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Colombian Government, Rebels Sign Historic Peace Deal

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June 23 was a day of a celebration in Colombia, especially in the large cities and in the rural and jungle zones most sharply impacted by 52 years of war between regular government forces and the guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC).

That day, in Havana, Cuba, where the two sides have held talks since November 2012 (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012), Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and rebel leader Rodrigo Londoño, better known as Timochenko, signed a bilateral ceasefire accord that marks the beginning of the end for the conflict. Looking on, in representation of the two guarantor countries, were Cuban President Raúl Castro and Norwegian Foreign Affairs Minister Børge Brende. Also present were UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and representatives from Chile and Venezuela, the two countries officially accompanying the peace process. Dozens of other high-level delegations traveled to Cuba as well to participate in the historic developments. A definitive peace agreement is expected to be signed July 20.

Final details still need to be worked out in two areas. The first has to do with the number and location of the so-called “temporary hamlet zones” that will be designated as gathering areas for the guerrillas during the initial post-conflict phase. The rebels fear that if the zones are too few and far between, many of their combatants will be uprooted, weakening, in turn, the FARC’s ability to become a legitimate political party. The guerrillas want the number and location of the zones to coincide specifically with places where they plan to reinsert members into society and regular politics.

The second unresolved issue involves the laying down of weapons. Colombia has had experiences in the past of groups disarming only to be decimated afterwards by paramilitary organizations. Examples include the Unión Patriótica in the late 1980s and the M-19 a decade later. Still, starting June 28 with the arrival of the first 23 out of 450 observers the UN will dispatch to oversee the disarmament, the FARC let it be known in Havana that it is willing to melt down all of its weapons and use the metal obtained to erect three symbolic monuments.

The June 23 pre-accord now needs congressional approval as a way to bolster its legality (NotiSur, June 3, 2016). From there, the Corte Constitucional, Colombia’s supreme authority on constitutional matters, will set a date for a popular referendum on the peace deal and the mechanisms needed to implement it. As President Santos reminded them on July 4, the 25th anniversary of the current Constitution, the justices of the Corte Constitucional “are the key to bringing about peace.”

Concerned about campesinos

In a separate agreement, the two sides decided jointly to destroy illegal crops (namely coca, used to make cocaine, and poppies, for heroin production) and replace them with legal alternatives as a way to keep the campesinos (agrarian workers) who farm the aforementioned plants from having to emigrate. The advance is the latest in a series of moves that, one by one, are helping discredit the
The crop-substitution accord was preceded by other overtures that together helped “de-escalate the conflict and build up trust,” observers say. The first to be implemented was an agreement between the government and guerrillas to jointly clear minefields (Notisur, April 3, 2015). The painstaking work began in March and is being carried out in the western departments of Antioquia and Caldas in coordination with Norsk Folkehjelp, a Norwegian non-governmental organization. The experimental crop-substitution project, underway since June 10, also involves personnel from both sides and is being financed and supervised by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). It is being carried out on 400 hectares of land and will benefit 450 families.

“Once the crop-substitution commitment is signed, immediate efforts will be undertaken to help the implicated communities, which will play a central role in executing and overseeing the plan,” the negotiators in Havana said. The agreement was signed in May 2014. The project was delayed, however, for reasons never made public and despite insistence by the FARC that it move forward.

Last month’s long-awaited project launch occurred, interestingly enough, three days before the world television premiere of an HBO documentary called “Guerras Ajenas” (Distant Wars). The film calls attention to the controversial use—as part of the US-driven Plan Colombia—of glyphosate to destroy coca fields in Antioquia and Caldas. Glyphosate, applied in the case of Colombia via aerial sprayings, is a powerful herbicide that is “probably” carcinogenic, according to a 2015 report from the World Health Organization (WHO) (Notisur, July 1, 2016). While the UN agency didn’t say definitively that glyphosate causes cancer, its findings raise enough doubt, argue environmentalists in Colombia and elsewhere, to suspend use of the herbicide pending further investigation. There have been no studies, furthermore, concluding that glyphosate is innocuous for humans and animals, or that it doesn’t pollute the air, soil and fresh water sources.

“Guerras Ajenas” uses testimonies from 30 scientists, ecology groups, and Colombian and US government and military authorities to point out the many problems associated with herbicide use as a way to eradicate coca plantations. “In Colombia, as well as in Peru and Bolivia (the three main producers of the plant used to make cocaine), these powerful herbicides have proven to be a powerful weapon, because when they’re used without any accompanying effort to promote crop substitution, they create a real social tragedy,” Colombian filmmaker Carlos Moreno, the director of the documentary, said in an interview published June 1 by Semana, a Bogotá-based newsmagazine.

Moreno and Colombian environmentalists see the new eradication project as a huge improvement because it also promotes and helps finance crop-substitution and thus protects campesinos from being uprooted and forced off their land, as was the case with the excessive use of herbicides.

The pitfalls of plebiscites

As Colombians look toward the next steps in the peace process, some sectors are questioning whether a plebiscite—with a categorical question that can only be answered with a simple “Yes” or “No”—is really the best way to gauge public opinion on a matter of such fundamental importance. The question is particularly pressing in light of the recent Brexit referendum, which set the stage for Great Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union.

The Bogotá daily El Tiempo, seeking insight from overseas, raised the issue with Jürg Steiner, a professor emeritus at the University of Bern, in Switzerland. “One of the risks with a plebiscite is
that people use their vote to express frustrations that go beyond the question at hand,” said Steiner, an expert on Colombian issues who also teaches at the University of North Carolina in the US. “To a degree, this is what happened with the Brexit. There were people who voted in favor of leaving the EU because they wanted, for example, to reduce immigration by Muslims.”

Some people worry about a similar result in Colombia, according to Semana. “By leaving final approval of the [peace] accord in the hands of a people who’ve experienced more than 50 years of wounds and hardships, it could be that the old animosities take over and result in a negative vote that delivers a mortal blow to the chance for peace,” the Bogotá weekly wrote.

Semananael Tiempo, along with Steiner and other European intellectuals, all agree on a central idea: that it’s not always best to submit such complex issues to a popular vote. The current situation in Europe is a case in point, but it’s not the only one. For another example of how plebiscites can be problematic, one only need look south, to Uruguay and its president, Tabaré Vázquez.

Uruguay, together with Switzerland, is the Western nation most experienced with up-down referendums. Since 1989, it has held eight such votes and was able, as a result, to protect its state assets against the neoliberal privatization push that took hold in the region in the 1990s. Uruguay twice came up short, however, with referendums (in 1989 and again in 2009) aimed at scrapping an amnesty law that protects people who committed crimes against humanity during the last civil-military dictatorship (1973-1985) ([NotiSur, Nov. 6, 2009]).

Vázquez was a lead campaigner for the failed amnesty annulment effort in 1989. Twenty years later, when the second plebiscite took place, he was finishing his first term as president (2005-2010). “Putting that kind of issue to a popular vote was a mistake,” Vázquez, who returned to the presidency last year, later admitted. “Things like punishing killers, or peace, are sensitive issues. And philosophical questions, issues that are profoundly conceptual, can’t be reduced to a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Hopefully others won’t have to suffer what we Uruguayans learned the hard way.”

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