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From issue: **Cuba and Colombia** (Fall 2014)

AQ FEATURE

Colombia and the War in the Eyes of the FARC

BY Jenny Manrique

The FARC's negotiators emerge from the jungle.

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In August, the 27th round of negotiations between the Colombian government and delegates from the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC) took place in Havana. Since November 2012, both sides have been negotiating behind closed doors to search for ways to end the 50-year-old civil war that has killed more than 200,000 and displaced almost 6 million Colombians.

View slideshow of the FARC in Havana.

A view of the Palco Hotel in Havana, Cuba, where peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC delegates take place. Photo: Jenny Manrique

In that round of talks, military officers, victims of the conflict and scholars that make up the *Comision Histórica del Conflicto y sus Victimas* (Historical Commission on the Conflict and Its Victims—Commission) were invited for the first time to join the discussions held at El Palco Hotel in Havana. The 11 days of meetings were marked by unexpected vignettes: generals and colonels shaking hands with guerrilla commanders; kidnapping victims talking face-to-face with their tormentors; and scholars outlining their goal of objectively documenting the origins and consequences of the civil war.

The visits broke the routine that the FARC delegates (30 in total) have followed in Havana: 12 hours of work per day spent reading documents, in working committees, holding press conferences, and

negotiating with government representatives. They work 11 days and rest four. During one of those breaks, I was able to speak to four plenipotentiary members (Andrés París, Marcos Calarcá, Rubén Zamora, and Victoria Sandino), as well as two members of the technical committee (Tomás Hojeda and Diana Grajales).*

All of them have been in the FARC for at least 25 years, with the exception of Grajales, 27, who is the youngest and has been a combatant for only nine years. Several had the experience of being negotiators in at least one of the previous peace processes (Caracas-1990, Tlaxcala-1992, Caguan-1998), except for Grajales and Hojeda, who are rookies.

The fact that this is their first time negotiating quickly became evident. Grajales, who went to college, is particularly energetic, talks fast and often with resentment—even hatred—for her opponents. Hojeda, who had not left the jungle in 30 years until now, is shy, talks slowly, and can't hide his surprise with the things that technology has brought. In contrast, the other delegates are more polished, more political and polite.

After more than a year of living in Havana, few war scars can be noticed at first sight. But their skin, particularly their hands, look ragged, and their accents belong to the more remote regions of the country.

These days, they have little time for physical activity. Instead of enduring long marches in the bush or combat, they run or play soccer on the lawns outside their temporary homes in the exclusive El Laguito sector, west of Havana.

Photo: Enrique de la Osa/REUTERS

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El Laguito, which once served as the Cuba Country Club, and as the residence of former dictator Fulgencio Batista's sons, offers

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unimaginable luxuries for the guerrillas. “I am not used to people serving me, or using tablecloths, napkins and flowers; who needs that in the jungle?” says Grajales, who is part of the Eastern Bloc commanded by the infamous Mono Jojoy.

Grajales was with Jojoy when he was killed during a Colombian Army bombing, and has a large scar on her left arm from the attack.

“Carrying machetes, digging trenches, loading heavy logs, being in combat, that is what we are used to,” she says. The guerrillas read Colombian newspapers and watch international news channels, but prefer the “alternative media, which have great ethics but a limited audience,” says Calarcá, 57.

Calarcá, known as the FARC “chancellor,” criticizes “the oligarchic media for telling lies” about them. According to him, even the reports from the United Nations bodies and various NGOs recounting their violence against civilians “are [created] by adversaries, military foes and intelligence operatives; the traditional press just reproduces it.”

To counter the mainstream media reports, the FARC created a press and propaganda commission that monitors everything published about them and uploads the reports they consider most favorable to their website. The FARC’s English-language website is curated by the Dutch guerrilla Tania Nijmeijer. “You can imagine that Colombians won’t give a ‘like’ to our page, or won’t dare to share it because of the stigma” says Grajales, who is in charge of social media. “But the numbers are good,” she adds. Their Facebook page, “*Delegación de Paz FARC*,” has nearly 6,000 likes; while on Twitter, followers exceed 12,000.

During the evenings, they go for medical checkups and occasionally visit the sites of the Cuban revolution. “Here I feel closer to a dream,” says Zamora, 50, commander of Bloc 33, acknowledging his admiration for the Cuban Revolution.

In spite of their Marxist discourse and their desire for a communist model in Colombia, the guerrillas are aware that they cannot push their economic model at the negotiating table, which has opened —according to them—some room for agreement.

“There are sectors of the [Colombian] establishment that know peace is necessary, and understand that capitalism can only develop if there is peace,” says Calarcá. “We differ about how we are going to get to that peace, but we already agree that war is not convenient.”

But in other areas, the views of the FARC delegates make clear not only how far they are from the government negotiators—but from much of contemporary world opinion.

Victims

The first face-to-face meeting between the FARC and the 12 victims of different armed groups who went to Havana on August 16 was a solemn moment. Both sides listened to each other respectfully. Iván Márquez, the leader of the FARC delegation, asked for forgiveness and declared that the FARC was willing to recognize errors.

However, there is a strong belief within the FARC that they are victims too. “We will not respond for what the state should respond to,” says París, 60, part of the Eastern Bloc. “We will not accept unilateral recognition as perpetrators, because we [the FARC], as [FARC founder Manuel] Marulanda said, were the first victims.”

For the FARC delegates, the solution to this sensitive issue is the creation of the Commission, whose historians and academics—chosen by both sides—will write reports on the conflict’s origins. According to the source considered most reliable by both parties, the *Grupo de Memoria Histórica* (Historical Memory Group—GMH), the war left at least 220,000 dead between 1958 and 2012, most of whom were civilians.

“We are willing to clarify responsibilities, but reject in advance any possibility of self-incrimination. It is the state, with its armed forces and money and military doctrine from the U.S., that committed crimes against civilians,” argues París.

Nevertheless, the guerrillas were responsible for kidnappings in Colombia. According to the GMH, between 1970 and 2010, the FARC were alleged perpetrators of 9,447 kidnappings, of which 3,325 have been confirmed. Most of the hostages were eventually released.

But the FARC delegation challenges charges that they were responsible for the disappearance of a number of civilian non-combatants.

“There are people that the military forces claim are missing, and we don’t know where they are,” insists Calarcá. “Sometimes it is impossible to recover corpses after combat. Let’s create an international commission to solve those cases.”

The FARC also remains silent about other specific events, such as the 2002 Bojayá massacre, in which 119 civilians were killed by improvised FARC mortars.

Drug Policy

Although some guerrillas have recently admitted to being engaged in the drug trade, the FARC officially declares that its participation is confined to taxing plantations in areas under their control.

“Farmers plant coca, opium and marijuana in areas where there are guerrillas because we are nationwide, but we can’t repress their only alternative to poverty,” says Sandino, 48, one of the 17 women at the table.

An agreement is now in place regarding eradicating illicit drug cultivation through crop substitution. The parties have also reached a deal for addressing drug consumption as a health problem, not a military problem. However, the guerrillas’ commitment in this accord is still a subject of debate.

“We are not drug traffickers and our troops won’t turn into a simple workforce to eradicate coca,” claims Zamora.

A 2013 study by InSight Crime, a research institution that focuses on organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, claims that the FARC “may be earning between $500 million and $1

billion annually from drug trafficking," which may explain why there is a huge risk that some of the 20 rebel blocs operating in agricultural areas may remain involved in illicit activities, even if a final peace agreement is signed.

Political Participation

What future political role is envisioned by the FARC? The experience of the last peace negotiations in the early 1980s—when around 3,000 ex-FARC members who tried to compete in elections as representatives of the legal *Unión Patriótica* (Patriotic Union) party were assassinated by paramilitaries and security forces—has left many guerrilla leaders suspicious of politics. The systematic killings were recognized as genocide by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 1997. Most of the people I interviewed had belonged to the Communist Party before joining the FARC, and decided to take up arms because, as Hojeda, 45, the second commander of the Iván Ríos Front, says, "We couldn't find guarantees in the legal system."

Discussions on this point resulted in a November 2013 agreement that included guarantees of political participation for leaders of NGOs and social movements, human rights defenders and minority candidates—Indigenous and Afro-Colombians. The accord calls for the creation of temporary special congressional districts for areas most affected by the conflict, and mechanisms to ensure security during electoral campaigns.

But few of the delegates I spoke to share Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos' vision of having reformed former FARC members elected to Congress and participating legally within the system. "We are not here for seats in Congress," says París.

And rather than the popular referendum proposed by the Colombian government to approve any final peace deal, the guerrillas want the agreements to be approved by a constituent assembly comprising 141 people from all the sectors of society: representatives of the government, guerrillas, campesinos, Indigenous, Afro-Colombians, victims, women, students, LGBT communities, veterans, and refugees or exiles abroad. The Santos government, though, has rejected this demand since the beginning of the negotiating process.

Gender Violence

Seventeen of the 30 delegates in Cuba are women. They claim that they are treated fairly and equally in the guerrilla army. Nevertheless, confessions of former combatants, including the infamous guerrilla "Karina," commander of the 47th Front, who pled guilty to 218 crimes including killings, kidnappings and recruitment of child soldiers, have described abortions and forced contraception as a guerrilla policy to prevent women from having children.

"It is not true that we live in abortion camps," insists Grajales. "We use contraception such as Mesigyna, Cyclofem, the 'T' [an intrauterine device], and everything is controlled with spreadsheets by the commanders. But if any woman gets pregnant, she must have an abortion."

According to her story, there are specialized medical units that practice abortions in the jungle. If there is any risk to the mother's life, they continue the pregnancy and then the guerrillas find a family to leave the baby with.

"Many times, women can't contact the caring family again, because those kids would become targets for the Army, and frequently receive financial offers to denounce their guerrilla parents," says Sandino.

The delegates I spoke to denied that FARC soldiers rape fellow guerrilla combatants or civilians, arguing that, in the case of the fighters, women have guns to defend themselves from any attack by their "comrades." However, organizations such as UN Women and the *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* (Women's Pacifist Route) a civilian movement of Colombian women against violence, have reported instances of rape by FARC forces, particularly in Indigenous communities.

Child Soldiers

Official UNICEF figures indicate that more than half of the nearly 6,000 children who have deserted guerrilla and paramilitary groups in Colombia in the past 14 years had been in the FARC. According to the UN coordinator in Colombia, Fabrizio Hochschild, the rebel group continues to recruit children "daily, mainly in the southwest of the country."

The FARC leaders I interviewed refuse to accept the figures cited by UNICEF. Instead, they insisted they were in compliance with international humanitarian law, a set of rules established by the Geneva Conventions for times of war, which allows recruitment from the age of 15—different from the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says non-governmental recruits must be 18.

"We are the people's army, so all people have the right to participate: children, women and adults," says París, while insisting that "we don't have 10-year-old kids carrying AK-47s."

He adds, "In fact, what we have denounced is the use of children in military intelligence tasks, like the infiltration of our organization."

Although the recruitment of children was one of the issues left out of the original agenda, it is expected to be raised during the talks with the victims' delegations.

"Most fighters are aware of our revolution when they join our army, but many people enter because they have no choice," says Zamora. "Among them are children without opportunities to go to school and whose only chances are to join the armed fight."

Because agreements don't count until a final agreement is signed and endorsed by civil society, the long path to reconciliation could be jeopardized if parties—especially the FARC—don't recognize their victims and crimes. It is understandable that negotiators want to make their troops (guerrillas and army) feel as though they are not backing down, but the very questioning of truth will remain a huge stumbling block before combatants and Colombian citizens will accept the guerrillas' re-integration into Colombian civil life.

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