

## GREED OR SOCIAL INJUSTICE? COMPETING APPROACHES TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN COLOMBIA

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### I. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the relationship between poverty and inequality on the one hand and insurgency and armed conflict on the other, against the recent historical background, the current political developments towards a negotiated settlement, and the prevailing internal armed conflict in Colombia. Particular attention will be given to the ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) guerrilla movement since these conversations and earlier peace negotiation efforts, as well as earlier negotiations with FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), Colombia's major insurgent movement, may give insights with regard to the prospects and the social and political prerequisites for serious peace negotiations and sustainable peaceful development. The economicist approach to the study of relationships of inequality, rebellion, and internal conflict in terms of "greed" and "grievance" or similar dichotomies will also be critically examined with a view to Colombian evidence and experience. Analyzing the complete peace talk scenario in Colombia requires that the character, objectives, and policy of the Colombian government as well as the interests and influences of the Colombian establishment be taken into account. In this context, the main obstacles to and requirements for sincere and efficient peace negotiations and sustainable peace in Colombia will be put forward.

### II. RECENT PEACE NEGOTIATION EFFORTS AND GOVERNMENT POLICY IN COLOMBIA

After the failure of the Pastrana administration's peace process with the FARC,<sup>1</sup> Álvaro Uribe Vélez won the 2002 presidential elections in Colombia on a promise to take a hard line against the insurgent groups FARC and ELN. When Uribe took office, therefore, the so-called

“democratic security” policy was introduced and this policy has since then been applied by the government. The policy involves, in essence, a strong effort to strengthen the military power and territorial control of the Colombian armed forces, and a sustained military offensive against the insurgent groups to bring them back to the negotiation table in a considerably debilitated and more acquiescent condition. As a complement to the strengthening of the regular armed forces, units of “peasant soldiers” and a nationwide network of informants were created.

In May 2006 Uribe was re-elected after having mobilized enough political support in Congress to impose necessary changes in the 1991 Constitution, which originally did not allow consecutive re-election of the president. Uribe won the election with 62 percent of the vote, followed by the moderate left coalition *Polo Democrático Alternativo* (22 percent). Participation in the elections was very low. The voter turnout reached only 45.1 percent. Mounting evidence and revelations of widespread paramilitary influence and intervention during the past (and the preceding) elections,<sup>2</sup> however, as well as alliances between paramilitary leaders and numerous regional and local politicians aligned with Uribe, tend to cast very serious doubt on the legitimacy of Uribe as well as the present Colombian government and Congress.<sup>3</sup>

Well into Uribe’s second term, progress in terms of peace, peace negotiations, or even a humanitarian agreement has been virtually absent, and the most important insurgent group, FARC, has not shown any signs of military weakness nor willingness to enter peace negotiations with the second Uribe administration. ELN entered into exploratory talks with the government in 2005, but so far the parties have not advanced beyond discussing the impending agenda for real peace negotiations.

In July 2003 the government initiated a highly controversial demobilization process with the paramilitary umbrella organization United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC). The negotiation process was quite secretive, evolving, as it is still evolving, under constant paramilitary violations of the cessation of hostilities agreed with the government in December 2002. In spite of the agreement, the paramilitaries have since then assassinated more than 3,300 civilians, including members of Congress, judges, journalists, human rights activists, peasants, indigenous and trade union leaders. The Justice and Peace Law proposed by the government as a legal framework for the demobilization process has been strongly criticized by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and international and Colombian human rights groups for not meeting international standards and being too beneficial to the paramilitary. Basic questions regarding its

implementation, such as establishing the truth, reparations to victims, the functioning of the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation, as well as the reintegration of demobilized paramilitaries, remain unclear and economic resources for implementation are lacking. Also the Colombian Constitutional Court ruled that some sections of the law violated both Colombian basic law and international legal norms.<sup>4</sup>

A tangible though illusive result of the demobilization process is that 34,590 paramilitary combatants have been removed from the battlefield (31,000 demobilized collectively and 3,590 individually). Still, only 18,051 weapons were surrendered to the authorities in the process. Among the demobilized combatants over 1,000 have been murdered, 78 injured, 1,070 arrested for new crimes and 144 convicted, 4,693 demobilized paramilitaries cannot be traced, and 6,567 have lost their rights to the benefits of the process. In the course of the demobilization process various major drug traffickers acquired entire paramilitary blocs (military units) or posed as paramilitary leaders to legalize their assets and escape extradition to the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

The OAS-MAPP Verification Mission of the Organization of American States, responsible for monitoring the process, has been useless for verification purposes and instead served to legitimize internationally a process that was a false step from the beginning. In June 2005 Human Rights Watch<sup>6</sup> strongly urged Sweden and Holland to immediately withdraw their support to the OAS-MAPP, asserting that:

Unfortunately, the OAS Mission, a key international observer to the demobilization process, failed throughout the entire debate over the legal framework to urge any changes to the serious flaws in the bill or to take any other steps to improve the process. Rather than pressing for compliance with international standards, the Mission has supported the process unconditionally, legitimizing the Colombian government's actions. Notably, the OAS Mission has not played a significant role in verifying compliance with the cease-fire. As noted by the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights during a recent visit to Colombia, paramilitaries have been committing widespread violations of international humanitarian law in breach of the cease-fire, in near-total impunity. Indeed, the Colombian government is completely undermining the credibility of the cease-fire declaration by allowing Diego Murillo (also known as "Don Berna" and "Adolfo Paz"), a notorious paramilitary commander, to demobilize and receive benefits even though he allegedly breached the cease-fire declaration by ordering the assassination of three people, including a Colombian congressman, in April of this year.... In this context, the continued presence of the Mission will serve only to enhance the image of the process and to benefit the paramilitaries themselves, signaling the approval of the OAS and the Swedish government for the process.

In conclusion and deeply troubling, the demobilization process has failed to dismantle the paramilitary economic and political structures. New or “recycled” paramilitary groups are emerging in different parts of the country,<sup>7</sup> and paramilitary leaders have been able to operate as such even from jail. In the course of Uribe’s two terms the paramilitary leaders have also increased their share of the country’s agricultural land and other economic activities and extended their political influence over politicians, regional and local governments, and the Congress.

### **III. CAUSES OF INSURGENCE – GREED OR SOCIAL INJUSTICE?**

What has been denominated economicism (or economic imperialism) is the attempt to reduce and subordinate other social sciences and history to economics. Economicism holds that everything social is directly or indirectly of an economic nature and can be successfully dealt with through neoclassical economic theory and methods. One recent example is conflict and rebellion. Economists have attempted to explain the causes of internal armed conflict and rebellion in terms of greed, rent-seeking “preferences,” and “opportunities,” according no or minor importance to such factors as poverty, inequality, and social injustice. Economicism also constitutes the theoretical and political foundation of neoliberal development policies such as those applied in Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America during the last decade.

The economic policy during the years of Uribe government has consisted of a rigid application of the neoliberal recipe for economic development, including privatization of state-owned enterprises, public and social services, “liberalization” of the labor market and foreign trade, as well as reduction of public spending. Strengthening of the armed forces and anti-insurgency offensives have brought high military expenditure and a mounting fiscal deficit, which by implication have resulted in lower than expected investment in social welfare sectors like public health, education, and social services. Normally, such budget cuts or restrictions disproportionately affect poor people.

The causal relationship between poverty and violence, and between inequality and violence, has been intensely debated in Colombia and internationally. The view that poverty and social, economic, or political inequality are important, often necessary but not always sufficient factors behind uprisings or insurgent armed struggle has a long and solid tradition in the social sciences and in history.<sup>8</sup> The perceptions of social injustices and the development of grievances in a given society have social foundations and prerequisites and, given certain of these prerequisites, may cause rebellion. This approach views the relationship between inequality

and conflict as multidimensional and significantly influenced by past experiences and processes. According to this stance, analyses of such relations need to be grounded in history. This view has been challenged by neoclassical economists, arguing that the neoclassical economic approach is more rigorous than sociological, historical, or anthropological studies and has developed sophisticated analytical tools that can be applied to conduct large cross-sectional and theoretical studies on the economic causes and consequences of crime and violence.<sup>9</sup> In addition, proponents of this approach claim that its basic conceptual and theoretical assumptions and foundations<sup>10</sup> are universally applicable and hold for all human behavior.

It is debatable to what extent this approach is “rigorous,” but it is clear that it is both ahistorical and depends on a series of far-reaching assumptions, definitions, and *ceteris paribus* clauses that have to be made by the researcher in order to categorize and standardize observations so that they, *inter alia*, fit into the requirements of statistical analysis. The subsequent steps and the results of the analysis thus hinge on the assumptions made at the outset and the quality of the data set. This is why the economic approach is noticeably reductionist and unable to satisfactorily account for causes, relations, and dynamics of open systems in a constant state of flux, such as social systems.

Also the economy as a system is open to the political and cultural systems as well as to the environment, and therefore not describable in purely economic terms.<sup>11</sup> Overall, and against the beliefs of neoclassical economists, social systems are clearly and qualitatively different from the objects of research of the natural sciences. In the latter, for instance, the variables assumed to be constant (e.g., temperature) are explicitly identified and controlled, whereas in the neoclassical or mainstream economics approach they are usually left unidentified and uncontrolled; here the expression *ceteris paribus* is often used to denote whatever the researcher overlooks.<sup>12</sup> In addition, a general setback of neoclassical economics and similar positivist approaches (whether applied in sociology, political science, conflict research, or economics) is that the findings and policy implications they produce tend to be remarkably trivial and simplistic.

A prominent example of this economicist approach is the paper “Greed and Grievance in Civil War” by Collier and Hoeffler.<sup>13</sup> This paper presents an econometric and “epidemiological” study of the causes of civil war based on a data set on civil wars over the period 1960-1999. Holistic and historically grounded analyses stress *grievance* arising from social injustice and inequality as a fundamental, though partial, cause of rebellion, while Collier and Hoeffler, in accordance with the economicist approach,

distinguish between “preferences” and “constraints” in order to identify circumstances which favor rebellion. According to Collier and Hoeffler, societies can be prone to conflict either because preferences for rebellion are “atypically strong” or because constraints upon rebellion are “atypically weak.” It is worth noticing here that according to historically grounded social science conceptions, “preferences” cannot in this context be regarded as just a matter of opinion, subjective whim, or personal values. They are produced and reproduced in given social contexts and systems, and there are better and worse preferences and moralities as well as better and worse social systems and collective purposes.

Neoclassical economists, including Collier and Hoeffler, have normally treated the objective of rebellion as financial gain (*greed*). In the referred paper, however, the authors cautiously insert that the assumption that rebellions are motivated by greed is merely a special case of the focus on constraints, thus arriving at a somewhat less crude and unqualified stance on greed as a motive for rebellion. In relation to constraints they argue that the factors which determine the financial and military viability of a rebellion are more important than objective grounds for grievance, and that this viability depends on the existence of “extortable” and “lootable” resources, which are particularly accessible in countries with a high dependence upon primary commodity exports. Diamonds in Sierra Leone and Angola, timber in Cambodia, and cocaine in Colombia are quoted as examples. This finding, however, is neither new nor surprising since virtually all poor developing countries tend to be dependent on primary commodity export.

In an econometric model the contrasting accounts or “models” of the causes of conflict, i.e., preferences (grievance) and constraints (greed), are compared and subsequently combined to test their importance as determinants of internal conflict. The authors find that the model focusing on the constraints facing rebel organizations performs well, whereas objective indicators of grievance add little “explanatory power,” and that the results are consistent with economic models of “conflict risk” in which the critical parameters are the financial opportunities for rebels, the social and geographic constraints which they face, and the financial capability of the government to provide defense, but harder to reconcile with accounts of conflict that stress ethnic, religious, political, or economic grievances.

A basic and pervading flaw of “Greed and Grievance in Civil War” is its manifest economic reductionism. The mathematical modeling requires simplicity and uniformity, and hence the abovementioned greed and grievance “models” are presented as more or less dichotomous or opposed alternatives. In the context of holistic and historically grounded approaches

it is long since acknowledged that material and economic factors are influential in the emergence of rebellion and internal conflicts.<sup>14</sup> A key theoretical and empirical challenge in this context is to inquire into the relationship and interaction of social injustice and inequality (grievance) with material and economic factors. Such an account of the dynamic and interplay of “grievance” and “greed” as causes and motives requires a historically grounded analysis of the evolution and dynamics of internal conflicts over time, and in this regard Collier and Hoeffler have next to nothing to say.

They state that the fundamental question with regard to rebel motives, and the character of rebellion, i.e., whether extortion of primary commodity export “directly motivates rebellion (greed) or simply provides critical finance which facilitates the violent pursuit of other (grievance) objectives,” are considered to be “beyond the scope of our paper.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, there is no account at all of the interaction and mutual influence of the greed and grievance motives. In fact, this is not only beyond the scope of the paper, but also beyond the scope of the neoclassical econometric approach, since the answer to this fundamental question would require careful sociological and historical analysis of variable and contradictory processes and dynamics which cannot be dealt with by means of the reductionist methods, assumptions (e.g., human behavior as utility maximizing, all social systems being competitive markets, etc.), and abstractions characterizing the neoclassical approach.

The implicit point of departure in the analysis of Collier and Hoeffler is that status quo and “peace” is the normal “equilibrium” situation and that social or collective action threatening this equilibrium (“conflict risks”) is undesirable. The political and economic character of the prevailing social order or equilibrium situation enters the analysis only in a very shallow and limited way. The question is never asked, for example, whether social conflict or rebellion can be justified or even desirable in order to confront social injustices resulting from various forms of social and political domination or predatory authority.<sup>16</sup> Concepts and factors such as social class and stratification are referred to only through aggregate measures of inequality. The potential greed or corruption on the part of dominating groups or elites is not acknowledged or considered as a factor influencing the emergence of internal conflicts. Therefore, the conclusions and policy implications of the study stand out as one-dimensional and one-sided.

The paper focuses on the importance of the “constraints facing rebel organizations,” something which in order to prevent or resolve internal conflicts would imply reducing “the financial opportunities of the rebels” and increasing “the financial capability of the government to provide

defense.” This is exactly the strategy, the “democratic security” policy that has been in place in Colombia since the advent of the Uribe government several years ago. Yet this strategy has in no way moved Colombia closer to peace, nor has it eliminated or visibly weakened the country’s insurgent movements.

This is probably because the motives and real roots of the insurgency should not be sought in the “greed” and “financial opportunities” of the rebels. Manuel Marulanda Vélez, who has been FARC’s most prominent leader since its foundation in the 1960s, once stated that FARC had already been in existence for over two decades when coca cultivation for cocaine production took hold in Colombia and promised that FARC would go on existing with or without coca. In general, the “lootable or extortable resources” referred to in the paper did not exist in Colombia until the latter part of the 1970s, while the guerrilla movements were founded in the mid-1960s and have been active in the country since then.

It is also clear, and very few observers would deny, that ELN and FARC in Colombia were founded on the basis of perceived social injustices or “grievances.” These organizations, their political programs and demands, obviously address social, political, and economic grievances. Furthermore, such demands and grievances have been remarkably consistent over the more than four decades that have passed since the foundation of the insurgent organizations.<sup>17</sup> A very common “anti-insurgency” narrative concerning greed, grievance, and the evolution of the guerrilla movements in Colombia holds that “those grievance-motivated rebellions which actually take hold do so by combining some material payoff with the grievance. . . . For example, in Colombia groups which began as grievance-based organizations (of the political extreme left and extreme right) have evolved into drug baronies.”<sup>18</sup> This, of course, is a comfortable conclusion for the defenders of status quo and equilibrium. The same argument has been used, in different guises, by the Colombian military and the various political regimes since the guerrilla movements emerged. Considering the Colombian historical experience, however, the conclusion does not appear more conducive to any solution of the internal conflict now, than in the past.

In the absence of empirical knowledge it is difficult to objectively determine the “real” motives of the insurgents in terms of “greed” and “grievance” and to what extent they might be influenced by rent-seeking behavior. The very conditions of a long and degenerated internal conflict are obviously conducive to abuse and, for better or worse, to exploitation of all available resources, legitimate or illegitimate. Nonetheless, to deny that the insurgent groups still represent grievances addressing social injustices

and that they retain their basically political character is to deny their origin and history and to obstruct the possibilities of reaching a negotiated political solution of the internal conflict.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the demands of the insurgent organizations were formulated four decades ago. The social injustices which these demands were addressing have been growing and becoming more acute ever since. Still, the Colombian government and establishment have never during these decades taken any serious steps to carry out the social, economic, or political reforms demanded by the insurgents.

To correctly perceive the motives and forces driving internal armed conflicts like the Colombian one, it is therefore necessary to include in the equation the character and political behavior of governments and establishments that obstinately tend to defend equilibrium and status quo. The motives for such a defense in many instances classify appropriately as “greed,” and the methods normally involve political exclusion, political clientelism, corruption, and paramilitarism in different guises.

#### IV. ELN – ORIGIN AND CHARACTERISTICS

The ELN was founded by students, Catholic radicals, social and labor activists, as well as left-wing intellectuals who had participated in earlier regional and national social struggles and found inspiration in the Cuban revolution and Latin American liberation theology. Among its earlier supporters were also dissidents from the Youth of the Revolutionary Liberal Movement<sup>20</sup> (*Juventud del Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal, MRL*). The guerrilla movement emerged on July 4, 1964, in the rural neighborhood of La Fortuna, situated in the municipality of San Vicente de Chucurí, Santander, and the area of its initial guerrilla operations was in San Vicente de Chucurí and Simacota in the department of Santander.

ELN was perceived from the beginning as a national liberation movement with a nationalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-oligarchic political discourse and program. It launched its first insurgent operation on January 7, 1965, with the seizure and temporary control of Simacota, a small town where ELN’s first political program, the Simacota Manifest, was made public. The program proposed the installation of a popular and democratic government that should liberate the country from international monopolies and domestic oligarchy, guarantee plain equality and democratic liberties to the popular sectors, give legal rights to women, liberate the creative forces of the masses, and guarantee respect for the human dignity and the free development of all Colombians.

The Simacota Manifest also demanded agrarian reform, including elimination of the large landed properties (*latifundios*) and the

smallholdings (*minifundios*), as well as a series of social, technical, and economic rural development services to benefit agricultural producers. Demands for urban and housing reform; reform of education and health systems; elimination of discrimination of all kinds, whether based on race, religion, social origin, or gender, were also put forward in the program as well as a call for a new and independent foreign policy.

As we have mentioned above, the demands of ELN have remained remarkably consistent over the years. In recent documents of the organization the demands of the Simacota Manifest have been updated and supplemented with views and demands referring to reforms of the judicial system, a new legislative system based on popular participation, sustainable economic growth and human development, social welfare, environment, as well as improvement of the situation of indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples.<sup>21</sup> With respect to illegal drugs and drug trafficking recent ELN documents confirm ELN's categorical demarcation (*deslinde categórico*) and rejection of participation in drug trafficking:

The Fourth National Congress of ELN (July 2006) confirms the policy of demarcation concerning drug trafficking. We are not, nor have we been, involved with routes, laboratories, trafficking, money laundering. In the context of the tax policy of ELN applied with respect to all economic sectors of the country, in areas where crops for illicit use exist we continue limiting ourselves to receiving taxes established in agreement with the cultivating communities, and parts of these taxes are still used for social development. We will continue to promote regulation policies regarding cultivation of crops for illicit use, which translate into norms for social coexistence, promotion of communitarian organization, the development of an alternative base of production and the curbing of environmental contamination.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, ELN's policy on cultivation of illicit crops, drug trafficking and integral alternative development solutions is highly reminiscent of the alternative development policies put forward by the European Union and the United Nations. In addition, some innovative ideas are suggested, such as introduction of international subsidies to small-scale producers instead of indiscriminate aerial fumigation.<sup>23</sup>

During its first years ELN followed the Cuban political and military conception of revolutionary struggle prioritizing guerrilla struggle in rural areas. ELN characterized itself as a politico-military organization, i.e., neither a party nor an irregular army. In the course of the 1960s ELN activities were geographically focused on the Middle Magdalena region and included the establishment of urban support networks, momentary seizures of smaller towns or villages, freeing prisoners from jails, bank robberies and dissemination of revolutionary propaganda throughout the country.

In 1966, Camilo Torres Restrepo, a Catholic priest and sociologist from a prominent Colombian family, joined ELN. During the years before joining the guerrilla Camilo had studied sociology at Louvain University in Belgium, where he came in contact with the Priest-Worker Movement of France and Belgium, and went to Paris for a period to work with Abbé Pierre. He also entered into contact and collaborated with the Algerian independence movement. Back in Colombia Camilo Torres co-founded, with Orlando Fals Borda, the Sociology Department of the National University in Bogotá<sup>24</sup> and came in contact with the political discussion of the Cuban revolution. Many of the students were admirers of the Cuban experience, some had visited Cuba, and a few would later be part of the embryo ELN.

Camilo Torres had earned national fame as a political leader of the United Front (*Frente Unido*), a broad left-wing and popular movement opposing the National Front government of the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties. The confrontation with the National Front and the Colombian ruling class led to increasing political radicalization and diminishing faith in the possibilities of reformist political work on Camilo's part. His visibility as a political leader of a radical mass movement in opposition to the government also made him fear for his life and contributed to his decision to join the guerrilla. The main reason, however, was his conviction as a Christian that the revolution was necessary as a means of bringing "effective love" to the neighbor, the poor. This is the moral imperative that has also persuaded other Catholic priests and laymen with an experience of society similar to Camilo's to join the armed struggle, and it has left a deep mark on ELN's ideological and political orientation. The message, as formulated by Camilo Torres, is as follows:

What is essential in *Catholicism* is love of neighbor. "He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Rom.13, 8). For this love to be real it must seek to be effective. If kindness, alms, the few free schools, the few housing plans, so-called "charity," does not feed the majority of the hungry, or clothe the majority of the naked, or teach the majority of the uneducated, we must seek effective means for achieving the well-being of the majorities.... It is necessary then, to take the power from the privileged minority to give it to the poor majority. This, if done quickly, is the essential element of a revolution. The Revolution can be peaceful if the minorities put up no violent resistance. The Revolution is the means of obtaining a government that will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, teach the uneducated, perform works of charity, love their neighbors not only in a transitory and occasional way. For this reason, the Revolution is not only permissible but obligatory for Christians who see in it the one effective and complete way to create love for all.<sup>25</sup>

Barely four months after joining ELN Camilo Torres was killed in a confrontation with an army patrol in Patio Cemento, Santander. Even so, he has remained an extremely important symbol of resistance and struggle for social justice over the years, for ELN and beyond. Camilo Torres became an important example for numerous young priests and religious Colombians sympathetic to Catholic liberation theology, many of whom subsequently opted for the armed struggle and joined the ranks of ELN. Among them were the Spanish priests José Antonio Jiménez Comín and Domingo Laín, who both died in combat in 1970 and 1974 respectively. Another Spanish priest, Manuel Pérez Martínez, also joined ELN and became one of its most important leaders for many years.

The important influences from liberation theology explain the recurrent emphasis in ELN on idealist, moral, and ethical motives for the armed struggle against what is perceived as social injustices and greed on the part of the dominant classes. This moral dimension is clearly visible in the political discourse of the organization<sup>26</sup> and obviously contributes to the shaping of a more nuanced and complex picture of rebel motives than the simplistic conceptions offered by the neoclassical analysts referred to above. Furthermore, looked at from a European viewpoint, the programs and demands of the Colombian insurgent movements do not appear markedly more radical than early versions of programs and demands put forward by European social democratic parties.

During the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s ELN was considered at least as effective as and more active than FARC and EPL (*Ejército Popular de Liberación*),<sup>27</sup> Colombia's two other main guerrilla organizations at the time. In the early 1970s, however, ELN's military and political capacity was reduced by the counterinsurgency campaign launched by the Colombian Army. In June 1973, a column of ELN troops was surrounded and the two leaders Manuel and Antonio Vázquez Castaño were killed in combat together with twenty-eight ELN guerrilla combatants as a result of an encirclement operation in the Anorí area in the southeast of the department of Antioquia. The Colombian Army claimed, after the Anorí operation, that ELN had been virtually destroyed as a political and military organization.

Although the Colombian military dealt a serious blow to ELN in Anorí, among other things severing the links to its urban networks, ELN managed – to the surprise of the military and many political observers – to survive and recoup its strength in the course of the following years. From 1975 onwards ELN carried out several high-profile guerrilla operations, particularly in Antioquia, including the killing in an urban operation of the

Inspector-General of the Army, José Ramón Rincón Quiñones, who had played an important role in the counterinsurgency operations against ELN.

The ELN of the 1970s was affected by internal ideological, political, and leadership crises as well as by a marked predominance of military aspects and actions over political. Internal ideological and other contradictions were often resolved by force rather than debate and discussion. This quite dogmatic and militarist orientation also entailed ELN's assuming a critical and closed position with regard to the ongoing struggle of the legal sectors of the Colombian left and labor movement and isolating itself from their "reformist" actions.

From the mid-1970s and early 1980s, internal ELN debate led to the modification of its initial political and military strategy based on its interpretation of the Cuban rural *foco* conception of guerrilla struggle and political action. A key issue referred to the emphasis placed up to then on military activity and aspects at the expense of the development of political work as an integral part of the guerrilla struggle. One of the early proponents of a reorientation was Manuel Vázquez Castaño, the commander killed in combat in Anorí, who had stressed the importance of strengthening the education and capacity of militants and the rank and file, as well as the links between urban and rural sectors.

As a result of this internal debate a process of decentralization of command and actions was carried out and more importance was given to parallel political organization and work in urban areas. In the mid-1980s the so-called war fronts, *Frentes de Guerra* (Northeastern, Northwestern, Northern, Central and Southwestern), were established and ELN's efforts to strengthen its political work and orientation were also reflected in the creation of the civil "political front" *Unión Camilista*, UCELN.

During the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s ELN extended its presence and influence from the traditional Middle Magdalena area and eastern Antioquia to Arauca and parts of Norte de Santander, Cauca, Nariño, and areas of the Atlantic coast, and attempted to launch a military offensive at the end of the 1980s. At this time ELN had formulated three political objectives for the work in its core area of Middle Magdalena:

- Defense of the right to life and respect for the civil population situated in the areas of armed conflict in observance of treaties and international humanitarian law;
- Defense of national sovereignty interpreted as the "defense" of the petroleum resources and of Ecopetrol;<sup>28</sup>

- Constructing Popular Power, promoting all autonomous forms of organization of the masses, and developing accountability mechanisms for the municipal administrations.<sup>29</sup>

One of ELN's most important experiences in attempting to build a political mass movement and conduct political work was the civic strike (*paro cívico*) in 1988 in northeast Colombia (departments of Arauca, Cesar, Norte de Santander, and Santander). Here all of ELN's regional fronts supported the preparatory work of "A *Luchar*," an organization close to ELN that participated directly in the organization of the strike. The strike was a real example of mass mobilization, and ELN dedicated a huge effort to mobilizing and preparing the participation of thousands of peasants in the remote areas of the departments involved. The strike took place on May 7-14 and more than 120,000 peasants from different parts of the departments participated, marching toward the departmental capitals Bucaramanga and Cúcuta. Access to the capitals was ultimately blocked by the army, but the strike demonstrated ELN's considerable capacity to mobilize the peasants. The peasant marches of May were the most important expression of mass social action supported by ELN. The participating peasant organizations, however, would afterwards suffer the violent consequences of the paramilitary offensive led by Carlos Castaño in the year 2000, and at that time ELN was unable to protect them.<sup>30</sup>

Soon after the strike the interests of the participants started to diverge. While one current within ELN wanted to promote an insurreccional development, the leaders of the strike movement, some of them ELN militants, preferred to emphasize demands for rural poverty reduction and improvement of public services. These differences of opinion and political tactics would result a few years later in the split from ELN of the *Corriente de Renovación Socialista* current,<sup>31</sup> which after peace negotiations signed a peace agreement in 1994 with the government of César Gaviria.<sup>32</sup>

As a consequence of ELN's military offensive at the end of the 1980s the organization lost an important number of combatants in confrontations with the army and was obliged to reconsider its strategy, returning to military operations and organization based on smaller groups. The attempt to create a legal political movement (*Unión Camilista*) associated with ELN proved largely unsuccessful as well.

Since the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, ELN has been forced to confront a strong offensive of paramilitary forces (generally in coordination with the police and the military) in historically core areas such as southern Bolívar and eastern Antioquia. ELN still remains in

control of important rural sectors in these regions, but paramilitary groups have taken control of urban areas and infrastructure.

One of the main reasons behind the paramilitary offensive in southern Bolívar was the importance of this area for coca cultivation and coca paste production, and the fact that illicit drug production and trafficking is one of the main sources of financing for the paramilitary forces and operations. Because of their military and political control of key urban areas and infrastructure, the paramilitaries, predominantly the Central Bolívar Bloc (*Bloque Central Bolívar*) and its successors, are at present in control of the major part of the drug trafficking in this subregion.

Already during its Second National Congress in 1999 ELN assumed a position of categorical rejection of any involvement in illicit crop cultivation, drug processing, and trafficking. This stance was based on economic, political, social, and moral arguments, considering, among other things, that the illegal drug economy has contributed to increasing corruption, impunity, and the emergence and strengthening of a “narcobourgeoisie” that has captured powerful positions at the regional and national levels.

In the rural areas, according to ELN, the illicit drug economy has brought about land concentration, increased violence, growth of paramilitarism, and forced displacement of large groups of peasants. Moreover, the illicit drug economy dissolves traditional communitarian peasant values and makes organization more difficult for the groups hit by the crisis in the agrarian sector. Solution of the illicit drug problem, according to ELN, requires cooperation between producer and consumer countries as well as implementation of integral and ambitious substitution programs for illicit crops.

It is likely that ELN’s rejection of involvement in the drug trade is part of the explanation for why this organization has not succeeded so far in consolidating its military power and self-sufficient operative capacity to the same extent as FARC, Colombia’s largest and strongest guerrilla movement. Currently, estimates of the number of ELN combatants fluctuate between 3,000 and 5,000. Yet it is important to note with regard to numbers that the lower estimations include only the number of combatant guns, while the guerrilla organization as a whole also comprises the support network, the *milicianos* (combatants armed with small arms), and other sympathizers working for the benefit of the organization. According to some observers, the number of ELN *milicianos* is approximately equivalent to the number of combatants. This means that the total number of the ELN force, according to this estimation, would be about 10,000 men and women.<sup>33</sup>

## V. EARLIER PEACE NEGOTIATION EFFORTS – DEMILITARIZATION AND NATIONAL CONVENTION

During the years 1999-2001 a dialogue parallel to that between the FARC and the Pastrana government was going on between the government and the ELN. The objective of these talks was to reach an agreement that would allow reinsertion and legalization of the ELN as a political movement.

In a manner similar to the tentative conversations conducted in late 2005 and the beginning of 2006, the outlined proposal had been preceded by a series of meetings with international facilitation or mediation, inside and outside Colombia (the Viana Pre-agreement 1997, the Mainz Agreement 1997, meetings in Geneva 2001, and the Agreement for Colombia in Havana, Cuba, December 2001).

To start real peace negotiations, ELN demanded the establishment of a demilitarized zone (*zona de encuentro*) in the southern part of the department of Bolívar, where negotiations were to take place. This zone would constitute the space required for the National Convention through which negotiations would be carried out. The participants in the convention would be the Colombian government, ELN, and representatives and organizations of Colombian civil society. At the beginning of the dialogue the area demanded by ELN comprised 7,600 km<sup>2</sup> of the municipalities of Santa Rosa, Simití, San Pablo, and Morales. By the end of the dialogue, however, the area originally demanded by ELN had been reduced to a considerably smaller zone within the municipalities of San Pablo and Cantagallo.<sup>34</sup>

The convention was to discuss five key problem areas, namely:

- international humanitarian law, human rights, impunity, justice, insurgency, and conflict;
- natural resources and energy policy;
- democracy, the state, the armed forces, and corruption;
- economy and social problems;
- culture and identity, nation, region, territorial reorganization, the agrarian problem, and drug trafficking.

Once a consensus had been achieved on diagnosis and possible solutions of these problem areas it would also be possible, according to ELN, to reach a National Agreement by which the mechanisms of social transformation in the desired direction could be identified. The National Agreement would thus convene a National Constituent Assembly and

define its objectives, its participants, its preparation, and the forms of citizen participation in the Assembly.

Subsequently, the task of the Assembly would be to develop a new Constitution oriented by the diagnosis, the problem solutions, and the forms of transformation identified in the National Agreement.<sup>35</sup> It is worth mentioning in this context that the particular ELN conception of the peace process and the National Agreement was inspired by and constitutes a legacy of Camilo Torres and his *Frente Unido* movement, maintained and passed on within ELN by leaders with a religious background such as Domingo Laín, Manuel Pérez, and Francisco Galán. It is also worth noting that similar national convention and constitutional assembly processes, but in an entirely reformist and parliamentary context, have been carried out in Venezuela and are underway in Ecuador. These two are neighbor countries of Colombia. In a referendum in Ecuador on April 15, 2007, 81.7 percent of the voters supported the proposal of the newly elected Rafael Correa government to convene a Constituent Assembly.<sup>36</sup>

The existence of the first Peace and Development Programme in the Middle Magdalena region, the ongoing dialogue between the Colombian government and ELN, and the possibility that the National Convention outlined in the dialogue might be located in the southern Bolívar area constituted important factors when the European Union decided to establish the first Peace Laboratory in the Middle Magdalena region.<sup>37</sup>

The principal objective of the development cooperation of the European Union in Colombia is to support the Colombians and their government in their efforts to achieve peace. Concretely, the EU supports a negotiated political solution of the internal conflict attacking its root causes (marginalization, inequality, social exclusion, and extreme poverty) and offers humanitarian assistance to the victims of the conflict.

The role assigned by the European Commission to this cooperation is that of an instrument aimed at facilitating already existing dynamics in Colombian civil society, i.e., to enhance, strengthen, and systematize experiences initiated by the citizens and to facilitate their articulation with governmental peace initiatives and the armed groups involved in the internal conflict. Accordingly, the regional context and the peace dialogue with ELN offered an excellent opportunity to realize the European Commission's aspiration to support a negotiated solution of the internal conflict.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, the experiences, lessons, and capacity already acquired by the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Programme in its earlier phases contributed to making Middle Magdalena a strategic region for peace processes in Colombia and allowed the European counterpart to

initiate a peace and development effort that complemented and strengthened a process that was already underway. Also of interest to the EU was the intention to examine, in the abovementioned Convention, the drug trafficking problem in order to initiate a program of voluntary eradication of illicit coca crops and social investments to promote alternative development projects.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to the more bilateral and exclusive negotiations that were going on at the same time between the Pastrana government and FARC in the much larger demilitarized zone in Caguán, southern Colombia, the National Convention project of ELN involved more “organic” and active participation of many categories of citizen or civil society groups that had traditionally been largely excluded from political influence.

The contrast stands out as even more glaring when the ELN peace negotiation approach is compared to the demobilization process of the paramilitary groups involving exclusively the government and the greater part of the AUC paramilitary leaders,<sup>40</sup> which has been distinguished by a high degree of ambiguity, improvisation, and lack of transparency concerning commitments, methods, and intended outcomes.<sup>41</sup>

Strong forces and interests were opposed to the peace process and the initiation of the National Convention in the southern Bolívar territory. The progress of a National Convention and the potential implementation of coca eradication and alternative development projects, for example, would have implied far-reaching consequences for the inhabitants of the subregion where the whole local economy was penetrated in one way or another by the expanding coca economy. All of the municipalities that were to be included in the demilitarized zone had come to depend increasingly on the rapidly growing drug economy. According to the government of the department of Bolívar, the seven municipalities of southern Bolívar produced 15 tons of coca paste (*base de coca*) per year at the time, while unofficial data sources estimated the production at 34 or 35 tons per year.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately, the peace process of the Pastrana government and ELN was finally frustrated. On the one hand, the government gave priority to the ongoing peace negotiations with FARC, believing that after reaching an agreement with FARC it would be relatively easy to subdue or defeat ELN militarily. On the other hand, the demilitarized zone and the National Convention met strong opposition and intense counter-mobilization from local politicians and elites (cattle ranchers, transport entrepreneurs, middle- and large-scale coca growers, etc.) inspired and supported by the AUC paramilitary groups and indirectly supported by entrepreneurs and politicians from other municipalities in the Middle Magdalena region.<sup>43</sup> In consequence, there are good reasons to be cautious about the prospects of

the ongoing dialogue between the Uribe government and ELN, particularly with respect to the challenging but potentially promising National Convention project.

## VI. EXPLORATORY TALKS ON OBJECTIVES AND MECHANISMS FOR PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

On September 12, 2005, ELN commander Antonio Galán was temporarily released from the high-security prison in Itagüí, where he had served thirteen years of a more than twenty-year prison sentence, to represent ELN in exploratory talks with the government about conditions and mechanisms for formal peace negotiations between the government and ELN. As part of the preparation for future meetings in Havana, Francisco Galán met with the five-member commission of Colombian facilitators of the preliminary talks.<sup>44</sup>

The commission promoted the creation of the meeting place Casa de Paz in San Cristóbal, Medellín, to facilitate a consultation process between ELN and sectors of Colombian society as well as the contacts between Galán and Luis Carlos Restrepo, high peace commissioner of the Colombian government. A broad range of social, political, and religious organizations and institutions participated in the consultations, which were concluded with a document on the results of this phase prepared by the commission of facilitators. Exploratory talks abroad mediated by international facilitators were suggested in the document.<sup>45</sup>

Such a formal exploratory meeting was held on December 16-22 in Havana with representatives of the Colombian government headed by High Peace Commissioner Restrepo and ELN represented by Antonio García, Francisco Galán, and Ramiro Vargas. Diplomats from Switzerland, Norway, and Spain, countries that were facilitating the preliminary process, observed the talks. The meetings were held with an open agenda and with an ambition to reach a commitment to continuing the process. Among the key issues initially explored in Cuba were conditions and a verification mechanism for a ceasefire, and the establishment of an agenda and a framework for peace talks.

To guide the talks forward, the commission suggested as a point of departure for the parties the earlier proposal put forward on June 4 and 14, 2004, by ELN's Central Command (Comando Central, COCE) and the August 3, 2004, proposal of the government. The June proposals comprised suggestions regarding a humanitarian agreement linked to bilateral ceasefire, restrictions on the use of landmines, release of prisoners, and brought to completion through a National Convention. The August 3 proposal of the government involved an initial cessation of hostilities on

the part of ELN complemented by reciprocal cessation of military hostilities on the part of the government. These measures would be complemented with humanitarian actions such as joint removal of landmines in ELN areas, release of victims of kidnapping, and judicial benefits for imprisoned ELN members. After consolidating the cessation of hostilities phase, a National Convention would be convened.

As a result of the formal exploratory meeting in Havana the government and ELN agreed that a new meeting between Antonio García and Luis Carlos Restrepo should take place again in Havana, with the purpose of establishing an agenda for negotiations. Such a meeting was initiated on February 17, 2006, with the participation of García, Galán, Restrepo, the Colombian ambassador to Cuba, the Norwegian, Spanish, and Swiss ambassadors, and representatives of Colombian civil society.<sup>46</sup> To date, the government and ELN have conducted five rounds of negotiations in Havana and initiated a sixth round in April 2007. Some progress was achieved during this latter meeting, when ELN negotiators for the first time accepted talking about cessation of hostilities and the Colombian government accepted a “temporal and experimental” cessation of hostilities.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, this is but a small step forward. Evident differences persist with respect to concentration of ELN forces during cessation of hostilities and how verification of cessation should be carried out. According to ELN commander and negotiator Pablo Beltrán, it would be “suicide” to concentrate ELN forces in only one area, because this would involve ELN’s losing contact with its regional networks and would also expose the concentrated forces to acts of aggression from paramilitary groups. The most significant and profound difference between ELN and the government, however, relates to the political dimension.

The government proposes a conventional disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration agenda without political content. Uribe refuses to discuss political issues with illegal armed groups, while ELN has an agenda for negotiations which definitely puts forward a series of political issues for negotiation.<sup>48</sup> This is a contradiction that will be much more difficult to resolve than the technical issues and mechanisms of concentration and verification of cessation of hostilities. So there is still a long way to go.

## VII. THE PROSPECTS OF THE CURRENT PEACE TALKS

It is said in Colombia that President Uribe’s “democratic security” policy has extended security “as far as asphalted roads reach,” but still no end to the internal armed conflict is in sight. Proportionally large

investments have been made in strengthening and increasing the capacity of the armed forces, and a significant part of these resources have been spent on U.S. “advisers,” consultant mercenaries, and war equipment. This substantial military spending has contributed considerably to an increasing fiscal deficit that sooner or later may restrict the government’s ability to increase or maintain the current spending and military offensive. According to some observers, the tactical retreat of the insurgent groups, particularly FARC, may come to an end when the economic restrictions on the government’s military spending grow more acute.

Meanwhile, the Colombian indicators of poverty and land concentration have continued to linger, for a long time, at appallingly high levels. The gains in poverty reduction achieved in the 1980s and the early 1990s were wiped out by the economic crisis and recession after 1996, which brought the proportion of poor back to its 1988 level, after a previous decline of 20 percentage points between 1978 and 1995 (see table 1).

**Table 1- Poverty Indicators (%), National, Urban, and Rural Colombia 1978–1999<sup>49</sup>**

	1978	1988	1995	1999
<i>National</i>				
Poverty rate	80	65	60	64
Extreme Poverty rate	46	29	21	23
US 2\$ per day poverty*	33	19	13	16
Mean income per capita ♦	112	183	216	210
<i>Urban</i>				
Poverty rate	70	55	48	55
Extreme Poverty rate	27	17	10	14
US 2\$ per day poverty*	34	5	3	5
<i>Rural</i>				
Poverty rate	94	80	79	79
Extreme Poverty rate	68	48	37	37
US 2\$ per day poverty*	59	38	29	30

\* Based on Purchasing Power Parity Converters from *World Development Indicators* database.

♦ Thousand 1999 pesos, based on monthly household income.

It should be stressed in this context that poverty estimations and measurements here are based on official data that, according to critics, in

some cases tends to underestimate the incidence of poverty for political reasons (see box 1).

**Box 1 - Statistics as a Political Tool**

- Dane, *Departamento Administrativo de Estadísticas*, calculated the 2003 poverty rate at 66 percent, a figure that caused political discontentment. After modification of calculation methods and criteria by the Ministry of Social Protection, the poverty rate for the same year was established at 50.7 percent. Currently, according to the modified criteria it is 49.2 percent.
- The director of the National Planning Department, DNP, recently declared that the fiscal deficit which has been projected to reach 5.1 percent of the GDP in 2006, should in fact only amount to 3.8 percent since the higher figure for the first time includes the pensions of the ISS (Institute of Social Security) system. The Controller of the Public Finances, Luis H. Barreto does not agree with this view. He is concerned about the credibility of the fiscal accounting that in his view should not be managed, as currently, by the Ministry of Treasury due to the strong incentives tempting this Ministry to use creative bookkeeping.
- In 2003 the Ministry of Commerce informed that 80.5 million people had joined the “tourist caravans” (organized by the government to offer safe transport to tourist sites). The figure was based, however, on multiplying by four, each car toll fee paid, without considering that for one single travel route a car is likely to pay several toll fees.
- In 2004 and 2003 five studies were conducted on the impact of the labour reform with respect to creation of employment. Four of these studies – by Cide, Universidad de los Andes, ACOPI, *Asociación Colombiana de Pequeña y Mediana Industria* and Universidad Externado – demonstrated that very few enterprises created more employment as a consequence of the reform. The fifth study, conducted by the Ministry of Social Protection, found that 64 percent of the enterprises said that they had created more employment due to the reform.
- Calculating the number of kidnappings the Ministry of Defence now excludes the formerly included “simple kidnappings” (e.g. separated parents “kidnapping” their children from their former spouses or partners). This change obviously improved the figures on reduction of kidnappings.
- While the unemployment rate tends to decline, the underemployment rate is on the rise and the National Planning Department, DNP, explains this by referring to measurement problems. DNP argues that the underemployment variable includes all those persons that consider themselves underpaid and that, therefore, even the director of DNP says he belongs to this particular category.

*Source:* El Tiempo, February 11, 2006, Álvaro Uribe convirtió el manejo de las estadísticas en una de sus herramientas de gobierno.

According to the calculations of the Poverty Mission (*Misión de Pobreza*) of the National Planning Department, DNP, at the beginning of the 1990s the percentage of people below the poverty line was 53.8, while in 2004 it was 52.6, demonstrating a clearly stagnant trend in poverty reduction.<sup>50</sup> Another key characteristic of the Colombian economy is a high degree of inequality, which also affects poverty and poverty reduction. Between 1993 and 1997, according to the DNP, the Gini coefficient moved from 0.51 to 0.56, meaning that the poorest 20 percent of the population

received only 2.6 percent of the national income, while the richest 20 percent received 40 percent.<sup>51</sup>

Domestic inequality within countries has been growing for the last few decades, and Colombia is an extreme case. According to a recent study by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, UNRISD, rising income disparities mean that higher economic growth rates are necessary to reduce poverty and that lower inequality leads to better growth performance. International consensus that globalization and liberalization policies have contributed to increased inequality is sufficient enough, according to the UNRISD report, to support policies that would reduce inequality. Moreover, rising income disparities contribute to social and political tensions.<sup>52</sup>

To determine the poverty reduction effects of economic growth and the incidence of inequality, the concepts of pro-poor and no-poor growth have been used. Pro-poor growth and the achievement of poverty reduction effects require that the poor receive a proportionally higher share of the benefits of economic growth than not-poor groups. It is also well known that the rate of inequality is an important determinant of the results, in terms of poverty reduction effects, of economic growth and thus has to be taken into account.

Núñez and Espinoza<sup>53</sup> analyzed the effects of economic growth<sup>54</sup> on poverty reduction during the 1997-2004 period and found that only in 2000 and 2004 did the poor receive a proportionally higher share of the benefits of economic growth than not-poor groups. For the rest of the period, economic growth was no-poor, causing increasing poverty and inequality.<sup>55</sup> Had the effects of economic growth been only neutral, involving a lower level of inequality and equal benefits for the whole population, poverty would have been reduced by 10 percentage points during the last ten years, according to Núñez and Espinoza.

An additional aspect of inequality is that out of an economically active population of 20 million (with a total population of 43 million), only 740,000 Colombians pay income taxes. Evasion is widespread, and because land taxes are administered by municipal authorities they are virtually ignored by landowners, since local governments are normally either too weak to exert coercive power over local elite interests, or under pressure from illegal armed groups.<sup>56</sup>

Estimations by the DNP conclude that 49.2 percent of the Colombian population was below the poverty line during the last quarter of 2005 as compared to 52.7 percent the year before.<sup>57</sup> The Gini coefficient was estimated at 0.55. However, according to more recent information from the DNP based on a household survey in the thirteen largest cities, the real

income of workers dropped 10.6 percent in 2004 and 2005.<sup>58</sup> The most alarming data of the abovementioned DNP estimations referred to rural poverty, which during the same period had increased from 67.5 to 68.2 percent, thus surpassing the 1991 rural poverty level and highlighting the unequal development of the Colombian society.

Colombia's persistent and widespread rural poverty should not be surprising to anyone, given that in the year 2000 no more than 0.4 percent of the landowners owned 61.2 percent of the arable land, while 57.3 percent of the landowners were small-scale peasants owning just 1.7 percent of the land.<sup>59</sup> The government's agricultural policy focuses on the promotion of agro-industry and investments in animal husbandry and export crops like African oil-palm, rubber, and cocoa. Due to aggressive land grabbing by means of forced displacement on the part of paramilitaries-cum-drug traffickers and lack of redistributive agrarian policies on the part of the government, land concentration has accelerated rapidly in the course of the last few years since 2000.

At the beginning of his first presidential period, in 2002, Alvaro Uribe Vélez ventured to predict that he would defeat FARC in three years. Five years after the prediction, however, and despite large investments in strengthening and increasing the armed forces, no significant weakening of the military power of insurgent organizations, least of all FARC, seems to have occurred (see Box 2 on the next page).

The widely publicized original and main objective of the *Plan Patriota* military offensive, i.e., to get to, apprehend, or eliminate members of the FARC Secretariat or other high-ranking FARC commanders, has never materialized.<sup>60</sup> On the contrary, the many military operations carried out by FARC during the last few years in various parts of Colombia indicate that FARC may be gradually returning from a tactical retreat and that an intensification of FARC attacks cannot be ruled out in the course of what remains of Uribe's second presidential period.

The results of the government policy have been meager also concerning peace negotiations with FARC and ELN. With respect to FARC the government initially seemed to agree to FARC's demand for a downsized 180 km<sup>2</sup> demilitarized zone in Pradera, Valle del Cauca, for negotiating the humanitarian agreement and subsequent exchange of prisoners. The proposal was formulated through diplomatic mediation by a commission including France, Spain, and Switzerland, and consisted of an exchange of prisoners for hostages (*canje* or *intercambio humanitario*). Shortly after the presentation of the proposal, however, FARC withdrew, alleging that Uribe was using the commission for electoral purposes. FARC has persistently stressed the urgency of reaching an agreement on exchange

but has also maintained its demand for a demilitarized zone.<sup>61</sup> So far, the government has not been willing to meet FARC's conditions and an agreement seems therefore distant.

#### Box 2 - Major FARC attacks in 2005

- February 2, Iscuandé, Nariño, on the Pacific coast: attack by 100 FARC insurgents, 16 soldiers killed, 25 wounded.
- February 8, Mutatá, Antioquia: 1 officer, 19 soldiers and 11 insurgents killed in FARC attack.
- April 5, Tame, Arauca: FARC ambush on the road between Fortul and Tame, 18 military killed.
- April 14, Toribío, Cauca: 150 FARC insurgents besieged the small town for more than a week.
- June 25, Teteyé, Putumayo: 100 FARC insurgents attacked military post, 21 soldiers killed, 8 soldiers wounded.
- August 1, Atánquez, Cesar: FARC attack on police transport, 15 policemen killed.
- September 22, La Cruz, Nariño: FARC attack on police transport, 1 officer 1 non-commissioned officer and 7 policemen killed.
- October 2, Sipí, Chocó: FARC seizure of village, 6 police killed, 8 wounded, 48 prisoners (subsequently released).
- November 28, San José del Guaviare: FARC-established checkpoint, 22 civilians kidnapped.
- December 17, San Marino, Chocó: 300 FARC insurgents attacked police post, 8 policemen killed, 7 wounded, 28 captured.
- December 28, Vista Hermosa, Meta: 300 FARC Bloque Oriental insurgents attacked elite 12<sup>th</sup> Mobile Brigade, 29 military killed.

In addition to the above incidents a series of minor FARC attacks have taken place over the year in different parts of the country as well as "civic strikes" (*paros armados*) inspired by FARC, paralysing transports and public services in Norte de Santander and Putumayo. An 87.6 percent increase in blow-ups of energy transmission towers has also occurred. In the course of 2005 insurgent groups destroyed 227 energy transmission towers as compared to the 121 towers demolished in 2004.

*Sources:* Semana, Mapa Interactivo, Los ataques de las Farc, January 1, 2006, Nuevos retos para la seguridad democrática, and, Farc, lejos de la derrota, El Espectador, January 1, 2006, Anticipo violento del 2006, El Tiempo, December 19, 2005, Respuesta de las Farc (Atando cabos), El Tiempo, January 7, 2006, Atentados contra las torres de conducción eléctrica aumentaron en un 87, 6 por ciento durante 2005, El Tiempo, January 5, 2006. For more information, see, Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, Los Datos del Conflicto, [www.seguridadydemocracia.org/datosConflicto.asp](http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org/datosConflicto.asp).

To facilitate the start of exploratory talks with ELN, Uribe found himself obliged to modify somewhat his most outlandish standpoint, namely that "there is no internal armed conflict in Colombia," now admitting its existence. Uribe's minor peace talk concessions have been regarded by some observers as motivated by his need to gain international recognition and economic support for the implementation of the "Justice and Peace Law." In relation to ELN, however, the parties have still not

reached an agreement on the agenda and mechanisms for real peace negotiations.

Only the contentious and criticized disarmament and demobilization process with the paramilitary umbrella organization AUC has made some progress in terms of demobilized combatants, but critics and recent revelations indicate that AUC is rather allied than opposed to the government in its struggle against the principle adversary, i.e., the insurgent groups. Nonetheless, the “Justice and Peace Law” was passed in 2005 by Congress to serve as a framework for the disarmament of the AUC, despite strong criticism from the UN as well as international and Colombian human rights organizations.

Extradition to the U.S. for drug trafficking and crimes against humanity is what paramilitary leaders fear most, and it is well known that Uribe has as yet not extradited any paramilitary leader. Extradition has been a treatment exclusively reserved for some “pure” drug traffickers and for insurgents such as FARC’s Simón Trinidad and Sonia (Anayibe Rojas Valderrama). Thus, when paramilitary leaders and their political front men analyze past experience and forecast the future, they find good pragmatic reasons to support the president, and already during Uribe’s first presidential campaign some paramilitary leaders declared their preferences for him.

In the beginning of 2006 some influential politicians belonging to the Colombian establishment such as former presidents Alfonso López Michelsen and César Gaviria<sup>62</sup> publicly expressed their concern about paramilitary influences on the election process by means of open or tacit pressures in the nomination of candidates and preparation of lists for the past election campaign. Paramilitary political influence and ambitions have been well known and denounced in Colombia for quite some time. It was thus revealed over a year ago that tangible financial support from the paramilitaries, or people closely associated with the paramilitaries, entered Uribe’s first presidential campaign in 2002.<sup>63</sup> These circumstances constitute the background<sup>64</sup> of the ongoing debate on “parapolitics” and paramilitary links to Uribe and his second government.

Presently, more than thirty political leaders and congressmen, two governors, former director of the Colombian security services (DAS) Jorge Noguera and his information technology specialist Rafael García, all politically aligned with or appointed by President Uribe, have been arrested for links, conspiracy, and cooperation with the paramilitaries. Also a considerable number of former members of Congress, departmental and local government councils, former departmental deputies, mayors, and governors as well as public servants are being investigated or are under

warrants of arrest.<sup>65</sup> On April 17, 2007, opposition senator Gustavo Petro launched an anticipated debate in the Colombian Senate on the paramilitary expansion in the department of Antioquia that occurred during Álvaro Uribe's period as governor of the department. Various serious accusations were directed against Uribe. According to Petro, two of Uribe's farms in Antioquia had been used as bases for paramilitary operations and assassinations of supposed guerrilla supporters had taken place there on various occasions.

Petro also censured how various *Convivir*<sup>66</sup> authorized by Uribe had been transformed into outright paramilitary units led by well-known paramilitary leaders such as "Chepe" Barrera, "Monoleche," and "Julian Bolívar" without any reactions from him as governor. Other accusations referred to the relations of Uribe's brother Santiago with known drug traffickers and paramilitary leaders, and the appearance of a helicopter of the government of Antioquia in connection with a massacre committed by the paramilitaries.

As a consequence of this debate former U.S. vice president Al Gore cancelled a meeting in Miami where he was to be introduced by Uribe, and according to officials in Bogotá, Gore also called off a planned September visit to Colombia, Washington's closest ally in Latin America. The mounting scandal has also led U.S. Democrat representatives to block 55 million dollars in military aid to Plan Colombia.

This debate is likely to continue and increase in intensity during the remaining period of Uribe's second term. Many observers have argued for more than a year that the cleanup of paramilitary influences in the "Uribista" camp leaves a lot to be desired and has so far mainly affected convenient and less important scapegoats.<sup>67</sup>

For these reasons, the political setting, currently and for the immediate future, of the ELN peace talks is very complex, with many conceivable, open or concealed, motives and interests involved. It is also important to note that what has occurred so far are just preliminary, exploratory talks between the parties, and consultation with civil society representatives. The experiences of recent Colombian peace talks and negotiation processes demonstrate that there are good reasons to balance optimistic expectations of short-term progress with a large dose of caution.

## VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Uribe government's timidly increasing interest and activity with respect to peace talks and humanitarian agreements should be viewed in the light of the government's need to gain international political recognition for the AUC demobilization process and its legal framework, the "Peace and

Justice Law,” both of which have been strongly called into question. To be able to go forward with the paramilitary demobilization process and achieve real disarmament and reintegration, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the government to get international economic cooperation and support.

Mobilizing such international support will probably, and hopefully, also require that the government demonstrates its preparedness to take decided measures to dismantle those paramilitary political and economic structures which are not likely to be affected in any significant way by the ongoing demobilization process and the “Peace and Justice Law” in its current guise. In addition, and more important from the perspective of the Colombian government, the new Democratic majority in the U.S. Congress is demonstrating that Uribe probably cannot expect from the Democrats the special treatment he has enjoyed from President Bush. A key issue for the Colombian government is the passage in the U.S. Congress of the Free Trade Treaty (*Tratado de Libre Comercio, TLC*) between the U.S. and Colombia. However, at this point the future of the treaty is uncertain, since Democratic representatives have voiced grave concerns about the freedom and basic human rights of Colombian workers.<sup>68</sup>

Last year 72 union leaders and activists were murdered, making Colombia the world’s most dangerous country for labor unionists, and out of 2,100 murders of union members since 1991, there have been only 30 convictions. The recent disclosures about the role of the DAS intelligence service and its head, Jorge Noguera, in the murder of several labor unionists and in cooperating with paramilitary groups have caused indignation among Democrats on Capitol Hill and are seriously jeopardizing the conclusion of the Free Trade Treaty.

Thus far the “democratic security” policy of the Uribe government has consisted, above all, of military and repressive measures, too often involving violations of the democratic and human rights of some categories of Colombian citizens. A manifest bias toward military objectives and means at the expense of social and redistributive policies has been and continues to be evident. The disproportionate emphasis of the government on military means to resolve the conflict and the absence of a strategy and major initiatives to address, as government and upholder of the rule of law, structural inequalities, impunity, and social problems, have been pointed out by various international observers and analysts.<sup>69</sup>

The main contradictions or obstacles to peace negotiations and the historical core problem of Colombian society are unequal distribution of wealth and income along with exclusion of large categories of people. Most observers therefore agree on one obvious conclusion, namely that

Colombia urgently needs structural reform addressing inequality, poverty, and exclusion. Besides the moral and ethical imperatives, mainstream economic arguments can be advanced as well for such reforms, since one long-term result of the current widespread poverty and the prevailing distribution of wealth and income is the significantly reduced growth potential of the internal market, which in its turn curtails overall economic growth.<sup>70</sup>

In the context of peace negotiations, such structural economic, political, and social reform is also the key objective and demand of the insurgent groups ELN and FARC, while, to the degree that any ideological tenets are discernible in the case of AUC and other paramilitary groups, these seem to imply a tenacious defense of the existing condition and the distributive mechanisms prevailing in Colombia.

The Uribe government has not, as yet, shown any interest in structural reform or a fairer distribution of wealth and resources. Instead, land and capital concentration have accelerated without restrictions, and common-property lands of Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples are being encroached upon. The government's agricultural policy focuses on the promotion of agro-industry and it is indicative that initiatives such as the Peasant Reserve Zones (*Zonas de Reserva Campesina*), supported for ten years by the World Bank, intended to protect peasant production and offset increasing land concentration, never received support and finally were suspended by the government. Furthermore, there is no effective redistribution yet in sight of the lands expropriated (*extinción de dominio*) by the state from drug-traffickers and paramilitaries.

To initiate a credible peace process the government must recognize and broach in a serious fashion the structural reforms (not least land reform) which are an absolute prerequisite for sincere negotiations on the part of the insurgent groups and, in fact, also a prerequisite for sustainable peace and social development in Colombia. If the government and the Colombian establishment were sincere about peace negotiations, the way to demonstrate this would be to show preparedness to yield something in terms of redistribution and structural reform. As we have just seen, several such urgent reform projects would be easy to identify, and without such reforms or concessions no sustainable peace negotiation and peace process will be possible.

Nonetheless, there is no evidence, and it must be considered highly unlikely, that the present government would be prepared to assume this responsibility and compromise. Therefore, the prospects for genuine peace negotiations are gloomy for the remaining period of the present government. Concerning negotiations with FARC, progress is highly

improbable. Not even a “humanitarian agreement” seems feasible. On the contrary, escalation of FARC military operations is not unlikely.

Potential progress in the government’s exploratory peace talks with ELN remains to be seen. ELN’s National Convention project with broad citizen participation is undoubtedly an interesting proposal, but the refusal of the Uribe government to negotiate ELN’s political agenda, instead focusing only on demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration, raises doubts about the real intentions of the government. On the part of ELN the talks, in the absence of a political agenda, may constitute an opportunity to make some progress regarding the acceptance of ELN’s model for peace negotiations and the National Convention, but also for tactical retreat and recovery.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> June 1998 to February 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Revista Arcanos, Informe Especial (2007). See also Valencia, L. (2007).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sierra (2006).

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Molano Bravo (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Huertas (2007).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example Moore (1978); Wolf (1969); Paige (1975); not to mention the works of Eric Hobsbawm, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels.

<sup>9</sup> [www.worldbank.org/research/conflict/analytic.htm](http://www.worldbank.org/research/conflict/analytic.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Such as, e.g., maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences; all of which have met convincing objections in the literature. A basic distinction between the two approaches is that the neoclassical approach is based on methodological individualism while the other approach has more holistically oriented theoretical and methodological foundations.

<sup>11</sup> Polanyi (1944); Sen (1987).

<sup>12</sup> Bunge (1998: 17).

<sup>13</sup> Collier and Hoeffler (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Marx’s fundamental conceptualization and discussion of “base” and “superstructure” immediately comes to mind as an early example. In the analysis of Barrington Moore, Jr. (*Injustice*), the existence of economic resources is regarded as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of a rebellion.

<sup>15</sup> Collier and Hoeffler (2004: 3).

<sup>16</sup> Moore (1978: 440ff).

<sup>17</sup> FARC (2001); ELN, [www.eln-voces.com](http://www.eln-voces.com); ELN (2006a); Camacho Guizado (2002).

<sup>18</sup> Collier (1999).

<sup>19</sup> Camacho Guizado (2002: 138ff).

- <sup>20</sup> The Revolutionary Liberal Movement (*Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal*) MRL was a movement of dissidents from the traditional Liberal party led by Alfonso López Michelsen.
- <sup>21</sup> ELN (2006c); ELN (2006a); ELN (2006b).
- <sup>22</sup> ELN (2006c: 50). See also, Torres (2004: 139-144).
- <sup>23</sup> Fumigation has proved to be useless for crop-reduction purposes and causes incalculable environmental damage and human suffering. Despite large-scale aerial fumigation there was a 6,000-hectare increase in areas under coca cultivation in 2005 according to UNODC (2006).
- <sup>24</sup> Broderick and Torres (1975); Villanueva Martínez (1995).
- <sup>25</sup> Torres (1965) Message to the Christians, editorial published in *Frente Unido*, August 26, translated in Zeitlin (ed.) (1972:314-316).
- <sup>26</sup> Camacho Guizado (2002:142-143).
- <sup>27</sup> EPL emerged as a result of a Maoist secession from the Colombian Communist Party in the 1960s, inspired by the Chinese revolution and the conception of armed revolutionary struggle as being initiated in the countryside to expand and surround the cities. EPL abandoned its Maoist political line and agrarian conception of armed struggle in the 1980s, in favor of combined, armed-political and urban-rural, forms. Most of the EPL combatants abandoned the armed struggle on February 15, 1991, after a peace agreement with the government.
- <sup>28</sup> Empresa Colombiana de Petroleo, the oil company owned by the Colombian state.
- <sup>29</sup> Vargas Velásquez (1992).
- <sup>30</sup> La negociación del ELN, Especiales Online, Semana.com, Bogotá, 2006, [www.semana.com/wf\\_InfoSeccion.aspx?IdSec=25](http://www.semana.com/wf_InfoSeccion.aspx?IdSec=25). See also Zamosc (1990)
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., Semana.
- <sup>32</sup> Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris (2005).
- <sup>33</sup> Hechos del Callejón (2007).
- <sup>34</sup> The southern Bolívar subregion presents the most acute conditions of marginality and extreme poverty in the whole Middle Magdalena region, with 79 percent of the households suffering unsatisfied basic needs and 59 percent below the extreme poverty line.
- <sup>35</sup> Rodríguez, García, Beltrán, Vargas, and Santos - ELN, Comando Central (2000).
- <sup>36</sup> Diario Hoy (2007).
- <sup>37</sup> For more detailed information, see Rudqvist and van Sluys (2005).
- <sup>38</sup> Laboratorio de Paz en el Magdalena Medio (2002).
- <sup>39</sup> Fonseca, Gutiérrez, and Rudqvist (2005).
- <sup>40</sup> The OAS-MAPP Verification Mission of the Organization of American States has so far played an insignificant role in this process, serving mainly as window dressing.
- <sup>41</sup> See, for instance interview with Natalia Springer, *El Tiempo* (2005); Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2006); Corporación Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo (2006).
- <sup>42</sup> Gutiérrez Lemus (2004).
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>44</sup> Industrialist Moritz Akerman, the coordinator of the Colombian Campaign against Landmines Álvaro Jiménez, university vice rector Alejo Vargas, former high commissioner for peace Daniel García-Peña, and civil society representative Gustavo Ruíz.
- <sup>45</sup> Casa de Paz (2005).
- <sup>46</sup> El Tiempo, (2006b).
- <sup>47</sup> El Tiempo (2007).
- <sup>48</sup> Zuluaga Nieto (2007).
- <sup>49</sup> The table is based on data from The World Bank, Colombia Poverty Report, vol.1, March 2002, Washington D.C.
- <sup>50</sup> Núñez and González (2006).
- <sup>51</sup> In 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, the Gini coefficient was 0.545, 0.554, 0.517, and 0.536 respectively (ibid.). The Gini coefficient ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 denotes perfectly equal distribution and 1 entails extremely unequal distribution.
- <sup>52</sup> Culpeper (2005).
- <sup>53</sup> Núñez and Espinosa (2005).
- <sup>54</sup> Whether growth is pro-poor, favorably affecting the poor, or not-poor, favoring not-poor groups.
- <sup>55</sup> Núñez and Espinosa (2005).
- <sup>56</sup> Sweig (2003).
- <sup>57</sup> El Tiempo (2006d); Carrizosa (2006); Gaviria (2006). It should be underscored that the DNP data are the result of a preliminary estimation and therefore should be interpreted with caution and as an approximation.
- <sup>58</sup> El Tiempo (2006a); Sarmiento (2006: 2C).
- <sup>59</sup> Cuadernos Tierra y Justicia (2002).
- <sup>60</sup> The purpose, publicity, results, and human rights implications are clearly reminiscent of President Bush's "War on Terrorism" and his key objective and promise, to capture Usama bin Ladin.
- <sup>61</sup> Márquez (2006a); Márquez (2006b); Marulanda Vélez (2003).
- <sup>62</sup> El Tiempo (2006c).
- <sup>63</sup> El Espectador (2006a); El Espectador (2006b); Spitaletta (2006).
- <sup>64</sup> Caballero (2006a and b), El Espectador (2006c).
- <sup>65</sup> Corporación Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo (2007); Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (2006).
- <sup>66</sup> Private defense cooperatives collaborating with and supposedly controlled by army and police authorities. These organizations were promoted by Álvaro Uribe when he was governor of Antioquia.
- <sup>67</sup> Duzán (2006); Caballero (2006a); Revista Cambio (2006b); Revista Cambio (2006a).
- <sup>68</sup> Forero (2007:A09).
- <sup>69</sup> See, for instance, Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (2003); Christman, Heimann, and Sweig, (2004); Haugaard, Stanton, Walsh, and Voigt (2005); Isacson (2005).
- <sup>70</sup> See, for example, a recent World Bank report which says that Latin American countries need to fight poverty more aggressively if they want to grow more and compete with China

and other dynamic Asian economies, and asserts that while growth is key for poverty reduction, poverty itself is hampering the achievement of high and sustained growth rates in Latin America, which remains one of the most unequal regions in the world with close to one-fourth of the population living on less than US\$2.00 a day. (Perry, Arias, López, Maloney, and Servén, 2006). As we have seen above, in Colombia between 52.8 and 66 percent (depending on calculation criteria) are living on less than US\$2.00 a day.

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