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Inside FARC-Colombia peace talks with key delegate



Victoria Sandino Palmera is a commander in the FARC-EP, the oldest, active guerrilla organization in Colombia and Latin America. She is part of the FARC delegation for the peace talks with the Colombian government, which are currently underway in Havana, Cuba.

Photo credit: FARC-EP

By Brittany Peterson

WASHINGTON (VOR)— The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or the FARC, is Latin America's oldest active guerilla army, and has been fighting the Colombian government for land rights and economic justice over the last 50 years. Yet recent peace negotiations between FARC rebels and the government may finally bring about an end to the half-century civil war.

QUPDATE: On November 12, 2013, the Colombian government accused the FARC of an assassination attempt on former president, Alvaro Uribe, which was reportedly diverted. Uribe is a strong critic of the peace talks and diminished the FARC army to half its size under his administration. President of Congress Juan Fernando Cristo said that if the details are confirmed, then they will demand a response from the FARC peace delegation in Cuba. It is unclear how this alleged assassination attempt could impact the delicate peace talks.

QVOR's Brittany Peterson had the rare opportunity to speak one-on-one with Victoria Sandino Palmera, a commander of the FARC and representative in the peace talks.

QBrittany: In early November, the FARC, which has about 8000 active combatants, and the Colombian government reached an agreement on the second of five key issues debated during ongoing peace negotiations held in Havana, Cuba. The most recent agreement focused on how to incorporate members of the guerrilla organization into political life once the conflict officially ends. Yet the hopes for peace still hinge on three remaining issues, which

President Santos said he wants to push through before the end of the year, well before the May 2014 presidential election. Joining us to discuss the negotiations is someone actually sitting at the table... Victoria Sandino Palmera. She has risen to the rank of a commander in the FARC and is currently in Cuba, awaiting the third round of talks to begin later this month.

QCommander Sandino Palmera is here to speak with us about the advancing negotiations, and she will also share with us her experience as a female combatant in the FARC army. Thank you so much for joining us today.

QVictoria: Thank you Brittany. I am here to try to help resolve any curiosity you may have. I am a participant in the peace delegation of the FARC here in Havana.

QBrittany: The negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government have already lasted for a year. As part of the delegation, you have been deeply involved in this process. Describe the atmosphere surrounding the peace talks and the disposition of the parties involved.

QVictoria: I was incorporated into the delegation in April of this year. It has been a year since the delegation has been in negotiations in Cuba. I am part of the negotiation table, of the ten who attend each day during every cycle to discuss with the government the six issues previously agreed upon for discussion. The atmosphere is one of respect. There is a lot of debate and discussion and it's very respectful, but they are pretty strong, heated and intense. Each side defends their position. You have to remember that these are two enemy forces that have been in conflict for the last 50 years.

QBrittany: Many Colombians have been displaced due to the conflict between the FARC and the paramilitary and military forces. I am wondering if there was significant pressure from those victims, from the citizens, to move forward with these peace talks.

QVictoria: No. Look, the calling of the FARC has always been peace, ever since the organization formed. In '64 when the FARC was born, it was for that same reason. There is a confrontation between the Colombian regime against the Colombian people. The government has their theory of national security, which considers its national citizens as internal enemies. So in this sense, any protest or manifestation has that connotation and is treated in such manner. That has generated the bloody, painful violence that Colombia has suffered. Peace was part of the origin of the FARC, when in '64 there was a call for the Church to intervene so that there wouldn't be a strike on Marquetalia, which was the birthplace of the FARC, but the plea was never heard. But it was a call for peace. And that's how we continued. It was ratified in '84 when we signed the Accords at Casa Verde. Then again in '90/'91 in Cravo Norte. Then in Caracas and later in Tlaxcala, Mexico. And then we tried again in '98 through 2002, but the dialogues were broken again in El Caguán, a rural zone in Colombia. Our convocation for peace has been permanent, historically, ever since our origin.

QBrittany: What is different in the negotiations this time around? Is it that there is more political will now from President Juan Manuel Santos?

QVictoria: Precisely. You could say that the government has political will, as does President Juan Manuel Santos, although in certain instances, he appears confused or unsure. But at least in the most recent times he has expressed more of an emphasis for arriving to a deal that allows an end to the conflict. But also, we have received great support from the international community and their governments, some of whom are guarantors of this peacemaking process. There is Cuba and Norway, and also Venezuela and Chile. This is important to creating a

favorable environment to reach a peace agreement. But there is an additional factor that is fundamental and we haven't seen before, which is the mobilization of popular sectors in Colombia, which has seen a massive growth. This is what has put the nail to the government regarding the peace talks.

QBrittany: The last point was discussed through last week and a decision was reached regarding political participation. There were many proposals to create a broad and inclusive democracy. Describe the political exclusion you see today in Colombian politics.

QVictoria: The aspect of political participation is fundamental to reach peace. That implies installing a true democracy in Colombia, a real democracy, what we call a popular democracy, that doesn't only allow for participation among popular sectors and everyone who wants to express their opinions, but it also allows for the people to actually decide and work for the country they want to build.

QBrittany: The next negotiation will address the issue of drug trafficking, which is one of the main ways in which the FARC generates resources to finance their activities. Why did the FARC decide to finance themselves that way, and also through seizures?

QVictoria: Let's go part by part. Soon, we will begin the next cycle of talks that relate to illicit crops. The name of the topic is "Solution to the problem of illicit drugs." This problem is related to the need replace illicit crops in Colombia, which is a massive quantity. The FARC delegation is currently discussing the core proposals we want to push forward on this issue. But allow me to say that in Colombia, drug trafficking is an enormous issue. It has permeated the structure of the State, the structure of the government, the regime. Drug trafficking has permeated all institutions, due to the big money that is deeply tied to corruption. Farmers in many regions survive off of crop production. They survive off of this problematic industry. And, of course, the FARC charges a weight-based tax, but it is a standard tax. It's not like the organization is charging the buyers of the drugs. So I repeat, this must be clear on a national and international level, that the FARC does not cultivate these drugs, it is not a trafficker, and it is not an organization that lives off of and depends on drug trafficking. Regarding the tax, it is an additional fee that is solicited just like any other tax, because it is our territory where the plants are grown, just like any other businessperson who survives off of any other business.

QBrittany: Would you like to comment about the hostages?

QVictoria: Ok. I believe that you, who seems knowledgeable about this process, knows that before initiating the talks a year ago, the national administration of the FARC released a set of guidelines regarding the restriction of economic sequestrations. And we have been following through with them. We don't call them hostages. What has occurred are economic retentions that relate to what I was telling you, the financial aspect, which has been very complex and difficult for our organization and for the Colombian people in general. So in certain instances, we have resorted to this method. But I insist that the guideline was released a year ago and since then, there have been no economic retentions.

QBrittany: In this moment, three important points still need to be debated in the peace talks, which could last up to a year-and-a-half, right?

QVictoria: We don't know. We insist on maintaining an important pace with the talks. But as you can see, a year has passed and we have only debated two points. From here on, it is possible that the talks advance much quicker, or

they may continue with the same rhythm. The important thing is for us to continue deeply focusing on each point, and that indiscretion doesn't lead us to a bad agreement.

QBrittany: Are you hopeful that this time around, negotiations will be successful?

QVictoria: Exactly. We have all the hope, we have all our determination focused on the success of these talks. You know that in one year, we cannot end a conflict that has lasted for 50 years. But all our hope, all our strength, all our ability, all our knowledge, every muscle and nerve are dedicated to this process to reach a definitive agreement. We believe that it is possible. We definitely believe it is possible.



QPhoto credit: © FARC-EP

QBrittany: Could you tell us how your own family has been impacted by the conflict?

QVictoria: My dear...that is a long story.

QBrittany: Ah, ok. Could you at least tell us if your family is in agreement with you and your beliefs and the cause of the FARC?

QVictoria: It's very difficult to say if my family is in agreement or no. I want to say that in Colombia, I don't think there is a single family that has not been impacted by the conflict. My family in particular has been displaced from four different territories and I deeply hope that they won't continue to be affected. That's why I do not have any form of communication or relationship with them, so they can remain safe as they have been in the last few years. They are quite elderly. I couldn't tell you what they think. But when I decided to join the FARC army years ago, they supported me. But it's difficult to say whether they agree with me. This is a bloody, violent war, and no mother or father wants their child to go to war, because they know they will lose them one way or another.

QBrittany: Why did you decide to join the FARC?

QVictoria: It wasn't a difficult decision. It wasn't hard because there were no other options. Ever since I was very young, I was politically active and was very close to the process of Patriotic Union during the time of the assassinations and massacres, which today marks 25 years since a well-known massacre in Colombia in Segovia. That is a region in Antioquia in the northern part of the country. So with so many deaths, assassinations,

persecutions, there was no other option for popular fighters, as was my case, than to make the big decision of joining the guerilla. The option was to join, or meet your death.

QBrittany: Along with other women in the FARC, you launched the website, mujerfariana.co, which is a space for the women of the FARC to share their own experiences as a female combatant. It also addresses other issues affecting women in Colombia, which is widely known as a misogynistic society. How have people, who are not connected with the FARC, reacted to the website?

QVictoria: First of all, for us here in the delegation, and for all the female combatants in the FARC, the website's launch has been hugely significant both politically and personally. It has been a collective effort by all the women, with the support of the FARC directive, from the highest commander, Timoleón Jiménez. The impact has been generally positive. We have received many congratulatory messages by social organizations. There have been many positive comments, and of course some that were not so positive, some very crude, criticizing us for being online and sharing our opinions in this manner. But I think it is very important because it allows us an outlet to express our opinions and thoughts, how we view the FARC, and how we have lived out this fight that has overtaken Colombia.

QBrittany: When the FARC began, was it this open regarding gender issues?

QVictoria: No. It hasn't been easy. It's been very difficult given that we are in war. I don't know who said it, but some say that war is a man's game. I don't think it's really that way. It is so grueling, bloody, violent and rough, that no one imagines that women are involved in it. It hasn't been easy within the organization either. Of course since the FARC's beginning, women have been involved, though not as many as we see today. The women had other responsibilities, like working as nurses, or in the kitchen, in communications, among other responsibilities. But women began gaining a space in combat, in the high command, and here we are today. It has been an internal fight as well because there is definitely sexism among the men and women in the organization. It's not easy for women and men to be in the ranks together. We come from a sexist society, and within a military structure it is especially difficult to carry forth these changes.

QBrittany: The women who write for the website comment on the difficult decision many face in deciding to become combatants or mothers. Could you please elaborate?

QVictoria: That is a very difficult issue within the organization, particularly for women. But it's not just women who are impacted. Here, there are couples. Some are very stable relationships that have formed over the years in the middle of war and confrontation. Many of these couples want to have children. There was a long ceasefire during the Casa Verde period, so many babies were born in the FARC camps, which basically had their own schools because there were so many children. They received good treatment and education there. But when the conflict heats up again, it's not at all convenient and we should not have children during that time. So for some women, it is a very difficult issue. I decided not to have children before even joining the FARC, because I knew what I would be facing and I decided it would be better to not have children. But that is a personal decision. Other female comrades, in middle of the confrontation, decided to have children anyways. Some had even requested and received permission to reproduce. For others, the conditions are not even an issue. Sometimes there is no way to plan a pregnancy, and at times, there is nothing else to do but give birth in the middle of the conflict. Sometimes even during a strike, because we have no way to get them out of the zone and into better conditions. Sometimes we can't get the woman out of the zone and we have to transport the newborn all over the place until we can take it to a nearby camp. We have seen all these circumstances. This is very painful for us women especially. Many fighters have left to

have their babies, and as a minimum, they end up in jail along with their baby. Or sometimes they end up dying, as has occurred several times before.

QBrittany: You said that some women have requested permission of the directive to get pregnant. Is that a requirement, to request permission first?

QVictoria: That applies to everyone, men and women. This is a military structure, an army, and as part of an army, I can't say, "I'm going to leave today or tomorrow because I have some idea." Because I have already made the very personal decision to go to combat. So in an organization like the FARC, which has a military structure, any decision or measure I want to make must be approved by the corresponding body.

QBrittany: Is there any other reflection you would like to make regarding gender issues in the FARC?

QVictoria: Look, there is a point that I think is important to make, and that is that despite being in the middle of a conflict, in the middle of the difficulties of war and the tough lives we live here, in the FARC, the female combatants have a space, an enormous possibility to develop ourselves, and feel part of this organization, and project the future of the country we want to build where we have equal rights, where we have the same possibilities as either men or women. That is what we want to signal to others. But it is also our pride to say "Here we are, we are learning." There is a lot of criticism from other women, who think we are, I don't know, who think we make independent decisions regarding the conflict and peace. But this is a collective organization where all the fighters are committed and the female combatants in particular. But simply being here in Havana, where we make up nearly half of the delegation, we are 13 of the 30 present, it is an important recognition. And of course we are putting forth our best efforts in this process.

QBrittany: As we finish up, Victoria, I am wondering what excites you the most regarding the pending end to the peace talks. When there is no more conflict and when the FARC begins to integrate into the political world in Colombia, what is it about the end of the conflict that most excites you?

QVictoria: Well, what excites me the most is the hope that we would all live in peace in Colombia. That we could make policies, that the country's conditions will change, that there will be a true democracy, that we can dissent, that simply for being politically active and having a different opinion, no one kills anyone. That we won't have the anxiety in which we have lived for the entirety of this 50-year conflict. That is the essence of this fight. From there on out, we will begin to build. All of us will rebuild together the country that we want and hope for: one with peace and social justice.

QBrittany: Those were the words of Commander Victoria Sandino Palmera, member of the peace delegation of the FARC for the talks with the Colombian government. She is speaking with us from Havana, Cuba.

Q*To follow the progress of the peace talks, you can follow updates on the [FARC's peace delegation website](http://www.farc.org.co/), or the international press updates from the [Colombian government's site](http://www.gob.gov.co/).
Read more: http://voiceofrussia.com/us/2013_11_13/Inside-FARC-Colombia-peace-talks-with-key-delegate-0940/