

Colombian Government to Restart Stalled Peace Talks with ELN Rebels



Bogota, January 11 (RHC)-- After canceling talks, the Colombian government will continue negotiations with the country's second-largest rebel group, the National Liberation Army, ELN. In a positive sign for Colombia's ongoing peace process, the government is set to relaunch the suspended peace talks with the ELN beginning tomorrow, Thursday, in Quito, Ecuador.

The public phase of the talks with the second largest active guerrilla force in the country was scheduled to begin on October 27, 2016, but President Juan Manuel Santos' government canceled the scheduled meeting just hours before it was set to begin.

The Colombian government demanded that the ELN release prisoner Odin Sanchez as a prerequisite to begin the talks, but the guerrilla group argued that there were disagreements over the time-line for his release and asked the government to pardon two ELN prisoners in exchange for Sanchez' freedom.

The first phase of talks between the government and the ELN, which was private and informal, began more than three years ago. The exploratory process achieved a breakthrough in March last year with an agreement from both sides to proceed to formal, public negotiations.

The lead government negotiator, Juan Camilo Restrepo, will head the peace negotiations and said in a statement from Bogota that he will "seek formulas of understanding that will allow for the start of a public roundtable for talks."

The ELN, founded in 1964, has said its leaders want to see a different peace process than the one with the FARC. The rebels and the government agreed on March 30, 2016, in Caracas, Venezuela, to launch a formal peace process.

The peace talks come after the Colombian government reached in November the end of the internal armed conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, also known as the FARC, after 52 years of civil war.

In its statement announcing the restart of ELN talks, the Colombian government also thanked the Ecuadorean government for "the generous hospitality that it has been giving in its territory for the development of these conversations."

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