

Colombian peace talks resume in Cuba as conflict rages
By Marc Frank
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(Reuters) - The Colombian government and leftist FARC rebels resumed peace negotiations in Havana on Sunday after a recess of more than two weeks, during which 19 soldiers and a number of rebels were killed and rural protests left four farmers dead and several police injured.

More than 200,000 people have died and millions have been displaced in fighting since the FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, was founded in 1964 as a communist agrarian reform movement.

The talks, which began in November, recess every few weeks, then resume, even as the longest, and last, armed conflict in Latin America rages on.

"Many Colombians do not understand why we are in a dialogue when attacks by armed groups continue," Colombian former vice president and lead government negotiator, Humberto de la Calle, said before the new round of talks began.

Patience with the FARC, considered a terrorist group by the United States and the European Union, has deteriorated in recent weeks after an escalation of violence that culminated last weekend in the death of 19 soldiers and the announcement that the guerrillas had kidnapped U.S. citizen Kevin Scott Sutay in June and now wanted to free him.

Fifteen of the soldiers were ambushed by the FARC as they protected an oil pipeline under [construction](#) and four others were attacked in the south of the country

Reading from a prepared statement, de la Calle said the government of President Juan Manuel Santos had announced when they began in November that there would be no ceasefire until an agreement was reached.

"These conversations, as President Santos pointed out this week, are taking place in the middle of conflict. There is no ceasefire," he said.

In May, after six months of negotiations facilitated by [Cuba](#) and [Norway](#), the two sides reached an historic agreement on agricultural reform that calls for developing rural areas and providing land to the people living there.

LAND OWNERSHIP

FARC negotiator Andres Paris said ongoing clashes between farmers and the government in the Andean nation's volatile northeast called into question the latter's sincerity over agrarian reform.

"It is worthless to talk in Havana of limiting land ownership, stopping foreign ownership, of a policy that favors the poor and national sovereignty, if the government turns what it has agreed to into empty words," Paris said.

Impoverished farmers in Catatumbo have blocked roads and clashed with police in the past month to protest against the government's regular fumigation of illegal coca crops - the raw material that makes cocaine - the only means of subsistence for many Colombians.

The protesters want to be able to farm coca without government hindrance, as well as substantial increases in spending on roads, health, education and job creation. Santos has sought dialogue with the protesters but things fell apart in the last few weeks when they refused to lift their roadblocks.

Police said the rebels are behind the protests and have fomented the unrest, but the farmers deny that.

The confrontations have resulted in the deaths of four protesters and injuries to dozens of people, including police officers who were maimed by explosives.

The FARC is strong in Catatumbo, an area that borders [Venezuela](#) and where the state oil company, Ecopetrol, has operations.

The FARC and the government are discussing the second item on their six-point agenda: turning the rebels from insurgents into political participants.

Other unresolved issues include the drug trade, compensation for victims and implementation of any final accord.

Santos initiated the peace talks last year in the belief that the FARC had been so weakened by the government's 10-year, U.S.-backed offensive that its leaders were ready to end the fighting.

Three previous peace efforts have failed. The rebels have been pushed into far corners of the country, but they still have an estimated 8,000 fighters and regularly attack oil and mining operations vital to Colombia's economic growth.

(Reporting by Marc Frank; editing by Christopher Wilson)

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