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Colombia steeped in gloom even as Farc prepares to disarm

Weapons piles remain intact and peace process plagued by setbacks

Gideon Long, Andean correspondent, in Bogotá

Colombia's largest leftwing guerrilla group will formally disarm this week after more than half a century of conflict, but the country is still awash with weapons and its people feel increasingly gloomy about the historic peace process.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc) and the government will mark the end of the disarmament process in what is likely to be a highly symbolic ceremony in the town of Mesetas on Tuesday. President Juan Manuel Santos, who won a Nobel Peace prize for his efforts in clinching the peace deal, will attend.

The area around Mesetas, 120km south of Bogotá, was a Farc stronghold during a brutal 52-year conflict with the state in which about 260,000 people died.

But behind the fanfare and symbolism lie some harsh realities. Colombia is not yet at peace and the process has been plagued by setbacks and delays since it began last year.

For starters, Farc's disarmament is incomplete. The guerrillas have given up their handguns, rifles, machine guns and some heavy weaponry but their arms caches remain intact. The group says there are more than 900 of them, dotted around the country. Some of them are reachable only by river or foot through formidable jungle and mountain terrain.

The UN is tasked with finding the caches and dismantling them — a painstaking and dangerous job. It is supposed to complete the process by September 1 but few people believe it can. And the fear is that if the UN does not reach the caches soon, paramilitaries or criminal groups will.

Then there is the National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia's second-biggest rebel group. It has refused to disarm and, as if to remind the government of its muscle, kidnapped two Dutch journalists last week. In another part of the country, dissident Farc rebels have been holding a UN worker captive for over a month.

The ELN and the government have begun peace talks in Ecuador, but they are stalled and unlikely to resume soon.

In another blow to peace, a bomb exploded in a shopping centre in Bogotá on June 17, killing three people. No one claimed responsibility but it was a reminder of the bad old days, when guerrilla groups and drug cartels terrorised the country.

“A lot of Colombians are saying we’re heading back to the days of Pablo Escobar, and that’s reflective of a broader mood of defeatism,” said Sergio Guzmán, a Colombia analyst at Control Risks in Bogotá. “People feel the peace process isn’t working well and the situation is deteriorating.”

A Gallup poll in April found 57 per cent of Colombians felt the implementation of the peace process was going badly compared with 43 per cent last December. Asked how they felt about the situation in Colombia generally, 75 per cent said it was getting worse. Mr Santos, lauded abroad but resented at home, had an approval rating of just 26 per cent.

This is the president’s final year in office and he is determined to ram the peace process home before next year’s elections, when his former boss, now foe, Álvaro Uribe — a vociferous opponent of the process — will try to lever a rightwing candidate into the presidency and undo much of Mr Santos’ work.

And yet despite the political bickering and the sense of gloom, Colombia has much to be thankful for. The murder rate is lower than at any point since the 1970s and since the government and the Farc signed their accord last year, infringements have been negligible.

“The ceasefire has held,” says Sergio Jaramillo, Colombia’s High Commissioner for Peace. “You have to keep things in perspective. At times you despair, but I’m convinced that eventually people will look back and say ‘I never thought I would see the Farc disarm in my lifetime’.”

Even those who are sceptical of the implementation of the peace process acknowledge and welcome the fact that there is no turning back.

“I think the credibility of the peace process is in grave peril because so many people don’t believe in it,” Mr Guzmán said. “But despite that, it is irreversible.”

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