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Divisions erupt as Colombia rebels criticize their own

AFP

In the latest sign of division amongst Colombia's FARC rebels as peace talks continue, the group's leadership made a rare condemnation of an attack by some of its own guerrillas.

The group's central command, in a stern message on its website, "repudiated and condemned" some fighters from within its own ranks following a car bomb attack last week.

A civilian died and more than 20 people were injured when the bomb was detonated in front of a police station in Pradera, a town in the western Valle de Cauca region.

"Those responsible never intended to cause injury to the non-combatant civilian population," the FARC secretariat said, condemning the "lack of foresight" shown in the attack.

The statement said the FARC will take "appropriate disciplinary action."

The remarks seemed to confirm the existence of divisions within the rebellion or at least communication issues between leaders in Havana for peace talks and those on the ground in Colombia.

"It's the first time that they have condemned an attack. Not only did they reproach it, but they also said that it is not the way to do war," Conflict Analysis Research Center director Jorge Alberto Restrepo told AFP.

The Pradera attack, he said, showed "some form of dissidence among FARC's mobile columns," over which there is not "total logistical control."

The detailed condemnation was rare for the FARC, which does not commonly admit to making mistakes in its armed struggle, part of Latin America's longest-standing conflict.



Colombian police officers and soldiers inspect damage after a bomb blast near a local government headquarters in the western municipality of Pradera, department of Valle del Cauca, Colombia, on January 16, 2014. Colombian police officers and soldiers inspect damage after a bomb blast near a local government headquarters in the western municipality of Pradera, department of Valle del Cauca, Colombia, on January 16, 2014.

The message came after Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzon accused the FARC of "acting like Al-Qaeda" and President Juan Manuel Santos blasted its "irrational and contradictory way of acting."

Santos, speaking on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, welcomed the FARC's mea culpa.

"I appreciate that they have recognized being the perpetrators of this attack," he said.

This newest development by the FARC is "a historical fact that confirms that they are fragmented," said political scientist and Colombian academic Jairo Libreros.

Analysts point to continued reports of civilian abductions by the group despite a pledge before peace talks to end the practice, as further proof of divisions in its ranks.

A report by the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation, which specializes in Colombia's conflict, said some groups in drug-trading border areas did not observe FARC's Christmas ceasefire.

But the FARC has denied that there are divisions within its ranks, claiming any violations of the ceasefire were in self-defense.

Ultimately, the biggest threat to the peace process, some analysts say, would be a FARC attack with a heavy civilian toll -- something central leadership may not have ordered but could not prevent.

Incidents attributed to the guerrillas include a December bomb attack that killed eight people including two civilians in the small village of Inza in southwestern Cauca province.

More recently, in the same province, a missile destroyed a home in the Toribo area, killing a mother and her family.

Talks between the Colombian government and FARC have been underway in Havana since November 2012, with preliminary agreements reached on two of five agenda points.

Other issues that remain unresolved are compensation for victims of the conflict and the disarming of the rebel forces.

Founded in 1964, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia is the country's largest rebel group, with an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 fighters.

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