

# Colombia's 'Total Peace' and Climate Change

Written by Andres Revis, Juheon Lee and Margarida Soares Rodrigues

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## Colombia's 'Total Peace' and Climate Change

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ANDRES REVIS, JUHEON LEE AND MARGARIDA SOARES RODRIGUES, FEB 22 2023

At the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26) in November 2021, Colombia pledged to be a carbon-neutral state by 2050 and was hailed for having the most ambitious plan in Latin America. Then-president Iván Duque also signed the Declaration on Forest and Land Use in which signatories committed to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030. Despite the much-applauded pledge and commitment, Colombia has been failing to protect environmental activists in the country. According to a 2021 Global Witness report, Colombia was the country with the highest number of documented killings of environmental activists in 2019 and 2020. In 2020 alone, 65 out of a recorded 227 land and environmental activists killed worldwide were from Colombia. Global Witness also ranked Colombia second after Brazil in the number of land and environmental defenders killed in 2021. These figures paint a picture of Colombia as one of the most dangerous countries for environmental activists.

The killing of environmentalists has been closely linked to the country's delayed peace. The 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the largest rebel group in the country, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC, marked the beginning of new era for the country. The historic peace deal, which received international praise and earned then-president Juan Manuel Santos the Nobel Peace Prize, was expected to end the decades-long guerilla war that had killed more than 220,000 people in the country. However, the demobilization of FARC led to a power vacuum in the jungle territory of Colombia, accompanied by the rise of FARC splinter groups, right-wing paramilitary groups, and criminal organizations. Experts have already warned that Colombia's delayed implementation of the accord, especially in rural areas, may close the window for achieving lasting peace in the country. What is not discussed as much is the fact that these on-going conflicts intensify the most urgent environmental problem in Colombia—deforestation—and undermine international efforts to protect the Amazon, a crucial safeguard against climate change. This paper highlights the link between ongoing conflicts among armed groups and the deforestation of the Amazon, a problem that has been exacerbated by the failures of domestic and international institutions. We argue that the efforts of Colombia's current government toward "total peace" provide a good path forward, and ought to receive more international attention.

### Continued Conflicts and the Loss of the Amazon Forest Since 2016

The 2016 peace deal should have marked the end of the decades-long conflict in Colombia. The FARC turned over its weapons under UN supervision and some 13,000 ex-combatants agreed to reintegrate into Colombian society in exchange for government concessions, including social and economic development of rural areas, land reform, and political participation for former guerilla leaders. Despite the initial widespread adherence by former combatants, dissident groups emerged and continued armed conflicts with the government in rural areas. Members of these groups include former FARC fighters who never demobilized, other members who participated in the demobilization process but since returned to arms, and newly recruited fighters. In August 2019, three years into the accord, FARC's former second-in-command and top peace negotiator, Iván Márquez, announced that he was taking up arms again. He and other former FARC commanders created the Second Marquetalia, named after a 1960s stronghold of the groups that eventually formed the FARC. These groups have continued to engage in terrorist activities and assassinated human rights leaders, leading to their designation as foreign terrorist organizations by the US Department of State. At the same time, the National Liberation Army (ELN), which did not participate in the 2016 peace deal, made inroads with former FARC fighters.

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Throughout rural Colombia, right-wing paramilitary groups have re-emerged. These groups were initially formed during the 1980s by ranchers, farmers, landholders, and the business community to defend their lands and properties from the anti-government guerrillas operating amid weak state control. Despite the Colombian government's efforts to demobilize such organizations, thousands of members remained active and reorganized into new groups, such as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGG), also known as the Gulf Clan, Colombia's most powerful paramilitary groups that control most of the country's drug trade. The 2014 ceasefire and 2016 peace accord provided an opportunity for these paramilitary groups to assert control. With state authority in the countryside still weak, these groups have extended their illegal businesses, thereby intensifying the humanitarian crisis. In July 2021, fighting between the AGG and a FARC dissident group forced over 4000 people to flee from the conflict. Since 2016, over 500 human rights defenders have been killed in Colombia, with the greatest concentration of killings occurring in areas with high levels of illegal economic activities, like drug production and trafficking.

The environmental impact of the armed conflict has received inconsistent attention over the years. Guerrilla groups have caused environmental damage through activities such as illegal mining, coca cultivation, attacks on oil pipelines, and the building of encampments in protected areas such as national parks. Before their demobilization in 2016, the FARC had established some rules against environmental damage in many territories, including limiting deforestation. These rules were less about environmental concerns than they were a tactical choice to avoid aerial detection by the government. There were some groups, however, who valued protecting the environment for the sake of small farmers and who would fine violators and undertake restorative measures. After the ceasefire, deforestation in the territories rapidly increased due to a significant decrease in FARC authority. Farmers interviewed by the Crisis Group revealed that there was a manual of coexistence that governed the environment under FARC control, and limits were imposed on where and how much coca they could plant. After the ceasefire, however, deforestation surged in territories formerly controlled by FARC. Under the control of non-ideological armed groups, whose chief concern is profits, land clearance for coca crops, cattle ranching, timber trade, and illegal gold mining have expanded. Forest loss in Colombia increased significantly since 2016. In 2020 alone, the country lost 171,000 hectares of forest, which is twice the size of New York City. Halting deforestation is essential to the fight against climate change, especially considering that parts of the Amazon now produce more carbon than they absorb.

## Institutional Failure

Colombia's paramilitaries operate alongside corporate interests in Colombian natural resources, creating a deadly environment for activists in Colombia's Amazon region. In May 2022, throughout Colombia's Santander region, the Gulf Clan paramilitary group shared pamphlets naming environmental activists the group intended to kill if they did not cease their activism. In the Putumayo region, the paramilitary group Border Command also threatened to assassinate activists. Partnerships between paramilitary groups and petroleum companies aggravate the situation and pose further threats to the environment. The Gulf Clan is suspected to have ties to the state-owned Ecopetrol, which conducts fracking in Santander. Border Command has claimed direct links with a subsidiary of the multinational oil company GeoPark and threatened residents not to interfere in the company's projects. The paramilitary groups that forcefully control these regions gain profit in allowing these corporations to exploit the natural resources. This nefarious alliance is given legitimacy when international organizations fail to condemn these corporations. In August 2022, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reportedly partnered with GeoPark in Colombia within the indigenous Siona reservation, where the UNDP announced \$1.9 million in aid for a village without electricity and running water. Meanwhile, the Siona people are in direct opposition to GeoPark's activities, viewing oil drilling as "draining blood from the earth". This partnership was viewed as essential for the UN, considering GeoPark's control in the region and its potential to provide development. However, residents perceive the UNDP as using oil money to silence local opposition while providing controversial development in the region. This economic deal furthered the reach of oil corporations in these already volatile areas.

The solution to this problem resides in the political might of Colombia's leaders. Former Colombian President Iván Duque did little to mitigate this issue. He was reluctant to implement the peace process and empower the Special Justice of Peace to prosecute these paramilitary groups and associated corporations. As a result, environmental killings increased during his administration. Duque effectively undermined the 2016 accord, including its many land reform initiatives. Such initiatives include expanding Campesino Reserve Zones to ensure land for small farmers,

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establishing the National Land Fund to help victims of displacement, introducing a registry to record land ownership, and creating an Environmental Zoning Plan to manage and protect sustainable land use. The accord also encourages the implementation of Territorially Focused Development Programs to help historically violent communities resist the persistence of radical armed groups and a National Program for Integral Substitution to help farmers substitute coca for legal, sustainable crops. The substitution program was designed to support farmers when they eliminate the entirety of their coca crops; however, the government has not given the farmers the training and resources they promised to ensure economic success. In the years since the 2016 accord, the Colombian government has not adequately implemented these elements and has not committed to the initiatives.

### **Petro's "Total Peace" and its Challenges**

The swearing in of President Gustavo Petro in August 2022 opened the possibility for a new approach to the conflict. With Petro being Colombia's first left-wing president, the government's ability to negotiate with leftist guerillas has grown. He presented his proposal for "total peace," which aimed to negotiate a national ceasefire with several armed groups who remain active in the country. The proposal was approved by the Colombian Senate on October 24, 2022. The plan also provides alternative forms of employment to curb illicit economies driven by coca cultivation. The new government aims to negotiate with several armed groups involved in violence, massacres, and illicit economies. As of October 2022, 22 armed groups have already communicated interest in the plan's initiatives. Petro's plan is to resurrect the spirit of the 2016 peace accord by restarting peace talks with a prominent rebel group, ELN, which has stalled due to deep mistrust, and providing plea-bargaining benefits for criminal activities and human rights violations. This initiative has been endorsed in the polls and by key international organizations, including the UN and the Organization of American States. Petro, who is himself a former member of the M-19 rebel group, has been praised by environmentalists for his plans to reduce Colombia's dependence on oil extraction through banning new contracts for oil exploration. His plan for "Total Peace" also has domestic political support with its approval by the Senate and popular support with its ability to stabilize day-to-day life for rural residents. Thus far, the plan provides significant signs of mending discord and effectively ending conflict in Colombia.

Nevertheless, critics argue that Petro's "Total Peace" tends to give precedence to peace over justice and warns about the risk of impunity this initiative would bring. Petro's "restorative justice approach," which is based on the idea that a criminal or retributive justice approach could jeopardize the need to promote reconciliation and restore national unity, fails to address the grievances of victims in decades-long criminal activities. Critics argue that peace should expand beyond ceasefires and ultimately requires addressing criminal justice. Acknowledging effective criminal justice entails a multi-sided approach. While mending Colombia's deep institutional wounds includes appropriately recognizing the long-term damage guerillas have caused, the recognition of government culpability is also necessary. Acknowledging the fault of related parties requires the military to take into account the social costs of its activities in rural Colombia. This peace initiative likewise requires judicial approaches toward multinational oil companies responsible for environmentalist killings. Petro's administration could achieve this by reinforcing the Special Justice of Peace. Admonishing culpable corporations also requires international condemnation from groups that previously supported them, like the UNDP. Therefore, Petro's administration will have to evaluate the costs and benefits of negotiations in the short term and find a balance between peace and justice in the long term. Peace talks between the government and the ELN resumed in December 2022, marking the first new negotiations since January 2019. Considering the ELN's human rights violations and bombing of oil infrastructure and the police academy in Bogota, the most challenging aspect of these negotiations will be finding the balance between peace and justice. However, the success of these deals and the continuation of the peace process in Colombia are important not just to the citizens of Colombia but also to our ongoing fight against climate change.

### **Conclusion**

Colombia's moves toward lasting peace have never been closer to success. Never has the government had as effective of an ability to negotiate than the present with the new president and his popular peace initiative. The ongoing violence in Colombia has reached international heights due to guerilla partnerships with multinational corporations, alleged UN involvement, and worldwide attention on environmentalist killings. Considering the significance of the Amazon rainforest's impact on global ecosystems, the importance of Colombia's lasting peace

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reaches beyond its borders. The ongoing negotiations are a hopeful step forward, but the recognition of justice is key. Although addressing criminal justice among armed groups is crucial to Colombia's institutional rebuilding, it is also necessary for the government to recognize its role in perpetuating violence in order to reestablish legitimacy among the public. Petro's administration seems to have considered this need with their plan to restructure the military to focus on civilian protection, but a recognition of culpability is still necessary. Moreover, the plan needs a clear structure to properly involve the diverse multitude of groups. Petro's administration needs to consider how they plan on issuing judicial punishment for responsible groups and how to determine who these groups are. The international community must pay more attention to the country's path toward lasting peace.

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### About the author:

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