



Colombian Senate Approves Historic Law on Victim Reparation

Colombia's Senate approved a law on reparations for victims of the country's long-running civil conflict on the May 24, 2011, fulfilling a major campaign promise of President Juan Manuel Santos.

- President Juan Manuel Santos described the Senate's approval of his landmark law as "historic", and congratulated all those who had taken part in the process. The Law on Victims of Violence and Restitution of Land, which must now be passed to the lower chamber for a conciliation of some of its articles that should not affect the main provisions, sets out reparations for victims of the violence caused by Colombia's armed conflicts since 1 January 1985, and provides for restitution of approximately six million hectares of land to peasant farmers forcibly displaced by a range of armed groups since 1991. Santos has set out a goal of returning some two million hectares by the end of his mandate in 2014.
- An estimated three to four million Colombian citizens will be covered in some way by the provisions of the law, although the legislation does not cover the period prior to 1985. The insurgency mounted by the left-wing Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) began in 1964, although the most intense violence suffered by the country came in the 1980s and 1990s as the FARC insurgency was joined by other left-wing rebel groups, right-wing paramilitaries set up in opposition to the FARC, and a range of drug-trafficking and organized-crime networks. Illegal activity by agents of the state will also be covered, and once signed by Santos the law will be in force for 10 years. The law nevertheless excludes activity by so-called "emerging criminal groups" (bacrim) formed by demobilized paramilitaries from the 2003-06 period.

Widespread Support

- Senate president Armando Benedetti, from Santos's Social Party of National Unity (U-Party), described the law as "the greatest ever recognition made by society and the Colombian state to the victims of violence", amid widespread support for the initiative from the country's political establishment. His comments were echoed by Minister of the Interior and Justice Germán Vargas Lleras, of the Radical Change (CR) party, who claimed that it offered "an example to be highlighted globally". No votes were cast against the law in the Senate. Some controversy had existed over the law's recognition of the existence of a state of internal armed conflict within the country, although the insurgents were categorized as terrorist groups in order not to give them the legal status of belligerents.
- With Santos enjoying an almost unassailable ad hoc alliance majority in both chambers of Congress, the law is certain to be passed by the 166-member House of Representatives. The only opposition criticism of the measure came from the small, left-wing Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA), which holds five seats in the lower chamber, and which criticized the 1985 cut-off and the exclusion of bacrim from the law's restorative provisions. On October 27th, 2010 Panama signed a Tax Information Exchange Agreement with the United States, solving one of the final outstanding issues that the Administration had indicated needed to be concluded before it would consider moving the U.S.-Panama TPA.