Colombian Government Accepts ELN Call for Formal Peace Talks

Bogotá, January 10 (RHC-teleSUR), -- The Colombian government announced it is willing to engage in peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia's second largest guerrilla group, after the rebels agreed Wednesday to a cease-fire if the government participated.

The two sides have been engaged in exploratory peace talks since June 2014, but Colombian Interior Minister Juan Fernando Cristo said the government and the ELN will take "more steps in the coming weeks" to start formal negotiations, reported 'El Universal' Friday.

"The government and the ELN are in an exploratory stage and when they reach the end of that stage [they will] formally initiate these conversations. It will be announced to the country, and we hope it will be sooner rather than later," said Cristo.

Hernan Penagos, one of Colombia's ruling Social Party for National Unity's leaders, suggested negotiations with the ELN should start from where the peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) stand today, in order to advance as quickly as possible toward ending the country's 50-year internal conflict.

He went on to say that it would be sensible to take advantage of any coincidences regarding the issues that have already been analyzed and approved by the FARC and the government.

Earlier this week, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos asked the ELN to follow the example of the FARC, who called an indefinite bilateral cease-fire in December. The ELN said they would consider also committing to a cease-fire if peace negotiations with the government made progress.

The announcement has made many in Colombia optimistic that a long-term peace agreement between guerrilla groups and the government could be reached, which would finally end the decades-long armed conflict in the country.

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