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By the International Crisis Group

Colombia: From "Total Peace" to Local Peace

The government's pursuit of "total peace" with armed groups has hit a rough patch, with fighting erupting on several fronts. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2025, Crisis Group explains how the EU can nudge dialogue toward putting civilian protection first.

A wave of violence swept Colombia in the opening days of 2025, raising deep concerns about Colombian President Gustavo Petro's flagship security policy, known as "total peace". Until now, Bogotá has deployed a combination of dialogues and ceasefires with an array of armed groups in a bid to reduce persistently high levels of violence, especially in rural areas. The authorities are now involved in peace processes with at least ten groups, but with chequered results so far. Homicide rates stabilised in conflict-affected areas in 2024, but other forms of violence, such as child recruitment and extortion, continued to rise. Rebel and criminal groups, some of them born in the aftermath of the 2016 peace agreement with the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), have continued to enlarge their footprint in parts of the country.

The start of the year has seen one the few success stories of "total peace" unravel miserably. At the outset of his term, Petro's government had ushered in a de facto truce between rival armed groups in Catatumbo, a region along the border with Venezuela. Beginning on 16 January, the guerrilla National Liberation Army (ELN) embarked on a coordinated offensive against dissidents of the former FARC known as the Estado Mayor de los Bloques. Petro called off peace talks with the ELN in the following days. But within hours, other battlefronts erupted involving a range of armed groups, including in Colombia's Amazon and central regions. Alarmingly, many of the armed groups involved in combat are also sitting in peace talks with the government.

The wave of violence will likely consolidate a pivot in the government's negotiation policy. First, the government has moved away from traditional peace talks at a national level, such as those with the ELN, that discuss broad issues such as political or economic reform. Instead, the focus is on local dialogues to address the specific concerns of each region. Instead of aiming for comprehensive demobilisation, the government is asking armed groups to dial down violence against civilians. Secondly, Bogotá has taken the crucial decision to ratchet up military pressure on nearly all armed groups in the hope of recovering the state's leverage over them. Although it seems unlikely that Colombian state forces will be able to contain deteriorating security conditions, let alone defeat the vast majority of these armed groups, the government now understands that without military pressure these outfits have little incentive to hold up their side of any bargain.

The European Union is accompanying one of these formal dialogue processes, and it has used its good offices to support two others in urban

areas. As such, it can help remind Bogotá of the urgency of de-escalating conflict and nudge the new approach forward in a direction that puts the protection of endangered civilians first.

The EU and its member states can:

- Continue to emphasise civilian protection in any agreement with armed or criminal groups.
- Highlight the urgency of ending child recruitment, while also helping plan and support demobilisation and reintegration programs for young people who are members of gangs that have agreed to truces.
- Redouble support for the justice sector, with the goal of hindering criminal activity. Technical assistance to the Attorney General's offices and Ministry of Justice would enable them to carry out more efficient investigations into conflict-related violence and prosecute cases. The EU can build on its past work supporting a specialised unit set up to stem violence against social leaders and reincorporated FARC fighters.
- As a guarantor of the 2016 peace agreement, maintain the focus on implementation of that accord, including linking past commitments to new "total peace" efforts to protect social leaders and support rural development at a local level.
- Ensure the continuity of vital political and financial support to civil society.

From a Successful Peace Process to Mutating Armed Groups

The change in tack of "total peace" is a response to major mutations in the nature of conflict in Colombia. In contrast to the 60-year war with the FARC, a guerrilla force that sought to overthrow the Colombian state and the social status quo, today's half-dozen major armed groups plus a menagerie of smaller criminal franchises tend to avoid clashes with state security forces. Most of the country's fighting now derives from violent competition among these outfits for control of illicit business such as coca and cocaine production, illegal mining and extortion. Talking to these small, splintered groups has become an "exercise in unlearning [how to make] peace", a government negotiator said. "Reality obliged us to break with old methods."

This pragmatic turn responds to lessons learnt in the past two years, above all the unwanted effects of the government decision to declare ceasefires in early 2023 – a move that security forces say has put them at a major disadvantage and led to a loss of state control in many areas. This new, localised approach may prove a better fit for a fragmented, heavily criminalised conflict. But even if the diagnosis is correct, the new strategy still faces enormous challenges. A micro-level approach to local conflicts is painstakingly slow and may not yield results before Petro leaves office in August 2026. The tide of public opinion, particularly in cities, has turned against "total peace". The political stakes of failure are also high: decades of experience in Colombia have shown that while military pressure is necessary, force alone is not a solution to non-state armed violence. Negotiations are an essential component of reaching peace. But unless it produces tangible results, negotiation itself could be discredited as a strategy for addressing conflicts in the future. While it is still early days, likely leading

contenders in the 2026 presidential race from across the political spectrum have been sharply critical of Petro's peace strategy.

Colombia's security dilemmas cannot be pinned solely on the president. Beginning in the years after the 2016 peace accord, and well before Petro took power, armed and criminal groups sought to profit from the FARC's demobilisation, both by expanding their presence across Colombia and by honing their coercive methods in order to silence, co-opt and control civil society. The state ombudsman has reported that FARC dissident factions – led in many cases by individuals who either refused to sign the 2016 accord or renounced it later, and strengthened since then by a stream of new recruits – have doubled the number of municipalities where they claim a presence since 2019. The Gaitanista Army, also known as the Gulf Clan, now the largest group with as many as 9,000 fighters, has expanded by 62 per cent over the same period, establishing a pre-eminent role in cocaine exports and migrant smuggling through the Darién Gap to Panama.

While the presence of armed groups is not new to many rural communities, local people report that the pressure they exert today is worse because dominating civilian populations has become these groups' core operating method. Controlling a community enables a group to establish command over territory and all the rents that come with it – whether from legal or illegal activities. Civilians accused of being critical of the armed group – or worse, collaborating with a rival outfit – are subject to threats, displacement and assassination. In 2024, the UN said it received reports of 186 human rights defenders assassinated nationwide. In Cauca, a heartland of conflict along the Pacific coast, with at least four armed groups vying for territory, nearly 400 leaders and former combatants have been killed since the peace accord.

The ways in which these groups establish their sway over civilian populations vary. The Gaitanista Army, which is strongest in northern Colombia, funds community development projects, hands out Christmas gifts to children and offers paid jobs in its ranks – not just to fighters but also to accountants and community organisers. Intolerant of outside views, the group has sought either to co-opt existing civil society organisations or simply to start its own, better-funded outfits to meet local needs. In Colombia's Amazon, on the other hand, FARC dissident factions have frequently imposed themselves upon branches of unarmed civilian guards run by local farmers, which then become the rebels' gatekeepers and enforcers. Meanwhile, the ELN, the largest remaining insurgency, tightly monitors social leaders in areas it controls, such as in Arauca and the Magdalena Medio region, supporting some and ensuring that others are silenced, expelled or killed. Knowing that any word spoken out of turn could end in a violent penalty, many rural residents say self-censorship is their only protection.

Child recruitment is a pressing challenge, with boys and girls as young as eleven being tricked to join the front lines. Recruiters are paid a fee to deliver children to groups, in amounts based on the child's qualities; prices are higher for strong boys or pretty girls, former forced recruits told Crisis Group. Using TikTok, Facebook and WhatsApp, recruiters spin a life of money, guns and motorcycles to boys. In the case of girls, the playbook includes promises of love, empowerment, education and even lures such as all-expenses-paid cosmetic surgery. Girls who face abuse at home are told they will finally be free.

Once in the rank and file, though, children are given only the most basic training – if any – before being sent to the front. "They endure hunger for days", an Indigenous leader who helps recovered children in Cauca told Crisis Group. "They are hurt in fighting, [and] many return home dead". Armed groups commonly send child recruits to distant locations, so it is harder for them to escape, the leader explained. Girls at times find that the most effective form of self-protection is allying themselves with a commander, who may nonetheless sexually exploit them and even "rent" them out to other

members of the group who are willing to pay. The conditions are so harsh that around Christmastime, community leaders in FARC dissident-controlled areas say they see dozens of cases of children trying to flee to their families. Some of those caught by armed groups have been summarily executed, a common practice for punishing and deterring runaways.

Recalibrating the "Total Peace" Strategy

Faced with this new landscape of violence and its own initial failures, Petro's government has looked to recalibrate "total peace". The strategy began by unintentionally encouraging armed groups to extend their reach over local communities, since each organisation wanted to demonstrate the strength of its supposed social base to justify full political negotiations with the state. As noted earlier, government ceasefires, which were intended to scale down levels of violence, in many cases simply gave armed groups breathing space from military pressure and the opportunity to fine-tune their hold on territories and communities. National-level negotiations rooted in wide-ranging discussions of political and social reform, for example with the ELN, progressed at a snail's pace for two years until being formally cancelled on 17 January.

Two years in, the government is working under a new set of assumptions. Negotiators understand that the vast majority of groups have no interest in laying down arms, that the conflict ebbs and flows according to the vagaries of violent grassroots competition, and that approaches rooted in local understandings have the best chance of success. Petro's strategy now aims to ensure peace efforts have a firm territorial grounding. In an ideal scenario for this new approach, negotiators from the state and the armed group in question meet in a place where a pilot development project could be set in motion. Separately, the government consults with local communities on these same initiatives. The armed group agrees to curb its use of violence, such as kidnapping, extortion and recruitment; allow state civilian officials full access to areas where it holds sway; and potentially enable the return of state security forces. The state, in turn, supports economic development projects, including in infrastructure, livelihoods and services, and agrees to reduce offensive military operations in the area. All these commitments are geographically specific and tailored to the needs of the community.

Progress toward implementing this new methodology is mixed. The model is most advanced in talks with the FARC dissident faction known as Estado Mayor de los Bloques, which the EU is accompanying. Pilot projects are under way in Caquetá and Norte de Santander, with more to follow in Antioquia. Negotiations in the south-western department of Nariño with the Comuneros del Sur, an armed faction that broke from the ELN in early 2024, have secured an agreement from that group to hand over lethal weapons while the government establishes a legal mining district in the area, allowing artisanal miners to join the legal supply chain. The Comuneros have strong ties to the mining business, and they may believe they can earn more running operations legally than under the table. While truces in the Pacific cities of Buenaventura and Quibdó have hinged on gangs reducing violence in exchange for local investment, the state has been slow to fulfil its end of the bargain. Other processes are likely to adopt a similar approach. Talks with the Gaitanista Army, currently in an exploratory phase, may formally kick off with pilot projects in violence reduction in order to build trust between the sides, as Crisis Group has previously recommended.

Outside these peacebuilding ventures, security forces have been given a freer hand to combat armed and criminal groups. This move is sound: it will both help contain the worst eruptions of combat and restore targeted pressure on the groups sitting in talks. But it will take

time to regain control and leverage, as military officers say they are struggling to keep up with the scale and breadth of the threats. Resources are being concentrated on priority objectives: for example, an offensive in Cauca against the FARC dissident faction Estado Mayor Central (EMC), which broke off from talks in April 2024. Yet the unintended consequence of this campaign appears to have left other areas with fewer resources. Military units just north of that operation, in Valle de Cauca, say they are short of personnel, equipment and overflight capacity. Armed groups are acutely aware of these limited state resources, which may be one reason why they seized on the distraction offered by the ELN's January offensive to launch new military campaigns nationwide. A mid-level officer put it bluntly: "It is painful, but we have to admit that the threats have overtaken our ability to combat them. And if tomorrow there are no more negotiations, we will not have the capacity for a military response".

The Importance of Civilian Protection

Petro's new approach faces a gamut of challenges, beginning with the tight timeframe. Armed and criminal groups are gaining space faster than the government can conclude negotiations with them. Military resources are stretched, and the armed forces may not be able to hold off all armed threats at once or to keep any specific group in check before detailed peace arrangements have been agreed upon. If the government cannot achieve concrete security gains from talks in the near term, Petro's successor in office is likely to calculate that abandoning unpopular negotiations is less costly than keeping them going.

Bogotá will also need to take care to ensure that this new version of "total peace" does not end up inadvertently strengthening armed groups' control of communities by making them appear to be the sponsors responsible for delivering state investment to the area. Lastly, localised negotiations run the risk of further splintering Colombia's criminal landscape by encouraging internal factions to seek a better position by striking their own deals with Bogotá, as the Comuneros have done. Further schisms have already emerged over the last year, most significantly among FARC dissident groups, two of which began an all-out battle in the Amazon region in the wake of the ELN's border offensive

Despite these hurdles, Bogota's foreign partners should give another chance to "total peace", if it can respond in a realistic, pragmatic way to security threats across the country. As a guarantor of the 2016 peace accord, and a longstanding supporter of human rights defenders and rural communities, the EU is well positioned to provide continued diplomatic support to the strategy. It can continue to help steer this delicate process toward achieving its most important goal: providing safety and relief for the civilian population. The EU is already playing this role formally in talks with the Estado Mayor de los Bloques and its frequent diplomatic presence, commitment to violence reduction in Quibdó and Buenaventura, and funding for local development have been vital in keeping talks on track. The EU can also help remind the Colombian government that current rural development efforts agreed upon in talks should be connected to commitments from the 2016 agreement.

In the coming months, the EU's voice will also be essential in ensuring that issues such as child recruitment and demobilisation remain at the heart of negotiations. Child combatants should be released as a priority in peace processes; once they are free, they will need a properly resourced program of support to enable them to return to civilian life. Furthermore, young people – especially girls – often face ostracism, stigma and social isolation when they put down their arms, placing them at greater risk of falling back into armed groups' ranks. Drawing on the lessons of the 2016 peace agreement, reincorporation programs

for these young people need to provide tailored approaches based on gender and ethnicity if they are to succeed. The newly launched National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, which backs female participation in dialogue processes and post-conflict settings, among other goals, could also address some of these challenges if properly resourced. In talks with urban groups, it may also be a good moment to start thinking about how to create off-ramps for fighters in gangs who wish to demobilise. The EU can keep up pressure on state agencies to keep this and other government commitments, as well as help design and finance these initiatives. The delegation is also seeking to encourage more private-sector investment in rural development. The EU should also continue its irreplaceable support for civil society and the protection of human rights defenders, as well as funding for small grassroots livelihood projects in conflict-affected areas.

Separately, and in line with Petro's two-pronged approach, the EU should consider how it can support the state in regaining territorial control and prosecuting those accused of criminal activities. A number of EU member states are already actively involved in training and providing equipment to security forces in their efforts to combat crime. The EU delegation could seek to help coordinate these efforts and engage with Colombian authorities about where there are gaps. The EU could also build on past work with the Attorney General's office in strengthening its capacity to investigate violence against social leaders and reincorporated fighters, which could act as a starting point to provide further support for the judicial probes into conflict-related violent crime against civilians. Investigative police, state prosecutors and judges are all under-resourced, overloaded and often under threat themselves. They need technical and logistical support in order to fight impunity and provide justice for a much wider set of victims.

After two years of stumbles, the Petro government should now do its utmost to ensure that fighting does not escalate across the country. The government rightly realises that in Colombia's current conflicts, an incremental approach rooted in an appreciation of local conditions will likely prove more effective than a sweeping national peace accord of the sort reached with the FARC nine years ago. It has also learned that military pressure is a critical part of the leverage that the state needs in order to negotiate with groups that are mostly interested in controlling criminal economies. Despite the current setbacks, myriad peace processes have demonstrated that negotiations are a necessary component of violence reduction in Colombia. The core challenges for "total peace" will now be to draw armed groups back from the path of violence and provide concrete improvements in security for civilians. ●