

'Historic' day as last FARC-EP members gather to turn in arms – UN mission in Colombia

20 February 2017 – About 300 members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) today arrived in central Colombia's Agua Bonita zone, bringing the number to close to 6,900, to lay down their arms under United Nations verification, and to begin a transition to social, economic and political life, the UN Mission in the country said today.

"In the past 19 days they rode cars, buses, boats or walked some 8,700 kilometres [...] across the country, accompanied by over 860 [members] of the tripartite Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MVM)," read a news release from the UN Mission in Colombia.

The Mission's Chief Observer and MVM coordinator, Major General Javier Pérez Aquino, called the day "historic."

"The UN Mission in Colombia and the MVM consider that the FARC-EP's decision to move into the zones [...] in spite of the limited logistics in the majority of them [...] very positive," he said.

"This decision considerably reduces the possibility of armed contact [...] and we also hope that their presence will accelerate the construction works in these camps, creating the appropriate conditions to continue with the process that will lead to their reinsertion into the social, economic and political life," he added.

The Chief Observer also noted that despite limited logistics, the deadline for the completion of the laying down of arms [...] 180 days after the Final Agreement, which came into force on 1 December [...] stands.

Working hand-in-hand so that 'our children and grandchildren live in a conflict-free country'

In Colombia's capital, Bogotá, as well as at eight regional and 26 local sites, FARC-EP and Government members, along with 350 UN observers, are working together to verify the parties' commitments towards the ceasefire and cessation of hostilities.

"We work together to implement the Final Agreement and I feel hopeful that this process will lead to a country with more social justice," said 45-year-old Esperanza Fajardo, who joined FARC-EP in the 1990's, now working with Government and UN Mission counterparts.

Mayor Alejandro Cruz, from the Government, echoed: "I feel very committed to this process because I want our children and grandchildren to live in a conflict-free country."

Mr. Cruz was twice injured in combat with the FARC-EP and bears a large scar on his chest while Ms. Fajardo joined the rebel group to escape the killings of left-wing *Unión Patriótica* political affiliates.

In early October 2016, Colombian voters narrowly rejected the historic peace accord between the Government and the FARC-EP. That deal led to a cessation of hostilities and agreements on key issues such as political participation, land rights, illicit drugs and victims' rights and transitional justice. The two sides signed a new agreement in late November.

Bird flu vaccines set to undergo clinical trials

Four kinds of vaccine for the H7N9 strain of bird flu virus have been approved for clinical trials by China's top drug regulator, according to the Beijing Food and Drug Administration.



The China Food and Drug Administration. [File photo/Xinhua]

The administration will continue to provide assistance and guidance for clinical trials of the vaccines so they can enter the market as soon as possible, it said in a statement last week.

Beijing Tiantan Biological Products Co, a State-owned enterprise in Beijing, which developed the vaccines, announced on Wednesday that the China Food and Drug Administration had approved clinical trials. The company added that it must conduct other procedures after the completion of clinical trials before the vaccines can be sold on the market, including applying for registration of the drugs and acquiring certificates for their manufacture from the CFDA.

There are currently no vaccines for the H7N9 strain of bird flu—which is most active in winter and spring—available on the market in China or overseas, although several other domestic companies have also acquired approval from CFDA for clinical trials for similar products, Beijing Tiantan said.

Two human cases of H7N9 have been reported in Beijing this year, with both patients suspected of having been exposed to live poultry markets. Both are in critical condition, the Beijing Center for Disease Control and Prevention said last week.

A 41-year-old woman infected with the H7N9 strain of bird flu in Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, died on Sunday, the regional Health and Family Planning Commission said.

The central government has intensified measures to control the spread of H7N9, including shutting down live poultry markets, according to the National Health and Family Planning Commission. The commission called on the public to take precautionary measures such as avoiding contact with live poultry and cooking chicken meat thoroughly.

Human cases of H7N9 have been reported in 16 provinces in China since October, including in Yunnan, Fujian, Hubei and Hunan provinces, with most of them involving exposure to live poultry markets, according to the commission.

In January alone, 192 human cases of H7N9 were reported on the Chinese mainland, including 79 deaths, making it the worst period since the virus first appeared in China in 2013, the commission said.

There is no evidence to support sustained human-to-human transmission of the virus, which was first reported in the spring of 2013, according to the World Health Organization.

The Beijing Center for Disease Control and Prevention said last week that more sporadic cases are expected in the city.

Sporadic cases of the bird flu may last until late April, said Ni Daxin, deputy director of emergency response at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Plan to lower age to 14 on detention gets mixed review



[Shanghai Daily]

A new draft law that would change the minimum age for administrative detention from 16 to 14 has been met with both concerns of over correction and voices of support, albeit cautious.

In China, administrative detention is a punishment for violations that threaten public security but do not constitute a criminal charge. Sentences usually do not exceed 20 days. People awaiting trial are sometimes held in administrative detention.

Currently, minors are exempt from administrative detention. However, the draft public security administration law released last Friday proposed administrative detention should be applicable for individuals "at least 14 and under 18."

The draft law comes in response to rising concerns about young offenders, especially those involved with bullying or violence at school.

Moreover, a survey by China Youth and Children Research Center in 2015 showed that juvenile offenders are getting younger.

Many people, however, are wary about the new draft law.

"I don't agree with it," said Ge Haiyan, a mother in Beijing. "Children of that age are not mature enough to understand the consequences of their actions, and they are often rebellious at puberty. If we are too strict, our methods could have a negative effect."

Wang Tingting, another Beijing parent, said there should be a more holistic approach to punishment, as juvenile offences were influenced by home and school life. "Teachers and parents should step up," she said.

Song Ruiyong, an education official in Beijing, said he was more concerned about the negative effects administrative detention had on young offenders.

"There is a risk that they will interact with more seasoned criminals while in detention, and they could have a negative influence on them," Song said. "Being locked-up is an irreversible experience, especially for children."

He said youth education services would be better suited for young offenders.

Bian Feng, a judge in Shenyang City, said that the incarceration of minors was ignoring the fundamental problem. "I think community or social services could be a better option."

Some people welcomed the proposed law, but not without conditions.

Wu Changhai, a law professor at China University of Political Science and Law, argued that the minimum age should only be applied in certain situations. "The rule should only be executed if the misconduct has had a huge social impact or if the suspect is a repeat offender," Wu said.

Deng Xiquan, deputy director of CYCRC, also supports the new rules. "There are no existing actions in the current law for young offenders aged 14 to 16, and this has been exploited by some criminals who use kids of that age to circumvent the criminal law process," Deng said. "The new rule, in a way, protects minors."

Deng's support comes with a condition. "All young offenders should be kept at a specialized complex, away from bad influences," he said.

Wang Na, a lawyer in Beijing, supported the lowering of the minimum age, especially for those suspected of severe crimes.

"Teenagers these days mature earlier," Wang said. "I have encountered cases of 14-year-olds suspected of molesting girls."

She said the number of reported school bullying cases had increased, so the new law could work as a deterrent.

Rural poor to receive scientists

China will dispatch 18,000 scientific and technical workers annually to help poor villagers become technology-savvy in the battle against poverty.

According to a plan drafted by the Ministry of Science and Technology and the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, under privileged residents in remote areas or regions inhabited by minority nationalities will mainly benefit from the arrangement.

The personnel will train about 2,300 people every year and assist in the application of new technologies, so that farmers could increase their incomes and be lifted out of poverty, according to the ministry.

About 100 scientific and technological parks will be set up in poor areas to the poverty relief effort, the ministry said.

It added entities in the eastern part of the nation, which is more developed, including institutes of higher education, scientific research units, and science and technology parks in agriculture, will be encouraged to cooperate with counterparts in the west on precision poverty relief.

Xu Nanping, vice minister of science and technology, said the move aimed to mobilize the science and technology field to play its part in the fight to eliminate poverty.

Scientists striving to save rare pangolins



Police check a pangolin seized in a smuggling case in Jiangmen, Guangdong province.[Cai Yanhong/For China Daily]

When social media posts about endangered pangolin being eaten at banquets triggered public fury in China last week, a wildlife protection specialist saw a ray of hope.

"I hope the scandal will become a turning point in our search and rescue of the critically endangered animal," said Zhou Canying, head of the Wildlife Protection Association in Changsha, Hunan province.

Zhou and her team have trekked the mountains of Hunan for more than a year, but not spotted a single pangolin.

Earlier this month, a screen-shot of a micro blog post went viral that allegedly showed officials in southern China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region inviting investors from Hong Kong to eat pangolin at a banquet.

"The public rarely pays so much attention to pangolins, and I hope the incident will lead to new breakthroughs in its protection," Zhou said on Saturday, which was World Pangolin Day.

The species, which has evolved over 80 million years, was once abundant in tropical and subtropical areas of Asia, including Hunan.

But things changed drastically in the past two decades: People used excessive pesticides; trees were replaced with different varieties that produced more profitable lumber; and the remaining pangolins were caught and sold to dealers.

A survey by the provincial forestry department in 2001 confirmed that the

wild pangolin population in Hunan was zero.

Pangolins are the most illegally traded mammal worldwide, with about 1 million being sold over the past decade.

In China, the animal's scaly skin is used as an ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine, and is believed to ease swelling and promote lactation. Their meat is also considered a delicacy by many.

Wu Shibao, a wildlife conservation specialist and professor at South China Normal University, said that about 300,000 pangolins are consumed in China each year.

Zhou said she has seen only one living pangolin outside a lab.

"It was at the end of 2015. Someone had saved the animal from illegal dealers and left it at a temple in Changsha. It was dying and had blood-stains on its mouth," she said.

Despite Zhou's efforts to save it, the animal died in less than two weeks. When researchers dissected it, they found gypsum in its stomach, a material used by dealers to make it heavier so it can be sold for more money.

"It was pregnant, too," Zhou said.

"I hope more people will join us to protect pangolins from such a miserable fate," she said.