

# VOICES FROM THE SOUTH



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## Peace as the Fruit of Justice Social Organization and the Peace Process in Colombia

*On March 20th, negotiators from Colombia's government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group closed another round of peace talks in Havana without reaching a much-anticipated deal on one of the peace talks six primary points. In a joint communiqué released earlier this month, the two sides indicated substantial progress: "We have advanced in the construction of an accord on the following issues: land access and use; unproductive lands; formalization of property; agricultural frontier; and protection of [smallholder] reserve zones." Yet, the lack of deal before the Easter recess has left many civil society and ecumenical organizations in Colombia feeling unnerved.*

*In this month's "Voices from the South," we present two voices from Karibu partner The Programme for Ecumenical Accompaniment in Colombia (PEAC). The first article, from Rev. Milton Mejia, reflects on the situation on the ground for many in Colombia. The second, written by Blanca Lucia Echeverry, provides concrete suggestions for how to strengthen and secure the peace process today.*

### The Situation on The Ground

By Rev. Milton Mejia, PEAC

In our work as an ecumenical community to construct a true peace in our country we have experienced the harsh realities of a war that impacts millions of our citizens. They suffer forced displacement from their communities, threats, persecution and many more forms of violence, all of which destroy human dignity and prevent them from enjoying abundance of life.

We have experienced this pain and suffering in our own churches, as many members of our worshipping communities have been displaced, threatened and murdered because they were com-

mitted to the defence of human rights, committed to the accompaniment of communities seeking justice, reparations, and non-violent means to achieve peace.

Faced with this harsh reality, we are convinced that the only way to overcome this cycle of violence, which has continued for more than 50 years, is by working for conditions which will make possible a negotiated end to the armed conflict which has gone on in the country for all this time.

An agreement to end the armed conflict between the guerrilla groups and the government would help greatly to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, to reduce



Photo: PEAC "Ecumenical Accompaniers" from Mexico, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic in San Onofre, Colombia.



the level of violence and allow all of us as citizens to feel less afraid and more confident in our ability to construct a true peace for Colombia.

It is because of this conviction that we in the churches and ecumenical sectors in Colombia have expressed our support for the peace dialogues between the Colombian government and the FARC currently continuing in Havana.

Over the course of these many years we have learned that peace is a process, a process which must be constructed out of common initiatives and common experiences in our local communities. A process in which we as human beings learn to live in such a way that we are truly reconciled with each other and with God's creation. For this to be possible, at the very least there must be from the parties:

- Protection of human dignity and the dignity of creation, with guarantees provided by the States, FARC, and civil society.
- Reparations paid to the many of victims of violence and the creation of public and private sector plans to overcome the poverty and

social exclusion which are the daily reality of the majority of Colombians

- Rejection of all forms of violence, and creation of mechanisms for our citizens to come together to resolve social and political conflicts through means of dialogue.

- Strengthening democratic participation by all the various social and political factions, so that we can live and work together as a reconciled society. In this endeavour, it is important to recognize the particular ways in which the traditional indigenous and afro-Colombian communities are organized.

For our churches this means that we are called to contribute to the process a spirituality which makes paramount the respect for and protection of life, to see that the many ways in which we express our humanity and organize ourselves are manifested and shared.

In this way, as churches, we will be able to contribute to a lasting peace, a peace which will be the fruit of justice, respect for human rights and participation of the wide diversity of our social factions and communities. ■

**“The successful outcome of the negotiations depends on a true proactive role of the parties to include the broad spectrum of social and political forces in Colombia in the process.”**

### Perceptions of the Peace Process from Civil Society

By Blanca Lucia Echeverry, PEAC

When we read the current information arising in the media about the peace process being held between the Colombian government and the FARC in Havana, it is easy to detect a sort of “syndrome of national optimism.” Both parties, as well as the media, use language such as “a visible scenario of political relationships” and “substantial progress” to describe the status of the talks.

This is a good step forward, but there are still substantial gaps in the process that affect the people on the ground.

One critical gap is that the current peace talks do not include a discussion of a ceasefire, nor for any interim agreement on the humanitarian dimension of the conflict. Although the parties are sitting around a negotiation table in Havana, it is in fact likely that the violence will worsen over the course of the process of the talks.

Additionally, the talks neglect to cover a number of critical issues related to the conflict. For example, the talks do not include suggestions for social reforms, whether profound or even superficial.

There is nothing about stopping armed attacks, nothing about re-

ducing drug trafficking, nothing about prisoner exchanges or the release of kidnapping victims, and nothing about humanizing the conflict.

Analysts of the peace process are in agreement that it is precisely these points described above that would actually strengthen the process and an eventual Agreement. If the objective of the process is in fact how it is expressed, “to terminate the conflict”, including such concerns would in fact protect the process, not derail it as some have said.

Civil society in Colombia (i.e. the social organizations, associations, political parties, popular movements, communications media, private enterprise, professional groups, unions, churches, NGOs, and citizens in general) are configured in many ways with different experiences and understandings of the conflict.

It can thus be said that the successful outcome of the negotiations depends on a true proactive role of the parties to include the broad spectrum of social and po-

litical forces in Colombia in the process. A successful peace negotiation must therefore be accompanied by the participation of civil society in order to enrich and deepen the negotiations, and to address the deficiencies in representation of all groups in the negotiating room in Havana.

There are currently a few initiatives aiming to bring in the voices of civil society to the peace process. The Joint Peace Commission of the Senate and House, with technical assistance from the United Nations System in Colombia (particularly the UNDP), has established a program to attempt to bring the voices of civil society to Havana. They are coordinating nine regional discussion tables “to contribute to the end of the conflict”.

The purpose of these discussion tables is to promote the participation of the different social sectors in order to bring feedback to the parties on three of the five issues being discussed in Havana, namely:

- An integrated plan for agricultural development

- Political participation
- Alternatives to cultivation of illegal crops (i.e. coca)

The problem with the current model is that while civil society is invited to participate, we have been given little information of the progress of what has or has not been achieved so far in Havana. We are left not knowing what proposals have been put on the table, and how our input is being used -- or not used.

We are convinced now more than ever, however, that active participation of the civil society is crucial to have a lasting peace agreement. It is especially important that the participation of the victims of violence is secured, so that those who have been excluded may be heard.

These things are needed to make sustainable peace and true reconciliation possible. ■

To learn more about PEAC, and their work in Colombia, [click here](#).

