



DPI Briefing Note: Negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN)¹

I. Background

The ELN was founded in 1964 in the wake of *la Violencia* and started as an expression of grievances concerning wealth disparity across Colombian social classes. The group became a guerrilla army advocating a combination of Libertarian and Marxist theologies and originated in a melange of students, Catholic radicals, and left-wing intellectuals aiming to replicate the Cuban revolution in Colombia. They oppose the privatisation of natural resources and claim to represent Colombia's rural poor against the wealthy.

The ELN operates mainly in the northeast of Colombia (including strongholds in provinces of Aracua, Narino and Norte de Santander) and is estimated to have 1,400 members. Their forces have been weakened by decades of competition with FARC, aggressive government security forces, and paramilitary offences. The ELN has used illegal tactics to secure funding, including but not limited to: kidnap, extortion, and involvement in the drugs trade. The ELN was not party to the peace negotiations that were undertaken between FARC and the Colombian government during the 1990s-2000s. The group sees itself as a resistance movement and is structured along more participatory leadership than FARC.

II. The Peace Deal

As of 30 March 2016, Colombia announced formal negotiations with the country's second largest rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN). This is the third time that the ELN has engaged in talks in its 52-year history. The two sides have been holding exploratory talks for two years, which have frequently been stalled due to ELN engagement in kidnapping and extortion. The latest round of discussions was held in Caracas as the ELN released two

¹ This information is correct as of 7th April 2016.

hostages. The announcement comes just as FARC, the largest Colombian rebel group, failed to meet a self-imposed deadline to sign a peace deal following over three years of negotiations.² The two sides state that they have agreed upon a six-point agenda for the formal peace talks, which will take place in Quito. The issues to be discussed include:

- Participation of society in constructing peace
- Democracy for peace
- Transformations for peace
- Victims
- End of the armed conflict
- Implementation³

The agreement was signed by government negotiator Frank Pearl and rebel leader Antonio García. The talks are expected to take place in Venezuela, Chile, Brazil, Ecuador and Cuba – countries which are acting as guarantors of the peace. However, there remain conditions that could hamper the process; one condition being the release of hostages. In a televised speech following the press conference in Caracas, President Santos stated the government would not engage in dialogue with the ELN while victims are still held hostage. In response to these comments, the ELN released two hostages. ELN Commander and peace negotiator Pablo Beltran said a bilateral ceasefire would be welcomed during the negotiation process. Peace with the ELN will be distinct from efforts with the FARC.

Feasibility of the Negotiations

It is undoubtable that the peace deal will benefit from the negotiation process occurring with FARC. For example, victim's rights are expressed as a key point within both peace deals, and President Santos has already made specific measures and institutions to address this issue. It is possible that the ELN's own structure may hamper the process. The group operate along a much more horizontal axis than the distinctly hierarchical FARC, which could lead to discord through the ranks concerning the best steps towards peace. Issues

² Brozinsky, Sibylla "Colombia Starts Peace Talks with ELN, country's second biggest guerrilla group", *The Guardian* (30 March 2016), at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/30/colombia-starts-peace-talks-with-eln-countrys-second-biggest-guerrilla-group>

³ The full agenda can be found in Spanish, "Acuerdo de diálogos para la paz de Colombia entre el gobierno nacional y el ejército de liberación nacional." (March 2016) at <http://www.eltiempo.com/contenido/politica/proceso-de-paz/ARCHIVO/ARCHIVO-16549986-0.pdf>

regarding the laying down of arms and reintegration into society have previously proved to be considerable stumbling blocks to previous discussions.

In the recent press coverage there is a large question-mark over whether or not the ELN will fully comply with Santos' demand that all kidnapping cease. The act of kidnapping is a major revenue stream for the group and could put strain on their financial resources. It is also interesting to consider that the conclusion of a peace deal with the ELN is likely to make them less attractive to disaffected FARC fighters forced, but unwilling, to demobilise in the event of a final peace deal with FARC. This could ultimately diminish recruitment, and thus the durability of violence. There are similar apprehensions regarding demobilisation as a whole – due to the large membership of both FARC and the ELN some commentators remain sceptical of how the government will distinguish guerrilla soldiers from civilians. Moreover, Colombia's military will continue offensive action against the ELN, despite the peace deal, angering ELN members.

Bibliography:

“Acuerdo de diálogos para la paz de Colombia entre el gobierno nacional y el ejército de liberación nacional.” (March 2016) at <http://www.eltiempo.com/contenido/politica/proceso-de-paz/ARCHIVO/ARCHIVO-16549986-0.pdf>.

BBC News, “Colombia ELN: Government and Rebels to Hold Peace Talks”, (30 March 2016) at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-35925934>.

Brozinsky, Sibylla, “Colombia Starts Peace Talks with ELN, country’s second biggest guerrilla group”, *The Guardian* (30 March 2016), at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/30/colombia-starts-peace-talks-with-eln-countrys-second-biggest-guerrilla-group>.

International Crisis Group “The Colombian Government’s First Official Talks with the ELN”, (31 March 2016) at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/statements/the-colombian-government-s-first-official-peace-talks-with-the-eln.aspx>.

Isacson, Adam, “A Three-Player Chess Game: Colombia’s Peace Talks with ELN – and FARC”, *World Politics Review*, (5 April 2016) at: <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/18397/a-three-player-chess-game-colombia-s-peace-talks-with-eln-and-farc>.

Lohmuller, Michael, “FARC Peace Talks Provide Model, Few Shortcuts for ELN Negotiations”, *Insight Crime* (30 March 2016) at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/farc-peace-talks-provide-model-few-shortcuts-for-eln-negotiations>.