

# Effective Multilateralism: Reflections on the Contribution of the United Nations to the Building of Peace in Colombia

*Multilateralismo eficaz: reflexiones sobre la contribución de las Naciones Unidas a la construcción de paz en Colombia*

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## Abstract

In this article, the author describes some of the specific actions taken by the United Nations special political missions in Colombia that have been decisive in the peacebuilding process, focusing on innovative aspects of the process and the role played by the Organization. He then reflects on how the participation of the United Nations in this particular peace process highlights the importance of multilateralism in complex contexts.



## Resumen

En este artículo, el autor describe algunas acciones puntuales desarrolladas por las misiones políticas especiales de la ONU en Colombia, que han sido determinantes en la construcción de la paz, por lo que resalta aspectos innovadores del proceso de paz colombiano y del papel desempeñado por la ONU. También reflexiona sobre el impacto que el proceso de paz y la participación de la ONU en él puede tener en maximizar la relevancia del multilateralismo en contextos complejos.



## Keywords

Colombia, peace process, U.N. special political missions, Government of Colombia, FARC-EP, Final Peace Agreement, resolution 2261 (2016), resolution 2366 (2017)



## Palabras clave

Colombia, proceso de paz, misiones políticas especiales de la ONU, Gobierno de Colombia, FARC-EP, Acuerdo Final de Paz, resolución 2261 (2016), resolución 2366 (2017)

# Effective Multilateralism: Reflections on the Contribution of the United Nations to the Building of Peace in Colombia\*

*Carlos Ruiz Massieu*

For a world marked by conflicts, many of them without an end in sight, Colombia sends a clear message: it is time to invest in peace.

ANTÓNIO GUTERRES,  
*secretary-general of the United Nations*

## Introduction

More than 75 years after its creation, the United Nations continues to work to maintain international peace and security (Charter of the United Nations, Article 1), guided by the purposes and principles set forth in its charter. Yet in times of growing tensions and conflicts, both domestic and international, the effectiveness of the main multilateral forum of the international system—born in response to the challenges of the 20th century to address those of the 21st century—, is frequently questioned.

In this regard, the participation of the United Nations in the various phases of the peace process between the Government of Colombia and the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) is an opportunity to analyze and put into perspective the role played by the United Nations in a specific process.

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\* English translation by Alison Stewart.

That said, rather than provide an exhaustive list of good practices or lessons learned, this article describes some of the concrete actions taken by the United Nations special political missions that have been decisive in leveraging peacebuilding efforts in Colombia, and that could serve as a reference for decision-making in similar processes around the world. I will focus on the more innovative aspects of the peace process in Colombia, the role of the United Nations, and how its participation has underscored the importance of multilateralism in complex situations like these.

Bearing in mind the specificity of the Colombian case and the multiplicity of settings the United Nations is involved in around the world, these reflections should be understood in the context of a process that, despite its manifold obstacles and challenges, is deemed a successful effort to achieve peace through dialogue. Similarly, it is worth mentioning that these are merely preliminary reflections, given that the Final Agreement of 2016, which was designed to be implemented over a period of at least 15 years, is barely approaching the halfway point and the United Nations continues to conduct verification missions.

## The United Nations and its special political missions in Colombia

In the peace process between the Government of Colombia and the former FARC-EP—today the political party Comunes, whose former guerrilla fighters remain committed to their reincorporation into civilian life—, the role of the United Nations has essentially consisted of supporting the efforts of the parties and Colombia’s vibrant civil society to seek peace through dialogue and successfully implement the ambitious Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace (hereinafter, Final Agreement).<sup>1</sup> As the Secretary-General of the United Nations said on his most recent visit to Colombia, on the fifth anniversary of the sign-

<sup>1</sup> For the English translation of full text, see: United Nations Security Council, “Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace,” S/2017/272, April 17, 2017, at [https://unmc.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s-2017-272\\_e.pdf](https://unmc.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s-2017-272_e.pdf) (date consulted: February 5, 2023).

ing of the Final Agreement on November 12, 2021, “I humbly acknowledge that our task is a secondary one. The hard work has been done by Colombians. If this were a film, we would not be Oscar candidates for best actor, but only best supporting role.”<sup>2</sup>

But while there can be no question that progress building peace in Colombia can essentially be attributed to the perseverance of local actors after decades of armed conflict, the support of the international community in general and the United Nations in particular has not gone unnoticed. This contribution has been acknowledged by the parties themselves and various local interlocutors, who are in agreement as to the added value of the political support of the United Nations, the benefits of its experience gained at peace processes around the world, and its technical rigor, always in accordance with the context and the wishes of the parties.

For more than seven years, both the U.N. Secretary-General and the Security Council—the highest body responsible for maintaining international peace and security—have expressed their full support for the Colombian peace process. Since 2016, the Security Council has emphasized the scope of the Final Agreement at every stage in the process, while pointing out the many and serious challenges it faces, and the importance of guaranteeing its comprehensive implementation.

It should also be noted that the Council has unanimously adopted all resolutions on the special political missions involved in the Colombian peace process. This consensus, unusual in its unwaveringness, illustrates how important the success of the peace process is to the Organization and the commitment of its Member States to this end. Furthermore, the accompaniment of the United Nations has proven key in at least two respects: externally, to ensure the international community continues to focus its attention on the peace process in Colombia, and internally, to maintain the momentum of the implementation of the Final Agreement.

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<sup>2</sup> António Guterres, “Declaraciones del Secretario General en el antiguo ETCR Llano Grande, en Dabeiba-Antioquia,” in United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, November 23, 2021, at <https://colombia.unmissions.org/declaraciones-del-secretario-general-en-antiguo-etcr-llano-grande-en-dabeiba-antioquia> (date consulted: February 5, 2023).

At the request of the parties, toward the end of negotiations in Havana, the Security Council adopted resolution 2261 (2016)<sup>3</sup> establishing the United Nations Mission in Colombia. The “First Mission,” as it is informally referred to, had the very limited mandate of verifying the ceasefire and cessation of hostilities as part of the tripartite Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MMV) comprised of the Mission, the Government of Colombia and FARC-EP members, including the laying down of arms by members of the guerrilla organization.<sup>4</sup>

The First Mission played an essential role in the first year of implementation of the Final Agreement, during which time the tasks assigned it were carried out effectively.<sup>5</sup> At this stage in the process, probably one of the most sensitive, the presence of the Mission—not just in the capital, but in remote regions of the country where former FARC-EP guerilla forces had been active for decades—was instrumental, particularly tripartite efforts within the framework of the MMV, in creating trust between the parties and rallying support for the peace process via intense talks with social and political actors.

At the same time, the United Nations lent the process legitimacy through its objective, impartial verification of compliance with the terms of the agreement between the parties, and the quarterly reports remitted by the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the execution of the Mission’s mandate.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2261 (2016), S/RES/2261 (2016), January 25, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> MVM reports are available at “Informes del MMV,” in Misión de Verificación de la ONU, at <https://unmc.unmissions.org/informes-del-mmv> (date consulted: February 5, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> The ceasefire and cessation of hostilities, including the surrender of arms, were successfully completed and served to pave the way for the process of reintegrating thousands of former FARC-EP members into civilian life. For details on the results of the surrender of arms by former FARC-EP members and other aspects of the U.N. missions in Colombia, see *United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia*, Bogota, United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, 2022, at [https://colombia.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/brochure\\_unvmc\\_2022\\_eng.pdf](https://colombia.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/brochure_unvmc_2022_eng.pdf) (date consulted: February 5, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> The Secretary-General’s reports on the missions in Colombia are available at “Informes del Secretario General,” in United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, at <https://colombia.unmissions.org/informes-del-secretario-general> (date consulted: February 5, 2023).

Toward the end of this stage, the Security Council adopted resolution 2366 (2017) establishing the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia. The task of this “Second Mission,” according to the provisions of the Final Agreement, was to verify the reintegration of former FARC-EP combatants into civilian life (Section 3.2) and security guarantees (Section 3.4).<sup>7</sup> In undertaking this task, which, it should be noted, is an ongoing one, the Mission has stepped up proactive verification. In practice, what this term signifies is that the work of the Mission goes beyond the basic task of reporting on the progress and challenges encountered in the implementation of the Final Agreement to actively seeking to contribute to compliance with the commitments adopted therein, among other aspects, via its good offices, the promotion of interinstitutional coordination and the fostering of constructive dialogue on implementation mechanisms. This approach to verification is essential on all levels and enables the Mission to act as a catalyst for implementation, together with other social and political actors, thereby contributing to the success of entities responsible for compliance with the Final Agreement, which is in everyone’s interest.

Impartial, objective verification on the ground via the deployment of personnel in zones where these are most needed, combined with political messages of the highest level allows the United Nations to influence decision-making, with a view to improving implementation. For instance, the Secretary-General himself has stressed that persisting violence—especially in zones historically affected by the conflict—is the most serious threat to the consolidation of peace in Colombia. These messages are, in turn, taken up by members of the Security Council, who also call for measures to be taken in this regard.

Direct observation and the influence of the Verification Mission on the ground and in Bogota, along with the observations of the Secretary-General and the messages issued by the Security Council in New York have been essential in encouraging the Colombian government and the state organizations that are directly responsible to step up efforts to provide much-needed security for social leaders, human rights advocates, rural

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2366 (2017), S/RES/2366 (2017), July 10, 2017.

communities, and the thousands of former FARC-EP members committed to their reinsertion into civilian life.

Likewise, motivated by the MMV and the results of tripartite efforts, the Mission has contributed to other ad hoc mechanisms conceived by the parties with the accompaniment of the United Nations to promote implementation. One example is the humanitarian demining of several regions of the country, a joint initiative undertaken by the parties with the support of the Verification Mission and the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), and on which significant progress has been made. Crucial to preventing future horrors as a consequence of the armed conflict, an exercise like this would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

Another task entrusted more recently to the Verification Mission by the Security Council via resolution 2574 (2021)<sup>8</sup> is related to the innovative transitional justice system created in Colombia by the Final Agreement, which is based on the principle of the centrality of victims and recognition of their rights to the truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence. Once again, at the request of the parties, the Mission has been tasked with verifying conditions for the implementation of and compliance with so-called “special sanctions.”<sup>9</sup> These are sentences with retributive and restorative components that the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the court of justice created by the Final Agreement, will impose on the perpetrators of crimes committed within the context of the armed conflict—former FARC-EP members, agents of the State and third-party civilians—and that fully acknowledge the truth behind these acts and who is responsible for them (Section 5.1.2).

The first sanctions have yet to be imposed and in the meantime, the work of the Mission is focused on providing good offices and supporting key state and national government actors by ensuring they have everything they need at their disposal (conditions of security, coordination of the reintegration

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2574 (2021), S/RES/2574 (2021), May 11, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> A description of the special sanctions to be applied by the JEP is available at Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, “ABC de las Sanciones Propias que impondrá la JEP,” comunicado no. 063, May 12, 2020, at <https://www.jep.gov.co/Paginas/ABC-de-las-Sanciones-Propias-que-impondr%C3%A1-la-JEP.aspx> (date consulted: February 5, 2023).

process, etc.), so that as soon as sanctions are imposed, the transitional justice process can move forward and achieve its objectives.<sup>10</sup>

Confident that the transitional justice system created by the Final Agreement will illustrate that peace and justice can mutually reinforce one another, in verifying the application of and compliance with sanctions, the Mission seeks to support all the parties involved in their efforts to ensure the rights of victims are respected and contribute to reconciliation, while earning the trust of society at large at this decisive stage in the process. It should be noted that there is no precedent for verification of the special sanctions to be imposed by the JEP, meaning this is a task of the Mission that surely has important lessons to teach us vis-à-vis the involvement of the United Nations in transitional justice processes in other parts of the world.

On January 11, 2023, at one of the regular meetings of the Security Council on the peace process in Colombia at which I have the opportunity to submit the reports of the Secretary-General and update members on the work of the Mission, the Council adopted resolution 2673, which added the verification of two additional sections of the Final Agreement to the Mission's mandate: Comprehensive Rural Reform (Section 1) and the Ethnic Chapter (Section 6.2).<sup>11</sup>

Presented with fresh opportunities to continue building peace, the new Colombian government administration and former FARC-EP members requested that the Mission's mandate include these two points, whose implementation will be decisive in addressing the underlying causes of the conflict, bringing development opportunities to neglected regions and rectifying

<sup>10</sup> In August 2022, the Mission and the JEP signed a protocol for the creation of a Monitoring and Verification Mechanism for Special Sanctions (MMVSP), which is provided for in the Final Agreement and whose purpose is to provide assistance with the verification of conditions for the application of and compliance with special sanctions. For further details on this mechanism, see JEP and Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Colombia, "La JEP y la Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Colombia firman protocolo que activa el Mecanismo de Monitoreo y Verificación de las Sanciones Propias (MMVSP)," joint communiqué, August 16, 2022, at <https://www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/La-JEP-y-la-Misi%C3%B3n-de-la-ONU-firman-protocolo-que-activa-el-Mecanismo-de-Monitoreo-y-Verificaci%C3%B3n-de-las-Sanciones-Propias.aspx> (date consulted: February 5, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2673 (2023), S/RES/2673 (2023), January 11, 2023.



historic conditions of inequality. In this regard, and in keeping with the now traditional approach of proactive verification, the new task of the Mission will be focused on high-impact, strategic matters, and the drawing up of recommendations on how to surmount obstacles and foster progress in the implementation of these two transformative measures.

## Final reflections

The role played by the special political missions in Colombia since 2016 clearly reflects the commitment of the United Nations to finding political solutions to armed conflicts. The results achieved by the Organization to date, such as its contribution to the ceasefire, the surrendering of arms by former FARC-EP members and the ongoing reincorporation of thousands of former combatants into civilian life are just a few examples that evidence the usefulness of our presence on the ground, the importance of international support for domestic processes, and the enormous influence multilateralism can have on the search for peace through dialogue, even in the most complex of situations.

As diverse interlocutors have acknowledged, the accompaniment of the United Nations throughout the peace process in Colombia has revealed the added value of its good offices and its political and technical support for a strategy led primarily by national actors.

The progressive adaptation of Security Council mandates to changing circumstances as the peace process evolves has enabled the Organization to maximize the impact of its contribution by focusing on aspects key to its success in the short, medium and long terms. This is especially important at a time when multilateral organizations and their Member States find themselves under pressure to meet multiple demands on ever-tighter budgets.

For this reason, the United Nations special political missions in Colombia have focused on verifying specific commitments agreed to by the parties and accompanying them as they strive to honor these, with the overriding goal of ensuring that the rights of victims are respected and that the horrors of the conflict are never repeated. Likewise, the presence of the Organization has served to round up the political, technical and financial

support of the international community, which, in turn, has been decisive in leveraging the admirable efforts of national actors, while helping maintain momentum in the implementation of the Final Agreement between the Colombian Government and former FARC-EP members.

But while the United Nations missions have made a valuable contribution to the peace process, the real driver of progress has been the conviction and tireless work of Colombians themselves. Deserving of special mention are the civil society organizations with which the United Nations has close ties, including those formed by women, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and that have played a leading role in the process.<sup>12</sup> There can be no question that the inclusivity of the Colombian peace process and its appropriation by national actors has been essential in guaranteeing the implementation of the Final Agreement at every stage in the process, and that this will continue to be important as it moves forward, despite the many obstacles it faces, both local and global, such as insecurity, a shortage of resources and the unpredictability of politics.

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<sup>12</sup> For further details, see the report on lessons learned: *From Words to Actions: The Experience of U.N. Special Political Missions on Women, Peace and Security in Colombia*, New York/Bogotá, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs/United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, 2020, at [https://colombia.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/final\\_wsp\\_study\\_from\\_words\\_to\\_action.pdf](https://colombia.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/final_wsp_study_from_words_to_action.pdf) (date consulted: 5 February 2023).