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Colombia's Last Guerrillas Make First Step toward "Total Peace"

As part of his commitment to bringing "total peace" to Colombia, President Gustavo Petro has inaugurated new talks with the country's last leftist insurgency. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Elizabeth Dickinson explains why this round of negotiations could differ from failed past attempts.

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What is the ELN, and how strong are they in Colombia today? Why does the government want to negotiate with them?

The ELN, or National Liberation Army, is Colombia's last remaining leftist insurgency. Talks with the rebels are crucial to President Gustavo Petro's ambition of achieving "[total peace](#)" with all armed and criminal groups in the country. [Founded in 1964](#) by a group of students enamoured of the Cuban revolution and steeped in Catholic liberation theology, today the ELN has a [presence](#) in 183 – or about 16 per cent – of Colombia's municipalities. The group also has a sizeable footprint in Venezuela, where it [controls stretches](#) of territory along the border as well as deeper in the interior. With roughly [2,500 men under arms](#), divided into small, well-trained cells, the ELN is able to engage in offensive operations throughout Colombia, including bombings of [infrastructure](#), [military](#) and [civilian targets](#). The [number of civilian victims](#) of the group's attacks has fallen over the last year, while the number of military targets has risen.

The ELN's primary objective is not to take power in Bogotá but rather to transform Colombia's unequal society and economic structures. The organisation's [propaganda](#) frequently rails against the economic elite and the "destabilising action in which big capital and a large part of the Colombian oligarchy are engaged". To this end, the organisation has relied

heavily throughout its history on a network of civilian militias who support its activities. Compared with the larger and more hierarchical Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the guerrillas who signed a peace deal with the state in 2016, the ELN is nimble and decentralised. Its Central Command retains control of the group's ideological and political orientation, and its dictates in these areas are largely adhered to. Beyond that, the ELN operates [five regional fronts](#), as well as an urban front of guerrilla fighters, each of which has considerable leeway to take decisions about military goals and, crucially, profit-making criminal activity. Although drug trafficking is officially prohibited by the organisation, a number of fronts are now prominent players in the narcotics supply chain, moving cocaine along trafficking routes and taxing each step of production.

The ELN portrays itself as benevolent toward civilians, particularly toward allied or co-opted parts of civil society, but it has exacted a devastating human toll in the course of prosecuting its conflicts. Forced recruitment, including of children, is widespread, as is enlistment of hard-up adolescent Colombians and Venezuelan migrants. The group has also engaged in assassinations, extortion and kidnappings, restricted freedom of movement, and conducted "social cleansing" – the killing of petty criminals and others it considers undesirable. Today, the public demand for negotiations with the rebels is high in some of the regions suffering most from violence, particularly Arauca and Norte de Santander on the Venezuelan border, as well as Bajo Cauca, Magdalena Medio and the Pacific Coast.

What do we know about how the negotiations will take place?

Talks began on 21 [November](#) in Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, and the first session is set to last roughly [twenty days](#). The two sides [say](#) they will start with the framework they agreed upon on 30 March 2016, during their last foray into negotiations. That agenda laid out [six points](#) for discussion: participation, democratic engagement, socio-economic transformation, victims, the end of conflict and implementation. While all these topics are thorny, perhaps the most difficult to address will be the ELN's insistence on popular participation in the negotiations. The group has rejected the public consultation mechanisms that the Petro government has already embarked upon, notably its Binding Regional Dialogues, forums in which the most conflict-affected communities can offer input into the administration's national development policies. It is not clear what sort of popular participation the ELN envisages instead or how much the participation would shape eventual agreements with the Colombian state.

The government's lead negotiator with the ELN is [Otty Patiño](#), who was once a guerrilla in the M-19 urban movement (to which Petro also belonged) and helped negotiate its demobilisation. Patiño was part of the

Constituent Assembly that produced Colombia's new constitution in 1991, an experience that the ELN has previously suggested it may wish to repeat despite Petro's [past expressions of aversion](#) to drafting a new charter. Another crucial member of the government's team will be [José Félix Lafaurie](#), a prominent political adversary of Petro and right-wing former politician who today is head of the country's cattle association. Lafaurie's involvement follows an audacious and entirely unexpected invitation from Petro, who is seeking to ensure broad political buy-in for the talks, particularly with respect to the contentious issues of land and rural reform. Former President Álvaro Uribe, widely regarded as the leader of Colombian conservatism, has [lauded the decision to include](#) Lafaurie. Still, this strategy has risks – namely, that the government could find itself negotiating simultaneously with the ELN and the landed elite, to the satisfaction of neither. Finally, two retired senior military officers and an active general will participate directly in the talks, while a team of other officers will act as technical advisers. The military's backing will be critical to ensuring that any accord that parties reach is fulfilled.

Central Command member Pablo Beltrán leads the ELN negotiating team, as he did during a previous round of talks. He is joined by Aureliano Carbonell, a movement intellectual, and Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, another former senior commander and veteran of talks. The full ELN delegation could have up to [twenty](#) members, including seventeen individuals for whom Colombia [suspended arrest warrants](#) in order to enable the talks to take place. The ELN said in a [statement on 21 November](#) that the negotiating team "has the backing of the entire organisation, of all the national and regional leadership". As was the case in 2012, when the FARC began talks with former President Juan Manuel Santos' government, both sides' negotiating teams are overwhelmingly male. The Catholic Church, seen by both sides as a credible interlocutor, will have [no formal role](#) but is invited, along with the UN, to sit in as an observer. After the first round of talks, the dialogue will shift to another host country.

Different Colombian governments have tried to negotiate with the ELN before. What failed then, and what is different this time around?

At least seven different governments dating back to 1985 have attempted talks with the ELN. The most recent effort began under President Juan Manuel Santos in 2016, before it was [definitively](#) terminated under President Iván Duque after an ELN suicide bomber attacked a police academy in Bogotá on 17 January 2019, killing 21. Specific incidents interrupted certain other previous attempts as well, while others fell by the wayside, in part because the government was focused on its battle with the larger FARC insurgency. The ELN has proven a particular challenge for past negotiators because of its decentralised structure and ideological commitment, as well as the group's mindset: while the group understands it will not assume control of Colombia, it nevertheless

considers that every day it remains in battle is a victory, and resistance to the state is a political success. In these circumstances, a successful negotiation for the ELN may simply end up being a protracted conversation that falls short of their full demands, such as overhauling the prevailing economic order.

An important difference this time around is that the government is not just talking to the ELN but has opened preliminary informal conversations with a handful of other armed and criminal outfits. [Legislation governing](#) the administration's "total peace" plan, [passed by Congress](#) in late October, authorises the government to negotiate not only with insurgencies like the ELN but also with what it calls "high-impact criminal groups". These groups, which are among the ELN's toughest opponents today, are defined as organisations with a clear hierarchical leadership and persistent capacity to carry out attacks threatening civilians. Addressing all these groups at the same time is essential, the government argues, because otherwise the demobilisation of one group would simply leave spaces for other outfits to fill. Still, the ELN sees itself as a political movement and, therefore, different from criminal groups. It bristles at the idea that the latter deserve any sort of dialogue with the authorities.

Another crucial difference in the format of talks this time is the government's openness and even preference for partial agreements, abandoning the 2016 peace accord maxim that nothing is agreed upon until everything is. This time, the Petro government is seeking initial mini-deals, with particular stress on improving humanitarian conditions in conflict-affected communities and curbing fighting among various armed groups. The latter issue is likely to prove difficult, as the ELN is engaged in active combat with rivals including the Gulf Clan (in Chocó, Valle de Cauca and Bolívar states) and so-called FARC dissidents (in Arauca, Norte de Santander, Nariño and Cauca). ELN commander Antonio García [has stated](#) that the group does not buy into the idea of a "multilateral ceasefire", a government proposal aimed at mitigating conflict not just between the state and armed organisations but also between rival groups. For the same reasons mentioned above, the ELN opposes this proposal, insisting that it is not to be treated on the same terms as criminal bands with no political goals.

Yet another novelty of these talks is that neither side is seeking disarmament, at least not at first. Citing what it perceives as the Colombian state's non-compliance with the 2016 FARC peace accord, the ELN is unlikely to agree to any comprehensive handover of arms, preferring [a gradual process](#) that would move along in step with the government's progress in honouring its promises.

The government has announced Norway, Cuba and Venezuela as guarantor states. What role will these countries have?

Officially so far, Norway, Cuba and Venezuela will act as guarantor states for the ELN peace talks. Yet this group is expected to widen, possibly to include Chile, Spain, France and/or Brazil. Norway and Cuba are also guarantor states of the 2016 FARC agreement. Reopening talks with the ELN represented a major thaw between Colombia and Cuba, where the ELN negotiating team has been based since the 2019 breakdown of talks. The Duque government adopted a hostile stance toward Havana after the bomb attack that year in Bogotá and demanded to no avail that the island nation extradite the ELN leadership. Cuba was host to the first meeting between the Petro government and the ELN delegation; its involvement in fresh talks has already moved Petro to ask the U.S. to consider rescinding Havana's designation as a "state sponsor of terrorism", a status that Washington imposed in the late days of former President Donald Trump's administration at Duque's request.

Among the outside participants, Caracas' role in the talks, as initial host and guarantor, is both the most critical for their success, and also the most complicated. While the ELN has long maintained a presence in Venezuela, across the border from Colombia, the number of fighters there has grown sharply since 2016. Rebel commanders have consolidated relations with local authorities and security forces, including by operating illegal mines and enforcing political and social control in border communities, while the ELN leadership professes sympathy with the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. As a result, Venezuela's participation is both vital to generating a workable agreement and potentially dangerous, should Caracas' support for the talks flag. The Maduro government's backing might weaken for any number of reasons, including dissatisfaction with Bogotá over a matter that arises in their warming bilateral relationship, or a general unwillingness to sacrifice its privileged ties to the guerrillas. Among the issues to be resolved are whether and how the fate of ELN fighters in Venezuela will figure into talks on eventual demobilisation.

What has happened on the ground since the announcement of the negotiations?

Petro's election, with his commitment to negotiating with armed and criminal groups, has reconfigured the Colombian conflict landscape. With an eye toward starting talks in the strongest position possible, armed and criminal groups across the board rushed to expand the territory in their grip. Security sources report that the ELN sent a number of fighters over the border from Venezuela to battle rivals in Arauca, Chocó and Valle de Cauca departments in Colombia, among other places. According to the military, July saw more combat between armed groups than any other month in 2022.

This violent push continued throughout Colombia until roughly early September, when the warring groups shifted tack. In his initial outreach to

these outfits, Colombia's High Commissioner for Peace Danilo Rueda asked them to show gestures of good-will by lowering violence against civilians. Homicides fell in September and October, yet other types of duress aimed at social control have ratcheted up, community representatives say. For example, the ELN has stepped up its pressure on local communities, forcing elected authorities in the neighbourhood-elected Communal Action Councils to fall into line with their orders. The group has also reactivated forced recruitment in Arauca and Chocó, according to local leaders there.

Dynamics in the border department of Arauca also demonstrate the [fragility of the good-will gestures](#). Violence in that department has recently picked up again, amid an internecine conflict between the ELN and FARC dissident Fronts 10 and 28. Residents report a rise in killings, as well as curfews, forced confinement and more frequent kidnappings, including of soldiers who can be used as bargaining chips in talks. In the words of one social leader from a rural area in Arauquita: "These groups are talking peace abroad but killing people here".

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