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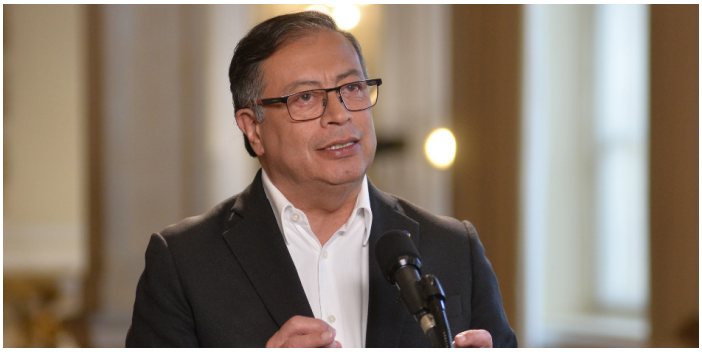
THEDIALOGUE

FEATURED Q&A

Will Peace Take Root During Colombia's Talks With the ELN?



Colombian President Gustavo Petro's government this month began its third round of peace talks with the National Liberation Army, or ELN, rebels. // File Photo: Colombian Government.

Q Representatives of Colombia's government and the National Liberation Army, or ELN, rebel group restarted peace talks on May 2 in Havana. It is the third round of talks between the two sides since President Gustavo Petro's government relaunched negotiations last November, three months after taking office. In late March, the ELN killed nine Colombian soldiers in an attack that threatened to derail the peace talks, weeks after the two sides had completed their second round of discussions. How likely is the third round of talks to be successful? What are the ELN's demands, and what are the main impediments to reaching a peace deal?

A Erika Moreno, professor of political science and international relations at Creighton University: "Although Colombia has struggled to find peaceful resolution to a complex internal conflict that has raged for more than half a century, the 2016 peace accords provided a new hope to those who sought an end to decades of violence. However, a failed referendum and uneven approaches to peace negotiations have left the state searching for new ways to achieve peace with armed actors such as the Cuban-inspired National Liberation Army, or ELN. Recent efforts to resume bilateral peace talks between the ELN and the state were triggered by President Petro's vision of creating a national peace strategy that could create a path for current ELN combatants to quickly return to civilian life. However, the ELN appears to prefer a broader discussion to address deep-seated concerns surrounding the nation's democratic development and the need for social justice. So, while Petro sees this moment as apt for folding the ELN into

Continued on page 3

TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Guatemala's El Periódico to Cease Publishing Today

Guatemalan newspaper El Periódico, whose founder was arrested last year and which is known for reporting on corruption, said it will cease publishing today.

Page 2

BUSINESS

Venezuelan Gov't Issuing Gas Export Licenses to Eni, Repsol

Venezuela is set to issue licenses for gas exportation to Italy's Eni and Spain's Repsol.

Page 3

ECONOMIC

Argentina Plans New Measures to Fight Inflation

Argentina's government on Sunday announced a package of measures to fight the country's triple-digit inflation rate. Economy Minister Sergio Massa has also been attempting to persuade the International Monetary Fund to advance the disbursement of loans.

Page 2

Massa // File Photo: Argentine Government.

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POLITICAL NEWS

Guatemala's El Periódico to Cease Publishing Today

Guatemalan newspaper El Periódico, which is known for reporting on government corruption, announced Friday that it will cease publishing today, the Associated Press reported. Last November, the newspaper laid off 80 percent of its staff and stopped printing its newspapers, moving its operations completely online, Reuters reported. "With deep sadness, we are forced to stop the daily edition of El Periódico," the publication's directors said in a statement. The newspaper's founder, José Rubén Zamora, was arrested last July and was charged with money laundering and other crimes, the AP reported. He has said the charges are an effort to silence an independent news outlet that has been critical of the government of current President Alejandro Giammattei. Prosecutors accuse Zamora of money laundering in connection with a $30,000 deposit that he asked another person to make for him, the AP reported. Relatives of Zamora have said the money was a donation from a supporter to keep the newspaper running after advertisers left amid government pressure, the AP reported. Zamora has said he did not deposit the money in the newspaper's account because the donor wanted to remain unidentified. Nine other El Periódico journalists and columnists are also under investigation on allegations of obstruction of justice, Zamora has said. "Our team resisted 287 days of persecution, political and economic pressure," the newspaper said in a statement in reference to the time that has passed since Zamora was jailed. Four of Zamora's defense lawyers have also been arrested, Reuters reported. Human rights activists and the Guatemalan Association of Journalists have said the case is motivated by Zamora's efforts at reporting on corruption, the AP reported. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists has said the newspaper and its staff have faced harassment. "The Guatemalan government is responsible for this situation," said Carlos Martínez de la Serna, a program director at the organization, the AP reported.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Argentina Planning New Measures to Curb Inflation

Argentina's government on Sunday announced a package of economic measures designed to curb the country's soaring inflation rate and support its currency, Reuters reported. The initiatives include interest rate adjustments, new deals with creditors and additional interventions in the exchange market, the wire service reported. The economy ministry said the measures will include rate increase, which an official source told Reuters would be 600 basis points. Such a move would bring the benchmark interest rate to 97 percent. The rate hike will take effect today, the unnamed source told the wire service. Argentina's rate of inflation in April hit 109 percent on an annual basis. The country also faces eroding confidence in its currency and falling reserves of foreign currency, which threaten the government's finances, Reuters reported. Argentina's current inflation rate is the highest since 1991, the Financial Times reported. Economy Minister Sergio Massa has also been attempting to persuade the International Monetary Fund to advance the payment of loans to which it has agreed with the government. However, the IMF is unlikely to bring those disbursements forward ahead of Argentina's presidential election in October, which the ruling party could lose. Massa also plans to travel to China in late May in order to seek expanded use of the renminbi in foreign trade. In April, the South American country activated a currency swap with China, which allowed it to pay for more than $1 billion worth of imports in the Chinese currency. Over the past year, the IMF has allowed Argentina more flexibility in targets to boost its reserves and lower the level of money-printing in an effort to keep its $44 billion loan program with the

NEWS BRIEFS

Honduras to Launch Talks on Trade Deal With China: Foreign Minister

Honduras will soon launch talks in order to reach a trade agreement with China, Honduran Foreign Minister Eduardo Reina told reporters Friday, Reuters reported. "It will be good news and [offer] opportunities for access to our products to China," Reina told reporters in Tegucigalpa.

Ecuadorean Lawmaker Driving Impeachment Re-Elected Assembly Head

Independent lawmaker Virgilio Saquicela was re-elected as Ecuador's National Assembly president on Sunday, Reuters reported. Saquicela took over as president last May and has been a key figure driving the impeachment proceedings against President Guillermo Lasso. The assembly voted to pursue the impeachment process on Tuesday in a session convened by Saquicela, with 88 of the 116 legislators present voting in favor. "This parliament has to be the counterweight against power," Saquicela said.

Deforestation in Brazil's Amazon Falls 68 Percent in April

Deforestation in Brazil's Amazon rain forest fell 68 percent in April as compared to the same month last year, preliminary government data showed on Friday, Reuters reported. It represents the first significant drop in deforestation since President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva took office in January. Lula's predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, had cut environmental protection efforts, reducing funding and staff, as he sought to promote farming and mining. "The environmental agenda has been resumed, but we know time is necessary for the results to be reaped," said Daniel Silva, a conservation specialist at WWF-Brazil.

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country on track. [Editor's note: See **Q&A** on inflation in Argentina in the March 29 issue of the Advisor.]

BUSINESS NEWS

Venezuela Issuing Gas Export Licenses to Eni, Repsol

Venezuela is set to issue licenses next months to Italian energy company Eni and Spain's Repsol to export natural gas, said Oil Minister Pedro Tellechea, who also heads state-run oil company PDVSA, Bloomberg News reported Friday. The South American country signed a deal with the European energy majors earlier this month, allowing for the export of natural gas liquids to other markets. The agreement enables Venezuela to promote natural gas exports, diversifying its exports beyond oil. "In the next few days, we will finish negotiating the LNG export license," Tellechea told the news service in an interview on Friday in Caracas. "Eni and Repsol are interested in growing in the area of gas in Venezuela. They had been waiting for seven years for the export permit for natural gas liquids, which we have just granted," he added. The start date of exports will "depend on the speed of the investment they will disburse," he said. Tellechea assumed his position as oil minister in March after a widespread corruption scandal at PDVSA involving billions of dollars in missing revenue led his predecessor, Tareck El Aissami, to step down. "PDVSA's operational and financial woes are longstanding given the loss of technical capacity, the default of the company, its militarization and politicization and, more recently, sanctions." Diego Rivera Rivota, a research associate at the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University, told the weekly Energy Advisor in a **Q&A** published April 7. "The lack of governance and diminished operational capacity has left PDVSA unable to reroute its oil flows without surrendering its ability to capture oil rents," he added.

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

a national pacification process that it had been excluded from in prior years, the ELN prefers to use its platform to address the social ills that led to its creation. While these are not irreconcilable positions, the ELN is looking for structural change that will take more time to design, implement and assess. So, the likely result is that these positions will prolong the peace process considerably and make success less likely in the short run."

Oliver Kaplan, associate professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver: "With criticism of President Gustavo Petro's Total Peace plan as being overly ambitious, it would help to have a 'win' to maintain support. Any round of peace talks is promising in that it opens channels for dialogue. But will the Cuba round of talks with the ELN will be 'successful'? Success is likely if the goal is to sustain and stabilize the process and make incremental progress—both sides have reason to benefit from an eventual deal. Yet, a comprehensive agreement arriving out of the blue is less likely. Like the previous FARC talks, the ELN process has weathered several shocks. On April 15, 2015, 11 soldiers were killed in a FARC attack, and the parties were fortunately able to come back to the table. Most recently, the ELN disavowed the existence of a truce and killed nine soldiers. The ELN process is still relatively young, but the resumption of talks in Havana is an encouraging sign of resilience. The ELN has voiced some demands to date, and the 'Mexico Agreement' from the previous round of talks set forth an agenda including issues of democratic strengthening, development programs, civil society participation and attention to victims. The announcement of these points can encourage commitments to achievable outcomes and shed light on possible yardsticks of progress. But talk is cheap, and it's time to see some initial agreement on specific terms. Still, structural limitations to the peace process remain, such as the need to strike a justice balance between societal demands for accountability versus the ELN balking if punishments are too severe. With other armed groups waiting in the wings for their turns, the government may also be limited in terms of what it is willing to put on the table."

Jennapher Lunde Seefeldt, assistant professor of government/international affairs at Augustana University: "The third round of talks between the ELN and the Colombian government stands a better chance at achieving success than previous attempts. The ELN's delegate, Pablo Beltrán, has remarked that this time around all fronts of the ELN are on board so long as all parties demonstrate complete adherence to 'total peace.' In Cuba, both sides emphasized that the agreement must be followed 100 percent in order to win the trust and confidence of all Colombians. While ensuring the safety and trust of citizens is indeed a real concern, so too is the trust between the government, the military and the ELN fronts. A series of assaults from both the ELN and the Colombian military after the previous rounds of talks ended up fostering more distrust and violence. The trust issue also speaks to the ELN's decades-long demands for social equality and economic stability. The group's understanding that the government has been unable and unwilling to address social injustices has in large part kept the movement alive. The Colombian government needs to demonstrate unwavering willingness to adhere to 'total peace' alongside policy changes to address issues the ELN has with the government's capacity to institute meaningful reforms. One potential impediment to the success of this ceasefire is any lingering dissenters within some fronts in the ELN. The chain of command is somewhat unclear and incohesive, which has caused problems and misunderstandings in the past. Lastly, continued economic problems stemming

Continued on page 4

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FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 3

from covid, recessions and corruption will not placate the group or aid in the stability of the cease-fire."

Juan David Escobar Valencia, professor in the Center for Strategic Thought at Universidad EAFIT in Medellín: "Since no change has occurred in relation to the leaders, nature and objectives of the ELN narco-terrorist cartel (not 'rebel group'), past experience of multiple failed negotiation processes is a powerful indicator of what can be expected from the third and additional rounds to come. The ELN is a narco-terrorist cartel strengthened by the impunity agreement between the Santos government and the FARC cartel, as well as the Venezuelan dictatorship and certain conceptual affinities with the current Colombian government. If in the past, when it was weak, it was never really interested in an effective and quickly defined process, now, in a condition of strength, much less will it opt for something different. The ideological intransigence of its leaders, the economic boom in which it finds itself—which allows it to continue attacking the population and the military forces, as well as increasing its force footing, as evidenced by the increase in the forced recruitment of minors, makes it possible, more so than before, to slow down the talks and reinforce its position: it should be the country that surrenders, not them, knowing that the current government has committed part of campaign promises to said agreement. The ELN is not affected if the process is slow, unlike its 'counterpart.' The ELN's method of negotiation is a tropical version of the strategy used by the Kim dictatorship in North Korea: appear dangerous, even if not completely powerful, and lengthen the negotiation with periodic episodes of rapprochement and hostility to buy time and reinforce oneself."

> **"The ELN's method of negotiation is a tropical version of the strategy used by the Kim dictatorship in North Korea..."**
>
> **— Juan David Escobar Valencia**

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

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