

Peace deal with Colombian gunmen on track

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BOGOTA, Colombia - Colombia's peace process with far-right paramilitary gunmen was back on track Monday, following days of tensions caused by a court ruling that tossed out part of a peace pact, Interior Minister Sabas Pretelt said.

The constitutional court last week overturned elements of a law dealing with peace talks. Interior Minister Sabas Pretelt said misunderstandings arose because the decision was poorly explained.

In explaining its ruling, the court initially appeared to suggest those paramilitaries who had been convicted in absentia before the peace process started would have to serve their entire sentences, which would mean decades in prison for some commanders.

Paramilitary leaders called it a serious blow to the peace process.

Later, however, court magistrates explained that the commanders would have to serve no more than the five to eight years as established in the peace deal.

"The situation really became critical, but I have personally clarified to the paramilitaries that the peace deal will continue," Sabas Pretelt, minister of interior and justice, told radio station W on Monday.

The right-wing paramilitaries were created in the 1980s by landowners and drug-traffickers as a private army to battle leftist rebels. Since peace negotiations started in 2003, more than 30,000 of them have demobilized. The process has helped bring Colombia's homicide rate down to a nearly two-decade low.

Pretelt said that the government would continue meeting with the paramilitaries.