

Colombian government violates peace talks agreement
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The Colombian government's negotiating position that was revealed at last week's press conference in Oslo, Norway appears to violate the peace talks agreement reached recently in Havana, Cuba.

At the Oslo press conference, lead negotiator Humberto de la Calle declared that country's economic model is a topic that is non-negotiable in the peace talks. But isn't rural economic development the first of the six agreed-upon topics to be negotiated? Therefore, the economy is clearly negotiable according to the agreement signed in Havana by both the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In particular, the country's economic dependence on the extraction of natural resources (oil, coal, gold, etc.), which has hugely impacted rural communities and land ownership in the countryside, is one of the core issues that must be addressed with regard to creating a strategy for rural economic development.

Interestingly, most analysts failed to respond to the government's refusal to negotiate Colombia's capitalist economic model (responsible for the country's massive inequalities) in the same aggressive manner that they criticized the FARC for stating its negotiating position that Colombia's economy needed to be restructured in order to achieve peace. Curiously, given that rural economic policy is the first issue on the negotiating agenda, these analysts claimed that it was the FARC and not the government that was renegeing on the Havana agreement. In actuality, the economy has always been the primary issue in negotiations between the FARC and the government.

It was the government's refusal to negotiate the neoliberal economic model that prevented any progress being made on the first of the twelve negotiating points in the El Caguan peace process (1998-2002). President Andres Pastrana terminated that peace process because the FARC refused to agree to a ceasefire and the guerrillas continued military operations outside the safe haven where talks were being held. But in actuality, the talks had long been stalled on the economic question.

Similarly, the government's refusal to negotiate the economic model also stalemated the exploratory talks held in Venezuela and Mexico (1991-1992). One of Colombia's best known journalists at the time, Alfredo Molano, noted that the major impasse was the unwillingness of the government to negotiate the neoliberal economic model. According to Molano, the guerrillas "succeeded in placing a debate about the neoliberal model on the agenda, and the government's economic team came to the negotiations to justify the Washington Consensus of free trade and privatization."

The fact that the government has taken the same approach in the current negotiations is not surprising given the make-up of its negotiating team. Among the government's negotiators is Luis Carlos Villegas, president of Colombia's largest business association (ANDI), making the country's business community the only civil society sector represented in the government's negotiating team. Undoubtedly, this will result in the interests of the country's economic elites being over-represented on the government side of the table.

The glaring absence of members of indigenous, environmental, development, women's, Afro-Colombian and peasant organizations, many of which are also critical of the neoliberal economic model, raises serious questions about the government's commitment to effectively addressing issues related to social and economic justice. The government's neglect of these sectors of civil society is particularly disturbing given the fact that Colombia's neoliberal policies, despite achieving impressive economic growth, have

resulted in the country being one of the few Latin American nations to experience an increase in inequality over the past decade.

Additionally, the presence on the government's negotiating team of former National Police director Oscar Naranjo and former Armed Forces chief Jorge Enrique Mora will likely further hinder any possibility of seriously addressing the neoliberal model and social justice issues. More than \$8 billion in U.S. aid has allowed the Colombian military to secure resource-rich rural regions for foreign investors—a process that has forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of peasants. This rural “cleansing” along with neoliberal economic reforms has created favorable conditions for foreign investors, with more than 80 percent of foreign investment in Colombia over the past decade occurring in the oil and mining sectors.

During the past eighteen months the government has implemented some moderate reforms including the Victims and Land Restitution Law, which seeks to distribute land to peasants forcibly displaced by violence, and the Legal Framework for Peace Law, which allows for the possibility of amnesties or virtual amnesties for FARC leaders not guilty of crimes against humanity. But more than a year after the Restitution Law's passage there has been virtually no land turned over to displaced Colombians and human rights groups have been critical of potential amnesties for guerrillas responsible for human rights violations.

Nevertheless, the Santos government appears to be entering the talks believing that these reforms sufficiently address most of the points on the agenda, including the first point: rural development policy. Consequently, it appears that the government will simply seek to negotiate the logistics related to the demobilization of the guerrillas—as it has done in previous peace processes.

Ultimately, if a peace agreement fails to effectively address the root causes of Colombia's conflict—poverty and gross inequality, particularly in the countryside—then the country will likely experience a continuation of violence even if the FARC demobilizes. After all, peace accords in the 1990s that led to the demobilization of guerrilla groups in Central America, and also the M-19 in Colombia, failed to address the social inequalities and injustices that lay at the root of those conflicts. As a result, the legacy of the Central American peace accords consists of poverty, inequality and rampant gang and criminal violence. In essence, politically-motivated violence has been replaced by criminal violence marked by anarchic tendencies that is perpetrated by individuals and gangs, many of which are involved in drug trafficking.

Currently in Colombia, demobilized paramilitaries and guerrillas lose their government benefits three years after laying down their weapons. But many of them, despite Colombia's economic growth under neoliberalism, are unable to find jobs. According to Luis Fernando Martinez, who works with the demobilization program, “Because they cannot find work and have difficulty adapting to urban life, many of the demobilized are turning to crime or joining emergent criminal gangs.” The increases in violent crime in Colombia's cities in recent years suggest that the shifting nature of violence evident in Central America following those peace accords may already be occurring in Colombia.

So unless the government is willing to discuss the rural economic model as it agreed to do in the Havana agreement, which means addressing the predominance of resource extraction, there is little reason to believe that a peace agreement can be reached. And if one were signed without addressing the economic question, then the end of the armed conflict will likely not mean an end to violence. Sadly, unless a peace agreement results in far-reaching structural changes that address Colombia's gross social and economic inequalities, particularly in the countryside, then the violence in one form or another will likely continue deep into the 21st century.

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