

COLOMBIA

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STATEMENT BY
THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF COLOMBIA,
JUAN MANUEL SANTOS,
BEFORE THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE UNITED NATIONS
IN ITS 68TH SESSION

New York, 24 September 2013

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Mister President,

Mister Secretary General,

Heads of State and Government,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen:

Please allow me to slightly break the protocol and start these words speaking about a humble woman, a Colombian woman called María Zabala, who has to bear the pain in her heart day in and day out.

Two decades ago, armed members of illegal groups arrived to her village, located in the Colombian Caribbean, determined to impose their rule of terror.

Before her and her small children, they murdered her husband and two other relatives; they forced her to abandon her house, and burnt everything down.

She barely managed to save the corpses from the ashes, buried them right there, and fled from her parcel with her children, empty-handed. She only carried the weight of her tragedy.

Today, María Zabala is a courageous and inspiring leader; a leader of the victims who is working for peace.

Sadly, there are thousands of cases like María Zabala's in Colombia.

It's estimated that over these 50 years, more than 220 thousand people have died because of the conflict.

That's twice as much as the death toll of the Bosnian War in former Yugoslavia, which was an open and ruthless war that moved the world!

And we would have to add the injured, the people mutilated by antipersonnel landmines, those who have suffered the infamy of kidnapping and those forcefully displaced from their own land, which could amount to nearly 5 million people.

That's the harsh and ugly reality of a conflict that, unfortunately, is still in force.

It's the oldest, and the last, conflict in the Western hemisphere.

Colombia –in spite of everything– has achieved unprecedented progress over the last years on matters ranging from security and fighting poverty, to economic performance.

We have achieved a lot –very, very much!– in the midst of this confrontation. Imagine how much more we could do without it!

And I must confess before you that for me, as the head of the government, it would have been easy to continue moving forward on the path we were following and leave the conflict unresolved. Because waging war is easier than seeking peace.

It would have been easier, but not responsible.

Because continuing to coexist with the conflict would be like sentencing millions of people to more years of violence, of fear, of poverty, of victimization.

It would not be responsible with Latin America or with the world, which also suffer, in different manners, the effects of the Colombian conflict.

And it would not be responsible with my own conscience, because we have the best opportunity before us today –an actual opportunity, maybe the last one– to bring the conflict to an end, and I couldn't die in peace if I fail to do everything in my reach to take advantage of it.

My generation has not seen one single day of peace, and my dream is for my children and the children of all Colombians to have the chance to see it.

I hope the guerrilla understands that the time has come to leave this 50 year confrontation behind; that the time has come to change from bullets to votes, from weapons to argumentations; that the time has come for them to continue their struggle, but within democracy.

Today, before this Assembly, we Colombians want to thank the international community for the support we have received in the endeavor of achieving the end of our conflict through the dialogue.

And with the world as our witness, we would like to vindicate our right to achieving the peace.

We are tired of being afraid, we are tired of violence, we are tired of a conflict that confronts the children of a same nation and delays our development.

María Zabala is a victim among many, and all of them are entitled to justice, to the truth, to reparation, to non-repetition. That's what we are working on in our country.

My government promoted an ambitious bill to recognize and repair victims amidst a conflict, a bill I had the honor to enact in the presence of the honorable Secretary-General of the Organization.

But our commitment goes beyond serving the victims of the past; our commitment is eliminating the possibility of having new victims as a result of this conflict.

Our obligation is to end this conflict now, to ensure that the spiral of violence and pain will not continue repeating itself.

We will stop this conflict according to our democratic tradition, the Rule of Law, and attending to our duties with international community.

We are going to achieve an end to our conflict; but make no mistake, this does not mean that we will relinquish justice, and much less the truth and the reparation of the victims.

And I want to offer my thoughts in this Assembly on the role of the United Nations and the multilateral bodies in our peace process and its eventual implementation.

It's a pertinent and current thought, since Colombia is probably the first country in the planet to engage in a process of this nature during the existence of the Rome Statute. This will turn us into a model for other countries to learn from our experience.

Former UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Louise Arbour, recently stated that the doctrine on International law has not been successful in finding practical answers on solving the existing tension between peace and justice.

Madame Arbour recalled paradigmatic cases, such as the tribunals for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, which have been endowed with immense resources but yielded poor results in this matter

The tribunal for Ruanda, founded in 1994, has only managed to solve 40 cases, out of nearly 800 thousand murders committed in one year.

The tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, in 20 years, has barely managed to solve around one hundred cases.

Thus, how can we achieve at the same time the end of the armed conflict, the fulfillment of our investigation and prosecution obligations, and the maximum possible satisfaction of the victims' rights?

This dilemma must be confronted with honesty and seriousness, and that is what we are doing in Colombia.

Indeed, we have adopted an international strategy for transitional justice. The strategy addresses the principles of truth, justice and reparation, which we hope will enable us to make the transition towards peace.

We have pioneered the implementation of transitional justice measures amidst the conflict, prioritizing the satisfaction of the victims' rights.

Not anyone in Colombia –not a soul!– wants the perpetuation of violence.

What we are asking from the U.N. and the international community is to respect Colombia's right, and the right of every nation, to pursuing peace.

We ask you to keep accompanying us in this effort, respecting our choices, the way in which we act, and trusting that our decisions have never been against the international community's needs.

We cannot aim to investigate every action committed over half a century of violence. We cannot prosecute each and every one of those responsible because we do not want to fail to comply.

We can build a realistic, honest and transparent strategy that may enable the best possible satisfaction of the rights of all the victims.

If we understand justice and the fight against impunity –in a transition– as a set of measures aimed at satisfying the victims and not just as the administration of criminal processes, it is possible to find a comprehensive solution for all.

I'm referring to measures such as the actual clarification of the events, acknowledging responsibility, recovering trust, having access to reparation, or those aimed at guaranteeing there will be non-repetition.

In this manner, justice becomes –as it should be– a support, rather than an obstacle for peace.

And I want to be clear: there will be NO impunity for crimes against humanity or systematically committed war crimes.

Quite the contrary, this is the first time that Colombia seriously takes on the obligation of fighting impunity for crimes committed in the armed conflict.

Hence, the purpose is not to sacrifice justice to achieve peace, but how to achieve peace with maximum justice.

I say it fully convinced.

There is much at stake: not more and not less than the end of a half a century long conflict and the fate of 47 million Colombians.

We have already been talking for one year and we have reached agreements on just one of the six items of the agenda. I'm still optimistic, but the patience of the Colombian people is not infinite.

The guerrillas will have to decide whether they opt for an honorable and long-lasting peace, or whether they will insist on the war.

From this venue, I call upon them to understand that history has led us to this determining moment.

The time for decisions has come. If we come out empty-handed, we will condemn our nation to many more years of bloodshed and pain.

We can't miss this opportunity! Future generations and history would not forgive us!

Moreover, our conflict –with all its violence and cruelty– has been speared by a poisonous arrow that feeds it and feeds from it: drug trafficking.

This illicit activity has been the main funding source for violence and terrorism in my country –and I'd say in the whole world as well– in recent times.

Without the grim influence of drug trafficking –which fuels the fire of our war– I'm sure it would have already ended.

That is why we have included the topic on illicit drugs –as a specific item– in the agenda of the discussion with the guerrillas.

If we manage to get the guerrillas, once they've demobilized, to change sides and become an ally of the State to curb drug trafficking and end illegal crops, just imagine what it would entail!

A Colombia without coca crops and without a conflict was an impossible dream that we can now make possible, for the benefit of Colombians and of the whole world.

Right here, in this same headquarters, 52 years ago, the Convention that gave the birth certificate to the war on drugs was approved.

Today, we must acknowledge, that war has not been won.

And I say this as the president of the country which has suffered more deaths, more blood and more sacrifices in this war, and the country that has also achieved more results in the fight against this scourge and the mafias that underpin it.

Fully aware of this, last year, chairing the Summit of the Americas, I led a proposal to debate and explore different scenarios in the fight against the world's drug problem, aimed at evaluating what we are doing and seeking for ways to be more effective.

We commissioned the Organization of American States to conduct studies with experts, scholars, and people with different approaches on how to face this problem.

Those studies were delivered in May.

The different governments are evaluating them and they should serve as inputs for discussions at all universities and think tanks, and in different scenarios, not just from America but from the whole world, because this is a global problem that requires a global solution.

Because of that –because it's a global problem– we expect their conclusions to be discussed in this body, the United Nations, which has already summoned a Special Session on Drugs for year 2016.

If we act together on the drug problem, with a comprehensive vision devoid of ideological or political biases, we will be able to prevent much harm and violence!

And I'm not speaking just about harm inflicted on the people, but also on nature, because drug trafficking has become a major predator of our forests, something we could rightly label as a true "ecocide."

Colombia is deeply committed to environmental protection.

In the Rio +20 Environmental Summit we drove the proposal aimed at establishing Sustainable Development Goals as a mandatory benchmark in the development agenda for the coming decades.

These goals, in whose design we are actively taking part, may and should be incorporated into a visionary and ambitious development agenda for all countries as of 2015.

Colombia is contributing a lot.

For example, a few weeks ago we doubled the area of the largest national natural park in Colombia, the Chiribiquete Park, located in the heart of our own Amazon region.

Our decision declares this zone as a natural reserve and proscribes mining and deforestation activities in an area roughly the size of Belgium, and not just in any place, but in the area where the Amazon region has the greatest biological and cultural diversity.

That's how we are assuming our responsibility with climate change –which has already affected us, and how so–; by protecting the sources of oxygen and water for the planet's subsistence.

I will now conclude with this statement:

In my country we are and we will continue working in order to prevent the case of María Zabela –and of millions of victims– from being ever repeated; never again!, NEVER!

My aspiration is that the end of the conflict will be the good news that the President of Colombia will bring to this Assembly next year.

Thank you very much.