



Security in Colombia

Top dog down

The death of the FARC's leader is a triumph for the government. But will it make peace any easier to attain?

Nov 12th 2011 | BOGOTÁ | from the print edition

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COLOMBIAN officials have sometimes exaggerated their successes over the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). But there was no room to quibble when Juan Manuel Santos, the president, called the killing of the guerrillas' leader on November 4th "the most resounding blow against the organisation in its entire history." Following two air strikes on his camp in the south-western province of Cauca, Guillermo León Saenz, whose nom de guerre was Alfonso Cano, tried to hide in the surrounding jungle. But troops flooded the area and found his glasses, wallet and false teeth. A soldier then spotted him trying to escape and shot him dead. He had shaved his signature beard and moustache. It is the first time in the FARC's 47 years that their chief has fallen.

Mr Cano, once a middle-class anthropology student, spent 33 years as a guerrilla. He took over the FARC in 2008 after Pedro Antonio Marín (known as Manuel Marulanda or "Sureshot"), their founder, died of a heart attack. He was known as an intractable Marxist who advocated taking power by force. "Our struggle is to do away with the state as now it exists in Colombia," he told *The Economist* in 2001. "Preferably by political means, but if they don't let us, then we have to carry on shooting."

When he became leader, the FARC were reeling from a series of setbacks. The government of Álvaro Uribe had rescued their most prized hostages, including Ingrid Betancourt, a former senator, and killed one of their top commanders, yielding a trove of intelligence. Many security analysts doubted that Mr Cano could hold the group together. But he soon proved his mettle by returning the FARC to their guerrilla roots, conducting hit-and-run ambushes on troops and relying more on urban militias. Last month the group staged two surprise attacks that killed 20 soldiers.

Even as he strengthened the FARC militarily, however, Mr Cano kept the door open to

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peace talks. He praised a law granting reparations to victims of armed conflict and returning land taken from them, and said in a video message released in August that "dialogue is the way." Ariel Ávila, an analyst with Nuevo Arco Iris (New Rainbow), a think-tank, says Mr Cano had won consensus among the FARC's leaders to seek talks, although that would not guarantee a willingness to lay down their arms. (The FARC made a sham of the 1999-2002 peace talks by using their "safe haven" territory as a military training ground).

It is unclear whether Mr Cano's successor will be able to offer a credible peace deal. The top two candidates to replace him are Luciano Marín Arango (known as Iván Márquez) and Rodrigo Londoño-Echeverry (Timochenko). Colombian officials say they live mainly in Venezuela. Mr Márquez is the only FARC secretariat member who has participated in civilian politics: he served in Congress for the Patriotic Union, the group's failed attempt at a legal political wing. Timochenko joined the FARC at 13 and was a protégé of Mr Marulanda. He is seen more as a military leader than a political one. Neither candidate would be likely to drop Mr Cano's strategy. But they would need years to consolidate authority before entering talks.

By that time, the FARC may well have become a different type of threat. Since Mr Santos served as Mr Uribe's defence minister, he has focused on attacking the group's leaders to cause disarray in the ranks. If he maintains this strategy, says Jorge Restrepo of the Conflict Analysis and Resource Centre in Bogotá, the FARC might break up into smaller gangs—possibly merging with the violent drug-trafficking mobs that took shape after right-wing paramilitary groups were demobilised. Mr Santos has presented a constitutional amendment that would establish a transitional justice system to reinsert demobilised FARC members into civilian life, including the possibility of participating in politics.

Although Mr Cano's death may make it harder for the FARC to resume peace talks, it also makes it easier for Mr Santos to propose them. As the guerrillas resumed attacks, he was criticised for letting them regroup—particularly by Mr Uribe, who had reduced their ranks by half. By decapitating them, he has won enough political capital to enter talks without risking a backlash. His approval rating rose from 79% to 83% on the news, according to one poll.

For now, though, Mr Santos is focusing on the fight, keeping up military pressure until the FARC has a change of heart. "When we see that will for peace," he says, "we will open the door for dialogue."

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