

For Colombia's peace process, disarmament was a sticking point. Here's why.

By Jamie Levin June 28

After four years of negotiations, the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) reached a cease-fire agreement June 23. The historic deal, signed months behind schedule and six months after a self-imposed deadline lapsed, puts the Colombian peace process back on track and an end to Latin America's longest running civil conflict within close reach.

What kept the Colombian peace negotiations in limbo for so long? Attitudes harden over time, making conflict more intractable. And some issues are simply indivisible, such as territory or holy sites. Indeed, civil wars rarely end by negotiations, Barbara Walter writes in "International Organization."

But the problem in this case wasn't indivisible issues. Indeed, rapid progress was made on even some of the thorniest issues separating the parties. The problem in the Colombian peace process was the insistence on disarmament. The government asked FARC rebels to give up their weapons, initially without a promise of robust security guarantees. And despite ongoing negotiations, at least six left-wing activists were slain in acts of political violence in recent months.

Why push for disarmament?

Disarmament rests on one simple premise: Weapons cause insecurity and, therefore, must be eradicated for a civil conflict to end. Security specialist Joanna Spear discusses how “removing the means by which civil wars have been prosecuted” will prevent the recurrence of war. Without the means to continue fighting, combatants will have little choice but to commit to peace.

The disarmament of combatants emerged as a leading practice in the post-Cold War era. No longer hamstrung by Cold War rivalries, the United Nations began to intervene actively in the growing number of civil conflicts. U.N. peacekeeping missions became more ambitious, going beyond simply monitoring cease-fires.

The U.N. instead began to actively enforce peace within conflict-wracked countries, stem humanitarian crises and reconstruct shattered nations. Robert Muggah, a leading scholar on the subject, recently described disarmament as a “growth industry.” Nearly every U.N. intervention since the 1990s has included disarmament provisions.

But the insistence on rapid and complete disarmament isn't always as helpful as we like to think. Indeed, it often acts as a brake on negotiations, as it did in Colombia. Here's a closer look at why disarmament often is a sticking point in conflict negotiations:

1) Disarmament means opposition groups are often left defenseless.

Walter argues that negotiations often fail because belligerents are asked to disarm, which leaves them defenseless. It's a sort of prisoner's dilemma — if negotiations fail, belligerents then have no means with which to defend themselves. And so, unable to “survive exploitation, they avoid cooperation and continue to fight,” Walter concludes. In Colombia, the threat of disarmament generated insecurity deep enough to undermine negotiations and prolong the conflict. Despite making significant progress on a range of issues, including land redistribution, war crimes prosecutions and elections

protocols, negotiations stalled for six months over disarmament.

2) Disarmament often isn't voluntary.

Unless they are defeated militarily, rebels seldom disarm voluntarily. So it is difficult to eliminate weapons entirely, as Mark Knight concludes in the Journal of Peace Research. Commentators have already warned that FARC rebels may join other armed groups, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), another rebel group with whom negotiations have stalled, or criminal gangs, such as the Usaga Clan, which itself grew out of the remains of the failed attempt to disarm the United Self-Defence Forces (AUC), a right-wing paramilitary group.

3) Third-party guarantees aren't always enough.

Walter argues that third parties can promise the guarantees that belligerents are unable to offer each other, allowing them to disarm. And many scholars find that peacekeeping efforts boost peace, democratization and economic development.

But peacekeeping has its limits. Plagued by consistent budgetary shortfalls, and the increased demands of the post-Cold War era, the U.N.'s limited resources are spread particularly thin. Peacekeeping missions are often short-lived, understaffed and under-resourced.

The passage of a British-sponsored U.N. resolution to deploy peacekeepers to monitor and verify the disarmament process is promising, but it remains to be seen whether an unarmed 12-month peacekeeping mission will be sufficient to overcome the security concerns that the FARC has expressed during negotiations.

Where peacekeeping has proved less than robust, cheating has often resulted. Rather than being left disarmed and defenseless, rebels hold back weapons contrary to the terms of an agreement. Peace breaks down all too often, and combatants often see weapons as a more reliable insurance policy than third-party guarantees.

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What was the breakthrough in Colombia?

The negotiators had previously agreed to “*dejación de armas*” (the abandonment of arms), purposefully nebulous phrasing concerning the process of disarmament. But differences soon arose, slowing progress at the bargaining table. The government of Colombia long demanded a process of rapid disarmament while the FARC insisted on a more gradual process. The recent breakthrough came when the government acceded in negotiations, agreeing to a phased program of disarmament and the creation of dozens of demilitarized zones where the FARC could assemble free from government interference.

Thursday’s agreement commits the parties to an immediate cease-fire, formalizing the practice of the past year, but defers disarmament until 180 days after a final peace accord (which has not yet been negotiated) is approved in a countrywide referendum, giving the FARC ample time to assess their security situation before finally handing over their weapons to the U.N.

Disarmament was the last major unresolved issue in the Colombian peace negotiations. With this obstacle now satisfactorily resolved, focus will turn to implementation of the agreements. A phased agreement lends itself to missed deadlines, which can easily undermine trust between the parties and reignite violence. The type of monitoring and verification promised by the U.N. only go so far in preventing cheating. Robust security guarantees go much further in keeping a process on track.

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