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Embassy of Colombia in the United States



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"The Promises of Peace in Colombia"

Op-ed by Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos

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At the start of each school year, Colombian schoolchildren are still given specially prepared instruction manuals in the form of comic books to teach them how to avoid stepping on land mines. Despite these efforts, during 52 years of war, more than 1,000 Colombian children, usually from the poorest of our farming families working their fields, were killed or maimed by land mines.

I ran for president of Colombia to lead a nation where the books we give Colombia's schoolchildren teach reading, science, math and poetry, not warnings against stepping on explosives. Today – having signed a historic peace agreement between my government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, on Nov. 24 – we are building a peaceful Colombia.

In more than 203 Colombian municipalities, the dangerous work of locating, disabling and removing Colombia's land mines is being carried out by NGOs, specially trained units of the Colombian armed forces and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. Our goal is to make Colombia land-mine free by 2021.

Last year, we saw the lowest level of violence in our country in more than 40 years. FARC guerillas are turning their arms over to United Nations supervisors. But the agreement does more than silence weapons; it delivers a welcome end to conflict for Colombians, a majority of whom have never lived in a country at peace.

The agreement sets out to bridge the historic divide between the Colombia of developed urban centers and that of the vast, impoverished interior, where historically there has

been little or no government presence and, as a result, limited security, weak rule of law and deficient health care and education.

To close this gap, my government has committed itself to a far-reaching program of rural development for the largely low-income population, including land, titles, credit, roads and crop substitution programs.

The transition to peace demands a great amount of time, resources and leadership in Colombia — as well as the continued assistance of the United States and the international community. United States support through Peace Colombia — a new initiative that will deepen our partnership and reinforce security gains we have achieved together — is more important now than ever. I had the opportunity to meet with President Trump at the White House on Thursday, and we had a productive conversation about working together to strengthen our strategic alliance in ways that benefit Americans and Colombians.

Colombia is a vibrant democracy, and the terms of the peace touched off a spirited debate within my country, which continues to this day. That is why, when the first draft of the agreement did not secure majority support in last October's referendum, I convened a national dialogue, made substantive changes on nearly 60 topics proposed by critics and submitted the revised accord to Colombia's Congress, where it was approved by 3 to 1.

One of the most challenging aspects of the long negotiations was to balance the demands of justice with the demands of peace. Until the agreement, peace settlements in Latin America routinely included blanket amnesty for both guerillas and state actors.

The Colombian agreement ends that impunity. Those who fail to confess to war crimes, atrocities or other serious violations of humanitarian law, such as kidnapping, face up to 20 years in prison. Those who confess their crimes and sever themselves from all criminal activities face sentences of up to eight years of "effective restrictions on liberty" and reparations, such as removing land mines, that are deemed acceptable by their victims.

The war cost 225,000 Colombian lives and drove eight million Colombians from their homes. Translated into United States population terms, that would be 1.5 million American lives lost and 30 million citizens driven from their homes. American assistance, training and hardware under Plan Colombia, the military and diplomatic initiative to combat drug cartels and left-wing insurgency and stabilize the country, which began in 2000, helped our nation successfully defend our democracy. Plan Colombia was sustained through multiple administrations and Congresses with enduring bipartisan support. Our victory is a United States foreign policy victory as well.

Today, Colombia and the United States, are focused on consolidating the gains and promises of the peace. One of our most important commitments to the United States is to counter narcotics. Some farmers who anticipated significant resources under the

peace agreement significantly ramped up production of coca leaf in recent years. Although seizures of illicit drugs have been at record highs these past several years, we are committed to working with the Trump administration to stop and reverse this increase in production.

Colombia and the United States are also working together to help Mexico and the "northern triangle" of Central America — Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador — combat the drug cartel violence that is fueling refugee flows. And we are joined with the United States and other democratic nations to defend democratic values in our hemisphere.

My country is far better off today than it was seven years ago. As we strived for peace, we strengthened our economy. We dramatically reduced poverty. Peace in Colombia will only further those gains and will usher in a new era of cooperation with the United States. Colombia is now better prepared to confront the challenges of the future and benefit from its opportunities, and to be an even stronger ally and partner to the United States.

See the op-ed online [here](#).

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