

Colombia: A Dangerous Setback

Bogotá, Brussels | 16 Apr 2015



Colombian soldiers carry equipment of one of ten soldiers killed by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas, in the rural area of Buenos Aires, department of Cauca, Colombia, 15 April 2015. AFP/LUIS ROBAYO

Colombia's attempt to end five decades of bloodshed could be at risk, after local Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) units appeared to have breached a four-month-old unilateral ceasefire by ambushing a military patrol 14 April, reportedly killing eleven soldiers and wounding another twenty. The deadliest guerrilla action since the peace negotiations began two and a half years ago is not likely to lead to a collapse of the talks, but the parties and the international community must now move quickly to prevent them from unravelling.

More questions than answers

According to official sources, the soldiers were ambushed with grenades, explosives and firearms near the municipality of Buenos Aires (Cauca), while carrying out an unspecified nightly "territorial control" mission. FARC has not given an alternative account but has called the incident a "legitimate reaction" to continued counter-insurgent operations against their troops. However, this sits uneasily with some of the facts on the ground. The stark disparity in the number of victims - just one guerrilla was reportedly killed - and the intensity of the combat make it appear rather to have been a premeditated attack, unlike the kidnapping of General Ruben Dario Alzate, which triggered a short suspension of the talks last year.

This has led many in Colombia to speculate that FARC may have tried to use an ambush to pressure the government into an immediate bilateral ceasefire. This is relatively unlikely. The government has repeatedly rejected such a deal ahead of a final agreement. But things were at least moving in the right direction, when President Santos last month temporarily stopped air attacks on guerrilla camps and renewed that decision just days ago. The immediate, predictable

consequence of the Cauca attack was that Santos declared it a clear rupture of the ceasefire and ordered resumption of the bombing that over the last decade has inflicted significant losses on FARC.

This suggests the true problems run deeper than a mere strategic miscalculation. FARC's strong control over its organisation notwithstanding, the incident could be evidence that the negotiators in Havana, including several recognised commanders from Cauca, have problems controlling their troops and preventing them from reacting to continued military actions. If so, it would also suggest that the government's effort to stabilise the ceasefire by rewarding FARC with the suspension of air attacks may have failed to significantly change the situation on the ground.

A Process at Risk

The human tragedy apart, these developments put the process at serious risk. Re-activating bombing was perhaps necessary to give the government room to manage both the angry military and highly sceptical public opinion, but it must now withstand pressure for unrestrained retaliation. Despite shortcomings, including smaller violations over the last month, FARC's ceasefire had helped reduce the intensity of the conflict to a historic low. A major offensive would jeopardise these humanitarian gains and possibly drive FARC to call off its ceasefire, thus potentially paving the way for a new wave of violence in which the talks would struggle to survive.

The government should also resist the mounting political pressure to issue an ultimatum. As the negotiators labour to make headway on transitional justice, under discussion since mid-2014, patience has started to wear thin ahead of closely contested local elections scheduled for October, even among some supporters of the process. But a tougher line in Havana would not likely be helpful in reaching an agreement on transitional justice or the "end of the conflict", the other remaining item on the five-point agenda. Both sides already face increasing time pressure, as they will need the remainder of Santos's term (ending in 2018) to begin implementing a final agreement. A deadline would have little added value, but it would significantly increase the risks of failure or of a shallow peace agreement that lacks the parties' full buy-in.

The Way Forward

There is no real alternative to a bilateral conflict de-escalation strategy ahead of a final agreement. Efforts in that direction have been underway since last year, culminating in an unprecedented agreement in March to begin joint humanitarian demining. Getting back on this track will not be easy. Cauca has probably wiped out what little confidence there was between FARC and the military. It could also prove a severe setback for efforts to get the military behind the process, emboldening hardliners and raising new doubts among troops about the credibility of government promises.

Repairing the damage will require, above all, rapidly clarifying what happened, as FARC has requested. Ideally, this should be done by independent and trusted third parties. Cuba and Norway, the two countries accompanying the talks, already played a key role in overcoming the crisis triggered by the kidnapping of General Alzate last November and are likely best placed to lead such an effort. Others, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), might help to facilitate communication on the ground. In order to minimise the chance of a future incident, changes in the management of FARC's ceasefire might be required, including

continuous impartial verification, something the government has until now rejected. In addition to such measures, Colombia's international partners should publicly renew their support for the peace talks.

Both sides have invested much in this process, and there are no doubts that they remain committed to reaching a final agreement. It is positive that even most critics have not called for ending the process. But risks of an involuntary breakup due to military escalation or political backlash are real. Both the government and FARC will need to keep on course if they are to steer through this latest crisis.