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Los secretos de la paz en Colombia

Is Colombia’s Peace Deal Falling Apart?

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Imran Garza: Promises made but not delivered. After a splinter of former FARC rebels takes up arms, is President Iván Duque facing another guerilla insurgency? I’m Imran Garza and today’s newsmaker is Colombia’s fragile peace.

0:31

Imran Garza: When one of the key players who helped broker the 2016 peace deal announced on YouTube, he was once again taking up arms, president Iván Duque’s reaction was to put a bounty on his head. But does commandant Marques speak for all former FARC members? While his group of ex-guerillas, who Duque calls narco-terrorists, show no signs of abandoning their cocaine business or the idea of bringing down Colombia’s government, FARC’s top leadership remains committed to the deal. Not as committed it seems is the government who's been both slow and reluctant to implement most of its conditions. Caught in the middle are thousands of former rebels in the tricky process of reintegrating into society while facing a lack of resources and the threat of targeted killings. Natalie Poyhonen has more.

01:50

Natalie Pyhonen: Fighting words for a nation that's no stranger to conflict. More than 200,000 people died in the 52 yearlong war between the leftist guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC, and the government. But in recent years, there's been a fragile peace, brokered in a 2016 accord to end the bloodshed. It's now at risk of crumbling. A group of dissident FARC rebels, including a former commander who negotiated the deal, says it's taking up arms again.

02:27

Ivan Marquez: it is the continuation of the guerrilla struggle in response to the state’s betrayal of the peace agreements in Havana.

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Natalie Pyhonen: He's accused the state of failing to uphold its side of the pact, including protection for demobilized guerrillas. About 7,000 former combatants handed over their weapons and agreed to return to civilian life as part of the deal. The majority of them and FARC’s political leadership say they're committed to it. Temporary settlements like this one were set up to help ex-guerillas reintegrate into society.

03:02

FARC dissident: There have been many difficulties in this process, but this does not mean that we are going to give up and take up arms again. No, on the contrary we cannot leave what little we have already built.

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Natalie Pyhonen: The health of the deal under President Iván Duque had already been questioned. He came to power last year on a pledge to change parts of the Accord and had support from Colombians, who felt the rebels got off too lightly. He's been accused of moving too slowly to implement parts of the deal. It's full of promises that will take years if not decades to deliver, like greater development in rural areas affected by the fighting. So, delays already at this point in the process are adding to concerns. And the government is still fighting dissident FARC guerrillas. It’s estimated there are more than 2,000 fighters, including recruits who've joined after the Accord was signed. Bogota accuses Venezuela of providing some of them with shelter. This new threat has shaken Colombia's peace, but was it already in danger before this recent called to arms? Natalie Poyhonen, The Newsmakers

04:18

Imran Garza: Well to answer that question and more let's got our guests in Washington DC. I’m joined by Peter Hikam, he's the President Emeritus and Senior Fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue in Bogota. That wasn't Peter Hakim my apologies. In Bogota, Colombia, Sergio Guzman is also there. He is the director and co-founder of Colombia Risk Analysis, a political risk consultancy and also in Bogota is Richard McCall, a journalist, writer, and the host of the Columbia Calling radio show. I promise we'll have everybody up at the right time in the next few minutes, but gentlemen, let's begin with you Richard. Is Columbia returning to war based on the available evidence and recent developments?

05:01

Richard McColl: Um, in a quick answer I'm going to say that no, Columbia is not returned to war but what we are presented with there's a certain case of dynamics which can create increasing security challenges for Columbia. We have of course the vacuum of power in the regions which are now controlled by various armed group, not just the dissidents of the FARC. We've got the problems in Venezuela, and of course there's all sorts of equations that are unique to Colombia because of the economics of the cocaine industry and indeed the politics in neighboring Venezuela. But Colombia is not returning to war.

05:41

Imran Garza: Peter Hakim, is Richard right?

05:45

Peter Hakim: Well, I think he's got it just right frankly. What we're seeing is armed groups who are obviously interested in getting access to resources, money, etc. In some cases, it's worthwhile for them to think of themselves as guerrillas, but by and large I think a return to the war that pervaded Colombia for 50 years, there’s very little prospect of that. Despite the problems in Venezuela, I don’t think that that adds a whole lot to the dangers confronting Colombian on this.

06:30

Imran Garza: So, Sergio Guzman, when we-- if Colombians see the news and they hear that in western Kalka there was a mayoral candidate who was murdered along with her mother and four others by dissidents, and on the other hand we have the government saying they killed nine dissidents in an air raid. Doesn't it sound very much like the peace deal isn’t holding when we have these incidents happen?

06:56

Sergio Guzman: First of all, let me thank you for the invitation and greetings to Peter and Richard. You know, in a way, the peace agreement as always had inherent fragility. Inherent fragility that the state doesn't control rural areas, inherent fragility that there’s still illegal economies throughout the country in cocaine trafficking and illegal mining, inherent fragility in that rural young men remain unemployed and are being recruited by insurgent groups and criminal organizations still. So, I think that in a way, until Columbia doesn’t fix those inherent fragilities, real peace is never going to be a reality. But what you mentioned is closed aligned to the proximity of an electoral moment which we have local elections on 27th October.

07:50

Imran Garza: Right. Richard McColl, if we look at these fragilities, who is most to blame for the fragile situation then?

07:58

Richard McColl: Well, we can say of course the government has its fair share of blame; it's been strangling the commitments that were supposed to be made of course when the peace accord was signed. There's been a lack of money and a lack of will. But of course, President Duque ran on these phases of tearing the peace accord to shreds which he hasn't but at the same time that that was his policy. But the FARC as well the dissident FARC and of course these two high-ranking FARC members were José Sanchez and Ethan Marcus are very much to blame as well and it seems like there was an internal struggle very much in the FARC itself between the leader Rodrigo and Antonio Evan Marcos. So, we're seeing that both sides harbor some of the blame.

08:46

Imran Garza: Right. Peter when these guys come out with their YouTube video and they say “Listen, there’s no peace and Timoshenko's a sellout. We don't abide by all of this,” do the likes of Duque and Alvar Uribe and others get vindicated in the eyes of the Colombian public? Especially those who voted against the peace deal because they say “You see! We cannot trust these guys.”

09:13

Peter Hakim: Well, you know I think it's a very complex situation, but I think that making peace itself is always very very difficult. Lots of people in Colombia sort of have a deep-seated anger, hatred almost, for the FARC. They wanted them to be punished, they thought a war had been won, and they didn't have to offer all this kind of generous conditions for a peace agreement. And there's still that kind of anger at the at the FARC that that--and at the same time what I think was most helpful of your question was the fact that the relations with the with the FARC and the guerrillas and the illegal gangs etc. in rural areas has very much to do with the internal politics of Colombia itself. In other words, a lot of Duque's reaction to the statements, to relations with Venezuela has to do not with only the potential for reigniting a guerrilla war, but for the internal politics of the country seen broadly.

10:37

Imran Garza: Right and I'm gonna bring in the Venezuela angle a bit later on. I want to talk more about Maduro in a few moments, but I want to ask you Sergio: if we if we rewind and we look at Duque on the election trail and we look at him as he became the leader of Colombia and took over from Santos by emphasizing a different peace deal, one with more accountability ,one with more justice, one where the FARC has to faceup to its crimes, it doesn't just have community service and so on that appealed to many people. Is this then inevitable because you have to throw out the peace baby with the bathwater if you want to get tougher?

11:19

Sergio Guzman: Yeah, I think I think you're right to an extent. All peace agreements have opposition, all peace agreements also have spoiler actors, but Duque can’t have the peace that he wants and sacrifice the rest of the peace that was signed. So, if you look at the peace agreement, it has five major components and bear with me. The first one is on rule reform, the second one is on political participation, the third one is injustice and victims’ rights, the fourth one is on drugs and then finally disarmament and demobilization. Well Duque very much likes the disarmament and demobilization part of the agreement but the other four much less, and so he's introduced measures to the effect of reforming those parts which haven’t passed muster in Congress and so and you just pick and choose what parts of an agreement signed by the state to implement then then you are in effect trying to throw the baby with the bathwater.

12:21

Imran Garza: Richard, as an outsider when I was there a year ago, I found something that struck me was that there seemed to be two very different Columbias; there was the urban Colombia and the rural Colombia and people had very different views about what they wanted or how they perceived or experienced the past few decades. So, when they spoke about peace, they had different parameters. For people in the urban settings, it was it was one thing, and for people who lived in the rural areas especially, those places where FARC had an influence or an imprint, it was something fundamentally different. Is that part of the problem as well that we’re talking about two very different Colombias when we talk about peace?

13:00

Richard McColl: It goes a bit further than just rural and urban Colombia because of course you've got it so let's say young liberal urban Colombia who are of course in favor of peace. But if you take the referendum, for example, that of course failed, President Santos's referendum on the Peace Accords, the places that were most affected in the countryside in the rural areas by so many years of conflict were those who voted in favor of the Peace Accords. So, I mean you have different regions and different areas voting for distinct you know whether they wanted the peace accord or whether there against the peace accord. You'll have places like Antioquia where the former president and now senator Alvaro Uribe Velez is from and now senator Alberto Rivera Ellis is from voting almost blindly behind what he says and of course he's very much, you know against the peace deal.

13:56

Imran Garza: Right and that’s fascinating. Sergio Guzman how much appetite is there among Colombians if we were able to tell--to back Duque in being tough with these dissidents, whether they are the FARC splinter dissidents or ELN or others?

14:13

Sergio Guzman: Yeah, absolutely if there are terrorist attacks or if there are activities by these groups that suggest, you know, we’re backing conflict with these groups and then it's gonna affect civilians, sure a lot of the population in Colombia will be like “These individual members of the FARC are now out of balance”. However, I think that there is great respect both in the government and amongst the population to the ninety percent of members of the FARC who did demobilize who are concentrated in different zones in camps and who are looking to have a better future for themselves and their family. So, I think very much the individuals that abandon the peace agreement by virtue of this announcement or are non-grata in Colombia, but the individuals were reintegrating to a society that is very much willing to stand up for them.

15:10

Imran Garza: Right. Peter Hakim let’s bring in the Venezuela angle now. So, Duque blaming Maduro saying he’s supporting these quote "narco terrorists". Is Maduro fiddling-- is Maduro helping the dissidents and trying to destabilize Colombia.

15:29

Peter Hakim: It's very hard to sort through the evidence on this. I think there is movement of armed forces and armed insurgents between Venezuela and Colombia. I think Colombia provides something of an ideological tie to the Colombian guerrillas. But on the whole I think that Colombia’s problems go beyond the guerrillas. I mean they involve-- but there’s lots of old grievances, old battles. There's still a huge, you know, drug industry in Colombia. There’s illegal mining in Colombia. There’s a huge--in the rural areas illegal activity and poverty predominates so I don't think that much of the blame can be placed on Venezuela. I think this has been Colombia’s problem for 50 years, it’s still Colombia's problem. Certainly, it’s made worse if you know there's some support from Venezuela, but I think that should be seen as the central point.

16:41

Imran Garza: Okay and Sergio, this comes at an interesting time because the Wall Street Journal has documents which seems to suggest that the late ex-Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in the mid-2000s was attempting to sort of bombard the US with cocaine and he was working along with Colombian rebels in doing so to unsettle the United States back then. Now we have the claim that even though Maduro has got all his problems in his country, he’s still trying to unsettle the Colombians. Is this part of an internal dynamic where Duque has to demonize the other side, or does it check out is there something real here?

17:22

Sergio Guzman: No, I think it checks out. I think for a very long time we've all known the regime that Chavez started, and Maduro has continued is model in criminality, sometimes at the highest rank of the state and the military, who own the food distribution programs, control currency exchange. And to a large degree they have aided and abetted both the ELN and the FARC for a very longtime. Whether or not they want to inundate the United States with cocaine that’s an allegation that that is unclear, whether they have the capacity to do so. But is Venezuela functioning very much as a normal state yes, I think that that checks out.

18:07

Imran Garza: Richard is Venezuela making it worse in Colombia?

1809:

Richard McColl: Well, honestly the border between Colombia and Venezuela has always been so porous and because the relationship between the neighboring countries is that, you know, brothers and sisters. So, it is a problem, there's a problem with of all of these huge migrations coming back and forwards and of course the security that crossing a border for the ELN or the dissident FARC offer can you know can be offered by the Venezuelan state. It is a problem, it's a problem that Colombia doesn’t need right now.

18:42

Imran Garza: Peter Hakim, would they be thinking about plan B right now in Bogota? A plan for if this entire peace deal unravels?

18:56

Peter Hakim: I just don't know that. I presume some people are thinking about it. I think some people should be worrying about it. But by and large, I just don't see how this is going to go back to the pre-2016 era of, you know, a FARC force that could really do considerable, continuing damage and be such a powerful force to sort of influence the flow of politics in Colombia as well. No, I don't see that, and I think also you--one has to remember that the United States is very focused on Venezuela at this point and a lot of the pressure on Colombia to take hard stand toward Venezuela at this point comes I think from Washington.

19:59

Imran Garza: Hmm. Sergio is that true? Is that pressure coming from Washington, whether John Bolton is around or not, is the pressure still coming from Washington?

20:08

Sergio Guzman: Well, I was just gonna mention that, under Noom and SC director O'Brian, we still don’t know what his position is on Venezuela. We do know Trump was very hawkish on Venezuela and presented Trump with a number of options because I believe the administration thought this was a low-hanging fruit it turned out not to be as much. But the United States is this is a much larger geopolitical game that is at play in Venezuela that both includes Russia and China and their interests in that country in the form of huge investments and large debts. And so those countries are not gonna you know, let the United States and Colombia you know, have their way on Venezuela so this this is a much more global issue.

20:54

Imran Garza: Right. Elliott Abrams, the Trump administration’s special envoy to Venezuela, telling reporters the regime in Caracas seems to be fermenting this kind of activity in essence turning over parts of the country particularly to the ELN. So, we have a clear idea of where this administration stands on this issue for now. Gentlemen, this is where I thank you all for your geopolitical analysis. Richard McColl, Sergio Guzman, and Peter Hakim, I thank you very much for joining us here on the Newsmakers. Because I want to take a slightly different angle now and bring in one more guest. In San Salvador is Christian Visnes. He's the Norwegian Refugee Council’s country director for Colombia and the surrounding region Christian I'm sure you listened into the political debate of Colombia and also, we touched on the issues with Venezuela and the stuff on the border. As you look at the humanitarian situation, is your organization preparing for things to get worse.

21:53

Christian Visnes: Yes, actually we are. And that’s what’s striking in this discussion, is the difference between the political reality and the humanitarian reality or the life that people are facing in those regions affected by conflict. If you go and ask people living in rural areas particular, along the border to Venezuela or along the Pacific coast, one of the worst areas, they would say they have seen no traces of the peace. I think the peace agreement is still alive but, for many people their reality the everyday life is armed conflict. They’re living in the midst of an expanding now armed conflict and I saw you had images from ELN and what we have seen this these years is that Eilen has actually expanded their --as it was the second-biggest guerrilla and now easy guerrilla that is present in many places.

22:53

Imran Garza: Okay. So, we have these vacuums left behind in Colombia, right; when these are the places that the FARC once governed places where other dissident groups had a presence the government didn’t have much of a presence and Colombia is trying to figure out how to how to fix this and how to make things better. And then to add to all of that along the border, you have Venezuela in economic turmoil in political turmoil and refugees flooding across the border. How much worse does it make the situation in those areas?

23:27

Christian Visnes: It is a situation that feeds into each other. Basically, you had areas that were govern by the FARC and they were demobilized, more than 90 percent are still committed to that. Those area was not filled by government forces when they were demobilized and became by that destabilized, because that other groups moved in, splinter groups, new groups moved in. And then you have the situation on the Venezuela side where you have a country in deep crisis which is also destabilized. So, you have two countries actually in a very destabilized region and you see the conflict now filling and flowing into new areas where years before we hadn't seen. If you look at, for example, the number of internally displaced in Colombia. Since 2017, you see the number is slowly rising again and we expect this year it will be more than 150 thousand people internally displaced in Colombia, which is one of the measures of what is really going on in those areas affected by armed conflict.

24:33

Imran Garza: Can we technically formally describe it as a refugee crisis?

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Christian Visnes: The – Venezuela crisis you are referring to now?

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Imran Garza: Especially on the border with Colombia?

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Christian Visnes: Well, I think we both have an internally displaced crisis and then we have a high number of people that are in need of what we call international protection, which should be then people that could access a refugee status. But all of the people that that live in Venezuela, which is extremely high numbers, between three to five thousand people every day leave Venezuela and come into Colombia, not all of them could be considered refugees. But clearly there are a number of them that that should be able to access refugee status, and most of them are considered migrants vulnerable migrants, but we believe that a number of them should also be able to access refugee status, not only in Colombia but around in the region where they are choosing to go.

25:35

Imran Garza: Okay Christian Visnes from the Norwegian Refugee Council. It was fascinating getting your perspective on the issue. I thank you very much for joining us, and of course earlier on Peter Hikam, Sergio Guzman, and Richard McColl. So, we’re keeping a close eye on the situation in Colombia. I thank you very much for joining us here on the Newsmakers. Buh-bye.

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