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## Colombia-Farc Peace Talks: A Status Update

A recent agreement on rural land reform might suggest that talks between Bogota and the FARC are making progress, but Antonio Sampaio isn't so sure. He argues that conflict over land ownership is a real possibility and that some local FARC leaders remain as committed as ever to their decades-old struggle.

By Antonio Sampaio for ISN

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There has never been such a high level of optimism among Colombians about the possibility of a peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc). On 26 May, the negotiations in Havana that were announced last year produced an agreement on rural reforms – the first of five broad topics on the agenda. The agreement came after six months of talks, a longer-than-expected period which showed the complexity of the negotiators' task. This complexity stems from the fact that a serious attempt at land reform involves a deep transformation of the political economy of rural Colombia. The negotiators, however, showed a willingness to compromise on difficult issues in order to reach a deal that will substantially benefit the Colombian economy.

The [deal](#) tackles an issue that has been at the core of the Colombian conflict, dating back at least to the 1960s. Although the statement released by the two sides in Havana was not very detailed, it does include [measures](#) to distribute land to peasants and to provide development and productivity assistance. This involves a shift away from a rural economy based on large properties concentrated among powerful landowners to a more diverse scenario with more room for small farmers.

The demand by small farmers for more access to land and more support from the government has traditionally been impeded by the structure of land use in Colombia, which revolves heavily around animal husbandry, particularly of cattle. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [estimated](#) in 2009 that 76.8% of the rural territory in Colombia was devoted to raising livestock. Land dedicated to this activity, which is less productive per hectare than raising crops, grew by 29% between 1999 and 2009, whereas cropland shrunk by approximately 20%.

One of the ways the government plans to pursue land redistribution is by [forming](#) a 'land bank', with a register of all rural areas that are unproductive or that were seized illegally. This process of redistribution, with the accompanying promise of infrastructure development by the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos, is a landmark in the history of the conflict. After all, land was the founding principle of the Farc insurgency in the 1960s. Since then, however, the structure of rural Colombia has become even more complex, setting the scene for a possible clash with powerful economic interests. These patterns provide the context for the mission specified in the joint statement released in Havana, of starting 'radical transformations' in the Colombian countryside.

**A clash with big business?**

The government is contemplating the coordination of land redistribution on a massive scale, and has already been the target of fierce criticism from cattle ranchers and sectors of the political opposition in Congress. The President of the Federation of Cattle Ranchers, for example, José Félix Lafourie, has [criticised](#) the deal, claiming that the rural model proposed by the Farc is 'anti-business' and means 'going back decades in rural development'. Underlying opposition to the deal is fear of the chaotic [structure](#) of land ownership in Colombia, which involves a high degree of informality and incomplete official databases. This means that the deal designed to end one longstanding conflict might result in other types of conflict, over land ownership, which would test the patience of both sides after a peace deal. The other side of the coin is the potential increase in the productivity of Colombia's agricultural sector, especially because the signing of a peace deal with the Farc would push rural development and infrastructure programs onto the government's list of priorities.

As the guerrillas eye integration into the Colombian political process, they have increasingly turned their attention to the changed economic structure of rural Colombia. Alongside cattle ranching, large-scale mining projects, now a major economic activity in the country, have frequently emerged as an issue in the discussions in Havana, to the displeasure of the government's chief negotiator, Humberto de la Calle. The issue first raised eyebrows in Colombia on the very first day of the peace talks, in Oslo on 18 October last year, when the head of the guerrillas' negotiating team, known as 'Iván Márquez', dedicated one-third of his speech to [criticising](#) mining projects conducted by multinationals, calling them 'a demon of social and environmental destruction'. This led to a quick rebuke from de la Calle, who said that 'the development model of Colombia' was not on the negotiating table. The guerrillas, however, have associated themselves with opponents of the extractive industry and have even incorporated the cause into their political narrative, adding it to the list of injustices they aim to correct through armed struggle. In the state of Antioquia, the National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia's other leftist guerrilla group, even [announced](#) in February an alliance with the Farc against 'mega-projects of mining exploration' and energy, 'which impoverish the people and the environment'.

Although the mining issue was noticeably absent from the joint statement on rural reforms, Farc negotiators made it clear that they have not forgotten about it. The guerrillas' spokesperson, alias 'Ricardo Téllez', told the Colombian political website [La Silla Vacía](#) that the deal 'closes the agricultural frontier', avoiding the 'poisoning' of the land by large mining projects'. He was referring to a brief passage of the statement which says that 'areas of special environmental interest' will be protected. Téllez's comments show that opposition to large-scale mining is not limited to some isolated Farc fronts, but is now central to the guerrilla's political narrative.

As promising underground mineral deposits frequently overlap with agricultural lands, the two issues - land reform and the extractive industry - have become intertwined. The size of the territory dedicated to mining in Colombia has [surpassed](#) that for agriculture. But the fact that Farc negotiators have recently refrained from publicly calling for the review of the country's economic model points to a willingness to conduct a democratic debate about the issue in the future. This is, perhaps, the most important lesson from Havana: that the guerrillas are willing to pursue their agenda of political change in a negotiated way, including holding back on radical demands such as those previously called for by 'Iván Márquez.'

### **But will the guerrillas fall in line?**

The guerrilla leaders now face the challenge of explaining the message from Havana to the broader network of jungle insurgents. Many Farc fronts have aligned themselves with the opponents of the extractive industry, and may feel especially passionate about this cause. This is the case for many of the fronts operating under the Iván Ríos Bloc of the Farc, in north-west Colombia. The Farc, just like the ELN, have stepped up attacks against the energy infrastructure that supports foreign direct

investment. Explosive attacks against oil pipelines [increased](#) 89% in the first four months of 2013, in comparison to the same period last year. By putting entrenched issues, such as the structure of resource exploration, on hold, Farc leaders will test their authority over their ranks as well as the commitment of some local fronts to the peace process.

The task of enforcing a possible peace accord throughout the Farc ranks faces the additional obstacle of a command and control structure weakened by more than a decade of heavy government offensives. Groups attacking infrastructure and the extractive industry are used to receiving extortion payments from companies, especially foreign ones, in order to guarantee the safety of their employees, equipment and supply chains. Extortion, alongside the exploration of informal mines and drug trafficking, provides comfortable revenues for guerrilla fronts, which now operate with a high degree of autonomy. Government intelligence points to several guerrilla fronts operating heavily in these areas. Moreover, many of the local front leaders belong to a new generation, with only a weak connection to the Farc's ideology and leadership.

The deal reached in Havana tackles a broad range of rural issues and may provide an important accomplishment for Farc leaders to showcase to their rank and file. Many crucial details of this first agreement are yet to be revealed, but the progress so far demonstrates the willingness of both sides to compromise. It is significant that the Farc negotiators gradually acquiesced to a list of tangible proposals on rural reforms and seemed to refrain from attempts to put the deeply entrenched issue of the extractive sector on the table. Attacks against companies and infra-structure related to this sector have been one of greatest causes of damage to the Colombian economy stemming from the armed conflict.

As negotiations slowly advance in Havana, the challenge of keeping the guerrillas' behavior cohesive becomes more urgent. This involves not only accommodating several political/ideological demands, but also overcoming gaps in the command and control structure. As the government will have to manage competing claims and interests in order to redistribute land, the guerrillas will be called upon to overcome the fragmentation of their operational structure and to leave issues that are central to their political narrative off the table. Both sides of the negotiating table have committed themselves to a complex - yet promising - restructuring process.

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