The Government of Colombia (GOC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) have been in formal peace talks since March 2016, a process which culminated in the declaration of a temporary bilateral ceasefire between 1 October 2017 and 9 January 2018, a development which raised hopes for the achievement of a “Complete Peace” in the country. However, violence escalated after the end of the ceasefire, and the future of the talks has become increasingly precarious since they were suspended by President Juan Manuel Santos at the end of January. The GOC insists on the cessation of hostilities as a precondition to resuming talks, while the ELN contends that the talks would be the forum in which the new ceasefire should be negotiated. Meanwhile, the humanitarian toll of the conflict has again fallen on the communities caught in the cross fire.

This Spotlight analyses the peace talks and national context to date; and discusses the challenges to the resumption and success of the GOC-ELN peace process, with the aim of contributing to the discussion and lessons learned through the process.

The public talks between the GOC and the ELN began in the honeymoon period following the successful culmination of the negotiations between the GOC and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in November 2016. Over the first four rounds of talks in Quito, partial agreements were reached on the issues of society participation in peacebuilding and humanitarian actions; and a temporary bilateral ceasefire was agreed upon, implemented, and largely respected between 1 October 2017 and 9 January 2018. There was a general trend towards a de-escalation in violence over 2017 (28.8% fewer offensives and 42.8% fewer combats as compared to 2016), which improved the humanitarian situation of communities affected by the conflict.

Ten preparative sessions with the participation of diverse social sectors were organized between 30 October and 16 November 2017, during which proposals were made for a methodology to organize and guarantee that civil society will participate in peacebuilding, an issue which forms the basis for the negotiation of points 2 and 3 of the agenda (democracy and transformation for peace). However, the agenda is far from bearing results beyond the merely procedural.

Meanwhile, the unclear terms and time constraints on both the negotiations and the ceasefire have contributed to growing mistrust, an increase in verbal and physical violence, and the political undermining of the negotiation process. This situation came to a head when the ELN attacked a police station in Barranquilla on 27 January, and the GOC suspended the talks two days later, calling on the ELN to be more coherent in their dedication to the peace process. The ELN, on the other hand, claims the terms for a continued ceasefire should be discussed during the 5th Round of negotiations in Quito, and defends its actions in the context of continued assassinations of social leaders and the “paramilitary expansion” into territories and economies previously controlled by the FARC.

There were 52 armed actions attributed to the ELN, and 49 to the armed forces over the first month since the end of the ceasefire, all of which have had a humanitarian impact on the communities in the areas of ELN operation, particularly in Arauca, Norte de Santander, and Chocó. On February 25, the ELN announced that they would implement a further temporary ceasefire during the national elections over 9 to 13 March, and again called on the GOC to resume talks.

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**2017**

- **January 27:** Exploratory contacts begin
- **February 7:** Formal public phase of peace talks begin in Quito, Ecuador
- **October 1:** Temporary national bilateral ceasefire begins, the first time the ELN suspends hostilities
- **December 4:** The GOC’s chief negotiator withdraws from the talks, along with 3 other negotiators
- **December 18:** Gustavo Bell announced as new chief negotiator for the GOC
- **January 9:** Ceasefire ends
- **January 29:** GOC suspends talks

**2018**

- **February 25:** ELN Central Command (COC) announces a ceasefire to be held over the Colombian elections from 9 to 13 March
- **February 10:** Armed strike announced by the ELN, resulting in 16 violent actions and 3 confrontations with the Armed Forces
- **February 12:** Arrest warrants issued for ELN leadership following the death of 3 demobilized FARC members;
  the recruitment of 45 minors; and kidnapping

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**CURRENT SITUATION**

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OUTLOOK

Although both sides have reasserted their commitment to a negotiated end to the conflict, the future of the peace process is now looking increasingly precarious. However, the degradation of the armed conflict into a struggle over illegal economies is not convenient for either party, and both sides are concerned with social participation in peacebuilding, which is key to the first 3 points of the agenda and the basis for building a consensus around any final agreement. Three key issues to be addressed for the talks to resume are:

1. **The humanitarian dynamics related to the conflict between the two sides, and with other illegal armed groups.** The GOC has been called on to be more assertive in investigating human rights abuses and in protecting social leaders and demobilized FARC members. The ELN must also reach an internal consensus to protect civilians in its areas of operation, particularly in Antioquia, Chocó, Cauca, Nariño, and Norte de Santander, where new recruits do not have the experience or political training to exercise authority.

2. **The promotion of active society participation in peacebuilding,** a process which was begun with the preparative audiences in 2017, but which still lacks clarity and a broader representation of civil society (e.g. political parties, the media, unions, and other social and grassroots organizations).

3. **The fulfilment of the Peace Accord signed between the GOC and the FARC in terms of economic reincorporation and the promotion of productive projects within the Territorial Spaces for Training and Reintegration.**

An improvement in these conditions will open the way for the discussion of other issues on the agenda, and will boost the legitimacy of the peace process with Colombian society and the international community.

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6 Razón Pública “Mesa de Quito: Falta de voluntad y capacidad para alcanzar la paz” February 11 2018.
7 Semana “Seis razones por las que a Gustavo Bell su trabajo con el ELN no le quedará fácil” February 19 2018.
8 La Silla Académica “Cinco razones por las que se pierde el tiempo con el ELN” February 18 2018.

International Organization for Migration (IOM), Mission in Colombia RPR Program