

PPWG Assessment – Colombia Peace Accords Implementation

Prepared for the Atrocity Early Warning Task Force

Conflict Background

The spread of Colombian Marxism in the 1960s, inspired by the Cuban Revolution, was a reaction to the government's indifference to economic inequality and hostility to political opposition. The insurgent groups known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) were born in 1964 as a direct result of these grievances.

Over the decades, the FARC-EP and ELN increasingly resorted to illicit activities to accumulate wealth and resources. By the early 2000s, the FARC-EP controlled about 60% of Colombia's cocaine production. These insurgents also committed terrorist acts, including car bombings, attacks against government officials and buildings, and mortar shellings — acts that rattled the Colombian government and society. Countless innocent civilians were killed or injured in these attacks.

To repel the insurgents and protect their own property, Colombian landowners and politicians allied themselves with right-wing paramilitary groups. These paramilitary groups were similarly ruthless in their pursuit of the FARC-EP, often killing many civilians in massacres and targeted killings. The national military also became involved, committing atrocities of their own. Between 2002 and 2010, for instance, in a gruesome public relations effort to make the military look effective at combating rebels, an estimated [10,000 civilians](#) were murdered, dressed in fatigues, and declared to have been insurgent fighters (what came to be known as the “false positives” scandal). The more recent [spying scandal](#) underlines that military abuses under the guise of counterterrorism continue to this day.

Colombia continues to lead the world in cocaine production. The U.S. invested over [\\$10 billion](#) in the U.S.-Colombia joint anti-narcotrafficking and counterinsurgency strategy known as Plan Colombia from 2000 to 2016. Yet cocaine production proved difficult to sustainably reduce. A key intended goal of peace is to empower rural communities with the resources necessary to deliver legitimate goods to market—if it is well implemented.

An estimated 260,000 civilians were killed and more than 8 million displaced over the course of the 52-year-long conflict. This half century of misery was finally promised to end in 2016, when President Juan Manuel Santos signed a historic peace accord with the FARC-EP. The accords have led to progress on several fronts, including the official disbanding of the FARC-EP. However, not all insurgent groups were included in the negotiation of these accords, and the government has failed to implement key portions of them — inactions that could lead to a return of mass violence. As a result, despite the hope inspired by the signing of the peace agreement, the situation today remains dire for Colombian civilians. If peace in Colombia continues to crumble, countless innocent lives will again be threatened by insurgents, paramilitary successor groups, and the military.

Current Situational Assessment

Sixteen Action Plans for Regional Transformation have been planned since 2016 (as part of the Development Plans with a Territorial Focus, known as the PDET process). However, critical provisions,

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including widespread implementation of these plans, remain unrealized¹. The commitments to rural reforms (such as instituting crop substitution rather than reverting to crop eradication and aerial spraying policies of decades past), provisions related to indigenous and Afro-Colombians (specified in the ethnic chapter), and gender provisions remain largely unimplemented. These failures have led some ex-combatants to regroup and begin rearming against the government although the vast majority remain demobilized. It should be noted, however, that in places where rural reforms are being implemented, crop substitution seems to be stemming the tide of coca exports.

In previous years, the Duque administration has slashed funding for peace accord implementation. Members of the international community and Colombian civil society organizations have urged the Duque administration to fully fund the transitional justice system.

COVID-19 highlights a long history of inadequate support for Colombia's marginalized communities. According to a recent [report](#) by the Human Rights Watch, communities along the Colombia-Venezuela border (such as the [Wayuu people of La Guajira](#)) had inadequate health-care resources long before the outbreak of COVID-19. At least 300,000 people—60 percent of whom are minorities—have been internally displaced since 2017. Many of them have fled to cities where social distancing and lockdowns have become much harder to enforce over time.

COVID-19 has severely limited the work of humanitarian organizations. Many communities rely on NGOs in the absence of government institutions. With [142,430 active coronavirus cases](#) reported in Colombia (as of August 3), the Colombian economy will continue to suffer beyond 2020.

Venezuela's conflict impacts peace in Colombia. By late 2018, Colombia saw an influx of over 1 million Venezuelan economic and political migrants. Funding for the 770,000 Venezuelan migrants who qualify for government assistance is estimated to have cost more than [\\$1.5 billion in 2019](#). If the political stalemate between current President Maduro and Opposition Leader Guaidó (who is contesting the presidency) continues, USAID projects that the number of Venezuelans outside the country will likely rise to [7 million](#) by the end of 2020. Colombia will continue to be the host country for most Venezuelan refugees due to its 1,378-mile shared border. This crisis has further strained Colombia's peace process by providing new areas of safe refuge for FARC-EP dissidents hiding from the Colombian military and for illicit actors using pathways between the two countries to smuggle goods. Successful implementation of the peace accords will help Colombia maintain its critical role in providing refuge to Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

Human rights abuses persist in Colombia. Over 500 human rights activists have been killed in Colombia over the last four years. Additionally, in 2019, Colombia led the world in the numbers of [environmental and land rights defenders killed](#). Many advocates worry that nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns will continue to make human rights activists [targets for illicit actors](#).

Colombia remains one of the [most dangerous countries in the Western Hemisphere for journalists](#). Reporters are regularly targeted with violence and intimidation.

¹ Kroc Institute for international peace studies. 2020. State of Implementation of the Colombian Final Accord. December 2018 to November 2019. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: <http://peaceaccords.nd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/June-24-2020-Updated-Executive-Summary-Fourth-Report.pdf>

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Human rights abuses have increased against Venezuelan migrants as well. Between 2017 and 2019, 1,783 migrants were murdered. Between January and April 2020, an average of [two Venezuelan migrants were killed](#) per day in Colombia.

Atrocity Risk Factors

- **Fighting and mass internal displacement continue.** Despite striking peace with the FARC, the ELN and narcotrafficking groups remain in conflict with the Colombian government. In 2019, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported that [25,000 Colombians](#) were subjected to mass displacement and about [27,700 were confined by conflict](#).
- **COVID-19 restrictions are emboldening armed groups** in communities where government presence is weak. The pandemic has created environments where armed groups have further inserted themselves as *de facto* authorities. Many of these groups have instituted curfews punishable by death if not obeyed.
- **Thousands of FARC ex-combatants have given up on reintegration due to “broken promises” related to rural reform, security guarantees, and addressing economic inequality.** The presence of disgruntled and disaffected armed groups creates a high risk of future violence.
- **There is ongoing impunity for paramilitary successor groups and military actors involved in past atrocities.** The recent [spying scandal](#) (where military actors illegally monitored foreign and domestic journalists, human rights defenders, and potential military whistleblowers) underlines the ongoing abuses by the military under the guise of combatting guerrilla insurgents. There is a continued lack of political will from the Colombian government to fully dismantle paramilitary successor groups and bring military officials involved in past atrocities to justice.

Recommendations

Despite all these challenges, Colombia's peace is still within reach. However, peace won't come to fruition if [the United States and the international community remain idle while peace efforts continue to crumble — failures that will have consequences far beyond the borders of Colombia](#). If narcotraffickers and armed groups continue operating with impunity, internal and external displacement, economic hardship, and social unrest — in a region hard-hit by COVID-19 — will increase, raising the specter of renewed conflict.

- For the State Department
 - **The United States must prioritize the full implementation of the Colombian peace accords and pressure the Colombian government to fully fund all aspects of it.**
 - **Foreign Service Officers should meet regularly with civil society representatives**, including human rights activists, Afro-Colombian and indigenous leaders, women's groups, and local farmers — to respond to the ever-changing situation.
 - **The United States should encourage the Colombian government to take more effective steps to dismantle paramilitary successor groups.** Paramilitary groups have historically been responsible for about [80%](#) of the civilian deaths in the war, and continue to threaten ex-combatants and human rights defenders.
 - **U.S. policy toward Colombia must remain focused on advancing the peace accords while avoiding being narrowed to only focus on Venezuela or anti-narcotrafficking policy.**
 - **The U.S. Mission should pressure the Colombian government to build upon the month-long ceasefire with the ELN negotiated in April 2020.** The goodwill shown by the temporary ceasefire should be built upon into further peace negotiations with the ELN.

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- For USAID
 - **International COVID-19 aid and aid for Venezuelan refugees should complement — not replace — existing funding for the peace accord.** COVID-19 assistance can be implemented in a conflict-sensitive way to support peacebuilding efforts.
- For Congress
 - **Congress should provide military assistance to Colombia only if the following conditions are met:** human rights violations by Colombian security forces are effectively investigated and prosecuted, paramilitary successor groups are dismantled, human rights activists and ex-combatants are protected, and the rights and territories of Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups are respected.