

Colombian President Opens Door to Peace Talks with ELN Rebels



Cienaga, September 29 (RHC-teleSUR)— Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has said that talks aimed at ending hostilities with the country's second largest guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), could start as early as next week if the rebel group agrees to hand over hostages.

“If they release the hostages, the very next week we could announce the start of the public phase of the negotiations,” said Santos from the coastal city of Cienaga on Tuesday, a day after his government signed a historic peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-people's Army (FARC-EP), after nearly four years of negotiations in Havana, Cuba.

Santos said that half of the work has been done with the ELN since an agenda has already been set after more than two years of exploratory talks. But although the government and rebel group have already laid the foundation, talks have failed to move forward due to sticking points between the two sides, including the hostage issue.

The informal talks between the ELN and the Colombian government hit a breakthrough in March with an agreement to move ahead with formal peace negotiations based on a six-point agenda, covering such topics as the participation of society in peace building, democracy, victims, an end to the armed conflict and implementation of the peace deal.

Talks will be held in the Ecuadorean capital of Quito with the support of Chile, Brazil, Cuba, Norway, Venezuela and Ecuador as guarantors.

Colombia's over five-decade armed conflict has claimed some 220,000 lives and displaced more than 6 million people.

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