Colombian Government, Rebels Struggle to Keep Peace Process On Track

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Colombian Government, Rebels Struggle to Keep Peace Process On Track

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Just when the government of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) were showing clear signs of progress toward signing an agreement to end a half century of armed conflict, "those who live off war"—as the president called critics who contend that such social conflicts can only be explained using military language—made several alarmist statements aimed at destroying the dialogue taking place in Havana, Cuba.

Spokespersons for the government and the rebels had made it known that in May they might announce an agreement on the first of six points—the agrarian issue—included in the conversations begun in November 2012, with the Cuban and Norwegian governments acting as guarantors and the Chilean and Venezuelan governments as observers (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012). Any agreement would then be submitted to a popular referendum.

The talks have been welcomed enthusiastically by Colombian society, which held a peace march on April 9, drawing a huge turnout on the streets of Bogotá.

US general, Colombian ex-presidents not helpful to process
In the days before the march, ultraright former Presidents Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) and Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) as well as the head of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Gen. John Kelly made statements—"false statements," said the government—indicating that the president "bowed down to the FARC terrorists" (Uribe), or that, rather than thinking about peace, the rebels are obtaining SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles that could decisively change the outcome of the Colombian war (Kelly).

Kelly's remarkable allegation was preceded by a campaign to discredit the FARC that led the guerrilla delegation at the talks to release a communiqué denying, as it has done many times, that it is involved in drug trafficking—"We are revolutionaries, not drug traffickers," the statement said—and asserting collusion between military and police and the cartels that traffic the cocaine that reaches US consumers. On April 1, the rebels complained that "this campaign [against the talks] is gaining strength just as we are talking about ending the armed conflict."

Days earlier, on March 19, Kelly had testified before a US House of Representatives committee. The German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) quoted Kelly as saying, "The hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue the FARC receives from cocaine trafficking alone enable them to purchase surface-to-air missiles and fund the construction of multimillion dollar 'narco subs.'"

The official SOUTHCOM spokesperson Col. Gregory Julian went even further, telling the Associated Press (AP), "I can confirm that the FARC has acquired surface-to-air missiles."

However, Colombian Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón said, "We have no information confirming that the FARC has that weaponry." The minister and the head of the armed forces Gen.
Alejandro Navas said that intelligence data have shown the guerrillas' "intention" to acquire such missiles. Col. Julian's "has missiles" and Pinzón's "wants missiles" became, on April 3, an assertion by Gen. José Roberto León, director of the Policía Nacional, that the FARC "intends to acquire" such missiles.

Navas admitted that US intelligence "may have more up-to-date information that we don't as yet have," but he doubted the US story. "It has always been the other side's aspiration to acquire strategic capability, that is natural in a conflict," he said. "In a war, one side always tries to have the best weaponry, equipment that can shift the balance." The general said that statements such as Kelly's "are old and without merit."

Pinzón recalled that in October 2012 the armed forces confirmed that, two years earlier, "shells" of "two old, used, and discarded missiles, from the 1960s or 1970s, had been found in a guerrilla encampment ... it was two SAM-7 missiles, frankly old, frankly useless, decidedly ineffective, according to experts."

On April 3, Italian news agency ANSA quoted an unidentified source dismissing Kelly's remarks in the US capital, saying that "the head of SOUTHCOM tried to frighten the representatives into not reducing the budget."

**President Santos criticizes "those who live off war"**

Against the backdrop of that debate aimed at generating a climate of mistrust in society about the FARC's real intentions and, at the same time, pointing out the government's presumed "naivety" in the negotiations, President Santos on April 4 spoke out against "black propaganda aimed at sabotaging the peace process," attributing it to "those who live off war and use whatever ruse to poison the process."

Without naming either Pastrana or Uribe, Santos said that he had heard "rumors that the FARC would have impunity when an agreement was reached" and that "negotiations were being held in Cuba behind the backs of the military, something absolutely and totally false." Both allegations had been made days earlier by the former presidents.

Santos said the facts disprove those accusations. He said that the security forces are represented in the negotiating delegation at the highest level, by retired Gens. Jorge Mora and Óscar Naranjo, former heads of the military and the PN, respectively, in the Uribe administration. He added, "We continue on the offensive, fighting, and only when we reach an agreement will there be a permanent cease-fire so that we stop killing each other."

Three days later, former vice president Humberto de la Calle, head of the official negotiating mission, wrote an article in the Bogotá daily El Tiempo calling statements that negotiations were being held behind the country's back "sinister" and accusing Uribe and Pastrana of "making black propaganda against peace." He said that any agreement reached in Havana would be submitted to a referendum.

While the level of debate among the political elites is deteriorating with each public appearance by Uribe, in particular, and by his new group Puro Centro Democrático (PCD), Colombian society is expressing its opinion in the streets. On April 9, a huge crowd—2 million people, said Spanish news agency EFE—took to the streets of Bogotá and other cities to show their support for the peace talks.
In the largest gathering in the country's memory, the initiative of the progressive Marcha Patriótica (MP) was even supported by the government, and President Santos led the march alongside former guerrillas, social leaders, and leftist activists. And with them were police, soldiers, human rights advocates, campesinos, indigenous, Afro-descendants, and other victims of the conflict. The president wore a white T-shirt, as the MP had asked, with the slogans "My contribution is to believe" printed on the front and "I believe in peace" on the back.

The only ones absent were the extreme-right groups, represented by Uribe and journalist Francisco Santos, a cousin of the president. The two, along with Pastrana, are the visible faces of an increasingly small sector that—despite a half century of a failed military option with its hundreds of thousands of dead and millions of displaced—continues believing that the barrel of a gun holds the key to silencing the strong guerrilla movement that has managed to control and administer an area in which it provides education, health care, and justice to those living there.

The multitudinous demonstration by the citizenry and the incorporation into the dialogue process in Havana of two guerrilla leaders from the most conflictive areas of the country paved the way for optimism regarding the expected announcement from both sides about some agreements. The street demonstration was like a huge gesture of recognition for the MP, which is believed to be a structure that, once a peace agreement is signed, can provide a venue for the guerrillas to legally participate in political life.

Besides showing that the FARC is not divided regarding the dialogue, the trip by rebel commanders Jorge Torres Victoria and Joaquín Gómez was a very strong sign of the government's commitment, in that it granted safe-conduct passes so that the two most hunted guerrillas in the country could travel legally to Havana.

Finally, the request from both sides that the UN mission in Colombia and the Universidad Nacional convoke an open forum to draw up society's proposals for the guerrillas' political participation after an eventual accord and the guarantees they world receive to participate in legal political opposition seemed to strengthen the idea that the end of the long, bloody war might really be in sight.

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