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Colombia's Uribe Opens a Small Window Toward Peace

BOGOTA, Colombia, AUG 23, 2005 (Associated Press) - President Alvaro Uribe has accepted an offer from the Catholic Church to set up a meeting with leftist guerrilla commanders to explore a cease-fire, officials said Tuesday.

Government officials and leaders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, have not met face-to-face since the last round of peace talks collapsed in February 2002 and Uribe embarked on a massive U.S.-backed offensive aimed at bringing the group to its knees.

But after discussions with church officials Monday, Uribe gave the go-ahead for Monsignor Luis Augusto Castro, Colombia's most senior clergyman, to try to organize preliminary talks about a suspension of hostilities, Interior and Justice Minister Sabas Pretelt said Tuesday.

Pretelt insisted there could be no peace process until a cease-fire was firmly in place.

"The aim of the meeting would be to discuss steps toward a cessation of hostilities, since we cannot hold (peace) talks while the shooting goes on," he told local radio Tuesday.

There was no immediate reaction from the FARC.

But the group has previously refused any meeting unless the government grants them a sizable safe haven in southwest Colombia - a move Pretelt ruled out, saying the state cannot cede territory to "terrorist organizations." He added that Church envoys will "try to soften" the rebels' position on any future talks.

Monsignor Fabian Marulanda, secretary-general of the Colombian Episcopal Conference, explained that the church would try to convince the rebels to agree to "a meeting outside the country, without preconditions, between government representatives and the outlawed groups."

Uribe's decision to accept the church's proposal comes at a time when the FARC has dramatically stepped up its attacks on government forces after a period of lying low. Since January, more than 300 troops have been killed in attacks and from mine blasts.

Nevertheless, army officials maintain the FARC is made up of 13,000 fighters now, down from 18,000 a year ago, with the drop attributed to deaths, captures and desertions brought on by the government clampdown. The number of kidnappings and killings has also dropped sharply across the country, making Uribe hugely popular among Colombians.

But analysts say the FARC is determined to shatter Uribe's re-election hopes by mounting bold attacks designed to show that his security crackdown has failed and that only talks with a president more sympathetic to the rebels can lead to peace.

Colombia's drug-fueled conflict pits the FARC and the smaller National Liberation Army against a handful of right-wing paramilitary militias and government forces, killing more than 3,000 people every year.

Episcopate Forgives Rebels for Murder of Priests

Colombia's ELN Calls the Killings a Mistake

BOGOTA, Colombia, AUG. 23, 2005 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The president of the Colombian bishops' conference says he will continue his contacts with National Liberation Army guerrillas, even though they admitted to last week's killing of two priests.

"As regards the Church, we forgive the ELN for what happened," said Archbishop Luis Augusto Castro of Tunja, in statements published by news agencies. "We will of course continue to dialogue with them and with all illegal armed groups to seek peace."

He added: "Relations with the ELN have been geared to facilitate progress toward a

negotiated solution and we will continue to maintain these channels, because the guerrilla organization said that the crime was an error."

The ELN issued a communiqué late Friday in which it admitted having "accidentally" killed the two priests and two civilians on Aug. 15 in the department of North Santander. On Saturday, in a new document, the insurgent group reiterated its apologies to the Catholic Church and expressed its interest in maintaining contacts with representatives of the Church.

"With profound grief, the ELN announces to national and international public opinion the accidental death of priests Ramon Mora and Vicente Rozo, and of building workers José Carrascal and Edgar Vergel," stated the first communiqué.

"These deaths were caused by an error of intelligence and calculation of our guerrilla units, made easier by the very characteristics of the conflict in the area," added the document.

According to the communiqué, "the deed will not go unpunished and disciplinary measures will be taken in the framework of our code of war and humanistic ethic."

Last Thursday, Archbishop Castro announced the death of another priest, Father Jesús Adrián Sánchez, of the Diocese of Espinal, who worked to dissuade youths from joining the guerrilla movements.

For more information about peacebuilding in Colombia, please refer to the CPN website: <http://cpn.nd.edu/colombia.htm>

The Catholic Peacebuilding Network (CPN) is a voluntary network of practitioners, academics, clergy and laity from around the world which seeks to enhance the study and practice of Catholic peacebuilding, especially at the local level. The CPN aims to deepen bonds of solidarity among Catholic peacebuilders, share and analyze "best practices," expand the peacebuilding capacity of the Church in areas of conflict, and encourage the further development of a theology of a just peace. While it is a Catholic network, the CPN believes that authentic and effective Catholic peacebuilding involves dialogue and collaboration with those of other religious traditions and all those committed to building a more just and peaceful world.

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