5-21-1991

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Colombia: Summary Of Political Violence, Plans For Peace Talks, May 7 - May 19

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Category/Department: General
Published: Tuesday, May 21, 1991

May 7: In a communique, the Simon Bolivar National Guerrilla Coordinator (CNG) said the rebels had accepted a government offer for peace talks. A date for beginning the talks was not specified. The Coordinator is comprised of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). The guerrillas agreed to meet with government representatives in Cravo Norte, Arauca department, located near Venezuelan border. Rebel delegates at the talks will be three guerrillas recently given political asylum in Venezuela. Venezuelan president Carlos Andres Perez is scheduled to arrive in Bogota Tuesday for a two-day visit. Both the government and rebels have called on Perez to mediate possible peace negotiations. The rebels' statement also requested that journalists and a delegation from the Constituent Assembly attend the talks in Cravo Norte. An estimated 150 rebels launched a surprise attack in San Pablo, Bolivar department. After five hours of combat, 20 rebels and three police agents had been killed, and eight soldiers and policemen were wounded. The rebels destroyed several businesses, and left the police station in ruins. May 8: After 72 hours of captivity, seven journalists were released unharmed by ELN rebels in northern Colombia. The reporters delivered messages from rebel leaders, including Alfredo Builes, commander of the ELN's northern front. Builes' message said the nine ELN commands in the Atlantic region are willing to call a cease-fire as long as military forces in the area reciprocate. May 10: In Yondo, Antioquia department, rebels released unharmed 15 police officers as a gesture of goodwill. The guerrilla prisoners were delivered to a committee comprised of government, church and media representatives. The police officers were captured March 20 during an attack on the village of Santa Helena del Opon, Santander department. May 11: Carlos Jaramillo, a member of the government negotiating team, said preparations were nearly complete for the beginning of preliminary talks, scheduled to begin May 15 in Cravo Norte. The government team will include Jaramillo and Andres Gonzalez, deputy interior minister. May 12: The CNG released six police officers captured March 20 in the southwestern town of Palmira. Rebels ambushed an army patrol near Pitalito, located in southern Colombia. Army sources said five soldiers were killed. May 15: Government and rebel negotiators convened in Cravo Norte in a planning session to prepare for subsequent comprehensive peace talks. Official estimates put the death toll resulting from the 30-year guerrilla war at 75,000. Suspected rebels bombed a section of the Cano Limon oil pipeline. The pipeline transports about 230,000 barrels of crude per day from oil fields near Venezuela to Caribbean ports for export. The bombing forced state-run oil company ECOPETROL to temporarily suspend crude pumping and spilled about 5,800 barrels of oil into the Cano Leon River. May 17: In Cravo Norte, government and rebel spokespersons said the two sides had agreed to commence formal peace talks on June 1 in Caracas, Venezuela. Subsequent rounds would take place in Colombia. At the Caracas meeting, Interior Minister Humberto de la Calle Lombana and presidential peace adviser Jesus Bejarano will represent the government. Rebel representatives will include FARC commander Manuel Marulanda, and ELN commander Manuel Peres. May 18: According to government spokespersons, since Jan. 1, 391 Colombians have died in clashes between public security forces and CNG combatants. Victims include rebels, soldiers, police, and civilians.
The death toll included 112 soldiers and 104 police officers. The official report indicated that FARC rebels killed 18 agricultural workers, and the ELN, 34. FARC guerrillas launched 51 attacks against military and police installations, and 18 against army or police patrols. FARC rebels participated in combat with military and/or police forces 118 times. ELN rebels launched 14 attacks against military and police installations, and participated in 42 clashes with one or both public security forces. Next, CNG attacks against components of the nation's electricity grid and oil infrastructure numbered over 300. The report said rebels took over 80 members of the public security forces prisoner since the beginning of the year. On the roadway linking Bucaramanga and Barrancabermeja, rebels clashed with soldiers, resulting in the death of one rebel. In addition, six soldiers were wounded. May 19: Presidential peace adviser Jesus Bejarano told reporters that the government will begin direct telephone contact with the CNG's secretary major in the mountains to discuss their meeting next month in Venezuela. The CNG represents about 8,000 members of the FARC and the ELN. In the next 10 days, said Bejarano, the government and the CNG will establish conditions for the meeting in Caracas, including security arrangements. A second round of talks based on results of talks in Caracas will be arranged in Colombia in response to a rebel demand the dialogue be held inside national territory. In Montelibano, Cordoba department, four militants of the Freedom, Peace and Hope Party [the former Popular Liberation Army's (EPL) new name] were abducted from a hotel by unidentified persons. According to Jaime Fajardo, the former rebel group's representative in the Constituent Assembly, the kidnappings were the end result of threats against the party over the last few weeks. Fajardo called on the government to provide safety guarantees for the former guerrillas. He added that since the EPL disarmed, six former rebels have been assassinated. (Basic data from AFP, 05/07/91, 05/08/91, 05/10/91, 05/11/91, 05/18/91, 05/19/91; EFE, 05/10/91, 05/18/91, 05/19/91; Notimex, 05/17/91; AP, 05/07/91, 05/13/91, 05/15/91)

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