

UN Mission chief calls Colombia's congressional elections 'a clear step forward' in peace process

In a milestone exercise that “transited the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) from weapons to politics,” last month’s congressional elections drew millions of Colombians to the polls amid a trend towards a reduction of electoral violence, the senior-most United Nations official in the country said on Thursday

The mid-March elections were the first after the signing in 2016 of a peace deal between the FARC-EP and the Colombian Government that ended the Western hemisphere’s longest-running conflict in which more than 200,000 people were killed.

“While it is too early to take stock of a peace process that has set ambitious and long-term goals, we already observed that it has achieved [a notable reduction of violence](#) in the congressional elections,” Jean Arnault, head of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, [set up two years ago](#) to monitor and support implementation of the peace deal.

He said that the presidential election is now five weeks away, “and against a background of political polarization, the campaign so far has confirmed the trend towards a reduction of electoral violence.”

Among legislative developments, he said the Constitutional Court had endorsed the Law on the Status of the Opposition, which among other things provides opposition parties with access to media, funding and representation in the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives for runners-ups in vice- and presidential elections.

It also declared constitutional FARC’s political participation, including 10 Congressional seats provided for in the Peace Agreement.

Turning to the socioeconomic reintegration of FARC members, under a new decree, the Superintendent of Banks can provide banking services to former FARC members in the reintegration process – excepting those on international sanctions lists.

The next few months provide an opportunity to bring together government institutions, local authorities and social organizations
– *Jean Arnault, Head of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia*

Recognizing a number of new institutions as “a substantial change,” Mr. Arnault said “the next few months provide an opportunity to bring together government institutions, local authorities and social organizations to press

forward” with the peace agenda.

He also asserted that the last couple of weeks have brought new challenges to the peace process, such as the arrest of a FARC leader on drug trafficking, which “reverberated in a country that remains divided around the peace process.

Mr. Arnault added that both sides were calling for calm and continued to pursue the path of the Peace Agreement, calling it “very important in addressing misgivings and mistrust among former combatants in the reintegration areas.”

The Mission wholeheartedly supported the reintegration of former combatants on a more solid basis before the end of the Government’s mandate.

“Weaknesses in this effort can only increase the risk of the drift of some ex-combatants to criminal groups,” he explained. Citing the Secretary-General’s [report](#) on the Mission, he said “the ingredients for a breakthrough are known – viable productive projects, functional cooperatives and the availability of land – and much of the legal and technical preparation has been done.”

As negotiations between the Government and the National Liberation Army have resumed, Mr. Arnault told the Council that both parties have reiterated their interest in UN support to implement a future ceasefire.

“The Security Council will make the appropriate decisions in due time,” he continued. “Meanwhile we will do our best to ensure that the design of the ceasefire is as robust as possible.”

In implementing the Peace Agreement, Mr. Arnault stressed that circumstances have occasionally tested the commitment of the two parties, saying: “They have stayed the course.”

“The unanimous support consistently voiced by the Council have helped sustain their resolve. It will continue to be a source of confidence and strength,” he concluded.

In annual memorial, UN pays tribute to 140 fallen staff members

Were it not for the sacrifices of United Nations peacekeepers, humanitarians and other personnel, the people who needed urgent support in the most difficult and dangerous environments would have experienced greater suffering, the top UN official said Thursday in an annual memorial service for fallen colleagues.

“I wish we never had to mourn [the loss of colleagues](#),” [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) said at the ceremony held at UN Headquarters in New York to remember 140 personnel who lost their lives in the line of duty between 1 July 2016 and 31 December 2017.

“But the sad fact is that people do lose their lives while serving the United Nations, and it is our duty to honour their service and sacrifice,” he said.

Of the 140 killed, 123 were military personnel; three police; and 14 civilians. They came from 42 nations.

During his remarks, he invited the bereaved families and others in attendance to join him in observing a moment of silence.

Mr. Guterres noted that over the past years, respect for those wearing UN symbols has diminished, making them a target of those who oppose peace “despite all our efforts to ensure the safety and security of our personnel.”



UN Photo/Mark Garten

UN Secretary-General António Guterres addresses an annual memorial service for fallen UN staff.

As UN High Commissioner for Refugees between 2005 and 2015, he remembered that symbols like the Red Cross, Red Crescent and UN used to be respected even by militant groups.

He said he saw how this respect was progressively being lost and in the end, he was starting to see situations in which UN staff were targeted exactly because they were UN staff.

Mr. Guterres, however, stressed that all around the world, the blue UN flag represents the hopes of some of the world’s most vulnerable people for peace, security and an opportunity for a better future.

Since 2011, the UN Secretariat has held an annual memorial service to honour fallen colleagues.

Mr. Guterres said that the UN faces “a terrible dilemma” about sending staff into the most difficult areas at the most dangerous moments because if they don’t go, “the people we care for will suffer even more, facing even more dangerous situations and circumstances.”

[Mosquito-packed drones ready to join fight against Zika and other deadly diseases – UN agency](#)

Robotics may soon be a critical ally in the fight against disease-spreading bugs, a United Nations agency said Thursday after a successful test releasing sterile mosquitos from aerial drones as part of efforts to suppress the insect that spreads Zika and other diseases.

The drone-based mechanism overcomes a critical bottleneck in the application of Sterile Insect Technique (SIT) to control insect pests, [said](#) the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which developed the system in partnership with the UN [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO) and the non-profit group WeRobotics.

“The use of drones is a breakthrough, and paves the way for large-scale and cost-efficient releases, also over densely populated areas,” said Jeremy Bouyer, medical entomologist at the Joint FAO/IAEA Division of Nuclear Techniques in Food and Agriculture.

SIT, a form of insect birth control, uses radiation to sterilize male mosquitos, which are then released to mate with wild females. As these do not produce any offspring, the insect population declines over time.

However, to be effective, the technique requires the uniform release of large numbers of insects in good condition over a given area.

For instance, *Aedes* mosquitos, responsible for the spread of diseases like dengue or yellow fever, do not disperse for more than 100 meters in their lifetime. They are also fragile, and high-altitude releases by airplanes – often used in the application of SIT for other insects – can damage their wings and legs.

The drone-based system overcomes this problem.



IAEA/Dean Calma

Aedes aegypti mosquitoes that can carry Zika as well as Dengue and Chikungunya viruses.

“We’re pleased with initial tests that show less than 10 per cent mortality through the entire chilling, transport and aerial release process,” said Adam Klaptocz, co-founder of WeRobotics.

The breakthrough technology is also cost-effective – almost half as cheap.

Until now, sterile mosquitos have been released using time-consuming and labour-intensive ground methods.

“With the drone, we can treat 20 hectares in five minutes,” said Mr. Bouyer.

Weighing less than 10 kilograms, the drone can carry 50,000 sterile mosquitos per flight and at 10,000 Euro per drone, its use also reduces the cost of releasing mosquitos by half.

The IAEA and its partners are now working to reduce the drone’s weight and to increase its capacity to carry up to 150,000 mosquitos per flight.

The testing of the system was carried out last month in Brazil, a country hit hard by the 2015-16 [Zika epidemic](#), which also spread to other parts of South and North America and affected several islands in the Pacific, and South-east Asia.

Brazil plans to start using the drone-based system in selected urban and rural areas from January 2019, at the peak of the summer and mosquito season.

“We are hopeful about the application of SIT for the control of *Aedes aegypti* in Brazil with the results from the drone tests,” said Jair Virginio, Director of Brazil-based Moscamed, a recently-designated IAEA Collaborating Centre.

[UN rights expert urge Iran to annul death sentence against prisoner](#)

A group of United Nations human rights experts have called on Iran to annul the death sentence against a prisoner citing serious concerns that he was tortured in detention and did not receive a fair trial.

In a [news release](#) on Wednesday, the experts said that Iranian Kurdish prisoner Ramin Hossein Panahi, who was arrested last June for alleged

membership of the Kurdish nationalist group Komala, was repeatedly beaten in detention, denied medical care and access to a lawyer, and held in solitary confinement until January.

They also expressed concern regarding his trial, which took place before the Revolutionary Court and lasted less than an hour.

“Executing Mr. Panahi, following his torture, and unfair trial and on the basis of charges that do not meet international standards for [the use of death penalty, would be unconscionable](#),” said the experts.

“We remind Iran that the only thing that distinguishes capital punishment from arbitrary execution is full respect for stringent due process guarantees.”

The experts also noted that despite marks of torture on Mr. Panahi body, the court did not order an investigation, and that he was allowed only one meeting with his lawyer between his arrest and the trial and no family visits. There are also ongoing concerns about Mr. Panahi, and he reportedly began a hunger strike early in 2018.

The experts also expressed concern that some members of Mr. Panahi’s family appeared to have been convicted in separate summary trials, and sentenced to long prison terms, in apparent reprisals for their efforts to obtain further information on his situation.

It is understood that the Supreme Court branch in Qom reaffirmed Mr. Panahi’s death sentence earlier in April, and his case was due to be passed to the Office of Implementation, said the experts, his lawyer has appealed for a judicial review.

The news release noted that the experts are in dialogue with Iranian authorities regarding Mr. Panahi’s situation.

The UN rights experts include Agnes Callamard, the [Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions](#); Dainius Puras, the [Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health](#); and Nils Melzer, the [Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment](#).

UN Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

Chemical watchdog confirms UK findings on Salisbury toxic chemicals

Results of sample analysis collected by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons ([OPCW](#)) from the individuals and the site of an alleged exposure to a nerve agent in Salisbury, United Kingdom, confirm the country's findings relating to the identity of the chemical, the Security Council [heard today](#).

"[The OPCW] Technical Assistance Visit team has noted that the toxic chemical in question was of high purity," said Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.

The [statement](#) from the OPCW does not specifically name the substance, it says technical experts confirm the findings of the UK relating "relating to the identity of the toxic chemical that was used in Salisbury and severely injured three people."

The UK has alleged that the toxic chemical in question is the nerve agent, Novichok, and said that it was "highly likely" that Russia was behind its use in the 4 March incident that seriously injured Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, and one other person – a police official – in the British town of Salisbury.

Russia has firmly denied the charge.

An OPCW expert team was deployed to the UK at the country's request seeking technical assistance in identifying the nature of the toxic chemical reportedly used.

The team collected biomedical samples from the three individuals, as well as environmental samples from the site, under full chain of custody and transported them to its designated laboratories for testing.

OPCW's report on its finding was submitted to the UK, and at the country's request, to the States Party to the Convention on Chemical Weapons on 12 April. A [public summary](#) of the report can be found on the OPCW website.



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Ambassador Karen Pierce of the United Kingdom addresses the Security Council meeting on the Salisbury incident in the United Kingdom.

Also at today's meeting, Karen Pierce, the Permanent Representative of the UK to the UN, updated the 15-member Security Council of the investigations conducted by UK authorities.

She went on to explain why, "there is no plausible alternative explanation than Russian State responsibility for what happened in Salisbury."



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia of the Russian Federation addresses the Security Council meeting on the Salisbury incident in the United Kingdom.

Vassily Alekseevich Nebenzia, the Permanent Representative of Russia to the UN, dismissed the charges and alleged lack of transparency by UK, stating "the British barred [OPCW] experts from even mentioning the type of technical assistance requested and from naming the toxic chemical that Porton Down identified."

He added that the UK instead had that information placed in the classified part of the OPCW report, which cannot be discussed in an open meeting of the Security Council.

The OPCW is the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which came into force in 1997 and outlaws the production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons and their precursors.