



December 10, 2009

Promoting Peace in Colombia: Ideas for the New Administration

On December 2, a closed-door, off-the-record conference was held in Washington, D.C., to explore the possibility of making peace in Colombia a priority for the new administration. The meeting was convened by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Colombia Human Rights Committee, and the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) of Colombia. Approximately 70 representatives of diverse social, academic, political, and religious organizations, in addition to representatives of the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Congress, and international organizations gathered for the day-long meeting, “Promoting Peace in Colombia: Ideas for the New Administration.”* The participants examined the state of play of war and peace in Colombia, exploring the possible options for U.S. policy towards Colombia that await the Obama administration.

The morning panel, “Challenges and Opportunities for Colombian Peacemaking,” reviewed the unilateral release of hostages by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) earlier this year, the rescue of other hostages, the harsh military blows dealt to the FARC, and its continued albeit diminished capacity to wage guerrilla war; the stagnated negotiations between the government and National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas; the resurgence and consolidation of new paramilitary and related groups; and new proposals for peace emerging from civil society and the international community in recent months. There was discussion of whether a “humanitarian accord” for a prisoner exchange should still be sought with the FARC and whether such an accord should be tied to further efforts to achieve a peace settlement to the armed conflict. There was general agreement on the need to change the course of the useless confrontation stubbornly pursued by the government of Colombia and the guerrilla forces, and on the need for a positive change in Washington to get back to the path of dialogue and negotiation.

The afternoon panel, “War and Peace in Colombia: The Role of the United States,” discussed how the new orientations in foreign policy announced by President-elect Obama might apply to Colombia; how adoption or failure to adopt the proposed U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement might impact the dynamics of war and peace in Colombia; and the challenges of getting the new administration in Washington to focus on Colombia quickly in view of the strategic importance of the Colombian conflict for stability in the Andean region.

The meeting agreed on the importance of human rights in the new context of U.S.-Colombian relations, and on the need to address the priority issues of land and territory, democracy and political power, and victims’ rights.

The participants agreed to follow up with additional meetings in Bogota and Washington to ensure that policy-makers in both Colombia and the United States heed the potential for creative U.S. policy approaches to help Colombians end rather than prolong the conflict. Upon conclusion of the day-long conference the Embassy of France, which currently holds the presidency of the European Union, hosted a reception for the Colombian participants.

* The Embassy of Colombia in Washington was invited to participate but declined the invitation.