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Andrés Gaudán

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Colombian Government, Rebels Reach "Humanitarian Demining" Agreement

by Andrés Gaudín

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Peace talks that began 28 months ago between the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas have produced their first tangible result: an agreement to jointly clear landmines planted in the course of the country’s long and cruel civil war.

The two sides have also begun discussing ways to investigate the more than 100,000 cases of people who "disappeared" during the conflict, boosting hopes that the negotiations, which began in November 2012 in Havana, Cuba (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012), will put a lasting end to the violence.

Despite these auspicious and until recently unimaginable advances, the peace process continues to be hindered by pressures from Colombia’s powerful extreme right (NotiSur, Oct. 17, 2014). The pressures are having a particularly negative effect on the armed forces, forcing a split between the top brass, on the one hand, and the mid-level commanders and rank-and-file soldiers who are doing the actual fighting, on the other. The former, conscious of how much influence the far-right’s pro-war position holds over the latter, have had to come out openly in favor of the peace talks.

The mine-clearance agreement was reached early last month, at the end of the 33rd round of the ongoing negotiations, but wasn’t made public until March 16, when Gen. Óscar Naranjo, head of the recently created (and optimistically named) Ministerio del Posconflicto, held a press conference to announce that the state and guerrillas "will work as a team" to remove the deadly devices. Naranjo, who headed the Policía Nacional during the last decade of the conflict, said the demining could begin "within six weeks," meaning in early May.

The work is expected to focus on two or three sites that, for now, the two sides prefer not to publicly identify. A likely priority area, according to press reports, is the southwestern department of Nariño, along the border with Ecuador. That same area serves as a major launch point for cocaine shipments to the US. Interestingly enough, most of the mines there were presumably placed not by the military or rebels but by drug-trafficking mafia groups that want to isolate their coca plantations and protect their transport routes.

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Campaña Colombiana contra las Minas (CCCM) estimates that there are mines in 688 of the country’s 1,123 municipalities. It also estimates that, in the last 25 years, mines have killed or mutilated more than 11,000 people in Colombia.

"What peace is about"

Naranjo explained that the Ministerio del Posconflicto, to determine where to begin the demining process, is collecting information from three sources: the FARC; government reports (since the regular armed forces also planted mines to protect strategic areas); and international organization reports. What the general/minister "didn’t say, for obvious reasons," the daily El Tiempo reported, is that "he won’t have data about landmines planted by drug traffickers and paramilitary groups."
President Santos has also spoken publicly about the mine-clearance project. "There isn't any problem with our armed forces cooperating on this task with enemy combatants. This is what peace is about," he said when asked about the issue during a mid-March press conference.

Several days later, in Havana, guerrilla fighter and FARC negotiator Rodrigo Granda used the term "humanitarian demining" to describe the joint project. "This means that we'll work side by side in specially chosen concrete areas. But our people who are camped deep in the jungle aren't going to stop defending themselves," he told an Associated Press correspondent in Cuba.

Sources cited in the March 18 Web edition of Semana, a Bogota-based weekly magazine, say the mine removal will be slow, expensive, and could take at least a decade to complete. The two sides will be counting on help from Norway, which, together with Cuba, is one of the two outside countries overseeing the peace talks. The NGO Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) will be coordinating the efforts to eliminate the more than 50 years worth of planted explosives. NPA, which has a wealth of experience in the dangerous task of deactivating landmines, is working right now to clear the heavily mined border between Chile and Peru. It is also active in Guatemala.

The agreement reached in Havana stipulates that personnel from the Army’s Batallón de Desminado Humanitario (BIDES) will lead the demining efforts and that the FARC, operating without uniforms or weapons and shielded, for the time being, from arrest, will assist and provide information, all under Norwegian supervision and in permanent communication with local communities.

**Political posturing**

One week after the mine-clearance agreement was reached, though not yet made public, Santos took the dramatic step of ordering a 30-day halt to Army bombing operations against rebel positions. With the announcement, the president appeared at first glance to have accepted a standing invitation to join a unilateral and indefinite cease-fire that the FARC declared on Dec. 20 ([NotiSur, Jan. 9, 2015](#)). That turned out not to be the case: Santos ordered the Army to halt helicopter attacks but is allowing ground operations—which, the rebels say, have increased since the cease-fire was declared—to continue.

It became even more clear that Santos was not signing on to the cease-fire when, several days later, Gen. Jaime Lasprilla reported that his troops, in an operation in the southeastern Andean department of Huila, had killed guerrilla chief Pedro Nel.

Santos scored points with his confusing announcement. But the FARC has proven throughout this process that it, too, can be quite politically adept. Examples abound. In recent weeks, the rebel group offered to work with the state to examine the cases of 100,316 people reported as "disappeared" during the past quarter century. Approximately 72,500 of those people remain missing; nearly 23,500 were found alive; the other 4,288 were found dead. Afterward, the FARC announced it would stop recruiting adolescents on the condition that the Army do the same "and not use children to infiltrate our camps."

In a third demonstration of political savvy, the FARC positioned itself as the most staunch defender of the pacification process by saying that, "for peace, we’d even talk with the devil." The devil, in this case, is a clear reference to ex-President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the leading opponent of the peace process. Later, when asked about its willingness to disarm if an armistice is signed, the
FARC said there would be an "abandonment of arms," meaning it wouldn't use arms as a means of political action. "That's an attitude that requires reciprocity, meaning the state must also stop using [weapons] for political purposes," the guerrilla group explained.

The FARC scored one last political point by talking about civilians who have actively participated in the process, an issue that had previously been all but ignored. "Nothing's being said about the members of civil society, business owners, politicians, and members of the judiciary who, in one way or another, have been protagonists and have pending debts with the Colombian people."

Uribe and the extreme right, in the meantime, have tried to counter the various advances in the talks by circulating rumors meant to undermine military morale (NotiSur, Feb. 20, 2015). In response, Gen. Juan Pablo Rodríguez, a top military commander, insisted energetically in an interview with El Tiempo that "the leadership of the armed forces is solidly united and keeping a watchful eye on the interests and rights of the country's soldiers and police who continue working with determination, commitment, and sacrifice for the security of the Colombian people."

Rodríguez went on to talk about the "constant misinformation that is spread on social networks and that sometimes generates uncertainty" among soldiers and mid-level officers. The general refrained from saying who might be behind the misinformation, but others have suggested that Uribe himself is responsible. An engineer named Andrés Sepúlveda, a hacker who was arrested for doing jobs meant to disrupt the peace process (NotiSur, June 6, 2014), claims the ex-president has a team of information technicians who are paid to make messages that are anti-government and against the peace talks "go viral."

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