

FARC ready for peace, top Colombia rebel says

Blade

France24

16 September 2012

Leftist FARC rebels are determined to reach a deal when they meet with Colombian officials in Norway next month to negotiate an end their decades-long insurgency, a senior commander said.

Ricardo Tellez, often described as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia's "minister of foreign affairs," is one of five rebel negotiators seeking to reach a peace deal with the government of President Juan Manuel Santos.

In an exclusive interview, Tellez said that "what we believe is that the war has to be put to an end."

"That is our objective," added the senior guerrilla, whose real name is Rodrigo Granda.

The first round of peace talks is set to open in Oslo on October 8, the anniversary of the death of Argentine-Cuban revolutionary icon Ernesto "Che" Guevara. A second round will follow in Havana.

It marks the first attempt in a decade to negotiate a peaceful end to the conflict that began when the guerrilla group was founded in 1964.

The FARC's negotiating team, named Friday, includes Simon Trinidad, a rebel leader currently serving a 60-year prison sentence at a US Supermax prison for kidnapping three Americans in Colombia.

US authorities are unlikely to release Trinidad, 62 -- whose real name is Juvenal Ovidio Ricardo Palmera Pineda -- but FARC leaders have said they hope he can participate via teleconference from his prison cell.

Tellez said the group will attempt to reach a ceasefire when peace talks begin.

The Colombian government "does not believe there should be a ceasefire or a truce," said Tellez. "Not having one would be a serious inconvenience... it is not the best situation and truly a minefield to be engaged in talks while also under fire."

Latin America's largest and oldest insurgency with some 9,200 fighters, the FARC has been battered by military defeats in recent years and its numbers whittled down by about half over the past decade.

The FARC is also involved in Colombia's lucrative cocaine business, sometimes as producers and smugglers, and other times protecting coca farmers.

In the interview, Tellez thanked US President Barack Obama for supporting Colombia's quest for peace, but asked for Washington to also reduce its military aid to Bogota.

The Colombian conflict, according to Tellez, was born as a reaction to US intervention in Latin America. "In the 1960s, the pretext was the Cuban revolution, and we did not want a repeat on the mainland," he said.

Tellez said Plan Colombia, the \$8 billion US aid package that began in 1999, was launched with the "pretext" to fight drug trafficking but was in fact masking a "counterinsurgency program."

The Colombian government negotiating team, led by former vice president Humberto de la Calle, includes retired top military commander Jorge Mora, businessman Luis Carlos Villegas and former national police chief Oscar Naranjo.

Tellez had especially harsh words for president Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), a conservative law-and-order leader who focused on crushing the rebels while in office. Rights groups complained of widespread abuses during Uribe's presidency.

Uribe was "one of the obstacles to peace" in the past years, Vellez said.

Santos says a peace agreement would represent an "infinite gain."

"It is to everyone's benefit to reach this final agreement," he said.

The last round of peace talks, held in 2002, collapsed when the Colombian government concluded that the guerrillas were regrouping in a Switzerland-sized demilitarized zone it created to help reach a peace deal.

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