

The Colombia Armed Conflict - A Review Until 2020

Suzana Lampreia^[0000-0002-9216-9174]

¹ Portuguese Naval Academy - CINAV, Base Naval de Lisboa, 2810-001 Almada, Portugal

suzanalampreia@gmail.com

Abstract. Colombian armed conflict origins remote to the beginning of 20 century, and even after the 2016 peace agreement, it is a reality. Colombia's armed conflict existed by the force of the armed hand of the FARC and other insurgents' groups, they financed themselves in illegal acts like arms and drug trafficking, abductions, coercion, and extortion. Till 2020, several FARC dissidents have returned to the guerrillas because they doubted Colombian political power defense their interests. This paper objective is to give a perspective of origins of the armed conflict in Colombia, and its development up to 2020. To expose the conflict, the facts and literature will be related demonstrating the conflict dynamic and involved actors. To support state-of-the-art during the 2016 peace agreement implementation, it was proceeded to interviews to some ex-observers that provided humanitarian support in the United Nations. In the end, it is possible to understand better the conflict, and it was made some reflections, which can contribute for possible solutions for the conflict.

Keywords: Conflict, Colombia, Guerrilla, Armed

1 Introduction

The nature of armed conflicts began to change in the 21st century. The United Nations (UN) has continually faced numerous and recurrent conflicts, that is, they do not disappear and are prolonged in time with the consequent loss of human life. The typical example of these conflicts is the trafficking of drugs, people, and minerals. Another factor that generally aggravates them is the simultaneous involvement of military forces from other countries [1].

The Colombia Armed Conflict (CAC) is considered to be part of Kaldor's "New Wars"[2], in which acts of violence occur essentially "against civilians and tend to be lasting rather than extreme" [3], in which armed groups, regardless of winning or losing, are interested in the condition of war for economic and political reasons [4].

In 2016, an agreement for the peace process in Colombia was signed between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP), or more simply FARC [5]. This process brought hope for the elimination of the conflict, however other challenges present themselves.

This study will focus essentially on the origin of the conflict, on the FARC guerrillas, on the perception of some UN observers who were on a mission in Colombia in

2016 and 2017, and on reflections and possible solutions for the conflict given the context.

Over the years, the CAC has been influenced by other countries, particularly the bordering ones, as there are groups of guerrillas concentrated in these regions, particularly with Venezuela and Brazil. It should also be mentioned that relations with Cuba continue to be in the news, as this country has served as a cradle for peace talks. However, for reasons of study limitation, the work will focus essentially on Colombia without developing, in detail, external relations, with countries like United States of America (USA).

2 The Colombia Armed Conflict

The Colombia armed conflict is part of the so-called “New Wars”. In these wars, the actors were the Armed Forces (AF) of the States, and it was fought for geopolitical interests or other ideologies. In “New Wars” the actors do not represent the State, they are private security guards, mercenaries, paramilitaries and/or warlords who fight for reasons of identity. Normally “New Wars” take place in areas where State power has been put into question and, therefore, there is no sovereignty. The reasons of political identity differ from the ideological ones, as the former make claims based on groups while the latter are clear systems of ideas [6].

The CAC's origins go back to the civil war triggered by the assassination of Liberal party leader Jorge Gaitán in 1948 and later to the US-backed anti-Communist repression in rural areas in which liberals and socialists fought conservatives. This war called “La Violencia” took place from 1948-1964 [7].

In 1964, the ex-liberal peasants, due to repression and a climate of revolt, fled to remote areas of Colombia and, under the leadership of Manuel Marulanda, formed the FARC-EP, also emerging the National Liberation Army (ELN – *Exército de Libertação nacional*) [8]. Since then, despite the peace agreements signed, the fragmentation of the groups and the emergence of dissident elements caused small conflicts that spread throughout the territory [9]. This occurrence and persistence of conflicts over time is directly related to the guerrillas, but also to the territory itself, mountain and forest, and the lack of communication routes between regions and villages.

The FARC was known as the People's Army and was Colombia's largest insurgent and guerrilla group posing a threat to peace that killed thousands of people [10], acting essentially for economic reasons. The FARC had an army with 20,000 combatants, which included a high number of women and children, and the ELN had 4,000 combatants [11]. A curious fact is that 40% of the FARC were female elements.

Other guerrilla groups in Colombia emerged simultaneously with the FARC, and others even later. These groups have become more dangerous and more difficult to control and are spread across Colombia [12]. The income and source of survival of

the FARC and other guerrillas derived and derive fundamentally from drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion [12].

The president of the pre-agreement, Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), was against the peace process with the guerrillas, as he believed that negotiation was only possible after the military intervention weakened the guerrillas' will to fight, and, therefore, ordered the bombing of the fields they occupied. His beliefs were based on previous fruitless economic, political, and social negotiations [8].

With the presidency of Ruan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), the 2016 peace agreement was signed, and later, he would receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In the strategy for the peace agreement with the FARC, President Santos introduced a change in the profile of the Colombian Armed Forces. These abandoned the counterinsurgent structure, and, specifically, the army was reorganized under the concept of multi-mission force, to be used in the internal peace process [13].

Currently, the government works to comply with the peace agreement, but warlords carry out acts of war on locals and others who try to impose their will. Apart from the violence of President Uribe's actions towards the FARC, it is considered that his methods were not the best strategy to bring peace to Colombia.

In the 2016 peace agreement, it was defined that the process of disarmament and integration of the FARC would be carried out with a monitoring committee of government and FARC-EP representatives, associated with an international mechanism, in this case the UN, which would contribute to the guarantee the implementation of the final agreement. Some of the issues on the agenda in the agreement were the following: the promotion of gender equality, the eradication of poverty and satisfaction of the population's needs, the restoration of victims' rights, the regularization of properties, the right to food, the participation of communities, and the protection of reserve zones [5].

Colombia is a country very rich in gold and other natural resources and has a vast territory with a large rural population, where the means of communication (for example: telephone, television, etc.) do not reach, making difficult the process of eradicating dissidents from the FARC and other active non-governmental systems [10].

The main actors till 2021 in the CAC was the following: the Government, the ELN, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL – *Exército de Libertação Popular*), the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC - *Autodefesas Gaitanistas da Colombia*) and the former FARC eastern bloc structures. The latter being the part of the FARC that does not accept the peace process. For reasons of article study limitation would not be detailed.

3 Perception of conflict – UN observers

The UN, as an organization with powers conferred by the founding Charter, may act in crises and armed conflicts [12], like CAC. Since the beginning of the signing of the peace process between the Government of Colombia and the FARC in 2016, many has been sending UN-represented observers to the FARC's Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) peace mission in Colombia.

The first UN mission in Colombia was the disarmament of the FARC and was led by militaries wearing civilian clothes on the ground identified by the UN vest. The second mission is still ongoing and involves the integration of FARC members into the community. This last mission is led by civilians but still has various militaries from other Nations participating.

This chapter presents the perceptions of the conflict by two observers who participated in the FARC disarmament mission, in different regions.

3.1 Humanitarian support – the Southwest

The observers' duties included traveling to villages to inform the location of the FARC camp, and the intention was to integrate members in the region with new economic activities such as agriculture. On the trips, the Colombian police escorted the UN observers, but inside the FARC camps, the FARC protected the observers.

The first interviewee (E1) observed that the presence of an international entity such as the UN was an asset in mediating the conflict, to eliminate possible friction between Government, Colombian Army, and the FARC; the nationality of the observers and the functions in which they were engaged should also be considered, this for historical reasons related to the country and the worldwide affirmation of the countries of origin of the observers. It was considered that having observers for too long in the same region can compromise their mission and security. So, periodic observer's rotations or substitutions seems to be positive; it was found that in the second mission - the reintegration of the FARC -, the leadership was made by civilians, and however, it was necessary to keep the military because the FARC has greater acceptability in the conversations.

By the difficulties of Colombia peacekeeping, E1 had personally precepted: the gap between the cities and the villages in the interior regions is big, sometimes there's no conditions of habitability; three times a year the cocaine leaf grows, without care, they only took herbs to get to the plant, and the drug traffickers go to the places to get the drug by helicopter, if it was vegetables (ex.: lettuce), they had to pay for transport, for example a canoe to go to the nearest village to sell in the markets; kids didn't have to go to school, now, in mostly places, they have to go to school and sit down most of the day, so many want to give up.

3.2 Humanitarian support – the Northeast

The interviewee in the second interview (E2) perceived that there was always a climate of tension during the period of disarmament, due to the criminal acts carried out by the FARC. However, in the local inhabitants and, fundamentally, the peasants interacted better with the FARC, which made it difficult for the local government to function. The FARC elements hoped, at the end of disarmament, to form a political party (Força Alternativa Revolucionaria do Comum – FARC), with the aim of guaranteeing their families conditions like in the big city, Bogotá; on the part of the FARC, he perceived the existence of a genuine desire to abandon the guerrilla life, so the peace process was a personal and with real commitment.

For the problem of society integration from ex-guerrilla people, E2 had perceived the next: upon arriving at the place, the observer found that people from FARC did not know how to behave in Occidental society; in other way was always a climate of tension in the cities because there have been FARC crimes against the urban population that the people did not forget; however, in the interior, the fact that the peasants were left to themselves, it was easier for the FARC to interact with this population and create ties even of hierarchical ascendancy; with the peace agreement, the exchange was for the FARC (including the military and their families) to be integrated into society and to be able to form a political party, and to have living conditions for the families.

4 Analysis and Perspectives on Conflict

By the year 2020, some guerrilla groups were active in Colombia and other warlords emerge that threaten the peace of the populations [15].

In 2018 and later in 2019, a news item appeared [16] from the Reuters agency, stating that 31 guerrilla groups formed by former FARC members had emerged. Many dissidents returned to the use of weapons and drug trafficking, due to the lack of opportunities for economic gains in other sectors, which included the number two of the FARC at the time of the beginning of disarmament, Ivan Marques.

4.1 Analysis of the current conflict

To mitigate eventual dissidents, in the case of the FARC, with the peace agreement and as they had different ideals from the existing parties, they created their own party, as a legal way of contributing to the power of the State in the future, as was expected from the observer E2.

In the 2018 elections, the president became Ivan Duque Márquez, from the Democratic Center party, the party of former president Uribe. The FARC, as a party, by votes, did not have a seat in the congress, however they guaranteed seats as part of the peace agreement. But suddenly some key elements in the formation of the FARC disappeared, allegedly murdered, then other key members went into hiding, making sporadic public communications [7].

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, other weaknesses about the peace agreement emerged. Before the country's capital, Bogotá, registered the first case of COVID-19 in March 2020, armed groups were once again consolidating their influence in areas previously hardest hit by the conflict. With delays in supporting legal trade due to the pandemic, the illicit trade in narcotics has found the ideal environment for its development [17].

The fact of the violence post-conflict occurred is usually attributed to the increase of organized crime after the peace agreement in 2016, it is used to preserve the authority of locally dissidents' other hand the land privatization led to an exclusive access to a rich Colombia territory and also contribute for prolonging the conflict in time [18].

Currently, Colombia is considered to have small guerrilla groups with little affirmation and fully organized groups that are the current actors recognized by the Government and that hold some subnational power in rural areas, referred to in chapter 2. These recognized actors, due to their characteristics, can be called "Warlords".

4.2 Columbia resolution reflections

Some investigators had demonstrated that the interventions of Human Rights Organizations (HRO) enhance the "commitment to criminal accountability for acts committed during conflict". [19].

For the integration of ex-FARC persons in the labor community it was found that an "inclusion model" and a "compassionate/trust-oriented leadership style" may be the basis for the success of it [20]. In rural zones people start to recognize how the coffee production can contribute for a more sustainable environment and contribute for a stable peace building on their regions [21].

DDR are important even after conflict settlements in order to maintain the conflict eradication and preventing eventual terrorist action from dissidents of the original groups [22].

A strategy to maintain peace building in rural zones was also found to be the development of tourism programs diminishing the social difference between cities and rural zones but it was found the lack of government presence in rural zones [23].

From the interviews carried out, it is considered that the peace process in Colombia can fail if it is not consistent over time. The participation of an internationally re-

known external actor, such as the UN, will be an asset in helping to end the conflict. Given that, given the nature of the interviews and Mary Kaldor's vision, it is considered that the intervention should be armed and legitimized by the United Nations Security Council.

The speed of decision-making is a factor that can bring advantages but is not decisive in the resolution of armed conflicts [24]. State resources are used in the mediation of armed conflicts, between state military forces and non-state insurgent actors, to balance the latter's flexible and adaptive behavior. These resources serve to identify and understand changes in the strategic environment to respond quickly to incidents or to prevent them. The International Crisis Group, given the pandemic, and the trend then to aggravation of conflicts with the guerrillas, should consider the next measures: make efforts to comply with the agreement of the process of 2016; put pressure on the Colombian Government to encourage the voluntary abandonment of cocaine production rather than to force eradication; to work with the Colombian Attorney General's Office to stimulate criminal investigations into the death of social leaders and ex-combatants, as well as the massacres of civilians; and encourage the Government to carry out a ceasefire with the ELN (already carried out in April 2020) and other insurgent's [17].

To mitigate future armed conflict, some authors had found important to implement environmental and ecologic measures [25].

The development of communication routes with the rural areas of the country can be an easier means of projecting the guerrillas, but also a means of better information and the protection of populations.

In 2020 the populations were isolated and, without communications to report the guerrilla attacks. Some guerrillas imposed their own rules locally, and as there was no economic growth, FARC members were in a clear economic recession [27].

Therefore, Nilsson and Marín suggest that it is necessary for local and isolated communities to build their legal security strategies. One measure can be the telephone and railway lines of communication can help to mitigate the lack of security [26].

Teachers and professors are a pillar for post-conflict peace keeping, the government should involve educational community in the process of society new reality adaptation [27].

Another important factor is that Colombian women have been outside some of the peace negotiation assemblies in Colombia, but it is important that they are permanently involved in peace negotiation groups in the sense of their contribution to peace in general and the post-war consequences, which sometimes is translated into sexual violence by armed actors [28].

The building of a peace environment in Colombia could be lead with a special jurisdiction considering the participation of the various actors: the guerrilla members, the Government, the victims and the population and the intervention of UN [29].

5 Conclusions

The CAC is an armed conflict that caused thousands of deaths in Colombia, often due to acts of coercion, revenge, or strategic actions to eliminate guerrilla groups or attacks by them against the Government and its allies. In addition to ideological struggles, the country is the largest producer and exporter of cocaine leaf in the world, and part of its economy is managed by drug traffickers, who also assert themselves through violence. CAC is a type of conflict that fits into the “New Wars”, with multiple actors, constantly changing and extending over time.

In the present work, deep bibliographic research was carried out to raise the state of the art and accomplish the aim of conflict understanding in its various aspects: origin, development, peace process and reflections about the solutions for the eradication of the conflict.

With the world pandemic COVID-19, some actions of the peace process stagnated or took place later, which delayed some prospects for a solution.

The perception of the interviewees enriched the state of the art on the CAC and provided the signatory with the realistic perspective of those who were on the ground in contact with the FARC, the Colombian Police and Army and the Government.

To contribute for CAC better management humanitarian support and the creation of local security systems on rural remote zones. It also is fundamental rural people education, access to information technologies, creation of road infrastructure, energy production, tourism development and environment protection. Only with society development, it will be possible reinforce prosperity and well-being of the population residing in Colombia rural areas.

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