

Andean Report by Javier Almario

Colombian 'peace talks' relaunched

Gaviria has plunged ahead into negotiations with narco-terrorists, but will the military put up with it?

Despite the widespread opposition of the Colombian population, business federations, and Armed Forces, the César Gaviria government has relaunched "peace dialogues" with FARC and ELN narco-guerrillas, with the objective of legalizing them as political parties.

After months of postponement, and after concluding that convulsed Venezuela was no longer an acceptable site for the negotiations, the "peace dialogues" were restarted in Tlaxcala, Mexico in early March. Yet before those negotiations were ever begun, the FARC and ELN were dramatically intensifying their terrorist attacks on energy and transportation infrastructure, to show the government that they were prepared to negotiate with "great strength and combat capacity."

There are currently more than 500 kidnap victims—mostly business executives and ranchers. Kidnaping, drug trafficking, and collecting "protection money" (known as *boleteo*) are these groups' primary means of subsistence. Indeed, there exists double taxation: on the one side, the taxes which farmers, industrialists, merchants, miners, and citizens must pay to the government, and on the other, those which these same people must pay to the narco-guerrillas to allow them to work in peace.

If the narco-guerrillas entered the negotiations at full strength, the Gaviria government entered at its weakest, having complied with all the conditions laid out by the FARC and ELN, and despite the fact that the sole demand of the government—that the

FARC and ELN suspend their terrorist operations and free kidnap victims—remains ignored. Further, Gaviria has agreed to turn the "dialogue" into a forum on economic and social policy with the same forces which, in combination with the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have helped to impoverish and bankrupt the country's most productive sectors with their terrorism and blackmail. Now, the FARC and ELN would use the Mexico talks to present themselves as the nation's defenders against the IMF.

While the government, confident in the defeat of communism around the world, believes the FARC and ELN will come to terms and surrender, it is clear that the narco-terrorists view the dialogue as just another propaganda outlet. The FARC is well aware that the more severely the austerity prescriptions of the IMF are imposed, the greater the discontent. According to FARC discussion papers in the hands of military intelligence, the FARC hopes to channel this discontent into a seizure of power this year.

The FARC has never disguised its intention. "We continue to maintain that armed struggle in Colombia is applicable," declared FARC chieftain Manuel Marulanda Vélez, in an interview with the Cuban news service Prensa Latina. The ELN, in a letter to its cadre, is equally explicit, explaining that the Mexican dialogue "marks one phase in the process of legitimizing Colombian insurgency."

The business federations of Antioquia department, one of the regions

most heavily affected by narco-terrorism, have expressed their opposition to the renewal of dialogue. "One cannot make the peace by talking and shooting at the same time, by extorting, kidnaping and promoting land invasions," they stated in a letter to the President on March 4, just before the Tlaxcala negotiations began. The national presidents of these federations also met with Gaviria and assured him that the most severe problem undermining economic activity was the insecurity caused by the government's eternal negotiations with narco-terrorism.

Discontent in the Armed Forces is similarly at unprecedented levels. Not only are their actions against narco-terrorism now impeded by the dialogue process, but any military action against these groups is severely investigated by the newly strengthened attorney general's office. The imposition of a civilian defense minister as part of the government's pact with the now-legalized M-19 narco-terrorists, remains a sore point with the active and retired military. According to *Cromos* magazine and the Communist Party's *Voz* newspaper, clandestine petitions and documents are circulating within military layers denouncing the "ridiculous talks" with the terrorists, "which are increasing their fighting power with the government's blessing." The documents condition the government's talks with the FARC/ELN on "not negotiating matters exclusive to government or congressional responsibility."

Enrique Santos Calderón, in his March 15 column in the daily *El Tiempo*, warned that this situation could lead to an attempted coup as in Venezuela. According to Santos, the military's feeling is that "we have a constitutional duty to defend a system we don't like, nor are we even allowed to defend it."