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Andrés Gaudín

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Demobilization Process Slow to Advance in Colombia

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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At a time when implementation of the peace agreement between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionaria de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas appears to be significantly delayed, Colombia's principal political parties have been dangerously quick to start campaigning for the next presidential election, which doesn't take place until May 2018.

Their enthusiasm is being dampened, however, by polls that show Humberto de la Calle, the lead negotiator in the peace process, as an early favorite, and by a corruption scandal involving the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht. The scandal originated in Brazil ([NotiSur, Jan. 13, 2017](#)) but has since spread to countries throughout the world, including Panama ([NotiCen, March 9, 2017](#)) and Colombia, where it is impacting a good part of the political leadership ([NotiSur, Feb. 24, 2017](#)). Most affected is the conservative Centro Democrático (CD), which lost its top candidate option as a result.

President Juan Manuel Santos, for his part, is turning public attention to the many victims of the country's 52-year-long civil war. In early April, he created a truth commission to study the approximately 50,000 people who went missing during the conflict. He also shared the state's latest estimate of the total number of people killed, mutilated, disappeared, kidnapped, tortured, or displaced: 8,376,463, according to the Registro Único de Víctimas, the official victims registry.

In tribute to those victims, an event was held April 10 in Santa Ana, a hamlet in the northwestern department of Antioquia, to plant the first "Peace Forest." The US organization behind the initiative, Saving the Amazon, based in Hikesville, New York, is planning 50 such forests, with as many trees as victims, each bearing the name of a person impacted by the war.

That same day, Santos noted that 17 civil society, labor, and human rights leaders have been killed so far this year. Earlier in the month, Ombudsman Carlos Negret suggested in an interview with the weekly newsmagazine *Semana* that "the recent attacks on social activists represent an effort to ruin the last step in the peace process, to sink it."

Negret's comments came two months after the rebels began leaving their encampments and gathering in 26 transitional zones, as agreed to in the peace deal signed on Sept. 26, 2016 ([NotiSur, July 15, 2016](#)). The move is a first step toward full demobilization but is not playing out as hoped, according to news outlets.

"This is the context in which we need to look carefully at Negret's claim, and at other troubling developments, like the efforts by some leaders to encourage intervention by the US government, and the international smear campaign launched against the peace accord," a commentator with Caracol Radio (Cadena Radial Colombiana) said.

The journalist was referring to a surprising private meeting held April 14 in Palm Beach, Florida, between US President Donald Trump and a pair of arch-conservative former presidents of Colombia, Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) and Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010).

'Worse than the jungle'

In the Andean department of Tolima, around the settlement of La Fila—one of the transitional zones where rebels have been gathering—there are no longer bombings, shootings, or exploding landmines. “All of that was left behind last Sept. 26, when the FARC and the Colombian government ended their 52-year war, the longest in Latin America,” journalist Jairo Vargas wrote in an article for the Spanish news site *Público*.

But there is also no potable water or any kind of basic infrastructure. “All one needs to do is walk a kilometer up [from La Fila] to see that the government isn’t doing what it promised,” Vargas wrote. “There’s nothing there except an immense clearing in the trees that, when it rains, turns into a swamp. And it rains a lot in the mountains of Tolima. Thanks to that, people can cook, wash their clothes, and do the dishes, because there’s still no running water or showers there, or a toilet, even. That’s not what was expected two months ago when [the rebels] came out of the jungle to gather in the transition zones and never fire another shot again.”

Vargas gathered testimonies in La Fila that ought to sound alarm bells. “We’re committed to peace, even though now they’re trying to demoralize us,” said Carlos Alberto, the commander in charge of the FARC’s La Fila column. “They didn’t beat us. We haven’t lost the war. They had to sit down and negotiate with us.”

But the government hasn’t delivered on its promise to provide basic sanitation, and living conditions, several of the rebels told Vargas, are actually worse in La Fila than in the jungle, where the vegetation protected them from the wind and rain. “We didn’t fight for 52 years so they could dump us here like animals,” Carlos Alberto said.

Planning a political party

And yet there’s no going back for the guerrillas, the article insisted. “They’re committed to laying down their weapons and becoming a political party. A half century of war is enough to tire anyone out, especially when advances in military technology were turning the tide in favor of the state,” Vargas wrote. The FARC’s first conference as a legal political entity is set to take place in late May. From there they’ll map out a plan for the 2018 elections, and that, indeed, is a huge step forward for Colombia.

Still, there’s much that needs to be accomplished, the *Público* article pointed out. The FARC needs to fully disarm, for one thing, and legal questions regarding amnesty or pardons for the rebels need to be resolved. These are issues of great concern for the Colombian population as a whole, particularly for people living in the large cities, where a majority of participants in last October’s peace-process referendum voted against the government/FARC accord ([NotiSur, Oct. 21, 2016](#)).

“We’re going to follow through and lay down our weapons. The country can be absolutely sure of that,” the FARC’s lead negotiator in the peace talks, Iván Márquez, said in an interview published March 5 by the Bogota daily *El Tiempo*. What’s not clear, for now, is the timeframe.

The UN mission that oversaw the peace process admits the delay. “It’s not easy to end a half-century of war,” one of the UN’s observers told *Público*. At the time Vargas filed the story, in early March, the guerrillas had been gathering in the transition zones for two months already. And yet there was clearly a lot of work still to be done. “[The rebels] fear the work will never be completed, or

that worse yet, a portion of the money earmarked for the process will be lost to corruption," the journalist wrote.

Angling for assistance

The country's deputy minister of defense, Aníbal Fernández de Soto, says he's moderately optimistic. He laments the delays and attributes them to a lack of resources and the government's failure to determine its priorities. "Some of these transition zones are more urgent than others," he said in reference to areas with a higher incidence of violence, where the only real authority was the guerrilla itself.

Andrés París, another FARC leader who participated in the peace talks in Havana, disagrees with Fernández de Soto's assessment and believes the government's "dilatatory" attitude is actually part of a clear strategy. "They want the party we're establishing in May to be weak from the outset and unable to make an impact," he told *Público*. "If they can't follow through on even the most basic, logistical elements of the peace deal, what can we expect of the fundamental aspects we agreed on, like amnesty or land reform in rural areas?" he added ([NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2016](#)).

President Santos, in the meantime, has been waiting since Jan. 20 for word of when he may be able to meet with his new US counterpart. Colombia is the US government's principal ally in Latin America. So far, though, the only thing Santos has been told is that the doors of the White House may be open to him between the end of May and the middle of June.

The Colombian leader is hoping for substantial US assistance for post-war expenses. And yet on April 14, Trump chose the peace of his Mar-a-Lago luxury estate in Florida over peace in Colombia by opening his home to Pastrana and Uribe, the two best known opponents of the peace process. "Regardless of what they may have talked about, the gesture by Trump, who's a kind of sheriff-for-humanity figure, is highly symbolic," *Semana* magazine wrote on April 16.

For the Santos administration, US financial assistance is of vital importance, given how dangerously delayed implementation of the cash-strapped peace process has been. Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama (2009-2017), promised US\$450 million in additional funding to help cover peace-process expenses ([NotiSur, Jan. 6, 2017](#)). It's unclear whether the new US administration plans to follow through. The only information that has reached Colombia—through media channels—is that on Jan. 22, just prior to his confirmation as the new US secretary of state, Rex Tillerson told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he would reexamine all of the previous administration's spending pledges.

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