

Colombian peace talks continue amid renewed combat

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Negotiations in Havana, Cuba between the Colombian government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas) guerrilla movement resumed Friday, despite repeated government bombardments that have claimed the lives of dozens of FARC members and a suspension by the armed opposition group of a five-month-old unilateral cease-fire.

The talks, which have been developing over the past two years, are ostensibly aimed at ending an armed conflict that has claimed the lives of nearly a quarter of a million Colombians since the FARC's founding in 1964 and as many as a million since the onset of the undeclared rural civil war known as *la violence* in 1948.

In an apparent signal that the Santos government is serious about accelerating the so-called peace process in Havana, it has dispatched its foreign minister, María Ángela Holguín, and Gonzalo Restrepo, one of the country's most powerful capitalists, to the negotiating table. Major big business interests, including oil companies in which Restrepo is a director, see an end to the armed conflict as vital to their profit interests.

Officials announced on Friday that the government and the FARC have begun working together on a joint program to locate and deactivate land mines placed throughout the country by both sides in the conflict. FARC members and a Colombian army battalion began collaborating on a pilot de-mining program in the northern department of Antioquia, even as government aircraft continued slaughtering FARC members elsewhere.

In the past week, air strikes have killed over 40 members of the guerrilla movement, including, Jairo Martinez, a participant in the Havana negotiations, who had returned to Colombia to inform members of the FARC about the state of the talks.

The FARC has charged that in at least one of the air strikes, government troops subsequently attacked the

bombed encampment, finishing off the wounded execution-style.

The government has cast the renewed air war as retaliation for an April 15 armed clash in which 11 Colombian army soldiers were killed in the southwestern department of Cauca.

The military, the government and a servile Colombian media all cast the incident as an unprovoked massacre of defenseless, sleeping soldiers. People in the area, however, have reported that the incident involved a pitched battle that continued for several hours and condemned the army for bivouacking its troops in a local sports stadium, close to a residential neighborhood. There were other reports that the battle was the outcome of protracted army harassment of the FARC guerrillas. A judicial investigation has been launched to determine whether Colombian army officers deliberately falsified the events in Cauca.

Sections of the military as well as the political right, including those aligned with former Colombian president and longtime US ally Álvaro Uribe, are openly hostile to the negotiations with FARC, seeking to exploit them as a means of further weakening the guerrilla movement while backing renewed military attacks with the aim of provoking a more decisive confrontation.

The Colombian security forces have developed into a massive state within a state thanks to the pouring of billions of dollars of US military aid into the country under the umbrella of "Plan Colombia." A program launched under the Clinton administration as part of the "war on drugs," it was quickly widened to include the war against the FARC and to fund and arm regular and irregular forces that have carried out ruthless and bloody repression against the Colombian working class and peasantry.

These elements have no desire to see an end to the war, which for many has been a very profitable business, while

serving as the pretext for generalized political repression. There are also concerns within the senior echelons of the security forces that there could be legal repercussions from the many massacres, assassinations and other crimes carried out against the population going back decades.

Among the more recent of these crimes was the so-called “false positive” campaign in which military units rounded up impoverished Colombians, executed them and then dressed them in uniforms in a bid to pass them off as slain guerrillas.

In an open letter this week, Timoleón Jiménez, the leader of the FARC, known as “Timochenko,” declared that it was “obvious that there is a smear campaign against the Santos government aimed at weakening it and forcing it break off the peace process.”

The letter reflects a broader trend within the so-called “left” in Colombia, which has posed the need to support the *santistas* (the big business political faction led by Santos) against the *uribistas* (Uribe’s backers).

While there no doubt exist tactical differences and conflicting financial interests between these two layers, there is no fundamental disagreement between Santos and Uribe, whom Santos served as defense minister. Both are committed to defending the interests of foreign and Colombian capital against those of the country masses and to continuing the close political alignment between Bogota and Washington.

While the FARC as well as the countries mediating the Havana talks—Cuba and Norway—have repeatedly called for a cease-fire on both sides, Santos has refused, deferring to the military and its refusal to halt armed attacks until a full treaty is signed.

The FARC’s aim is to turn itself into a new bourgeois party after militarily demobilizing. While the negotiations have reached accords on rural reform, political participation and drug trafficking—which became a principal source of revenue for both the FARC and the right-wing paramilitary groups aligned with the military—there are still no agreements on how crimes carried out by both sides will be adjudicated and on how the FARC fighters will be demobilized and integrated into the country’s political process.

An earlier attempt to achieve the same goal turned into a bloody debacle, when sections of the FARC joined with the Colombian Communist Party and other groups in forming an electoral front known as the Union Patriótica in 1985. Two of the party’s presidential candidates, dozens of its elected officials and some 5,000 of its members were murdered in a campaign of political

extermination by the security forces and right-wing paramilitaries.

In addition to the threat of another such bloodbath, the FARC leadership also fears that demobilization could be followed by Colombia’s extradition of leading members of the organization to the US to face trial as “terrorists” or drug traffickers. This was the fate of Simon Trinidad, a leading FARC commander who was captured in 2004, extradited to the US and convicted on terrorism charges, for which he is now serving a 60-year sentence in a maximum security federal prison in Colorado. FARC negotiators in Havana have insisted that Trinidad must be allowed to participate in the talks.

The guerrilla group “hailed” the appointment by the Obama administration earlier this year of a US envoy to the Havana talks, declaring Washington’s participation in the talks “a necessity, given the permanent presence and incidence that the United States has had in the political, economic and social life of Colombia.”

Tapped as the Obama administration representative was Bernard Aronson, a former undersecretary of state for inter-American affairs under the Republican administration of President George H.W. Bush. Aronson, a Democrat, was elevated to the position after becoming a leading advocate for US funding of the CIA-backed *contras* in their terror war against Nicaragua.

Aronson began his career as a political operative within the so-called reform leadership of the United Mine Workers of America in the 1970s. He was subsequently hired as an aide within the Carter administration. He has more recently headed up a private equities firm and served as an advisor to Goldman Sachs.

After his arrival in Colombia, Aronson announced that Washington “is not playing the classic role as mediator, nor is it a neutral figure.”



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