



APPEL DE GENÈVE GENEVA CALL

Geneva Call in the Press

Colombia: Landmines on the ELN-Government Negotiating Table

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Havana, Dec 22 (IPS) - The question of antipersonnel landmines could be included on a future humanitarian agenda for the civil war in Colombia, where these deadly weapons claim more than two victims a day on average, according to the international organisation Geneva Call.

The complex landmine issue was discussed by representatives of the National Liberation Army (ELN), the second largest rebel group in Colombia, during a meeting in the Cuban capital with Elisabeth Reusse-Decrey, the president of Geneva Call, and Mehmet Balci, the organisation's director for the Middle East and Colombia.

Geneva Call, which receives financing from the Swiss government and the European Union, advocates a global ban on landmines.

Reusse-Decrey and Balci were invited by the ELN to talk about the issue with Antonio García, the guerrilla group's second-in-command, on the occasion of his visit to Havana, where he met Dec. 16-21 with Colombian High Commissioner for Peace Luis Carlos Restrepo.

"The exchange of views was quite productive" and "we were able to explain the ELN's policy on the use" of landmines, García said in a press conference Wednesday, in response to a question from IPS. The insurgent said his organisation adhered to international standards on the use of landmines.

"We are using these explosives almost exclusively in direct combat," said García. He added that it was logical for the issue to be dealt with among the problems involving the humanitarian conduct of the actors involved in Colombia's four-decade armed conflict.

"An agenda to discuss and analyse the issue will be designed" as part of the exploratory talks with the government, he said.

In an interview with IPS, Reusse-Decrey and Balci said the ELN agrees that efforts should be made to reduce to a minimum the impact of landmines on the civilian population, although the group defends the use of the explosives to defend itself from the Colombian army's superior weapons.

Balci said "they assured us that they have changed the way they use landmines, to reduce the humanitarian impact to a minimum. This means that the weapons are operated by remote control, and that when the fighters leave the place, they take the landmines with them. There has been a change in attitude towards this problem."

Antipersonnel landmines, mainly manufactured in the mountains of Colombia, and other explosives are the most effective and lowest cost weapons used by the insurgent groups. An estimated 60 to 70 percent of landmine victims in Colombia are members of the military and police.

Also involved in Colombia's civil war, besides the 5,000-member ELN, are the 18,000-strong Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the extreme-right paramilitary United Self- Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), and the government forces.

The meeting in Havana was the first time that Reusse-Decrey and Balci have met with an ELN military chief. "The conversation took place in a very open climate. We saw that they are willing to increasingly sensitise their combatants on the need to limit to the utmost the personal impact (of landmines)," said Reusse-Decrey.

The president of Geneva Call explained that her organisation was seeking to keep open the possible options for dealing with the problem in a country in conflict, where "all of the armed actors, official or irregular, have sown mines that have caused many victims."

"On one hand, it is better if there is a process favourable to the talks between the parties on landmines, for the issue to stay on the agenda, for it to be discussed by both sides," she said.

But at the same time, Geneva Call is interested in continuing to deal with the question in a bilateral manner, independently of the exploratory talks between García and Restrepo.

"If (the exploratory) process were to stall tomorrow, we would hope that the same thing would not happen with the question of landmines," said Reusse-Decrey, who added that landmines are not only a problem in the conflict but can also serve as an opening to eventual peace talks.

"Common action on this issue could help restore confidence, trust and cooperation between the different parties," she said.

The activist also pointed out that the Colombian government had ratified the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction - the landmine ban convention - adopted in Ottawa, Canada in 1997.

The delegates of the right-wing government of Álvaro Uribe and the ELN agreed to meet again in the Cuban capital in late January, with the aim of continuing to work towards formal peace talks.

A joint communiqué issued by García and Restrepo at the end of the nearly week-long exploratory talks stated that one of the central focuses of the late January meeting will be "the construction of an agenda for peace negotiations."

Restrepo said the talks had taken place in "a constructive, cordial and frank climate" that made "advances" possible. But he declined to give an idea of possible topics on the agenda for the late January meeting.

For his part, García said "This first meeting was a symbol of what the search for a different route for Colombia should look like."

The dialogue between the ELN and the Uribe administration was closely followed by diplomats from Norway, Spain and Switzerland, as well as representatives of Colombian civil society.

Although the ELN and FARC were both founded in 1964, the two groups have very different origins. The FARC, which has deep roots in peasant struggles going back to the 1940s, was formally created by the Communist Party, while the ELN was inspired by the Cuban revolution as well as Roman Catholic liberation theology, and many of its members are urban intellectuals.

The ELN admits that a large part of its funds come from kidnapping. But unlike the FARC and the AUC, it is not involved in the drug trade.

The AUC paramilitary umbrella group, which has close ties to drug traffickers, is currently involved in demobilisation negotiations with the government, and thousand of its members have laid down their arms.

The United Nations and leading human rights watchdogs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch blame AUC for the great majority of atrocities committed in Colombia's armed conflict.