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Colombia on rocky road to peace

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Bonn, 3 August 2015. The last few weeks have seen the Americas in the German media spotlight, especially with regard to the restoration of diplomatic relations between long-time arch enemies Cuba and the United States. After decades of confrontation, real prospects are emerging of a long-term easing of tensions. At the same time, Havana has played host to another process since November 2012, namely the negotiations between the Colombian Government and the guerilla group *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), which give reason for cautious optimism as regards putting an end to the longest running conflict in the region.

The negotiations are taking place in difficult circumstances. The FARC and the Colombian military are fighting each other, mostly in the countryside. The Colombian Government has rejected a ceasefire to avoid appearing too eager to yield to the FARC's demands. Earlier negotiations in the late 1990s even resulted in the rebels being given an entire region, which ultimately strengthened the group. In adopting a tough stance, the government is seeking to prevent further developments of this kind. However, lately there have been indications that this position could change. For their part, the guerillas have stepped up their attacks since May after suspending a unilateral ceasefire.

The rural population is bearing the brunt of the fighting, which has never let up. Nevertheless, given that the urban population is less affected by the guerilla war, support for the peace talks among the Colombian public as a whole has fallen in recent months. The original political orientation of the FARC's activities in fighting for land reform and social inclusion has also waned over the years, with related objectives increasingly fading into the background. Over time, the practice of conducting warfare for sheer profit has become widespread within the organisation. While the FARC has bombed its way back into the public consciousness by attacking targets in the country's major cities, especially energy supply facilities, such actions are hardly likely to bolster support for its position.

Strengthening the rights of the civilian population

Over four million people have become refugees as a result of the conflict in Colombia. Together with Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the nation tops the list of countries with the highest number of internally displaced persons. The main victims of this conflict have been and continue to be men, women and children, who are tortured, raped,

murdered, kidnapped, blackmailed and denied basic social provisions such as access to land, education and water.

Negotiations between Latin America's oldest guerilla group and Santos' conservative government are anything but easy. However, the fact that they are continuing despite setbacks on the ground is itself good news. Of course, it would be even better news if the warring parties could agree a ceasefire to make peace efforts tangible to those in the affected regions.

Achieving compromise and plurality takes courage

Despite all the difficulties, the conflicting parties have committed to seeing the process through. Five topics have been placed on the agenda for the negotiation process and are being addressed successively. These are: resolution of the land issue, fighting the drug trade, political participation, restitution for victims of the conflict and, ultimately, the cessation of hostilities – all lines of conflict which Colombian society has been facing for decades.

In passing the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448) of December 2011, Santos' government has sent out an initial encouraging signal in terms of dealing with the country's bloody past. The negotiating parties have also reached agreement on the establishment of a truth commission in this area, which is another positive sign. Progress is being made on other issues, such as the land question, drugs policy and political participation, as well. However, success in these areas will depend on how effectively the measures are implemented in the individual departments.

The warring parties will need to take particular account of the burning social and economic issues in the country if they are to reach an agreement that does more than simply demobilise the weakened FARC. The Uribe government already created a farce of that nature with the right-wing paramilitary around the middle of last decade, which resulted in the groups returning soon after as *bandas criminales* (criminal gangs) that ply their bloody trade to this day.

We need to wish the warring parties courage as they work in Havana to resolve this ongoing conflict; courage to put an end to the exclusion and discrimination experienced by large swathes of the population and strive towards political pluralism. After all, it was primarily economic and political exclusion that led the FARC and similar groups to take up arms.