On 28th August 2012, Colombian President Santos, confirmed peace talks would take place between the Colombian Government and the Farc, writes Natasha Morgan. On 5th September 2012 the content of the agenda for the dialogues, signed by representatives of both sides in Havana, Cuba, was released.

Experts have reacted with cautious optimism. The agenda attempts to cover five central points, including agrarian development; political participation; the terms of ending the conflict; illicit crops; victims and truth. Issues such as the economy, national sovereignty and multinationals were left off.

Despite widespread enthusiasm in Colombian public opinion, civil society leaders have expressed some real concerns that need to be addressed. Among these is the need for civil society to have a voice in the process, and for it to tackle the root causes of the conflict, namely social inequality, if peace is to be achieved successfully. One of the most urgent concerns is the absence of a bilateral ceasefire.

Civil society organisations Colombians for Peace, has called for an end to hostilities on both sides, outlining, based on past experience, the fragility of any peace process conducted during ongoing military operations. They have also highlighted the urgent need to put an end to violence against civilians. The Patriotic March, a new political opposition movement including large sectors of Colombian civil society, including human rights groups and the trade unions, have added their voices to this call.

However, Colombian President Santos, speaking to the press following a meeting on 6th September 2012 with over 100 generals and officials from the Colombian armed forces, ruled out a ceasefire and said that he had asked the generals to ‘intensify their actions’.

Civilian casualties as a result of the conflict are ongoing, with recent bombings and machine gun fire on civilian homes reported by human rights groups in both the Cauca and Meta regions. The lack of a ceasefire also opens the process up to sabotage – something which is not unlikely, given the widespread activity of paramilitary groups. In addition, over 243 civil society activists have been assassinated during the first two years of this administration, many by members of Colombian State forces.

The violence generates serious concern for the guarantees that exist for safe political opposition. Just a few weeks ago, the Colombian Minister of Defence accused the Patriotic March of being financed by the Farc guerillas – a dangerous return to the previous government’s tactics of smearing any opposition. Opposition activists tell of a climate of fear, where death threats have shot up as a result of the peace talks announcement and these sort of comments. Given the horrors that occurred to the Patriotic Union, an opposition party that emerged during previous peace talks under President Betancur in the 1980s, and saw over 5,000 members, including presidential and congressional candidates assassinated by State forces and paramilitary groups, their fears are not without basis.

Several international leaders have welcomed the peace talks. British Prime Minister David Cameron said ‘We know from Northern Ireland how important it is to learn from past mistakes and to have the political courage to pursue peace. So I wish the President well in this important new effort... The UK stands ready to draw on its experience in support of the Colombian peace process as it progresses.’

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Argentine human rights defender and winner of the Nobel Peace prize, also expressed his support but made clear that there were obstacles to be overcome: ‘Colombia has a state with very corrupt levels of leadership, complicit in organised crime. Among them paramilitary and drug trafficking organisations. These are the sectors that increase their internal power and their bank accounts thanks to the war... This [peace] process cannot be resolved by the government and the Farc alone. If those interests are not confronted firmly and with sovereignty, no process of dialogue will last in time.’

The challenges ahead, such as the need for a ceasefire, ongoing threats against civil society activists, internal opposition from within the Colombian state, former president Uribe and the paramilitaries, highlight the need for international pressure to support those struggling for a lasting peace in Colombia.

Peace talks will take place with the support of the Cuban and Norwegian governments as guarantors and with the accompaniment of the Venezuelan and Chilean governments. According to the agreement, parties to the dialogue can invite other nations to accompany, as the process necessitates.

Justice for Colombia, the NGO of the British trade union movement, is working with parliamentarians, unionists and lawyers in the UK and Ireland, to gather experience and ensure that civil society and social justice are at the centre of any agreement.

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Henry Diaz, opposition activist, was disappeared in April this year, before he was due to lead a demonstration of the Patriotic March social movement, calling for peace and social justice in Colombia.