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## CFR Backgrounders

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### Colombia's Civil Conflict

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#### Introduction

Civil conflict in Colombia, one of the United States' closest allies in Latin America, has left as many as [220,000 dead \(PDF\)](#), 25,000 disappeared, and 5.7 million displaced over the last half century. A peace process between the government and leaders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FARC), the country's largest insurgent group, halted the violence in 2016. The process faces many challenges, including widespread public concern that the peace deal offers too much leniency to perpetrators of violence. But the deal's backers are hopeful that the early phases of demobilization, which are already underway, will lead to a sustainable peace.

#### History and Ideology

The FARC and the National Liberation Army (known by its Spanish acronym, ELN) were founded in the 1960s after a decade of political violence known as *la Violencia* (1948–58). Excluded from a power-sharing agreement that ended the fighting, communist guerrillas took up arms against the government. The FARC was composed of militant communists and peasant self-defense groups, while the ELN's ranks were dominated by students, Catholic radicals, and left-wing intellectuals who hoped to replicate Fidel Castro's communist revolution. The U.S. State Department has [designated](#) both groups as foreign terrorist organizations.

Although some say the ELN is more ideological than the FARC, the two have similar programs. Both oppose the privatization of natural resources and claim to represent the rural poor against Colombia's wealthy. Historically they have cooperated in some parts of the country and clashed in others.

Right-wing paramilitary groups with links to the state military emerged in the 1980s as landowners organized to protect themselves from the guerrilla groups. The largest paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), was on the U.S. State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations until July 2014. The group formally disbanded in 2006, but splinter groups, known as [bacrim](#) (short, in Spanish, for criminal gangs) remain.

#### Kidnappings and Acts of Terror

The FARC and ELN long used [violence, kidnappings](#), and extortion as sources of leverage and income. In one of its most high-profile kidnappings, the FARC abducted presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt in 2002. The group held her along with three U.S. military contractors until 2008, when Colombian forces rescued them and twelve other hostages. Other notable incidents include the FARC's [assassination](#) of a former culture minister in 2001 and its [hijacking](#) of a domestic commercial flight in 2002, during which rebels kidnapped a senator. Colombia's National Center for

Historical Memory estimates that guerrilla groups kidnapped [twenty-five thousand people \(PDF\)](#) between 1970 and 2010. More than ten thousand people, including nearly four thousand civilians, have been [killed or maimed](#) by landmines, most of which were planted by the FARC, according to the Colombian government.

## Drug Trafficking

In the early 2000s Colombia supplied as much as [90 percent \(PDF\)](#) of the world's cocaine, and the production, taxation, and trafficking of illicit narcotics provided the FARC with much of its revenue. Right-wing paramilitary groups were also involved in the trade, fueling conflict as the groups competed for territory. In 2009, the U.S. government reported that the FARC [was responsible for \(PDF\)](#) 60 percent of Colombian cocaine exported to the United States, and the U.S. Treasury Department froze the assets of several FARC members it identified as significant narcotics traffickers.

Estimates of the income the FARC derives from the sale of narcotics vary. In 2015, InSight Crime, an online publication that specializes in organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, estimated the figure [between \\$150 and \\$500 million a year](#). In 2012, Colombia's defense minister, Juan Carlos Pinzon, said it could be [as high as \\$3.5 billion](#).

The ELN, after shunning drug trafficking for many years as "antirevolutionary," recently turned to the trade. In late 2015, authorities found a massive [cocaine processing complex](#) run by the rebel group in western Colombia. Rebel groups have also reportedly turned to illegal resource extraction, including [gold mining](#), for additional income.

Coca cultivation [fell by more than half](#) between 2007 and 2012, and Peru surpassed Colombia as the world's leading cocaine producer from 2010 to 2014, according to White House figures. However coca production is again on the rise in Colombia, with 2015 production levels nearly on par with those from 2007. Experts attribute this to the Colombian government's decision to [halt aerial spraying of coca crops](#) due to health concerns, as well as moves by the FARC to encourage coca cultivation in hopes that greater cultivation would give them more leverage in rural development programs.

"The government programs will be in areas where there is coca, so one interpretation is that those who grow the most coca [will get the most government benefits](#)," Jorgan Andrews, former director of the narcotics section at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota told the *Washington Post*.

## Plan Colombia and Uribe's Crackdown

In 2000, U.S. lawmakers approved Plan Colombia, an [aid package](#) that aimed to help the country combat guerrilla violence, strengthen its institutions, and stem drug production and trafficking. The White House stated in February 2016 that Plan Colombia was "instrumental in paving the way" for subsequent peace talks, but some critics [have regarded U.S. funding](#) for the country, which has amounted to more than \$10 billion since Plan Colombia's start, as the cause of potentially thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of internal displacements. Washington has also sought to bind the two countries closer through expanded trade. The United States is Colombia's largest trading partner, and a bilateral free trade agreement between the two entered into force in 2012.

In the 2002 presidential election, Colombians elected Alvaro Uribe, who pledged to take a hard-line stance against the guerrillas. As his administration cracked down on the leftist rebel groups, violence fell dramatically: homicides fell by 40 percent and kidnappings by 80 percent [during Uribe's first term](#), but international rights groups accused Uribe's administration of [violating human rights](#). Colombian courts have [investigated](#) allegations that Uribe has links to [right-wing paramilitary groups](#), but no evidence of direct links has been found.

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Many experts say that the Uribe administration's crackdown laid the foundation for peace talks. By the time the FARC agreed to negotiations, in 2012, its ranks had fallen to **some seven thousand** members, down from sixteen thousand in 2001, according to government estimates. The group's founder and leader, Manuel Marulanda, reportedly died of a heart attack in 2008, and military **raids** have claimed other high-ranking **officials** in recent years.

The ELN, which operates mainly in northeastern Colombia, is **estimated to have about two thousand members**, down from **as many as five thousand (PDF)** in the late 1990s. After several years of informal talks, the government of Uribe's successor, Juan Manuel Santos, **announced multiple times** in 2016 that it would **begin formal negotiations** with the ELN, but the dialogue was **delayed to early 2017**. Many experts, citing continued kidnappings by ELN members, have questioned the group's commitment to reaching a truce, and Santos's government said that the **ELN's failure to release** former lawmaker Odin Sanchez, who has been detained since April 2016, was the reason for postponing negotiations.

### **Making a Deal for Peace**

Santos, who served as defense minister under Uribe, was elected president in 2010, and his administration began formal **peace talks (PDF)** with the FARC in 2012. The governments of Chile, Cuba, Norway, and Venezuela acted as hosts, mediators, and observers to **the Havana-based process**, which became the fourth round of talks between the government and the rebel group in thirty years.

Negotiations centered on **five principles (PDF)**:

- future political participation of FARC members,
- rebels' reintegration into civilian life,
- illegal crop eradication,
- transitional justice and reparations, and
- rebel disarmament and implementation of the peace deal.

The peace agreement calls for the FARC's roughly seven thousand **rebels to gather** in twenty-three hamlets across the country and turn in their arms to a UN commission. The accord also outlines a plan for the military to clear landmines scattered throughout the countryside, which have killed or injured eleven thousand people over the last twenty-five years. Santos has appealed for international support to finance development, public services, and justice institutions in former conflict areas. Most of that support has so far come from the United States. In June 2016, the U.S. House appropriated **roughly \$490 million in aid (PDF)**, with a portion of the funds dependent on Colombia reaching a peace deal.

As part of the agreement, Santos's administration also pledged to spend billions of dollars in **rural areas**, which many Colombians—including the rebels—say have been long neglected. Many hoped the investments, which experts said could cost **between \$80 and \$90 billion** over the next ten years, would create economic alternatives to the drug trade.

The two sides reached a cease-fire in mid-2016, and Santos and FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño (popularly known as Timoshenko) **signed** a peace treaty in the Caribbean city of Cartagena in September 2016. A week later Colombians narrowly rejected the accord in a referendum, sowing uncertainty over peace prospects.

The vote appeared to reflect public unease that the rebels were being treated too leniently after decades of committing serious abuses. "This vote shows you that while Colombians may want peace, they are very divided as to how that peace should be achieved," **said Gustavo Arnavat**, a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Government and FARC leaders had agreed to establish a **special tribunal** made up of Colombian and international judges to collect testimony and evidence, oversee reparations, and mete out punishments to those found guilty of serious crimes. Opponents of the peace deal found the proposed tribunal system to be insufficient, as it did not allow for prison time for former rebels. Some argued it would amount to amnesty for human rights violators. The U.S.-based monitoring group Human Rights Watch said leaders were "right to celebrate" peace, but the agreement would nonetheless "ensure that those responsible for atrocities on both sides of the conflict **escape meaningful punishment**." The rejected deal also would have allowed for former FARC members to create a political party and run for elected office. Uribe led the campaign against the peace accord, saying it was tantamount to "**surrender**."

Following the defeated referendum, Santos and FARC leaders said the cease-fire would remain in place while the two sides resumed negotiations. Santos maintained that significant changes to the rejected agreement would not be likely. "We can't start all over again with a clean slate," Santos said.

In December 2016, Colombia's Congress approved a revised peace agreement, which was not put to a national referendum. Under the new terms, the FARC pledged to hand over all of its assets for reparations, and the punishments that former FARC members would face, short of prison time, were better defined. The provision allowing political representation remained, but former members were banned from running for office in former conflict zones. Two weeks after the agreement won congressional approval, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of a government plan to expedite its implementation. On December 28, Congress approved an amnesty for perpetrators of minor crimes, an element of the deal the rebel group **demanded be in place** before they demobilized and disarmed. Former FARC members then began moving to designated demobilization zones, marking the start of the first stage of a government plan to achieve full disarmament by April 2017.

## Additional Resources

This **[Congressional Research Service paper \(PDF\)](#)** outlines Colombia's peace negotiations.

President Juan Manuel Santos describes Colombia's path to peace in his December 2016 **[Nobel Peace Prize lecture](#)**.

This *Washington Post* article explains how the Colombian government **[weakened the FARC](#)**.

The National Center for Historic Memory's report **[¡Basta Ya! \(PDF\)](#)** (Enough Already!) chronicles Colombia's decades of civil conflict. (In Spanish.)

Bogotá-based journalist John Otis assesses the FARC's current role in illegal drug production, taxation, and trafficking in this **[Wilson Center report \(PDF\)](#)**.

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