



Colombia's Peace Process: Successful Disarmament, But Other Implementation Proceeds Slowly

***Contents:** Successful Disarmament of the FARC; Government Slow to Implement Other Aspects of the Peace Accords; ELN Negotiations: Finally, a Ceasefire; Violence Not Over; Coca Production: The Need to Invest in Rural Farming Communities; The Pope's Visit; Recommendations for U.S. Policy*

September 28, 2017. Over the past three months, the demobilized FARC ex-combatants completed turning in their weapons and formed a political party. The visit of Pope Francis brought a welcome call for reconciliation, and the Colombian government and the last remaining major guerrilla group, the ELN, finally agreed to a 100-day bilateral ceasefire. Yet many aspects of peace accord implementation advanced far too slowly.

Successful Disarmament of the FARC

The FARC ex-combatants—who had finished handing over their individual weapons on June 27—launched a political party in August 2017 as agreed upon in the peace accords, marking their transition from an insurgent group into a civilian political organization participating in the democratic process. This is a historic step in ending a fifty-year conflict that claimed over 260,000 lives and displaced over 7 million people.

The new party, the Revolutionary Alternative Force of Colombia (retaining the acronym FARC), is guaranteed a minimum of 5 seats in the 102-member Senate and 5 seats in the 166-member House during a two-term transitional period through 2026, after which those guarantees for seats end. They have not yet announced if they will field candidates in the 2018 presidential and congressional elections.

The FARC turned over a list of over \$330 million in financial assets, almost 95 percent in real estate and 3 percent in cattle. While this drew criticism from Colombians concerned that it may not include the full extent of their holdings, it was more extensive than the list turned over by paramilitary groups in their 2005 demobilization. Insight Crime [noted](#) that some of these financial assets apparently are in the hands of dissident factions of the FARC that did not demobilize.

On September 15, the UN Political Mission—which is tasked with verifying the implementation of the accords—finished removing [750](#) out of a total of 998 arms caches whose location was identified by FARC leaders. The UN will continue to work with the Colombian armed forces, demobilized guerrillas, and a newly-formed special peace police unit to remove the rest of these caches. Over 488,000 pieces of ammunition, over 1,200 weapons, and over 26,400 kilos of explosives were located and destroyed. This is in addition to the over [7,000](#) individual arms turned over earlier by the guerrillas as they demobilized. This marks a successful end to the disarmament process.

Now that the demobilization and disarmament process is largely completed, the first UN Political Mission has ended and a UN Verification Mission in Colombia was launched July 10. This second mission will be in place for a three-year period, renewable if needed. It [focuses](#) on “verifying commitments

regarding the political and socioeconomic reintegration of FARC-EP members,” as well as ensuring “a comprehensive security and protection programme for the communities and organizations in areas most affected by the conflict.”

Government Slow to Implement Other Aspects of the Peace Accords

However, many other aspects of implementation of the historic peace agreement are proceeding slowly and with many obstacles.

Reintegration. *Semana* magazine in August [termed](#) the roll-out of reintegration programs for the demobilized guerrillas “tortoise-like.” The Colombian government has not yet rolled out substantial programs to reintegrate the demobilized guerrillas back into civilian life, one of the most urgent commitments of the accords. Any successful peace process must offer services—educational opportunities, job training and employment services, productive projects, land titling, and psychosocial support—to reintegrate ex-combatants. Otherwise, the likelihood of ex-combatants rejoining insurgent groups or criminal gangs escalates.

In the case of Colombia, protection systems for ex-combatants are also necessary. The memory of the assassinations of over 3,000 members of the Union Patriótica party, formed in 1985 after a previous FARC demobilization, cast a shadow over peace prospects for decades. A sub-directorate of the National Protection Unit has been established to protect ex-combatants, but it is not clear how the existing weaknesses of the unit—which was established to protect human rights defenders—will be overcome.

Transitional Justice. Complex transitional justice mechanisms are still in the planning stages. The Constitutional Court’s May decision overturning the fast-track mechanism for approving peace process-related legislation has slowed and complicated approval of laws setting up institutions. For example, the justice mechanism may not be fully staffed and operational for another year. However, the judges for the Special Jurisdiction for Peace were chosen, a diverse group with strong judicial credentials, including those with backgrounds in the Attorney General’s office, human rights organizations, public policy, the military justice system, international human rights mechanisms and law schools. Of the 38 magistrates, over half are women, 4 are indigenous and 4 are Afro-descendant.

Ethnic Chapter. The Ethnic Commission warned that [“an exclusionary peace”](#) will be forged if there is not an Afro-Colombian and indigenous focus in the implementation plan being crafted by the tripartite (government, demobilized guerrillas, and UN) verification commission. Per the peace accords, the Ethnic Commission is charged with ensuring the participation of Afro-Colombian and indigenous minorities in peace accord implementation, particularly monitoring the fulfillment of the promises contained in the accords’ Ethnic Chapter. Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities were brutally affected by the conflict and must have a leadership role in implementation and verification. Important issues for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities include: individual and collective land restitution for those violently displaced from their lands, collective reparations, community participation in development decisions, and protection from ongoing violence, especially targeted attacks against Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and other community leaders.

Unit to Dismantle Paramilitary Successor Networks. The peace accords call for an independent unit to be set up to dismantle the paramilitary networks that continue violent, criminal activity and are involved in the threats against and assassinations of local human rights defenders and community leaders. (These

networks stem from the paramilitary groups, with which some members of the Colombian armed forces collaborated, which were partially demobilized in 2005.) Human rights organizations are concerned that the way this unit is being set up will limit its independence from the Attorney General and deny it full scope to carry out investigations and prosecutions from start to finish. This unit is a key instrument to dismantle these vicious criminal networks—involved in drug trafficking, corruption, and homicides—and their financial and political backers. As the FARC demobilized, these groups have stepped in to expand their control over drug trafficking networks.

Unit to Search for the Disappeared. Families of the disappeared celebrated the inclusion in the peace accords of an effective national search unit to locate the estimated [60,000](#) people forcibly disappeared during the Colombian conflict. While the Colombian government has issued a decree to establish the unit, families of the disappeared are concerned that the latter will not have the required independence and territorial scope to effectively search for the disappeared. They [urge](#) that the unit be launched quickly and that it forge a close partnership with families of the disappeared. Families of the disappeared welcomed the appointment of Luz Marina Monzón, an expert on forced disappearance, as head of the new unit.

ELN Negotiations: Finally, a Ceasefire

On September 4th, the Colombian government and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the last major remaining guerrilla group in the country, [announced](#) they had reached a bilateral ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire is set to start on October 1st and it will remain in place at least through [January 9, 2018](#). The so-called “Acuerdo de Quito” aims to reduce the intensity of the armed conflict, its primary objective being the improvement the humanitarian situation of the population.

The announcement came only a couple of days before Pope Francis’s visit to Colombia.

The ELN [pledged](#) to stop recruiting minors; refrain from attacking the country’s infrastructure, especially oil pipelines; advance a pilot program for demining efforts and abstain from installing more anti-personnel mines; and suspend kidnappings. In exchange, the Colombian government pledged to protect social leaders and human rights defenders in regions most affected by paramilitary successor group violence, in part by strengthening early alert systems to promptly respond to threats against their safety; improve the prison conditions of ELN inmates; and launch the civil society participation process that was agreed in the first point of the [peace talks agreement](#).

Jean Arnault, head of the UN Mission in Colombia, [confirmed](#) that the second UN mission to support the country’s peace process, which officially started on September 26, will help verify the ceasefire.

Violence Not Over

While Colombia’s overall levels of homicides have declined with the progress of the government-FARC peace process and the signing of the accords, violence has increased in specific areas. This violence comes from a variety of sources, especially from increased action by paramilitary successor groups as well as ELN moving into areas vacated by the FARC. Clashes between two paramilitary successor groups, the Gulf Clan and Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces, account for some of the violence. The [Global Report on Internal Displacement](#) notes that over 171,000 people were internally displaced in Colombia in 2016, and the first six months of 2017 show a 20 percent increase.

A [study](#) by *Silla Vacía* acknowledges the drop in homicides in almost every area of the country while analyzing those municipalities in which homicides have increased by as much as 800 percent (comparing January 1, 2016 through August 23, 2016 to the same period in 2017). In 7 of 10 of the municipalities studied, all them rural, homicides have shot up in areas where the FARC withdrew and a struggle for power intensified between different groups, including the paramilitary successor groups Clan Usuga and the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces, ELN and EPL guerrillas, active dissident FARC factions, and drug-trafficking groups. Note that this study is carried out prior to the ceasefire with the ELN.

The leader of the Urabeños, a paramilitary successor group deeply involved in drug trafficking, offered to surrender and dismantle his organization after his second-in-command was killed by security forces. While the Urabeños were trying to position themselves as political actors to be negotiated with, President Santos emphasized that there was no possibility of political negotiation, while reduced sentences for cooperation were not off the table.

The slaughter of human rights defenders and local community leaders continues unabated in Colombia. The nongovernmental program Somos Defensores documented [80](#) human rights defenders assassinated in 2016. From January to June 2017, [51](#) human rights defenders were assassinated. The same group [analyzed](#) 458 cases of crimes perpetrated against defenders from 2009 to 2016 and determined that 87 percent of these crimes remain in impunity, rising to 91 percent for homicides of defenders. “It seems that there is a war against these activists that is still not ending,” [concluded](#) Somos Defensores. The majority of crimes against defenders are alleged to be committed by paramilitary successor groups.

Coca Production: The Need to Invest in Rural Farming Communities

Colombia is facing [an increase](#) in coca production, which the Colombian government acknowledges and has a plan to address. The Colombian government has pledged to eradicate 100,000 hectares of coca in 2017, half through crop substitution agreements with farmers and half through forced eradication. Some 31,000 hectares have already been eradicated, according to the government, while voluntary agreements continue being signed and are starting to be implemented, with an additional 6,000 hectares voluntarily eradicated as of September 2017. Some 275 tons of cocaine have been seized, “on pace to exceed 2016’s record seizures of cocaine and cocaine base,” according to the U.S. State Department. While increased coca production is a challenge, the peace accords should not be seen as an obstacle to addressing this problem but as a long-term, valuable tool to address it with more comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

Unique among peace accords, the agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC contains a “drug policy chapter” which commits the FARC not only to end any role in drug trafficking but to join efforts to eradicate and replace illicit drug production with licit livelihoods. The agreement commits the Colombian government to work with rural communities to manually eradicate coca and poppy and replace them with sustainable livelihoods. The chapter emphasizes working with rural communities and extending the civilian presence of the state in terms of roads, infrastructure, agricultural extension services, schools, and health clinics. To avoid the failures of past crop-substitution programs, commitments to farm families must be upheld and attention must be paid to rural infrastructure and to effective marketing of products. These long-term approaches can be more sustainable than the short-lived impacts of aerial spraying, which also has harmful impacts on human health and the environment and undermines rural communities’ trust in government.

The Colombian government needs to greatly step up its efforts to extend basic services to these neglected areas of the countryside and fully involve family farmers and rural communities in planning and implementing sustainable development activities if this is to succeed. Fundación Ideas por la Paz, a business-related Colombian think tank, [cautions](#) that international donors' demand for short-term results regarding drug production can undercut the need to focus on a long-term, sustainable solution centered on rural development and improving the lives of farmers.

U.S. policy would be well-served by focusing attention on encouraging and assisting the Colombian government to live up to its promises to extend basic services to rural areas and fully implement voluntary agreements with farmers. It is short-sighted and self-defeating for the U.S. government to refuse to support the Colombian government's voluntary eradication and crop substitution program because demobilized FARC guerrillas are involved in some aspects of it (the U.S. government continues to designate the FARC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization despite its demobilization and disarmament).

The United States must also turn far more attention to paramilitary successor groups and criminal gangs that are increasing their hold on the drug trade.

The Pope's Visit

On Wednesday, September 6, Pope Francis arrived in Colombia, where he stayed for four days, visiting Bogotá, Villavicencio, Medellín and Cartagena.

During his visit, he called for reconciliation, [noting](#) that "To reconcile is to open a door to each and every one of the people who have lived the dramatic reality of the conflict." He reminded Colombians that, "The search for peace is an ongoing job, a task that does not relent and requires the commitment of all." And he brought a message of solidarity: "And I wanted to come here to tell you that you are not alone, that like me there are many who want to accompany you in this step forward; this trip is meant to be an incentive for you, a contribution that in some way paves the way to reconciliation and peace."

Conclusion

The peace accord agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC offers a historic opportunity to end the Western Hemisphere's most long-lasting and brutal conflict, address the neglect of rural Colombia including Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, and strengthen regional stability. The United States and the international community must support Colombia's peace process while urging much greater progress in implementing the accords.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

- Provide full funding for peace accord implementation in Colombia, including programs for reintegration of demobilized guerrillas, for victims of the conflict, for strengthening human rights, and for Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. Continue human rights conditions on assistance.
- Urge the Colombian government and Congress to move forward effectively to comply fully with the peace accords, establishing the necessary regulations and laws, and faithfully implementing provisions to ensure reintegration and protection programs for demobilized guerrillas, as well as programs for truth, justice, and reparations for victims of the conflict.

- Call on the Colombian government to take action to dismantle paramilitary successor groups that are threatening communities and extending their control over the drug trade. To this end, the Colombian government must ensure that the Unit to Dismantle Paramilitary Successor Groups is launched, fully staffed and operational, has independent leadership, and is empowered to investigate and prosecute paramilitary successor groups and their backers.
- Exhort the Colombian government to ensure that the Ethnic Commission is fully included in developing and monitoring the plan to implement the peace accords.
- Encourage the Colombian government to vigorously implement the drug policy chapter of the accord, working closely with farming communities to manually eradicate coca and poppy and replace it with sustainable, legal livelihoods.

By Lisa Haugaard and Andrea Fernández Aponte

See previous LAWG Colombia Peace Updates:

[*FARC Guerrillas Turn in their Weapons: An End to Fifty Years of War*](#), June 2017

[*Peace Accord Implementation Advances in Colombia: Progress, But Challenges Abound*](#), April 2017

[*Peace Accord Implementation Begins in Colombia: FARC Guerrillas Enter Concentration Zones*](#),
February 2017