



Peacemaker wins award

Colombia's President shows the world that even complex wars can be stopped. NG YI-SHENG reports.



President Santos arriving at the signing ceremony of the peace agreement with FARC last September.

[Photo: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas]

For over fifty years, the nation of Colombia has been trapped in a deadly civil war. So far, over 220 million people have been killed. Most of them were not soldiers, but ordinary civilians.

Now, there is a very good chance that the country will finally have peace. This is thanks to the work of President Juan (say “hwan”) Manuel Santos. Last year, on 23 June, he signed a deal with the leaders of FARC, the revolutionary army that was trying to overthrow the government. It was approved by his parliament on 30 November.

Because of these efforts, Mr Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech, he explained how difficult it had been to create the agreement.

“To the great majority of us, peace seemed an impossible dream – and for good reason,” he said. “Very few of us – hardly anybody – could recall a memory of a country at peace.”

“Today, after six years of serious and often intense, difficult negotiations, I stand before you and the world and announce with deep humility and gratitude that the Colombian people, with assistance from our friends around the world, are turning the impossible into the possible.”



Juan Manuel Santos.

[Photo: UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré]

Long history of fighting

The roots of the Colombian civil war go back almost a century, to the 1920s. Back then, peasants were fighting over land where they could grow coffee. The two main political parties supported different sides of this conflict. This caused a deadly war called “La Violencia”, which is Spanish for “The Violence”. It lasted from 1948 to 1958 and killed at least 200,000 people.

At last, the two parties made peace. The new government decided to develop the country by creating large, modern farms. But, to do this, they stole the land of thousands of **peasants**. When the peasants tried to resist, the government sent army troops to attack them.

The current civil war began in 1964, when the peasants started organising armies of their own. The biggest army was FARC, which stands for “Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia”. This is Spanish for “the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia”. At first, it consisted of just 48 men, but it grew to include thousands of soldiers, both male and female.

The people in these armies believed they were fighting for justice. But, they caused terrible chaos. Their acts included murders and kidnappings of civilians. One group even stormed the Supreme Court and held the judges hostage. Furthermore, they supported themselves by selling cocaine, a dangerous drug made from native coca plants.

The government also did cruel things. They funded military groups to fight FARC, but these groups ended up slaughtering civilians and politicians who sympathised with the rebels. Sometimes, the army even executed civilians and claimed they were FARC members, so people would think they were doing a good job.

Planes were used to spray poison on FARC's coca farms. The result was that ordinary people's farms were destroyed, too. Ultimately, over 5 million people had to flee their lands because of the war.

Secret peace talks

Mr Santos originally dealt with FARC quite violently. In 2008, when he was the Minister of Defence, he led a bombing raid on one of their camps, killing their leader. This was controversial because the camp was not in Colombia – it was in another country, Ecuador. He had no legal right to attack them on another country's soil.

Nevertheless, he remained popular with citizens. In 2010, he was elected as President. Two years later, he surprised everyone by announcing that he had been meeting secretly with FARC to discuss how to end the war.

According to the new peace agreement, both FARC and the government will stop fighting immediately. FARC will become a political party that can participate peacefully in elections, and its soldiers can return to society without fears of being arrested. An independent court will investigate war crimes committed by both sides of the conflict. The government will also work to help the poor by making it easier for them to rent and own land.

People across the world have praised Mr Santos for the peace deal. But, many Colombians think he is being too soft on the rebels. A recent vote showed that 50.2% of citizens were against the deal, while 49.8% supported it. The former President even accused him of trying to have "peace at any cost". With so much opposition, it may be very difficult for the rebels to become part of society.

Colombia faces many other challenges right now. The war caused high levels of poverty and homelessness. These problems have worsened other issues, like unemployment, disease and drug addiction. There are also other, much smaller, rebel armies still hiding in the jungles. With so much instability, there is a possibility that the war could start all over again.

Nevertheless, the country can now hope for a better, more peaceful future. Mr Santos feels that this accomplishment should inspire people everywhere. "Perhaps more than ever before, we can now dare to imagine a world without war," he said. "The impossible is becoming possible."

VOCAB BUILDER

peasants (say "pez-unts" ; noun) = small farmers and ordinary workers in rural places.

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