An overview of Colombia’s latest conflict dynamics and prospects for peace in times of covid-19

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Conjunctural Analysis
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Content

4 PRESENTATION

5 ARMED CONFRONTATION

7 ELN

8 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PEACE AGREEMENT

10 SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

11 FINAL IDEAS
Presentation

As part of a series of conflict briefings presented by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and its Conflict, Security and Development team, this analysis is an edited version of my last presentation on the webinar discussion about “The Prospects for Lasting Peace in Colombia”. This session examined the complex picture of Colombia’s non-state armed groups, the threats to the hard-fought peace with FARC and the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on security.

Visit event site:
Prospects for lasting peace in Colombia

In this conjunctural analysis, I would like to address four salient aspects of the current peace and security situation in Colombia and the impacts of covid-19 on the prospects for peacebuilding.

1 Thanks to the Area of Conflict Dynamics who provided all the data for this analysis and inputs based on the previous published document: El conflicto armado y su impacto humanitario y ambiental: tendencias durante la pandemia (http://www.ideaspaz.org/publications/posts/1834)
1. The armed confrontation is still active and there are no signs of a change in trend in the near future

The armed confrontation continues with a variety of illegal armed groups, including guerrillas and a wide range of criminal gangs. In 2020 the offensive actions by the military forces and the police have increased. The same trend is found in illegal groups, being ELN and FARC dissidences the most active organizations.

The good news is that there is an important reduction on lethality levels. Compared to last year, during the first 5 months of 2020, homicides have dropped 15% nationally and 12% in the zones where the Peace Agreement is being implemented.

The bad news is:

- There has been a dramatic surge in attacks against social leaders and FARC ex-combatants, notably a rise in homicides of 30% and 136% respectively.
- Forced displacement has remained at the same level.
- Environmental affectations don’t stop due to illegal mining, deforestation and attacks to oil pipelines.
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The confrontation focalizes in few critical areas:
a strategic corridor that runs from the border with Venezuela at the northeast to the Urabá Gulf in the border with Panamá, the Pacific coast right to the border with Ecuador on the south-west, and to the south-east in the Amazon Region. It affects less than 200 municipalities out of 1,100.

What happened during the pandemic? (March-May 2020)

• Activity by warring factions declined in April but increased again in May. As expected, these groups had differentiated reactions (some commanded restrictions to prevent contagion; others increased their attacks targeting social leaders and specific communities).

• We register a significant decrease of homicide rates in some regions (partly related to the unilateral cease-fire declared by the ELN during April).

• Unfortunately, this trend was not visible in killings of social leaders and FARC ex-combatants.

• It is important to clarify that the pandemic is not identified as the cause of the problem, but as a dynamizing factor that may intensify or decelerate violence and armed confrontation dynamics.

Source: UN Verification Mission

Source: FIP Database and OCHA
2. There were no conditions for the ELN unilateral ceasefire to have sticking power

In the last five years, the ELN has increased its forces and has expanded into regions that were previously under FARC control. Their increased participation in illegal economic activities, raises questions about their political motivations. In addition, their growing influence in Venezuela, where they control key areas for natural resource extraction, is a cause for concern.

ELN declared a unilateral cease-fire on April 2020. It saved lives, and it meant significant humanitarian relief for communities of areas under the influence of this guerrilla but it did not lead to a bilateral cease-fire as the ELN demanded, nor to the reopening of negotiations with the ELN in Havana as many pro-peace organizations wished for. Both, the government and the ELN stuck to their preconditions and on the 1st of May the unilateral cease-fire expired.

At the same time, the government was preparing a different strategy that sought to encourage the individual demobilization and submission to justice of members of illegal armed groups, including the ELN. Since the decree came into force in late April more than 40 ELN combatants have surrendered. Nonetheless, to be effective, this strategy requires for recruitment be stopped in many of the critical areas where it has been growing in the past few years.

Last but not least, is the situation in Venezuela, a key country to advance in the ending of the armed conflict in Colombia and the process of dialogue with the ELN. The dramatic decrease in oil prices, the sanctions imposed by the United States—which are intended to pressure for a transition scenario—as well as the devastating consequences that covid-19 may have, perpetuates a scenario of crisis and uncertainty.
3. The implementation of the peace agreement with FARC slows down, and fissures between the parties deepen

The implementation of the peace agreement has faced numerous difficulties since its signing in November 2016, starting with the structural weakness of the Colombian State, which prevented the execution of an immediate response plan to stabilize the areas left by the FARC, protect the population and guarantee their rights.

There have been also budget constraints to advance on a long-term rural development agenda aimed at closing critical institutional and socio-economic gaps, and furthermore transforming the most affected areas by the armed conflict and criminal economies. In addition, the Peace Agreement has been at the center of a context of polarization and major political division.

Duque’s government came to power two years ago on behalf of the parties that opposed the Peace Agreement. While he actively opposed the transitional justice system established in the agreement, he prioritized three aspects in his Peace with Legality Policy: reintegration of low-ranking ex-combatants, the illicit crop substitution program, and the participatory development plans (PDET for its acronym in Spanish) aimed at transforming the most marginalized regions affected by conflict.

Overall:

- **Progress in economic reintegration has been slow**: three years after disarmament and demobilization, more than half of the ex-combatants are still waiting for their productive project. In addition, vulnerable conditions are exacerbated by threats and killings of ex-combatants.

- **From its inception, in early 2017, the illicit crop substitution program has been lagging on the payments and technical assistance to the 99,000 families that voluntarily joined.** By the end of 2019, 90% of the families received the first payment, 62% of the families received technical assistance, and almost none of the families had a productive project. On top of this, social leaders involved in the program have been targeted, and many killed (totaling 59 in January 2020).

On the other hand, as part of the measures to reduce coca, the government is promoting forced eradication (including returning to aerial spraying) which increases uncertainty among the coca growers and clashes with the security forces.
The government has concentrated great efforts on the regional transformation agenda related to the implementation of the aforementioned PDET. Nonetheless, recognizing this is a 15 years’ agenda, it has taken too long to design the roadmap to implement it. Until now, almost two years after its inauguration, the government has only advanced in the pilot of one of the 16 PDET zones. This has increased uncertainty and disenchantment towards the national government among the communities that participated in the process of definition of these programs. covid-19 has posed huge challenges to this agenda, in both logistic and operational terms. There will probably be a decrease in the (already slim) budget and a rearrangement of priorities. In the early days of the quarantine, the government announced that programs for rural roads, water and electrification, will be affected and will have delays. The implementation of these programs are also suffering delays due to the difficulties of the in-person participation of the local actors, because of the quarantine.

- During the past three months, there have been increasing complaints from the FARC Party leadership and pro-Agreement organizations to the UN and the international community for non-compliance by the government. They are arguing that the government is using the coronavirus to weaken the peace agreement, and that it is failing to protect social leaders and ex-combatants. Finally, a few weeks ago FARC withdrew from the Bilateral Verification Commission established in the Agreement, protesting the government’s backing of the US for including Cuba in the list of countries that do not contribute to antiterrorists efforts.

- The government has not ceased their claim to reform it, in order to remove what they understand as undeserved political and legal FARC privileges. Although the FARC promptly complied with the demobilization and disarmament, doubts remain about their contribution to the truth of the atrocities they committed and to the reparation of the victims. Soon (July 31) the term imposed by the government expires, in order for them to deliver all the ill-gotten assets, which most of them are scattered in the areas that were under their control. Therefore, at this point, it is unclear if FARC will be able to hand in all the goods registered in the list they delivered more than three years ago.
4. The time has come to talk about Security Sector Reform

The peace deal with FARC is unique in many ways. One of them is that it did not address the issue of security sector reform, mainly due to the lack of political space during the peace process; it was already a complex scenario to include this agenda which is extremely sensible.

Colombia has been facing for the past few years a situation both in the police and in the military, which has now been revealed in various scandals showing substantive irregularities that encompasses abuse of intelligence power, lack of transparency in the handling of resources, cover-ups and involvement in illegal activities (drug-trafficking, smuggling) and with criminal organizations.

This is not just a problem of a corrupt military and police, of bad apples as it has been put. It is a political issue of notable weakness in the civilian leadership to carry out the reforms badly needed, in order to adapt the sector to the requirements of stabilization and post-conflict.
5. Final Ideas

01. **The pandemic opened an opportunity for solidarity and collaboration, to strengthen peace in Colombia.** But as it has happened in other countries around the world, pre-existing political and criminal interests have had more weight. The gaps between cities and the areas most affected by violence and confrontation, become more evident, while resources are shortened.

02. **Uncertainty is at the center of the pandemic, but it is clear that the fragility of vulnerable regions is being exacerbated.** Although it is early to estimate the real costs, it is not too late to make decisions about its potential effects. The peace agenda will have to be based on recovery, protection of communities, social dialogue and the generation of capabilities and opportunities for the most disadvantaged territories.
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