

Cuba, a Rebel Group's Birthplace, Becomes a Refuge

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HAVANA — Dinner with the guerrillas was a civilized affair. A chauffeured Mercedes, courtesy of Cuba's government, delivered guests to the villa where the leaders of one of [Colombia](#)'s most resilient rebel groups often stay when they are in town.

Francisco Galán, a former seminarian with a long white beard, poured glasses of Añejo de Caldas rum and distributed cigarettes from a pack of Marlboro Lights. Before sitting down to a meal of red snapper, a treat commonly reserved for visitors with hard currency, Pablo Beltrán, the lead negotiator for the National Liberation Army, or E.L.N., offered a toast: "To Cuba."

To Cuba: a fitting tribute to a nation that nurtured the insurgency from its origins here in the 1960s and has since become something of a refuge for the aging rebels, who occasionally come here for medical care.

It is also, paradoxically, the place where the revolutionaries are trying to peacefully end their movement after decades of violent struggle against a string of pro-American governments. This is one of the only places where the E.L.N. feels safe enough to engage in cease-fire talks with Colombia's government.

"Havana is a place where things move in slow motion in comparison with other cities," said Mr. Beltrán, 53, who went from university studies in petroleum engineering to bombing oil pipelines and kidnapping employees of foreign energy companies. "It's the perfect place to negotiate with tranquillity and contemplate what comes next."

In this largely threadbare city, away from the threat of assassination or even random crime, the relative luxury the E.L.N.'s leaders experience speaks volumes about how much has changed in Colombia and Cuba — and perhaps how much they themselves have changed. Relations between Colombia, led by a conservative government, and Cuba are warming despite their very different political philosophies.

And after years of isolation and conflict, the rebels seem content, once the day's negotiations have ended, to visit this city's jazz clubs or stroll along the seawall without having to look over their shoulders.

The E.L.N.'s leaders, including Mr. Beltrán and Mr. Galán, are mainly men in their 50s who have spent their adult lives entangled in war, in mountain encampments or in prison cells. Mr. Galán, whose real name is Gerardo Antonio Bermúdez, travels here from Medellín, where he has been living since his recent release from prison.

Mr. Beltrán, who was born Israel Ramírez Pineda, travels from rebel camps in the border region between Venezuela and Colombia. Juan Carlos Cuéllar, another E.L.N. commander at the negotiating table, comes on furlough from his prison cell on the outskirts of Medellín.

The E.L.N. came together when priests intoxicated with the ideas of liberation theology allied with Colombians who had studied in Havana in the early years of Mr. Castro's revolution. Together they pledged to dislodge Colombia's moneyed elite.

The E.L.N.'s current leader, Nicolás Rodríguez, who uses the nom de guerre Gabino, joined the group in the mid-1960s as a teenage peasant.

The group emerged as a favorite of Mr. Castro's among foreign guerrilla movements, along with the insurgency in Bolivia that Che Guevara was guiding at the time of his death in 1967.

For years afterward, Cuba did what it could to help export its revolution to Colombia, including allowing the rebels to use Cuba as a listening post. The E.L.N. was decimated by counterinsurgency forces in the 1970s, but it regrouped by focusing attacks on foreign-owned oil infrastructure.

In more recent years, Cuba took on a different supporting role, as battles with right-wing paramilitaries and other leftist rebels eroded the E.L.N.'s strength. And Colombia, which broke off diplomatic relations in the early 1980s over Mr. Castro's support for rebel groups, changed its stance with Cuba. President [Álvaro Uribe](#) of Colombia, the Bush administration's closest ally in South America, has improved ties with Cuba, and the two countries have been in talks over how to lower trade barriers.

The E.L.N.'s commanders now visit less for ideological reasons than for practical ones. They are sometimes clandestinely flown here for medical treatment. Manuel Pérez, the Spanish-born priest who preceded Mr. Rodríguez as the E.L.N.'s leader, was reportedly treated here for complications from hepatitis before his death in 1998 at age 54.

And then there are the various rounds of cease-fire talks. For those, Cuba has offered to act as host, but has also provided the rebels with the villa in El Laguito, a gated area with pre-revolution homes meticulously preserved for use by foreign dignitaries.

So far, peace remains a distant goal. The recent talks ended late last month on a note of bitter discord. The E.L.N. rejected a proposal for its leaders to be transferred outside Colombia. (Another round of talks has been taking place in Venezuela this week, but details have not been made public.) Cuba's future role as a base for talks, meanwhile, remains uncertain.

And so the E.L.N. soldiers on. It is not Colombia's largest rebel group, a distinction that belongs to the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#). Nor is it especially active, having avoided in recent years actions like its 1999 hijacking of an Avianca jet.

The group, branded as terrorists by the United States, still finances itself through extortion and kidnappings, holding an estimated 200 captives, and says it has 5,000 members; private military analysts say that may be an exaggeration.

“The E.L.N. is neither at war nor at peace,” said León Valencia, a former E.L.N. commander who writes on security issues in Bogotá.

So much of the commanders’ lives is lived in a gray zone: for those still wanted by Colombian authorities, orders for their arrest are suspended to allow them to travel to the negotiations.

Havana may be the only place where the rebels escape the feeling of limbo. Here, they can almost be regular visitors. Besides visiting jazz clubs, they sometimes stroll the streets of Old Havana, where the background chatter in Russian no longer belongs to Soviet advisers, but to sunburned beach enthusiasts.

Sometimes, after dining in their villa, the guerrillas walk around the nearby lake, lined with mansions that once belonged to Cuba’s elite. On occasion, the Colombian government’s negotiators, who stay in the same complex, have the same idea and the two delegations bump into each other.

“We greet each other cordially,” said Mr. Beltrán, “before getting on our way.”