The inauguration of the Ten Country Facilitation Commission, San Vicente del Caguán, 21 March 2001

Source: Miguel Solano / ANCOL

The role of the international community in Colombia

Augusto Ramírez Ocampo

Following the end of the Cold War, the international community has focused its efforts on searching for security and peace through the respect, protection and promotion of human rights, the defence of human dignity, the cultivation of economic and social equality and by adopting 'Sustainable Human Development' as a new paradigm. Colombia lags behind on this agenda, ranking 64th in the world according to the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report 2003. This situation, which partly explains the conflict, is compounded by the consequences of 40 years of first political, then social, and now degenerated and narcoticized violence, which impedes the full development of democracy and the complete guarantee and implementation of human rights and responsibilities.

While the Colombian conflict may not be the cause of all the country's ills, it does contribute in a decisive manner to the fact that Colombia is perceived as a problem country regionally and globally. The need to address the critical human rights situation, environmental ravages, the impossibility of adequately integrating into the globalization process, violent human displacement, and the global drugs problem, are only a few of the issues where the Colombian agenda coincides, fundamentally, with the international agenda.

However Colombia has been reluctant to accept the 'international community' as an actor in the solution to the armed conflict. When the National Conciliation Commission (CCN) first proposed this in 1995, many voices spoke about the primacy of absolute autonomy when dealing with an issue considered to be tightly linked to national sovereignty. Only recently has there been greater recognition of the growing interdependence of nations and an acceptance that, in addition to serious internal efforts, active collaboration with international organizations, friendly governments and NGOs is required in order to achieve peace.

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Background to international support for peacemaking efforts

There was limited international involvement in the pre-1998 peace processes. The guerrilla group M-19 had strong international links and managed to establish 'action centres' in Mexico and Europe. Socialist International witnessed the signing of the Political Pact between the M-19 and the government in 1989, as well as verifying the Peace Accords signed with the Popular Liberation Army (EPL).

Violence increased dramatically during the government of President Ernesto Samper. The state lost control of broad swathes of national territory that were dedicated to the cultivation, processing and production of illegal substances, affording an increased income for the rebels and the paramilitaries. The International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC) played an important role in promoting international humanitarian standards at this time. With the government's blessing, the CCN and the ICRC initiatives led to the first application of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in Colombia, resulting in the release of 72 soldiers and Navy personnel held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The internationalization of the conflict and peace process

Andrés Pastrana came to power under the banner of a politically negotiated solution to the armed conflict and a proposal for Peace Diplomacy. Faced with the 'internationalization of the conflict', that is to say a situation that began to be understood as a threat to the peace and security of the region and hemisphere, the Colombian government opted for an 'internationalization of the peace'. It invited the international community to understand and cooperate in finding solutions to problems resulting from both the causes and consequences of the armed conflict.

During the negotiations (7 January 1999 - 28 February 2002) an active international presence served to safeguard the continuity and development of this difficult process, supporting a political solution to the conflict. The international community attempted to influence the armed actors, informing them that their war tactics and financing by drugs, extortion and kidnapping defied agreed multilateral principles. They severely denounced the FARC's violations in

the demilitarized zone. Finally, they also provided technical and financial assistance to the negotiations and to conflict reduction projects.

During this period a more hopeful situation emerged: Colombian society, the government, and the international community declared that the peace process had to include the defence of human rights and international humanitarian law. At the same time they reinforced the urgency of short-term accords upholding civilians' immunity. A Group of Friends for Peace in Colombia was formed and a Special Advisor to the UN Secretary General appointed. The government also maintained in-depth talks with the US and there was even a fleeting meeting between the guerrillas and the Andean Group representative in the US State Department.

The Groups of Friends

The Group of Friends was created following an agreement between the government and the FARC. It comprised 26 friendly nations and the Special Delegates of UN Secretary General and the European Commission.

The group designated a smaller 'Facilitating Commission' of ten nations, with one representative each from Canada, Cuba, Spain, France, Italy, México, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Venezuela. The Commission's role was to coordinate six-monthly meetings with the wider group and stimulate their cooperation across different activities. They agreed that the Commission would act by consensus, have a coordinating country which rotated every two months, and act with the discretion and confidentiality proper to the work of 'good offices'. The Commission worked with diligence, supporting the process as a neutral observer, but in key moments taking up the functions of facilitator and even mediator, such as in discussions leading to the two last extensions of the demilitarized zone.

In the same manner and with the agreement of the government and the ELN, another Group of Friends was created, comprising Cuba, Spain, France, Norway and Switzerland. Their representatives were always present in the talks as facilitators and actively participated in numerous meetings in Colombia and Cuba. Alongside the UN, they offered technical assistance on crucial issues such as the regulation of the meeting zone in the Sur de Bolívar. The Group continues to exist despite the breakdown of the process and both the government and the autonomous Civilian Facilitation Commission have requested that the Group promote the resumption of talks aimed at establishing humanitarian agreements, and eventually the resumption of peace negotiations.

The United Nations

Since the UN Secretary General named his Special Advisor for Colombia, Jan Egeland, in 1999, the UN has played an important but diffuse role in the peace negotiations with both the FARC and the ELN. During the Pastrana administration, the parties accepted UN intervention, offering a semi-formal role that was neither facilitation nor mediation. This lack of definition meant that the Special Advisor's many efforts were at times ignored during the various breakdowns in the negotiations. Nonetheless, without this participation the negotiations would probably have been more short lived and current recognition of the need for international presence in the processes would not have been possible.

During his work, Jan Egeland was accompanied by James Lemoyne, who succeeded him in the position. He established in-depth contact with President Pastrana but had difficulties with the High Commissioner for Peace who offered very little information to the Secretary General's staff. The UN Special Advisor also coordinated the participation of other UN organs with regard to the peace process.

Neighbouring countries

Neighbouring countries have increasingly voiced concerns about the cross-border effects of the conflict. In particular Ecuador has received about 6,000 refugees and Venezuela and Panama have at moments suffered from the same effect to a lesser degree. Venezuela has also become the main corridor for illegal trafficking, as well as a destination for injured guerrillas and paramilitaries requiring hospital treatment. The Venezuelan government has however refused to contribute to interdiction efforts. Brazil, and to a lesser degree Peru have experienced problems relating to the drug trade and local guerrilla activity, and Ecuador has also recently been accused of allowing the supply of arms, munitions and explosives to the guerrillas and paramilitaries.

The regional insecurity generated by the conflict has galvanized various initiatives. The Colombian government has initiated bilateral and multilateral meetings to address the problems. The Andean Community (CAN) has initiated a systematic approach to an Andean security policy, formalized in the 'Lima Declaration' of November 2001. This approach is developed within the framework of efforts such as ending arms trafficking, some countries' attempts to reduce their defence budgets, intelligence sharing, multilateral actions, coordination and border development. In addition, some US$458.8m of US aid has been directed to supporting the affected

countries and the US Congress has recently approved US$697m for 2004 for the Regional Andean Initiative.

Other regional organisms and mechanisms have also made statements about the armed conflict. In May 2003, the Heads of State and Government of the Rio Group, composed of all Latin American countries, the President of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Haiti called on the UN Secretary General to use his good offices to 'promote with rigour a peace process in Colombia', exhorting the guerrilla movements to engage in dialogue. This call was supported in June by the OAS member states' meeting in the XXXIII session of the General Assembly.

Financing peace

By 1998 there was growing support for efforts to obtain financial resources for peacemaking, in a similar form to the hugely successful fund-raising for the Central American peace processes. Then, in response to a request by the Presidents of Central America in 1998, the UN Secretary General proposed a Special Coordination Plan (PEC) to support peace efforts in Central America, approved by consensus by an extraordinary Assembly of the United Nations. This plan committed $2 billion to debt relief, $2.2billion for special projects for the internally displaced, the reconstruction of sub-regional integration, institutional strengthening and democratization. The UNDP implemented the Plan over a five-year period and it is considered an excellent model of international cooperation.

Following this example, with the support of the Inter-American Development Bank, the Colombian government developed a project estimated at US$3 billion. It was to be administrated by the Peace Investment Fund and implemented over a three-year period serving as the 'Bank of the Process', providing alternative development to facilitate the eradication of drug-crops and assisting the 1.5 million internally displaced people. The Colombian contribution of US$1.2billion was raised through a special tax.

However, the Colombian government, with the support of the US, subsequently included the need to strengthen the Security Forces in this initiative. Their modernization was a necessity in order to recover the monopoly of force for the rule of law, the legitimization of the armed forces and the success of negotiations through a new balance of military power.

This led to the birth of Plan Colombia, which generated a strong reaction from the rest of the International Community, because of the weight of US military aid to Colombia, the Andean Region and the Caribbean. The US converted Colombia into an issue of national and regional security, epicentre of the war on drugs at the global level. It approved an aid package of US$1.3bn for 2000 and 2001, dedicated to supporting the government's offensive in the southern regions of Colombia, improving its capacity to decisively intercept the cocaine and cocaine-traffickers, and increasing the eradication of coca crops. Only US$323 million was dedicated to other objectives. Following this, a three-year extension of the Andean Trade Preferences was also achieved, and the Andean Trade Promotion Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA) was passed in recognition of the antinarcotics effort.

With regard to the treatment of the drugs trade and its influence on the internal armed conflict, the European Union (EU) and US applied clearly different criteria, with obvious consequences in the economic, social and political domains. The EU refused to contribute to the military budget and instead directed its support to the defence of human rights and International Humanitarian Law, and initiatives aimed at supporting the internally displaced and alternative development.

Despite these differences, the continuation of multilateral initiatives to fight the drugs trade is essential. The eradication of illicit crops is vital in cutting off sources of finance from the guerrillas and paramilitaries. This can be achieved through initiatives that combine crop eradication with alternative development. Efforts should also be made outside Colombia to reduce levels of consumption, end the trade of chemicals and halt the money-laundering activities taking place in rich countries (the majority of whom are members of the EU).

During this period there were also meetings of a group of potential donors (the EU, Norway, USA, Canada and Japan) under the banner of the Support Group to the Peace Process, in Madrid (July 2000), Bogotá (October 2000) and Brussels (April 2001). In the last meeting the Colombian government and the FARC were applauded for the advances made in the *Los Pozos Accord* and the preliminary Accord signed by the ELN in January 2001. The meeting also expressed support for the work of the UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor and acknowledged the increased support for the process from regional governments.

At the same meeting, the EU presented an aid package equivalent to Euro 330m over a five-year period, to be used according to four principal strategies: economic and social regeneration, institution strengthening and social development, (through humanitarian aid and integrated alternative development), the peace process and the fight against drugs. They also announced that Euros 45m

of EC funding would support projects like the 'peace laboratory' in Magdalena Medio. The EU has also insisted that the war against drugs must be tackled by both the producers and the consumers. It favours the manual eradication of illicit crops, and supports plans for alternative income-generation methods and to addressing social needs.

The Support Group had limited success in its principal objective of securing the support of other important donors for Plan Colombia, with the exception of some bilateral promises from the EU, Japan and Spain. Due to the paralysis of the peace negotiations, the Group as a whole has not met again but the EU and Canada have followed the United States' example in declaring the FARC and the United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (AUC) terrorist organizations, deepening their international isolation. They have also exerted constant pressure for the release of kidnap victims, giving particular attention to the case of former senator and presidential candidate Ingrid Betancur.

Current trends in international policy

Since 11 September 2001, the approach to terrorism in the Colombian context has changed in emphasis, particularly with regard to US assistance. The US has accepted that its military aid be used not only in the war against drugs but also in combating the FARC and the AUC, and only the EU continues to stand by its decision to not give any military aid.

President Uribe has maintained the momentum of Plan Colombia. The exchange of visits between US and Colombian figures such as the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defence and the Commanders of the Military alongside the fairly untraditional position of the Uribe Government in supporting the US intervention in Iraq, suggests that the resources requested by President Bush for national and regional security reasons will be maintained by the US Congress.

The role of the UN and Colombian responses

Despite his unwillingness to engage in dialogue with the FARC without a unilateral ceasefire, President Uribe asked the UN to intervene in the Colombian armed conflict on the day he took office, and asked for the presence of Blue Helmets to protect the displaced population from the inclemency of war. This was subsequently modified to a request for a Civil Accompaniment Commission to assist in the return of internally displaced persons to their place of origin. He also wanted to use such a mechanism to verify the negotiation process initiated with the AUC.

None of his recommendations has received a positive response from the UN.

Special Advisor James Lemoyne has maintained contact with the FARC for the purpose of organizing a formal meeting. This has not materialized because of UN demands that it take place outside Colombia (perhaps in Brazil), without the presence of other actors and without excessive publicity. Despite refusing the UN's offer to mediate, the FARC sent an open letter to the UN asking for an opportunity to make its case. It is not inconceivable that the UN could begin again to 'facilitate' the resolution of the armed conflict in Colombia if requested and accepted by the parties as the UN Charter allows. It could take advantage of the experiences accumulated since 1999 and offer an effective service to peace in Colombia.

The need to support the UN's work in Colombia and its office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights was one of the conclusions reached at a meeting in London on 9–10 July 2003 attended by ten governments and six organizations, including the UN, EU, and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Participants also expressed full support for the Colombian government's fight against violence and drugs, the search for a negotiated solution to the internal conflict, and the important role played by Colombian civil society. At the same time, donor countries expressed their concern regarding the humanitarian crisis, forced displacements and the serious human rights and IHL situation. They offered to reorientate their cooperation programmes and continue discussions in the next conference on donor coordination.

Challenges for the international community

In a conflict like the Colombian one, in a moment like the present, a solution is unlikely to be possible without the presence of the international community, understood as states, international organisms and civil society. Their participation is necessary in each of the distinct phases of a peace process, from the early contacts between the parties to create the necessary conditions for dialogue, to helping the parties during the negotiations, witnessing the signing of accords, verifying their implementation and accompanying the national reconstruction and consolidation phase. As was the case in Central America, the participation of the international community will be essential in the future administration of the peace to guarantee compliance with and the sustainability of the agreements.

Personal reflections

Jorge Otalora

Jorge was kidnapped by the ELN in north Tolima in 2001. He was freed after two months thanks to the intervention of the National Coffee Growers Federation, whom he has worked with for 19 years.

Kidnapping is one the most horrible crimes that can happen to someone. The privation of liberty either from minute to minute, hours, a day, a month, years, it's always in my mind and it's in the background any time something happens. It's like drowning.

These are people that have other objectives. Now the ideological objectives they had are no longer relevant nor is it what motivates them. I think that at this moment, undoubtedly, what motivates them is a common drug-trafficking cartel, pure and simple.

The government is obliged to be constantly looking for ways to make contact and to see how to reach them, to obtain the freedom of all those people retained for so many years. They are obliged to do that and to continue to insist and look, using all means whether at a national or international level. We need to wait and see if their counterparts will accept an intervention like that and at least give some kind of sign.

Santiago Chaparro

Santiago is 54. He has lived for 30 years on the streets in a poor area of Bogotá. He now works singing his own songs on buses.

In the sense that people are beginning to realize what a disaster this war is, and what a disaster intolerance is, I think that they are going to start to realize that peace is something we should find as quickly as possible, if not then when we do find it, there'll be no one to enjoy it.

There's a big problem, we know that there's a segment, quite a large segment of the population that maybe because they are sensitive to it do as much as they can to propose dialogue, to try to reach agreements, but I think there is a serious problem. We can do the part that corresponds to the state, either through voting, or through marches because we know that the state in one way or another has to listen to us, but the other side in the conflict, I don't know if any of what Colombia says to them about being tired of the war has ever gone further than their ears.

In this sense the problem is that everything that is done is sterile, it's like serenading a guest of honour who hasn't arrived.