

The UN's new role in Colombia can strengthen the peace process during its most vulnerable phase



For the first time in a post-conflict situation, the parties (FARC and the Colombian government) have created a tripartite verification mechanism with an international component (United Nations). This innovative mechanism, which helps to generate trust and resolve conflicts at key points, can serve as a useful model beyond Colombia, writes [Juana García](#).

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The Havana agreement underwriting the Colombian peace process establishes the terms on which hostilities with the FARC-EP will come to a halt. It includes a schedule for arms to be handed over to the United Nations within 180 days, a role the UN has performed in various other post-conflict situations. The agreement also includes provisions for a bilateral and definitive ceasefire, which will be monitored by a tripartite mechanism made up of the United Nations, the Colombian government (in the guise of its military) and the FARC-EP. But since this innovative method has never been applied before, important questions remain about its means and ends within the Colombian peace process.



The tripartite monitoring and verification mechanism visits a transitory normalisation point in Cauca province (© [ONU Mision Colombia](#))

The UN has been present in Colombia for several decades through its agencies, funding, and programmes, providing support through cooperation in projects addressing the causes and consequences of the ongoing conflict. The UN also controls one of the five trust funds that have been established to support the peacebuilding phase and the implementation of the peace agreement. The UN trust fund, which has already received contributions from various programmes and countries, will provide short-term financial support during the early months and years of peacebuilding in Colombia.

In the context of post-conflict Colombia, the United Nations has two additional roles related to a special political mission, requested by the Colombian government and the FARC, which has a very concrete scope. Unlike in other transition and post-conflict processes, this is not a peacekeeping or blue-helmets operation, and it has no armed personnel or security functions. The role of the political mission in post-conflict Colombia is limited to confirming the handover of weapons and coordinating the tripartite mechanism of monitoring and verification. The peculiarity of this mechanism is that it creates an unprecedented relationship between conflicting national actors and an international component.

Under the hood, the monitoring and verification mechanism actually has three levels: a National Coordination headquartered in Bogota, eight regional branches, and 26 local monitoring offices (19 transition and normalisation zones and seven encampment points). At each level the tripartite composition at the national level is replicated. The UN mission also has offices at national and regional level.

On 19 January 2016 the Colombian government and the FARC issued a joint communiqué asking the Security Council to establish a political mission made up of unarmed international observers and civilians, drawn almost entirely from the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). A week later the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2261 establishing this kind of political mission to monitor and jointly verify a definitive ceasefire, as well as confirming decommissioning of weapons.

The political mission began on 27 September 2016, the day after the signing of the peace agreement. Around the same time the tripartite monitoring and verification mechanism was set up in Bogota. But rejection of the peace agreement in a referendum meant that it could not enter into force, effectively putting the brakes on official monitoring and verification activities. On October 13 a transitory protocol was established for the monitoring and verification of the FARC at its assembly points, and on 7 November the tripartite mechanism reinitiated its activities on the basis of [a letter from the chair of the Security Council](#).

After the peace agreement was changed to incorporate various demands of its opponents, it achieved ratification in congress. The parties agreed that “D-day” would be 1 December 2016, with the 180-day countdown beginning on assembly of ex-combatants in transitional normalisation zones where weapons were to be handed over.



FARC combatants arrive in one of the zones for the handover of weapons and transition to civilian life (© [ONU Mision Colombia](#))

Almost 7,000 FARC members had reached these zones by the end of January 2017, and the UN started arms registration on 1 March. The handover of weapons has followed the international standards set out in the agreement: registration and identification, monitoring and verification of possession, reception and storage, decommissioning, and ultimately removal from the camps. The registration phase ended in late March with a UN-estimated average of one weapon per combatant. This is a more promising result than in other similar processes, where the number of weapons decommissioned has often been lower than the number of fighters. Secret caches of weapons in the jungle are also being identified for destruction in situ. Given logistical difficulties in the organisation of some of the camps, the schedule of 180 days for the handover of individual weapons was extended into June and the schedule for transition into civilian life into August. The handover formally ended with an official event on 27 June.

The tripartite mechanism has helped to generate trust not only between the two parties to the agreement, but also within wider society, where it promotes public confidence that agreed goals can be achieved. It helps to resolve disputes and prevent them from escalating, and it will allow for new ways to reduce the probability of future conflicts. Experience has shown that the first 18 months are the most fragile. Having a mechanism that maintains the delicate relationship of trust between the two sides and offers means of resolving tensions is especially important in terms of navigating this risk-laden early period.

However, the implementation of the tripartite mechanism faces operational and logistical difficulties, such as the distance between the designated zones, weak coordination between Colombian institutions, and a wearily bureaucratic reporting process. The major challenge for the Colombian government and the FARC will be in respecting recommendations and notifications even when commitments are not met by any of the parties. The UN, meanwhile, needs to make sure to restrict its recommendations and notifications to the scope of the mission.

These difficulties in the first phase of implementation, in which the UN plays a special role, also raise some concerns for the future. Logistical and material difficulties in setting up the camps, which delayed the handover of weapons, seem to suggest a lack of capacity in the state's attempts to reach into former conflict zones. Yet, deployment of state services and institutions in these areas is fundamental to the implementation of the peace agreement. Apart from the handover of weapons, the reintegration of Farc members requires a clarity that continues to be lacking, because this reintegration will differ markedly from previous reintegration processes in Colombia. Previous experiences were centred on individuals and their socioeconomic reintegration, whereas this reincorporation will be collective and political as well as socioeconomic.

The current UN mission will last until September 2017. The tripartite mechanism and the handover of weapons, processes relevant to rural districts, have a schedule of 180 days, which has now been extended into August. What is more, on July 10 a [second UN mission was approved](#) by the Security Council, tasked with monitoring FARC reintegration and security issues in receiving communities.

Overall, it is clear that despite some teething problems the tripartite mechanism has helped to generate trust between both parties in Colombia's peace process. Since this kind of mechanism helps to defuse tensions during the most fragile phase of a post-conflict situation, it may yet come to represent an example of best practice that could be applied in similar situations the world over.

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