Peace Accord Implementation Begins in Colombia: FARC Guerrillas Enter Concentration Zones

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February 6, 2017. Arriving by foot, river boat, bus, mule, and truck, some 6,500 members of the FARC guerrillas have now moved into special agreed-upon zones as the new peace agreement is starting to be implemented. During a 180-day period, they are beginning the process of being reintegrated into civilian life. All members of the FARC guerrillas are scheduled to turn in their weapons by the end of this period.

This accord offers the opportunity to end the longest-running conflict in the Western Hemisphere in which more than 220,000 people have died and 7 million people have been displaced. The benefits of potential peace are already being felt, as—despite important exceptions, described below—Colombia is experiencing the lowest levels of violence in decades.

Arriving at Peace Accord 2.0. An initial peace accord was signed on September 26, 2016. Colombian voters in an October 2nd referendum turned down the peace accord by a razor-thin margin, although citizens in the areas most affected by the conflict voted to approve it. The Colombian government then embarked on a marathon listening session with diverse sectors and made substantial revisions. Among the most important changes: FARC combatants convicted of crimes will serve their sentences in restricted geographic areas under international surveillance while doing reparations-related work; FARC members are to turn over all war assets for reparations; the term “gender focus” was defined, to address concerns of evangelical groups; and the special tribunal for transitional justice was placed under the regular justice system and international judges were removed. While the original accord did not limit private property rights, the second accord positively reaffirmed private property rights. Although not every objection was addressed, the great majority of concerns raised were included in the revised accord. FARC leadership accepted these changes, and remarkably, the second accord was signed on November 21, 2016.

The Colombian Congress then approved the revised accords on November 29 and 30, by a vote of 75-0 in the Senate and 130-0 in the House. Some opponents of the peace accords abstained.

Legislating the Accords. The Colombian Congress is now proceeding to debate more than 50 laws that need to be passed in order to implement the peace accords. Colombia’s Constitutional Court gave a green light for the Congress to fast-track the legislation, but there are still obstacles to overcome to reach agreement on these numerous and complex laws.

Obstacles, Now and Ahead

Although this initial entry of the FARC into special concentration zones has proceeded on track, this first phase of peace accord implementation will hardly be an easy process, of course, and problems are surfacing.
In the zones where the guerrillas are concentrating, the Colombian government has been slow to deliver basic services—such as temporary housing and adequate food and potable water, not to mention materials for the demobilized guerrillas to build classrooms, health clinics and mess halls. These basic needs and more must be met in order to ensure demobilization proceeds effectively.

Attention is focused on whether the FARC will hand over all of the remaining minors in their ranks, or let them “go out the back door,” rather than handing them over to authorities. It is crucial that they be handed over properly so that they can receive the support services they will need and be returned to their families.

More broadly, there are serious concerns about the security situation in the conflict zones. Other armed actors are moving in to fill the power vacuum left by the FARC guerrillas. Paramilitary successor groups, criminal bands, and ELN guerrillas are strengthening their presence in areas the FARC is leaving.

Disturbingly, attacks against community leaders and human rights and peace activists have increased, even as overall violence has gone down. According to the office in Colombia of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 57 such leaders were killed in 2016; 7 more activists were killed in January 2017. Paramilitary successor groups that target human rights activists as threats to their interests or the interests of companies or politicians that employ them; conflicts between illegal armed groups for territory as the FARC pulls back; lack of state presence; and disputes over illegal economies are some of the reasons for this targeted violence. As a Washington Post article notes, “These assassinations are kryptonite to the fragile peace deal.”

The prospect of such targeted violence also being directed against demobilized guerrillas affects the viability of peace. The assassination of some 4,000 members of the Patriotic Union, a political party formed after guerrillas demobilized in the past, was a major obstacle to peace and still casts a shadow over this process. The Colombian government with the assistance of international monitors must ensure that ex-combatants’ lives are protected if peace is to be achieved.

**ELN Negotiations**

Negotiations between the government and the last remaining major guerrilla group, the ELN, have been agreed to, but have not moved forward. One stumbling block was removed when the ELN on February 2 freed ex-congressman Odin Sanchez, who had been held in captivity for 10 months.

**U.S. Policy: A Historic Opportunity Must Not Slip Away**

A successfully implemented peace agreement offers a historic opportunity to Colombia to end this brutal fifty years of war. Colombians will be able to extend the presence of the state in rural areas and turn national efforts to building a prosperous economy, unleashing creative energy and innovation, and providing a better life for their citizens. For the United States, a Colombia at peace means a partner that contributes to regional stability and that can better address the issues of tackling organized crime and reducing drug production and trafficking.

**Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

- Support peace accord implementation through balanced diplomacy, urging all parties to fulfill their commitments;
• Support, with patience, the slowly advancing peace process with the last remaining major guerrilla group, the ELN;
• Provide substantial assistance that is tailored to the implementation of the agreements in the accords;
• Encourage the Colombian government to dismantle the paramilitary successor groups;
• Support the United Nations mechanisms to monitor the peace process and human rights, namely the UN Political Mission in Colombia and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights office in Colombia; and
• Urge the Colombian government to protect human rights defenders, victims, union activists, women and LGBT leaders, journalists, and Afro-Colombian, indigenous and other community leaders.

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