

## Summary of the August 2010 Meetings of the Washington Group in Paipa

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With a new administration in Bogota, a call for dialogue from the FARC guerrillas, and the threat of armed conflict on the borders, the Paipa meetings could not have been more timely. The gathering at Paipa included 29 people, most of who had been in the initial meeting in 2008. New participants included representatives from regions outside of Bogota, and a few invited experts on drugs and policy issues. U.S. participants included seven representatives of U.S. NGOs.

The dialogues opened on Sunday evening with a welcome reception, a special recognition of the work of one of the North Americans, Adam Isacson, and dinner. CODHES and USIP co-moderated the program, which began the next morning. After a round of introductions and a review of the activities of the Washington Group process, participants were asked to summarize their hopes and expectations for the Paipa meetings. Participants wanted to share analysis of the shifting political contexts in the United States and Colombia, and to identify and strategize about opportunities for action. They wanted to discuss how to legitimize speaking about peace, to discuss the formulation of public peace policies, and to build bridges between local, regional, and national peace initiatives. They hoped the meetings would provide an opportunity for supporting dialogue, coordinating advocacy, and creating a peace agenda for a more comprehensive peace movement. They wanted to develop a structure for continuing to meet, for citizens' diplomacy in the United States, and for putting peace in Colombia on the U.S. agenda.

The program, originally intended to review the draft policy papers and develop a strategy for moving forward, had shifted somewhat to take advantage of the new political moment in Colombia. Commitment by Vice President elect Angelino Garzón to participate in an opening panel at Paipa had given the meetings a particular sense of timeliness, urgency, and importance; unfortunately, the vice-president elect had to cancel his participation at the last minute. The legislative director from the office of Representative James P. McGovern (D-MA), who had accompanied the process from the start, and a Colombian political scientist from the Universidad Nacional launched the first panel discussion on U.S.-Colombian relations. A presentation by one of the Washington Group members followed with a presentation on land issues, a theme that had not been addressed by the group previously but that had been identified as a priority by the incoming Santos administration. The group next watched the video of the FARC leader's call for dialogue, which had just been posted online. Participants analyzed the clip and concurred that there was a welcome shift in tone, content, and proposals that suggested improved prospects for dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia M. Bouvier, "Cautious Optimism for Peace in Colombian," *USIP Peace Brief*, September 2010, <http://www.usip.org/publications/cautious-optimism-peace-in-colombia>.

While the participants in 2008 had preferred to have all conversations as a plenary, a sufficient level of trust had now been achieved to vary the format. USIP identified four participants who were particularly attuned to issues of process, and asked them to serve as facilitators for smaller group work. The facilitators met together over lunch and designed a common methodology for these break-out sessions. When the plenary re-convened, the new methodology was presented and approved. Authors were asked to present their drafts to the plenary, which would then divide into smaller discussion groups. Each of the smaller groups was asked to articulate the message on the particular theme that Colombians and their counterparts wished to convey to U.S. policymakers, the changes they wanted to see, and the steps needed between now and the next meeting to make their proposals viable. The facilitator helped keep the small groups on task and each group selected a rapporteur who would report back to the plenary. This process was repeated for each of the four issue areas. After the last round of small group work, the plenary session was used to prioritize the ideas that had emerged and to identify potential follow-up actions related to each theme. Individuals then made commitments on behalf of their organizations to carry out the activities that had been identified.

As with the first major gathering in December 2008, USIP organized and distributed an online survey to which twelve of the 33 participants (just over thirty percent) responded. Most of the respondents noted that the meetings continued to build international solidarity and important links and networks between U.S. and Colombian civil society organizations. They also identified a number of ways in which the dialogue process could be improved. They called for more advance preparation, including the distribution of relevant reports and papers prior to the events. Participants recommended finding ways to incorporate Colombian NGOs and community leaders engaged in exemplary local and regional peacemaking models into the Washington Group process. Concerns were again expressed about the composition of the group, with a call for greater representation from the business sector, indigenous communities, trade unions, the churches, internally displaced persons, and both the U.S. and Colombian governments.

Some felt the agenda was too ambitious and that the group needed to focus more on how the topics selected related to the central issues of peace and human rights. Paipa participants expressed their hope that there would be follow-through on the agendas, proposals, and commitments that came out of the conference, and urged that a conference report be produced and circulated. A number of ideas and projects--including an online mechanism to facilitate the sharing of ideas, information, analysis, proposals, and joint initiatives--were proposed, but most felt that it would be prudent to see what the first few months of the Santos administration would bring, and to assess the attitude of the Obama administration towards Colombia given the change in Colombian leadership.