

Laying down of arms in the UN Mission in Colombia

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UN Mission in Colombia

What were the UN Mission in Colombia and the Monitoring and Verification Mechanism?

The UN Mission in Colombia (UNMC) was established after the approval of UN Security Council Resolution 2261 on 25 January 2016 (UNSC, 2016) and the signing of the Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace on 24 November 2016 between the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP, ending 53 years of internal armed conflict in Colombia (GoC and FARC-EP, 2016). Peace negotiations had begun in Havana, Cuba, four years before the agreement was reached. The FARC-EP was the most powerful guerrilla group not only in Colombia, but in all of Latin America.

The peace agreement established a tripartite Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MVM) comprising the UNMC, the Government of Colombia, and the FARC-EP that was unique in the history of UN missions. The MVM was organized into a national headquarters, eight regional headquarters, and 26 local sites known as the transitional local zones for normalization (ZVTNs) and transitional local points (PTNs). The MVM was responsible for ensuring compliance with the ceasefire agreement, including the protocols and procedures established in Chapter 3.1 on the 'laying down of arms'. The international component of the MVM comprised 450 international observers, who were unarmed and without uniforms, and mostly came from countries in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. Its members were commissioned officers and NCOs of the armed and police forces of their respective countries. They were responsible for monitoring the ceasefire and the disarmament process.

Jean Arnault, the UNSRSG, led the UNMC. A UN substantive component was also established comprising civilians responsible for providing political and logistical support to the UNMC.

Within the international component a commanding officer in the national headquarters and in each regional headquarters, and two in each local headquarters, were responsible for disarmament. A team of three worked on disarmament in the national headquarters, assisted by two part-time specialists from the UN Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. The FARC-EP also had its own disarmament officers at various levels. Although some international observers were directly responsible for disarmament, all other observers were also involved in related tasks. A mission support team in the UN's substantive component also played an important role in acquiring equipment (such as

tents, containers, wire, etc.), providing contracts, and supporting the mobility of UN personnel and weapons.

The Colombian government created a Police Unit for the Construction of Peace (UNIPPEP) within the national police. This unit was directly responsible for the security of the international observers and FARC-EP personnel, in addition to all other activities related to the peace process. A separate Strategic Transition Command in the army was in charge of all military personnel affected by the peace process. At the political level the highest body involved in relevant negotiations was the Commission for Follow-up, Impulse and Verification of the Implementation of Peace Agreements.

Where did disarmament take place?

The Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP jointly defined, delimited, arranged, and carried out disarmament in the ZVTNs/PTNs.¹ The objective of focusing on these areas was to guarantee the ceasefire agreement and the disarmament process, and to begin preparations for the reincorporation of FARC-EP members into civilian life, as well as their accreditation and transition to a lawful status. The government built camps in the ZVTNs/PTNs as temporary accommodation for members of the group. Initially, the disarmament process was scheduled to last 180 days, from 2 December 2016 to 31 May 2017. As described below, this time line was pushed back for various political and logistical reasons.

In each ZVTN/PTN the UNMC installed a disarmament camp built by civilian contractors, which consisted of living quarters to house the international observers and two containers where weapons and ammunition were stored and marked. Security measures were applied in accordance with international standards. For logistical reasons no containers were installed in four ZVTNs/PTNs and temporary storage facilities had to be constructed. Metal boxes were also temporarily used in some cases.

In the vicinity of each ZVTN/PTN an MVM local headquarters was established and a camp for military and police was installed nearby. A security zone was established around the ZVTNs/PTNs that ranged between 0.5 and 1 km in width; Colombian security forces provided security in this zone.

How did disarmament proceed?

Disarmament was a technical and verifiable procedure through which the UNMC received the FARC-EP's arms. It occurred in a number of planning and execution stages and included the following technical procedures:

- registration;
- identification;

- monitoring and verification;
- collection;
- storage;
- extraction; and
- final disposal.

Planning for disarmament began before the peace agreement was signed. For this purpose the UNMC participated in the final phase of the so-called ‘Havana Agreements’. From the outset, the process of the laying down of arms was designed to receive significant financial and logistical support from the UN and the Government of Colombia—in accordance with the agreement—although this did not occur in practice due to a series of delays. Once the peace process began in December 2016, the disarmament process was planned in detail, including by creating the necessary tools to carry it out. This involved the drafting of SOPs, technical operating procedures (TOPs), and a guide for use by the international observers. Bar codes were developed to identify each weapon and facilitate its registration, for identification and control, and for reporting on related incidents and each weapon’s destruction. Once a weapon was identified and registered it received a bar code sticker, a copy of which was put in each weapon’s file.

It should be noted that during the implementation of the disarmament process it was necessary to make training videos for the international observers to help them to understand the tasks at hand and to standardize procedures. A UN media team made these videos.

Systems also had to be designed to manage information and data. This was one of the most complex tasks due to the confidentiality that was necessary during the entire process. The substantive component of the UNMC designed a programme to store information on each identified and registered weapon and its subsequent management in the local, regional, and national venues.

As laid down in the peace agreement, the FARC-EP had to deliver all of the information about its weapons holdings to the MVM so that it could plan the operation. This was done with extreme secrecy. The process was initially delayed due to disagreements between the parties. Finally, at the end of January 2017 FARC-EP members began to move to the ZVTNs/PTNs, bringing with them their individual weapons with their ammunition. Upon arrival, the UNMC–MVM identified and registered all the individual weapons and then monitored them in the camps in accordance with relevant procedures.

The peace agreement stipulated the following:

- that the storage of weapons, grenades, and ammunition should take place by D+60;²

- that between day D+10 and day D+60 the FARC-EP had to destroy any unstable materiel stored in its storage facilities, which was to be verified by the UNMC–MVM; and
- that the collection and storage of individual weapons that remained in the hands of the former combatants in the camps had to be done sequentially and in three phases. By D+90, 30 per cent of the total had to be stored, by D+120 another 30 per cent, and by D+150 the remaining 40 per cent.

The first to deliver their weapons were the FARC-EP members who were participating in the MVM and the peace process. The dates for the storage of weapons had to be readjusted in accordance with progress made in the peace process. On 29 May 2017—the day when the storage of weapons was to be completed—three new dates were established for the delivery of individual weapons. Delivery was to occur in percentages similar to those established in the agreement, leaving a minimum of 10 per cent in the hands of the FARC-EP to ensure the security of its camps. This last percentage was delivered the day before the extraction of the weapons (see the discussion of the extraction process, below) in accordance with a schedule agreed in each ZVTN/PTN. This process ended on 15 August 2017.

The destruction of unstable materiel and ammunition

The FARC-EP's move to the ZVTNs/PTNs should have taken place without any explosives or unstable materiel, which were supposed to have been destroyed before FARC-EP members entered the ZVTNs/PTNs. This did not happen in all cases, and these materiel had to be destroyed at the ZVTNs/PTNs, which was done between 1 and 28 July 2017. Between 11 and 28 July all the ammunition was incinerated, leaving a minimum percentage for the weapons retained by the FARC-EP to ensure the security of its camps (see above). The TOPs guided these activities. The FARC-EP destroyed the unstable materiel and the UNMC monitored the process, while the FARC-EP and UNMC jointly incinerated the ammunition.

Each person who handed over their weapons was given a certificate in order to facilitate their transition to civilian life. This was done in coordination with the government's Office of the High Commissioner for Peace.

The destruction of arms caches

In addition to the destruction of personal weapons, the peace process required that at the beginning of the implementation phase the FARC-EP should provide geo-referenced information on the location of all its other weapons, ammunition, and explosives (the so-called '*caletas*' or arms caches), whose extraction had to be completed before D+60. For various reasons there were significant delays in providing this information.

In total, more than 180 such extraction operations were conducted, reaching 750 out of almost a thousand arms caches that the FARC-EP had reported (the Colombian security forces extracted those that remained after the UNMC's mandate had ended) (UNMC, 2017b). Relevant operations required more than 280 UN helicopter flight hours, 210 government helicopter flight hours, 20 movements on rivers, and more than 120 movements over land, accounting for approximately 40,000 km travelled (UNMC, 2017b).

The procedure was as follows:

- The FARC-EP provided information on its caches, including the type of materiel they contained.
- The UNMC and FARC-EP planned the extraction process at the local level; the regional and national headquarters then approved these arrangements.
- National headquarters approved and coordinated the extraction with Colombian security forces.
- Colombian security forces secured the relevant area where the caches were located.
- Once the area was secured, FARC-EP and UNMC personnel approached the caches, accompanied by members of UNIPEP.
- FARC-EP personnel carried out the operation and the UNMC personnel monitored it.
- The personnel involved returned to the ZVTNs/PTNs with the weapons and ammunition scrap. Explosives were destroyed on site.

The UNMC's involvement in the extraction process ended on 15 September 2017.³

The weapons extraction process, disabling, and final disposal

The disabling of arms was originally planned for each ZVTN/PTN, but due to the logistical challenges involved it was undertaken in a centralized arms depot outside Bogotá. The arms had to be moved from the ZVTNs/PTNs to the central depot. They were grouped by type and size for the transfer, in packages of five, with the exception of grenade launchers (packed in twos due to their size) and those with a calibre greater than 12.7 mm (packed individually). Scrap ammunition and other supplies were placed in bags.

Detailed and careful coordination was necessary among the UNMC, the substantive component of the mission, the FARC-EP, UNIPEP (which provided security to each convoy), and the government security forces (which provided area security) to complete the task. The FARC-EP had organized the extraction in close coordination with the UNMC and the government using land and air transport. Each convoy consisted of a truck that transported the relevant container with the arms, magazines, and

ammunition scrap, accompanied by personnel from the UNMC, FARC-EP, UNIPEP, and the armed forces.

In some cases, the ZVTN/PTN did not have containers and the materiel was transported by river or, for security reasons, by UN helicopters. Two waves of extractions were conducted, involving 20 ground movements and 32 air-ground movements that involved 81 hours of flight in three helicopters and the use of 37 trucks, with a total of 26,000 km travelled. The operation ended on 15 August 2017. In total, 8,994 weapons, 1.3 million rounds of ammunition scrap, and 22 tons of magazines and other effects were transported to the Bogotá depot. Those responsible for the disarmament process personally delivered all the corresponding documentation to the depot.

It took some time to organize the depot and equip it to execute the task. Activities began on the site on 23 July 2017. Eleven international observers, a civilian specialist hired by the UN, and 13 members of the German company Technisches Hilfswerk were employed to disable the weapons, with 40 members of UNIPEP providing external security. Approximately 400 weapons were disabled per day. Technisches Hilfswerk personnel cut the weapons to permanently disable them and international observers verified the process before, during, and after the cutting had occurred.

Once this activity was completed, on 6 October 2017 all of the disabled weapons were delivered to the government for final disposal and for use in the construction of three monuments.

The final challenge was to inform Colombians, many of whom were sceptical about the peace process, of the progress that had been made. Little by little, information that was initially secret was disseminated, not only via reports and other forms of information, but also by using images to strengthen the credibility of the process.

Overview of the disarmament process

In September 2017 the UNMC certified the laying down of a total of 8,994 weapons, including the following:

- 6,177 assault rifles;
- 28 precision rifles;
- 6 shotguns;
- 229 grenade launchers;
- 1,817 pistols;
- 274 machine guns;
- 170 revolvers;
- 13 sub-machine guns;
- 12 rocket launchers; and
- 268 mortars.

In addition, the following were destroyed:

- 1,765,862 rounds of small arms ammunition;
- 38,255 kg of diverse explosives;
- 51,911 m of detonating cord and fuses;
- 11,015 grenades (both hand and 40 mm grenades);
- 3,528 anti-personnel mines;
- 46,288 initiators; and
- 4,370 mortar rounds (including 81 mm and 60 mm) and rockets (UNMC, 2017c).

Conclusion

The peace process in Colombia led to the establishment of an unprecedented tripartite MVM, which could be applicable to other peace processes. Its functioning was complex; however, the overall result was very positive.

Because the laying down of arms was subject to a road map that also covered other aspects of the peace agreement, disagreements between the parties led to non-compliance with the terms established for the reception of weaponry.

The completion of the disarmament process within 180 days would have required logistical arrangement to be in place from the outset. This did not happen, and overcoming logistical challenges was one of the greatest difficulties that the mission had to face.

During the implementation of the peace process several differences became apparent between what was agreed and what actually took place. However, the broad mandate was fulfilled.

Despite the difficulties experienced and the delays, in less than a year the UNMC—with the support of the FARC-EP, the Government of Colombia, and Colombian society as a whole—accomplished the mandate entrusted to it by the Security Council. This was, therefore, one of the most successful peace processes in the UN's history.

Endnotes

- 1 The Government of Colombia did not take part in the actual implementation of the disarmament process.
- 2 'D' refers to 1 December 2016, the day when the peace agreement was endorsed and the beginning of the process by which the FARC-EP would lay down its arms. D+60 refers to 60 days after 1 December 2016.
- 3 The UNMC completed its Security Council mandate on 26 September 2017. The UN continues to provide support to the Colombian peace process through the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, established by Security Council Resolution 2377 (2017) (UNMC, 2017a).

References

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