Will Colombia Bet on Peace?

By Diane Lefer

Diane Lefer: The last time (1985) the FARC engaged in electoral politics after negotiations with the government, what followed was the targeted and systematic assassination of their candidates and office holders on both the national and municipal level.

Within weeks (or even days), negotiators for the Colombian government and the FARC-EP, the largest and most powerful guerrilla group active in the country, are expected to finalize a roadmap to end more than five decades of civil war. The second largest militant group, the ELN, wishes to follow suit. The Santos administration is expected to present the peace plan to the Colombian Congress and then to the public in a national referendum.

The referendum is not legally necessary but is a way of engaging grassroots support, crucial in days to come as treaties and agreements signed by leaders don't guarantee peace on the ground. It's also a risky gamble as rightwing former president Alvaro Uribe—George W. Bush's bestie in Latin America—has mounted strenuous opposition, including a petition
drive repudiating any peace accord and a Twitter campaign through which he and his followers warn of the country becoming a Communist-dominated narco-terrorist state.

I find myself asking: How can the population be reassured about the agreement? How does the agreement go from something decided on from above to something lived on the ground by the people who've suffered most from generations of violence? What needs to be done in the post-conflict era? And what is the role of the US?

We are already involved. Peace Colombia, as proposed by Obama, will make $450 million in aid available to help pay for education, retraining, and reintegration of members of the FARC, but it appears that funding will also go to security and a continued war on the drug trade. That suggests a continuation of the violence and destructive power of Plan Colombia through which, since 2000, we supported the Colombian military lavishly to the tune of between $8 and $10 billion, money that too often financed the massacre of civilians and the aerial spraying of poisons meant to destroy coca fields but which instead killed food crops while sickening people and their livestock.

My past visits to hotspots Barrancabermeja and Putumayo and my work with the Colombia Peace Project here in Los Angeles have introduced me to people victimized by all parties—the Colombian military, the guerrilla movements, the paramilitaries, the drug traffickers. It was in Barrancabermeja I first heard people talk about choosing to "bet on peace"—and so I share my thoughts on what might make peace a safer bet.

**Peace and Reconciliation at the Grassroots Level**

While the US tends to fund government agencies and large-scale projects, the UN and some European countries seek out smaller, local projects that seek to change attitudes by reaching individuals on a directly personal level.

Just one example: *Victus*, a theatrical work directed by Alejandra Borrero, brought together former guerrillas, paramilitaries, military and police officers, and civilian victims to create and perform a play about the impact of violence on their lives. In this video below posted by Colombian daily newspaper *El Espectador*, a former paramilitary says that sharing the stage with the others was *difficult*, but at the start they believed it would be *impossible*. "We started to listen to each other's stories, and we found out we weren't so very different." The recognition of shared suffering helped humanize the enemy. According to a participant in another interview, "*Victus* is a family now. We are all one family."

Five years ago in Barrancabermeja, I met Father Leonel Narváez, sociologist and Catholic priest, who has for years brought traumatized community members together in Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation. Not an easy lesson for people still grieving or, as one woman objected, "How can I forgive when I still see the man who killed my family? He smirks when he passes me in the street." Father Narvaéz explained that his schools don't solve the problem in an hour or two. It's a longer process. "Forgiveness," he said, "doesn't have to mean taking the hand of one who's hurt you. It's letting go of bitter hatred..."
engendering rage and then revenge." One goal is "self-reparation. In forgiving, I reconstitute my inner self."

Educational institutions in Colombia are now required to have a Peace faculty chair. Not a bad move. But I believe one thousand small projects that reach 20 people at a time or even fewer in a profound way and then ripple outward will accomplish more than top-down efforts aimed at mass reeducation.

**Protection**

The last time (1985) the FARC engaged in electoral politics after negotiations with the government, what followed was the targeted and systematic assassination of their candidates and office holders on both the national and municipal level. The killings were so effective and widespread they became known as a political genocide, or "politicide".

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Now FARC intends to advance its political program through nonviolent, electoral means. As almost 20 thousand FARC guerrillas will return to civilian life, can their safety be guaranteed? The government hasn't even protected civilians, survivors of violence and human rights defenders as the case of my friend Ramiro (not his real name) makes clear.

I saw a memorial photo of his murdered brother before I actually met Ramiro himself. I was in Barrancabermeja when survivors marked 13 years since paramilitaries swept into the low-income neighborhood while people were outdoors celebrating Mothers Day with a street fair and bazaar. The complicit Colombian military chose not to intervene while the rightwing death squad gunned down civilians and abducted and disappeared more than two dozen others, among them Ramiro's brother. More than 10 years passed before the body was found, but the family's grief didn't end there. The reason I didn't see Ramiro in Barrancabermeja was that death threats had caused the family to flee.

When we did meet a few years later, Ramiro was resettled in a major city, coordinating efforts to seek justice not only for his own brother but on behalf of many families of the dead and disappeared. The constant threats and attempts on his life qualified him for government protection. It was not forthcoming.

In fact, rightwing terror increased with the start of peace negotiations in 2012. In 2015 alone, at least 63 human rights defenders and social organization leaders were murdered. Earlier, I remember how hopeful people were when the Santos administration initiated a program of land restitution for people who'd been forced from their homes by violence but it turned out that filing an application was like putting a target on your back.
The government clearly lacks the resources and political will to protect its own citizens. Responding to the need (but also extremely limited in how many people they can help), NGOs including the Fellowship of Reconciliation Peace Presence and Peace Brigades International offer "accompaniment", placing unarmed international volunteers physically present in communities or alongside individuals living under threat.

For Ramiro, the situation became so dire he recently and reluctantly took advantage of an offered visa (not to the US) and fled into exile where he now lives a precarious existence.

Add to this that an estimated 63% of Colombian territory is at risk for landmines, and how can anyone's safety be guaranteed?

**Genuine Demobilization and Reintegration**

Colombians have every reason to doubt the effectiveness of these programs, again thanks to recent history. In 2005, the AUC (the umbrella organization of paramilitary groups through the country) turned in weapons in what has largely turned out to be a sham demobilization. Some groups simply refused to lay down arms. Among those that officially complied, death squads promptly reorganized under new names such as Aguilas Negras and Rastrojos and continued intimidation, killing, and drug trafficking. Promised transitional help—living allowances, education, training, psychosocial rehabilitation, employment—was insufficient and one reason that many demobilized fighters with little work experience beyond violence and drug trafficking turned to organized and disorganized crime. Others entered "civilian" life on the payroll of the police or private security companies where they continued to act with impunity.

When I visited Putumayo following demobilization, I met with a group of landless widows who (like 6.7 million other displaced Colombians, mostly women and children) had been driven from their homes when their husbands were murdered by paramilitaries. They were protesting that in the interest of demobilization, twenty paramilitaries were each granted one hundred hectares of productive land while they—the victims—remained displaced and were given nothing.

In 2005, with Uribe still in power, it's likely the administration turned a blind eye to paramilitary abuses but problems of insufficient resources and political will remain in play with the FARC. And unlike the situation in 2005, the Colombian economy is contracting now and meeting needs will be difficult. What's particularly critical right now is that the first guerrillas to be demobilized—and soon—are thousands of child soldiers, many of whom have been held for years against their will, are in need of therapeutic intervention and are ill-equipped for civilian life.

**Political Reform**

At the very start of the Santos administration in 2010, even Carlos Lozano, director of the leftwing weekly, *Voz*, was cautiously optimistic about the possibility of a political—rather than military—solution to Colombia's conflict. When I met him, he saw "positive spaces
opening up, a moment in Colombian life when grassroots organizations have a different relationship with power."

Unfortunately, just as in the US, a new president said good things while old policies continued. A corrupt and recalcitrant Congress blocked real change. Government spending went to soldiers rather than the education of children. And the grassroots organizations representing the least powerful—the rural indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities—had no place at the table of power. They still need to be included, respected, and consulted as the peace process continues. Instead, they remain marginalized, their protests and needs ignored, while they continue to suffer the worst poverty, exploitation and extreme violence, usually under the radar and ignored by much of urban Colombia. Without access to real political representation in the seats of power, local leaders will continue to be assassinated, territory stolen or "invaded" not just by armed actors but by agribusiness and multinational extractive industries.

I think back to what Lozano said in 2010: "The ruling classes of Colombia—both main parties—have refused to address agrarian reform, hunger, poverty. For all the military force, and all the money from the United States, the guerrilla movement has not been crushed because the causes still exist."

Any post-conflict era has its share of difficulties and setbacks. In Colombia, the wounds inflicted by decades of civil war won't heal overnight but the country today is at a crucial and hopeful juncture. The US Congress needs to ante up with the right kind of support, the help that builds confidence and makes a successful outcome more likely. Ultimately, of course, it's up to the people of Colombia to take the gamble and place the nation's bet on peace.

Diane Lefer

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