

Colombian government renews civil war amid growing social unrest

By Julian James
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Colombia's right-wing President Iván Duque has launched a new military offensive against a dissident faction of the disbanded FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), which announced its resumption of the armed struggle in the face of the government's failure to comply with the terms of a 2016 peace deal.

The agreement, hammered out in Havana by representatives of the FARC and Duque's predecessor, President Juan Manuel Santos, provided for the disarming of the guerrilla group and its transformation into a new bourgeois party with seats in the Colombian legislature.

The accord was supposed to put an end to the longest running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere. It traces its origins to the late 1940s and the murderous repression and rural civil war that followed the 1948 assassination of Liberal Party candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitan and the *Bogotazo*, the massive social upheaval in the Colombian capital that his killing provoked. The fighting involved government forces as well as paramilitary units of the Liberal and Conservative parties and guerrilla units formed by the (Stalinist) Colombian Communist Party (PCC).

The treaty signed in Havana in August 2016 granted a near blanket amnesty for decades of atrocities carried out by both sides in the war. The FARC was guaranteed a minimum of 10 seats in the legislature in return for handing over its weapons at UN-monitored drop-off sites. The deal also included guarantees of investment in education, health and infrastructure in rural areas affected by the war, reparations for victims, a stipend as well as safe "Territorial Spaces" for demobilized guerrillas and subsidies meant to help farmers replace coca with other crops.

The former FARC leader who announced the return to armed struggle was "Ivan Márquez," who had served as the guerrilla movement's chief negotiator in the talks with the Colombian government in Havana. Together with another former FARC leader, Jesus Santrinch, who went into hiding after being jailed on drug trafficking charges, Márquez issued a 32-minute video on YouTube on August 29. He denounced Duque for sabotaging the peace deal and called for, the "continuation of the rebel fight in answer to the betrayal of the state of the Havana peace accords."

The dissidents have pointed to the continuing wave of

killings that has claimed the lives of at least 150 former guerrillas and members of their families since the signing of the accord. Also targeted have been community leaders and social activists, over 50 of whom have been killed so far this year. This week alone three such assassinations were reported in the northwestern department of Antioquia.

In the wake of the Marquez's announcement of a return to arms, the government launched an attack that it claimed killed nine members of the FARC dissident group. At the same time, it has withdrawn guards assigned to protect the officials of the ex-guerrilla group's political party, the Alternative Revolutionary Force of Colombia (also known by the Spanish acronym FARC).

The last attempt by the FARC to carry out such a demobilization and transformation into a political party turned into a bloody debacle. The ex-guerrillas joined with the Colombian Communist Party and other groups in forming an electoral front known as the Union Patriotic (UP) in 1985. While it elected members to the national legislature and some two dozen mayoral races, the UP was subjected to a systematic campaign of assassinations, with two of its presidential candidates, dozens of its elected officials and 5,000 of its members murdered by security forces and right-wing paramilitaries.

Duque, a political protégé of ultra-right-wing former president Alvaro Uribe, won the presidential campaign of 2018 on a law-and-order platform calling for a buildup of the police and military along with tax cuts and the elimination financial and other regulations for big business. He beat his opponent Gustavo Petro, an ex-M-19 guerrilla turned bourgeois politician and former mayor of Bogotá, whose Progressive Movement party along with the rest of the official "left" had been discredited by its alignment with the militaristic and austerity-driven policies of the Santos administration.

Duque was inaugurated in August 2018 and swiftly proposed a "National Development Plan"—a broad package of austerity measures that includes major cuts in funding to the nation's pension and healthcare systems. While failing to provide the funding for the rural projects negotiated by the FARC—which based itself on retrograde Maoist and Guevarist conceptions of peasant war—it also has resulted in sharp attacks on the working

class, the vast majority of Colombian society.

The result has been a steady escalation of the class struggle. A nationwide strike by the Colombian Federation of Education Workers (Fecode) broke out in April of 2019, led by students and teachers, with farmers, pensioners and other sections of workers joining to defend public education and pensions. The government responded to these strikes with a combination of promises to increase funding, insinuations that students were linked to guerrillas and claims that the sums demanded by the protesters for university funding did not exist.

In an attempt to pit different sections of the working class against one another, Duque released a statement addressed to student leaders, saying, “[The money] isn’t there, so how can we negotiate or commit resources that aren’t available? Should we take away social subsidies to the elderly and for [child education and nutrition]?” while falsely claiming that “the government is not the enemy of the students.”

Duque laid bare his true contempt for broad masses of the population by tweeting a month earlier that “Poor people shouldn’t have children, they just raise criminals, drug addicts and prostitutes.”

There have been protests and strikes since those that took place in April, with a recent two-day strike led by Fecode on August 28 in opposition to the assassination of several professors by security forces and right-wing paramilitaries, as well as to the privatization of their benefits fund. The teachers also raised demands for improvements in the broken healthcare system and in defense of their right to be promoted and transferred within the university system.

Since being elected, Duque has made good on his promises to roll back the peace plan, systematically sabotaging the deal by refusing to allocate the funds needed for its implementation. According to a congressional report prepared by members of the opposition and center-right voting bloc, Duque has cut compensation to victims of the civil war by half compared to his predecessor Santos, and has reduced funding for land redistribution among peasants displaced through violence by three-quarters.

As for promises of investment in infrastructure in affected areas, the report states that under Duque, the amount allocated “is only 0.08% of the total resources required.” The assassination of social activists that has been a hallmark of the decades-long conflict has continued unabated and even increased under the current administration, prompting a nationwide “March for Life” on July 27, at which protesters held up a banner bearing the names of those assassinated for their involvement in efforts to implement various components of the peace deal.

The entirely predictable and, no doubt, desired result of these policies has been the resumption of the armed struggle by a group of ex-FARC members. This will be exploited by the government as the pretext for stepped up repression aimed at the working-class and poor peasants.

Members of Duque’s right-wing Democratic Center Party (PCD), also immediately seized on this development to ramp up the drive for a war of aggression against neighboring Venezuela.

María Fernanda Cabal, a PCD senator, was quoted by the *Telegraph* as saying, “Maduro offers shelter to those who want to bring harm to Colombia. A military intervention with the support of other countries from Latin America is the only solution.” Duque, for his part, reached out to Venezuela US puppet “interim president” Juan Guaidó and declared in a televised address, “We’re not witnessing the birth of a new guerrilla army, but rather the criminal threats of a band of narco-terrorists, who have the protection and support of Nicolas Maduro’s dictatorship.”

Duque’s allegations have been echoed by US officials. Washington is likewise seeking to exploit the limited and entirely provoked renewal of armed conflict in Colombia as a pretext to invade Venezuela.

This exposes the true purpose of undermining the peace deal by Duque and the right-wing Uribe faction he represents: a reversion to unrestrained militarism, the crushing of political dissent, and total subordination of Colombia to the geopolitical interests of the United States in Latin America. These are the pillars of the foreign policy concocted under the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton and formalized in the genocidal “Plan Colombia,” which was wound down to a significant degree during the initiation of peace talks in 2015.

A military intervention in Venezuela would spell disaster for the population, already facing a nationwide shortage of food and medicine that has led to skyrocketing levels of malnutrition and a mass exodus of millions of Venezuelan families to other countries in Latin America.

While the crisis has been exacerbated by the corrupt and incompetent bourgeoisie government of Nicolas Maduro, overwhelming responsibility for this disaster lies with the United States, which has pushed through a series of far-reaching economic sanctions meant to cut off Venezuela from foreign investment and trade, and thus the ability to import basic goods needed to sustain the population.

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