

COLOMBIA

Cease-fire talks lagging

Colombia's attempts to negotiate a cease-fire with leftist insurgents have been strewn with obstacles, and the current outlook is far from bright.

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BOGOTA --

Peace talks between the Colombian government and the country's second-largest leftist guerrilla group have entered a critical stage as the two sides discuss the terms of a cease-fire and the broad outline of the rebels' political future.

At same time, however, both the government and the National Liberation Army or ELN, have threatened to break off talks if no agreement is reached in the current talks, now in their sixth round in Havana.

Adding to the complications, the ELN recently has been fighting the larger Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, while the government is struggling with a scandal connecting it with illegal right-wing paramilitaries.

The government has not made a public statement since the current round of talks began in late April, but the ELN issued an ominous communiqué May 1 that hinted at the difficulties.

"It's clear that we are speaking two different languages," the declaration reads. "And peace is conceived from different sides and [with] very different proposals."

SINCERITY DOUBTED

Prior to the talks, Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo said the government wasn't sure if the ELN was serious about the talks, which have been going on for a year and a half.

"Since we started the negotiations, every six days the ELN has kidnapped someone in Colombia," Restrepo said in a press conference. "This is unsustainable."

Colombia is enmeshed in a four-decades-old civil war, fueled by drug money and kidnappings and complicated by shifting alliances that often depend more on survival and monetary concerns than ideology.

The ELN, with an estimated 2,500 fighters, is the country's second-largest rebel group, behind the FARC, which is estimated to have some 15,000 fighters and has refused to negotiate with this government. The ELN and FARC have battled each other in recent months, leaving hundreds dead throughout the country.

The reasons for the fighting are many, analysts say, including a struggle to control drug- trafficking and arms- smuggling routes as well as political differences, which have been exacerbated by the ELN's talks with this government.

"The role the ELN has as an insurgent movement is pathetic," the FARC's Caribbean Bloc said in a communiqué in February, before accusing the smaller rebel group of ambushing and killing several FARC fighters and commanders.

"All these events make us think that the ELN is deeply infiltrated by military intelligence," the communiqué added.

In an interview with the BBC last month, ELN leader Pablo Beltrán insisted there was no "fight to the death" with the FARC, and that the two sides were negotiating a political settlement.

Beltrán also seemed cautiously optimistic about the future of the talks with the government. He spoke of a temporary cease-fire, releasing kidnap victims, and the ELN's possible political future.

"Those of us who are negotiating need to show that there's a willingness to create an environment for peace, even if it's temporary," he said.

But other ELN leaders seem less enthusiastic. Antonio García has been a no-show at previous talks in Havana, and it is not clear if he is attending the sixth round.

Some ELN units appear to be striking out on their own, recruiting new fighters, trafficking drugs and allegedly allying with a major drug trafficker, Wilber Varela, for weapons and money to help them stave off the FARC attacks.

PROBLEMS MOUNT

The government is also facing problems. Several of President Alvaro Uribe's political allies in congress are in jail, accused of working with the paramilitary groups. Authorities are also investigating Uribe's former handpicked security chief for alleged connections to paramilitaries, and one opposition senator has alleged that Uribe's family also had connections to the illegal groups.

The distractions may prove too much for either side to focus successfully on the Havana talks.

"This negotiation is littered with mistrust," said León Valencia, a former rebel turned political analyst.