

Peace and Violence in Colombia

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Peace and Violence in Colombia

For Marxist guerillas in Latin America, the end is near. The government of Colombia is negotiating with the last of the rebels, FARC and ELN. But a peace agreement will not make the widespread violence disappear, as the criminal underworld is expected to reorganize and everyday violence will continue. The example of urban innovation in Medellín gives reason for hope.

By Enzo Nussio

The Colombian government of President Juan Manuel Santos is currently in talks with the oldest of Latin America's guerilla groups, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC); most recently, it has also engaged with the smaller *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). In particular, it appears possible that a peace agreement will soon be signed with FARC. President Santos is promoting the negotiations in Havana internationally as good news in a crisis-ridden world.

However, the general population of Colombia remains skeptical. In a survey of March 2016, about two thirds of respondents were pessimistic about the negotiations; nearly half would prefer an end of negotiations and a military offensive against FARC. Many Colombians have no faith in a treaty with the rebels, whom they regard as untrustworthy, and believe that the violence plaguing Colombia cannot be eliminated at the negotiation table. "Peace" is generally regarded as an unrealistic, utopian goal, even if the FARC and ELN fighters should lay down their arms. Despite the hopeful prospects, it is likely that the pessimism of the general population will prove correct: An end of political vio-



A historic moment: On 23 September 2015, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC commander Rodrigo Londoño, a.k.a. "Timochenko", shake hands in Havana. A. Meneghini / Reuters

lence would by no means lead to the end of societal and criminal violence in the country.

The Longest Conflict in the West

The armed conflict in Colombia between communist rebels and government forces began in the 1960s, when several groups

took up arms, inspired by the Cuban Revolution (cf. info box on p. 3). In doing so, they were responding to a peace deal, sealed by the elites in 1958 after years of violent conflict, that divided up power in the nation between liberals and conservatives. The entire left wing of the political spectrum was thus de facto excluded from po-

litical life. The two oldest of these groups, FARC and the ELN, still remain active today. Most of the other guerilla groups disarmed during the 1990s.

The conflict, long marked by low intensity, has nevertheless caused about 220,000 deaths over the decades, and turned more than 5 million people into internally displaced persons. Right-wing paramilitary forces in particular have acted brutally against civilians, who made up about 80 per cent of the conflict's victims. These illegal private armies fought side by side with the military against the guerilla. Long tolerated by the government, they have carried out more than a thousand massacres. With their terrorism campaign, they aimed to suppress collaboration between local populations and the guerilla groups; in doing so, especially around the turn of the millennium, they murdered untold numbers of innocent people. Between 2003 and 2006, the paramilitary groups were demobilized upon the government's initiative.

Under then president Álvaro Uribe (2002–10), a frontal assault was carried out against FARC in particular. Thanks to gen-

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erous military aid by the US and a professionalization of the armed forces, this strategy has noticeably diminished the activities of the insurgents. Uribe has consistently sought to portray FARC as “narco-terrorists”, claiming that FARC was abusing civilians and generating huge revenues through the drug trade and kidnappings.

Today, the military estimates that FARC still has about 6,700 members – compared to over 20,000 in the year 2002. Since then, more than 17,000 FARC members have deserted and joined a reintegration program, often in return for strategically important information. Uribe has reason to boast that his policy has cornered FARC and reopened large parts of Colombia for tourism and trade. The population largely come to accept massive human rights violations, as well as the demobilization of the paramilitary forces, which took place in a manner that was highly questionable in terms of the rule of law, as the price of improved security. The fact that it has im-

proved is also due to an enhanced focus on security outside of the conflict zone, e.g., crime-fighting in the cities. Since 2003, there has been a general decline in the number of homicides in Colombia (cf. illustration p. 3).

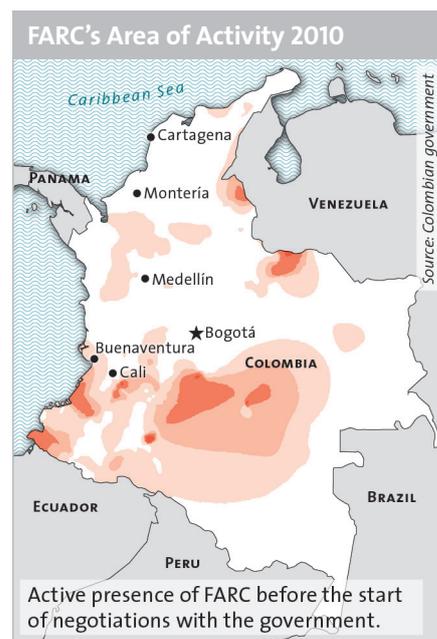
Six Points for Peace

Although FARC has been weakened in the past years, it has proven difficult to overcome militarily. With three chains of the Andean Mountains and broad swathes of tropical forest, Colombia's topography is ideally suited for guerilla warfare. The financial resources derived from the drug trade and, more recently, from illegal gold mining remain available. Moreover, since 2008, FARC has proven its strategic flexibility with a new battle plan that gained it some breathing space. For these reasons, President Santos, who took office in 2010, has chosen the negotiation route, despite the vehement protests of his popular predecessor Uribe.

Santos has avoided the mistakes made by former president Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) in negotiating with the FARC guerilla. Unlike Pastrana, Santos did not announce his intention to negotiate during his presidential election campaign. After taking office, he initially engaged in secret pre-negotiations. These preliminary talks resulted in a strictly limited agenda of six issues – agricultural development, political participation, ending the conflict, illegal drugs, victims of the conflict, and implementation of the treaty.

While the negotiations under Pastrana took place in a demilitarized zone the size of Switzerland, located in the rural heartland of FARC's territory, the current talks are taking place in Cuba. Moreover, the conflict continues for now, without a temporary mutual ceasefire. However, following several unilateral ceasefires on the part of the guerilla and a de-escalation of regular military activities, the intensity of the conflict has strongly diminished; in 2015, it was at its lowest point since the beginning of the conflict.

When he officially announced the negotiations in September 2012, Santos promised they would last “months, not years”. Although this promise has been broken, the negotiating teams in Havana have made great progress and concluded partial treaties on four points. Through the inclusion of victims' voices and a sub-commission



dealing with issues of specific concern to women, the negotiations have a special quality. Moreover, the basic construct for the judicial processing of crimes against humanity is regarded as a legal masterpiece.

Despite widespread skepticism among the population, it is possible that an agreement may soon be signed. However, while the peace treaty had been due to be signed in March 2016, its conclusion was delayed by the need to finalize important details such as penalties for war criminals, the specific logistics of disarming the guerilla, and the process of securing legitimacy for the substance of the treaty (popular referendum vs. constitutional assembly).

Delayed ELN

One important factor for the period after FARC's disarmament will be the role of the ELN, which was founded in 1964 with help from Fidel Castro and in the spirit of Latin American liberation theology. While the government is also pushing for a negotiated solution with the ELN, the secret moves towards rapprochement alone took more than two years. On 30 March 2016, President Santos announced that a separate agenda would be negotiated with the ELN.

The government has come to understand that an agreement with FARC without a simultaneous treaty with the ELN guerilla might have fatal consequences: Once

again, Colombia would be confronted with a partial solution for the decades-old conflict; once again, the military might absorb huge resources for military suppression of the insurgency; and once again, an existing illegal group might serve as a rallying point for disaffected former combatants. Engaging with the ELN at a separate negotiating table will likely delay a definitive resolution of the conflict and a referendum on the respective peace treaties. However, it is preferable to have the ELN on board, too.

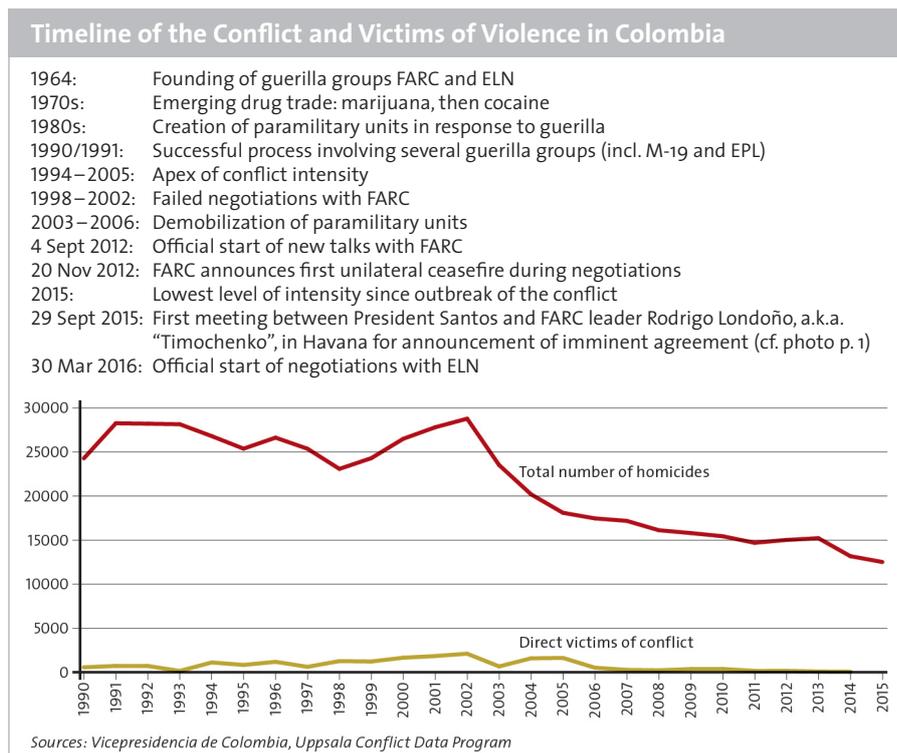
It is difficult, though, to assess the likelihood of success regarding the negotiations with the ELN. A number of presidents before Santos failed in attempting to negotiate with the ELN, whose leaders are significantly more dogmatic than the FARC commanders. Some believe that the ELN is a cult-like organization with flat hierarchies that make decisionmaking a cumbersome affair. Moreover, should negotiations stall, the government might be tempted to use military force against the relatively small ELN guerilla and its estimated 1,600 armed members.

Criminal Successor Organizations

In what way would peace agreements with FARC and the ELN affect violence in Colombia? One would expect it to diminish if key violent actors are removed from the scene. Additionally, an end to the conflict would enable the state to shift its budget towards measures to reduce social inequality and combat everyday violence. But it is also to be expected that the transition to peace will bring forth a realignment of the criminal underworld.

Not all insurgents will agree to disarm and return to civilian life. A common feature in all previous peace agreements with armed groups in Colombia has been that some fighters decided to hole up and continue to benefit from the lucrative income to be gained from the business of war. Each of the guerilla groups that disarmed during the 1990s spawned smaller groups of kidnapers and drug dealers.

It was specifically the demobilization of right-wing paramilitary groups in the mid-2000s that left a jumbled legacy of criminal successor organizations. The government uses the shorthand label *bacrim* (*bandas criminales*, or “criminal gangs”) to refer to these groups. Independent observers frequently describe them as “neo-paramilitaries”. They could also be considered a new generation of Colombian mafia. There is no



doubt that these organizations of demobilized cadres are led by paramilitaries and profit from the drug trade, protection rackets, and illegal gold mining.

In 2011, the then head of the Colombian police described them as the biggest threat for national security. As early as 2009, various estimates counted between 4,000 and 11,000 members of these groups. Disputes between various *bacrim* have caused increases of violence in certain regions, such as in the environs of Montería in the north or in the southwest of the country. There, the violence has only leveled off with the consolidation of various gangs into larger conglomerates (especially *Clan Úsuga*, *Rastrojos*, and ERPAC).

However, there is reason to believe that disarming the left-wing guerilla would bring forth less criminal successor groups. The guerillas have a stronger political ideology than the former paramilitary groups. Most of the FARC rebels are schooled once a week in Marxist ideology. If FARC were just another drug cartel, as its main detractors claim, the group would hardly invest so many resources in ideological indoctrination. Therefore, deviation into the criminal underworld is likely to be less widespread than was the case with the more opportunistic paramilitary forces:

About 37 per cent of former paramilitary fighters have committed crimes since their demobilization, and ten per cent have been murdered, most of them in connection with criminal activities.

However, even if the guerilla were to be fully disarmed, the potential for reducing violence would remain limited. Existing criminal organizations have an interest in tapping the same revenue streams that for many years supplied the guerilla groups for themselves. This might lead to ongoing clashes between existing criminal formations and new groups, including new outbreaks of violence in the areas historically dominated by the guerilla.

A Sustained Culture of Violence

Thus, ending the conflict will not make violence in Colombia disappear. In the past 25 years, the immediate victims of the conflict have never accounted for more than ten per cent of the country’s homicide rate (cf. graph on p. 3). Accordingly, the absolute majority of homicides in Colombia is not directly linked to the conflict. Since the 1980s, Colombian researchers – the so-called “violontologists” – have noted the prevalence of violence taking place outside of the military conflict. By far the greatest share of violence is due to organized crime, domestic violence, and petty crime on the

Switzerland and Peace in Colombia

For some time now, Switzerland has been supporting efforts to bring peace to Colombia. When the government of president Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) was negotiating with the guerilla, Switzerland was among the so-called “**países amigos**” (friendly states) involved in talks with both ELN and FARC. After the breakdown of negotiations, Switzerland maintained its contacts to both groups via its mediator Jean-Pierre Gontard and, in coordination with the Colombian government, worked, inter alia, to get hostages released. However, these contacts were cut off in 2008, when the government of Álvaro Uribe accused the Swiss mediator of **being too close to FARC**. Since then, Switzerland has no longer been engaged as a mediating state. Currently, Norway is the only European country involved in the ongoing talks with FARC and the ELN.

Apart from the highly public peace negotiations, Switzerland has **continuously contributed to peace** in Colombia by way of its Human Security Division (HSD) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The HSD supports the peace process with technical expertise – on issues such as ceasefires and participation mechanisms for civil society – as well as at a grassroots level via civil-society organizations. Since 2006, Switzerland has been advocating measures to come to terms with the past, which have made possible the pursuit of excellent research on atrocities and dialog on perceptions of history. Furthermore, Switzerland plays an active role in protecting human rights activists, in the process of returning land for the use of internally displaced persons, and in other aspects of the ongoing peace process.

For its programs in Colombia, which include not just the HSD and the SDC, but also the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), Switzerland has **budgeted CHF 27.5 million for the year 2016**. In the coming years, all cooperation programs will be focused on the implementation of the potential peace agreements.

streets of major cities. While Colombia has achieved great progress in violence reduction in recent years, the homicide rate remains high: In 2015, there were 25 killings per 100,000 residents. This is higher than any homicide rate Mexico has ever experienced since the war on the drug cartels there began in 2006.

Furthermore, there is a generally negative perception of the security situation. According to a survey in 2015, most residents of the country's capital, Bogotá, feel insecure: Only 25 per cent stated that they lived in a safe neighborhood. This feeling of insecurity is to a large extent caused by pervasive petty crime. In the last year, 38 per cent of respondents living in the capital or their close relatives were victims of a crime. Most of them were robbed. Together with the ongoing conflict, this everyday violence has eroded trust between people over the years. At the same time, Colombian society has become mired in a culture of violence that is difficult to overcome.

Despite this chilling panorama of violence, a negotiated settlement is the best alterna-

tive for finally ending the anachronistic conflict in Colombia. Absurdly, the Colombian state was one of the first in Latin America to attempt to negotiate with Marxist rebels, but will now only be able to close this chapter of Cold War history long after El Salvador, Nicaragua, or Guatemala have done so. In those countries, left-wing forces have achieved greater progress after concluding peace deals than they did with their armed struggle, and have even been voted into government. In Colombia, too, the left-wing movement that is engaged in legitimate political activity could wield greater influence if it were no longer linked to the guerilla, as has been the case in the past. The potential for development of the political left and of civil-society organizations will therefore increase with a peace agreement. This might lead indirectly to political and social reform and thus to a deepening of democracy.

The Miracle of Medellín

Another reason for being hopeful about a more peaceful future is the fact that the Colombian security forces are better prepared for the transformation of criminal

organizations than was the case, for instance, in the Central American states during the 1990s. The Colombian police and military have more than 30 years of experience in combating drug barons and have become increasingly more professional.

In Guatemala and El Salvador, violence in the post-conflict phase has increased, often dramatically, and especially in urban areas, where youth gangs have since been engaged in lethal fighting. Even though this is already true for certain Colombian cities such as Cali or Buenaventura, it is the metropolitan areas of Colombia in particular that have undertaken innovative reforms for combating urban violence. Despite the negative perception of security, Bogotá today has a homicide rate that is just one quarter of what it was in the early 1990s. With novel interventions, such as emphasizing the importance of rules for peaceful coexistence, rapprochement between police and urban dwellers, and a transparent handling of violence statistics, Mayor Antanas Mockus has placed the city on a path towards violence reduction.

A series of responsible mayors has also transformed Pablo Escobar's Medellín, which at the beginning of the 1990s was dominated by contract killers, into a modern model of urban development. While the metropolis at the heart of the Andean Cordillera was once described as “the world's most dangerous city”, today the talk is of “the Miracle of Medellín”. While problems with drug gangs and street crime persist, the residents of Medellín have every reason to be hopeful about the future. And maybe, this success story will repeat itself as the “Miracle of Colombia”.

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