



Colombia lifts bombing truce after attack threatens peace process

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Colombia has resumed air raids against rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) after a deadly attack killed 11 soldiers earlier this week, highlighting the fragility of the ongoing peace process to end the more than 50-year-long conflict.

"There are painful memories in the Colombian people about what happened in the last peace process that eventually collapsed so there is a lot of concern that this could be happening again," Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a policy analyst on Latin America at the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity in Washington, told RFI.

Suspected FARC rebels launched a pre-dawn assault on the soldiers Wednesday as they hurled grenades and fired shots while the government forces sought shelter.

President Juan Manuel Santos called it a "deliberate attack" by the FARC and lifted a suspension on Wednesday of its bombing campaign on hideout positions of the left-wing guerrilla group.

"I have ordered the armed forces to end the order suspending bombing raids against FARC camps until further notice," said Santos.

In Havana, FARC negotiator Pastor Alape expressed regret over the attack, but blamed the government's "incoherence in ordering military operations against a guerrilla militia observing a truce." He added that he did not know of the circumstances that led to the brazen assault.

Pascal Drouhaud, a Latin American expert and the vice president of the Institut Choiseul, told RFI that the suspension in its month-long ban on air raids on FARC targets signals a new period in the long-running conflict that had seen a temporary suspension in hostilities.

"Certainly the last attack of the FARC has brought a moment of tension," Drouhaud said. "The president said he will not stop the peace talks but it is a moment of reality, responsibility and tension."

In recent months, the talks, with both sides present in Havana, Cuba since November 2012, had put forward the veneer of positive results. In December, the FARC declared a unilateral ceasefire and the government responded by stopping military operations, while holding out on a bilateral ceasefire.

The two sides also pledged to work together in removing land mines, which are littered across the country.

However, Hidalgo says that while the FARC has recently sent some seemingly positive signals, it has been playing with public and government opinion.

“There is some concern in the Colombian people that President Santos has invested so much on this deal – basically his political career and his legacy – that he is willing to go beyond what is good for the Colombian people,” Hidalgo said.

Hidalgo says that while the impetus behind the attack is still uncertain, it could have been an attempt on behalf of the FARC to show that they could still inflict harm on the armed forces.

Another possibility is that the people who launched the attack, who are based in the FARC stronghold of Cauca, did so without command or the knowledge of FARC authorities in Havana.

This is especially worrisome, according to Hidalgo, because it could signal that whatever ultimately happens in Havana would not necessarily trickle into the more remote areas of Colombia.

While experts say the attack has fundamentally changed the tone of the peace negotiations, they are set to continue.

“Acts of this nature and of this severity show once more the need to accelerate the negotiations to put an end to this conflict that continues to fill Colombian families with mourning,” said Santos. “This is the war that we want to and have to finish.”