

Show caution and walk prayerfully; Missionaries in Colombia face uncertainty as peace talks collapse

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Miami, FL (LAMNS)—Uncertainty and caution are the hallmarks of life for evangelical missionaries in Colombia following the breakdown of peace talks between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's largest guerrilla group.

“We must show caution and walk prayerfully as always,” reported Stephen Armet, a missionary with the Latin America Mission (LAM) who works in the capital, Bogotá. “We have not been personally threatened, and we continue on with work and life as normal.”

Armet said, however, that several missionary friends have chosen to leave the country in the past year because of the deteriorating security situation. “We know of two in particular who are preparing these days for a departure very soon,” he said.

Prolonged talks between the government and FARC leaders collapsed on February 19 after the rebel group hijacked a national airliner and kidnapped a senator and the head of the country's peace commission.

Colombian president Andres Pastrana angrily ordered the army to retake a guerrilla enclave that Pastrana had ceded to the FARC in late 1998 as a concession aimed at spurring peace talks.

Some 10,000 Colombian soldiers were deployed in the military mission, dubbed “Operation Thanatos” after the Greek god of death. Troops took control of all five towns within days after guerrilla forces fled into the jungle.

The 38-year-old guerrilla conflict has claimed more than 40,000 lives in the past decade.

While most missionaries live outside of the former guerrilla enclave, the renewed military action and fear of guerrilla reprisals have left many of them wary.

“Tension is up, of course, and everyone is very aware of the moment-by-moment news being broadcast,” said LAM-Canada missionary Beverly Ramirez from her home in Armenia, northwest of the most intense military action. “All across the country we are being advised not to travel, either by air or by road, unless absolutely necessary. We are also advised, if at all possible, to stay close to home, work and school.”

While Armenia has been quiet as far as guerrilla conflict has gone over the past years, Ramirez reported that a nearby town of Calarca is plagued with both urban and rural guerrillas. “We are on the alert, but not in a panic mode,” she reported.

Even before the recent outbreak of serious fighting, insurgent action had affected Christian ministry in parts of the country.

“In Seravena, the Four Square church is on the plaza as is the police station,” reported Medellin-based seminary professor Don Sendek who is currently on sabbatical leave in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. “The whole plaza was placed off limits by the guerrillas for any movement, so the church members have had to use the back entrance to the church for meetings.”

“The pastor, who lived next door, moved into another house for his family’s safety,” Sendek, an LAM missionary, said. “A gas cylinder had landed in front of the house where the pastor, his family and guests were sitting. It did not explode.”

Meanwhile, some churches and missionaries are calling for political caution and a resumption of peace talks. “War rhetoric is in the air,” said Alvin Góngora, who serves through LAM Canada with a campus ministry in Bogotá. “Newscasts hail the army, thus casting a somber shadow on those who dare to speak up for peace.”

Góngora said that the new military action came as a blow to human rights organizations. “There is no way to be in touch with people in the area that is now being recovered by the army,” he reported. “We are trying to find concrete ways to assess the situation. May God encourage us to push God’s agenda of peace, justice and reconciliation.”

Lilia Sotola, Góngora’s wife who is the president of the Latin America Theological Fraternity, said that the new violence began as peace groups were preparing marches to demand social justice. Noting that the government announced that one billion dollars would be shifted from other priorities to finance the military action, Sotola said, “The costs of financing the war will fall on the shoulders of its direct victims.”

The vice president of Colombia’s Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic), Archbishop Victor Manuel López said, “We support the government. In a country of laws, it is necessary to close ranks, defend the authorities and support the institutions that insure the life and honor of Colombians.”

However, López called on government and guerrilla negotiators to return to the negotiating table, saying “the solution is not war but in rational dialogue and settlement.”

Meanwhile, Presbyterian leaders in Colombia were also calling for the renewal of peace talks. “We reaffirm as a church that peace will be possible when all the sectors of Colombian society are able to participate in the construction of economic, social and democratic alternatives that overcome the exclusion and violence that we have lived in the last 50 years in our country,” said pastor Milton Mejia, executive secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia.

The U.S. embassy in Bogotá has circulated an advisory to all mission groups in Colombia warning that “American citizens avoid all travel to Colombia. Americans already residing or traveling on Colombia are advised to exercise increased caution and vigilance under the current circumstances.”

Armet said that most of the larger missions have contracted full-time security people who have also sent notices of a high security alert. “This means to have your paperwork in order and be ready to leave quickly if you must,” he said. “They also advise to avoid travel in any ‘red zones’ where guerrilla, ELN (National Liberation Army) or FARC may be present in force.”

“We do covet your prayers for safety,” Armet asked. “And for wisdom if it comes to making a decision whether to stay or leave.”

Ramirez said she wasn’t sure how their ministry would be affected. “We are just continuing on as normal,” she reported. “If anything, we are heightening our efforts to spread the gospel and bring in more ‘lost sheep’ as the political and social situation worsens each day.”

“May God protect us and help us,” she prayed.

Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission’s web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM’s Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

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