands of disappeared and tens of thousands of exiles.

This time, when the talks reach point six, "the government will have to give strong guarantees of sincerity and offer all its legitimizing support to the political structure through which the rebels will be reintegrated into political life. This will be the only way to ensure that a legal political proposal, such as the one that created the UP, does not end up becoming a new genocide," said Teófilo Vázquez of the Centro de Investigación Nacional y Educación Pública (CINEP), a civil agency that works for "a society that is just, sustainable, and at-peace."

Many speculate that that political structure will be the Marcha Patriótica (MP), an organization launched on April 23 that the establishment largely ignored. The MP gathered in the central Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá, and in the first public demonstration formulated a series of demands and stressed that "the only way to end the war is through dialogue on the social, political, and armed conflict in the country."

Referring to the marked correlations with the guerrillas' long-standing demands, Deputy Hernando Hernández Tapasco—one of the visible faces of the MP—said, "The points of agreement can't be denied, but that doesn't mean that we're the political arm of the FARC or the ELN."

Hernández Tapasco, leader of the Embera Chamí ethnic group and a deputy since 2010 for the campesino and indigenous wing of the Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), explained the power of the new organization. "We have a presence in 29 of the 32 departments, we include more than 2,400 associations, some small, with only 10 or 12 members, but others with hundreds of followers. We have the ability to immediately convocate 300,000 people throughout the country."

In any event, it seems premature to envision the guerrillas in a permanent political organization, when, after a half century of clandestine life, they have only recently begun conversations to see if they can find a legal anchor in this convulsed South American country where the feared paramilitary organizations continue dominating vast swathes of the rural countryside.

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