

### 3. Peace negotiations in America

- Four negotiating processes took place in the Americas (two in Colombia, one in Venezuela and one in Nicaragua), accounting for 8% of the negotiations that took place during 2018.
- Negotiations between the ELN and the Colombian government underwent enormous difficulties and were suspended and restarted at various times during the year, though they were scrapped indefinitely after the inauguration of President Iván Duque.
- The process to implement the peace agreement signed between the government of Colombia and the FARC progressed with various difficulties and was determined by electoral processes in the country.
- The Episcopal Conference's facilitation of talks between the government of Nicaragua and the opposition was unable to solve or deflect the most serious socio-political crisis to grip the country in recent decades.
- Given the impasse in negotiations between the Venezuelan government and the opposition, some European and Latin American countries were willing to form an international contact group to facilitate the dialogue.

This chapter analyses the main peace processes and negotiations in the Americas during 2018, including the general characteristics and trends of the negotiations and the development of each context throughout the year, including references to the gender, peace and security agenda. There is also a map at the beginning of the chapter showing the countries in the Americas that hosted peace negotiations during 2018.

Table 3.1. Summary of peace processes and negotiations in America in 2018

Peace processes and negotiations	Negotiating actors	Third parties
Colombia (FARC)	Government and FARC	Guarantor countries (Cuba, Norway), accompanying countries (Venezuela, Chile), UN
Colombia (ELN)	Government and ELN	Guarantor countries (Ecuador, Brazil, Norway, Cuba, Venezuela and Chile), accompanying countries (Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Netherlands and Italy), Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (UN, Colombian Episcopal Conference, Government, ELN)
Nicaragua	Government, political and social opposition	Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua
Venezuela	Government, opposition (MUD)	Dominican Republic Government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (former president of Spain) and accompanying countries (Chile, Mexico, Paraguay, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Nicaragua and Bolivia)

#### 3.1 Negotiations in 2018: regional trends

The Americas were the scene of four negotiating processes in 2018, one more than in the previous year. Colombia continued to host two peace processes, Venezuela hosted another and negotiations began in Nicaragua as a result of the serious political and human rights crisis that the country suffered during the year. One of the peace processes in Colombia was focused on implementation of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC two years after it was signed, while the other process featured negotiations between Bogotá and the ELN guerrilla group to put an end to the armed conflict. The negotiating processes in Venezuela and Nicaragua were aimed at resolving the political crises facing both countries.

Regarding the **actors** involved, there were notable differences between the negotiations that took place in Colombia and those in Venezuela and Nicaragua. The negotiations in Colombia were led by the government and by the ELN guerrilla group and the former FARC guerrilla organisation, which has transformed into a political party. Furthermore, in Colombia, various civil society actors tried to influence and contribute to the different negotiating processes. The process to implement the agreement with the FARC involved different mechanisms to consult with civil society, such as the High Level Special Body with Ethnic Peoples and the Special Body on Gender. In Nicaragua, the parties participating in the

Map 3.1. Peace negotiations in America 2018



■ Countries with peace processes and negotiations in America in 2018

dialogue were the government and the opposition, which mainly consisted of student representatives and members of the private sector and civil society. Women's organisations also gave their input regarding the dialogue. The participants in the negotiations in Venezuela were the government and the political opposition.

In addition to the negotiating parties themselves, **third parties** were also involved in the different dialogue processes, and in some cases they were local and international stakeholders. In the peace negotiations between the government of Colombia and the ELN, third parties acted as guarantor countries—notably Ecuador (which abandoned the position during the year), Brazil, Norway, Cuba, Venezuela and Chile—and accompanying countries (Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands and Italy). A specific mechanism was set up by the UN, the Episcopal Conference of Colombia and the negotiating parties to verify the ceasefire agreement. The negotiations in Nicaragua were facilitated by the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua and the worsening political crisis in Venezuela had a direct impact on the involvement of external facilitating actors, causing some of them to withdraw. The Vatican, UNASUR and international

***All the negotiating and dialogue processes in the Americas underwent major crises during 2018***

figures like the former leaders of Spain (José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero), Panama (Martín Torrijos) and the Dominican Republic (Leonel Fernández) have facilitated the negotiations in recent years and several countries have accompanied them since late 2017 (Chile, Mexico and Paraguay, chosen by the opposition, and Nicaragua, Bolivia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, selected by the government).

Negotiators in both Venezuela and Nicaragua expressed their distrust of third parties. The Venezuelan opposition was critical of both Zapatero and UNASUR's efforts, while Caracas criticised the performance of the OAS. The Nicaraguan government was mistrustful of the Episcopal Conference and other international players like the OAS and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which did try to influence the political crisis despite their lack of a facilitating role.

Each process focused on specific issues related to its particular aspects, but the parties generally disagreed about the negotiating agendas, causing great tension. In Nicaragua, no agreement was reached between the parties regarding the possible content of the agenda. Added to the violence and repression, this led to a deep crisis in the negotiations. In Venezuela, where dialogue also faced

many difficulties, there was forceful disagreement regarding the elections. Issues related to the political and economic situation in Venezuela were discussed during the Agreement on Democratic Coexistence, as was a possible Truth Commission, an institution that the Nicaraguan opposition had demanded. Elections were part of the discussions and differences between the parties in both Venezuela and Nicaragua. In Venezuela, this involved discussions about timing and electoral guarantees and in Nicaragua early elections were viewed as a possible way out of the crisis. In both cases, the opposition demanded support and observation for the elections. In Colombia, negotiations with the ELN focused on the possible achievement of a new ceasefire and the participation of civil society, one of the central lines of the negotiating process. In the process with the FARC, the content of the agreement made in Havana defined the agenda for implementation.

**All the negotiating and dialogue processes in the Americas underwent major crises during 2018** and their development was quite negative. There were repeated suspensions and attempts by the facilitating actors to revive them failed. Reasons for these crises included the impact of the dynamics of violence experienced in different countries, as well as the enormous distrust between the parties, which determined and corrupted attempts at rapprochement. The process to implement the agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government did make progress, though amidst great difficulties and accusations of non-compliance. The conclusion of the ceasefire agreement and the change of government in Colombia prevented progress in the negotiations with the ELN.

Regarding the **gender, peace and security agenda**, it is important to highlight the active role played by women in some of the processes, especially in Colombia, where in addition to direct participation, gender agendas were defined in the dialogue and implementation processes and there was a specific gender architecture. Women's organisations were central players in promoting implementation of the peace agreement with the FARC and in dialogue with the ELN. In the agreement with the FARC, there was a Special Body on Gender to advise the CSIVI, the commission in charge of monitoring and verifying implementation of the peace agreement. Also notable was the gender work of other bodies in charge of verifying said implementation. Women were part of the negotiating delegations in the talks with the ELN and various initiatives were also promoted to strengthen the gender focus in the negotiating agendas. In Nicaragua, women were key players in the movement opposing the Sandinista government and submitted their demands regarding the National Dialogue, though a negotiating agenda addressing the demands of the women's movement could not be defined.

## 3.2. Case study analysis

### Central America

Nicaragua	
<b>Negotiating actors</b>	Government, political and social opposition
<b>Third parties</b>	Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua
<b>Relevant agreements</b>	--

#### Summary:

In April 2018, as a result of the government's attempt to reform the social security system, a series of protests broke out throughout the country that caused the death or disappearance of hundreds of people and plunged the country into the worst socio-political crisis in recent decades. Faced with domestic and international concern over the protests, a repressive crackdown by the state security forces and clashes between government supporters and opponents, in May the government began a National Dialogue with various opposition groups that was facilitated by the Catholic Church. Due to the lack of progress in the dialogue and the government's growing opposition to mediation by the Episcopal Conference, several international players like the United Nations and the Central American Integration System said they were willing to facilitate it, while others, such as the OAS and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, exerted pressure on the government to end the crisis and the many human rights violations it was committing.

Faced with the most serious political and social crisis in Nicaragua in recent decades, which broke out in mid-April and caused the death of hundreds of people throughout the year, **the government and several opposition groups agreed to establish a National Dialogue mediated by the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua (CEN), though no significant agreements had been reached between the parties by the end of the year.** Indeed, a few days after the start of the protests against the attempt by Daniel Ortega's government to reform the social security system, which led to the death of between 25 and 60 people, according to sources, the Catholic Church, through the CEN, offered to facilitate talks between the government and student representatives, as well as members of the private sector and civil society. The National Dialogue began in Managua on 16 May and a reduction in violence was initially agreed. However, the dialogue was suspended a few days later due to a lack of agreement about the design of the substantive agenda of the negotiations, for which the CEN proposed forming a mixed commission of six people (three from each side) to channel the topics on which the talks should pivot. However, amidst rising violence from the police and armed groups sympathetic to the government at the end of May, the CEN announced that it was withdrawing from the National Dialogue and condemned the violence employed by the ruling party. Nevertheless, the CEN resumed facilitating the dialogue in mid-June, but it collapsed again a few days later after the opposition accused the government of breaking its promise to

invite representatives of the EU, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate the dozens of deaths that occurred since the protests began in mid-April.

Tension between the government and the Catholic Church started to increase markedly in July, and in fact the sessions of the National Dialogue did not resume for the rest of the year. Though there had already been many reports of harassment of the clergy by pro-government supporters throughout 2018, **one of the main reasons for the CEN's withdrawal from the National Dialogue was the attack on a church in the town of Diriamba in early July by dozens of government supporters in which several members of the clergy were assaulted**, including two with significant roles mediating between the parties: Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes and Monsignor Silvio Báez. A few days after the attack, which was condemned by much of the international community, Daniel Ortega accused the Catholic Church of being part of a coup plot, referring in particular to statements made by the CEN suggesting that Ortega move the presidential election scheduled for 2021 to March 2019 and pledge not to stand for re-election for a fourth term. Faced with this impasse, the United Nations offered its support to complement the good offices carried out by the CEN and the government's main representative in the National Dialogue, Foreign Minister Denis Moncada, met with UN Secretary-General António Guterres. In late July, Daniel Ortega was willing to resume negotiations with UN mediation and the participation of the Church, but in the end there were no more meetings between the parties or sessions of the National Dialogue.

Given this situation, the OAS created the Working Group on Nicaragua, made up of 12 countries (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, USA, Guyana, Mexico, Panama and Peru), but the Nicaraguan government described it as interference and refused to cooperate with it or receive any visit from it in the months that followed. Ortega's government even called for OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro to resign on the grounds that the organisation was meddling in Nicaragua's internal affairs. The Working Group issued periodic reports on the situation in Nicaragua and asked Managua to readmit the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to the country, and specifically to cooperate with two of its main instruments: the Special Follow-up Mechanism for Nicaragua and the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts. In early September, the main opposition platform (Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy) called for the National Dialogue to resume. This was seconded by the Catholic Church, but Ortega said that the conditions to resume the National Dialogue were not being met and instead suggested talks at the community level.

***Faced with the most serious political and social crisis in Nicaragua in recent decades, the government and several opposition groups established a National Dialogue, mediated by the Episcopal Conference***

Faced with these obstacles to a negotiated solution to the crisis, in September the US government raised the conflict in Nicaragua for discussion in the UN Security Council, the Central American Integration System (SICA) announced that it was working for negotiations to resume and the EU announced that it would halt all cooperation with the national police. Later, in October, MERCOSUR also addressed the issue, calling for the release of hundreds of prisoners, and the OAS suggested that its Permanent Council could use the Inter-American Democratic Charter to restore democracy in Nicaragua.

## South America

Colombia (FARC)	
<b>Negotiating actors</b>	Government, FARC
<b>Third parties</b>	Guarantor countries (Cuba, Norway), accompanying countries (Venezuela, Chile), UN
<b>Relevant agreements</b>	The Havana peace agreement (2016)
<b>Summary:</b>	
Since the founding of the first guerrilla groups in 1964 there have been several negotiation attempts. In the early 1990s several small groups were demobilized, but not the FARC and the ELN, which are the two most important. In 1998, President Pastrana authorized the demilitarization of a large region of Colombia, around the area of San Vicente del Caguán, in order to conduct negotiations with the FARC, which lasted until 2002 and were unsuccessful. In 2012, and after several months of secret negotiations in Cuba, new talks began with the FARC in Cuba based on a specific agenda and including citizen participation mechanisms. After four years of negotiations, a historic peace agreement for the Colombian people was signed in late 2016.	

**The process to implement the peace agreement between the government of Colombia and the former guerrilla movement FARC, which has since transformed into a party, moved ahead bumpily in a year marked by several**

**elections and the formation of a new government that was highly critical of the agreement achieved in Havana in 2016.**

In the second year of implementation of the agreement, **some important progress was made, but the agencies in charge of verifying it warned of many obstacles in its path.** In its follow-up report on the fulfilment of the peace agreement, the Kroc Institute indicated that from the beginning of the implementation process until 31 May 2018, only 21% of the provisions of the agreement had been fully implemented, 9% had achieved an intermediate level

of implementation, 31% had only reached a minimum level and 39% had not even started. The Kroc Institute's report noted that significant progress had been made in measures related to the termination of the conflict and the creation of verification mechanisms, but that



very important challenges remained in connection with security and protection guarantees, as the murders of human rights activists and former FARC members continued. It also described the process to reintegrate former combatants as being slow and fraught with problems and stated that important normative and institutional challenges persist, especially with regard to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), or the Special Transitional Districts of Peace, and other aspects.

Some of the most significant events of the peace process during the year were the various elections that took place in the country, leaving a political scene of players opposed to the peace agreement. In March, legislative elections were held in which the FARC party won no parliamentary representation beyond what was guaranteed by the peace agreement (five representatives in the Senate and five in the House). Right-wing parties won the legislative majority, raising great questions about the future of the peace process. In the presidential election, the right revalidated its result with the victory of Iván Duque, from the Democratic Centre Party, who took office in August with a speech saying that the peace agreement was being upheld, but that changes would be made in areas such as transitional justice and political participation. One of the important achievements was the start of the three-year mandate of the Truth Commission, chaired by Francisco De Roux, which must investigate serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law; the collective responsibility of the state, the FARC-EP and paramilitary groups; the human and social impact of the conflict on society; and its impact on the exercise of politics and other aspects.

There were serious obstacles in the process to reintegrate former FARC combatants and in the FARC party's political participation. In April, the former commander Jesús Santrich was arrested on charges of drug trafficking, although the FARC alleged that it was a set-up. His arrest prevented his inauguration in Congress. As a result, FARC senior official and Senator-elect Iván Márquez was not sworn into office either, in protest against Santrich's arrest and the distortion of the peace process. Iván Márquez and five other former FARC commanders later went missing, leading to speculation that they may have joined the FARC's dissidents, since they had to appear before the JEP. In the end, Márquez did deliver the required information to the JEP, though he did not appear again in public.

## Gender, peace and security

Women's organisations continued their activity in support of implementation of the gender approach, as did international and national institutions with a mandate in this area. The Special Body on Gender of the Commission for Monitoring, Promoting and Verifying Implementation of the Final Peace Agreement (CSIVI) issued its first report, which highlighted

its contributions to including a gender approach in the Implementation Framework Plan, territorial development plans and other areas of implementation and constant dialogue with several parties involved in the peace process. Alongside the body's work, the verification mechanisms of the agreement also submitted their evaluations of implementation of the gender approach. The Kroc Institute, UN Women, the Swedish Embassy in Colombia and the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) stated that only 4% of the agreement's 130 provisions identified as having a gender focus had been fully implemented and the implementation of 51% had not begun. Furthermore, 38% had only reached minimal levels of implementation and 7% had achieved an intermediate level. These figures clash with the overall levels of application of the agreement, since 22% of the provisions of the agreement have been fully implemented, compared to only 4% of the gender provisions. These institutions indicated that the points with a lower level of implementation are related to comprehensive rural reform, political participation and solving the problem of illicit drugs. Civil society also evaluated progress in implementation in different reports, such as those issued by the National Summit of Women and Peace and by the GPAZ Platform. These reports also described the obstacles and difficulties of including a gender approach in the implementation process.

Colombia (ELN)	
<b>Negotiating actors</b>	Government, ELN
<b>Third parties</b>	Guarantor countries (Ecuador, Brazil, Norway, Cuba, Venezuela and Chile), accompanying countries (Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Netherlands and Italy), Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (UN, Colombian Episcopal Conference, Government, ELN)
<b>Relevant agreements</b>	"Heaven's Door" Agreement (1988)
<b>Summary:</b>	Since the ELN emerged in 1964, various negotiating processes have tried to bring peace to the country. The first negotiations between the Colombian government and the ELN date from 1991 (Caracas and Tlaxcala). In 1998, both parties signed a peace agreement in Madrid that envisaged holding a national convention. That same year, the "Puerta del Cielo" agreement between the ELN and civil society activists was signed in Mainz, Germany, focused on humanitarian aspects. In 1999, the Colombian government and the ELN resumed meetings in Cuba, which ended in June 2000. The government of Álvaro Uribe resumed peace negotiations with the ELN in Cuba between 2005 and 2007, though no results were achieved. At the end of 2012, the ELN showed its willingness to open new negotiations with President Juan Manuel Santos, appointing a negotiating commission, and exploratory meetings were held. Formal peace negotiations began in 2017.

**The peace process between the Colombian government and the ELN guerrilla group faced enormous difficulties throughout the year, interspersing periods of deadlock with phases of active negotiations**

**between both parties. The year 2018 began with the suspension of negotiations on 29 January prompted by the rise in violence after the agreed ceasefire ended on 9 January and was not renewed with a fresh agreement.** Despite the government's statements that it would extend the ceasefire, the ELN said it preferred to negotiate a new agreement. The failure of these negotiations resulted in an uptick in violence and the aforementioned suspension. The ceasefire agreement was not renewed throughout the year, though there were cessations of hostilities during the various elections that took place. Prior to the suspension of the negotiations in January, the Colombian president at that time, Juan Manuel Santos, had ordered the return to Bogotá of the negotiators with the ELN who were in Quito to evaluate how the process was going. In February, the ELN announced a unilateral truce between 9 and 13 March for the legislative elections and called for the negotiations to resume. The government considered the truce a positive gesture, which led to **both parties announcing the resumption of negotiations just after the elections, following a two-month suspension.**

This announcement was welcomed by the guarantor countries supporting the negotiating process (Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Norway and Venezuela). After the announcement that the negotiations would resume, the parties agreed on a new timetable, setting 18 May as the deadline for the fifth round, nine days before the presidential election. The central themes agreed for this new round were a new ceasefire and the participation of Colombian society in the process. However, the negotiations hit a new stumbling block in April after Ecuador announced that it was going to stop being a guarantor and therefore would no longer host the negotiations. Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno's announcement came amidst a serious border crisis between both countries as a result of several kidnappings carried out by a FARC guerrilla dissident group. Ecuador's withdrawal did not cause a breakdown in the negotiations, as the Colombian government and the ELN agreed to transfer them to Havana as the new venue for the process.

In this new location, the process was resumed in May to start the fifth round of negotiations for the initial purpose of achieving a new ceasefire before the presidential election on 27 May. Although this objective was not met, a temporary suspension of the talks was agreed when the election was held. The central issues that the negotiating delegations addressed during the fifth round, which took place between 30 May and 12 June, were the bilateral ceasefire, for which a technical committee was created, with members of the police participating, and the design of a participatory process for civil society. The sixth round of negotiations began in July, the last under the presidency of Juan Manuel

***The negotiations between the government of Colombia and the ELN faced many difficulties throughout the year and were suspended after the inauguration of new President Iván Duque***

Santos, after Democratic Centre Party candidate Iván Duque won the presidential election with a campaign focused on his opposition to the peace agreement with the FARC. Duque's victory led the ELN and the outgoing government to seek common ground, but this did not result in a ceasefire agreement. **In August, Duque's new government announced that it would withdraw from the negotiations, pending a final decision on whether or not to continue with the process.** Later, in an attempt at rapprochement with the government, the ELN freed six people that it had kidnapped, two of them civilians. Meanwhile,

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez offered to host the negotiations in the future. In September, the government took another step in blocking the process, discharging all members of its negotiating delegation and the technical ceasefire table from their duties and refusing to recognise Venezuela as a guarantor country. In response, the ELN said that it did not accept the conditions laid down by Duque's government to continue the talks, including an end to the kidnappings, to the attacks against the population and to the hostilities. The

ELN said it would honour the commitments made with the previous government and urged a bilateral ceasefire to de-escalate the conflict. Bogotá held to its demands and questioned the armed group's desire to reach a peace agreement. However, in December the ELN announced a 12-day Christmas truce (between 23 December and 3 January) and called for the peace negotiations to continue. President Duque responded to the ELN's statement by saying that the only way to build trust was to release the hostages and end criminal activity. Thus, the year ended with serious disagreement between the parties and the peace process in a situation of maximum fragility due to the growing distance between the government and the ELN.

## **Gender, peace and security**

The women's movement for peace in Colombia made several calls for the parties not to abandon the negotiating process and to maintain the ceasefire agreement without a time limit. The National Summit of Women and Peace argued publicly in this regard. Women's organisations also participated in several initiatives linked to the negotiations. In February, representatives of 36 civil society organisations, including women's organisations, met with both President Santos and Pablo Beltrán, the head of the ELN delegation, with proposals to de-escalate the conflict and reach a bilateral ceasefire. A workshop on the gender perspective was held with the negotiating delegations in May, facilitated by the National Summit of Women and Peace and the Women's Gathering for Peace (Juntanza de Mujeres por la Paz).

Venezuela	
<b>Negotiating actors</b>	Government, political and social opposition
<b>Third parties</b>	Government of the Dominican Republic, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (former president of Spain) and accompanying countries (Chile, Mexico, Paraguay, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Nicaragua and Bolivia)
<b>Relevant agreements</b>	--

#### Summary:

Faced with the worsening political and social crisis that Venezuela experienced after the death in 2013 of President Hugo Chávez, the leader of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution, his successor Nicolás Maduro's narrow victory in the presidential election of April 2013 and the protests staged in the early months of 2014, which caused the death of around 40 people, in March 2014 the government said it was willing to accept talks with the opposition facilitated by UNASUR or the Vatican, but categorically rejected any mediation by the OAS. Shortly after Pope Francis called for dialogue and a group of UNASUR foreign ministers visited Venezuela and held many meetings, preliminary talks began between Caracas and the opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) in April 2014, to which the Secretary of State of the Vatican, the former Apostolic Nuncio to Venezuela, as well as the foreign ministers of Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, were invited as witnesses in good faith. Although the talks were interrupted in May 2014 due to developments in the political situation, both UNASUR and the Vatican continued to facilitate through Apostolic Nuncio Aldo Giordano. In May 2016, shortly after a visit to Venezuela by the former leaders of Spain (Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero), Panama (Martín Torrijos) and the Dominican Republic (Leonel Fernández) at the request of UNASUR, the Venezuelan government and opposition met in the Dominican Republic with the three aforementioned ex-leaders and UNASUR representatives. After a meeting between Maduro and Pope Francis in October, both parties met again in Venezuela under the auspices of the Pope's new special envoy, Emil Paul Tscherrig. In late 2017, both sides decided to resume the talks in the Dominican Republic starting in December, accompanied by several countries chosen by both parties (Chile, Mexico and Paraguay by the opposition and Nicaragua, Bolivia and San Vicente and the Grenadines by the government). Although some agreements were reached during the several rounds of negotiations that took place between December 2017 and February 2018, Maduro's unilateral call for a presidential election for 2018 brought them to a standstill and caused the withdrawal of several of the accompanying countries designated by the opposition to facilitate them.

**There was no progress or even talks between the government and the opposition in 2018 following the suspension early in the year of the negotiations that both sides had started in the final quarter of 2017 in the Dominican Republic. By the end of 2018, however, new options for resuming the talks seemed to be emerging due to the willingness of several European and Latin American countries to form a new international contact group to facilitate them. At the end of January, the Constituent Assembly, controlled almost exclusively by the ruling party and not recognised by the opposition and much of the international community, voted in favour of holding the presidential election**

before 30 April, against the opposition's wishes. Following Caracas' announcement of this decision, the governments of Mexico and Chile indefinitely terminated their participation in the negotiations in support of the dialogue, believing that the presidential election would not be able to meet international democratic standards. Also in late January, the Supreme Court ordered the National Electoral Council to block the registration of the opposition alliance Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), and consequently its participation in the election, as well as to require other large opposition parties to provide a certain number of signatures in order to register. Despite these decisions by the Constituent Assembly and the Supreme Court, in the days that followed both parties met bilaterally with former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who has been facilitating dialogue in recent years, and gathered in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) to carry out the sixth round of negotiations and, eventually, to sign the Agreement of Democratic Coexistence. However, the negotiations were scrapped in early February after the Electoral Council announced that the aforementioned election would take place on 22 April (it normally takes place in December). After the opposition refused to sign the agreement and a request was made to extend the round of negotiations in order to come up with a counter-offer, the government delegation withdrew from the negotiations, accusing the opposition of not complying with what had previously been agreed in the exploratory meetings in Venezuela. The opposition accused the government of holding the election unilaterally and without addressing any of its demands, such as delaying it beyond April, securing international election observers led by the United Nations, allowing the participation of political organisations like the MUD, Voluntad Popular and Primero Justicia and changing the composition of the National Electoral Council, which it views as biased.

A few days after the formal negotiations were suspended, described as an "indefinite recess" by the president of the Dominican Republic, Danilo Medina, the Lima Group voiced its firm opposition to the government's announcement of the presidential election and called for the restoration of democracy in Venezuela. The US government proposed an oil embargo against Venezuela, while the government of Peru even withdrew its invitation to Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to attend the Summit of the Americas in Lima in mid-April. Nevertheless, in late February several meetings were still held between the government and several minor parties that had shown their willingness to participate in the presidential election in April, which led Caracas to postpone the election until 20 May and to authorise international observers. Notably, the candidate of one of the main MUD parties, Avanzada Progresista, broke with the MUD's unity of action by deciding to run in the presidential election.

**After the abrupt breakdown in the negotiations in early February, both sides failed to resume formal negotiations for the rest of the year. Contributing factors included**

the growing polarisation caused by the holding of the aforementioned presidential elections, which Nicolás Maduro won handily, most of the opposition boycotted and the international community condemned almost unanimously for its lack of democratic guarantees; the growing political, economic and humanitarian crisis; the attempted assassination of Maduro in August; the institutional clash between the opposition-controlled National Assembly and the Constituent National Assembly, which was created unilaterally by the ruling party; the call made by several countries, supported by the opposition, for the International Criminal Court to investigate Nicolás Maduro for crimes against humanity; and the Venezuelan government's increasing isolation. However, in the last quarter of the year, new possibilities for resuming dialogue seemed to open up after the EU said it was willing to create and lead an international contact group to facilitate meetings between the parties. The EU proposal, which emerged at the initiative of Spain, Portugal and Italy and was still being discussed at the end of the year, envisaged including Latin American countries in the contact group and was compatible with upholding EU sanctions on certain Venezuelan government officials. This new initiative could be a response in part to several opposition leaders' calls in the second half of the year for a negotiated political solution to the conflict with fresh international support, or to signs of the parties' fatigue or distrust of the international actors who had facilitated the dialogue thus far. Also notable is the institutional crisis suffered by UNASUR during the year, as half of its members cancelled their membership in the organisation due to disagreements over its operations. Furthermore,

Zapatero's efforts at facilitation were rejected by most of members of the opposition-majority National Assembly, which considered it biased towards the government.

## **Gender, peace and security**

There is no public record that the negotiations between the government and the opposition addressed issues related to the women, peace and security agenda or that there was a significant presence of women in the delegations of both parties or in the structures and mechanisms to facilitate the dialogue in 2018. However, it is important to highlight the important role that the president of the Constituent National Assembly, Delcy Rodríguez, is playing in the dialogue process. Among other tasks, she attended the negotiations that took place at the beginning of the year in the Dominican Republic. Outside the strictly formal and institutional scope of the negotiations, the "Las Mujeres Proponen" ("Women Propose") National Convention was held in Caracas in March, an event organised by 165 women's organisations (including Aliadas en Cadena, the Venezuelan Observatory of Human Rights for Women and Voces Vitales Venezuela), in which more than 500 women met in the US Embassy to create an agenda of proposals to influence public policy and to address the challenges and difficulties faced by women and girls in matters such as political participation, education and health. This convention was preceded by five previous meetings in several Venezuelan cities that addressed the role of women's organisations and civil society in gender equality and equity policies, in addition to other issues.