

Colombia's unfinished symphony: Composing peace in a land of conflict

Journey into the heart of Colombia's post-conflict era, where the voices of survivors, rebels-turned-politicians, and peace architects intertwine to reveal a multifaceted quest for lasting peace. Probing the depths of reconciliation and the enduring question: Is peace in Colombia a new dawn or a lingering mirage?

By Domenic Demasi

In the heart of Medellín, the city's fervent pulse beats in harmony with the everyday, an echo of resilience amidst a history of violence¹. Pergamino cafe² stands as an oasis of calm, where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingles with the subtle scent of arepas, hinting at comfort and tradition. As I take a seat, I'm not alone with just my thoughts; instead, I'm here to meet Jineth Bedoya Lima³, a journalist whose life was irrevocably altered by the conflict that has long plagued Colombia. Her story is a testament to the enduring quest for truth and the elusive nature of peace in the wake of the 2016 Peace Accord⁴.

The cafe around us is a microcosm of Colombia's vibrancy⁵, alive with the chatter of patrons, yet in our corner, there's a hushed reverence for the story that's about to unfold. Bedoya Lima's presence is understated yet commanding, her resolve etched into the very lines of her face—a map of the trials she has endured.

Outside, the city is bathed in a perfect 27-degree⁶ warmth, a stark contrast to the chill that descends as Bedoya Lima recounts her ordeal. The paramilitaries, the abduction, the unspeakable acts she suffered at their hands—each word she speaks lays bare the cruel paradox of a nation seeking peace while its daughters and sons bear the scars of war.

The walls of the cafe seem to listen and absorb her courage and her pain. She speaks not just for herself but for all those silenced by fear and violence. "I was taken because I dared to tell the truth," she says, her voice steady, "They wanted to silence me, but here I am, still fighting for justice, for recognition."⁷

¹ Narco-Wars: Paramilitarios (FARC, ELN), the Government, Cartels (from 1980s to 2000s).

² Visited October 10, 2023. Located in the heart of Medellín. Quinte café, busy with tourists.

³ Interview, October 10, 2023 9:30 am (local).

⁴ Following a referendum in early 2016, it was defeated and then subsequently approved by October 2016.

⁵ Colombia is the second most biodiverse country in the world.

⁶ 26-27 degrees on the morning of the 10th of October.

⁷ Bedoya-Lima was kidnapped and tortured by the ACCU, and leader Carlos Castaneda on May 25, 2000.

Her story is more than a personal narrative; it's a window into the struggle of a country grappling with its fractured identity, where peace is promised yet often undercut by the lingering shadows of conflict.

As Bedoya Lima shares her journey—from the depths of her darkest moments to her rise as a beacon of hope and defiance—the tapestry of Medellín and its people takes on new hues, painted with the strokes of her resilience.

Paradox of peace in Colombia

We embark on a journey through Colombia's verdant mountains and vibrant cities, through the silence of graveyards where the missing whisper names, and into the cacophony of political debates where the future of peace is contested. It's a journey to understand the meaning of "peace" to the Colombian people and to scrutinize if what was hailed as a herald of harmony was, in fact, a façade or a foundation for a new Colombia.

In the narrative that unfolds, we will explore the dimensions of human rights, the responsibilities of journalists as the sentinels of truth, and the potency of reconciliation in a society yearning to heal. This is the story of Colombia's peace—a narrative stitched with threads of tenacity and the enduring question: What does peace truly mean?

The personal cost of conflict

With each sip of my coffee, I find myself both a confidant and a witness to the power of human spirit. In Bedoya Lima's tale, the personal and political are intertwined, a single thread in the broader narrative of Colombia's search for a peace that is genuine, inclusive, and just.

Bedoya Lima's story is not told in a vacuum; it resonates through the bustling streets of Medellín and echoes in the halls of power where decisions about war and peace are made. As the soft light of the café illuminates her face, each line seems to chronicle Colombia's turbulent journey—a country at the precipice of change, still haunted by the spectres of its violent past.

She leans forward, her voice a whisper over the clatter of the café, "The peace accord was a beacon of hope for many, but for others, it was a mirage that disappeared as they drew closer." Her insight cuts through the political rhetoric to expose the raw heart of the nation's struggle. The Peace Accord of 2016, a document meant to end decades of bloodshed, now faces the scrutiny of those it was meant to protect.

As a journalist, Bedoya Lima has been more than a mere observer; she has lived the story she reports. Her abduction and torture at the hands of paramilitaries underscore a harrowing truth: the path to peace is fraught with the personal suffering of countless individuals. "To speak of peace, we must first acknowledge the pain," she asserts, "and ensure that those responsible are held to account."

Her determination is palpable, a force that has propelled her advocacy for victims' rights and the campaign "No Es Hora De Callar" (It's Not Time to Be Silent), demanding justice for the countless women who have suffered sexual violence in the conflict. "This is not just about my story. It's about all the stories untold, the voices that have been stifled by fear and oppression," she emphasizes, her gaze unflinching.

The conversation turns to the role of journalists as the fourth estate, the bearers of truth in a society where truth can be as elusive as peace itself. "We, as journalists, have the duty to unearth the stories buried beneath the official narratives," Bedoya Lima reflects. "In doing so, we face threats, but silence is a greater threat to our nation's soul."

Through Bedoya Lima's eyes, readers will experience the dichotomy of Colombia's landscape—its breathtaking beauty and its scars of conflict. They will hear the stories of former FARC combatants grappling with their new roles in society, and of politicians who debate the terms of peace in air-conditioned chambers, far removed from the jungles where the war was waged.

As the feature unfolds, it will challenge readers to consider the true meaning of peace. Is it the cessation of violence, or is it something deeper—a reconciliation that heals, a justice that restores? Is the peace accord a solid foundation for a new Colombia, or is it, as some fear, a façade masking unresolved tensions and unhealed wounds?

In the end, Lima's narrative is a beacon, guiding the feature through the labyrinth of Colombia's peace process. Her story, interlaced with many others, forms a mosaic that is as complex as it is compelling—a narrative that honours the resilience of the human spirit and the unending search for a peace that lasts.

The role of journalism in the fabric of peace

The thread of Jineth Bedoya Lima's narrative weaves through the role of journalists⁸ in Colombia's societal tapestry, a role that is both protector of democracy and harbinger of truth. As the dusk turns to night, the streets of Medellín light up, reflecting the never-ending cycle of day-to-night, war-to-peace, silence-to-storytelling.

Journalists in Colombia have historically walked a precarious line, serving as the 'fourth estate'—a term that bespeaks their essential role in maintaining the checks and balances of power. In the context of the Colombian conflict, this role is amplified, transformed into an act of valor, as they become the voice for those who have been silenced by violence, intimidation, or the grave.

Bedoya Lima's career is marked by a dedication to uncovering the truth in a world that often prefers shadows to sunlight. Her investigations into paramilitary groups and their ties to political power placed her in the crosshairs, yet her commitment to the story never wavered. "The duty to inform is our shield and our burden," she reflects. "It is what drives us towards the danger, not away from it."

The narrative then shifts to the newsrooms where the peace accord was dissected, debated, and discussed. Journalists like Bedoya Lima pored over the pages of the agreement, questioning its provisions, seeking clarity on its promises, and holding those in power accountable for its shortcomings. They asked the hard questions: What does justice look like for the victims? How will reintegration truly function? Is this peace sustainable?

The feature takes us into the field, where journalists meet with former FARC members⁹ now navigating civilian life, their stories a potent mix of regret and hope. They speak of the jungle's claustrophobic embrace, the camaraderie of combat, and the surreal experience of now sitting across from those they once fought.

These stories are gathered and shared by the likes of Bedoya Lima, who understands that the narrative of peace is not written solely by those at the negotiating table. It is also penned in the everyday lives of former combatants, in the markets where they now sell goods instead of bullets, in the classrooms where they learn trades that do not involve warfare.

⁸ Jineth Bedoya Lima, Hollman Morris (to be interviewed), and Claudia Julieta Duque, namely for this research.

⁹ Julian Gallo Cubillos (aka Calos Antonio Lozada): former FARC subcommander (ammunitions) turned Senator.

Yet, the pursuit of these stories is fraught with risk. Colombia remains one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, where the pursuit of truth can lead to threats, kidnappings, or worse. The feature pauses to honor those who have paid the ultimate price, whose bylines have ended, but whose stories continue to inspire and compel their colleagues to press forward.

Bedoya Lima's voice is just one in a chorus of journalistic tenacity that sings across Colombia. It is a chorus that resonates with the power of stories that refuse to be untold—a power that not only informs but also shapes the very essence of a nation's understanding of itself and its peace.

As the feature closes this section, it holds space for reflection on the importance of a free press in the peacebuilding process. It is a tribute to the journalists who serve as the chroniclers of Colombia's history, the architects of its memory, and the stewards of its truth.

The Peace Accord: A path to peace or a precarious promise?

The 2016 Peace Accord, inked in Bogotá, was heralded as a historic breakthrough in Colombia's turbulent history. Crafted to end over fifty years of conflict¹⁰, its pages were imbued with the promise of a new era, yet the journey from signature to implementation has revealed a landscape riddled with complexities and challenges.

Central to the Accord were ambitious aims: addressing land reform, curbing drug trafficking, ensuring political participation for former combatants, upholding victims' rights, and integrating FARC members into civilian life. Julian Gallo Cubillos¹¹, once a FARC subcommander¹², now a senator, offers a unique perspective on this transition. "Moving from armed insurgency to political engagement was our pledge for peace," he explains. "Yet, the essence of peace transcends disarmament. It demands a societal overhaul, a task that Colombia is grappling with."

The role of innovative peace-building strategies, such as those spearheaded by Jose Sokoloff¹³, is critical in this context. Sokoloff's advertising campaigns, aimed at humanizing combatants and fostering societal reconciliation, reflect the creative avenues explored to promote peace. "Our goal extended beyond encouraging FARC members to lay down arms," Sokoloff

¹⁰ At the time, this marked 54-years of civil war.

¹¹ Formerly known as Carlos Antonio Lozada.

¹² Ammunitions leader.

¹³ In 2015, his firm MullenLowe Global was hired to design a campaign to lure child combatants back to their families (mothers), called "Christmas Tree" campaign.

shares. "It was about reframing the narrative from conflict to coexistence, resonating with both combatants and the broader society."

Responses to the Peace Accord vary widely across Colombia. For many, it signified a long-awaited cessation of violence and a path toward national healing. Others perceived it as an unsettling compromise, offering concessions to former rebels without fully addressing the accountability and justice crucial for the victims.

Insights from Fabio Andres Diaz Pabon, an academic and professor at the University of Cape Town (South Africa) specializing in transitional justice, shed light on the complexities of achieving a meaningful peace. "Peace goes beyond silencing guns. It encompasses justice, human rights, and tackling deep-rooted inequalities that fueled the conflict," Pabon elucidates. "The Accord opened the door, but the journey to these objectives is far from complete."

In Colombia's rural areas, where the war's impact was most acutely felt, the Accord's effects are tangible. The feature takes us to communities cautiously adapting to peace, balancing hope with the haunting memories of conflict. Here, stories of former FARC members reintegrating into communities and the quest of victims for recognition and reparations unfold.

The implementation of the Accord has been a complex endeavour, influenced by shifting political landscapes and numerous obstacles. The narrative examines both the triumphs, such as the decline in overall violence and the FARC's transition to a political entity, and the setbacks, including ongoing attacks on social leaders and sluggish progress in land reforms.

Through this examination, it becomes evident that the envisioned peace and the experienced reality in Colombia are often at odds. While the Accord laid the groundwork for peace, its true realization requires sustained effort, deep societal change, and a commitment to addressing the nuanced needs of a nation still healing from decades of conflict.

O' Christmas Tree: A tool for changing narratives and building peace

In 2015, in the corridors of a bustling advertising agency in Bogotá, Jose Sokoloff has been quietly crafting a narrative of peace, one that reaches far beyond the conventional boundaries of marketing. Known for his innovative approach to peacebuilding, Sokoloff has played a pivotal role in Colombia's journey towards reconciliation.

Sokoloff's journey into the heart of Colombia's conflict was an unconventional one. As a leading figure in the advertising world, his expertise in communication and narrative-building

was brought to bear on one of the country's most enduring challenges: demobilizing the FARC. His campaigns, grounded in empathy and understanding, sought to speak directly to combatants, offering them a vision of a life beyond warfare.

One of his most notable campaigns involved decorating trees¹⁴ with Christmas lights in regions heavily impacted by conflict, sending a message of hope and homecoming to guerrillas. "We wanted to reach their hearts," Sokoloff explains, "to show them that there was a place for them back in society, that they were not forgotten."

The impact of these campaigns was profound. They not only encouraged numerous FARC members to demobilize but also shifted public perceptions about the possibilities of peace. Through creative storytelling and empathetic messaging, Sokoloff's work helped to humanize a conflict often defined by statistics and political rhetoric.

Reflecting on his role in the peace process, Sokoloff emphasizes the power of communication in peacebuilding. "Changing the narrative around conflict is essential in paving the way for reconciliation," he states. "It's about altering perceptions, both among combatants and the wider society, to foster an environment where peace can take root."

Within Colombian society, these campaigns sparked conversations and altered viewpoints, contributing to a changing landscape of opinion on the peace process. Internationally, Sokoloff's work has been recognized as a groundbreaking approach to conflict resolution, offering valuable insights for other nations grappling with similar issues.

Jose Sokoloff's legacy in Colombia's peace process is a testament to the power of innovative thinking in addressing complex social challenges. His campaigns serve as a reminder that in the realm of peacebuilding, creativity and empathy can be just as potent as political agreements and negotiations.

President Santos and the Peace Accord

In the annals of Colombia's history, few figures are as pivotal as Juan Manuel Santos¹⁵, the President who dared to envision peace in a land long torn by war. His tenure was marked by a bold endeavour – the negotiation and signing of the peace accord with FARC, a move that would earn him both acclaim and criticism.

¹⁴ Christmas Tree Campaign focussed on returning child combatants back home to their families.

¹⁵ Preceded by Alvaro Uribe, who failed in peace negotiations. Santos was president of Colombia from 2010-2018.

Santos' pursuit of peace was a journey filled with political gambits and diplomatic nuance. The peace accord, his administration's crowning achievement, was a tapestry of complex negotiations, reflecting aspirations for a Colombia free from the grip of armed conflict. It promised comprehensive reforms and a path to reintegration for former combatants, but the journey from aspiration to reality proved to be a challenging one.

The peace process under Santos was met with a spectrum of reactions. Internationally, he was lauded for his courage and vision, culminating in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet, at home, the accord sparked a polarized debate. Critics argued it was too lenient on FARC members, while supporters saw it as a necessary step towards ending decades of bloodshed.

Santos' legacy, intertwined with the fate of the peace accord, is a subject of ongoing debate. His tenure was a time of historic change, laying the groundwork for a future where peace might be more than a fleeting dream. However, the challenges in implementing the accord's provisions have left some questioning the efficacy and durability of this peace.

In reflecting on his presidency, Santos often emphasized the notion that peace was a process, not a singular event. "Sustainable peace," he remarked, "is built day by day, through each action that fosters reconciliation and each policy that addresses the roots of conflict." His vision of peace was not just the demobilization of armed groups, but the transformation of a society long fractured by violence.

Today, as Colombia continues to navigate the complexities of post-accord life, the impact of Santos' decisions remains a subject of significant importance. The peace accord, with all its imperfections, stands as a testament to a nation's longing for an end to violence and a commitment to forging a new path. Santos' role in this historic process – as a catalyst for peace and a figure of controversy – will undoubtedly continue to shape discussions about Colombia's future for years to come.

From Guerilla Warfare to Political Participation

In the halls of the Colombian Congress, Julian Gallo Cubillos represents a living testament to the nation's complex journey toward peace. Once known as Carlos Antonio Lozada, a name that resonated with the echoes of guerrilla warfare, he now navigates the intricate landscape of political dialogue and governance. His transition from a FARC subcommander to a senator encapsulates the transformative potential of the peace accord.

Cubillos' story is one of profound change, symbolizing the possibility of a new chapter for thousands of former combatants. "My journey from the jungles to the Senate was marked by a search for common ground," he shares. "It reflects our collective aspiration for a Colombia where former enemies can engage in democratic debate instead of armed conflict."

The road to reintegration, however, is fraught with challenges. For Cubillos and his peers, the transition to civilian life has been a journey of redefining identity and purpose amidst a society often skeptical of their intentions. The stigma associated with their past, coupled with the logistical hurdles of adapting to a new role, highlights the complexities of reintegrating former combatants into a society still healing from the scars of war.

Reflecting on the peace process, Cubillos emphasizes the significance of political participation for sustainable peace. "True peace extends beyond disarmament," he asserts. "It's about creating spaces for dialogue, understanding, and collective decision-making." His insights reveal a nuanced understanding of peace – not as a singular event but as an ongoing process of societal transformation.

Cubillos' integration into political life marks a significant milestone in Colombia's peace process. It represents both the progress made in moving away from a history of violence and the ongoing challenges in fostering trust and reconciliation. His presence in the political arena serves as a reminder of the peace accord's potential to reshape Colombia's future, offering a model for conflict resolution and democratic participation.

As Cubillos continues to advocate for policies that reflect the interests and needs of former combatants and conflict-affected communities, his role underscores the importance of inclusive governance in post-conflict societies. His story is not just about personal transformation but about the broader implications of integrating former adversaries into the fabric of a nation's political life.

In this narrative, Julian Gallo Cubillos stands as a figure of hope and controversy, embodying the promise and perils of a peace process that seeks to reconcile a divided nation. His journey from the battlefields to the corridors of power illuminates the path toward a peace that is built on the pillars of understanding, acceptance, and shared aspirations for a better future for all Colombians.

Justice and reconciliation: The heartbeat of sustainable peace

In Colombia's journey towards peace, justice and reconciliation stand as twin pillars, essential yet complex in their realization. The aftermath of the 2016 Peace Accord has opened a challenging dialogue about what true reconciliation entails and how justice can be served in a landscape scarred by decades of conflict.

The quest for justice is deeply personal for many Colombians. Families of the missing, a group whose grief remains palpable years after the ceasefire, epitomize this struggle. Their relentless search for truth leads them through a maze of bureaucracy and the remnants of war, driven by the hope of unearthing answers about their loved ones' fates.

Human rights lawyers, often unsung heroes in this saga, work tirelessly to bridge the gap between the high ideals of the peace accord and the gritty realities of its implementation. They advocate for the victims, demanding accountability, and reparations from both the government and former FARC members. Their efforts highlight the delicate balance between forgiveness and accountability, a balance crucial to genuine reconciliation.

In this landscape, the role of transitional justice emerges as a cornerstone. Transitional justice aims not only to address past wrongs but also to lay the groundwork for a future where such atrocities are not repeated. Fabio Pabon, an expert in this field, sheds light on its significance: "Transitional justice is not just about retributive justice. It's about understanding the root causes of the conflict and ensuring that the victims' voices are heard and honoured in the peace process."

The feature delves into the stories of ex-combatants struggling with their newfound identities in a society that views them with a blend of skepticism and hope. Their narratives are complex, interwoven with remorse, redemption, and the daunting task of rebuilding lives in a world vastly different from the jungles of their former warfare.

In the heart of this reconciliation process is the concept of 'restorative justice,' which focuses on repairing the harm caused by the conflict and rebuilding relationships. This approach is evident in community-led initiatives where former combatants and victims engage in dialogue, an effort to foster understanding and heal wounds that run deep.

However, the road to reconciliation is fraught with challenges. Political divisions, societal skepticism, and the ongoing violence in certain regions pose significant obstacles. The feature explores these tensions, highlighting the fragile nature of peace in a country where the echoes of war are still audible.

Amid these challenges, stories of hope and resilience emerge. Communities once ravaged by conflict now host joint projects involving victims and former combatants, symbolizing a collective effort towards a more peaceful future. These initiatives, though small in scale, represent the seeds of a broader cultural shift towards reconciliation.

As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Colombia's journey to peace is not a linear path but a complex tapestry of efforts, struggles, and aspirations. Justice and reconciliation, in their many forms, are not just abstract concepts but lived experiences, integral to the nation's pursuit of a peace that is both lasting and meaningful.

International perspectives and the road ahead

As dawn breaks over the Andes, casting its light on a Colombia still navigating the aftermath of its peace accord, the international community watches with a mixture of admiration and apprehension. The peace process in Colombia, while a beacon of hope for conflict-ridden regions worldwide, also serves as a complex case study in the challenges of post-conflict reconstruction.

The narrative here shifts to incorporate a global viewpoint, drawing on insights from the interviews and documents provided, including the reflections of Jose Sokoloff on the innovative approaches to peacebuilding. Sokoloff's campaigns, which garnered international attention, offer lessons on the power of communication and empathy in transforming societal narratives. "Our campaigns aimed to reach the hearts of combatants and civilians alike, promoting a vision of peace that transcends borders and resonates universally," Sokoloff shares. His perspective underscores the importance of creative strategies in changing public perceptions and fostering a culture of peace.

The Peace Accord itself, a document scrutinized and lauded in equal measure, becomes a focal point for international analysis. The feature delves into its intricacies, drawing from the provided documents to highlight its groundbreaking aspects, such as the inclusion of transitional justice mechanisms and the focus on rural development. However, it also acknowledges the criticisms levied against it, such as the perceived leniency towards former combatants and the challenges in implementing its ambitious provisions.

This section also explores the role of international organizations and foreign governments in supporting Colombia's peace process. Financial aid, technical assistance, and diplomatic support

have been crucial, yet the feature raises questions about the sustainability and autonomy of a peace heavily reliant on external aid.

In the words of Pabon, "International support is vital, but the true test of Colombia's peace will be its ability to foster internal cohesion and address the deep-seated inequalities that gave rise to the conflict." His insight points to the need for a peace that is not only politically negotiated but also socially and economically integrated.

The voice of Jineth Bedoya Lima resurfaces, echoing her unwavering belief in the resilience of her people. "Peace is more than a treaty; it's a daily commitment by each one of us to forge a nation where the next generation knows the stories of the past but is not burdened by them," she declares, encapsulating the collective hope and responsibility of a nation striving to turn the page on decades of conflict.

Evaluating peace — Beyond the façade

As we traverse the winding path of Colombia's peace process, the stories and insights of Jineth Bedoya Lima, Julian Gallo Cubillos, and former President Juan Manuel Santos paint a picture of a nation grappling with its tumultuous past while daring to envision a more harmonious future. These narratives, rich in their diversity, reflect the multifaceted nature of peace – a concept that is as deeply personal as it is broadly political.

Returning to our central question – Is the peace in Colombia a façade or a genuine transformation? – the answer lies in the shades of gray that characterize the postaccord landscape. The peace achieved is neither a perfect realization of the accord's aspirations nor a mere illusion masking unresolved conflicts. Instead, it is an ongoing process, marked by significant strides in reducing violence and integrating former combatants, yet tempered by the challenges of implementing comprehensive reforms and addressing deep-rooted societal issues.

Today, Colombia stands at a critical juncture. The peace accord, despite its groundbreaking nature, faces hurdles in its full realization. Political polarization, the slow pace of certain reforms, and the continued struggle for justice and reconciliation are testament to the complexity of building peace in the wake of a protracted conflict.

Looking ahead, the future of Colombia's peace process hinges on a sustained commitment from all sectors of society. It requires not only the political will to carry forward the accord's provisions but also the active participation of communities, victims, former combatants, and civil

society in shaping a peaceful and inclusive society. International support, while crucial, must complement, not overshadow, the agency of the Colombian people in determining their destiny.

The peace process in Colombia, though fraught with challenges, stands as a testament to the resilience and determination of a nation striving to overcome its history of violence. The journey towards a lasting peace is an evolving narrative, one that continues to be written by the hands of those who believe in the possibility of change. As Colombia moves forward, its experience offers valuable lessons for the world – that peace is a complex endeavor, requiring patience, understanding, and a relentless pursuit of justice and reconciliation.

In the spirit of cautious optimism, we recognize the ongoing efforts of the Colombian people to build a future where peace is not just a signed accord but a lived reality – a reality shaped by the collective dreams and actions of a nation committed to turning the page on decades of conflict.

As the evening light fades, casting a golden hue over the bustling café, the patrons are oblivious to the weight of the conversation here in the corner. For them, peace is a given, a simple fact of their daily lives. But for Bedoya Lima and the countless others whose narratives she carries, peace is a labour—a daily act of courage and conviction.

As Bedoya Lima rises to leave, the last rays of sunlight catch the edges of her silhouette, framing her not just as a victim or a survivor, but as a warrior in the truest sense—a warrior for peace. "We must continue to fight," she says, parting words that linger in the air long after she's gone. "Not with guns or words of hate, but with truth, with memory, with an unwavering demand for justice."