Latin America Working Group

Bogotá, Colombia

19 January 2012

-- Rapporteur’s Report --

The Inter-American Dialogue hosted the twenty-second meeting of the Latin America Working Group on 19 January in Bogotá Colombia. The group is now in its 11th year, having begun as the Colombia Working Group in 2001, and has expanded its reach to discuss issues across the Andean region. This year, the working group was opened further to incorporate the challenges and opportunities facing Latin America as a whole. The meeting was supported by the Open Society Institute and CAF.

The meeting focused on the current political and economic climate in Colombia as President Juan Manuel Santos enters the second year of his presidential term. Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón joined the group to reflect on the achievements and ongoing challenges for citizen security in Colombia. Working group members also discussed regional security challenges and the role of multilateral institutions in addressing drug trafficking, violence, and transnational organized crime in Latin America. Dialogue president Michael Shifter and president emeritus Peter Hakim also met with President Juan Manuel Santos and Foreign Minister Maria Angela Holguín to discuss Colombia’s role in international affairs.

Colombia: Politics and Economy

As President Santos enters the second year of his term, there have been several noteworthy achievements. In the last 18 months, Santos has maintained strong economic growth, established Colombia as a diplomatic leader in the region, and has made critical security gains against a weakened FARC. Yet a number of the Colombian participants were skeptical about the administration’s progress, while most of the non-Colombian members found that criticism overly harsh.

For several participants, this skepticism stemmed from what they characterized as a series of tensions in the Santos administration agenda. Some saw a tension between the need to maintain economic policy and sustain growth with the desire to pursue popular legislative reforms. One participant argued “we don’t know if Santos will be the great politician or
the great reformer”. Given that Colombia’s economy is growing at about 7.5 percent, inflation has dropped below 4 percent, and unemployment is declining, it is unsurprising that the administration is hesitant to make any changes. Foreign investment in the country is also booming, particularly in new sectors such as mining. Beyond economic policy, some felt that a desire to preserve the gains made by former President Alvaro Uribe under the democratic security strategy was undermining President Santos’ ability to craft a legislative reform agenda in other areas, such as social policy.

A second tension concerns the difficulty in balancing the administration’s social agenda, which emphasizes environmental protection and minority groups, with an economic agenda focused on mining and investment. One participant described the Santos Administration’s approach as an economically-driven political agenda. The increased focus on trade, particularly through the Asia-Pacific trade fora was highlighted by the number of economists in Santos’ cabinet. Yet, Santos, they argued, was also attempting to move Colombia into a post-conflict state, which required reparations, restitution, and environmentalism that could generate tension with the economic agenda. Other participants criticized the Administration for distorting itself from the close government – business relationship that had existed under Uribe.

Finally, participants identified an ongoing tension between Santos’ desire to retain popularity, and the threat to governability posed by inevitable compromise. They argued that while building, and maintaining, political capital was critical to the President’s success, his tendency to back down under pressure threatened the reform agenda and his credibility. Participants cited the student protests, and transportation policy disputes. Some participants argued that this reluctance to spend his political capital on a reform agenda, and risk losing the hard-won support, undermined the quality and efficacy of his governance.

Others suggested that Santos should push harder, and make some of these difficult decisions. They noted that his support stemmed in large part from his ability to consolidate his government over the course of 18 months, securing a level of political capital unheard of in the Colombian executive. This has partly been achieved through an expansion of the national coalition, which now includes a range of parties from the Conservatives to the Greens, which ran against Santos in the presidential elections. This extra “manpower” has increased the governance capacity of the Santos administration. Whether Santos is prepared to utilize this capacity remains to be seen.

The Santos administration has also improved its media management, building the government’s image through more effective communication with the public. Finally, the president’s gains in security, particularly against the FARC, have countered some of his most vociferous critics from the Uribe camp, who have argued that President Santos had departed from Uribe’s democratic security policy, threatening the former president’s progress in this area.

President Santos’ expansion of the national coalition to include parties from the Conservatives to the Greens raised questions about a lack of opposition in Colombian
politics. While participants agreed that the new coalition was more centrist and inclusive, it left a political vacuum in the opposition at the national level. Moreover, all opposition debate now occurs between parties and individuals within the coalition itself. Some participants were concerned that this setup undermined democratic principles as genuine opposition parties have been excluded from the debate, which could have long-term implications for democratic governance in Colombia. What remains of the opposition is now divided between those on the far-left and hardline Uribe supporters, who believe that the Santos government has strayed from the previous administration’s goals, particularly in security policy and foreign affairs. Uribe supporters have also opposed the warming of relations between Santos and Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez.

Colombia: Security

While security remains a concern in Colombia, the changing nature of violence, both its actors and intensity, has challenged the outdated assumptions and strategies of the Colombian government, according to participants. Although much of the country has benefited from former president Uribe’s democratic security policies, recent indicators show rising security concerns in urban areas, particularly Bogotá and Medellín. The emergence of bandas criminales (or BACRIM), and the increasingly violent nature of their actions, also poses a serious problem for Santos’ security agenda.

One participant characterized 2011 as an “annus horribilis” for the FARC, which culminated in the death of leader Alfonso Cano in November. Yet this has been matched by a resurgence of the ELN, which has reportedly rebuilt its ranks to around 2500 members. Members also identified changing patterns in violence that require a revised national strategy. They cited the rising trend in certain types of violence in Colombia, particularly kidnappings, as well as the nature of violent acts, such as increased attacks on infrastructure.

Unlike the historically violent clashes between guerrilla groups and the paramilitaries, the FARC and ELN have developed a non-combative relationship with the BACRIM. Indeed, some participants described the relations as akin to those between “mafia” groups in Europe, in which territory and interests are negotiated and violence is unnecessary unless there is a departure from the agreed terms. Moreover, the BACRIM are not politically motivated and are explicitly concerned with control of the drug trade, illicit gold mining, and kidnapping. As the guerilla groups control 70 percent of coca cultivation, many participants understood the motivation behind a more business-oriented relationship. There BACRIM are now comprised of an estimated 6000 members and are able to organize, as evidenced by the armed strike carried out by the Urabeños in January 2012 that affected six departments in the north and east of the country.

One participant described the BACRIM as a victim of the government’s success. As successive Colombian administrations have eliminated large-scale cartels, they have been replaced by “micro-trafficking”, in which the trade is spread across numerous, smaller groups. Colombia’s domestic drug consumption, including cocaine, is also a growing
concern, particularly in secondary cities such as Ibagué, Baranquilla, and Barrancabermeja.

Despite success against the FARC in 2011, many in the working group felt that the Colombian government’s security strategy was based on outdated assumptions about internal armed conflict. The government has struggled to respond to the shifting operations and tactics of guerilla groups coupled with the rise of the more agile BACRIM.

Many participants agreed that President Santos still sought to build his legacy through bringing peace to Colombia. While the President has stated that he is open to dialogue with the FARC in particular, he has been careful not to reveal under what conditions peace negotiations would be possible. The president must tread carefully to avoid the errors of previous peace processes, as failure would be a disaster for his administration. Yet many in the group were ambivalent about the President’s statements, questioning whether Santos could provide any real incentive for armed groups to demobilize, the defining condition of any lasting peace.

Regional Security Challenges

As reductions in poverty and inequality have become apparent across the region, security has become the number one citizen concern in Latin America, according to Gino Costa’s paper, *Citizen Security in Latin America*. Analyzing security indicators participants noted that while drug trafficking is critical to regional security, two of the largest cocaine producers – Bolivia and Peru – have low levels of violence. Some speculated these figures reflected a “mafia” model in the drug industry in which low levels of violence coexist with high levels of criminality.

In highlighting the disparity in indicators across the hemisphere, working group members distinguished between North America and the Southern Cone – both with lower incidences of violence – and the Central America and Andean regions. The locus of violence remains in the “northern triangle” countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, although there are certain indicators shared across Latin America. Violence remains concentrated in the young, male population, while access to firearms and drug trafficking plays a critical role across all countries.

While all agreed that insecurity was a growing regional concern, working group members debated the validity of available data and its effect on analysis of the phenomenon. Some felt that the indicators were misleading, while others argued that most security analyses excluded major causes of violence, including transnational organized crime, widespread extortion, and the impact of a “culture of violence” in some countries.

In disputing the data available, and presented in Costa’s paper, some participants argued that the composition and structure of the police force should be a considered in any future analysis. Some participants called for a greater debate on the issue of decentralization. A decentralized police force is closer to the population and therefore more democratic,
according to the argument, and yet the proximity at the local level and removal from central supervisors also facilitates corruption. In countries such as Mexico and Venezuela with decentralized forces, it is much easier to “buy” police influence. In Chile and Colombia, by contrast, the police force is more professional and less corrupt, which participants attributed to its centralized nature.

With Latin America’s drug consumption on the rise, the region is now a drug producer, trafficker, and consumer. As a result, countries are now having discussions of drug policy with domestic implications, particularly the legalization debate. These discussions are happening simultaneously with debates on curtailling production and reducing the criminal activities and violence associated with drug trafficking. Yet many of the participants felt that real progress on the issue of drug-related violence was dependent on moves by US policy-makers, including genuine engagement on the drug legalization and/or decriminalization debate.

Participants agreed that there had been limited regional response beyond minor initiatives within the Organization of American States (OAS), including a violence observatory. Recommendations included developing regional or international standards and monitoring mechanisms, an issue addressed in the following debate.

**Multilateralism in Security**

The final session built on earlier discussions of the causes and consequences of violence and insecurity in Latin America to ask whether a coordinated, regional response was even possible and what would be the steps to achieve it.

In the lead up to the Summit of the Americas in April 2012, there are concerns about the strength of regional institutions and the capacity for multilateral responses to citizen security. While some participants identified the numerous failed treaties at the international and regional levels, others posited that this allowed for the possibility of more selective, informal cooperation. Rather than larger, full-scale regional responses, they argued for a strategy of smaller initiatives. Although it would require one country to take the lead, they could then select one or two partners in the region and develop a bi- or multilateral approach to citizen security problems. This incremental approach to developing a security agenda would then allow either for the gradual incorporation of interested states or it could be advocated as a regional approach via a regional forum, such as UNASUR, CELAC, or the OAS. In the meantime, the leading countries would have time to build support for the initiative, as well as acting as a pilot that could demonstrate the benefits of a multilateral response to security.

Yet some participants were more pessimistic about the chances of developing a regional response to security challenges, regardless of the timeframe. Some group members argued that it was almost impossible to even discuss regional responses without a common understanding of violence, crime, and citizen security. Latin America is not alone in this problem. The major regional and international agreements focus on drugs, rather than violence, making them an unsuitable base from which to tackle Latin
America’s security crisis. For some participants it was a matter of which elements needed to be in place first. They argued that without the development of regional mechanisms through which to monitor the progress towards security goals, regional discussions and strategies were unlikely to be successful.

The several regional fora in Latin America, including CELAC, UNASUR, and the upcoming OAS Summit of the Americas, offer an alternative setting for regional discussions. The problem for many Latin American countries, however, is internal – legislative reform is never simple – plus the ongoing influence of the US both within the region and in international bodies, such as the UN, has discouraged many countries from taking action.

The debate remained open at the end of the meeting, although it was clear that Latin America’s security concerns remain tied to issues beyond its control. US drug policy and approach to guns, as well as transnational drug trafficking organisations are driving violence and crime in Latin America. Yet regional responses are difficult to coordinate, and a crisis of multilateral institutions presents further challenges. Moreover, given the current political climate in the United States in the lead up to the 2012 presidential elections, Latin Americans are unlikely to see any movement on this debate, at least in the short term.