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Colombian Government Begins Talks with ELN as Peace Process Advances

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After securing a peace deal with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas ([NotiSur, Jan. 6, 2017](#)), the Colombian government now hopes to do the same with the smaller Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). The two sides have already made a number of generous overtures but face continued opposition from a pro-war political faction.

To stop the more than half-century-long civil war from ending, the rightist Centro Democrático (CD)—led by Álvaro Uribe, a senator and former president (2002-2010)—launched a campaign to discredit the peace process abroad and, on the home front, prevent legislative approval of peace accords that have been or are yet to be signed ([NotiSur, Oct. 21, 2016](#)).

In Washington, Rex Tillerson, the new US secretary of state, acknowledged before the Senate that Colombia is a privileged ally. But he also warned that President Donald Trump would review his predecessor's policies, casting doubt on a promise by former President Barack Obama (2009-2017) to provide Colombia US\$450 million for post-conflict expenditures.

Further proof of the complexity of the situation in Colombia came from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which revealed on Jan. 26 that in addition to the 64 campesino (agrarian worker) leaders and humanitarian activists killed in 2016, another 14 had lost their lives in just the first two weeks of this year. "They're still massacring social leaders," said Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

A show of good faith

In the weeks before Feb. 8, when talks began in Ecuador between the government and the ELN, Colombia witnessed a series of gestures that would have been unimaginable just a few months earlier. On Feb. 1, the rebels released Odín Sánchez, a former lawmaker held captive since April 2016. The ELN had also released a former mayor and two rice growers.

President Juan Manuel Santos answered the gesture by pardoning two guerrilla commanders who then joined the negotiating delegation. He will consider doing the same, he announced, for a pair of jailed rebels suffering from health problems. The peace talks are set to take place not only in Ecuador, but also, on an alternating basis, in the other guarantor countries: Brazil, Cuba, Chile, Norway, and Venezuela.

And yet, no sooner had this auspicious new phase in the peace process begun than signs emerged demonstrating just how difficult peaceful coexistence will be in a country whose inhabitants, without exception, have always known war. One of those was a call for help issued by the Catholic bishopric of the northern department of Antioquia, warning that areas vacated by demobilized guerrillas are being occupied by paramilitary groups. The priests were quoted by various media outlets as saying that in the neighboring department of Chocó and in Urabá, a northern subregion

of Antioquia, residents have spotted hundreds of well-armed men belonging to the extreme-right Autodefensas Gaitanista group.

The weekly newsmagazine *Semana* reported, for its part, that approximately 420 km away from the Gulf of Urabá, on the banks of the Catatumbo River, campesino organizations had blocked FARC members from leaving the area and making their way to a designated demobilization site, where the rebels were to hand over their weapons. The campesinos asked the guerrillas to protect them from illegal groups by remaining in their enclaves until the regular Army could arrive.

Crime and corruption

Once the demobilized FARC fighters have been concentrated into 26 designated zones, as stipulated by the peace accord, areas that the guerrillas “governed” for more than half a century will be left abandoned. In fact, many of those places already have been. What’s not clear is what will happen to those lands.

Semana, in a report published Feb. 11, posed two pertinent questions: First, who will arrive first in these enclaves, the state or the paramilitary groups? And second, who will stay on those lands and govern the communities? “[The people there] fear that the Army and police will only enter temporarily and that it’ll be the illegal groups, in contrast, who stay,” the article notes.

As analysts point out, the situation represents a huge challenge for the regular Army, which must switch gears and go from fighting an enemy to properly controlling territory. That, they argue, is something the state has struggled to do in the past and is one of the main reasons why the civil war has dragged on for so long.

The Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (Peace and Reconciliation Foundation) says the state has already been relatively successful at controlling former FARC zones in the departments of Tolima and Huila, which lie southeast and not very far from Bogotá, the Colombian capital. The problem, according to the non-governmental organization, lies in regions where the economy centers around coca production and illegal mining. In those areas, other groups besides the FARC call the shots, namely the ELN, small outfits of FARC dissidents, and paramilitary commandos known as “bacrim,” short for *bandas criminales* (criminal gangs).

Although the Army tries to downplay the ELN, which reportedly has fewer than 2,000 fighters overall, communities in the aforementioned zones see things quite differently, the *Semana* report explains. With the FARC opting for peace and in the process of demobilizing, Colombia’s regular military forces can now focus on controlling the ELN, but with two well-defined limitations: First, ELN fighters are trained to blend in with the civilian population; second, the state has never done permanent intelligence work on the rebel group.

The other serious threat, according to *Semana*, are the bacrim, which the police, rather than military, are responsible for containing and combating ([NotiSur, May 20, 2011](#)). “The dominant [bacrim group] is the Clan del Golfo (the Gulf Clan), and the battle is far from won,” the Feb. 11 article reads. “For starters, it functions like a network of franchises, particularly with regards to urban crime ... It doesn’t function like the old cartels or the guerrilla groups, which are solid and vertical organizations. The second problem is its capacity for corruption. Without ethical or moral limits, it managed to successfully infiltrate divisions of the police and judicial system and is now [looking to corrupt] guerrilla fighters who are disarming.”

The Clan reportedly offers guerrillas a base monthly salary of US\$630, three times as much as they can make through the government's reinsertion plan. And for higher-ranking guerrillas in cocaine producing areas, the criminal organization pays nearly US\$3,500 per month, according to the Fundación Paz y Reconciliación.

Waging peace

The *Semana* piece also looks at different plans in place for the post-conflict period. Experts across the world warned during the drawn-out peace negotiations between the government and the FARC that transitioning from war to peace is difficult, and that in most cases, the shift gives rise to new forms of violence. Both the Army and police say they're prepared to function, for the first time, under a doctrine that isn't just about engaging the enemy. Plan Victoria, designed for the Army, calls for troops to enter territories together with other state institutions, and with a different vision. And Plan Comunidades Seguras (Safe Communities Plan), a police strategy, looks to encourage peaceful coexistence but from a non-militaristic standpoint.

"Changing the orientation of large and complex institutions takes time," the *Semana* article notes. "Sources in the Army say that once the FARC are concentrated in the 26 disarmament zones, the troops will really be able to take control of [the FARC's] old territories, and for that they've assigned 68,000 soldiers. There are another 12,000 tasked with securing and protecting the corridors along which the guerrilla lines are demobilizing, plus 20,000 who have begun manually eradicating coca plantations."

Highly reputable organizations like the OHCHR, the permanent mission of the Organization of American States (OAS) and Colombia's Defensoría del Pueblo (Ombudsman's Office) agree that there are real and extremely delicate problems involved. One of the questions they ask is why the military and police—which have 300,000 and 180,000 people respectively and are trained, equipped and generously financed by the US within the framework of Plan Colombia—aren't able to control the entire territory. The answer, according to *Semana*, isn't an easy one. After decades of war, there's a tendency to think the solution lies with more bombs and machine guns. But this paradigm has begun to shift and give way to the idea that only through integral development can these rural zones be protected.

"The only way to have peace in the future is by winning the battle against the illegal economies, because that's what really drives the violence," the magazine argues. "That's done by having a monopoly on force, but also by providing more opportunities for the people."

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