

COLOMBIA COMMITS TO PEACE PROCESS DESPITE CONTINUING VIOLENCE ON THE GROUND

By André Burstin

The Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) used the opportunity of the United Nations General Assembly's annual meeting in New York to publish on Wednesday September 24 the provisional content of a proposed peace settlement. President Juan Manuel Santos, who will address the General Assembly on Thursday, explained that confidentiality was no longer necessary, as the peace talks were "advanced enough" to ensure the continuation of the process started in November 2012 in Cuba's capital city of Havana.

According to a joint statement issued in Havana by the negotiators, efforts should now be made to favour transparency instead. Moreover, both delegations stressed the importance of "the participation of the Colombian people in this process" and invite them to comment the proposals and to "send their opinions regarding the agenda". The final outcome of the negotiation process should indeed be subject to a national referendum, which partly explains this commitment to transparency.

The partial agreements (a copy of which is available in Spanish on the website www.mesadeconversaciones.com.co.) are setting out the framework of post-conflict programs, especially in the areas of political participation of former rebels, land reform and agricultural development and fight against drug trafficking. In concrete terms, the government agreed to allocate more seats in Congress to the areas affected by the conflict (but not to former rebel groups) and to guarantee the security for the insurgency's political leaders. On the other hand, FARC pledged to cut ties with drug trafficking groups and to participate in the battle to eliminate coca cultivation.

The Havana negotiations are however far from succeeding, and several stumbling blocks could still create impassable obstacles for the whole process, including the recognition of the rights of the victims and the provisions for the disarmament and demobilization of the guerrilla fighters.

It is worth mentioning that rumours concerning these aspects of the negotiations have so far been used by the opposition to denounce the impunity which could be granted to rebel leaders. Moreover, while a new round of talks is about to start in the Cuban capital, chief FARC negotiator Ivan Marquez urged the government to “go beyond rhetoric” and to take “concrete steps” in favour of peace. According to him, President Santos should declare an “armistice” and put an end to the “foreign interferences” in the conflict.

Although real progresses were made in the peace process, the situation on the ground indeed remains extremely tense in the guerrilla-plagued departments of the country. Over the past days, Colombian media and authorities communicated on numerous incidents involving FARC members:

- On Tuesday September 16, 7 police officers were killed in an ambush against their convoy on the road between the municipalities of Puerto Libertador and Tierradentro, in the department of Cordoba. Authorities blamed the “Iván Ríos” column of the “58th Front” of the FARC, which has supposedly formed an alliance with the “Clan Usuga” drug trafficking organization. The rebel group claimed responsibility for the attack on Sunday September 21, however denying any alliance with the “Clan Usuga”.
- On Wednesday September 18, fighters of the “Daniel Aldana” column of the “21st Front” of the FARC carried out an attack against the Amoya River hydroelectric power plant, in Tolima department’s Chaparral municipality. Security forces however repelled the attack and killed two rebels later identified as “El Zorro” and “Yeison”, who were both veteran members of the organization.
- On Sunday September 21, it was reported that suspected FARC rebels had fired 4 “Tatucos” home-made shells at the Tumaco’s military and police base, in the Nariño department. Two police officers were slightly injured in the attack, for which responsibility was also attributed to the “Daniel Aldana” column. It is worth mentioning that the facility, which is located near a local airport, is used as headquarter for the anti-drug traffic operations carried out in the area of Tumaco.
- On Monday September 22, the daily “El Tiempo” reported that the army had seized a bomb making facility which had been installed by men of the “6th Front” of the FARC in the municipality of Toribío, in the department of Cauca. According to security sources mentioned by the newspaper, the rebels had hid their camp in a small river creek heavily protected with landmines.
- On September 22 an IED had exploded the day before in the municipality of Leiva, 185 kilometres north of San Juan de Pasto, the capital of the department

of Nariño. According to local security sources, 8 people were injured in the blast, including 3 minors. Leiva's mayor, Wilfredo Bolanos, blamed the FARC for the attack, adding that the actual target of the attack may have been a police station situated in the same block.

- On Wednesday September 24, security forces announced the arrest of 9 members of the "Alirio Torres" column of the "6th Front" of the FARC, including the leader of the group, aka "Samuel". They were reportedly intercepted in possession of guns and explosives in the municipality of Tulua, in the department Valle del Cauca.

All these incidents, which represent only a small fraction of the daily violence in Colombia, are indicative of the long road ahead of the ultimate termination of more than 50 years of civil war.

The progress made in ongoing peace process in Havana is indeed being hampered by the extreme fragmentation of the insurgency's structure on the field. Moreover, the increasing links between criminal groups and many leaders of the FARC's "Fronts" are causing doubts on the ability of a future global peace agreement to effectively halt violence.

In this particular context we can expect the rebels to carry out more attacks against security forces in their main strongholds of Cauca, Cordoba, Huila, Quindío, Tolima and Valle del Cauca departments. This situation could also strengthen the position of those opposed to the negotiation process, although Juan Manuel Santos secured a second presidential term in June after an extremely harsh campaign focused on his peace strategy.

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