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While five groups representing victims of Colombia’s decades-long armed conflict met with negotiators from the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Havana, site of the peace conversations, the extreme right was making a last-ditch effort to stymie the peace process (NotiSur, Oct. 17, 2014, and Sept. 5, 2014). During the past two years, warmongering sectors led by former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) have used various tricks to stir up resentments between the negotiating parties. But the Uruguayan weekly Brecha reported Dec. 12 that ex-senator Piedad Córdoba said, "Despite moments of extreme tension, governmental and guerrilla representatives have maintained a balance."

A few days after Brecha’s report—when Uribe was spreading false rumors that both President Juan Manuel Santos and the rebels subsequently refuted—two notable events sparked unprecedented changes at the Havana talks. The first was the guerrilla’s capture of Gen. Rubén Darío Álzate, the top military leader of the anti-insurgent fight (Dec. 5, 2014); and the second, the FARC’s announcement of the beginning of an indefinite cease-fire that it proposed be made bilateral and supervised by independent domestic and international organizations.

As war-victim delegations returned to Colombia, the country appeared to accept the idea that, just as Santos had said, a definitive peace agreement could be signed in 2015.

Uribe accuses Santos of capitulating
However, Uribe then began to play his final cards, handing the press a document titled "Santos’s 52 Capitulations in Cuba."

From the perspective of the extreme right, the laborious preliminary agreement on the agrarian dilemma (landless campesinos and millions of displaced persons whose property was usurped by paramilitary groups) was described as "land distribution threatening private property, permitting expropriations, and supporting a system ending the validity of property titles."

Concerning the agreement regarding drug trafficking in Colombia, the world’s largest cocaine producer, Uribe said that Santos "accepted that the FARC would continue to take part" in drug trafficking.

Uribe also said that the government agreed to constitutional reforms that would allow the political party that the rebels would eventually create following the signing of a peace agreement to be "financed by the state with resources generated by mining and petroleum sectors."

Even though few believed these allegations, both the government and the rebels refuted them publically.

Humberto de la Calle, the government’s chief negotiator, said, "Uribe says the accords allow for extinction and expropriation although termination of ownership for failure to work the land is part of legislation passed more than 80 years ago and expropriation based on social interest is an established legal concept allowed by the Constitution even with a simple administrative procedure."
Uribe may oppose the legislation, but this does not allow him to attribute things not said to the accords nor reject norms established since the first half of the last century in an effort to alarm landowners and entrepreneurs."

As for other supposed "capitulations," the government pointed out that they could only come about through constitutional reforms that require a special majority approval that Santos does not have. If he could have counted on a two-thirds vote in Congress last year he would have had the support necessary to extend presidential terms from four to six years and prohibit presidential re-election.

FARC leaders responded to Uribe’s statements with irony: "How it must pain this troubled man to see that peace gestures could make the reconciliation process among Colombians irreversible. Surely it confirmed his hallucinations with the hacker of his own madness," said comandante Iván Márquez.

It’s clear that Uribe’s campaign bore fruit. A poll unveiled Dec. 11 indicated that in just two months trends have reversed. The consulting company Cifras y Conceptos found that Uribe had a better image than Santos and Colombians no longer want peace. They now want war.

Sen. Iván Cepeda said, "This could also be one of Uribe’s tricks."

Rebels hold general two weeks

On Nov. 16, Gen. Álzate fell into the hands of a guerrilla unit. He had entered rebel territory unarmed, dressed in civilian clothes, without bodyguards, and, according to Santos, "violating all the security protocols he had written." A female attorney and a corporal, who piloted a small boat, accompanied him. The corporal advised them when they entered enemy territory. Inhabitants of La Merced, a town 310 km northeast of Bogota, said various unarmed civilians approached when the boat landed and took the general away. Sources at the weekly magazine Semana said, "It appeared he turned himself in." Álzate was freed two weeks later. This event made him a key actor in an episode that suspended—and might even have ended—the peace talks.

Santos said that the general "would have to explain" why he entered FARC territory in those conditions. Álzate, who never explained what Semana saw as his turning himself over to rebels, tendered his resignation.

Álzate isn’t just anybody. A personal friend of Uribe, he headed the war effort against the FARC. A Nov. 20 Associated Press dispatch reported that his 31-year career included ten recognitions, among them seven medals and three decorations including the Orden del Mérito Militar Antonio Nariño Medal and a Servicios Unidos por la Paz medal of the Fuerza Multinacional de Observación. He is a graduate of a leadership course in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where, in 2005, Gen. David Petraeus, former commander of the US intervention forces in Afghanistan, presided over the promotion ceremony. He returned to the US in 2010 to earn a master’s degree at the Army War College in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

On Dec. 17, the FARC announced the start of a definitive cease-fire and invited the government to do the same. That same day, Santos rejected the offer, saying his obligation "is to ensure the security of the Colombian people," the exact phrase Uribe used an hour before him. The truce began Dec. 20.

After the freeing of Álzate and the lack of explanation about the strange circumstances of his detention, the FARC continued its political offensive. The announcement of a unilateral and
indefinite cease-fire and the related invitation practically forced Santos to respond to the peace gesture. Nevertheless, and perhaps because of strong pressure from persistent critics from the extreme right, said the daily El Espectador, the president recognized the FARC’s stance but at the same time rejected following its path.

On Dec. 19, Semana commented on the rebel organization’s offer and affirmed that "the decision leaves Santos in a difficult position because he has continually rejected the proposal of a bilateral cease-fire." The magazine lamented the presidential decision and expressed agreement with the most optimistic sectors of Colombian society that "predict that, if this unilateral truce continues and peace accords are signed, the FARC will have silenced its guns forever." In an unusual gesture, it published the full communiqué in which the guerrillas ratified the start of the end of hostilities.

The rebels pointed out that "US President Barack Obama recently announced that, following the complete failure of the Cuba blockade, he would begin to normalize diplomatic relations," and they invited Santos to follow suit. The transcript, as published in Semana, continued, "We take this example of decision and creative determination [by Cuba and the US] to call on your conscience to find in the achievements gained at the negotiating table reasons to put down the arms that through years of violence only threaten to spill more blood of equals. It is time to understand that a soldier in Colombia is no different from a guerrilla fighter in any part of the country … and one should not thwart the desire of a people to live without the roar of bombs and machineguns. If the most powerful country in the world failed to subdue the Cuban soul, neither can the continent’s second military force [Colombia], even with its state-of-the art technology, defeat a rebel force wielding arms against an unjust regime."

**FARC seeks political solution**

After stating that "Colombians have only one path, that of a political solution to the conflict," the FARC asked Santos to "look to the horizon and discover a new tomorrow. We invite you to believe in yourself, something that undoubtedly is necessary to complete the process now underway. Let us all march together toward the future—with friends and adversaries, greens, blues, reds, and yellows, indigenous communities, afro-Colombian communities, churches, white flags, women, LGBTI people, teachers and students, soldiers and campesinos, merchants and ordinary citizens—everyone together rejecting death and conquering life in equality, democracy, and justice in the broadest and most complete sense of the word. The step we have taken with the Dec. 17 announcement cannot be stained with blood. There is no institutional pride nor worthwhile governmental reason that justifies stopping us from silencing our arms."

On Dec. 20, the cease-fire began and rebel arms were silenced. On Christmas night, rebels again called on Santos to "join the struggle for peace." They freed Carlos Becerra, a soldier, on Dec. 26. Following this series of events, they left the ball in the government’s court.