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## **India's bleeding insurgencies: Lessons from Latin America (Comment)**

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The tiny northeast Indian state of Tripura has turned into the second largest producer of natural rubber in the country largely because several hundred former militants of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) were rehabilitated a decade ago and allotted land.

On the other side of the world, Latin America has been no stranger to violent insurrections over the past decades, most inspired by left-wing ideologues. They mobilised large numbers of rural and urban workers disenchanted with inequalitarian, exploitative regimes seen as beholden to the United States and crony capitalists.

Colombia, around a third of the territory of India, continues to confront the 50-year-old Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP). Large areas of the country have been off limits to business and travel for decades. FARC was even granted a safe haven of 42,000 sq km in the late 1990s by a gullible Colombian government. According to reliable reports, the guerrillas have colluded with the colossal and insidious narcotics industry which provided them funds in exchange for protection.

Alvaro Uribe – whose father had been assassinated by the FARC – was sworn in president in 2002 and swore to eliminate this menace. The United States (ostensibly acting against the drug trade) provided material and training worth an estimated \$500-600 million annually. By early 2012 FARC had lost its major leaders, considered leftist icons in the region. Their current strength is estimated at less than 9,000, operating in small groups. A smaller guerilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), accounts for around 2,500 militants, who have also offered to talk. Both are resilient enough to continue with hit and run bombings, kidnappings and assassination attempts.

The conflict changed the complexion of the Colombian establishment. With US backing, it built one of the most formidable militaries in the region, pumping \$86 billion into its security apparatus during 2000-2010, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Neighbouring countries, particularly Venezuela, Cuba and Ecuador, earlier accused of harbouring and even abetting these groups, today collaborate and ensure the guerrillas do not use their territory against Colombia.

Success came at political cost, with allegations of brutality and widespread displacement of innocent civilians. In 2011, the government finally passed a law to oversee rehabilitation and compensation settlement.

Uribe's successor (and former defence minister) Juan Manuel Santos reached out to the FARC through the Cuban establishment. In August 2012, FARC opened talks with representatives of the Colombian government in Havana. Norway and Chile offered assistance, as did Venezuela. Preliminary talks on the agenda and other issues were held in Oslo in October 2012. Substantive discussions resumed in Havana in November 2012 and are ongoing.

There are differences and similarities with the insurgent scenario in India. In Kashmir, beset with religious fundamentalism and separatist demands, as in the northeast, the armed forces have been used extensively, some say indiscriminately. The Indian establishment has nevertheless been seeking political solutions to these and other insurgencies. Naxalite/Maoist violence in 182 of 602 districts in seven Indian States has been confronted by the police forces. In West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, success has come through police action combined with a willingness to negotiate. Rehabilitation and resettlement schemes, such as those in Tripura, have contributed to pacifying some areas of belligerency.

It appears that the Indian scenario is not unduly complicated by links between the narcotics industry and insurgent movements. There is, however, the ever-prevalent danger that insurgencies may collude with, or even spawn, organised crime.

The colossal expenditure incurred by the state, the destruction and waste, not to mention the loss of economic opportunities in the affected regions, call for a comprehensive approach. Colombia has realised this and, short of accepting the FARC demand to declare a ceasefire and overhaul the state's economic model, is discussing fundamental issues such as land reforms, reconciliation and rehabilitation, among other things.

There are lessons we can learn from Colombia's handling of the insurgency. In the first place, political rapprochement and negotiation is indispensable. Secondly, the damage that has already been done to victims of the conflict needs to be attended and assuaged. Rehabilitation of the radicalised elements is essential if the insurgent situation is to be rectified in a conclusive manner.

India has taken steps on all these fronts. Clandestine contacts were initiated with Nagaland's Isaac Swu and T. Muivah in Thailand in the 1990s. The Tripura case cited above is an example of success. We, nevertheless, have a long way to go. The central authorities need to be more involved and engaged, as in the case of Colombia. Insurgent situations go beyond the maintenance of law and order.

Finally, the most important lesson from the Colombian case is the centrality of collaboration with our neighbourhood. The FARC would not be negotiating without the good offices of Cuba and Venezuela, earlier seen as part of the problem.

Quiet and effective diplomacy, most importantly with Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, have helped. Intelligence sharing with Europe, the US, the Gulf region, perhaps some day with Pakistan and China, will also go a long way. Continuing efforts to bring about a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism – whose first draft was presented by India in the UN in

1996 – are crucial to military and political efforts to ensure lasting peace and insulate India from such threats without borders.

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