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Rebels, Government Maneuver to Keep Colombia Peace Talks on Track

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Over the course of three weeks, starting in late April, the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla force managed, with a series of timely moves, to protect their ongoing peace negotiations and neutralize the latest push by former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and others in the country’s pro-war camp to derail the process.

In Havana, Cuba, where the talks have been underway since November 2012 (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012), the two sides announced on May 12 that the peace accord they eventually hope to sign will be subject to congressional approval as a way to ensure its legality and successful implementation. “This way, the FARC will have the assurances it requires to disarm and transform itself into a political party,” said Humberto de la Calle, the government’s chief negotiator.

Later in the month, Congress approved a reform allowing the pending peace agreement to be incorporated into the national Constitution. Four days before that, on May 15, the rebels announced that they would allow the 21 child soldiers (under the age of 15) still in their ranks to return to civilian life.

The moves came just weeks after President Juan Manuel Santos carried out a major Cabinet shake-up, replacing seven of his 16 ministers as a way to accommodate the opposition. In doing so, he managed to kill two birds with one stone, as the expression goes. Able, on the one hand, to convey a message of unity, the president also decapitated, in a sense, the two most coherent opposition forces. He left the progressive Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA) without its president by appointing Clara López Obregón as his new labor minister, and the Alianza Verde (AV) without one of its founding members and key leaders by naming Jorge Londoño as the new justice minister. López Obregón made the move with support from her party. Londoño did not.

“The Cabinet shuffle was nothing more than a strategy by Santos to boost his popularity by doling out ministry posts to groups that support the peace talks. But it’s a strategy that pleased no one,” said Sen. Antonio Navarro Wolff (AV), a former guerrilla who is now one of Colombia’s most respected political figures. “Some are unhappy because they weren’t given [a ministry post], others because they wanted more. We in the AV [are unhappy] because they gave us what we didn’t want.”

The political right responded to the pro-peace maneuvers by accusing the government of “giving in to the FARC.” The government’s chief negotiator, in turn, gathered members of the press upon his return to Colombia to better explain the new developments. “They are necessary,” De la Calle said of the steps taken to make the eventual peace agreement legally binding. “The guerrillas won’t lay down their arms if they see or suspect that they’re being betrayed. This is elementary. The state has to provide guarantees.” The negotiator went on to say that the decisions reached in Cuba “facilitate” the surrender of weapons. “It seems legitimate to me that the FARC would want assurances that we’ll follow through on our promises. Without these guarantees, there will be no laying down of arms; the conflict won’t end,” he said.
The issue of guarantees is of vital importance given what befell the Unión Patriótica (UP)—a legally registered political party formed by demobilized guerrillas—in the 1980s. The UP was decimated by extreme-right paramilitary groups, which killed its top leaders along with dozens of congressional representatives and some 3,500-5,000 rank-and-file party members (NotiSur, March 27, 1990).

‘Who’s counted them?’

The FARC’s announcement that it will release child soldiers was particularly big news and is the strongest sign of “de-escalation” in the conflict since the launch, late last year, of a joint government-guerrilla effort to clear certain areas of landmines (NotiSur, April 3, 2015). It also challenges information put forth in recent years by governments, news media and nongovernmental organizations that claim expertise on the Colombian civil war.

Prior to May 15, media outlets showed columns of dozens of uniformed children parading and conducting military maneuvers in the jungle with powerful AK-47 assault rifles they could barely hold up. The minors were said to have been recruited by the FARC. Now, everyone from President Santos to the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and state-run Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) admit they don’t really know how many children are in rebel camps and accept the number (21) provided by guerrilla leader Iván Márquez as valid.

Just two months earlier, UNICEF said in a report titled “Childhood in the time of war: What peace prospects for children in Colombia?” that in the past three years alone, some 1,000 children had been incorporated into armed groups. The organization did not revise its claims in light of the announcement by Márquez. Nor did it mention in its report cases of so-called “false positives,” children who are abducted by the Army, disguised as guerrillas, and then killed and presented as “combat victims”—rebel casualties—so that soldiers can earn money rewards and promotions (NotiSur, Sept. 5, 2014, and Feb. 12, 2016).

“We don’t know how many there are,” said Paula Gaviria, a presidential human rights adviser. “Who’s counted them? Nobody. Who’s been in the camps and done real research into how many there are? Nobody. There are numbers provided by some former child soldiers, but no one has verified them. We ought to accept what Comandante Márquez said at face value.”

Guillermo Rivera, the deputy interior minister, was the only official to distance himself from the line that had been taken by the government, media outlets, and UNICEF. “Our measurements are based on the idea that the only people recruiting children are guerrilla groups. But that’s just not true,” he said. “There’s also the Army, the paramilitaries and others that take advantage of the poverty [of some children]. Now is the time to pay good attention to other numbers coming out regarding the use of children in illegal activities, in mining, in drugs trafficking and other forms of organized crime.”

Pendant for politics

In recent weeks, FARC leaders have shown they’re capable of more than just armed violence. They also have a flair for politics and diplomacy, as evidenced by a late January videoconference in which Márquez left members of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs speechless by suggesting they “stop banging their heads against the wall and acknowledge that the FARC is a warring party in the Colombian conflict.”
The encounter followed a series of unilateral cease-fires that the FARC issued and rigorously respected, all to the detriment of the Santos administration, which refused to follow suit. Márquez also said during his talk with the diplomats that, “If the European Union really wants to help establish peace, it shouldn’t just choose the easiest path by promising money to finance the post-conflict.” It ought instead to “remove the FARC from the list of terrorist organizations,” the guerrilla leader said. “The alarmingly flippant way you included us [on the list] is unbecoming of the old democracies you represent,” Márquez added.

Several days later, just as Santos was arriving in Washington, DC, for a Feb. 4 meeting in the White House, rebel commander Pastor Alape also tried his hand at diplomacy by sounding off against the government of US President Barack Obama. In statements quoted by the Chinese news agency Xinhua, Alape noted that in the past five years, the superpower invested US$10 billion in Plan Colombia, a still-functioning initiative signed in 2000 by then-leaders Bill Clinton (US, 1993-2001) and Andrés Pastrana (Colombia, 1998-2002) to combat guerrilla groups and drug trafficking organizations. “Having made itself a party to the conflict, committing to the war, [the US] ought now to commit itself to building a new era by helping fund peace,” Alape said.

On April 14, a few weeks before the FARC announced its decision to release the 21 child soldiers, the Bogotá-based daily El Espectador quoted a rebel leader saying, from Havana, that “besides doing away with the problem of children in war, we also need to do away with misery, hunger and neglect, which are responsibilities of the state.” The guerrilla commander suggested that more children die in Colombia from malnutrition than from war. “There are roughly 6,000 kids who die every year from hunger,” he said.

Surely without meaning to, world famous Colombian singer Shakira, who is also a UNICEF ambassador, added weight to the guerrilla leader’s argument when, on May 21, she spoke out about children dying from neglect and malnutrition in the northern department of Guajira, and criticized the state for “a lack of policies that guarantee the rights of our children.” The pop star was referring to a complaint made Feb. 10 by Javier Rojas, a leader of the Wayúu indigenous group, which has submitted reports to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) stating that more than 4,700 children from that community have died in the past eight years from hunger and a lack of drinking water.

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