

Colombia's Farc rebels vow to keep fighting despite top commander's death

Alfonso Cano was shot three times while trying to escape during a military operation in the south-west of the country

Sibylla Brodzinsky in Bogotá
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Alfonso Cano, leader of Farc, was killed after a military raid in south-west Colombia. Photograph: Raul Arboleda/AFP/Getty Images

Colombia's leftist Farc rebels have vowed to continue their struggle after the death of their supreme commander, Alfonso Cano, in a military operation in south-west Colombia.

"A policy has been laid out and it will continue," the ruling secretariat of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia said in a statement posted on the internet.

Cano, 63, had escaped a morning bombing raid on his camp in Cauca province on Friday, hiding in the jungle-covered mountains for nearly eight hours trying to avoid detection by hundreds of soldiers who descended on the area.

Troops found evidence he was near: his thick glasses, ID card, wallet and dentures, according to accounts by soldiers who participated in Operation Odyssey. At dusk, Cano emerged from his hideout to try to escape. He was seen by a soldier and shot three times.

The operation had been planned since Cano was named chief commander of the Farc in 2008, on the death of its founder, Manuel Marulanda. With the help of guerrilla deserters, at least eight police agents had infiltrated Cano's security details and were able to report on his movements. The military knew he had left the Farc stronghold in Tolima province where he normally stayed, and moved into the more accessible mountains of neighbouring Cauca.

The death of Cano, a recalcitrant Marxist, leaves analysts considering the implications. Under Cano, the Farc had reorganised after severe setbacks and returned to the offensive. But Cano had also made overtures on possible peace talks. Any progress will be delayed by his death, through whoever succeeds him will probably toe the same line

since Farc decisions are made collectively, according to the political analyst Alejo Vargas.

Colombia's president, Juan Manuel Santos, said that whoever replaces Cano will not have "the same command and control over the troops".

Jorge Restrepo, the director of the Conflict Analysis and Resource Centre in Bogota, suggested in El Tiempo newspaper that a weaker central leader could cause different Farc units to go rogue. "Some will demobilise, others will dedicate themselves exclusively to drug trafficking because there won't be a unified command," he wrote.

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