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Rebels and Government Move Toward Peace in Colombia

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After 38 months during which an auspicious peace dialogue advanced, President Juan Manuel Santos’ government and the guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) have begun to take concrete steps that point unquestionably toward the goal expressed by both parties when they met for the first time in Havana, Cuba, in November 2012.

In recent weeks, the Colombian government made two transcendental steps. One, it announced that it was willing to begin pardoning certain jailed rebels. Two, it refused to extradite guerrillas to the United States, which Sergio Jaramillo, the High Commissioner for Peace, said was done “as a gesture of building trust in the negotiation process” (NotiSur, Oct. 12, 2012, Dec. 6, 2013, and Oct. 9, 2015).

Guerrilla fighter Pastor Alape used practically the same terms Dec. 6 to explain the reasons that led the FARC to apologize to the people of Bojayá, a town deep in Colombia’s Chocó jungle victimized by a bloody battle in 2002 in which at least 79 persons died (NotiSur, Jan 23, 2004, and Sept. 5, 2014).

Government issues pardons

While both parties continue analyzing which will be the best instrument to ratify the peace—the executive power would like a plebiscite, while the FARC favors a constitutional assembly—the government announced during the last week of November that it intended to pardon 30 guerrilla members in a first stage. Jaramillo indicated that the decision was made “in accordance with institutional powers and foundations” and clarified that the guerrillas who would be freed had not been imprisoned for serious crimes. These details, which for many were not necessary, had the clear intent of preempting criticism from those against the peace process, a high level official said in a cryptic reference to former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) [NotiSur, Feb. 8, 2013].

After reiterating that neither this nor any other group of pardons would include people who have committed crimes against humanity, the high commissioner explained that “in order to guarantee adequate psycho-social support for the members of this group, and support for their re-entry and stabilization into family, community and social life, [to provide] access to education and to make possible job training,” the government would coordinate its actions with a multidisciplinary team.

Government also refuses to extradite to US

Similarly, between Dec. 1 and 15, the government made another gesture particularly appreciated by the guerrilla force when it refused to authorize the extradition of four guerrilla fighters to the United States. The Supreme Court, infiltrated by representatives of the extreme right, tried to embarrass President Santos by authorizing the dispatch of Octavio Orrego and other rebels to a New York court that had sought to try them for their alleged participation in the kidnapping of three Pentagon “contractors.” A FARC brigade had held the three men—Marc Gonsalvez, Thomas Howes and Keith Stansell—after the airplane in which they were traveling crashed in the middle of the southern jungle in 2003 (NotiSur, Feb. 28, 2003). The trio was turned over to the army in 2008 along with Ingrid Betancourt, a former presidential candidate (NotiSur, July 25, 2008). Justice Minister Yesid Reyes
said that Santos’ refusal to extradite these rebels “is a direct message to the FARC in the sense that the government is committed not to extradite those involved in the peace process.”

Guerrilla leader begs forgiveness for massacre

The FARC’s response to these official gestures was equally meaningful. On Dec. 6, Rebel Commander Pastor Alape traveled from Havana to Colombia to go into the jungle. Accompanying him was a delegation of the International Red Cross and representatives of the countries that are guarantors or companions to the peace negotiations (Cuba, Norway, Chile, and Venezuela).

That day, Bogotá’s weekly magazine Semana said, “The act of contrition that the FARC made in Bojayá is the most important peace act this year in Colombia. It is an example of what will be restorative justice.”

Alape, who is one of the negotiators, was charged with acknowledging the responsibility of the guerrilla force in the massacre at Bojayá. And so that morning, on the banks of the Atrato River, in the middle of the impenetrable Chocó Jungle, a new chapter in the country’s history was begun: that of restorative justice. The Bojayá victims had asked for a ceremony so that the FARC guerrilla fighters would assume their responsibility in the May 2, 2002, massacre. On that day, 13 years ago, there was heavy fighting between the FARC’s Front 57 and the Élmer Cárdenas Bloc of the paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), which were backed up by the regular Army. According to reports at the time, the far-right commandos used the town as a shield. The insurgents reacted by launching low-precision pipe bombs, one of which exploded in the town’s church where hundreds of civilians had sought refuge. Among the 79 people who died were 48 children. Shrapnel left permanent wounds in 100 other inhabitants of the town. The forced displacement of more than 1,000 families destroyed the lives of a full generation.

“The fact that the FARC traveled to Bojayá to accept its responsibility for the tragedy is a historic event,” wrote a reporter from the Bogotá daily El Tiempo. “The guerrillas, headed by Alape and Matías Aldecoa,” he added, “arrived along with their companions in a Red Cross helicopter. They were dressed in civilian clothes. They came to face a community that, with great moral stature, was willing to listen to them. The children of that bloody May 2002 are now adolescents or young people, adolescents and young people of the war, true adults.”

Semana reported, “There were 300 people waiting Alape’s talk, wondering if he would use the word perdón (forgiveness), because for these deeply religious communities, this word is full of symbolism and has no synonym.” For the FARC guerrillas, as Comandante Timochenko said a few months earlier, perdón is a Christian concept, and they prefer to speak of the acknowledgement of mistakes. To accept the responsibility for the disasters committed in war is a political act of great importance in transitional justice. For a society to accept the perpetrators of crime back into its fold, it is essential that the perpetrators themselves admit their wrongdoing and be sanctioned for it. In restorative justice, however, forgiveness is the most important thing, because it involves the offenders’ direct redress to the aggrieved. It is a gesture of humility and a form of atonement.

When Alape began to read his speech, the audience remained silent. He did not let them down. He offered an act of contrition never before seen in this long struggle, El Tiempo reported. “We also have cried with respect and honesty for the innocent deaths of those who expected mercy,” Alape said, his voice breaking. And he added, “The wrenching pain that affects all of you has weighed on our shoulders for 13 years... We carry a distressing weight that has been a wound in the heart of
all the guerrilla force since this fatal event, which continues to echo in everyone’s memory.” The anticipated phrases arrived: “Words can’t fix the unfixable, nor bring back any of those who died, nor erase the suffering that has been caused—suffering that is reflected in all of your faces, the faces of those who we hope some day will forgive us.”

Spokesmen for the victims read a document in which it was made clear that many acts of contrition are missing, not on the part of the guerrillas but on the part of other actors equally responsible for the event 13 years ago: the government and the paramilitary. And they demanded respect for their territory and their autonomy as ethnic groups.

**Funds created to support post-war rebuilding**

Beyond these deeply emotional issues, the parties know that they must pay attention to the cost of a future of peace. Post-Conflict Minister Rafael Pardo spoke about creating a Colombia en Paz (Colombia in Peace) endowment, a fund that would collect outside donations to consolidate the peace after the agreement is signed.

Alejandro Gamboa, of the Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación Internacional, believes it won’t be a problem to raise US$3.3 billion in the first four post-conflict years. This great “fund of funds,” as Pardo called it, has three options for those who want to contribute: The World Bank’s Post-Conflict Fund, a similar European Union fund, and the Sustainable Colombia Initiative promoted by the Inter American Development Bank (IDB). Sweden has already deposited nearly US$7 million in the first one; Spain inaugurated the EU’s with 3 million euros; and the IDB’s fund, which could be the most interesting of them all because the international market is more willing to support environmental programs, has already gathered SUS320 million from donations from Norway, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

However, that is no small challenge for the government. It must secure more resources in the context of a global crisis in which, after the attacks in November in Paris, the priorities of Colombia’s main allies have been focused on the war against the Islamic state.

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