

Colombian government, FARC guerrillas in peace talks

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Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos formally announced this week that his government is engaged in peace talks with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla movement.

Secret exploratory talks have been ongoing in Havana, Cuba since February. The first formal negotiations are set to begin in Oslo, Norway on October 5 and to resume later in Havana, with Cuba, Norway, Venezuela and Chile participating in the process.

Flanked by the Colombian military command and his cabinet, Santos made his announcement in Bogota on Tuesday. He said that it was “time to turn the page” on what he called Colombia's “half a century of violence.” At the same time, he stressed that his government would terminate the talks within months if a definitive agreement was not reached, and that the army would not call a halt to its counter-insurgency operations while the talks are ongoing.

At a press conference in Havana, the FARC issued a video in which the group's top leader, Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, known as Timochenko, declared that it would participate in the talks “without rancor or arrogance.” He referred to the breakdown of the last peace negotiations in 2002: “How much death and destruction and tears are necessary to finally come to the conclusion that the way forward lies not in war, but in civilized dialogue.”

The FARC leader, appearing in combat fatigues before a large photograph of the group's late former leader Manuel Marulanda, expressed confidence that the government would not make the same “mistake” as it had in the last round of negotiations. Peace, he said, could be “founded on reconciliation, to reach a point of balance between all,” and on “the extension of

democracy.”

This represents the fifth attempt over the past 30 years by the FARC and successive Colombian governments to broker an end to hostilities, which have claimed a quarter of a million lives and displaced millions of people. Earlier efforts were abortive largely due to powerful interests determined to continue the war—particularly the country's landed oligarchy, the military, the various right-wing anti-communist paramilitary groups created in the countryside and US imperialism.

The last round ended as the Washington introduced its Plan Colombia, which poured more than \$7 billion in military and police aid into the country, while deploying US military “advisors” and contractors to sharply escalate the counterinsurgency war.

With the coming to office of right-wing politician Alvaro Uribe, the Colombian government turned toward a further intensification of violence, resulting in the military's increased murder of civilians in an attempt to boost its body count, a phenomenon known as “false positives.” Meanwhile the so-called “peace” process became transformed into a plan to reintegrate and absolve members of the AUC right-wing paramilitary organization, which was responsible for the worst atrocities.

Santos, who was Uribe's defense minister and was complicit in the crimes of the former government, had vowed on taking office that he would renew efforts to negotiate with the guerrillas. Undoubtedly he cleared the latest talks with the Obama administration, which issued a statement saying that, “the Santos administration has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the search for a lasting peace and to ensure the best life for all Colombians through political security and social inclusion.”

Santos named as negotiators a former armed forces commander, a former head of the national police, one of Uribe's former "peace commissioners," a presidential security advisor, and the head of Colombia's Business Association.

Both sides referred to a five-point "roadmap" for the negotiations. The first point is discussion of rural development policy. Other points include the creation of conditions for former guerrillas to participate in politics, ending the conflict, providing alternative agricultural opportunities to coca cultivation and drug-trafficking; and providing an accounting for what took place and who was responsible in crimes against the civilian population.

The fact that the talks begin with the question of rural development is telling. The FARC, founded in 1964, has its roots in the late 1940s and the wave of murderous repression and rural civil war that followed the assassination in 1948 of Liberal Party candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan and the "Bogotazo," the massive social upheaval that this killing provoked.

Cobbled together out of various armed self-defense groups, it aligned itself with Colombia's Stalinist Communist Party. From its origins to today, its central political focus has been agrarian reform. This orientation, which became intertwined with the retrograde conceptions of peasant war propagated by Maoism and Guevarism, has persisted even as Colombia underwent a rapid urbanization, which has left little more than a fifth of the population in the rural agricultural sector.

Faced with dwindling popular support, it came to depend more heavily on "taxes" levied from coca growers and drug traffickers in return for protection—a tactic also pursued by the right-wing paramilitaries and the armed forces—as well as kidnappings.

Colombia is the most socially unequal country in Latin America. Over 37 percent of the population lives in poverty. In the countryside, just 0.4 percent of landowners own over 60 percent of the land.

The prospects for negotiations between the Santos government and the FARC transforming these conditions are nil. Only a radical redistribution of wealth and a reorganization of the country's economy to meet human needs rather than profit could begin to accomplish such a goal. Such a transformation is impossible outside of a socialist revolution.

The Santos government last year enacted a so-called Land and Victims Law. It is supposed to compensate the families of victims killed in the country's dirty war, as well as restore land to those from whom it was grabbed by armed groups. Little land has been returned, however, with substantial amounts of stolen acreage remaining in the hands of landlords, cocaine traffickers, and mining interests.

As for resolving the question of political participation, an earlier agreement reached in 1984 saw elements of the FARC integrate themselves into a political party known as Union Patriótica. It gained some popularity but was ultimately destroyed by the wholesale assassination of its candidates and campaign workers.

The model for a successful demobilization of a guerrilla force was provided at the end of the 1980s with the 19th of April Movement (M-19), whose members traded in their weapons for small business loans, and whose leaders found positions in bourgeois politics. These include such figures as Gustavo Petro, the current mayor of Bogota.

Unmentioned in the "roadmap" is whether FARC leaders would be allowed to follow a similar course, or whether they would be prosecuted for kidnappings and other actions. Also left unresolved is the question of extradition to the US.

After the demobilization of the AUC, many of its leaders found themselves extradited to the US to face drug charges. This provided the Colombian government, military and ruling class with a convenient means of covering up their complicity in the bloody crimes of the right-wing paramilitaries. Washington has designated the FARC as a "foreign terrorist organization."



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