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Positive Progress in Colombia’s Peace Process

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The tremendous reduction of armed clashes in Colombia—between mid-July and mid-August the country experienced the 30 least-violent days in 41 years of an internal war that has lasted more than half a century—has led both parties of the conflict to envision signing a peace accord before the end of the year. President Juan Manuel Santos gave voice to such optimism when he said, "We are living a kind of preview of what a country at peace would be." The internal conflict began in 1964 (NotiSur, March 2, 1989, March 7, 1989, and April 3, 2015).

After 40 rounds of negotiations during 32 months of dialogue in Cuba, the Colombian government and the guerrilla fighters of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) are making arrangements for the international community to help verify compliance once the peace is sealed. Based on the experience of other countries where internal conflicts have been resolved through dialogue, this external assistance is necessary to avoid unwanted failure. In Colombia’s optimistic climate, the press has begun to reveal previously unknown details about the role played by the countries that are "guarantors" of the dialogue (Cuba and Norway), "companion" countries (Venezuela and Chile), and countries with discrete proximity (NotiSur, Feb. 18, 2000).

Speaking on the RCN radio network Aug. 12, before the public had heard statistics on the decline in violence from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Colombian Centro de Recursos para el Análisis de Conflictos (CERAC), Santos surprised everyone by saying, "I wouldn't have any problem meeting with Timochenko if that would serve to accelerate the signing of a peace accord." He added that he would not order an attack against, or capture of, Timochenko, the nom de guerre of top FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño (NotiSur, Sept. 6, 2013).

These statements assume a radical change in the president’s view, understandable only by the progress achieved in the dialogue between the two parties in Havana since November 2012. In the beginning of the peace process, he had said that "security forces have been ordered to capture or kill Timochenko," a statement repeated last April. Nevertheless, faced with the certainty that the voice of the rebel leader is essential, Santos twice this year authorized Timochenko’s travel to Cuba so he could speak with the top government negotiators and meet with his fellow guerrillas. "All this," he said, "makes sense because we are approaching the end of the conflict."

Number of war victims drops by 48%

A week later, Fabrizio Hochschild, OCHA coordinator in Colombia, unveiled a report called "Humanitarian Tendencies and Peace, November 2012-June 2015," according to which there had been a 48% decline in the number of war victims since the peace talks began in Havana. He added that during the same period there had been a 27% decrease in the forced displacement of war victims. A day later, on Aug. 21, the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) picked up CERAC statistics, which said that, during the FARC’s unilateral cease-fire (July 20-Aug. 20) and the government’s "de-escalation" of attacks, "the number of victims (2) as well as the number of skirmishes and offensive actions during the previous month (6) are at their lowest point since 1974 on a month-to-month basis."
Nevertheless, both reports showed the other side of the coin as well: during the first seven months of this year, 69 human rights workers were assassinated compared with 35 victims in the same period last year. This indicates that tough enemies will prowl during the post-war period.

**Outside countries support peace process**

Amid such auspicious events, the weekly magazine Semana drew a chart of who’s who in the Havana talks, going beyond the members of each negotiating team. It shows how the international community might collaborate in the difficult stage that opens with the signing of the peace accord. In addition, the publication, linked to the Colombian establishment, contributed some information that had not been known until now.

"To begin with," said Semana, "Cuba, one of the two guarantors, is the host, and that’s no small thing. Havana pays for ten houses, living expenses, and security costs for the delegations. The FARC feels comfortable in Cuba because it’s a socialist country. The government feels the same because for the past 30 years Cuba has offered its good offices to work toward peace in Colombia with seriousness, discretion, and transparency," something that was not known until now.

The other guarantor, the magazine added, "bases its foreign policy on contributing to world peace. Norway participated in the Palestine-Israeli process as well as internal dialogues in Guatemala and Sri Lanka." Unknown to the public, "in Colombia, Norway has worked with military leaders during the past 15 years to prepare them for the moment of political negotiation. The Scandinavian country has also worked to clear mines in jungle areas."

The magazine noted that, ever since the dialogue began to touch on legal issues, Norway stepped up to pay fees of consultants needed by the FARC. "Contrary to what some say, this does not break its neutrality; the government agrees that it do so. First, because there are issues in which both parties require experts. Second, the state has more resources than the FARC to pay consultants. Correcting this imbalance favors the dynamics of the negotiation."

The magazine said that Rodolfo Benítez of Cuba and Dag Nylander of Norway, the diplomats who have participated as witnesses during the 40 rounds of dialogue, "have completed the role of bringing the parties together in critical situations that had threatened the talks."

Their latest joint communiqué in mid-July urged both parties to de-escalate the war and accelerate the bilateral cease-fire. They had a clear response: the FARC announced a new unilateral cease-fire, the sixth, and, within a few hours, the government ordered a "scale back" in the air attacks against the guerrillas.

"Without Cuba and without Norway, this process never would have worked," said Colombia’s Alto Comisionado para la Paz Sergio Jaramillo. "Cuba provided its best diplomacy and protocol infrastructure, as did Norway. They have worked in a professional manner, and, thanks to both countries, more than a few crises have been resolved."

Among the accompanying countries, Venezuela was vital, according to official sources cited by Semana. "The late [President] Hugo Chávez and the former foreign minister and current President Nicolás Maduro were key in the first approaches and the secret phase of the dialogue. Venezuela was a kind of bridge for the arrival and departure of the FARC delegations when there was not enough trust between them and the government to make transfers directly from the Colombian jungle as is done today."
Chile’s role has not been as important, but it kept abreast of the negotiations at all times, and today Foreign Minister Heraldo Muñoz is in charge of planning a meeting of guarantors and companions in New York during the UN General Assembly sessions, ”with the agreement that a peace accord be signed at the end of the year in Colombia.”

The US had secretly and closely followed the dialogue process before last February when the State Department assigned Bernie Aronson to follow the dialogue process step by step. Aronson, who was the US assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs between 1989 and 1993, was in Havana six times. He was there four times before his appointment was made official, and he met with both the guerrilla and government delegates.

US actions are explained thus: The US has been one more actor in the Colombian conflict, financing its governments and arming and training its armed forces to the point that Colombia became the third-largest recipient of US military aid worldwide. In addition, it has signed extradition and anti-drug-trafficking agreements with Colombia that should be revised following a peace agreement. Semana’s report surprised readers when it used slang to affirm, "We’ll have to see if the gringos who provided so much financing for the war in Colombia will pick up the tab (meterán la mano al dril) in the post-conflict period. The gringos refer to the US, and meter la mano al dril means to pay for the costs (NotiSur, July 14, 2000, May 10, 2002, and April 11, 2003).

As proof that everyone is interested in peace in Colombia, it is known now that Europe has already voted to put up US$29 million to address post-conflict costs and that Pope Francis has promised the parties he would visit the country to bless the peace accords. The UN designated French diplomat Jean Arnault, a specialist in mediation and peace accords, to represent them in the dialogue. The Uruguayan government, the eighth country in the world and the first in Latin America with foreign peace missions, will be one of the advisors in the design of a bilateral cease-fire and weapon surrender. All organizations and countries will be charged with verifying compliance with the Havana agreement.

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