6-28-2013

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Colombia's Peace Process Makes Significant Headway

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Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2013-06-28

After a half century of setbacks, so serious that they were manifested in a war that has taken a toll of hundreds of thousands of persons dead, exiled, or displaced, the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) reached an initial agreement on the central issue of the conflict—which in 1964 led to the birth of the rebel organization: land ownership and use (NotiSur, Oct. 12, 2012, and March 15, 2013). On May 26, when the two sides, meeting for talks in Havana, Cuba, acknowledged signing the far-reaching agreement, the entire political spectrum, except the far right, applauded.

Days later, on June 18, the government and the guerrillas resumed talks to work on the second point on the preset agenda: integration of the guerrillas into legal life and the guarantees they will receive, once demobilized, to participate in political activity.

The FARC insisted on calling for a constituent assembly to "reform the state" and proposed postponing the next presidential elections for a year so that the campaign would "not affect the excellent climate in which these conversations are developing and through which we are trying to begin to create a new egalitarian and democratic country."

The government rejected both proposals outright, but the dialogue continued, "a good sign that indicates that they are serious," said opposition Deputy Iván Cepeda of the Polo Democático Alternativo (PDA).

In the media, Santos sent other signals, this time contradictory. First, he made a clearly sympathetic gesture to Henrique Capriles, leader of the Venezuelan right, whom he received in Bogotá during one of the tensest moments in the neighboring country. Leading the opposition, Capriles refused to recognize the democratic elections won by President Nicolás Maduro. provoking serious acts of violence that left at least eight people dead and encouraged a destabilization campaign aimed atousting the new constitutional government in Caracas (NotiSur, May 3, 2013). Today more than ever, better relations with Venezuela are vital for Colombia because Venezuela, along with Chile, Cuba, and Norway, is accompanying and guaranteeing the dialogue in Havana (NotiSur, April 26, 2013).

Santos then announced his desire to have the country join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Finally, Santos admitted, without even a verbal protest, that the US Pentagon was interfering in Colombia's internal affairs with a plan to create and broadcast radio programs especially targeting rural areas, which goes against the spirit of the dialogue in the Palacio de Convenciones in Havana.

Agreement could bring "radical transformation" to rural Colombia

In a country in which everything is known, and at a time when the principal press outlets make tempting offers for a copy of the land agreement, the text signed in Cuba remains a secret kept under lock and key. The only public information are the evaluations by the heads of both negotiating
commissions and some isolated tidbits published by Spanish news agency EFE and the US-based Associated Press (AP).

"The agreement will mark the beginning of radical transformations in Colombia's agrarian reality, with equality and democracy" and "it is centered on people, on the small producer," said the joint statement read by Cuban diplomat Carlos Fernández de Cossio, who was flanked by Colombia's former vice president Humberto de la Calle, head of Santos' negotiating team, and comandante Iván Márquez, coordinator of the FARC negotiating mission.

Although no details were given, the communiqué alluded to some elements in the agreement, such as access to land, legalization of properties, reserve areas, and infrastructure to be built to accompany rural development.

Following the essential acknowledgment that the document had been signed, De la Calle said, "I can affirm with certainty that what was agreed to on the agrarian issue will enable the radical transformation of rural reality in Colombia." He added, "We have a real opportunity to achieve peace through dialogue."

Márquez said that "progress has been made in building an agreement with specific exceptions that will be re-examined before the final agreement is signed." As became clear, one of the points of disagreement is the rebel demand to limit the size of properties owned by individuals, businesses, or foreign states.

With the exception of former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), all sectors of Colombian society welcomed the progress in the dialogue with hope. In his increasing isolation, Uribe attacked Santos, saying that he "is developing a policy that many of us view with panic." The leader of Colombia's ultraright said that the president "has become an adulator of Castro-Chavismo and a great defender of the Venezuelan dictatorship, which is taking the same path as the Cuban dictatorship."

Camilo González of the private Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ) said, "This is the first agreement signed on this issue in a half century of conflict. On no other occasion and in no other talks has even an outline of such a text been achieved." Deputy Cepeda said, "What we are seeing is how the government and the rebels became flexible in their positions on a structural issue to make enormously significant progress."

The movement Colombianas y Colombianos por la Paz (CCP) celebrated the signing of the document, and former senator Piedad Córdoba, its main spokesperson, said that, at the defining hour, the two sides did not forget those displaced by the war. The Swiss-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said Colombia has the world's largest number of displaced persons, between 4.9 million and 5.5 million in 2012.

Information gathered by EFE and the AP indicated that the signed text refers to land access and distribution, the struggle against poverty, stimulus for agricultural production, and the reactivation of the rural economy. EFE sources said, "We want the greatest number of people without land or without sufficient land to have access to it through creating a land fund for peace. The government will progressively legalize, subject to constitutional norms, all the plots that campesinos have in Colombia." AP contributed what might be another part of the joint communiqué, which calls for
"mechanisms to be created to resolve land-use conflicts and an agrarian jurisdiction to protect property rights with prevalence for the common goal."

The agreement would also require that campesinos be supported with housing plans, potable water, technical assistance, training, education, adaptation of lands, infrastructure, and soil restoration. In the near term, the land fund could be augmented by incorporating the large, unused or underused tracts of land.

The country has 114 million hectares of arable land. During the armed conflict, at least 2 million ha were taken from campesinos by the ultraright paramilitary commandos, another 4 million ha were abandoned because of fear of the violence, and 500,000 ha were stolen by the government through fraudulent processes by notaries and land-registry officials.

Santos' mixed messages

Santos gave some explanations to justify having received Capriles and his desire to take a seat at NATO alongside the world's great military powers. The internal democratic opposition and other countries in the region took into consideration the special circumstances in Colombia and were satisfied.

Santos remained silent, but at some point will have to talk about the actions of foreign military interference. Specifically, Santos said nothing when on May 31 a decision became known that was adopted some weeks earlier by the US Army to contract a writer to produce 20 episodes of a radio soap opera with which the Pentagon and the US State Department are attempting to convince FARC members to put down their arms.

The request, which news sources Terra, EFE, Reuters, and others said was published May 23 on an official US government Web site, calls for 20 episodes, each 15 minutes in length, divided into three parts. Eight chapters "will convey messages that promote demobilization." Eight others will "convey messages that counter recruitment of target audiences (TAs) into illegal armed groups," and the remaining four will promote "traditional family values, belief in the respectful treatment of women, democratic alternatives to violence that can furnish functioning state institutions, and emerging environmental concerns in support of US and partner nation goals in Colombia, South America."

Each episode must use actors who speak in the regional variations of Colombian Spanish—paisa, llanero, costeño, and pastuso—and the scripts must be based on ideas supplied by a US psychological operations group (Military Information Support Team, MIST).

Contract conditions, initially reported by the magazine Wired—part of Condé Nast Publications of San Francisco, California—stipulate that names, places, circumstances, and other information that could lead to the identification of former FARC members must not be used. The script will be censored by MIST before airing. The Colombian government's only participation will be in giving its consent.

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