

COLOMBIA

HOLDING THE KEY TO PEACE

Peace talks are underway to end the armed conflict in Colombia, but peace will require more than the signing of an agreement between the government and FARC. Something fundamental must change within Colombian society.

BY: Lisbet Jære and Alfredo Durante (photo) in Colombia

OSLO, 18 OCTOBER 2012:

Ten serious-looking men take their seats around a table. They represent counterparts in one of the world's longest-running armed conflicts. The men with the stiffest collars and ties represent the Colombian government; the other five are representatives of The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC. The meeting has been carefully planned; security is tight, the location a carefully kept secret.

Apparently the two parties to the conflict have both come to realise that there is no military solution to the almost 5-decade-long civil war in Colombia, and are prepared to negotiate peace. In the course of the last 50 years, armed groups have killed several hundred thousand people in Colombia, between 4 and 5.4 million Colombians have been internally displaced, and half a million live as refugees abroad. Initially, this was a "Cold War" conflict between right-wing and left-wing groups. The conflict has, however, changed character over the years.

SOACHA, COLOMBIA, 18 OCTOBER 2012:

As the delegations sit down to talks in Oslo, a white car works its way up a steep and muddy hill towards a slum area in Soacha, south of the Colombian capital, Bogota. It is early morning, and the car radio is buzzing with live updates from the negotiations in Oslo. As we listen to Iván Márquez, the FARC delegation leader, make a rhetorical speech about poverty, imperialism, and fair distribution, we see children in ragged clothes and scruffy dogs running around between dilapidated sheds.

In Soacha, Eldemira Niaza Lucas, an Indian woman, has agreed to show us her home in this slum outside Bogota. Her husband is too proud to take part in the expedition and refuses to ride in the car with the rest of us. "A farmer with no land has more than enough time to walk," he says. Eldemira and her husband are illiterate and unaware of the on-going peace talks. When I ask them if they believe a peace agreement can



KEY TO PEACE. President Juan Manuel Santos has taken important steps towards reaching a peace agreement with FARC. However, a lasting peace will require that the president is willing to open up Colombia's traditionally elitist political system and involve civil society, human rights activists, and victims' organisations in the peace process and political debate without them risking harassment and death.



Facts Colombia



POPULATION: 45.3 million

AREA: 1,138,910 sq km

REFUGEES FROM COLOMBIA:
Approximately 500,000

INTERNALLY DISPLACED:
Between 4 and 5.4 million

TALKING TO THE ENEMY. Two members of the FARC delegation attending the press conference held just outside Oslo, Norway at the launch of the formal peace talks between the guerrilla organisation and the Colombian government on 18 October 2012.



be reached, they eye me with a puzzled look. However, they light up when reminiscing about their farm animals and the foodstuffs they used to grow on their farm situated a 13-hour walk off the beaten track in one of Colombia's rural provinces. In 2009, they were forced to leave their home at gunpoint by a group of armed men in civilian clothing. Eldemira clearly recalls that black day: "They told us: 'You have half an hour to leave the farm, or we will kill you. But there are many places to go; it is a huge world out there'."

Now they live in one of Soacha's poor neighbourhoods, which is predominantly populated by people displaced by the armed conflict. The slum is controlled by criminal gangs, so the people living here, though no longer in the direct line of fire, are far from safe.

PEACE TALKS

Ever since he came into power in August 2010, President Santos has claimed that he has "the key to peace" in his pocket. Un-

der his rule; the government has, for the first time, explicitly acknowledged that Colombia is embroiled in an armed conflict between the government and the FARC guerrilla. In September of this year, after more than a year of informal talks, the government and FARC publicly announced an agenda for formal peace negotiations. The Oslo meeting launched the formal talks that will now continue on Cuba. The parties have promised not to leave the negotiating table until a deal has been brokered (see fact box).

In the past, Colombia has experienced several failed peace talks, followed by an escalation of violence. Despite this dismal track-record, polls show that three quarters of Colombians support the ongoing talks.

"Colombians are tired of war and want peace. The only ones opposed to the negotiations, are groups on the far-right with ties to former President Uribe. These groups include powerful landowners," explains researcher Christian Voelkel from the International Crisis Group.

Nonetheless, many Colombians still question the intentions of the negotiating parties. Many believe that FARC is not committed to peace, but has only conceded to talks because they have suffered serious military setbacks, and lost much of their former legitimacy. In the 1980s FARC became involved in drug trafficking and, as a result, their image as a champion of the poor has been severely tarnished. Others believe President Santos is not primarily motivated by peace as such, but that he sees peace a prerequisite for transforming Colombia into a neo-liberal economy that will attract international investors.

THE ROOT CAUSES

At the heart of the conflict is the unfair distribution of land. Latin America is the region in the world where there is the greatest inequality and Colombia is one of the countries in the region where there is the greatest difference between the majority and the rich elites.

The armed conflict broke out

in 1964. Strong radical winds were sweeping through Latin America. The US, concerned that its back yard stood in danger of being lost to communist control, established alliances with right-wing forces all over the region.

In several Latin American countries, guerrilla groups emerged, aspiring to defend the rights of impoverished peasants, demanding land reform and political change. In Colombia the two most important guerrilla groups that came into existence, The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and The National Liberation Army (ELN).

While most of the other civil wars that erupted across the region during this period found their solutions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the war in Colombia continued. According to Voelkel one reason may be the lack of and weak public institutions in rural areas.

"In addition to the unequal distribution of wealth, the absence of state institutions in the provinces may explain why the conflict has lasted this long. Resulting from the lack of other alternatives, the population easily fall into the arms of guerrillas or paramilitary groups that take on the state's functions," Voelkel explains.

'WAR ON TERROR'

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US in 2001, changed the course of the Colombian civil war. Previously, there had existed a broad consensus that the conflict had deep historical roots, but in the aftermath of 9/11, President Uribe - a close ally of the US - rebranded the domestic conflict as part of the 'international war on terror'. FARC was labelled a terrorist organisation, or "drug terrorists". Through Plan Colombia, Washington allocated enormous sums of money to support Uribe's campaign against "narcotics and terrorist". Within a short period of time, the Colombian government was able to double its military budget.

As a result of the US-backed military offensive, FARC was reduced from 30,000 to 9,000 men and women under arms. The main sufferers, however, were the civilian population. Under President Uribe, two



A TOWN POPULATED BY THE DISPLACED. An indigenous family standing outside their home in Soacha. The slum areas in this town, not far from the capital, Bogota, are largely populated by people displaced by the conflict.

and a half million Colombians - an overwhelming majority of them living in rural areas - were forced to flee their homes. Plan Colombia has been subject to much criticism from human rights organisations for contributing to an increased number of civilian deaths, human rights violations and displacements.

Despite improving relations between FARC and the government, the humanitarian crisis continues to deepen. According to a report published by a number of humanitarian organisations in Colombia, between 2010 and 2011, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) increased by 7.1 per cent. Colombia has the largest internally displaced population in the world, and the large number of IDPs is the most visible and serious consequence of the conflict. 94 per cent of IDPs are poor, and 77 per cent live in extreme poverty.

WILLING TO FORGIVE

On the Sunday prior to the Oslo talks, several organisations representing victims of FARC gathered at Plaza Bolivar, in front of the presidential palace, in Bogota. Many of them carried a poster showing the face of

a family member either kidnapped or killed by FARC. One woman held up a poster reading: We want peace, but what about «los desaparecidos»? ("the disappeared").

One of the key organisers of the rally, Clara Rojas, was herself kidnapped by FARC in 2002, along with former senator and presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt. Ms Rojas was released six years later, following negotiations, in which among others, the Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez, played a key role.

Colombians are tired of war and want peace. The only ones opposed to the negotiations, are groups on the far-right with ties to former President Uribe.

CHRISTIAN VOELKEL, International Crisis Group

"Within civil society there is great readiness to embrace peace, and also to forgive, but for that to happen, FARC needs to put all cards on the table and admit to human rights abuses," says Rojas.

So far, however, FARC has been reluctant to admit to any form of abuse against civilians or involvement in the trafficking of drugs. FARC has also been criticised for using non-conventional weapons - such as gas cylinders filled with metal splinters - and for using anti-personnel mines. Colombia is second only to Afghanistan when it comes to the number of mines used on its territory, and many of the mines are locally produced and difficult to disarm.

THE PARAMILITARIES

Maria Vicotira Uribe, a social anthropologist, has studied the Colombian armed conflict for three decades, and she describes it as 'chronic'. Another word used to characterise the conflict is "comfortably deadlocked". After decades of violence, various groupings have found ways to adapt to, and even profit from, the conflict. Across the country, guerrillas, paramilitary forces, criminals, and the army have entered into secret agreements to secure, among other things, control over land, and drug-trafficking routes.

Ms Uribe has no sympathy for FARC, but is still adamant that the far-right represents a much larger threat.

"On the far-right you find some alarming constellations consisting of powerful land owners, politicians, and members of the military, and they exercise a strong grip on society," she says

The paramilitary groups are right-wing armed units that emerged in the 1990s, dedicated to defeating FARC and protecting the interests of a right-wing elite. Under President Uribe, the government in 2003, signed an accord to demobilise the groups. However, although many lay down their arms, many of the former paramilitaries formed new armed organisations that in practise operate in the same manner as the paramilitary units. The Colombian government does not acknowledge that they are in armed conflict with these groups and, technically, combating them is a police matter. These successor groups are responsible for many of the human rights abuses carried out against civilians in Colombia.

120 Members of Congress have been indicted on suspicion of having links with Colombia's illegal, paramilitary forces, according to Human Rights Watch, many are also associated with former President

Uribe. So far, 40 of these have been found guilty of the charges brought against them.

While the conflict may dominate the political agenda in Bogota, the capital bears few visible signs of a military conflict. The actual war is being fought out in Colombia's rural areas; the border provinces bearing the brunt of the fighting.

"SECOND-RATE" COLOMBIA

It is early morning at the airport in Tumaco, a city on the Pacific Coast, close to the border with Ecuador. There are almost no passenger planes in sight, but several small planes used for the aerial spraying of chemicals are parked on the tarmac. Colombia is among the two top coca producers in the world, and nowhere in Colombia is there grown more coca than in the Tumaco region.

The aerial spraying of coca plants with glyphosate is part of the "war on drugs", and is a remnant from Plan Colombia. Unfortunately, glyphosate does not only kill the coca plant. The pesticide also eradicates all other crops grown by the local farmers. Besides threatening food security, glyphosate is also described as highly damaging to health and it is far from uncommon for people to be showered by a dose of the chemical as the planes fly over.

Tumaco municipality has a population of 170,000. 95 per cent of the population are afrocolombians, 64 per cent are poor and a quarter live in extreme poverty. 37 per cent are illiterate. The town has a vibrant street life, but heavily armed security forces are present everywhere we go; a chilling reminder that there is a war in progress.

Nowhere in Colombia have more people been forced to flee from their homes than here in Tumaco. The situation is extremely volatile, and several people were murdered during the few days we spent there.



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CLARA ROJAS, who was held in captivity by FARC for six years between 2002 and 2008.



THE DISAPPEARED. On the eve of the Oslo peace talks, a rally took place in central Bogota, organised by victims of FARC's guerrilla warfare. This woman is holding a photo of a dead family member.

"This is second-rate Colombia. We have no public institution, such as schools or hospitals, only the army, guerrilla, and criminal groups, all fighting for control - at the expense of the civilians. We afrocolombians feel discriminated against," says Miguel Angulo, a leader of an organisation for the internally displaced. "Tumaco is divided by invisible borders separating different criminal groups. As a result, people are being displaced within Tumaco, forced to move from one part of town to another," says Angulo.

IN THE CROSSFIRE

In Canunapi, a 40 minute drive from Tumaco, Gustavo Nastacuos and his family squeeze together in the small space they share with another family. On our way here, we passed an endless row of military control-points, and a school that had just been bombed. One and a half month ago, the Nastacuos' and 40 other families were caught in the crossfire between government forces and FARC, and had to escape from their mountain villages to Caunapi, where they have found refuge with friends and relatives.

"We indigenous people, we are going to die. We have no food, no house, nothing," says Nastacuos.

Many of the families belong to the indigenous group Awa. The

Awas living at the foot of the Andes Mountains in Nariño have, for years, been forced to share their territory with FARC, ELN and other armed groups. The population are hopelessly trapped, forced to take sides in the conflict, and the subsequently punished by the other groupings for helping their enemies. In 2009, 12 Awa Indians were massacred by FARC. Half of these were children.

Since nine o'clock in the morning of this Sunday, the families have been gathered in a circle discussing whether or not to return to their villages.

"The problem started when the army arrived. They settled right next to our school, ignoring that it is illegal. Then FARC attacked, and we found ourselves in the crossfire. The army uses us as human shields," says Miguel Ángel Páez, the governor of the Awa villages.

In this area there is extensive coca production. The governor, however, says that the conflict in Colombia no longer revolves around the growing of coca. "The state wants to drive us away, so that the land - which we have nurtured for so long - can be used for mining."

Both the legal and illegal mining industry is expanding and illegal mining has been dubbed "the new drug trafficking". Mining is now believed to account for 20 per cent of FARC's revenue.

Facts

The Peace Agenda

1. LAND REFORM AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Important issues:

- Redistribution of land
- Access and use of farm land
- Building infrastructure in rural areas
- Social development
- Improving profitability for small-holders and
- Food security

2. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Important issues:

- Political participation for FARC following a peace agreement
- Guarantees for the exercise of political opposition
- Measures to increase political participation

3. PROCESSES TO END THE CONFLICT

Important issues:

- A Ceasefire
- Disarmament and integration of FARC into civilian life

4. FINDING A SOLUTION TO PRODUCTION AND TRAFFICKING OF DRUGS

Important issues:

- Creating alternatives for coca farmers
- FARC admitting to involvement in production and trafficking

5. COMPENSATION FOR VICTIMS

Important issues:

- Implementing the Victims' Law
- Truth Commission



Facts

President Juan Manuel Santos

Born: 10 August 1951, Bogota, Colombia

President Santos belongs to one of Colombia's most influential families. His great uncle was President of Colombia from 1938 to 1942, and his cousin served as Vice President under former President Uribe. Until 2007, his family owned Colombia's largest newspaper, El Tiempo, and his father edited the paper for more than 50 years.

After having graduated from secondary school, Santos was educated at the Naval school of Cartagena, studied economics and business administration at Kansas University in the US, economic development at the London School of Economics and attended the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Before becoming President he has, among other things, held the positions of Minister for Foreign Trade, Minister for Finance and Public Credit, and served as Uribe's Minister of Defence from 2006 till 2009.

▶ THE MAN WITH A POCKETFUL OF PEACE

When travelling around Colombia it is impossible not to notice the vast divide between rural and central areas, and between the elite and the majority of the people. President Santos - the man with the key to peace in his pocket - is very much a product of the Colombian elite. Is it possible for a man of his stature to bridge the divides and bring the country together?

According to Juanita León, head of the analytical online magazine, *La Silla Vacía*, it is difficult to describe the president “in black or white.” Although she believes that Santos holds the key to peace, she is concerned that he and his administration are too far removed from ordinary people.

“Colombia is a geographically complicated land to govern, with high mountains, deep forests, and poor infrastructure. I am concerned that they might know Miami or London better than the realities in the provinces,” says León.

She is concerned that despite having many competent members, the Santos administration are all “cast in the same mould” - a well-educated urban elite, many with a background from a prestigious university in the US.

Leon believes that Colombia needs to progress from a view that politics basically equals fighting terrorists and increasing security - as professed under President Uribe - to a mindset where the state is responsible for actively advocating peace. “Santos has failed to communicate this to the people,” she says, and continues, “Santos has many good intentions and projects, but he lacks the ability to reach out to his people.”

VICTIMS' LAW

According to a report by the International Crisis Group, Santos is “more sensitive regarding the victims’ rights than his predecessors”. Victims’ law is designed to restate land to those who have been displaced and provide reparation to victims of human rights violations. The law came into force this year and according to the Colombian newspaper, *El Tiempo*, by October 110,000 people had received compensation in accordance with the law. Most crucial, however, is the question of how to restate stolen land back to the millions of internally displaced.

“This is the most important Colombian law in 15 years, and we are well under way with its implementation. Nonetheless, the law has its opponents, both to the right and left; from powerful land owners, corpora-



PERMEATED WITH CONFLICT. Protesters clash with police in Bogotá at a rally organised as part of the “Weak of Indignation”, initiated by civil society organisations to increase awareness of how civilian Colombians are affected by the war and to demand a role for civil society in the peace process, above; one of many military checkpoints in Tumaco, close to the border with Ecuador.

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MIGUEL ÁNGEL PÁEZ,
governor of the Awa villages.

tions, and the FARC guerrilla. Both illegal and legal factions have made money from driving people off their land,” says Guillermo Rivera Florez, Member of Congress for the Liberal Party. Congressman Forez represents Putumayo province, situated along the border to Ecuador.

He believes that the ongoing peace talks will be crowned with success.

“I am optimistic about the peace negotiations. Compared to the previous effort ten years ago, they have a far more specific and realistic agenda,” he says.

SIGNING AN AGREEMENT IS NOT ENOUGH

His sentiments are echoed by Vera Grabe, head of the organisation Observatory for Peace.

“I do not believe the government would announce peace talks if they were not quite confident of success. Colombians are noticeably more interested in peace than earlier,” she says.

She underlines, however, that peace cannot be accomplished simply by two parties signing a political agreement. Observatory for Peace has created an alternative education programme, Pacicultur, internally displaced persons with incomplete



“SECOND-RATE” COLOMBIA. Afro-Colombian children in Tumaco eagerly posing for the camera. Ninety-five per cent of Tumaco’s population are afro-Colombian and well over half the population live in poverty.

primary education.

Inside a garage in one of Tumaco’s poorer districts, we find a group of female students being taught a varied curriculum using the Pacicultur programme. The teacher, Jerson Betancourt, is talking about “passive” and “active” peace.

“Passive peace is the absence of armed conflict, but where tensions are still present, and individual rights and freedoms are still limited. Active peace, however, is constructed from the bottom-up, with an active state working to eliminate the underlying causes of war, such as discrimination, unjust distribution, and lack of education and health care,” he explains.

His students, most of whom are youth and internally displaced women, dream and hope for peace. However, if their lives are to change for the better, Santos must deliver much more than a peace agreement. ■



FARC. FARC soldiers on patrol. The FARC came into existence in 1966, as a result of a radical upsurge throughout Latin America. Unfair land distribution, social inequality, and non-existent or weak public institutions in rural areas and services have all contributed to keeping the armed conflict alive for more than five decades.

Perspective Facts

Timeline

- **1819:** Simon Bolivar defeats the Spanish in the battle of Boyaca and the independent Republic of Grand Colombia is established. The republic included present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela.
- **1899-1903:** “The War of a Thousand Days” – a civil war between the Liberal and Conservative party, that resulted in an estimated 120,000 deaths. War broke out because the liberals, dominated by coffee-plantation owners and import-export merchants, became increasingly desperate as a down-turn in international coffee prices was coupled by a dramatic fall in the value of pesos when the Conservative government’s tried to counteract falling revenues by issuing paper currency without backing. Shortly after the war, Panama gained its independence. Ecuador and Venezuela had already seceded.
- **1948-1957:** “La Violencia” – the Liberal and Conservative party embroil in yet another civil war. The parties predominantly fight for control over land in Colombia’s rural areas.
- **1958:** The Liberal and Conservative parties form a national front to put an end to the civil war. All other parties are banned.
- **1965:** The National Liberation Army (ELN) established. The ELN guerrilla group advocates Marxist ideology, influenced by Liberation Theology.
- **1966:** The Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is formed.
- **1978:** Colombian government starts campaign against drug trafficking
- **1982-1987:** The Colombian government engages in talks with ELN and FARC.
- **1986:** Paramilitary groups kill 3,000 UP-party members; the party had been formed by demobilised FARC soldiers and members of the communist party.
- **1991:** Colombia adopts a new constitution. Democracy is increased and mechanisms to protect human rights are established. Nevertheless, the constitution has failed to increase security for political opposition.
- **1998:** The government and FARC engage in a new round of peace talks. FARC are given an area of safe-haven in the south-east.
- **2000:** Plan Colombia introduced for the first time. Under this programme the US allocated vast sums of money to support Colombia’s war on drugs and terrorists. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the US substantially increased its support.
- **2002:** Peace talks collapse. Alvaro Uribe elected president. During his campaign he promises to take a tough stance against the guerrilla.
- **2006:** Uribe wins a second term
- **2010:** Juan Manuel Santos elected president
- **2011:** Victims’ Law approved. Former intelligence chief sentenced to 25 years in prison for collaborating with paramilitary death squads.
- **October 2012:** Formal peace talks launched between FARC and the government.

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COLOMBIA

OPENING THE DOOR TO PEACE

Since he came to power, Santos has taken significant steps towards improving the possibility of peace in Colombia. However, it still remains to be seen if the government is willing to take responsibility for solving some very deep-rooted problems ahead.

This spring, I wrote an article on the situation for Colombian refugees and IDPs titled “A Glimmer of Hope.” My careful optimism was based on two key factors: the government’s long overdue acknowledgment that there exists an armed conflict in Colombia, and the approval by congress in May 2011, of the Victims’ Law, in December 2011. The law gives one million internally displaced persons the right to have their land returned to them or receive compensation within ten years. However, there were and are other positive developments underway.

SANTOS’ REFORMS

The rhetoric coming from the presidential palace has changed character. President Uribe’s hell-bent style, determined on military victory, and proclaiming that every Colombian was “either for or against the government”, has been replaced by President Santos’ far less confronting approach.

Over the last couple of years, several paramilitary leaders have been arrested, and the Colombian media is increasingly reporting on the close relationship between the paramilitary structures and parts of the power apparatus. The extent of the collaboration has not been fully examined, but may involve factions of the army, Congress representatives, and members of the Uribe administration. Suspicion have even been voiced against the former president himself.

When one considers the enormous revenues the paramilitary groups receive from the coca trade, coupled with the widespread corruption in Colombia, this form of collaboration is hardly surprising.

Still, it is embarrassing as the Uribe administration received enormous sums of money from the US to combat so-called “drug terrorism”. Colombia’s elite has never before had its dirty secrets aired out in public, but now, President Santos has allowed at least some insight into high-level corruption.

Another positive development was how quickly and successfully Santos improved relations with neighbouring Venezuela and Ecuador. This is essential in order to prevent a regionalisation of the conflict, and improves the prospects of a negotiated solution.

THE NEGOTIATION AGENDA

The FARC guerrilla responded to the government’s positive signals by freeing hostages, and promising to stop the kidnappings. For the first time in years, the parties in the Colombian conflict are taking decisive and concrete action to build a platform for dialogue.

The Oslo talks confirmed that the government and FARC have accumulated enough resolve and trust to continue the negotiations. However, the statements given at the joint press conference clearly demonstrated the distance that still exists between them. A defined agenda for the talks has been set, and as the negotiations continue on Cuba the parties will discuss five key areas. The most crucial subject is land and agricultural reform. The other

four issues on the agenda are: political participation, how to end the conflict, drug trafficking, and the rights of the victims of the conflict.

LAND REFORM

The battle for control over land runs like an unbroken thread through modern Colombian history, and its roots go back much further than the start of the present conflict.

According to the 2011 Human Development Report, published by the UN’s Development Programme (UNDP), Colombia has one of

■ ■ **The Oslo talks confirmed that the government and FARC have accumulated enough resolve and trust to continue the negotiations.**

the world’s most unequal land-distribution patterns, a pattern that has been reinforced by the conflict. Data from the Colombian Institute of Science, IGAC, show that in 1984, 30 per cent of the land was in the hands of 0.4 per cent of the land owners. By 2001, 62 per cent of the land was controlled by 0.4 per cent of the landowners.

This is the backdrop for FARC’s demand for a radical redistribution of land. The government, on the other hand, defines land reform as the returning of land to those who have lost their property as a result of the conflict. The role of smallholders versus large-scale, commercial agriculture is also a key issue. The government has made it unequivocally clear that it is not willing to discuss its liberal economic policies as part of the peace talks; these are policies that have dominated Colombian politics for decades.

Hopefully, both parties will realise the



READY TO LAY DOWN ARMS. In response to the government’s readiness to negotiate, FARC has promised to terminate kidnappings. Yet after five decades of intense conflict, peace is not restored simply by the stroke of a pen.

importance of implementing the Victims’ Law. Returning land to the displaced may prove to be a first step towards creating an atmosphere conducive to discussing a more equal distribution of land. However, the process is very much in its infancy, and can only progress one step at a time.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY AND OPPOSITION

Through the peace process, FARC hopes to regain some of its political legitimacy, which they themselves have undermined by recruiting child soldiers and becoming involved in drug trafficking, kidnapping, and other criminal activities. Their military power has been significantly diminished, and they are increasingly ready to move into the legal, political sphere.

However, FARC will probably and, with good reason, seek strong guarantees on issues regarding the demobilisation of its soldiers and the exercise of legitimate political activity. During the peace talks in the 1980s demobilised FARC soldiers and members of the Colombian communist party formed a new political party, the Union Partiotica. In the course of the last few years of the 1980s, more than 3,000 members of the UP were killed by paramilitary death squads, without the state being willing to protect them.

So far civil society organisations and

movements have not been included in the peace process. While the participation of civil society - not least representatives for the internally displaced and refugee populations - is crucial for the legitimacy of the process, and for achieving peace, their involvement must come at a time when the climate offers a genuine opening for them to make their voices heard. Colombia is the world’s most dangerous country for union members, and political activists risk both harassment and death.

DISARMAMENT

Like FARC, the government seems to have concluded that peace is more advantageous to their interests than war. Nonetheless, a strategy for a military offensive, codenamed “Sword of Honour”, has been fully developed, ready to be implemented should negotiations break down. The government has also underlined that a ceasefire is out of the question, pointing to experiences from the last round of peace talks which took place between 1998 and 2002, when FARC used the territory it had been given as a safe-haven for military rearmament.

Another challenge is the armed groups in Colombia that are not currently engaged in the peace negotiations. It is vital that the second-largest guerrilla movement, ELN, is included; and they have indicated that they

are willing to become part of the talks. It is highly unclear, however, how the criminal, paramilitary factions can be dissolved. Securing the victims’ rights to have their land returned to them, or be awarded reparation for wrongs committed against them is a crucial part of the peace process. The paramilitary structures are still operating in several areas. Many occupy land that should rightfully be returned to displaced farmers. Guaranteeing IDPs safe return to these areas will pose a major challenge. The government must also see to it that IDPs receive the information and legal counselling they are entitled to in order to file claims in accordance with their rights. Victims also have the right to know the truth about what happened to their loved ones and that perpetrators (whether belonging to the paramilitaries, the FARC or the military) are brought to justice. Without truth and justice, it is difficult to envisage that a peace accord would be sustainable over time.

Finally there is the question of combating the production and trafficking of drugs. State-led projects to increase development and improve prosperity for smallholders are important, but ultimately Colombia’s options are limited. The drug industry is a global problem and there is only so much Colombia can do to impact on the industry as a whole. ■



SIMPLE SURROUNDINGS. Nine-year-old Claudia and 5-year-old Oscar, together with their parents, were recently evicted from their home by armed men. Now they live in Soacha. Despite the make-shift conditions they live in, they are glad to have escaped the constant threat from armed groups.



A WORLD AWAY. Just a few miles away from Claudia and Oscar, Maria and Gerald live a comfortable middle-class life in central Bogota. They too worry about the violence that had divided the country for so many decades, but live in a different world.

TWO WORLDS, ONE COUNTRY

Julieta and Alejandro live in a tarp-clothed shack. Maria Patricia and Gerald live in a redbrick apartment building in central Bogota. The two families live only a few miles apart, but in diametrically different worlds - they share a cautious hope for peace.

BY Lisbet Jære and Alfredo Durante (photo)

The hills surrounding Soacha, just south of the capital Bogota, has become home to many Colombians fleeing the armed conflict being fought out in Colombia's rural provinces. Driving up from Soacha, the conditions deteriorate; the road becomes progressively more potholed and difficult to navigate; the houses turn into shacks; the children's clothes increasingly more ragged.

The settlements, situated at the top of the hills, almost 3,000 metres above sea level, have a spectacular view of Bogota. The capital seems so close, and yet so far away. The sanitary conditions here are abysmal, and most homes lack floors or roofs to protect their inhabitants from the rain and cold. There are some 34,000 registered

internally displaced persons living in Soacha; the actual number is probably much higher. Most are farmers, striving to adapt to city life.

Julieta and Alejandro Rodriguez, arrived in Socha two months ago, together with their children, 9-year-old Claudia, and 5-year-old Oscar.

On a Sunday evening four months ago, a group of armed men appeared at the Rodriguez' door with the following message: Leave the house within three hours, or die.

"We do not know who they were. They were gunmen dressed in civilian clothing," Julieta says. Her husband nods in confirmation. Internally displaced persons are often reluctant to report which group forced them to flee, if it was FARC, parami-

litaries or criminals. In some cases, they genuinely do not know, but often they fear reprisals.

"What choice did we have but to go? We packed some clothes and tried to find transport. It took us two days to reach Bogota," Alejandro says. Luckily, Alejandro has relatives in Bogota who were able to accommodate them for a shorter period of time. After two months of sharing a tiny room with several others in central Bogota, they heard that there were affordable properties in Soacha, and decided to move there.

"How did you make a living in the village?"

"Well, what employs people is primarily la mata," explains Julieta. She and her husband Alejandro each earned 60,000 Colombian pesos, or 32 US dollars, a week,

working in the coca fields from six in the morning till four in the afternoon. "It simply was not a living wage. At times, there was not even any work. The worst periods came when the fields were aerial-sprayed with glyphosate in order to kill the coca plants," Julieta says.

The young couple are reserved and shy, yet enthusiastic about showing us their new home, some 100 metres off the main road. To reach the house, we have to walk down a steep footpath. Their home consists of two rooms, with walls of green tarpaulin. The roof is not rainproof admits Alejandro, so it gets pretty cold and uncomfortable on a rainy day. In a corner, the toilet is separated from the rest of the room by a tarpaulin. A light bulb hangs from an electric cable overhead.

MIDDLE CLASS BOGOTA

It is Saturday 34-year-old Maria Patricia Mesa and 32 year-old Gerald Bermudez stretch out on the sofa in their flat situated in the middle class district of Chapinero, Bogota. The redbrick apartment building so characteristic of this area resembles the architecture of any European city. Patricia is five months pregnant. They are getting ready for a trip to visit Gerald's parents and are trying to find the X-ray photos of the baby to show the soon-to-be grandparents.

Patricia teaches English at a private, bilingual high school. Gerald is a historian and journalist, and has just taken up a well-paid communications position in the municipality.

"Bogota is like a separate kingdom; here, we do not notice the war. Colombia has distinct class divisions, and if you are born into the upper middle class you are

guaranteed a comfortable life with a career that earns you enough money to afford to live well and travel," Patricia says.

A HARSH WAKE-UP CALL

Patricia herself grew up in a conservative, Catholic upper-middle class family. She attended a Catholic private school for girls run by nuns, before she started studying at one of Colombia's most prestigious private universities, La Universidad de los Andes. She has travelled to Europe and the US on several occasions, and recently returned from a course in English Literature at the University of Cambridge in the UK.

Until she moved away from home, Patricia was ignorant of the deep divides within Colombian society. Her perceptions of Colombia changed dramatically after she started working at a high school in Santa Martha, on the Caribbean coast. This is an area that has traditionally been controlled by paramilitary groups.

"My students drove expensive cars and owned yachts, they were uninterested in learning and a challenge to teach. Many of them had parents who were members of paramilitary groups or drug cartels, making it impossible to establishing any form of teacher-parent dialogue. Several of the parents had been placed under house arrest."

"Behind every fortune, there is a crime - that is Colombia in a nut shell," Gerald chips in, citing Balzac.

NOT AFRAID TO CRITICISE

In Santa Martha, Patricia also got a glimpse of the widespread racism directed against afro-Colombians. Afro-Colombians make up

only ten per cent of the population, but is the group most affected by the war. According to the organisation for internally displaced persons, CODHES, as many as 22 per cent of afro-Colombians are internally displaced.

"In the building where I lived, all the families had afro-Colombian maids in white uniforms," Patricia says. She remembers one incident in particular. One of the maids had taken her child swimming in the pool, causing one of the residents to complain, saying black women were denied access to the swimming pool.

Stories like these makes Gerald furious. He is not afraid of criticising his country, and says Colombia still functions like a feudal state.

"This is a country with its eyes fixed on Miami and its feet stuck in the mud. In Colombia, there are

two ways to get rich: drugs or politics. Or a combination of both," he says.

GLAD TO HAVE ESCAPED

Back in the hills, Julieta and Alejandro tell us that they have no plans of returning to their home village and say they do not miss their old life. "We tried as hard as we could to avoid trouble back home. The army would regularly knock on our door asking whether we were in contact with the guerrilla, and FARC would come knocking asking whether we had any contact with the army. What can I say, the best thing is not to have contact with either of them," Julieta says.

"How did the children like the village?" "They were scared. Gunmen would often appear at their school, trying to extract information from the children. I told Claudia that whatever they asked, she had to say she knew nothing."

Several people they knew in the village were murdered, and they say that killings are not unusual.

SHOPPING IN MIAMI

In Bogota, many live a life of extreme luxury. Patricia was shocked when, at an oral English exam, around 80 per cent of her 14-year old students, when asked about their shopping habits, stated that they preferred flying to Miami to buy their clothes.

North of Patricia and Gerald's apartment building lies a popular shopping and restaurant area. Here, you can buy all the top international clothing brands and drink beer in an Irish pub - all at a European price level. Bogota is an expensive city to live in.

Nonetheless, when it comes to mood and style, the contrast to Europe is evident. Private security guards watch over buildings and police with drug-detection dogs patrol the streets. One guard brusquely asks our photographer why he is taking pictures of a shopping centre, but is brushed off by some police officers. The large number of women sporting silicone-filled breasts and wearing extremely high heels is also alien to the European eye.

"The beauty ideals are decided by soap operas," Gerald sighs, shaking his head.

Is Colombia a macho society?

"Alas, yes," Patricia laments. "I have two brothers, and my mother washed all their clothes and made their beds. I, on the other hand, had to do all that myself. At mealtimes, she always served my father first, then my elder brother, and finally my younger brother. I had to help myself to what was left." Patricia did not accept this unfair treatment, and rebelled.

BUILDING A BETTER LIFE

"Our life has improved a lot since we arrived," Julieta says. "What's vital for us is not having to live in the crossfire of the conflict, and that our children are able to obtain an education. Claudia likes school, and she is very talented, the third best in her class," Julieta states proudly, showing a rare smile as she gazes at her daughter. Claudia hugs her mother. She is busy doing her homework. "My favourite is writing," she says. Her little brother is shy, but shows us his toy truck.

Alejandro glances at his watch, indicating that he needs to leave. He has been unemployed lately, but he is trying to find construction work and needs to submit a job application. When they first arrived in Bogota, he was lucky enough to be hired to work on a construction site. He earned 25,000 Colombian pesos (14 US dollars) a day, and was able to support his family.

"Little by little, this place will grow on us. All you need is patience," Alejandro Rodriguez says.



BUILDING A NEW FUTURE. Elisa and Javier make their way down the hill to one of the many settlements set up by the approximately 34,000 internally displaced persons living on the hills around Soacha. Here they hope to build a new future for themselves and their children.

AN ELITIST SOCIETY

"You are expecting a baby. Is Colombia a good place to grow up?"

"Sometimes I want to leave, thinking there is no future here, but we do feel a responsibility to stay. There are also positive developments. Colombians have become less conservative, for instance in their attitudes towards homosexuality," says Gerald. He believes that legalising drugs might be the answer to ending the conflict and violence.

"I love my country, its culture and food, its beautiful and varied nature; but Colombia is not an easy place to grow up. It is very elitist. People will label you according to which class you belong to," Patricia says. She is always worried about the extensive use of drugs among Colombian youth.

RESTRAINED HOPE

The Rodriguez' do not own a radio or a TV, but they are aware of the on-going peace talks between FARC and the government.

"Do you believe peace will be achieved in Colombia?"

"Well, what can we say? There has been war in this country for as long as we can remember, so achieving peace in Colombia will not be easy, and over the past years, the violence has only become worse. But of course, we hope for peace," Julieta says, unconvinced.

The couple do not want to criticise the government's role in the negotiations, but expresses doubt about FARC's intentions, and suspect that the guerrilla group is only

engaging in peace talks because of their weakened position.

In contrast to many of Bogota's inhabitants, Patricia and Gerald have travelled around Colombia and are well-informed about the difficult circumstances many of their countrymen live under. They feel that many of the capital's citizens simply turn a blind eye to what goes on in the provinces, as if the war does not concern

them - but then again, the middle classes and the higher ranks of society are not the ones bearing the burden of the conflict.

Gerald worries that Colombians may have lost their capacity for conflict resolution and dialogue after so many years of war.

"Colombia may be compared to DR Congo, a resource-rich land full of warlords making life hard for its civilians," Gerald says.

Do they believe the negotiations will bear fruit?

"This is an important moment in history, and I choose to be optimistic. That does not mean that I am not concerned. For instance, not enough time has been allocated to discuss how to safeguard the rights of the victims. We are anxiously waiting for results," Patricia says.

Gerald scratches his head and frowns: "Yes. There is hope. But many of us wonder what are Santos' true intentions with these negotiations?" ■

Colombia section translated by Ragnhild Holmås

LIFE OF LUXURY. Bogota, with its expensive shops, cafés, and high-end living, could easily be mistaken for any European capital.

