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Despite Stumbling Blocks, Colombian Peace Talks Limp Along

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Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2013-03-15

While Colombians continue to show their commitment to ending an internal armed conflict that has lasted a half century and cost hundred of thousands of lives, the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas continue conversations toward that end, but without any signs of wanting to open the dialogue to all actors in the drama.

The rebels sent a complimentary letter to the Catholic Church, inviting the bishops to join the talks, but many analysts saw the gesture more as an opportunistic political ploy than a real desire.

The government is fully compliant with the agenda drawn up for the conversations that have been taking place since November 2012 in Havana, Cuba (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012), but it is clearly unwilling to have outsiders participate, even the other guerrilla group firmly implanted in the country, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). News agency analysts and major regional press outlets have expressed their surprise at the guerrilla's political ability and the government's ineptness.

President's brother concerned about pace of talks

The first to observe this was not just any analyst but the president's brother Enrique Santos, journalist and former director of Bogotá daily El Tiempo, who participated in the first phase of conversations with the FARC. On Jan. 30 in Washington, where he was participating in a forum at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Enrique Santos told Spanish news agency EFE, "It's necessary to step up the pace of negotiations, because if they don't have life breathed into them, they could die, and the public-opinion climate could go from indifference to hostility."

Enrique Santos also noted that the government delegation, especially the chief of mission, former President Humberto de la Calle (1994-1997), "reacted nervously" when asked about the progress of the dialogue. "The FARC has moved in such a way that it has achieved great visibility, creating a good image with the international community," said Santos.

That same day in Bogotá, before boarding a plane to Cuba to begin the fifth round of talks, de la Calle had surprised reporters with some undiplomatic statements. "If the FARC wants to continue prolonging things and doesn't want to reach an agreement, it should say so once and for all so that neither the government nor Colombians waste any more time," he said. That was the "nervous reaction" that worried the president's brother.

On Feb. 10, in Havana, de la Calle again appeared nervous. "We are not here to talk about divinity and humanity," he said, although the ANSA news agency journalist who quoted him did not know what had caused the government representative's annoyance.

Surprisingly, President Santos began making statements in the same vein. On Feb. 23, at a ceremony giving land to campesinos in the southern department of Caquetá, he said, "The dialogue process with the FARC is faltering." When a journalist asked him about the rebel proposal to
declare a bilateral cease-fire while the dialogue continued in Cuba, Santos, obviously annoyed, replied, "The rules of the game are very clear. Here there is no truce of any kind, not a military truce, not a legal truce, not even a verbal truce."

FARC shows public relations skills

The FARC's favorable image, which Enrique Santos referred to at the Wilson Center, is understandable. Since the dialogue began, the rebels have sent out various constructive signals. For two months, they maintained a unilateral cease-fire despite being subjected to the worst government-military offensive of the past year; they proposed a bilateral truce to the government to "optimize the dialogue climate"; then they offered a formula to "humanize the war"; they invited the Catholic Church to join the dialogue process; and they suggested signing a commitment to "guarantee the population food sovereignty and good living."

However, what disturbed the government more than those proposals was the FARC's request that the government recognize it as a belligerent party (NotiSur, Feb. 8, 2008, and March 30, 2012) and the positive reaction to that request from the international community. What particularly annoyed the government was the rebels' "ingenuity" in presenting their arguments to support the request.

Andrés París, the nom de guerre of one of the rebel negotiators in Havana, laid out to Cuban news agency Prensa Latina the justification for supporting their demand. "[Participating in] the peace process is already an example of our status as belligerents," he said. "But, in addition, if the government is seated at the dialogue table and if the Red Cross was the guarantor for bringing our combatants and leaders to Cuba, that means that all the Geneva Convention requisites are there for recognition as a belligerent force."

In coverage similar to that of other media in the region, the daily Jornal do Comercio of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul said, "The FARC fulfills the demands and requisites set by international treaties to grant such a designation [status as a belligerent party], since it is a force with a political proposal, a unified command, control of territory, administration of justice, schools and hospitals, and participation in a sustained war."

For now, the dialogue is limited to the government and the FARC. The ELN had at one time showed interest in participating and presented a draft agenda coinciding with what was being discussed in Havana. While both the Colombian government and the FARC hailed the proposal, they did not offer the ELN a seat at the table. They did, however, create other mechanisms for citizen participation, but from a distance, including a Web page where individuals can leave ideas and proposals regarding the issues being debated and even propose their own.

And, with the coordination of the Universidad Nacional and several UN agencies, 134 forums were carried out at which 522 civil organizations participated and gave valuable input and expressed their agreement with the process. When the government and rebels met again in the Cuban capital after a brief recess for the Christmas and New Year's holidays, they both emphasized Colombians' strong interest in joining a peace process. But they still did not open up the debate. Each side blamed the other.

Catholic Church rejects FARC invitation

On Feb. 12, the FARC made an important political gamble. "With great respect, we invite the bishops to discuss the war and peace and the ideas that they could bring to a less bloody solution
to this long armed conflict that confronts Colombians," said the guerrillas in a letter addressed to Rubén Cardinal Salazar, archbishop of Bogotá. Iván Márquez, head of the rebel negotiating delegation, agreed with the Catholic Church on the "need to humanize the war" and, in passing, complained about the government’s "incoherence" in "not accepting the proposal to discuss a bilateral truce."

Salazar simply said he understood "that the dialogue is moving forward," and responded that, regarding the supposed invitation, he had "received no formal invitation from the FARC." He added, "I don't think that it is up to them to send out invitations, that corresponds to the president."

To date, the president has not issued any formal invitation to the Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia (CEC).

Along with the ELN, various social agencies have said from the beginning that peace could not be discussed if negotiations did not include all stakeholders, especially victims of the conflict. Thus, lacking an invitation to participate in the dialogue, on Feb. 20 in Bogotá and other places around the country, more than 1,000 small and large organizations of people displaced by the war, women, Afro-descendants, indigenous, campesinos, workers, and students met. They did so at the behest of Marcha Patriótica—a movement thought to be a possibility for the incorporation of the guerrillas if the Havana talks bear fruit—and the humanitarian organization Colombianos y Colombianas por la Paz (CCP).

The Asambleas Constituyentes por la Paz con Justicia Social began in 2011 in the northern department of Santander, a year before anyone knew of a possible rapprochement between the government and the FARC, and are now used to pressure both sides. The creators of the initiative hope to carry out more than 300 regional gatherings and come together in August "in a grand Asamblea Constituyente Nacional that they cannot ignore and that will have to be an essential part of the final phase of the peace conversations."

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