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What is at stake at the Ninth Conference of the FARC***

While there have been advances in the dismantling of paramilitary structures and in the negotiation between the ELN and the government, the eyes of politicians and analysts have turned overwhelmingly towards the FARC as a key actor whose behaviour will determine if the conflict dies out gradually, or, on the contrary, is prolonged into the future. At the same time, however, the uncertainty about the strategic situation of the guerrilla led by Manuel Marulanda has increased to the point where contradictory explanations about their capacity and intentions are proliferating. On the one hand, there are those who are certain that a peace process is inevitable considering the setbacks suffered by the organization as a result of the almost five-year-old Democratic Security Policy. On the other hand, there are those who claim that the guerrilla remain practically intact, ready to continue their violent activities, and will only be inclined to negotiate under conditions they find satisfactory. Far from resolving these doubts, the recent communication from the Secretariat of the FARC that the organization has held a new Conference¹ in order to define their future political-military course of action has increased the controversy. Nevertheless, some clues to explain the current state of this organization and its perspectives on its own evolution can be found in this meeting.

The first news about the new Conference – the Ninth organized by the FARC since its birth in 1964

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- originated in the declarations of the Minister of Defence Juan Manuel Santos during the "First Meeting on the Financing of Terrorism" in mid November in Bogotá. The Minister referred to the FARC meeting, drawing attention to the fact that *"Now they can't have these conferences with speeches and parties as was the case in the past. Moreover, all the local commanders can't meet at the same time"*.² In this way, the Minister stressed not only the political importance of the event to the guerrilla group, but also the difficulties facing the organization in realizing it.

In fact, the FARC Conference is the highest political entity in which the main ideas about determining the group's political-military action are elaborated, and during which the members of the Central General Staff are chosen who in turn select the members of the Secretariat³, the executive branch of the organization. The preparation for the conference begins with the elaboration of the document by the Secretariat that is supposed to serve as a base for discussion for the organization. This text is sent to the different units of the guerrilla group – Fronts, Mobile Columns, etc. – where it is discussed in assemblies made up of all the militants regardless of their rank and condition. Afterwards, each unit chooses one or several delegates who are in charge of representing it during the Conference. In this way, the central event of the Conference ends up being a meeting of some eighty delegates in addition to the thirty one members of the Central General Staff and the nine members of the Secretariat. In other words, it is a meeting in which around a hundred or so members chosen from the organization meet, among which is included the complete leadership.

The conferences are key political moments for the FARC not only because they define the future course of action of the guerrilla group, but also because

they represent a scenario in which the base can make suggestions to the leadership. Of course it cannot be said that the FARC is democratic. In fact, the totalitarian character of the organization's ideology, the constant military discipline and the methods of coercion in the hands of the leadership frustrate authentic open debate. However, it is also certain the assemblies held by the Fronts in preparation for the Conference are scenarios in which the participants can air dissenting views capable of challenging the control of the Secretariat and, in certain cases, of forcing changes in the political direction of the organization including replacements in the leadership. In addition, the gathering of the FARC leaders in one place to celebrate the Conference creates important security problems in the risk of being found and attacked by the Colombian security forces. As has been suggested by certain parts of the Colombian Military⁴, this combination of difficulties in assuring political control of the meeting and guarantying its security may have been behind the decision of the leadership to hold a "virtual" Conference on the internet, avoiding a physical meeting of the delegates.

Whether or not the Conference has in fact been held, the more relevant question is why hold it now, particularly considering that it is a process full of political and security risks for a leadership that has monopolized power within the FARC. Without a doubt, one part of the answer to this question lies in the existence of problems with internal cohesion inside the organization. A symptom of this trend is the impact of the demobilization program on the ranks of the insurgents. From August 2002 to February of this year, 6.431 desertions from the FARC⁵ have been registered, an average of 115 per month. Furthermore, this flood of demobilizations has especially affected some particularly significant guerrilla units. In fact, in the period mentioned above, the Western Joint Command, the Cundinamarca and Tolima Central Joint Command, and the Mobile Column Teófilo Forero, have accumulated the greatest number of desertions in relation to the total number of men in the unit. This trend indicates how some of the armed units traditionally considered as part of the nucleus of the FARC have started to show signs of weakening.

Moreover, a more detailed look at the profile of the demobilized guerrillas shows new indications of the internal crisis within the FARC. The deserters who have given up arms are no longer young, low-level combatants recently incorporated in the organization. On the contrary, middle-ranking

members who have spent more than a decade in the organization have been turning to the demobilization program more frequently than before. Of all demobilized guerrillas in the past two months of January and February 2007, between five and six percent were identified as middle-ranking members. Although at first glance this appears to be a minor figure, it must be remembered that such members prefer not to identify themselves as middle ranking to avoid persecution by the former comrades and prosecution for their responsibility in atrocities. Similarly, some middle ranking members deciding to desert prefer to do it without turning to the government program, not seeing any great advantage in it for them. This makes it likely that there has been a substantial underreporting of the middle ranking number of guerrillas who have abandoned the organization. If the limited number of individuals that make up the command structure of the guerrilla - between 400 and 600 out of a total of 10.500 combatants - and the difficulty in replacing them are also taken into consideration, it could be said that current levels of desertion cannot be easily tolerated by the FARC.

These symptoms of eternal weakness are a result of a combination of factors. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the increase in pressure by the military during the last several years has frustrated the expectations of those who joined the ranks of the insurgents hoping to benefit from a quick victory over the state. As a consequence, a good part of those sectors has turned to the demobilization program as a way out of a struggle that has begun to be perceived as nonsensical. In addition, the reduction in military actions by the guerrilla as part of a strategy to preserve their strength has led to a paralysis in the Fronts that has resulted in a growing demoralization. Finally, the growing communication difficulties between the leadership and the operating units as a consequence of the government's military campaign has led to a reduction in the capacity of the Secretariat to control what happens inside the Fronts. The result has been a loss of strategic cohesion and the tendency for political differences to appear in the heart of the organization.

Indeed, the FARC has stopped being a monolithic organization for a while now, and today it is possible to distinguish distinct generation of commanders with different positions on how to respond to the government's security strategy and on what should be the future strategy of the guerrilla. It is possible to identify at least four political families within the insurgent leadership. On one side, there is the so called "Historic Generation" formed by the veterans of Marquetalia such as Marulanda himself

or Timoleón who participated in the founding of the organization. Also, there is the "First Urban Generation" which includes commanders such as Alfonso Cano or Ivan Marquez who joined the FARC in the beginning of the eighties in the wake of the Nicaraguan revolution. A third sector which could be classified as "Traqueto" or "Narco" built its power base inside the organization with its control over drug trafficking and its proven capacity to contribute financially to the organization. This sector is mainly composed of people with peasant origins who came to prominence in the areas under control of the Southern and Eastern Blocks such as Mono Jojoy, Negro Acacio and John 40. Finally, there is "Second Urban Generation" members recruited in the cities in the context of the ideological reaction to the fall of communism at the beginning of the nineties. Their role in the FARC has been important in the organization's move to mobile warfare in the middle of the nineties and in the impact of the connections with drug trafficking on the ranks of the insurgents. In any event, this latest generation is far from being homogenous. It is certain that all of them are equally critical of the setbacks in the implementation of the group's Strategic Plan (elaborated during the seventh Conference in 1982) and are looking for faster results. However, there are also distinct factions within this sector. On the one hand, there are those inclined to elaborate a political position for the FARC that could eventually include a negotiation and process of disarmament over the long term. At the other extreme, there is a hard line faction that wants to gamble on an intensification of the armed struggle as a way of gaining additional power. The first faction for example is dominant in the units of the Jacobo Arenas Mobile Column (which operates in Cauca and Valle), and the second faction has its representatives in the insurgent networks in and around Medellín.

The difficulties of the FARC have forced a taking of positions on the part of the distinct families of the organization around three possible alternatives in response to the security strategy of the Uribe administration. The first position could be called "traditional" and is the dominant one within the Secretariat and in the organization as a whole. The supporters of this option reject the possibility of opening a true negotiation with the current government. Instead, they are hoping to wear out the government through political-military means, relying on the type of armed actions traditionally perpetrated by the FARC – attacks on the military and police, against political leaders, etc. – and avoiding indiscriminate attacks against the population that will provoke the widespread rejection of society. The second position could be called "the negotiation

position", and it is a minority position within the organization. In the view of supporters of this option, the armed struggle is beginning to be seen as a failure, and they are beginning to consider the possibility of a political dialogue before the organizational and military situation of the group deteriorates to the point of terminal weakness. Finally, a third alternative, which could be called "radical", has very limited support. The supporters of this position maintain the need to compensate for the weakness of the organization with a massive increase in violence, including indiscriminate urban terrorism with the intention of making society submit with an overwhelming dose of fear.

The Ninth Conference should have aired these tendencies, sought a new consensual position and closed ranks on the new path that the organization should be taking in confronting the second administration of President Uribe. However, as the Conference has been celebrated in a "virtual" manner, without a physical meeting between the delegates of the different Fronts, it seems probable that the strength of the Conference as a space to bring forth dissident views has been frustrated. As a consequence, it is likely that some minority sectors that have not felt included in the political discussions will continue distancing themselves from the leadership and becoming the base of a future dissident group that could bring about a division of the organization. In other words, a virtual Conference could not have accomplished the task of reducing the internal pressure accumulated in the organization during the past years of failures, and the accumulation of discontent could result in a rupture. This perspective failure should have stimulated the Conference to seek consensus on one of the few questions on which all of the sectors of organization can be in agreement: the need to increase military pressure on the government.

In reality, for diverse reasons the distinct political families of the organization agree on the need to have a military escalation. For the majority supporters of the traditional position, the intensification of armed actions forms an integral part of their strategy in that they expect that an increase in operations will contribute to lowering the prestige of the government's security policy, will permit them to recover a presence in certain regions from which they have been expelled, and will give them influence over the results of the presidential elections of 2010. Supporters of the negotiation position agree with the necessity of realizing some military action that will restore the credibility of the organization after a period of setbacks and make it possible to initiate contact with the state from a position of strength. Finally,

the supporters of the radical option should be in agreement with any increase in the use of force against the government since they consider that it is the only possible way to recover lost political power. In this way, there seems to be broad consensus for the strategic necessity of expanding the military effort. Furthermore, this kind of movement would also bring indisputable political advantages to the organization. For a guerrilla group showing signs of division, a military escalation could be without a doubt one way to restore an increasingly questionable unity. In other words, the necessary effort to move forward with an escalation would force a closing of ranks of all the political families that coexist within the organization.

It is here where the second objective of the Ninth Conference becomes visible: as a means to reunite the entire organization around a common project and design a strategy of resource accumulation – human, financial, and military resources – that should be a preliminary step towards launching an armed escalation. In this sense, a look at history can be illuminating. In practice, the eight conferences that the FARC has called in its almost 43 years of existence⁶ have validated its internal structure and have been forums for necessary decisions to improve the quality of its political-military actions. This is particularly clear in the case of the Seventh Conference of 1972 and the Eight Conference of 1983. In the first case, there is no doubt that the Seventh Conference was a meeting of historic value for the organization. The organization elaborated a Political-Military Strategic Plan to serve as a guide to the organization on its road to power. It stimulated an increase in the number of Fronts – from seventeen to sixty in order to become a structure with national coverage – and it defined a deployment of 50% of its military force around the eastern range of mountains in order to surround Bogotá. At the same time, it led to the creation of urban networks in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla that continue to be active to the present day with greater or less strength. In the words of Jacobo Arenas, chief ideologue of the group, the Conference served to convert the FARC into “an authentically offensive guerrilla movement”⁷. This orientation took symbolic form in the change of the organization’s name to FARC-EP (People’s Army).

The Eighth Conference of 1993 began with an evaluation of the progress of the Strategic Plan. Changes in the functioning of the group were introduced according to this analysis. For instance, the existing fronts were organized into seven Blocks to function as “coordinating units for military and organizational actions”. At the same time,

the Secretariat was increased from five to seven members, each one having the responsibility of supervising the carrying out of the Strategic Plan in a Block. Also, there were innovations in the financial strategy of the organization. According to some sources, the objective was to raise an estimated fifty million dollars to be invested in the fulfilment of the Strategic Plan. But at the same time, it was put forward that the group should abandon certain indiscriminate fundraising practices such as asking for protection money or extortion that had had negative political consequences for the organization. In addition, with respect to military matters, efforts to improve the weaponry of the organization were intensified, and the formation of military units capable of significant military actions was initiated. Finally, the Conference approved the so called “Platform for a New National Government of Reconciliation and Reconstruction” and amended and broadened the “Agrarian Program” of 1964, two documents that were developed as a base for eventual negotiation with the Colombian state. All this effort at a political-military redefinition of the organization was a prologue to the military escalation of the mid nineties that led to the large operations realized in the southeast – Las Delicias, Cerro Patascoy, El Billar, La Carpa, Mitú, etc. – which put the Colombian army on the defensive and created the military context that led to the beginning of the failed negotiation with the Pastrana administration.

The present question revolves around if, in the actions of the guerrilla with respect to the Ninth Conference, there are signs of similar efforts to accumulate political-military resources that can be interpreted as the initial steps to the launching of an expansion plan for the organization. What is certain is that at least in aspects of recruitment, financing and armaments, there are signs that point in that direction. In terms of human resources, the effort of the FARC to increase the number of militants is obvious. Apparently, the Conference has discussed maintaining the objective of increasing the number of fighters in the organization to around 30.000 combatants. In this respect, there seems to have been little change from past political meetings of the FARC in which this number of militants was fixed as one the conditions to carry out the Strategic Plan. Moreover, an effort to increase recruitment has been detected, and last year’s cases of forced recruitment of minors in Arauca stand out in this regard. Furthermore, there is clearly an intent on the part of the organization to increase its ranks with members of the indigenous communities of Cauca. In fact, the FARC may be using extremist indigenous organizations such as “Los Nietos del Quintín Lame” (“The Grandchildren of Quintín

Lame") as 'seed groups' to recruit new members. Moreover, the Fronts operating in areas with indigenous populations may be establishing forced recruitment quotas in some communities, forcing them to hand over a certain number of youths old enough to bear arms to the organization. This recruitment effort may be intended to "restore the blocks affected by Plan Patriota and, where possible, increase by 50% the number of men in this blocks"⁸. A significant strengthening of manpower would make it possible for the FARC to increase their armed actions in a significant manner.

With respect to finances, the Ninth Conference dedicated a substantial part of their discussions to this theme. Apparently, the guerrilla assembly has fixed the goal of raising 230 million dollars after taking costs into account. From some perspectives, this ambitious financial objective would be an answer to the financial difficulties of the organization. In the words of the Minister of Defence Juan Manuel Santos, "today this terrorist group is without a doubt really feeling the blows inflicted to their finances"⁹. In fact, according to government estimates, the FARC may be going through a rough period in terms of its fundraising capacity. It is estimated that the organization's income from drug trafficking has suffered a 28% reduction from 2004 to 2005 as a consequence of the anti-drug operations of the military and police. Similarly, in 2006, the income from kidnappings has suffered a steep decline to 7.6% of the amount earned from kidnapping in 2003¹⁰. In any event, without underestimating the impact of the efforts to put a dent in the finances of the guerrilla, it is certain that their funds do not seem to be in danger of drying up nor do they seem to be needing new financial resources to maintain their military machine. On the contrary, they still have available significant sources of income. For example, the FARC still could be earning more than 580 million dollars annually through drug trafficking alone¹¹, to which must be added the income derived from illicit activities that are less well known and harder to quantify such as extortion. Finally, the resources accumulated by the organization in the boom years have to be taken into account as they grant a significant level of financial autonomy that allows them to endure during the current lean period.

It would appear that the new financial objective decided upon during the Ninth Conference is more oriented towards giving the organization the capacity to undertake new operations. This goal could be reflected in the increased efforts of the Fronts to augment their fundraising. Indeed, the new financial targets that need to be met by the

guerrilla commanders through extortionate means could explain the series of attacks against the dairy-product infrastructure of the multinational company Nestle in Caquetá. Similarly, the increase in protection money being paid in certain areas of Tolima could also be connected to the organization's hunger for new resources. In any event, this does not mean for certain that the organization has met the financial objectives foreseen by the Conference. On the contrary, it finds itself facing serious obstacles given the permanent effort by the government to disrupt its finances. Still, certain aspects of the strategic scenario in Colombia could assist the FARC. At present in some areas Colombia's Pacific coast, the guerrilla seem to have at their disposal enormous quantities of cocaine that apparently have not found their way to the consuming markets, while there have emerged criminal gangs who have replaced the demobilized paramilitary groups in the control over access routes to the coast. These gangs would have no problem allowing the guerrilla's drugs to reach the coast for export in exchange for a share of the proceeds. If this alliance comes to pass, the FARC would be nearer to having the financial resources it seeks.

Finally, the organization is also facing serious difficulties with respect to its armament. It seems, however, to be making an effort to provide itself with new abilities that could potentially have a critical impact on the strategic scenario. It is known that the soldiers of the FARC are not short of individual weaponry. According to the most recent report of the UNODC, which cites intelligence sources, two guns per fighter is the standard provision for FARC combatants¹². However, as it is common in such organizations, the real logistical challenge is not making weapons available but in maintaining a flow of ammunitions in order to make the weapons useful for combat units. It is in this aspect that the FARC seems to be having difficulties. The majority of their weapons use 7.62 mm calibre ammunition while a much smaller proportion uses 5.56 mm. In the current circumstances this creates significant difficulties for the guerrilla in getting cartridges of the right type in sufficient quantities. In fact, traditionally, the guerrilla used to get a part of their ammunition by stealing it from the enemy during combat (See Bulletin No.6). This is no longer possible, however. To begin with, the army stopped using 7.62mm calibre ammunition after switching to the new Galil 5.56mm rifle since 1992. Moreover, the demobilization of the AUC has taken another massive consumer of 7.62mm ammunition out of the conflict which has reduced even more the number of cartridges circulating in Colombian territory and, therefore, has also reduced the FARC's

possibilities of getting hold of them. If the efforts to intercept the illegal imports of ammunition and the amount of cartridges and other military supplies captured by the security forces are taken into account, it is clear that the inventory of the guerrilla is going through a rough period. In fact, according to government sources "(...) three years ago the FARC bought each cartridge of ammunition for their rifle for 3.500 pesos per unit. Today they have to spend 5.000 pesos for each bullet"¹³. The same can be said about explosives. In fact, in the attacks of the last two years the FARC has mostly replaced the use of imported industrial-grade explosive such as C-4 with homemade explosives such as Anfo that are cheaper and easier to get under the present circumstances.

Nevertheless, these difficulties do not appear to have weakened the FARC's attempts to develop new military means capable of having a significant impact on the conflict. For example, the guerrilla have intensified their search for shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles from illegal arms dealers from Eastern Europe and Central America. Given the critical role that air support has in the operations of the security forces, the use by insurgents of a significant number of these weapons could create a difficult situation for some military and police units, particularly in the most isolated zones of the country. In addition, the guerrilla has also intensified their efforts to build more sophisticated weapons on their own. It is well known that for a while they have had the capacity to build all the components of the land mines that they use. Still more recently it has been discovered that they have developed 80mm and 120 mm mortars with a range of various kilometers, as well as anti-aircraft rockets. Neither of these systems has yet been employed in any systematic fashion.

All that has been said in terms of the increasing efforts to collect money, soldiers and weapons, seems to suggest that the Ninth Conference, like its predecessors, has become a milestone in efforts to prepare an escalation on the part of the organization. Without a doubt, the question is what form will this escalation take. To begin, it is necessary to highlight the fact that the Conference marks the beginning and not the end of the process of resource accumulation that could open the door to the launching of a political-military effort by the guerrilla. In consequence, it is not expected that the FARC will change their pattern of operations in any visible way or increase their armed actions in a spectacular way any time soon. Instead, in the short term an intensification of all activities related to recruiting, fundraising and the strengthening of the logistical structure of the group can be

expected. Of course, this does not mean that the armed activity of the guerrilla will not present situational increases during this period. In fact, it is very probable that military action will spike as the local elections of October draw near, in which the FARC undoubtedly have a lot at stake in terms of both maintaining control of the areas where they have a presence and trying to retake areas where paramilitary demobilization has occurred. In any event, it will not be until the end of the current presidential mandate, which expires in the end of 2009 or in the beginning of 2010, when a scenario is possible in which there is a higher likelihood that the guerrillas will risk launching a real escalation. Two factors will make this situation particularly attractive for an armed effort of this type. On the one hand, the current government will find itself in its terminal stages and it is possible that it will be politically weak. On the other hand, the pre-electoral context will make the possibility of using violence to influence the vote very attractive and in this way affecting the political future of the country at least for the next 4 years.

In any case, it seems almost inconceivable that the FARC will be in a condition to launch a general offensive similar to the one that the country faced in the mid nineties. Instead, an escalation in this context could take the form of significant operation against units of the security forces in rural areas, an effort that could be followed by a wave of urban attacks destined to break the public's confidence in the government's capacity to maintain order and protect its citizens. This interest in affecting the cities may be seen in the current efforts urged by the leadership of the FARC to rebuild the Joint Central Command and to have bases at their disposal in the peripheries of the capital at some future time. In fact, this would be the principal responsibility of Carlos Antonio Lozada who is responsible for the guerrilla activities in this region.

Of course, the fact that the Ninth Conference marks the commencement of a process of resource accumulation with a view to making possible a future military effort on the part of the guerrilla does not necessarily mean that this escalation would be successful. In reality, there are a series of factors that could happen that would make an intensification of the operations described earlier impossible or that would simply ensure their failure. The persistent action of the security forces against a guerrilla force that is becoming progressively more worn out could thwart attempts to amass the necessary resources to launch an escalation in the period prior to the 2010 election. Alternatively, the inevitable military weakening that would be a consequence of the armed effort described above

could provoke the definitive undermining of the insurgency and open the way to its disintegration. But beyond these possible outcomes, the Ninth Conference is a sign that the FARC not only do not feel defeated, but also that they intend to launch a new armed challenge to the State. The conflict is simply not finished.

***Notes**

1 Communiqué of the Secretariat of the Central General Staff of the FARC-EP, March 26, 2007 (released to the public on March 30, 2007); “FARC insist Ninth Conference took place”, *El Tiempo*, March 31, 2007; “Defense Minister states that FARC commanders are planning meeting”, *Caracol Radio*, February 19, 2007; “Four-year FARC war plan discovered”, *El Tiempo*, February 22, 2007; “Did the FARC have to hold their Ninth Conference via the Internet?” *El Tiempo*, March 17, 2007.

2 From the words spoken by the Defense Minister, Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, during the opening of the First Meeting on the Financing of Terrorism, Bogotá, February 19, 2007.

3 At present, the Secretariat of the Central General Staff is comprised of Manuel Marulanda Vélez (Commander-in-chief), Alfonso Cano (Responsible for the Western Joint Command), Iván Marquez (Responsible for the José María Córdoba Block and the Caribbean Block), Jorge Briceño (Commander of the Eastern Block), Raul Reyes (Responsible for the Southern Block and Commander of the International Front), Timoléon Jimenez (Responsible for the Middle Magdalena Block) and Iván Ríos (Commander of the Joint Central Command). Also, there are two substitute members: Joaquín Gómez and Mauricio Jaramillo.

4 “Four-year FARC war plan discovered”, *El Tiempo*, February 22, 2007; “Did the FARC have to hold their Ninth Conference via the Internet?” *El Tiempo*, March 17, 2007.

5 Information from the Humanitarian Attention to the Demobilized Program of the Ministry of Defense, with a cut-off date of February 28, 2007.

6 These 8 Conferences occurred in the years: 1965, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1974, 1978 (January 18-25), 1982 (May 4-14) and 1993 (April 11-18).

7 Jacobo Arenas, *Ceasefire: A Political History of the FARC*, p. 107.

8 Four-year FARC war plan discovered”, *El Tiempo*, February 22, 2007

9 From the words spoken by the Defense Minister, Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, during the opening of the First Meeting on the Financing of Terrorism, Bogotá, February 19, 2007.

10 *Ibid.*

11 “Odds and Ends”, *Semana Magazine*, March 12, 2007.

12 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Violence, Crime and the Illegal Arms Trade in Colombia*. Bogotá, 2006, p. 26.

13 “Odds and Ends”, *Semana Magazine*, op cit.