

International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security, 8-11 March 2005, Madrid

From violence to voting: armed groups and peace processes

Panel summary

Non-state armed groups frequently enter political negotiations to reach peace agreements, yet the conditions that enable successful engagement remain elusive. The panel explored the case for engagement with armed groups and the impact of the 'war on terror' on peacemaking processes.

Former President of Colombia, Andrés Pastrana, outlined the multi-strategy approach his government adopted in response to the demand by the Colombian people to resolve the conflict with groups such as the FARC. This strategy included direct negotiations with the guerrillas, strengthening of the army, linking the international community into support for the process and tackling the impact of drugs on the armed conflict. This strategy was underpinned by a constitutional framework which enshrined the rationale of a right to peace and two additional laws, including a state of emergency to demilitarize areas and demobilize combatants, and the establishment of National Peace Council.

The presence of the international community was intended to push the guerrillas to move the process faster but it became clear that they were not ready or able to seriously negotiate. The value of keeping difficult negotiations out of the media spotlight was highlighted.

Alastair Crooke, Director of the Conflicts Forum in the UK highlighted two key dilemmas when thinking about engaging armed groups in a peace processes. Firstly, the challenge of negotiating when groups have committed atrocities or have utterly unrealistic demands. A willingness to talk allows expectations to be modified. Engagement is not the same as negotiation. The intermediary is often playing the role of a translator of meanings between groups. Furthermore, isolation and demonization can lead to increased violence.

Secondly the requirement by states for groups to give up their arms

before entering into a process of talks. It was stressed that this requirement does not recognize the reality of the situation, the trauma of communities or the psychology emerging from the armed conflict. There is a need for an inclusive process to de-escalate the violence. Building confidence in the process is key.

Tore Hattrem, Director-General of the Section for Peace and Reconciliation in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that there is almost never a military solution to internal armed conflict; peace has to come through a negotiated political solution. Most peace processes and peace negotiations involve a third party and the importance of this role was highlighted because of the third-party's ability to move in circles the parties involved in the conflict cannot. Non-state actors and governments keep their military options open during a peace process and it is the role of the third party negotiator to make the political solution attractive.

Third parties need to analyse the situation well to ensure they are best placed to play the role and considerations should include: whether the parties are open to negotiations; the existence of some form of political agenda; and that neither party is guilty of war crimes. Care should be given not to 'box in' non-state actors through the use of sanctions, as this can be counter-productive. At the same time, impunity cannot deliver peace. The importance of civil society's support for a peace process was highlighted and the need to mobilize this support as the process develops.

Joaquin Villalobos is Secretary for International Relations of the National Democratic Party of El Salvador. He provided insights into the armed groups' struggle to highlight the illegitimacy of the government in El Salvador. A number of factors moved the rebels to negotiate. They were open to change, there was a strategic use of violence and a pluralist coalition of armed groups and political factions existed. In addition, the international community played a key role in opening the channels of communication. There was also an emphasis on the need to understand that violence is a language for those involved in civil conflict.

Celia McKeon from Conciliation Resources, a British-based organization running a project that aims to learn lessons from different experiences of engaging armed groups in peace processes. A wide consultation with armed groups, governments, intermediaries and experts has taken place and these experiences will be documented in the next edition of [an international review of peace initiatives](#).

The case for engagement was highlighted as being conflict specific and dynamic, requiring an understanding of armed groups. Who you are will determine the threshold for engagement, this will be different if you are a state actor or a community leader for example. Non-state actors (such as local or international civic organizations) are particularly well-placed to engage with non-state armed groups as they have a lower profile, can operate differently and are able to create new opportunities for informal dialogue.

Within internal conflicts, asymmetries are hard to resolve and international responses to terrorism should avoid compounding these asymmetries. Democracy changes armed groups just as armed groups change democracy. For democracy to emerge strengthened from a peace process, the process matters and needs to be inclusive and legitimate.

Panel moderator, **Dame Margaret Anstee, former UN Under Secretary-General**, highlighted the need for the involvement of civil society and women in particular to peace processes and also referred to her experience in Angola with the MPLA and UNITA to highlight the challenges of engaging armed groups in peace processes.

For any negotiation process to be successful there must be political will from the parties involved in the fighting, as well as general fatigue with the conflict. Negotiators need to have a sense that the protagonists genuinely wish to negotiate, rather than simply use the space to recover from military setbacks to regroup or rearm.